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After Language Writing: In Defense of a Provisional Poetics

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by

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Abstract

This dissertation contextualizes North American "Post-Language" writing within a discourse about poetry and ethics—a discourse that I associate with explorations of ethical responsibility in poetic defenses. I posit a theory of "provisionality" in order to account for both the poetics and the ethics of the poetic defense. Provisionality consists of three aspects—the necessary, the conditional, and the anticipatory—aspects that characterize how apologists organize their defenses, and how poetry takes responsibility for the world, the audience, the poet, and the text. I contend that Post-Language writers represent the most recent defenders of poetry's ethicality, grounding the abstract politics of Language writing in actual political stakes, like gender, race, and class.

This dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter one elaborates my theory of "provisionality," providing a survey of poetic defenses. Inspired by M.H. Abrams's four orientations of literary theory, I chart the history of defenses in four major modes and four transitional modes of poetic responsibility. Chapter two considers four Language writers, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein, all of whom engage in four provisional modes of poetic responsibility—modes that revise the four traditional modes of poetic responsibility. Explicating four poems by these writers, I demonstrate how these writers enact an ethical responsibility. Chapter three explores the concept of the "Post-Language," examining the work of four American Post-Language poets, Mark Nowak, Rodrigo Toscano, Juliana Spahr, and Harryette Mullen. Aligning each writer with one of the provisional modes, I explicate poems by these writers in order to show how Post-Language writing grounds these modes in actual political stakes. Chapter four proposes a Canadian Post-Language

phenomenon, and considers the work of four poets, Jeff Derksen, Rachel Zolf, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Cain. Associating each writer with one of the provisional modes, I explicate poems by these writers in order to represent Post-Language writing as a North American sensibility. In my conclusion, I offer a Manifesto for an ongoing Poetics of Provisionality.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated

to my mother Cheryl Frank,

and to my father David Roberson.

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INTRODUCTION

9/11 and the Ethics of Poetry

In the wake of attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, on September

11, 2001, poetry has played a prominent private and public role. As Dinitia Smith of the

New York Times has suggested: "In the weeks since the terrorist attacks, people have

been consoling themselves—and one another—with poetry in an almost unprecedented

way." Commensurate with the unprecedented magnitude of the events themselves,

poetry has resurged into public view in a way unlike any other in recent memory. At

least ten anthologies have arisen in direct response to the events of 9/11, and the

website Poetry.com has archived over 55,000 poems dedicated to the day. In addition to

these examples, media mainstays like the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Vanity Fair*, and

the *New Yorker* have registered poetry as a central component in their own responses.

Not surprisingly, both PBS (Public Broadcasting System) and NPR (National Public

Radio) have also featured poetry. As Stephen Burt has asserted: "Public reactions—

and later analyses of those reactions—[have] featured [W.H. Auden's] 'September 1,

1939' far more often than … any other poem" ("'September'" 534). Perhaps ironically,

the poet who has penned the statement, "poetry makes nothing happen" has also

penned a poem that features so prominently in the popular imagination. Certainly, the

graphic image that dominates the first stanza—the "unmentionable odour of death" in

the "September night"—foreshadows the tragedy of September 11, 2001 (Auden). But,

the resounding message that closes the poem—an "affirming flame" existing "wherever

the Just / exchange their messages"—testifies to the value of poetry in a time of crisis

(Auden).

The September 24, 2001 issue of *USA Today* includes poems chosen by recent poet laureates of the United States—poems that aim to provide perspective or consolation about the events of 9/11. The, then, incoming laureate Billy Collins prefaces his poem by referring to poetry as perhaps "the original grief counseling center." Despite the quip, Collins qualifies his remark in the following:

> Since the destruction of the World Trade Center, the media has tried to fill that hole, that vacuum, with talk and print, but unsuccessfully. Poetry will not fill that space either, but poetry creates its own space apart from such terrible emptiness. It's not that poets should feel a responsibility to write about this calamity. All poetry stands in opposition to it. Pick a poem, any poem, from an anthology and you will see that it is speaking for life and therefore against the taking of it. A poem about mushrooms or about a walk with the dog is a more eloquent response to Sept. 11 than a poem that announces that wholesale murder is a bad thing.

According to Collins, poetry is oppositional and, therefore, political by its very nature, but such poetry functions at a remove, in a "space apart," from its immediate political context. While poets "should [not] feel a responsibility" to address politics directly, they should feel a certain responsibility to respond in a way that resists, what Wallace Stevens calls, "the pressure of reality" (36). Like Auden, and Stevens, Collins suggests that a proper response is indirect. All three of these poets value the freedom to voice one's choice of subject, neither obligated by, nor overwhelmed by, the political context; for these poets, poetic responsibility entails the maintenance of such a voice, rather than the adherence to an explicitly political, didactic or propagandist role.

In his dissertation, *Poetry After 9/11: Constructing the Memory of Crisis*, Moberly

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Luger observes that most poetry after 9/11 functions in three ways: by "respond[ing] to grief," by "address[ing] personal loss and uncertainty," and by "heal[ing] the emotional wounds the attacks caused" (10). In other words, he suggests that poetry has functioned more ethically than politically. Of course, ethics does not preclude politics necessarily; in fact, ethics and politics exist in a constant relation. By politics I am referring to the way that discourses, institutions and policies of power affect our personal and collective experiences. By ethics I am referring to the degree that our emotional, psychological, and intellectual disposition reflects the political. The political impinges on the ethical by affecting one's disposition and eliciting a response. The ethical impinges on the political, as well, whenever one's responses attempt to, or actually, confront discourses, institutions or, policies. As Vincent Pecora has noted:

> Politics is always permeated by the recognition that ethical belief,
> however strong or complete, is necessarily insufficient to promote the
> fulfillment of human interests, though politics-talk cannot consolidate and
> extend particular interests—cannot achieve hegemony—without the
> rhetorical invocation of ethics. (205)

In the majority of discussions about poetry and 9/11, poetry has operated ethically because it has represented an emotional, psychological, , intellectual response; however, this ethical functioning of poetry hardly impinges on the political because "poetry by its very nature moves us inward, not outward to the public the collective" as Billy Collins notes.

In contrast to an ethics of poetry that moves us solely inward, the poet Jeff Derksen has posited an ethics of poetry that moves us outward. Derksen takes issue with Collins's claims about poetry's role after 9/11, and Derksen has provided a

broader and more politically inflected view of poetic responses to 9/11. Derksen has

sought to avoid the "genre essentialism for poetry" that would delimit poetry's

application to a role that poets like Collins describe (Derksen, *Annihilated Time* 84).

Rather than advocating that poetry "can speak truth to lies uniquely, or provide a form

of political insight that other language uses simply cannot," Derksen advocates that

poetry can turn "inward and outward ... [as] a discourse that does not fall into

narrowed movements of inward *or* outward, but can tie the scales of subjectivity and

agency to geopolitics and the production of a transnational public sphere" (84).

Derksen has seen "in an expanding network of poets [a] poetry [that] is both engaged

with and constitutive of a political debate [that] can be seen as a cultural action tied into

other debates [about ecology, feminism or labour, for example]" (84). In other words,

Derksen has found, in a number of responses to 9/11, an ethical kind of poetry that

attempts to impinge on the political.[1]

I have begun this dissertation by focusing on the poetic response to 9/11 in an

effort to reconsider the importance of poetry, and to reconsider the role that poetic

responses and ethics play in such an assessment. In some sense, the archive of poetry

about 9/11 stands as a "defensive measure," to use Lee Upton's phrasing, against a

longstanding tradition of attacks upon poetry reaching back to Plato (15). While 9/11

has prompted a resurgence of poetry's relevance, in the decades prior, many critics like

Donald Hall, Vernon Shetley and Dana Gioia, have posited the endangerment of

poetry's value. "In 1983," writes Christopher Beach, "the poet Donald Hall set off the

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[1] Derksen charts five specific "aesthetic-political tendencies" in a post-9/11 poetics, each
with exemplary poets and poems (*Annihilated Time* 71). The five tendencies include a
lyrical tendency, a media-oriented tendency, a humourous tendency, an internationalist
tendency, and a citizenship-focused tendency (71-81).

first round of debate over what has variously been called the 'situation,' the 'fate,' and the 'death' of American poetry when he referred to the homogenized graduates of creative-writing programs as 'McPoets' (19). The broader context for Hall's complaint rests in a paradox. On the one hand, poetry, today, represents a massive industry—in which university presses, small presses, little magazines, online publishers, MFA programs, and literary awards saturate the market. On the other hand, poetry, today, represents an insular discourse—in which academic appointments, critical literature, poetry readings, blogs, MFA programs, and literary awards fortify the industry. In spite of this paradoxical relation between industry and discourse, debates about poetry's significance participate in an ongoing tradition of poets and critics defending poetry against forces that would dismiss it, nullify it and displace it. Moreover, the instrumentalization of poetry in the context of 9/11 has reinvigorated poetry once again, reasserting poetry's defensibility as a viable discourse in the popular imagination. In other words, people have defended poetry as an appropriate response to this tragedy—a response able to fulfill a particular "responsibility," whether to console, to memorialize, to document, or to critique.

As I have briefly outlined above, critics have conceived of poetry's ethicality after 9/11 in two ways, with two views of what poetic responsibility might entail. One type of ethics does not attempt to impinge on the political because this ethics represents a conciliatory response. Another type of ethics does attempt to impinge on the political because this ethics represents an oppositional response.[2] I am particularly interested in

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[2] I borrow the notion of oppositionality in part from Erica Hunt, as outlined in her essay "Notes Towards an Oppositional Poetics." In the essay, she defines such a poetics in an "expanded sense"—a poetics that draws on "plural strategies" to resist the totalizing

the latter not because it represents a better or more successful response, but because it represents a new horizon for how poetry matters. Rather than responding only after the facts in a consoling and soothing function, poetry can also respond to the facts in a critical and investigative function that might affect institutions or policy by challenging discourse. I frame this critical and investigative poetics as ethical because it presents a response to, and responsibility for, the political without necessarily invoking an overt political agenda. I also see this critical and investigative poetics in the avant-gardist work of Language writing and Post-Language writing.

Language writing is an avant-garde formation that has arisen in the United States during the early 1970s, originating in both New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area. As a theoretically-informed and politically-motivated collection of writers, Language poets have primarily contested the domain of linguistic referentiality by focusing on the materiality of the signifier, rather than on the content of the signified. By subverting the primacy of the signified, they have enacted a political intervention at the level of language. Language writers have extended this subversion by critiquing the world as a representable whole, the reader as a passive receiver, and the subject as a stable entity. Language writers have responded to these notions by treating them as provisional, rather than absolute. Representative Language writers include Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein.

Post-Language writing is an avant-garde tendency, rather than formation, because

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effects of "dominant modes of discourse" (199). Even more specifically, she states: "Oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects which have moved beyond the speculation of skepticism to a critically active stance against forms of domination. By oppositional, I intend, generously, dissident cultures as well as 'marginalized' cultures, cutting across class, race and gender" (198).

Post-Language writing has yet to garner the critical consensus about its identity in the way that Language writing has. Nonetheless, Post-Language writing has arisen in the 1990s, evolving out of the Language movement. As a loosely affiliated and geographically diverse generation of writers, Post-Language poets have essentially extended a skepticism about innocent referentiality, readerly passivity, and subjective stability. By maintaining the project of the Language writers, many of whom serve as mentors to, and collaborators with, these younger writers, Post-Language poets have espoused a more hybrid style—a sensibility in which Post-Language poets have sought to maintain poetry's significance by utilizing both conventional and experimental models, effectively treating poetic models as provisional rather than dogmatic. Post-Language poets have also broadened the concerns of Language writing to include investigations of race and gender—two areas under-scrutinized by the original Language poets. Post-Language poets have taken responsibility for their political circumstances, treating the details of these circumstances more explicitly in the content of their work, whether by incorporating personal testimony about actual events like 9/11 or steel mill closures, citing statistics and quotations from the news or including details and facts from cultural and political history. Representative Post-Language writers include Americans like Mark Nowak, Rodrigo Toscano, Juliana Spahr and Harryette Mullen, as well as Canadians like Jeff Derksen, Rachel Zolf, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Cain.

As outposts of the avant-garde in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, Language writing and Post-Language writing has critiqued and revitalized notions of poetry's ethical responsibility and thereby has defended the role of poetry in society. In other words, Language writers and Post-Language writers have taken responsibility for

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their art by extending its formal and ideological boundaries because, for them, poetry represents an ethical response to the events, discourses, institutions, and policies that shape our personal and collective experiences. As a response that might impinge on the political, in fact, poetry has demonstrated an ethics worthy of maintenance and defense. Unfortunately, scholars have not attempted to contextualize Language writing, let alone Post-Language writing, within a tradition of the poetic defense. Moreover, scholars have not sufficiently grounded Language writing and Post-Language writing within a context of a post-9/11 North America. 9/11 has pierced a geographical, if not symbolic, border that contains both the United States and Canada, so I am compelled to consider the ethics and politics of avant-garde work after 9/11 in a North American context—a consideration that must also account for the role that Language writing has played in Canadian letters.[3] In an effort to frame Language writing and Post-Language writing as ethical practices, within a tradition of poetic defenses, I offer a theory of provisionality.

Provisionality encompasses three terms—the necessary, the conditional and the anticipatory—terms that constitute the structure and logic of poetic defenses, from a Classical defense like Arisotle's *Poetics* to a Post-Language defense like Juliana Spahr's "Circle Out." While each attack against poetry necessitates a defensive response, each defense of poetry argues that poetry fulfills a necessary function. While each attack against poetry conditions the defensive response, each defense of poetry argues that poetry provides conditional knowledge. While each attack against poetry anticipates a future response, each defense of poetry agues that poetry offers anticipatory

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[3] I should add that in the context of this dissertation my use of the term "North American" indicates writing in English by poets from the United States and Canada. Such a limited use should not reflect on the contribution to the subject by Mexican writers, or Francophone writers in Canada.

significance. Poems constitute ethical acts because poems can articulate our emotional, psychological and intellectual responses to political realities. Poems take responsibility for our engagement with the world, just as defenses take responsibility for the poems themselves. Whether or not poems impinge on the political does not alter the ethicality of poetry itself; indeed, a theory of provisionality accounts for how poetry is ethical, without poetry being politically impactful in any immediate or quantifiable way. In what follows of this introduction, I consider the "ethical turn" in literature and how this turning, away from the political in part, provides a backdrop for my theory of provisional poetics and ethics. I discuss the relationship between ethics and innovation, and I provide a more thorough definition of provisionality. Then, finally, I offer an outline of the major facets to the four chapters of this dissertation.

Turning to the Ethical

In her introduction to *Poetics, Ethics and Globalization*, Mary Gallagher reports that, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, "discourse on ethics [has] been subordinated to political discourse; in other words, normative discourse [has been] monopolized to a great degree by politics, for example, the politics of colonial collapse, and of the Cold War and their respective implications and aftershocks" (14-15). But by the close of the century ethics has grown as a prominent concern, in what literary critics, like Mary Gallagher and Lawrence Buell, refer to as an "ethical turn" in critical theory.[4]

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[4] Buell cites three main aspects to the ethical turn: (1) a linguistic turn by Anglo-American thinkers like Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, who bridge their moral philosophical notions with an interest in literature; (2) the translation and influence of post-structuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, who apply a deconstructive paradigm to investigations of oppressive systems; and (3) an extraliterary interest in ethics by theorists like Richard Posner and Richard Weisberg, who investigate the intersection of law and literature (7-11).

According to Gallagher, "the ethical turn could indeed be seen as a movement against the primacy of politics" (16). Likewise, in Vincent Pecora's estimation, the increase of interest in ethics "is perhaps no accident" since "the possibility of viable adversary politics in Western Democracies (that is, more or less collective and coherent opposition to existing structures of power) has been once again reduced to mere neurotic fantasy" (204). Gallagher cites Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Rancière to defend her observation about the primacy of ethics. Both Levinas and Rancière consider the atrocities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the effect of a politics untied from the ethical. This claim, however, does not simply indict totalitarian politics as immoral; rather, this claim argues that, without ethical grounding, all of our political and moral systems have fundamentally failed to provide order and maintain humanity.

Levinas has drawn a distinction between ethics and morality, a distinction that not only parallels the difference between ethics and politics, but that also elaborates on a politics ungrounded in ethics. Levinas writes:

> By morality I mean a series of rules relating to social behaviour and civic duty. But while morality thus operates in the social-political order of organizing and improving our human survival, it is ultimately founded on an ethical responsibility towards the other. ... Morality is what governs the world of political "interestedness," the social interchanges between citizens in a society. Ethics, as the extreme exposure and sensitivity of one subjectivity to another, becomes morality and hardens its skin as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal "third"—the world of government, institutions, tribunals, prisons, schools, committees, etc. But

the norm which must continue to inspire and direct the moral order is the

ethical norm of the interhuman. If the moral-political order totally

relinquishes its ethical foundation, it must accept all forms of society

including the fascist or totalitarian, for it can longer evaluate or

discriminate between them. (65-66)

In Levinas's definition, ethics exists prior to morality and politics, and provides a basis

for a healthy moral-political system because ethics prioritizes the "interhuman"

interaction before the concretization of rules and codes by institutional apparatus.

Ultimately, Levinas has equated ethics not just with a deference to an-other, but a

responsibility for the other. But, how does this notion of responsibility, based on the

interaction of subjectivities, apply to an ethical poetics?

     In his essay, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," Derek

Attridge has applied Levinas's notion of responsibility for the other to a notion of

responsiveness in the creative act. In the first section of his essay, titled "The Creation

of the Other," Attridge has interpreted his title in two different ways: first, the

"bring[ing] into existence ... an entity that is absolutely different from what is already in

being" (21); second, the "coming into being of the wholly new" as "created *by* the other"

(21). According to Attridge, a truly innovative act combines both agency and deference,

responsiveness and responsibility. He has likened the creative process to an

engagement with a stranger in which we take certain conscious steps to respond to this

stranger, but in which we must also surrender to the stranger's otherness: "To respond

fully to the singular otherness of the other person (and thus render that otherness

apprehensible) is to creatively refashion the norms whereby we understand persons as

a category and in that refashioning—necessarily inaugural and singular—to find a way

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of responding to his or her singularity" (24). Likewise, to create something innovative

and singular, whereby its uniqueness is "apprehensible," requires taking responsibility

for that uniqueness—a kind of responsibility that entails trusting and affirming an

unknown before it ever manifests.[5] When one risks finding the right expression or the

right attitude that enables the other to manifest, one aspires to do "justice" (Attridge

24). For Attridge, the willingness to take responsibility for the other through a shift in

attitude, consciousness or method constitutes the very basis of ethics.

     I argue that avant-garde writers demonstrate an ethical disposition when they

respond to, and take responsibility for, the otherness in and of language—including the

ironies, indeterminacies, and assumptions, as well as the materiality, of language.

When these writers perform experiments in language, they open themselves up to risk

and unpredictability, an opening that Attridge also associates with ethics. As Attridge

writes:

> The most innovative artists or scientists have usually had an exceptionally
>
> great capacity to incorporate cultural materials and have therefore been
>
> able to make the strongest impression on cultures. [This is not] merely a
>
> question of the richness and range of the stuff that the mind has to work
>
> on; what the inventor finds in the cultural field is not just material but

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[5] Tyrus Miller uses the term "singular example" to describe avant-garde artworks. Traditionally, exemplarity serves a representative, didactic or inspirational function of "refer[ring] to an existing repertoire of cultural meanings" (8). In other words, singular examples serve as cyphers for an "already existing source of authority: the authority of tradition, morality, religious doctrine, or history" (8-9). With a decline in the authority invested in those examples, however, avant-garde artworks operate by "actively reversing the temporal direction of exemplarity, making the work exemplify not something already given in the past and in history, but rather something that the present has yet to bring forth fully and that will be realized in the future" (9).

gaps in the material, strains and tensions that suggest the pressure of the

other, of the hitherto unthought and unthinkable. (23)

The "pressure of the other," that Attridge associates with the pressure of innovation,

exerts an ethical force, acting as an "impingement" on the political because that

pressure "challenges assumptions, habits, and values"—aspects of our disposition that

ultimately reflect our political reality.   When Attridge associates innovation and ethics,

his perspective shares much with the "poethics" of Joan Retallack.

    In her book *The Poethical Wager*, Joan Retallack defines "poethics" as a relation

between poiesis and ethos: "Any making out of forms of language (poesis) is a practice

with a discernible character (ethos)" (11). Retallack elaborates: "Literature (in contrast

to journal writing) is an entry into public conversation. At its best it enacts, explores,

comments on, further articulates, radically questions the ethos of the discourses from

which it springs" (11). This "entry into public conversation" is ethical by virtue of its

engagement with, what I have called earlier, the political. In terms of innovative or

experimental work being overtly ethical, Retallack writes of Gertrude Stein and John

Cage:

> Every "great" innovator was acutely aware of changing circumstances
>
> and forms of her or his own times and had to devise a distinctive writing
>
> procedure to accommodate them. It is in this sense that authentically
>
> innovative work is consciously poethical. It vitally engages with the
>
> forms of life that create its contemporary context—the sciences, the arts,
>
> the politics, the sounds and textures of everyday life, the urgent questions
>
> and disruptions of the times. It's these factors that make it different from

earlier work and for a time unrecognizable—to all but a few—as

significant extension or transgression of existing genres. (40)

For Attridge, this accounting for one's "changing circumstances" as they arise in the

present means taking responsibility for the other on the horizon of experience. But, for

Retallack, this devising of unique measures to account also means taking responsibility

for both experience and for poetry itself. In both senses that Retallack suggests,

innovation is a form of ethical responsibility—poethical work not only changes

"existing genres" but also renews them for future use. Together, Attridge's notion of

the other and Retallack's notion of the poethical, provide a foundational context for a

theory of an ethics and a poetics of provisionality.

Defining the Provisional

Beginning with the etymology of the word "provisional" as my point of

departure, I posit that a provisional poetics, as an ethics of poetry, contains three

aspects: (1) the necessary; (2) the conditional; and, (3) the anticipatory. These three

aspects demonstrate a paradox at the heart of the word "provisional," since they

indicate that something "provisional" attempts to fulfill a present, and perhaps future,

need, in a way that is likely only temporary. "Provisional" includes the stem

"provision"—a word that denotes an immediate necessity, possibly for use at a future

time. "Provisional," then, indicates the temporary, or momentary fulfillment of the

necessary. "Provisional" also relates to the word proviso—a term that signifies a

condition, or stipulation, upon which a contract's fulfillment might hinge.

"Provisional," then, indicates an inherent contingency or conditionality. "Provisional"

also originates from the Latin *providere*—a word that means to see ahead or pro-vise.

"Provisional," then indicates the capacity for foresight or the anticipation of future

needs. The productive play within the etymology of the word "provisional" provides

the necessary flexibility for a theory that must account for the shifting nature of poetic

response along with the committed nature of ethical responsibility. Poetry sustains an

ethical force, not because it maintains a constant definition or moral drive, but because

it represents a continual renewal of our ability to respond to personal, social and,

political circumstances.[6] Likewise, defenses of poetry sustain an ethical force not by

defining a "putative essence," as Gayatri Spivak suggests, but by constructing

definitions in a "provisional and polemical" way (77). "[D]efinitions are necessary,"

Spivak continues, "in order to keep us going, to allow us to take a stand" (77).

Inasmuch as defenses register poetry under attack, they also register what poetry

should be responsible for at any given time.

Chapter Overview

In the four chapters of this dissertation, I explore the poetics and ethics of

provisionality. While my first chapter outlines a history of poetic defenses, and further

chapters contextualize more contemporary writing within a tradition of the poetic

defense, the majority of this dissertation examines contemporary experimental North

American writing—writing that I argue demonstrates a theory of provisionality. In my

first chapter, I examine the history of poetic defenses from the Classical era into the

twentieth century, in an effort to establish how critics and poets have couched their

claims for poetry's significance in ethical arguments about poetic responsibility.

Throughout the twentieth century, the intensification of avant-garde poetics has

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[6] My thinking about the relationship between response and responsibility comes from a line out of Robert Duncan's poem, "The Law I Love is Major Mover," where he writes: "Responsibility is to keep / the ability to respond" (10).

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provided an alternative and provisional critique of conventional poetic responsibility. In my second chapter, then, I examine the writing of four writers from the Language school, in an effort to contextualize how Language writing has demonstrated this avant-garde revision of the poetic defense. By the 1970s, writers like Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein develop a theoretically- and politically-invested poetics attuned to a critique of language and referentiality. In my third chapter, I examine the writing of four younger American writers, in an effort to account for the state of contemporary poetry in the United States. By the 1990s, writers like Mark Nowak, Rodrigo Toscano, Juliana Spahr, and Harryette Mullen refine and critique the poetics of Language writing, in a phenomenon many critics have termed Post-Language writing. In my fourth chapter, I examine the writing of four Canadian, Post-Language writers, in an effort to consider how Language writing inflects Canadian experimental writing, and to establish the difference between an American and Canadian contingent of such writing. By the 1990s, writers like Jeff Derksen, Rachel Zolf, Lisa Robertson, , Stephen Cain exhibit Language-inflected styles, both as the result of a general innovative milieu and as the result of cross-border interactions.

In the Prologue to Chapter One, I consider Plato's banishment of poets and poetry from his Republic as the inaugural call for poets and critics to defend poetry. In fact, Plato establishes the foundation for poetic defenses by allowing that poetry might return from exile once its defenders can affirm poetry's particular ethical function in society. Inevitably, subsequent defenses have borne the mark of Plato's demands. To frame my history of the defensive genre, I have borrowed M.H. Abrams's four-tier model of the history of literary theory: the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive, and the objective. Just as Abrams has suggested that literary theory first orients itself toward

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mimesis in the Classical era, so also do I argue that Aristotle's *Poetics* demands that poetry be responsible for providing a credible depiction of the world. Just as Abrams argues that literary theory orients itself toward pragmatics in the Renaissance, so do I argue that Sidney's "Apology for Poetry" demands that poetry be responsible for providing an edifying experience for the audience. Just as Abrams argues that literary theory orients itself toward expressivity in the nineteenth century, so do I argue that Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" demands that poetry be responsible for providing a release of the poet's imagination. Just as Abrams argues that literary theory orients itself toward textuality in the twentieth century, so do I argue that Allan Tate's "To Whom is the Poet Responsible?" demands that poetry be responsible for providing an object of experience in and of itself. I make use of Abrams's model because his terminology has provided me with a structure for thinking about how the orientations of literary theories arise primarily out of literary defenses and prescriptive treatises. I augment Abrams's four-tier model by providing intermediary or transitional examples between each of the four phases in order to offer a more thorough examination of poetic responsibility and to demonstrate how each of these four modes do the necessary work of defending poetry by also anticipating future definitions of poetic responsibility.

I also make provisional use of Abrams's model because previous scholarship on poetic defenses focuses on individual periods in literature, without establishing a coherent narrative about the history of these defenses. I examine the strengths and weaknesses in four books about poetic defenses: Margaret W. Ferguson's account of Renaissance defenses, *Trials of Desire*; John L. Mahoney's argument about Post-Restoration and Romantic defenses, *The Whole Internal Universe*; Christopher Clausen's consideration of Romantic, Post-Romantic and Modernist defenses, *The Place of Poetry*;

and Jeannine Johnson's discussion of Modernist and late-twentieth century poetic defenses, *Why Write Poetry?* The final third of this chapter looks more closely at actual defenses and show how these treatises demonstrate a model of provisionality in their description of poetic responsibility. I provide some context for the basis of attack to which each defense responds. I move onto an analysis of each defense's ethical argument, examining how each defense engages the three aspects of the provisional. First, attacks against poetry make defenses *necessary*, just as defensive arguments argue for the necessity of poetry itself. Second, attacks against poetry render defenses *conditional*, based on the fact that defenses convert the point of attack into the core of poetry's responsibility. Third, defenses of poetry envision poetry as *anticipatory*, in the sense that poetry does not necessarily deal with political or social reality directly, but provides visions of what, otherwise, could be or should be.

In the Prologue to Chapter Two, I examine Charles Bernstein's poem "A Defence of Poetry" as an example of a contemporary defense, representative of the Language school of writing. In Bernstein's poem, he has used grammatical and typographical "nonsense" to demonstrate a reflexive argument about poetry's ability to provide alternate versions of sense-making that have phenomenonological and political ramifications. I move on to provide a short history of Language poetry, in which I rehearse the early formulations of the movement in small magazines, such as *Alcheringa* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and in the provisional characterizations of this writing in essays by Lee Bartlett and Michael Greer. While different scholars debate the origins of Language writing and the coherence of Language writing as a coalescent phenomenon, my survey remains brief, but focused on how Language writing engages the four modes of poetic responsibility.

Specifically, I provide four provisional definitions for Language writing's challenge to the four traditional modes defined by Abrams. I refer to these alternative modes as provisional realism, provisional activism, provisional lyricism and provisional formalism. In other words, I suggest that Language writing has rendered the traditional categories of poetic responsibility as provisional, both through critique and revision. I align each provisional category with a particular Language writer, although I also explore how each of these four writers engages with each category. I align Ron Silliman with a provisional realist project, Bruce Andrews with a provisional activist project, Lyn Hejinian with a provisional lyrical project, and Charles Bernstein with a provisional formalist project. I offer these writers because they represent the most "academic" of the Language school—a context in which scholars continue to debate the volatility of both poetry's ethical status and poetry's political status. In the final third of this chapter, I explicate four different poems by Silliman, Andrews, Hejinian, and Bernstein from a 1982 collection in the *Paris Review*, titled "A Language Sampler." Each poem demonstrates a respective provisionality at work.

While I first define these respective provisionalities—provisional realism, provisional activism, provisional lyricism, and provisional formalism—through explication of the four Language writers above, I also expand these definitions in the second and third chapters. Basically, these alternative modes recognize that the phenomenological, the psychological, and linguistic assumptions undergirding so much poetry require interrogation, revision, and even dismantling. A provisional realism, for example, takes aim at the assumption that the world might be knowable and representable, in ways that do not reflect the fragmented, personal, and mediated manner that we actually experience the world. A provisional activism takes aim at the

assumption that the reader should be entertained, or affirmed, by poetry in ways that do not also recognize the value of poetry to aggravate, incite, and even change the reader himself. A provisional lyricism takes aim at the assumption that personality, even subjectivity, might be an essential, representable whole, available for harnessing into a crystalline, authentic voice without the effects of socialization. A provisional formalism takes aim at the assumption that language might operate clearly and innocently, as the vehicle of new ideas, without being haunted by ideology and history. Undoubtedly, history shows that poetry has investigated and challenged these assumptions, effectively taking responsibility for the world, the reader, the poet and our language. These alternative modes intend to challenge those assumptions further, but not by simply deconstructing them, but by rendering them provisional, as possibilities. Ultimately, I see an embrace of provisionality in the ways that so-called Post-Language writers attempt to hybridize, and makes use, of a whole variety of modes and sensibilities in an effort to defend the viability of poetry as a discourse capable of imagining the world, educating citizens, reflecting subjectivity and renewing our language.

In the Prologue to Chapter Three, I consider Juliana Spahr's essay-poem "Circle Out" as an example of a Post-Language defense of poetry. In her manifesto, Spahr has relied on the theme of circularity to suggest the similarity between poetry and philosophy, a similarity that, on the one hand, invokes the ancient quarrel between these disciplines and, on the other hand, suggests the role of poetry in a larger practice of understanding the universe. I move on to account for the scholarship that attempts to conceptualize different iterations of Post-Language writing, with terms such as "third way," and "post-avant" to "hybrid." I develop a genealogy of Post-Language writing,

similar in scope to my short history of Language writing—a history that begins with articulations in small magazines, then collections in larger anthologies, and, finally, in considerations by academic scholars. While scholars like Steve Evans and Mark Wallace begin conceiving of a Post-Language possibility in the early 1990s, anthologies like *American Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century* and most recently *American Hybrid* firmly solidify the Post-Language as a recognizable aesthetic. The online discussion of the "post-avant" also helps differentiate the genealogy of the Post-Language from that of Language, in that technology plays a more pronounced role in how scholars and poets articulate the Post-Language movement.

In the final third of Chapter Three, I align four American Post-Language writers with the four alternate modes of poetic responsibility—modes that I use to discuss Language poetry. I suggest that these four Post-Language writers extend the project of Language writing by accepting the provisional versions of mimesis, pragmatism, expressivity and objectivism. Unlike Language writing that represents two geographically-centered coteries of poets, however, Post-Language writing represent a far more disparate grouping, in which no convenient anthology, such as a "Post-Language Sampler," exists. I consider two male poets and two female poets, all of whom exemplify a provisional poetics in the broader context of their work, and in particular texts as well. First, I discuss Mark Nowak and his prose poem "$00 / Line / Steel / Train"—a poem that documents a provisional realism in its collection of photographs, testimonials, and lyric poems. Second, I discuss Rodrigo Toscano and his fragmentary poem "non-confidential memos"—a poem that exemplifies a provisional activism in its sparse "memos" that serve to educate, provoke, and amuse. Third, I discuss Juliana Spahr and her lyric serial "Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to

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March 27, 2003"—a series that demonstrates a provisional lyricism in its daybook-style collection of private and public experience after 9/11. Last, I discuss Harryette Mullen and her book *Muse & Drudge*—a book that exemplifies a provisional formalism in its lyrical exploration of blues, puns, idioms, sounds, and song. Post-Language writing in the United States is far more apparent and recognizable than in Canada, but in my final chapter, I consider the role of Language writing in Canadian literature.

In the Prologue to Chapter Four, I consider "Coasting," a manifesto by Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw, and Catriona Strang—a document that, I suggest, demonstrates a Canadian Post-Language defense of poetry. In the course of "Coasting," the authors defend poetry and poetics as investigative, particularly of the political assumptions undergirding our views of the world, subjectivity, and language. But the authors of "Coasting" also recognize the limitations in the politics of the Language project, doing so by arguing that textual activity is simply not enough to enact sufficient political change. I move on to chart a history of innovative writing in Canada—a history that engages the provisional and that culminates in what I am calling Canadian Post-Language writing. I begin with a short discussion of the Tish movement, and innovative writing in Canada after 1960, in an effort to establish how both Canadian Post-Language writing, like Language writing and Post-Language writing in the United States, arise out of responses to the New American Poetics. I provide a brief discussion of Steve McCaffery and his symposium in *Open Letter*—"The Politics of the Referent"—a symposium that helps commence Language writing but that also places Language writing in a Canadian context. Next, I turn to the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) and the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium—a colloquium that features members of the KSW cross-fertilizing with Language writers. I close my survey with a

brief examination of another bastion of Canadian Post-Language writing, the "Coach House Coterie," and with a discussion of Canadian contributions to the topic of Post-Language writing in *OEI* magazine.

In the final third of Chapter Three, I align four Canadian Post-Language writers with the four alternate modes of poetic responsibility—modes that I use to discuss Language poetry and American Post-Language poetry. Like their American counterparts, I suggest that these four writers have refined and revised the project of Language poetry. While the KSW represents a localized contingent of writers, the "Coach House Coterie" do not represent an organized group, although they have published with Coach House Books and they have often studied at York University. Like the previous chapter, I offer background into the work of four poets, two from the KSW and two from the "Coach House Coterie," each of whom demonstrate a provisional poetics throughout their work, while also delivering markedly distinct styles. First, Jeff Derksen's "Interface" represents a provisional realism in its rearticulatory assembly of Post-Marxist observation, quoted news, and statistics. Second, Rachel Zolf's book *Human Resources* enacts a provisional activism in its interweaving of instructional lists, appropriated corporate discourse, autobiographical fragments, and online database materials. Third, Lisa Robertson's poem "Men Deft Men" demonstrates a provisional lyricism in its exploration of textual subjectivity, the Muse turned Poet, asserting her voice. Stephen Cain's poems "American Standard" and "Canada Dry" exemplify a provisional formalism in their collage of constraints, puns, idioms, and recombinations.

I cannot deny that Language poets and Post-Language poets, of both the American and Canadian variety, demonstrate and articulate their engagement with

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political issues through the exploration of poetry and poetics. But, my argument remains that such efforts are primarily ethical—focused on responding to, and being responsible, for the world, the reader, the self, and the text. Inevitably, attending to these orientations represent four modes of being ethical. In their efforts to open up to the other in Derek Attridge's terms, and to respond accordingly, Language poets, and Post-Language poets alike, demonstrate a commitment that exists prior to, or simultaneous with, political concerns. To continue to argue on poetry's behalf, against attacks from within the same discursive community no less, sustains a collective disposition that recognizes the history of poetry as a history of efforts to improve the world. To act responsibly in and through poetry means answering the call, promising to answer back, about what the world may need. Maintaining the ability to respond, acting in an ethical fashion, requires a constant vigilance in writing and reflecting. Such vigilance characterizes an ongoing defense of poetry against its detractors, but also against poetry's seeming unimportance to the polis. For poetry is not a stable discourse; it is a provisional one. While poetry's beneficial qualities change to meet the demands in a temporary, and changing context, poetry does not necessarily lose currency. Poetry remains oriented toward the future as its legibility continues to evolve. As a response and a responsibility, poetry remains an ethical act, capacious enough to offer comfort and critique in the most destitute times, and, thus, poetry remains worthy of continued defense.

CHAPTER 1:

THEORIZING THE PROVISIONAL: A HISTORY OF POETIC DEFENSES

Prologue:

In Defense of the Provisional

At the end of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates states: "[H]ymns to the gods and eulogies

to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. If you admit the

pleasure-giving Muse, whether in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings

in your city instead of law or the thing that everyone has always believed to be the best,

namely, reason" (Plato, *Republic* 607a).[7] Such an allowance complicates the general

assumption that Plato out-rightly banishes poets from his city in words.[8] Further on in

his dialogue with Glaucon, Socrates asks "[I]sn't it just that such poetry should return

from exile when it has successfully defended itself, whether in lyric or any other

meter?" (607d). This challenge to poets includes a challenge to critics, "defenders, who

aren't poets themselves but lovers of poetry" (607d). These critics, Socrates argues,

must "speak in prose on [poetry's] behalf and … show that it not only gives pleasure

but is beneficial to constitutions and to human life" (607d). Plato's attack against

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[7] Rather than use page numbers, I reference the traditional "Stephanus numbers used almost universally in citing Plato's works" (Leitch 49).

[8] In the introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, the editors report: "Plato's Socrates argues that far from being divinely inspired, poets lie and ought to be banished from the ideal republic—or, at the very least, heavily censored" (Leitch 35). Similarly, in the introduction to *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Hazard Adams claims: "Plato found that he must banish the poet from the republic or limit him by strict censorship to songs offering innocuous praise of the state" (11). Neither text provides an excerpt of where Socrates gives an opportunity for "lovers of poetry" to come to poetry's defense (Plato, *Republic* 607d).

poetry, as articulated by Socrates, prompts poets to defend their art, to inaugurate a strain of poetic theory, and to frame that theory within the mode of the literary defense. As M. H. Abrams suggests: "In every age the seemingly positive principles of criticism have been designed for the defense of poetry" ("Belief" 3). To theorize poetry, if not most literature, after Plato means defending poetry and, responding to Plato's concerns about poetry's ethical disposition.

Despite the apparent centrality of the poetic defense in the history of literary criticism, the genre of the defense itself remains under-theorized. Moreover, any scholarship that considers this genre in isolation remains sporadic.[9] On the one hand, the majority of scholarship on the subject examines the poetic defense in certain major periods or examines the poetic defense by particular poets.[10] On the other hand, the least theoretically rich scholarship on the subject considers the poetic defense in total or summarizes the poetic defense in sweeping terms.[11] In the following discussion, I assess the criticism about poetic defenses, working chronologically through the major historical periods of literature: the Classical period, the Renaissance, the Romantic period, and the Modernist period. First, I examine Margaret W. Ferguson's account of Renaissance defenses in *Trials of Desire* (1983). Second, I examine John L. Mahoney's

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[9] Margaret Ferguson writes that "critics have rarely focused their attention on the defense as a special class of writing" (4). Similarly, in a footnote to his book *Literature Against Philosophy Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry*, Mark Edmundson claims that besides Margaret Ferguson's *Trials of Desire*, on Renaissance defenses, he knows of "no comparable volume for the modern period from, say, Sidney up through Blake, Shelley, Emerson and T.S. Eliot" (4).

[10] See, for example, the four texts that I consider in this dissertation as well as Peter C. Herman's *Squitter-wits and Muse-haters: Sidney, Spenser, Milton and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment* (1996) and Robert Matz's *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (2000).

[11] See, for example, Jay Parini's "Defending Poetry" in *Why Poetry Matters* (pp. 1-22).

argument about Post-Restoration and Romantic defenses in *The Whole Internal Universe* (1985). Third, I examine Christopher Clausen's theories about Romantic, Post-Romantic and Modernist defenses in *The Place of Poetry* (1982). Fourth, I examine Jeannine Johnson's discussion of Modernist and later-twentieth century poetic defenses in *Why Write Poetry?* (2007). While these texts represent the key arguments in the critical literature about poetic defenses, they do not establish a coherent narrative. In fact, my survey dramatizes the very problem in current considerations of poetic defenses: some historical periods do not seem to include explicit statements in defense of poetry, and thus such periods remain undiscussed by critics.

Before surveying the existing literature in the second section of this chapter, and providing my own account of poetic defenses in the third section of this chapter, I theorize a poetics of "provisionality," doing so in order to demonstrate a coherent structure and intention to the history of poetic defenses. Provisionality characterizes the poetic defense because the context under which apologists defend poetry changes over time. The etymology of "provisional," as a variation on the word "provide," informs my theory insofar as "provisional" affords three meanings—the necessary, the conditional, and the anticipatory—meanings that encapsulate the operative logic of the poetic defense throughout history. More contemporary associations of the word "provide" arise from the Latin *provisio*, which indicates an act of supplying necessary material, or readying essentials. *Provisio* evolves into the more current word "provision," which denotes a condition, or stipulation. Less familiar, however, is the original Latin word *providere*, which means to see ahead (pro-vise), or anticipate. I claim that poetic defenses rely on this trio of notions—the necessary, the conditional, and the anticipatory. Specifically, attacks against poetry render the value of poetry *conditional*

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making defenses *necessary*. Inevitably, then, defenses provide a necessary, though changing, service that act in anticipation: poetry remains perpetually under attack; so poetic statements often contain exhortative or pre-emptive claims that draw attention to poetry's value. Defenses of poetry also maintain that poetry is *anticipatory* by arguing that poetry foresees the needs of both the present and of the future. Poetry provides a necessary, though changing, service that acts in anticipation: poetry's relevance remains perpetually in question; so poetry often enacts unprecedented experiments that extend the value of poetry's place in the world.

By contending that each defense of poetry demonstrates a poetics of provisionality, I am also claiming that defenses rely on an ethical argument—an ethics of poetry, generally, and an ethics of provisionality, specifically. In my introduction, I define ethics as a response to the effects of politics on our psychological, emotional and intellectual disposition. Poetry engages ethics because poetry can articulate this relation between our personal dispositions and our political conditions. When poetry responds to forces of hegemony—discourses, institutions and policies—poetry takes responsibility for our political circumstances. This act of responsibility indicates what I mean by an ethics of poetry. Generally, defenses of poetry demonstrate an ethics because defenses respond to, and take responsibility for, the attacks against poetry—attacks that often originate in the political, religious or intellectual realm. Moreover, defenses of poetry frame poetry as acts of responsibility for the world itself, the needs of an audience, the experience of the poet or the nature of the genre. Both poetry and its subsequent defenses respond to needs brought on by changing socioreligious, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic conditions, in which poetry might provide a critical, affective or imaginative context for contending with those conditions. Specifically,

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defenses of poetry demonstrate an ethics of provisionality because defenses respond to the particular, *conditional* nature of the social milieu that make responses *necessary*. Of course, defenses of poetry frame poems as acts of necessity brought on by immediate and ongoing conditions. Both poetry and its subsequent defenses, then, provide critical, imaginative insights that are *anticipatory*—and such insights can act as an impetus for changes in personal dispositions—changes that enable the ethical to impinge on the political.

In the third section of this chapter, I survey the history of poetic defenses from the Classical period into the later twentieth century, and I provide evidence of what I am calling both a poetics of provisionality and an ethics of provisionality. I frame my historical account of poetic defenses by examining the changing answers to the ethical question: to what is poetry responsible?[12] My account of poetic defenses resembles M. H. Abrams's model for the history of literary theory. Abrams's model provides a useful means to consider the changing form of the poetic defense because, as he points out: "Alone among the major disciplines the theory of literature has been mainly a branch of apologetics; and we shall mistake the emphases of many major critical documents, whether or not they are labeled a Defense of Poetry, if we fail to recognize the degree to which they have constituted the rebuttal in a persistent debate" ("Belief" 2). In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Abrams argues that there are four major "elements" that orient critical theories throughout history—the "universe," the "audience," the "artist," and the "work" (6). For each of these elements, then, Abrams denotes a different "orientation" (7) and discusses how each orientation dominates in a different historical

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[12] I borrow this question from Allan Tate's essay "To Whom is the Poet Responsible?," an essay that I discuss later in my dissertation.

period. In the Classical period, for example, the "mimetic" orientation focuses on the universe (8). In the Renaissance, the "pragmatic" orientation focuses on the audience (14). In the Romantic period, the "expressive" orientation focuses on the artist (21). In the modern period, the "objective" orientation focuses on the work (26). Some continuity and overlap exist between orientations, as I plan to show, with deference to Abrams's descriptions.

Abrams describes the mimetic orientation as "probably the most primitive aesthetic theory" but certainly not a "simple concept" (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 8). In mimetic theories, art imitates "aspects of the universe" (8) such as "people and actions, ideas and feelings, material things and events or super-sensible essences" (6). Abrams describes the pragmatic orientation as the "principal aesthetic attitude of the Western world" by virtue of either "its duration or the number of its adherents" well into the eighteenth century (21). In pragmatic theories, art adheres "to the nature, the needs, and the springs of pleasure in the audience" such that art represents a "means to an end, an instrument for getting something done" (20-21, 15). Abrams describes the expressive orientation as the manifestation of "increasing attention [after the seventeenth century] ... to the mental constitution of the poet, the quality and degree of his 'genius,' and the play of his faculties in the act of composition" (21). In expressive theories, art "embod[ies] the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings" such that "[a] work of art is essentially the internal made external" (22). Abrams describes the objective orientation as the most "comparatively rare" of all perspectives in literary criticism, though it began "to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century" (26, 27). In objective theories, art exists "in isolation ... as a

self-sufficient entity" such that we "judge it solely by criteria intrinsic to its own mode of being" without recourse to "the spectator, the artist, or the world without" (26).

I rely on Abrams's model in charting my history of poetic defenses, but I do so only provisionally in that I make his model a condition for my own, following his suggestion that a history of literary defenses constitutes a history of literary theory. I expand his model in order to discuss transitional periods more explicitly, and to rectify an omission in the existing scholarship on poetic defenses. In contrast to Abrams, who examines four orientations in roughly four periods, I examine poetic defenses in eight periods of literature, although I rely on four major moments and four transitional moments. The four major moments demonstrate the four changing modes of poetic responsibility, while the transitional moments demonstrate the provisional nature of poetic responsibility across these major epochs. Also, the transitional moments do not necessarily contain explicit statements in defense of poetry; however, statements in these moments do investigate the continued volatility of poetry's place in the world. In each examination of a major text I discuss the attack against poetry and identify poetry's purported weakness, only to show how a correspondent defense reframes that weakness as a strength—a reframing that serves as the essential structure for all defenses. I also show how the conversion from weakness to strength creates the basis for poetry's "provisonality." I begin with Plato in the Classical period to illustrate how he, in spite of dismissing poetry, establishes the groundwork for the way that defenses of poetry utilize an ethical argument. Next, I consider Aristotle as the first mimetic apologist who argues that poetry is responsible for representing the world as it is and should be. Giovanni Boccaccio's defense in the Medieval period exemplifies a transition because his defense rests on both a Classical and Christian argument about poetry's

benefits to its audience. Next, I examine Sir Philip Sidney as the major pragmatic

apologist who argues that poetry is responsible for the virtue of its audience. John

Dryden's defense from the Neoclassical period represents a transition because his

defense moves from the primacy of virtue to the value of pleasure as the end of poetry.

Next, I consider Percy Bysshe Shelley as the essential expressive apologist who argues

that poetry is responsible for dramatizing the passionate imagination of the poet.

Matthew Arnold's defense from the late nineteenth century typifies a transition because

his defense anticipates the valuation of poetry over religion and science. Next, I

consider Allan Tate as a representative, objective apologist who argues that poetry is

responsible for maintaining the autonomy of the poem as a cultural artefact. Robert

Pinsky's defense from the contemporary period signifies a recent transition because his

defense preserves the integrity of the poem as an artefact unobliged to fulfill traditional

expectations about its political purpose. Ending with Pinsky culminates in a very

coherent, though canonical, trajectory about the history of poetic defenses—a trajectory

from which I deviate in my subsequent exploration of provisionality after Pinsky.

I recognize that a chronology of apologetic statements can constitute a history of

poetic defenses, but that such a mapping suffers from a failure to see that poetry exists

in a constant state of crisis or flux. Both poetry and its defenses represent provisional

endeavors. Moreover, poetry has had to contend, sometimes simultaneously, with

attacks from both without and within: from disciplines competitive with poetry, from

disciplines appreciative of poetry, and from disciplines prescriptive about poetry.   If

Jeannie Johnson is correct to say that, in addition to refuting particular attacks, poetic

defenses "also … insinuate their own voices into … the entire tradition of defense," (27)

then defending poetry means, in part, accepting the dynamics of the paradigm and

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assuming an inherent inadequacy, if not a default crisis, in the genre itself. Lee Upton

insists as much in *Defensive Measures: The Poetry of Niedecker, Bishop, Glück, and Carson*,

where he writes:

> Poetry is the literary form that incites defense. Perpetually in crisis over
>
> matters of its utility, or its dismissal of utility, its aesthetic appeal, or its
>
> renunciation of such an appeal, its generic existence, or its rebuke to the
>
> conceit of genre, poetry courts high expectations and, often enough,
>
> dashes them. (13)[13]

The irony that Upton observes here recasts and focalizes M. H. Abrams's point that the

"seemingly positive principles of criticism have been designed for the defense of poetry

and … on a terrain selected by the opposition" ("Belief" 3). I submit that poetry's

greatest risks paradoxically generate its greatest strengths and that the features of this

dynamic constitute the continued ethical role of poetry in society. The productive

quality of this paradox is central to my subsequent discussion of provisionality in such

contemporary movements as Language writing and Post-Language writing.

Four Accounts of Poetic Defenses: An Assessment

In *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry*, Margaret Ferguson focuses on

three defenses of poetry in the sixteenth century.[14] In her Introduction, titled "An

Apology for Defenses," Ferguson defends the apologetic genre against previous

scholarship by M. H. Abrams. She reads Abrams's claims in "Belief and Suspension of

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[13] Hazard Adams's recent study *The Offense of Poetry* (2007) argues that poetry primarily serves to offend, and that this default position prompts both attacks against poetry and subsequent defenses.

[14] Joachim du Bellay's *La Deffence et illustration de la langue françoyse* (1549); Torquato Tasso's *Apologia in difesa della "Gerusalemme"* (1585); and Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, also titled *Apologie for Poetrie* (written in 1581, published in 1595).

Disbelief" as a call for an end to apologetic discourse in literary theory. While

Ferguson's reading of Abrams remains controversial, her evaluation of poetic defenses

exists as one of the first sustained discussions of poetic defenses in a particular period.[15]

Ferguson relies on linguistic philosophy and psychoanalysis to assert that the defensive

mode, as both a "genre" and a "discourse," represents a "'boundary creature'" (4, 5).[16]

The force of her argument comes in her assertion that "[m]odern readers who are

accustomed to classifying defenses of poetry as a species of literary criticism or theory

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[15] Ferguson writes: "Abrams's aim was to call for an end to apologetic literary theory
and to plead for an approach that would consider poetry 'as poetry and not another
thing'" (1). Abrams, however, says much more than this. He writes:

> The persistently defensive position of criticism, and its standard
> procedure of combating charges against poetry by asserting their
> contraries, has forced it into an either-or, all-or-none choice that breeds
> dilemmas: either language is scientific or it is purely emotive; either a
> poem corresponds to this world or it is a world entirely its own; either
> poetry has a moral aim or it is totally beyond judgment of good and evil;
> either all our beliefs are relevant to reading poetry, or all our beliefs must
> be suspended. What we obviously need is the ability to make more
> distinctions and finer discriminations; and perhaps these will follow if we
> substitute for concepts developed mainly as polemical weapons a positive
> view designed specifically for poetic inquiry and analysis. ("Belief" 12).

Ferguson rightly calls Abrams's position one of "'cultural pluralism'" in which Abrams
defends a New Critical belief that literature and criticism present a unique form of
knowledge that requires its own individual attention (Ferguson 200). Ultimately,
Ferguson sees the dynamic of defense—"the creative value of trial" (17)—as not only
natural but productive to the development of 'more distinctions and finer
discriminations.' Perhaps Ferguson underestimates Abrams's goals since Abrams
forever pursued a defense of poetry in his criticism.

[16] I do not explore the psychological implications of "defenses" but Ferguson points out
that she borrows the term "'boundary creature'" from Freud, though for Freud the term
pertains to the psychic ego. Ferguson justifies her choice in a literary context when she
writes:

> Because Freud formulated a complex theory of psychic defense, and
> because he illuminates certain aspects of this theory by his own practice as
> a writer, he may serve as an important albeit not entirely reliable guide
> into the general territory of defensive discourse I attempt to explore in this
> book—a territory which must be mapped both with reference to
> modalities of psychic defense and with reference to social pressures on the
> authorial ego. (13)

should recall that the boundaries between criticism, fiction, and rhetoric were much less distinct in the sixteenth century" (11). [17] This intersection enables Ferguson to argue that defenses dramatize and sustain questions about subjectivity and the sociopolitical importance of poetry within the broader cultural economy of Renaissance Britain and Europe (16). While Ferguson observes that, in the Renaissance, the apology represents a "mode of discourse that both springs from and attempts to remedy failures of communication" (4), I think that she underestimates the way that defenses acknowledge the conditional value of poetry before they expound on poetry's ethical purpose. In fact, I believe that Ferguson's observation applies to a broader history of poetic defenses—an observation that I here pursue.

In *The Whole Internal Universe: Imitation and the New Defense of Poetry in British Criticism: 1660-1830*, John Mahoney examines the role of mimesis in a smattering of seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century critics and poets.[18] In his Introduction, Mahoney reassesses the status of artistic mimesis for many critics (notably M. H. Abrams), who suggest that mimesis erodes and disappears by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Writing about the nineteenth century in particular, Mahoney asks: "If imitation in its classical roots means the capturing of what is essential in the events and actions of human life, can it not now mean the capturing of what is central in the

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[17] Furthermore, according to Ferguson, Classical and Renaissance defenses blur the boundary between oratorical and written discourse and "between theoretical (disinterested) uses of language and pragmatic (self-interested) ones" (7, 8).
[18] In a chapter about the Neo-Classical seventeenth-century, Mahoney discusses John Dryden, Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke. In a second chapter, he tackles the Anglo-Scottish critics. In remaining chapters, Mahoney focuses on individual eighteenth-century critics like Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds, as well as individual nineteenth-century poet/critics like William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, William Hazlitt, and Samuel Coleridge.

imaginings and emotions?" (3). Mahoney reads the expressive orientation of the

Romantic poets—a term he borrows from Abrams—as an "imaginative struggle ... to

represent" the activity of a passionate subjectivity (4). Validating the imagination as a

means of representing reality not only constitutes a defense of a particular definition of

mimesis, but also, a defense of poetry. Mahoney ultimately claims that the "new"

defense of poetry occurs once critics, like John Dryden, liberate poetry "for the

expression of sincere and authentic passion, for the making of images not as audio-

visual aids but as self-contained embodiments of the complexities of a rich and

mysterious nature" (17). When Mahoney extends the definition of mimesis to

accommodate expressive theories—theories that prioritize the affective experience of

the poet—Mahoney anticipates my desire to posit a coherent thread in a history of

poetic defenses.

　　In *The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis*, Christopher Clausen

examines "some episodes in the history of Anglo-American culture as reflected in the

struggles and fortunes of its poets" (2). In his Introduction, titled "Rhyme or Reason,"

Clausen contends that, since the advent of hard science in the eighteenth century,

poetry has relinquished its "cultural status" as a truth-bearing discourse and has

therefore lost its audience. "Despite its ups and downs with philosophy and religion,"

Clausen adds, "poetry remained central in western culture from the time of Homer

until late in the eighteenth century because its competitors' claims to provide superior

insight into reality (no matter how conceived) either were unpersuasive or could

become the basis of poetry itself, as in Lucretius or Dante" (26). Clausen does point out

that Plato's attack on poetry constitutes another crisis in the life of poetry. His position,

however, underestimates how the entire history of literary apologies demonstrates a

persistent crisis in poetry. The "crisis" in his title only pertains to the "decline of the

rational element in poetry" (21).   Clausen argues that "nearly all important poets and

critics, even Romantic ones, took the intellectual responsibility of poetry for granted

until about the middle of the nineteenth century" (21). Of course, by "intellectual

responsibility" he means that a viable poetics must proffer practical knowledge to its

audience—"ideas normally intended to apply to the world outside the poem" (21).

Clausen makes this point by turning to M. H. Abrams's five-fold account of poetic truth

in *The Mirror and the Lamp*. According to Abrams, one type of poetic truth "corresponds

to concrete experience ... from which science abstracts qualities for purposes of

classification" (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 315). In Clausen's opinion, poetry must strive to

offer "the truth of moments, situations, relationships," which assists readers with

"interpreting the endless ambiguities of life in general or our own choices in particular"

(Clausen 18). I appreciate that Clausen privileges a pragmatic poetics because, like

Clausen, I believe that poetry must operate in an ethical fashion. Unfortunately,

however, his thesis neither credits the changing forms of poetic responsibility nor

accounts for the fact that poetry changes definitions over time in order to stay ethically

responsible, not simply 'intellectually responsible.'

In *Why Write Poetry? Modern Poets Defending Their Art*, Jeannine Johnson explores

different answers to the question in her title, by examining the verse apologies, rather

than prose defenses, of five twentieth and twenty-first century poets.[19] In her

Introduction, titled "This Green Sprout Why: Poetry as Apology's Natural Habitat,"

Johnson claims that "apology in poetry is, at base, a function of lyric introspection" (18).

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[19] She examines H.D., Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden, Adrienne Rich, and Geoffrey Hill.

Further, the reflexive measure of answering the question "Why write poetry?"

constitutes an admission of immanent inadequacy or an anticipation of imminent

attack: "It seems that to ask *Why?* in a poem would simply call unnecessary and

unwanted attention to something inimical to the poem. In other words, for the poet to

ask *Why write poetry?* is to make it vulnerable to the possibility that it cannot adequately

answer the question" (21). While the majority of her book examines the defensive

posturing of five Modernist and contemporary poets, her first chapter tackles the "prose

apologies" of literary history. She pays obvious attention to the ways in which these

apologies "justify the act of writing (and reading) poetry" (26). Unfortunately, Johnson

spends little time accounting for a history of defenses prior to the twentieth century—

defenses that might exceed a broad trajectory like that outlined by M. H. Abrams in

"Belief and the Suspension of Disbelief" to which Johnson refers in her first chapter

(Johnson 28). She does observe that "insofar as they are intended to convince an

opponent of their truthfulness, defenses of poetry (whether rendered in prose or in

verse) are in large part written for those who will never read them" (30). According to

Johnson, defenses of poetry often generate from an inherent feeling of inadequacy or

from a self-conscious apprehension in a poet's project. In other words, defenses do not

simply respond to attacks, but provide a basis for innovation, and the future of poetry.

Each of the texts evaluated above examines defenses of poetry from different

periods. I credit the strength of each author's respective argument with the limited

scope discussed in each text. This limitation, however, also represents the weakness

predominant in scholarship about poetic defenses. These authors do not attend to the

defensive genre in truly comprehensive ways, perhaps because they agree with M.H.

Abrams's assertion that defenses of poetry simply demonstrate the major principles of

literary criticism.   Still, these authors do successfully consider defenses in their

respective periods. Renaissance defenses offer Margaret Ferguson specific and

appropriate examples to explore the psychoanalytic dimensions of "defensive

discourse" (13), but the applicability of a psychoanalytic reading to all poetic defenses

remains undeveloped. Her desire to consider "the defense as an interdisciplinary mode

of writing" (15) avoids the necessity of first accounting for the broader history of poetic

defenses. Eighteenth and nineteenth century poetics provide John Mahoney with

evidence to substantiate a broadening definition of mimesis, but the effect of his

argument does not seem to change how we understand the history of poetic theory.[20]

His intention to value the expressive orientation of poetry by calling it mimetic simply

refutes the notion that mimesis, as a theory and as a practice recedes by the nineteenth

century. Nineteenth and twentieth century poetry and poetics gives Christopher

Clausen fodder for his accurate assessment of poetry's decline in social value and

impact, but the perspective that he offers on poetry's historical status remains naïve.

His aim of diagnosing poetry's crisis in terms of his own preference for didactic poetry

limits his discussion of a whole other range of poetries that attempt to enact

responsibility. Twentieth and twenty-first century verse apologies provide Jeannine

Johnson with the opportunity to discuss the relationship between defensiveness and

reflexivity, but her exclusion of defenses after Aristotle and before Sidney are

unfortunate. Her effort to show a link between defensiveness and lyric introspection

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[20] In positing his view of Aristotelian mimesis as an anticipation of Romantic mimesis, Mahoney makes the following comparison: "Rather than *mirroring* the world of ideas or offering some justification or *illustration* of a moral code, poetry holds meaning within itself. It *represents* and *communicates* a living process not requiring reference to an external norm" (13, italics mine).   In his statement he seems to move through three, if not four, of Abrams's orientations: mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective.

before the nineteenth century remains untested. While none of these authors foreclose on the possibility of a broader account, and none of their accounts contradict one another's, the absence in general criticism of a longer survey is an unfortunate omission.

While Ferguson, Mahoney, Clausen and Johnson all consider poetic defenses in specific periods, only Clausen and Johnson survey the genre overarchingly. Clausen discusses how the terms of defensiveness have changed over time—from a reliance on a social and moral argument to an insular and aesthetic argument—so that he can diagnose the degraded place of poetry since the nineteenth century. Johnson discusses how the history of defenses demonstrates a progressive increase in the correlation between self-reflexivity and self-doubt—from Aristotle's disciplined poetics to Modernism's polemical manifestoes—so that she can contextualize the verse-defenses of five modern poets within a larger defensive history. Neither Clausen nor Johnson's accounts, however, challenge the model of literary history developed by M. H. Abrams. In fact, as I have already suggested, these critics not only uphold his model, but Clausen relies on Abrams to discuss literary truths, and Johnson relies on Abrams to discuss literary history. While Ferguson and Mahoney do not challenge Abrams's model either, these scholars confront Abrams's ideas more critically. Ferguson confronts Abrams's perspective on apologetics as a genre that hinders the progress of literary criticism, and Mahoney contests Abrams's view on mimesis as an orientation that recedes in the nineteenth century. I would argue then that Abrams remains the important touchstone for scholarship on poetic defenses

Margaret Ferguson begins her introduction by claiming that Abrams seeks to progress beyond the need for literary apologetics, but she does not see such progression as either "desirable" or "possible" (Ferguson 4). According to Ferguson, Abrams views

apologies as distracting from what should be the critic's intention—to analyze and praise poetry for its intrinsic power. Ferguson values defenses, however, because the conflict at the heart of the apologetic scenario results in a clarity similar to that which follows "explanation and qualification" (4). Apologetic discourse, then, evinces a commitment not only to clarification, but also to dialogue, and these measures represent indispensible personal and cultural values. I would argue that Ferguson's critique of Abrams highlights the very ethical nature of defensive discourse. In contrast to Ferguson, however, John Mahoney begins his introduction by taking issue with Abrams's claim that imitative poetry ends by the late-eighteenth century (Mahoney 1); but, unlike Abrams, he does not see "critics and aestheticians" as abandoning imitation, so much as "widen[ing] its possibilities" (3). The basis for Mahoney's critique of Abrams comes from Mahoney's belief that 'mimetic' and 'expressive' are not mutually exclusive categories. Expressive poetry, in Mahoney's interpretation, not only "convey[s] the expression of the inner life," but this conveyance "represent[s] the truth of reality" (3). In other words, Mahoney takes aim at Abrams's division between an art driven by the mirror of mimesis and an art driven by the lamp of the imagination. Both Ferguson and Mahoney identify Abrams's ideas on literary defenses and literary history as indispensable and formative, despite challenging and refining his ideas.

In contrast to Ferguson and Mahoney, whose disagreements with M.H. Abrams provide an impetus for research, Christopher Clausen and Jeannine Johnson utilize Abrams's views on literary truth and literary history, respectively. Clausen, for example, begins his introduction by claiming that poetry in England and the United States "has been an art in continual crisis" since the Romantic period, and that every "innovation" since has attempted to reassert poetry's value in the defensive form

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(Clausen 1). One crucial aspect of Clausen's assessment rests on a consideration of M.H. Abrams's five variations on poetic truth in the nineteenth century, particularly Abrams's fourth proposition: "'Poetry is true'" when "'it corresponds to concrete experience and integral objects, from which science abstracts'" (qtd. in Clausen 18). In this proposition, Clausen partly grounds his diagnosis of the poetic crisis, and extends his argument for poetry's revaluation, both of which revolve around his belief that poetry must provide knowledge and interpretation of modern life. Unlike the other critics, Jeannine Johnson begins by exploring her question about modern verse defenses with no explicit reference to M. H. Abrams. One core acknowledgement that she makes comes in her brief summary of Aristotle's apology for poetry—a summary where she cites Abrams observation that literary "criticism [has] been designed for the defense of poetry … on a terrain selected by the opposition" (Abrams, "Belief" 3). In this citation, Johnson recognizes Abrams's foundational work in the area of defenses, and she accepts Abrams's identification of Aristotle as the first apologist after Plato's attack. Like Clausen and Johnson, I engage with Abrams sympathetically, and like all four critics, I do not challenge Abrams's model of literary history; but, unlike these critics, I rely on Abrams's model more explicitly only so as to extend the capacity of his four "orientations." In place of Abrams's four "orientations," I substitute four modes of responsibility, and four transitional moments. The four modes provide the basis for my theory of provisionality—the coherent thread among all poetic defenses.

Plato's attack against poetry and poets remains the canonical commencement of literary theory. When he offers to poets and critics the opportunity to defend poetry, Plato also commences the genre of literary apologetics. Moreover, in Book II of *The Republic*, Plato establishes the basis for subsequent defenses by turning his own attack

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against poetry into a defense of poetry. In essence, the weakness with which he charges poetry—poetry's reliance on mimesis—is the basis for poetry's strength—poetry's ability to dramatize virtue and 'goodness'; these strengths are the conditions for any proper defense according to Plato's allowances in Book X. Defenses must "show that [poetry] not only gives pleasure but is beneficial to constitutions and to human life" (Plato, *Republic* 607d). In other words, Plato insists that poetry must uphold an ethical role in society. Inevitably, poetic defenses after Plato engage his provision by broadening their interpretations of poetic responsibility and by converting the supposed weaknesses posited by attackers into provisional strengths. In general, a history of poetic responsibility progresses from defenses that evince a macrocosmic orientation to defenses that evince a microcosmic orientation. In the Classical period, poetry responds to the world and universal truths; in the Early Modern period, poetry responds to the audience and personal virtues; in the Romantic period, poetry responds to the poet and imaginative experiences; in the Modern period, poetry responds to the poem and formal problems. Despite seeming to retreat from an overtly ethical sphere into a predominantly aesthetic realm, poetic defenses continue to assert that poetry represents a culturally responsible activity, constantly aware of the events, experiences and technologies that shape culture at every moment.

Plato's Attack and the Inauguration of Poetic Defenses

Socrates's and, by default, Plato's perspective on poetry represents a preliminary example of the mimetic mode of poetic responsibility—that poetry must represent the world as it is and as it should be. In Book II of *The Republic*, Socrates exploits the tenuous relationship between poetry's dangerous potential and poetry's potential usefulness in order to show how poetry can serve the republican ethos. While Socrates

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and Glaucon discuss the necessary education for a proper guardian of the utopic city-state, Socrates submits that a formal, traditional education begins with "music and poetry" (Plato, Republic 376e). Recognizing the affective influence of poetry on developing minds and souls, Socrates responds with the suggestion that storytelling must be supervised. Philosopher-founders, he charges, should create "the patterns on which poets must base their stories and from which they mustn't deviate" (379a). Socrates characterizes the most dangerous poetry as that which "[t]ell[s] the greatest falsehood about the most important things" (377e). Poetry's greatest weakness, according to Socrates, is its openness, or susceptibility to relaying lies not in service to the civic ethos. But poetry benefits from being an imitation, a "falsehood in words," and is not as harmful as a "pure falsehood" (382b). A "pure falsehood" indicates an ignorance about reality that resides in the soul and is therefore detrimental to one's character (382b). In another line of inquiry regarding the benefit of poetry, Socrates suggests poetry's usefulness:

> What about falsehood in words? When and to whom is it useful and so not deserving of hatred? …. [I]n the case of those stories we were just talking about, the ones we tell because we don't know the truth about those ancient events involving the gods. By making a falsehood as much like the truth as we can, don't we also make it useful? (382c-d)

The use-value of falsehood enables poetry to fill holes in history or dramatize philosophical truths—to help rationalize and justify the world. Socrates defends poetry

because poetry can provide an approximation of the truth—a provisional truth that can serve in the education of future citizens.[21]

The Platonic defense of poetry exemplifies provisionality by exhibiting the two-part process of converting poetry's weakness into poetry's strength. First, Plato distrusts poetry because poetry represents the world, and the world already represents a dilution of the universal and timeless forms; but, poetry's strength and necessity hinge on a poet's ability to exploit poetry as a mimetic endeavor. Poetry's ability to provide the illustrations for precepts set by the philosopher-guardian is the condition for poetry's usefulness in the Republic. Second, poetry's ethicality wholly depends on the success of exploiting poetry as a mimetic art. If the poet's responsibility entails the perpetuation of the noble lie—the lie that maintains order and consistency within society—then the ethicality of poetry depends on poetry's ability to relay appropriate fictions.[22] These fictions, like mythologies, inevitably serve both present and future generations in need of justificatory or historical precedent. The poet's tales must not simply be temporary measures but also forward-looking illustrations. I might finally add that, if the most useful falsehood approximates the truth, then the actual product, the poem, is a kind of provisional object. The conditional relationship between poetry's aesthetic or poetic nature and its ethical nature constitutes the very essence of its provisionality. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle continues to explore this relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

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[21] According to Penelope Murray, in her book, *Plato on Poetry*, poets in the Classical-mimetic age create myths that serve to "inculcate religious or ethical truths" rather than factual or historical truths (152).

[22] Plato's recognition that lying, in the form of fiction, obtains a potential value and purpose in the Republic anticipates Nietzsche's view of language ventured in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense."

Aristotle's *Poetics* and the Mimetic Responsibility of Poetry

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle responds to Plato's mistrust of the mimetic nature of

poetry by focusing on the ethics of mimesis. In fact, Aristotle's *Poetics* exemplifies the

mimetic mode of poetic responsibility—a mode that emphasizes the art of responding

to the world as it is and as it should be.[23] Aristotle's brand of mimesis—what in Chapter

Two he calls portraits of "people in action" (32)—provides the foundation for both his

definition and defense of poetry.[24] Aristotle opens Chapter Two by prescribing that,

"[s]ince mimetic artists portray people in action, … these people must be either good or

bad (for men's characters practically always conform to these categories alone)" (32).

As Stephen Halliwell notes, Aristotle "stipulates the ethical characterisation of poetic

agents as a premise immediately attached to, or even inherent in, the idea of action"

(75). In other words, Aristotle suggests that depictions of action always carry a

particular ethical weight. In doing so, Aristotle correlates poetry with moral instruction

and inevitably responds to Plato's moral critique of mimesis. Further on, Aristotle

defines the proper poetic intention, which constitutes his answer to Plato's concern that

poets do not actually wield practical knowledge. Aristotle writes that the poet must

"speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which *could* occur,

and are possible by the standards of probability or necessity" (40).[25] Differentiating

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[23] In Chapter One of the *Poetics*, Aristotle immediately makes claims for the relevance of poetry as a worthwhile study and practice. Calling it the "art of poetry" Aristotle invokes Plato's claims the *Republic* that poetry does not resemble that of a techné—a craft or art.

[24] Chapter 25 of the *Poetics* includes a discussion of "the subject of problems and their solutions," anticipating various critiques of his definitions and program, defending them through clarification and qualification (61).

[25] In an important return to this theme of attending to the probable, Aristotle indicates in Chapter 25 of the *Poetics* a broader understanding of just what a poet must do: "Since

poetry from history, or practical knowledge proper, Aristotle invokes verisimilitude as the measure of poetry's usefulness—a strategy already suggested by Plato himself.[26] By specifying his definition of mimesis with an eye toward the provisional, Aristotle answers Plato's concerns about poetry's potentially harmful effects.

Aristotle's defense of poetry demonstrates an ethics of provisionality by converting poetry's potential weakness into poetry central strength. First, poetry's power under the Aristotelian system depends on accepting Plato's attack—the inherent susceptibility to misuse of mimetic processes—and working toward an ethics and a poetics of mimesis. Poetry's beneficial power is conditional based on poetry's adherence to the rules of the *Poetics*. Second, poetry's ethicality wholly depends on its success in turning its weakness into a strength. If poetic responsibility entails dramatizing the

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the poet, like the painter or any other image-maker, is a mimetic artist, he must in any particular instance use mimesis to portray one of three objects: the sort of things which were or are the case; the sort of things men say and thinks to be the case; the sort of things that should be the case" (61). In the full spectrum of truth and falsehood, poets deal in all levels from the historically particular, to the ignorantly believed or speculated, to the morally prescriptive. The word "should" also indicates again a sense of purpose in the poetic project—one attentive to the needs of a future time. Aristotle's regard for the future and his differentiation of poetry from history suggest that poetry works under an anticipatory logic.

[26] In the *Ars Poetica* (20 BCE), Horace's defense of poetry, Horace recognizes the contentious nature of defending poetry when he lists the ways in which during the "days of old" poets were sought for their wisdom on civic matters, but how they no longer wield such wisdom (133). He recognizes an already existing potential shame in assuming the role of poet—a shame no doubt imposed by Plato—when Horace writes that "there is no call to be ashamed of the Muse with her skill on the lyre or of Apollo the singer" (133). Curiously, Horace's consciousness of the Platonic attack comes also in his prescription to poets that "the man who combines pleasure with usefulness wins every suffrage" and that "whatever you [poets] invent for pleasure, let it be near the truth" (132). In the second of these two passages, the approximation of truth echoes Socrates's point in Book 2 of the *Republic* about the usefulness of "making a falsehood as much like the truth" as possible. In any case, Horace's reconciliatory formulation addresses Plato's concern for a misleading pleasure and a desire for art to be in the service of ethics.

observable ethos of one's culture, then poetry's necessity depends on a poet's ability to speculate with an eye toward the probable or possible. I might add that dramatizing what could be, or should be, carries with it the wisdom of foresight, in a way that demonstrates the anticipatory component of provisionality. Still, we should not extend to Aristotle's poet a legislative role because Aristotle does not elaborate on this prescriptive mode (i.e. what "should be the case"). As Stephen Halliwell writes:

> If Plato's charge is that poets purvey falsehoods about reality, Ar[istotle's] reaction is to assert both that many aspects of reality lie anyway outside the reach of poetry proper, and that when a poet does deal with his legitimate object (human action) he is not to be understood as making truth-bearing statements or claims, but as offering plausible yet fictional structures of possible (rather than actual) events. The poet is a dramatiser, not an interpreter, of human events. (74)

In order to represent human beings in action, the poet must be capable of recognizing the ethical nature of human beings as they act and interact. Ultimately, aesthetic choices depend on the ethical, and provisional, quality of poetry—specifically poetry's speculative capacity.

Boccaccios's *Genealogy* and the Medieval Transition

While the hypothetical, even speculative, potential of poetic mimesis comprises the cornerstone of Aristotle's defense of poetry, Aristotle's influence on poetics and the tradition of the defense recedes during the Middle Ages. Plato, however, remains influential, particularly in various Neo-Platonic interpretations—interpretations that posit the imperfections of the corporeal realm, even language itself, as a direct manifestation of the Absolute. Inevitably, allegory represents the threshold between the

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two realms, and therefore, both manipulation and interpretation of allegories becomes central during this time. Still, Horace's didactic poetics also has an unrelenting influence well into the sixteenth century, when readers finally reassess Aristotle in new translations. But for perhaps a thousand years, Christian discourse overshadows secular poetry. "This is not to say," Hazard Adams writes, "that medieval Christianity put an end to theoretical developments. Rather, theoretical interest expresses itself in allegorical interpretations of Scripture, the methods of which poets apply to secular works" (*Critical* 114). Still, until about the thirteenth century, secular poetry draws considerable suspicion, on the one hand, because of the residual Platonic concern that poetry incites passion and irrationality, and, on the other hand, because of the Christian concern that poetry promotes pagan beliefs and sensuousness. Defending poetry requires not only answering to the continuing concerns about poetry posed by Plato, but also staking a place for the many stories and myths that do not coincide with a Christian ethos. While mimesis represents Plato's first and foundational concern about poetry, and while Aristotle's defense hinges on turning that central concern into poetry's essential strength, poetry's defenders in the Medieval period must generate poetry's strength out of its allegorical, parabolic, or obscure nature. Boccaccio, by example, initiates such a defense of poetry.

Giovanni Boccaccio's defense of poetry in *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* hails back to the mimetic mode of responsibility and anticipates the pragmatic mode of responsibility.[27] The majority of *Genealogy* anthologizes allegorical interpretations of

[27] Boccaccio remains an anomalous and often overlooked figure in the history of poetic defenses. Despite his reliance on previous apologists, like Horace, his defense of poetry

classical myths in an effort to validate the world vision of pre-Christian culture. In the

final two books of *Genealogy*—fourteen and fifteen—Boccaccio defends poetry against

historical and contemporary detractors, suspicious of poetry in general and of the

poetry that he interprets in particular.[28] He summarizes the long-held criticism of

poetry—a mixture of Platonic and Christian concerns.[29] First, for example, Augustine

and Lactantius argue that poetry purveys fantastical stories and that these stories

constitute deceptive lies. Second, these critics then argue that, when poetry offers

complex allegories, these allegories only obscure truths. Third, these critics also argue

that, when poetry offers Pagan tales, these tales promote sacrilege. Fourth, Boethius and

John of Salisbury argue that poetry does not provide knowledge, but only mimics the

knowledge of philosophers.[30] Boccaccio responds to these critics by arguing for a

pragmatic, if not affective, definition of poetry as allegory, in which the source of such

poetry is divine. "Poetry," he claims, "is a practical art, springing from God's bosom

does anticipate a far more modern defense of poetry: one that demands being
responsible to the poem, or in his case, the veil of an allegory. He writes:
> It is not one of the poet's various functions to rip up and lay bare the
> meaning which lies hidden in his inventions. Rather where matters truly
> solemn and memorable are too much exposed, it is his office by every
> effort to protect as well as he can and remove them from the gaze of the
> irreverent, that they cheapen not by too common familiarity. (Boccaccio,
> Leitch, 261)

Somewhat ironic, the poet's ethical impact rests on his primary commitment to the
poem itself—a commitment that anticipates the later modernist responsibility to the
text.

[28] In Chapter Five of Book 14, Boccaccio allegorizes such detractors in a tale borrowed
from Boethius about Lady Philosophy. Surrounded by sycophantic and dissembling
followers, Boccaccio caricatures the "philosophers" who attack poetry (Boccaccio, Leitch
256).

[29] According to Charles Osgood: "It will readily appear that Boccaccio offers his reader
no new ideas. Even a well read man of the fourteenth-century could hardly have
thought his apology very original" (xl).

[30] See Osgood (154) for a more complete account of the sources of attack and defense
that Boccaccio rehearses.

and deriving its name from its effect" (Boccaccio, Adams, *Critical* 128).[31] A failure to

evaluate the actual effects of poetry or a failure to understand the inherent structure of

poetry results in claims by critics that poetry wields nonsensical, deceptive, ephemeral,

and inessential knowledge. In this way, poetry's allegorical structure represents its

greatest weakness, since allegory can mislead interpreters who cannot see beyond a

surface reading of the text. On the one hand, the success of an allegory depends on the

adeptness of the audience at understanding the layers of meaning. On the other hand,

"the power of fiction," Boccaccio claims, resides in how fiction "pleases the unlearned

by its external appearance, and exercises the minds of the learned with its hidden truth;

and thus both are edified and delighted with one and the same perusal" (Adams,

Critical 130). Boccaccio's defense of poetry clearly invokes the ethical criteria of Plato—

that poetry provide pleasure and constitutional benefit. Yet, poetry's ability to be

ethical depends on optimizing the very aspect that makes it susceptible to criticism.

Like Plato and Aristotle, Boccaccio's defense of poetry exemplifies an ethics of

provisionality by exhibiting the two-part process of converting poetry's weakness into

its strength. First, critics attack allegory's outer shell because it portrays fallacious,

unvirtuous or unphilosophical premises, but the poet's strength and ability to guard

"matters truly solemn and memorable" depends on his investment in the surface of the

allegory (Boccaccio, *Leitch* 261). Poetry's value depends on the poet's freedom to

deviate from verifiable fact. As Boccaccio suggests: "[I]f the privilege of ranging

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[31] Boccaccio claims erroneously that "[i]ndeed *poetry* has not the origin that many
carelessly suppose, namely *poio, pois*, which is but Latin *fingo, fingis*; rather it is derived
from a very ancient Greek work *poetes*, which means in Latin exquisite discourse
(*exquisita locutio*)" (Adams, *Critical* 128) Osgood notes that Boccaccio's etymological
definition of poetry resulted from his "limitations in Greek" (128).

through every sort of fiction be denied [poets], their office will altogether resolve into naught" (Adams, *Critical* 131). Second, then, poetry's ethical value—its ability to affect a diversity of people—wholly depends on the poet's success in wielding a full range of possible stories. Poetry's ability to console, stimulate, inspire and empower depends on the poet having recourse to a diversity of fictions. I might also add that, in his *Life of Dante*, Boccaccio indicates that ancient poetry, like Scripture, reveals its meanings over time, such that poetry speaks not only to the present but also to the future (Adams, *Critical* 125).[32] For Boccaccio, poetry's adherence to the aesthetics of allegory enables poetry to evolve as a responsible activity: as its meanings change so does its contribution to the ethos of a society. This ethical and aesthetic relation embodies the conditional and anticipatory qualities of a provisional poetics.

Sidney's *Defence* and the Pragmatic Responsibility of Poetry

In the Classical, Medieval and Renaissance periods, ethics remains the ultimate test of poetry's value, and the cornerstone to arguments on behalf of poetry. For example, Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry," alternately "Defence of Poesie,"[33] represents the next major iteration in a history of poetic defenses after Boccaccio's *Genealogy*. Just as Boccaccio contends with Christian concerns about the morality of poetry, Sidney writes his defense in partial response to Stephen Gosson's "School of Abuse"—a puritanical attack on the theatre of the time. Like Boccaccio as well, Sidney rehearses the debate about poetry's status in summary fashion, and updates it for

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[32] Additionally, the provisional element in Boccaccio's defense of poetry manifests in his acknowledgement that allegories give rise to polysemy—language opening up to new and different meanings over time (Osgood xvii).
[33] Margaret Ferguson points out that the two different titles for Sidney's defense stem from the text's publication history, in which two different publishers printed the same text without authorization, thereby using two different names (137).

contemporary audiences.[34] Also, like Boccaccio, who relies on a definition of allegory in

order to defend a view of Scripture as implicit poetry, Sidney relies on a definition of

allegory in order to defend poetry as a purveyor of both historical and philosophical

truths. In fact, Sidney confronts classical kinds of attacks that prioritize philosophy and

history over poetry—attacks that Aristotle initially discusses in Chapter 9 of *The Poetics*

(Aristotle 41). Sidney's defense of allegorical veiling is not simply a rehearsal, however;

his defense has a sociological relevance. Fashioning a language applies to the

construction of both poetry and subjectivity. The language of the poet, like the

language of the courtier, can demonstrate what is "fittest to nature" and genuinely true

or what "flieth from nature" and is purely art (Sidney 176). In other words, allegory

offers a model for literature, and for how a citizen might create, manipulate or perform

his personality in the course of social interaction. For Sidney, poetry can arouse

pleasure, but poetry should ultimately aim to instill virtue in its audiences.

Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between poetry, history and philosophy

also provides a basis for Sidney's defense of poetry and a cornerstone to a pragmatic

mode of poetic responsibility. Sidney's differentiation between the three disciplines

provides a moral definition of poetry—a definition influenced by Plato's attack on

poetry. Like Boccaccio before him, as well, Sidney acknowledges the four "most

important imputations laid to the poor poets" (Sidney 168). The first imputation

charges that poetry provides impractical knowledge about acting productively in

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[34] Sidney's definition of poetry, and subsequent defense, filters Aristotle, Horace and Boccaccio, but also paraphrases the much less well known Italian humanist philosopher Julius Caesar Scaliger, to whom Sidney partially credits (Sidney 167, 171). While writing a century before Sidney, the publication of Scaliger's *Poetics*—a defense of poetry in its own right—only predates Sidney's defense by twenty years—1561.

society; the second imputation charges that poetry demonstrates deliberate falsehoods about history and science; the third imputation charges that poetry arouses sinful passions that enfeeble and distract; and, the fourth imputation charges that Plato has banished poetry from his Republic as a moral threat (168). In response to these imputations, Sidney claims that "no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach move thereto so much as poetry" (168). When poets use fantastic stories or impassioned verse to inspire virtue, Sidney argues, poetry surpasses both history and philosophy—those disciplines that critics believe provide the most practical and truthful knowledge. Sidney believes that poetry can fuse the key elements from each discipline in a way that empowers poetry as the ultimate discipline. Poetry can attend to the particulars of history, without adhering to exact details, in order to dramatize philosophical tenets. Poetry can also explore the generalities of philosophy, without adhering to logical prose, in order to postulate "a conjectured likelihood" (162). Margaret Ferguson points out that Sidney plays the strengths of one discipline off the weaknesses of the other in an eventual triangle where Sidney generates poetry's power from a different weakness in each of the other two disciplines (142-146). In all, poetry's reliance on particulars for dramatic purpose enables poets to reinterpret, if not to reimagine, history, while poetry's freedom to interpret the facts allows poets the ability to postulate philosophically. Negotiating both disciplines inevitably empowers poetry as the "prince over all the rest" (Sidney 159)— within, of course, the constraint of inspiring ethical virtue.

Sidney defines poetry as an essential vehicle for shaping virtue because poetry mediates between revisionist history and philosophical discourse. This definition helps establish his ethics of provisionality in the already familiar two-part process. First,

poetry's strength and ability to incite or inspire virtue depends on amalgamating both philosophy and history, not adhering to either discipline. Poetry's lack of concern for historical facts allows the poet to dramatize "virtue exalted and vice punished" rather than compose in purely philosophical maxims (Sidney 162-163). Second, poetry's ethicality wholly depends on its success in capitalizing on its differences from both philosophy and history. The poet, Sidney states, must "delight and teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved" (158). Such an ethical imperative requires taking the best from each discipline and overlaying an allegorical formulation. While Sidney does assert, in Platonic fashion, that poetry must not offer anything that contradicts philosophy, he also argues, in Aristotelian fashion, that poetry must consider "what may be, and should be" (158). The prescriptive tone of this statement suggests that committing to the ethical obligation of poetry requires not simply generalizing (as in philosophy) or dramatizing (as is in history), but reimagining the present and anticipating the future. As such, poetry in Sidney's defense is a provisional endeavour.

Dryden's "Apology" and the Augustan Transition

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the genre of the poetic defense becomes more focused on the difference between Continental (particularly French) and English poetry, and on a tension between ancient and modern poetry. In many surveys of the poetic defense, the Neo-classical or Augustan period seems conveniently omitted. With Enlightenment values and the accession of rational philosophy, literature comes to be a commonplace discourse, no longer under such violent attack by philosophy, history or theology. By commonplace, I mean that the number of writers increases, due

in part to an increase in literacy, and the fact that the scope of literature opens up to include new genres, including all forms of philosophical and political discourse. According to Robert Con Davis and Laurie Finke literary criticism becomes a genre all its own: "No longer the plaything of gentlemen or of broad-based defenses of poetry, it becomes an arena of debate about what values a literate civilization should promote" (326). Critics and poets alike during this period take for granted the Classical and Renaissance views of poetry as a "civilizer," and as a source of edification and delight. Criticism, then, for Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson or John Dryden functions primarily as a preservative or guardian against the increasing influence of modernity. As Johnson writes in his "Preface to *Shakespeare*": "The great contention of criticism is to find the faults of the moderns, and the beauties of the ancients" (328). Defending poetry in the eighteenth century means defending Classical principles and universal values, since these inflect the craft of poetry in general, and dramatic poetry in particular.

Neo-classical seventeenth and eighteenth-century defenses continue to exemplify a pragmatic mode of responsibility related to poetry's benefit to the audience, most pointedly in hailing the Horatian maxim about edification and delight. Whereas Philip Sidney's defense rests on poetry's ability to affect virtue, John Dryden's defense rests on poetry's ability to provide pleasure. In Dryden's defensive treatise, an "Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License," Dryden argues on behalf of the heroic or epic poem, but with reference ultimately to the potential for instruction and delight

in all poetry (181).[35] While his essay defends poetry, and heroic poetry in particular,

Dryden engages in a pragmatic defense as evinced in the following claim from the

"Author's Apology": "[T]he boldest strokes of poetry, when they are managed

artfully, are those which most delight the reader" (183). Dryden addresses both his

"adversaries" (187), and their concerns, discussing these bold strokes of imagination.

He asks, for example: "[H]ow are poetical fictions, how are hippocentaurs and

chimeras, or how are angels and immaterial substances to be imaged; which, some of

them, are things quite out of nature" (187). Dryden answers by claiming that "sublime

subjects ought to be adorned with the sublimest, and consequently often with the most

figurative expressions" (190). Dryden argues that only a poet's Wit can accommodate

such fantastical aspects. Dryden equates Wit with a sense of responsibility for adapting

the appropriate style to a subject. By arguing for "poetic license," however, Dryden

does not empower poets with a complete freedom to invent (188). Rather, poets must

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[35] Compared to his "Author's Apology," Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* occupies a more central place in Neo-Classical specifically and Western poetics generally, but the *Essay*'s arguments pertain to the class of criticism, rather than to the genre of defense. The dialogic essay addresses both ancient versus modern poetry, and French versus English drama. The essay also deals with specific discussions about how to handle the Aristotelian unities, about whether to maintain the separation of tragedy and comedy, and about whether to use rhyme in dramatic poetry. An attack by Sir Robert Howard on Dryden's defense of rhyme in the *Essay* prompts the subsequent publication of Dryden's "Defence of an Essay" where Dryden defends rhyme as one of poetry's pleasurable components. The original *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* dramatizes the issues facing poetry in the seventeenth-century and the essay represents a typical format for considering poetry's function and responsibilities during this time. Still, in his "Defence" Dryden writes to a similar end as he does in his "Apology": "I am satisfied if [poetry] cause delight; for delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poesy: instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesy only instructs as it delights" (113). While Dryden, I suggest, represents the foremost apologist in this mode at the time, Alexander Pope, in his *Essay on Criticism*, equally addresses practical questions and offers proper critical tactics, but does not frame his treatise as a defense of poetry.

adhere to this sense of responsibility for figuring forth subjects that broaden, but do not transgress, nature. Still, Dryden's defense of the heroic poem stands as a defense of the figurative in all poetry, anticipating the defense of the poet's imagination in the nineteenth century. While Dryden acknowledges the contentiousness of poetic license, he confirms it as a defining asset, essential to poetry's ability to delight.

Although Dryden's minor and transitional defenses address literary critics as much as any particular enemy of poetry, his defenses demonstrate an ethics of provisionality, reliant on the two-part formula. First, critics have reservations about poetry's tendency to "image" the unnatural, but Dryden argues that this ability is a matter of style and a necessity that require the freedom to develop if a poet wishes to delight and instruct proficiently. A poet who wants to portray passion and invoke it must push the bounds of sense in the language—reaching toward language's limits to evoke the ineffable. Second, poetry's ethicality—its obligation to delight and instruct— wholly depends on its success in pushing the figurative possibilities of language to such an extent that, while they evoke the appropriate emotions, they do not seem unnatural. In fact, poetry's ultimate responsibility is ethical, as Dryden tells in his "Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy." He writes: "Poesy must resemble natural truth, but it must *be* ethical. Indeed the poet dresses truth, and adorns nature, but does not alter them" (Dryden 121). The poet must observe Wit or decorum—achieving the proper effect by a clear manipulation of form. Decorum constitutes a kind of responsibility for helping readers understand the world, both real and imaginary, more sharply and more imaginatively. The conditional relationship between poetry's aesthetic nature and poetry's ethical nature constitutes the very essence of poetry's provisionality in the eighteenth century.

Shelley's "Defense" and the Expressive Responsibility of Poetry

In the nineteenth century the explicitly labeled apology returns with Percy Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry." For Shelley, poetic responsibility entails emphasizing the poet's function and his poetic faculty rather than representing essential Universal truths or benefiting the audience's constitution. For Shelley, the poet's function is an extension of the poet's poetic faculty—the imagination. As such, Shelley's defense of poetry also serves as a defense of the imagination. Shelley defines poetry as the expression of the imagination, and he distinguishes between the analytic nature of Reason and the synthetic nature of Imagination. This distinction originates in response to the entrenching power of Enlightenment science and philosophy as manifested in Thomas Love Peacock's attack on poetry in "The Four Ages of Poetry." Peacock reverts to the argument that poetry does not advance the "progress of knowledge" and that nineteenth-century poetry proves of no "use" (496). For Peacock, the imaginative work of his contemporaries represents a mockery of "intellectual exertion" (496). The three ingredients of Peacock's attack—"unregulated passion," "exaggerated feeling" and "factitious sentiment" (496)—rehash the Platonic critique of poetry. In response, Shelley rebuts by focusing on the imagination as source of both knowledge and morality.

Shelley answers Peacock and defends poetry by expounding the ethical value and function of the poet's imagination; in doing so, Shelley demonstrates the expressive mode of poetic responsibility. Shelley argues first that the imagination provides useful knowledge: "The functions of the poetical faculty are twofold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order, which

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may be called the beautiful and the good" (510-511). The "materials of knowledge" refer to the "before unapprehended relations of things"—concepts and phenomena that the imagination renders through its synthetic process (500). In creating "new materials," the imagination ultimately moves to present them as poetry—a process that Shelley imagines as not only aesthetic (beautiful), but ethical (good). The "production and assurance of pleasure" Shelley claims "is true utility" (510). Shelley equates the pleasure of apprehending this new knowledge with the ethical because, rather than drawing attention to differences, the imagination functions to produce relations. These relations allow us to go "out of our own nature" and identify "ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (503). Shelley's imagination is consequently sympathetic and productive. Furthermore, Shelley's view of the poetic imagination answers Peacock's concern about knowledge and utility by upending Peacock's view of the imagination as mock intellect, replete with passion, feeling and sentiment.

Shelley's defense of poetry demonstrates an ethics of provisionality because his defense relies on turning the weakness of poetry into an inevitable strength, through a two-part transaction. First, poetry's strength and its ability to provide new knowledge, for example, depend on adhering to the faculty so discredited by Peacock's attack—the imagination. Shelley claims that the imagination represents the generative force behind reason, rather than reason's antithesis, and he couches his defense in that claim. The logic, utility and ethics of the imagination surpass those of reason because the imagination prioritizes beauty over rationality. Second, the ethics of the imagination and poetry wholly depends on poetry's success in turning its presumed weakness into its strength. The ethical value of poetry—its ability to help us recognize similarity over

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difference—depends on the capacity of the imagination to offer new knowledge and create "anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (512). While reason and science offer analytical methods for quantifying the "materials of external life," poetry and the imagination help assimilate these materials into a more general understanding about the universe. Moreover, Shelley's poet not only provides knowledge of the present, but the poet also anticipates the future. As Shelley writes:

> Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. (500)

In other words, providing for the present and for the future constitutes the poet's responsibility to society while accepting such a responsibility means attending to the power of his own imagination.

Arnold's "Preface" and the Victorian Transition

Turning from the early nineteenth to the later nineteenth century, the major statements of criticism return to a kind of Neo-Classical sensibility. Just as the eighteenth-century witnesses a rise of criticism and literary theory as a genre in itself, the nineteenth-century shows an increase presence of the critic, exemplified by figures like Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. If anything, definitions of the critic's role, and what the critic must defend, occupy critics more than general defenses

of poetry.[36] For Arnold, critics carry the responsibility of being both generally curious

and politically disinterested: "By keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view

of things;' by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of

the mind on all subjects which it touches" (Arnold, *Culture* 37). As a kind of

philosopher of ideas, the critic lays groundwork for the poetic project. The poet then

"ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the

world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be

worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it" (*Culture* 29). In a return to a

Socratic view of the philosopher who creates "patterns" that the poet dramatizes,

Arnold displaces the primacy of the poet. Arnold, however, eschews the prescription

for poets to attend to the practical and contemporary concerns of "modern times."[37]

Arnold's advice to avoid the contingencies of the present, both as critic and poet,

certainly anticipates the objective mode of the twentieth century. For Arnold, like his

critical descendants, the views of the poet and critic are central, but Arnold also

emphasizes the poem as a touchstone for what a culture knows and thinks.

Arnold's apology for poetry does not bare the explicit label of defense, as

Sidney's or Shelley's does, but Arnold's ideas represent a transitional moment in the

history of poetic defenses. Arnold fields the same concerns that Shelley does about the

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[36] Walter Pater's introduction of the term "art for art's sake" into English criticism
represents an alternative path for considering the defense of poetry in the later
nineteenth-century (841). His expounding of that idea in his *Studies* does help
encapsulate a key issue in the debates between the Pre-Raphaelite school (in its move
into decadence and ornamentalism) and its attackers. Like the eighteenth-century's lack
of an overt defense, the later nineteenth poses theoretical concerns for presenting a
thorough-going history of poetic defenses.
[37] Oscar Wilde, in "On the Decay of Lying," similarly, seeks to transcend a utile art
attentive to contemporary concerns. Wilde also conflates critic and artist in a fashion
similar to what Arnold prescribes as the poet's role in the late nineteenth-century.

rise of science as a threat to poetry, and Arnold anticipates the poem, perhaps more

than the poet's imagination, as the crux of poetic responsibility. In his Preface to *The*

Hundred Greatest Men, subtitled as "Superior Adequacy of Poetry," Arnold wonders at

"the reasons why the human spirit feels itself to attain to a more adequate and

satisfying expression in poetry than in any other of its modes of activity" like science or

religion (Cunningham 549).[38] Arnold recognizes the "partial explanations" of the past

by such critics like Aristotle and Francis Bacon, and Arnold concludes that the

"primordial and incontestable fact before us comes clearest into light" only

provisionally, by a select group at a particular time (549). Not surprisingly, Arnold

acknowledges both a history of attempts to define and defend poetry, and the

provisional nature of those attempts. Arnold invokes Aristotle's claim that poetry

supersedes history because poetry deals with universals, while history deals in

particulars. But Arnold also defends poetry against science by suggesting that

"[s]cience thinks, but not emotionally" (549). Science simply adds "thought to

thought," but poetry, according to Arnold, can present the ideas of science with a charm

and elegance. Moreover, poetry functions more beneficially than religion because

religion presents the "supposed fact" driven by dogmatic faith, whereas poetry presents

"ideas" driven by universal ideals, not historical particulars. "For poetry the idea is

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[38] In his later work, "The Study of Poetry," Arnold opens with an excerpt from the end
of his Preface to *The Hundred Greatest Men*, and continues his defensive posture: "More
and more mankind will discover we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to
console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most
of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry"
(Adams, *Critical* 596).

everything ... the idea *is* the fact," Arnold insists (550).[39] Ultimately, poetry can express

the wisdom of science and philosophy imbued with "beauty" and "emotion"; poetry

can also express the morality of religion without "traditions" and "dogma" (550).

According to Arnold, a poetry worthy of defense incorporates the universal, what he

calls elsewhere "the best that is known and thought in the world."[40] In a fashion similar

to Sidney's suggestion that poetry accommodates both historical particulars and

philosophical universals, Arnold defends poetry by capitalizing on the qualities that

differentiate poetry from these other two disciplines. In doing so, Arnold demonstrates

a provisional poetics. First, poetry's strength and ability to provide ethical values not

only depend upon infusing ideas with an emotional charge and an eloquent style, but

also avoiding the particular "facts" of history and religion (Arnold, Cunningham 550).

Poetry's eventual usefulness to society—its ability to console and sustain—is

conditional based on poetry's ability to remain exterior to the facts that occupy

everyday life and to avoid the trappings of what Arnold calls "divine illusion" (550).

Second, poetry's ethicality—its necessity—wholly depends on the poet's success in

maintaining this distance from science, history and religion. If the poet's responsibility

entails seeking, illustrating and preserving the pillars of wisdom, then poetry must

eschew the vicissitudes of faith and the practical issues of the day. For Arnold, "the

future of poetry is immense" because poetry represents a renewable resource that can

continue to portray the highest values, while its form and delivery might adapt and

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[39] In the "Preface to the 1853 Edition of *Poems*," Arnold writes that the poet must attend to "those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time" (Adams, *Critical* 578).
[40] This passage originates in Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (*Culture* 37).

change.   Ultimately, this tension between poetry's aesthetic distance and poetry's moral imperative comprise the essence of its provisionality.

<center>**Tate's "To Whom is the Poet Responsible"**</center>

<center>**and the Objective Responsibility of Poetry**</center>

By the twentieth century, literary theory demonstrates an inward turn to the poem itself, in what critics like K.M. Newton refer to as "'intrinsic criticism'" (19). The term 'intrinsic' here suggests an "impersonal concern for the literary work as an independent object" whereas "extrinsic" indicates a concern for "authorial intention, historical, moral or political considerations, and audience response" (19).   Inevitably, poetic defenses at this time demonstrate a responsibility for maintaining the intrinsic integrity of the poem. Matthew Arnold's desire for poetry as a touchstone of ideas, and not facts, anticipates this mode of poetic responsibility. The New Criticism of the early twentieth century, then, comes to defend the poem more explicitly as an autonomous object, not against direct attacks per se, but against the quieting public response to, if not demand for, poetry. Murray Krieger discusses a number of these New Critics in his book *The New Apologists for Poetry*. He writes:

> [W]hile refusing to subjugate literature to science or to philosophy by giving it the function of illuminating general truths, these "new critics" had equally to eschew an "art for art's sake" position which would trivialize literature. They had somehow to assert at once the autonomy of art and its unique power to give meaning to our experience, a power allowed only by its autonomy. (5)

New Critics like Allan Tate even argue that poetry provides a knowledge all its own of what he calls, "the experienced order," which is not the order of universal ideas, or

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scientific knowledge, but the order of human existence in flux (Tate, "Literature" 941). Inevitably, defending poetry as a form of knowledge without deference to effects or intentions means remaining responsible to the world of the poem.

The defensive work of New Critical poet and scholar Allan Tate represents this objective mode of responsibility. His position—a defense of the autonomy of the poem—prompts various critiques, particularly because it seems to prescribe that the poet remain aloof from politics. One major attack against Tate's position—formalized in work like Archibald MacLeish's *The Irresponsibles*—argues that poetry should respond overtly to immediate social and political concerns. In the 1930s and 1940s, the rise and pressure of fascism and communism represents the largest threat. In response to polemics like MacLeish's, Allan Tate's writes an essay titled "To Whom is the Poet Responsible?" (1951). Ironically, Tate does not discuss "to whom," but rather, "for what" the poet is responsible. He states:

> The relation of poetry and of other high imaginative literature to social action was not sufficiently considered in the attacks and counter-attacks of the past ten years. … The total complex of sensibility and thought, of belief and experience, in the society from which the poetry emerges, is the prime limiting factor that the poet must first of all be aware of; otherwise his language will lack primary reality, the nexus of thing and world. The failure to consider this primary reality produces willed poetry which usually ignores the human condition. The human condition must be faced and embodied in language before men in any age can envisage the possibility of action. (*Collected* 404-405)

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Like Matthew Arnold, Tate does not shun the ethical purpose of poetry, although Tate does realize a certain lack of political efficacy plagues the poetry during this time. Something deeply inadequate persists in the project of poetry despite claims to the contrary. "Poetry was to have saved us," Tate tells us, gesturing back to Arnold; "it not only hadn't saved us by the end of the fourth decade of [the twentieth] century; it has only continued to be poetry which was little read. It had to be rejected" (406). According to Tate, poets have a responsibility to provide views of the human condition, rather than to incite action. Tate's defense of poetry extends the Arnoldian notion that poetry is a necessary interpreter at a certain remove form the immediate social milieu— a milieu marked by readerly expectations and personalities.   Tate does not defend poetry as a source of consolation or as a social instigator, for those ethical aspects seem the most impotent. Rather, poetry's strength derives from facing the "prime limiting factor"—capturing the total complexity of "primary reality" (405).

As a defense of poetry, Tate's essay signals an ethics of provisionality by capitalizing on poetry's supposed weakness and turning it into its strength. First, critics worry about poetry's social irresponsibility, but, according to Tate, poetry's strength and ability to provide perspective on the "human condition" (*Collected* 405) depends on forgoing the promotion of social action. Poetry's usefulness depends on not being bogged down in prescription or propaganda. Second, poetry's ethicality, its responsibility, wholly depends on its success in embracing its distance from propaganda and politics. In fact, as Tate argues: "To suggest that poets tell men in crisis what to do, to insist that *as poets* they acknowledge themselves as legislators of the social order, is to ask them to shirk their specific responsibility, which is quite simply the reality of man's experience, not what his experience ought to be, in any age" (405).

What, then, the poet provides in Tate's defense of poetry is a "full report [in 'disciplined language'] of the reality conveyed to [the poet] by his awareness" (405). The poet must commit to the aesthetics of language as a sufficient register of contemporary conditions in order to fulfill his ethical responsibility. Reality is a changing "complex of sensibility and thought, of belief and experience," so a properly ethical poetry will remain inevitably provisional. Still, the "possibility of action" (405) in the future depends on, is stipulated by, the poem as a momentary and momentous depiction of the human condition.

Pinsky's "Responsibilities" and the Contemporary Transition

By the second half of the twentieth century, obituaries announcing the death of poetry begin, but rather than announcing poetry's actual demise, these statements are creative opportunities to launch new defenses of poetry, in which poets and critics couch their prescriptions and pronouncements. In "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991), for example, Dana Gioia explores what he calls "a paradox, a Zen riddle of cultural sociology." According to Gioia:

> [T]he engines that have driven poetry's institutional success—the explosion of academic writing programs, the proliferation of subsidized magazines and presses, the emergence of a creative-writing career track, and the migration of American literary culture to the university—have unwittingly contributed to its disappearance from public view.

Gioia's essay stands as an assessment of poetry's progress in the twentieth century, and a desire for a more public-oriented poetry. In the early decades, poetry retreats into the academy behind the preservative force of scholarly critics, who defend poetry's relevance by claiming autonomy for the poem. By mid-century, poetry's entrenchment

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in the academy prompts a challenge by advocates who see new life for poetry outside

the prescriptive parameters of the New Criticism. In the contemporary moment,

however, advocates of more divergent or experimental work tend to exist within the

academy. This return to the academy, as Gioia notes, initiates a certain stultification of

poetry. Christopher Beach comments that "[t]he amount of attention paid to this

alleged death is in itself an indication of how deeply the need for poetry, or at least the

talk about poetry, permeates our national consciousness" (21). Overall, the crisis of

poetry in the twentieth century revolves around its place both inside and outside of the

academy—as an object of study. In other words, poets and critics remain within an

objective mode of poetic responsibility.

Robert Pinsky's essay "Responsibilities of the Poet" represents a transitional and

contemporary example of the objective mode of responsibility—a mode exemplified

initially by Allan Tate's defense of poetry. In Pinsky's essay, he faces the same dilemma

that Tate does about the social inefficacy and unpopularity of poetry. Like Tate, Pinsky

distances himself from the contingencies of the world, and from effecting the audience,

but opens himself to direct experience and toward the text. Like Tate, as well, Pinsky

challenges the expectation that poets fulfill or should fulfill a "social responsibility" (7).

To this expectation, Pinsky answers that poets "must use the art to behold the actual

evidence before" them (11). They "must answer for what [they] see" (11). Pinsky's

definition of social responsibility as responding—of answering for experience—limits

the direct political impact that poetry can have. Furthermore, Pinsky identifies one

purported weakness of poetry as the failure to explicitly address contemporary political

concerns. To this weakness Pinsky replies:

There is a dialectic between the poet and his culture: the culture presents

us with poetry, and with implicit definitions of what materials and means

are poetic. The answer [poets] must promise to give is "no." Real works

revise the received idea of what poetry is; by mysterious cultural means

the revisions are assimilated and then presented as the next definition to

be resisted, violated and renewed. What poets must answer for is the

unpoetic. (12)

In Pinsky's defense of poetry, poetic responsibility entails responding to the imperatives

of the cultural moment in which the definition of poetry becomes implicit and

contrived. A truly responsible poetics "revise[s] the … idea of what poetry is" and

maintains an aloofness from the sociopolitical and cultural expectations that demand a

kind of instrumentality from it.

As a defense of poetic responsibility, Pinsky's essay demonstrates an ethics of

provisionality by turning away from the poetic and toward the "unpoetic." First, as

Pinsky notes, the received notions of what constitutes the definition and strength of

poetry can both interfere with and nullify poetry's ability to stay responsive.

Paradoxically, poetry can remain vibrant only by resisting its own empowerment.

Second, Pinsky writes that "only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which

as not already been made poetic by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive"

(12). In fact, the ethicality of poetry—its ability to stay responsive—depends on

poetry's ability to resist its own entrenchment. At the close of his defense of poetry,

Pinsky summarizes his view on poetic responsibility in a way that demonstrates

provisionality quite clearly. He writes: "The poet's first responsibility, to continue the

art, can be filled only though the second, opposed responsibility to change the terms of

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the art as given" (19). In other words, poetic responsibility requires constantly recognizing the poem as a necessary, but conditional object of a poet's response to the world. Moreover, Pinsky adds that part of a poet's obligation to transform the art entails a responsibility to the "unborn," by which he means, that a poet must respond to the possible needs of her future audience. A poet's ability to remain ethical revolves around her maintenance of poetry as a provisional endeavour.

Conclusion: The Crisis of Poetry and the Provisional Turn

The contemporary moment represents a transitional period in the history of poetic defenses—a period still very much marked by a crisis that may seem both bleak and promising simultaneously. On the one hand, the mode of responsibility oriented toward the text intensifies because of the industrialization and commercialization of poetry. By industrialization, I mean the absorption of poetry into the university as a discourse studied, taught and produced; by commercialization, I inevitably mean the publication of poetry by the stronghold of University presses and magazines. This industrialization and commercialization maintain the poem as a commodity and the responsibility of its mainstream defenders seems to revolve around sustaining the poem as an object bought, sold, exchanged, and recycled. Moreover, poetry's reflection of the world, effect on its audience, and manifestation of the personal imagination are all suspect in traditional senses because of the influence of University-based literary criticism that deconstructs the metaphysical assumptions of these more traditional approaches. On the other hand, the other modes of responsibility oriented toward the world, the audience and the poet resurge because of the democratization of poetry—the hybridization of poetry with other art forms, disciplines and media as well as the circulation of poetry through presses, internet and performance. This democratization

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maintains the poem as a diverse and evolving entity, and the responsibility of its defenders entails sustaining the poem as an object gifted, performed, exchanged, and reinvented. Poetry's reflection of the world, its effect on its audience, and its manifestation of the personal imagination have all remained possibilities despite the industrialization of poetry. "It may be too soon to judge whether poetry is in a state of decline or in the early phase of a new renaissance," according to Christopher Beach (35). "The best places to witness poetry's vitality," he states, "are no longer the pages of *Poetry* and *The New Yorker*. Cultural critics's assumptions of the 'decline' or 'death' of poetry dismiss changes in poetic practice all to easily, categorizing them according to the anachronistic set of aesthetic and cultural criteria" (35). In other words, such critics lack a sense of poetry's provisionality.

Certainly, a history of poetic defenses from Plato to the contemporary moment demonstrates how defenders of poetry continue to utilize a poetics of provisionality to maintain the relevance of poetry. The shifting modes of poetic responsibility—from the mimetic, to the pragmatic, to the expressive, to the objective—all derive poetry's strength from its purported weaknesses, and demonstrate poetry's necessity by virtue of its conditional nature. Each defense, also, couches its argument in the belief that poetry operates in anticipation—orienting itself to the contingent or possible, rather than to the real or known, thereby speaking to an unforeseen audience. Each defense, however, also operates first by accepting the argument against poetry—poetry's supposed weakness—as a condition for its resulting rebuttal. Each defense, in turn, transforms that argument into the basis for a defense. This conversion consistently renders poetry's power and value. In each defense, defenders also include a working definition of poetry that inevitably includes a sense of what responsibility poets have,

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whether to represent the world, affect an audience, relay the imagination or, preserve an artefact. All of these different responsibilities indicate what makes poetry necessary. In the chapters that follow, I examine more contemporary defenders of poetry— defenders who utilize these three aspects of the provisional—the necessary, the conditional and the anticipatory—to demonstrate the continued responsibility of poetry. But rather than maintain the four modes of poetic responsibility in their traditional forms, I show how writers from the Language movement and Post-Language school transform these modes, in a continued effort to defend poetry and rethink an ethics of poetry through a poetics of provisionality.

CHAPTER 2: LANGUAGE WRITING AND THE DEFENSIVE TRADITION

Prologue

Charles Bernstein's "A Defence of Poetry"

Charles Bernstein begins *My Way*, his 1999 collection of "Speeches and Poems,"

with a poem titled "A Defence of Poetry." Dedicated to Brian McHale, the poem

recounts the contents of an informal textual dialogue in which Bernstein and McHale

argue over the appropriate terminology to describe the reading and writing of some

postmodernist poetry.[41] In the poem, Bernstein utilizes an unorthodox orthographical

practice: jumbling and mistyping letters and punctuation. This method demonstrates

the crux of the argument between Bernstein and McHale. The poem begins, for

example, with the following:

> My problem with deploying a term liek
>
> nonelen

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[41] In the "Notes and Acknowledgements" to *My Way*, Bernstein indicates that this poem is "A reply to 'Making (Non)Sense of Postmodernist Poetry" by Brian McHale, a discussion of poems by John Ashbery, J.H. Prynne, and myself published in *Language, Text, and Context*, edited by Michael Toolan (London and New York: Routledge, 1992)" (317). McHale opens his essay fittingly with the claim: "Accusations of nonsense put literary people on the defensive" (6). McHale, in fact, initiates the form and content of Bernstein's poem by suggesting that "a stronger defence" to the charge of nonsense would involve "turning the accusation into a description" (6). By allowing the accusation to condition his response, Bernstein's poem enacts a similar formula to traditional defenses. While McHale does not attack poetry or even Language writing directly, the choice of terminology carries a connotation that sparks defensiveness, as he and Bernstein both discuss. In the first paragraph of his essay McHale writes that he uses the term "neither pejoratively nor dismissively": "Many postmodernist poems might appropriately be described as 'neo-Dada' or 'nonsense,' and part of the process by which we might come understand why such poems could be worth writing and reading involves coming to understand the possible uses and value of nonsense" (6).

in these cases is acutually similar to

your

cirtique of the term ideopigical. (Bernstein, *My Way* 1)

"[T]hese cases" refers to the poetics—what Bernstein calls both an "interprestive

proacdeure" (1), and a "texutal practice" (1)—of some postmodernist writing. Bernstein

takes issue with McHale's use of the term nonsense—a term that Bernstein alternately

refers to as "nonelen" (1), "nknsesne" (1), and "nonesene" (1)—because of its

connotation and imprecision. Bernstein's recastings of the word "nonsense" expand and

contest the conventional meaning of the word, which usually indicates "no sense at all"

(1). For Bernstein, nonsense relates to an unprecedented way of sense-making—of

making known ("nknsesne") what no one ("none") sees ("sene") or says ("ses"). In fact,

Bernstein prefers the term "ideopigical" or "ideological" (1) to that of 'nonsensical'

because "*poltical* purposes" motivate his poetics (1). Throughout "A Defence of Poetry,"

Bernstein utilizes a "texutal practice" that he simultaneously defends because

challenging the ideologies that shape how we make sense of the world begins with

challenging the linguistic structures that contain these ideologies and that delimit the

possibilities of alternate ways of making sense.

In the middle of "A Defence," Bernstein emphasizes that his concern with

McHale's choice of terminology hinges on the limited connotation of the word

"nonsense" and the failure of the word to account for the political potential of certain

postmodernist works. According to Bernstein:

[N]onesene see, msm to reduce a

vareity of fieefernt

prosdodic, thematic and discusrive

> enactcemnts into a zeroo degree of
>
> sense. (*My Way* 1)

For Bernstein, "nonsense" operates within a reductive "binary" (1) from which narrow

and dismissive perspectives can ensue. His playfulness in this passage, however,

demonstrates how nonsense can open language to make the unseen seen ("nonesene

see"), to expose the verity in variety ("vareity") and to insist on discussion in any

discourse ("discusrive"). Moreover, Bernstein offers the playfulness in contrast to the

political and commercial rhetoric that rely on "dicitfullness, manifpultaion, [and] the /

media-ization of language, etc." (2). "[President] Bush's speeches," for example,

represent only the "the simulation of sense-making" because, on the one hand, they

appear to exhibit common sense messages, but, on the other hand, they strive to conceal

ideological agendas. In another context, Bernstein refers to certain postmodernist

writing as enacting a "politics of poetic form" counter to forms like political

speechmaking.[42] In "A Defence," by example, Bernstein suggests that "not relying on

conventionally / methods of *conveying* sense" can "aloow for dar greater sense-

smakinhn than / specisi9us forms of doinat disoucrse" (1-2). In other words,

disruptions to how language conveys sense, such as Bernstein's orthographic

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[42] Bernstein has edited a collection titled *The Politics of Poetic Form*, including essays originally presented at the Wolfson Centre at the New School in the late-Fall and Winter of 1988. In the Preface to the collection Bernstein writes: "The particular focus of this collection is on the ways that the formal dynamics of a poem shape its ideology; more specifically, how radically innovative poetic styles can have political meanings" (*The Politics of Poetic Form*, vii). This collection also includes Bernstein's essay, "Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form," which he also includes in his *A Poetics*. In that essay, he anticipates the sentiments of "A Defence of Poetry." He states, for example, "Conventions are made to be broken in that they are provisional rather than absolute, temporal rather than eternal. Differing conventions mark not only different times but also different classes and ethnicities. As we consider the conventions of writing, we are entering into the politics of language" (*A Poetics*, 218).

experiments, become political once readers begin taking responsibility for the sense that they make of such experiments, and begin applying such lessons to all forms of media.

At the end of "A Defence," Bernstein reiterates that "nonesesen is too static" (Bernstein, *My Way* 2). Bernstein insists to McHale that the problem is definitional and semantic:

> What you mean by nomsense is
>
> soething like a-rational, but ratio
>
> …
>
> DOES NOT EQUAL
>
> sense! (2)

The typos and misspellings in "A Defence" do not immediately appear to have a *raison d'être*, but they do immediately evoke sensations, in how they affect the look, sound and meaning of words. The experience of sense-making in this context is an experience of "oscillation" (2) between a reasoned understanding and a sensory experience.[43] Bernstein compares this "oscillation" to the experience of the "duck/rabitt" (2) example that Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein provides an illustration that shows the profile of duck and rabbit simultaneously, in which most people see one profile or the other but not both—an experience that Wittgenstein refers to as "aspect blindness" (214). Bernstein attributes the experience of "oscillation" and "aspect blindness" to shifts in context. When a text demands that we

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[43] Bernstein discusses this concept more fully in his essay "Artifice and Absorption," an essay that he alludes to in "A Defence of Poetry" as "Artiofice" (*My Way* 2). In that essay, Bernstein uses the terms absorptive and antiabsorptive to describe different works of literature that either absorb the reader, thereby providing access to the meaning and workings of the text, or that withstand absorption, thereby inhibiting access.

expand the context of interpretation in order to make sense, we are both reading more

closely and taking responsibility for more possible meanings. Bernstein closes "A

Defence" with a Karl Kraus aphorism that suggests the stakes in reading with finer

discriminations. Bernstein quotes:

> *[T]he closer we*
>
> *look at a word the greater the distance*
>
> *from which it stares back.* (Bernstein, *My Way* 2)[44]

To read closely, as if with "jeweler's tools" (1), means that we not only oscillate between

comprehension and incomprehension, between a sense made for us, and sense we

make, but that when we do read closely, we open up the contexts of meaning. In fact,

Bernstein's orthographical tweaking forces readers to look closely and recognize how

meaning occurs at a great distance from actual, material words; in fact, reading "A

Defence" requires that we attend to the lexical, syntactical and discursive contexts in

order to translate. "A Defence of Poetry" argues that we cannot acquiesce to the

"hyperconventionality" (2) of discursive rhetoric because such rhetoric "steamroll[s]"

(1) meaning. Ultimately, Bernstein defends poetry as a medium that impedes that

steamrolling and that foments a practice of reading against such pressure and

momentum.

By spelling the title of his poem as "A Defen*c*e" rather than as "A Defen*s*e"

Bernstein explicitly invokes the long-standing (mainly British) tradition of poetic

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[44] I am struck by Bernstein's invocation of Kraus in the context of a poetic defense. Kraus, as J.P. Stern points out, felt that "language—that is the way a statement is made—bears within itself all the signs he needs to understand the moral and ethical quality of that statement and of him who made it" (74). In "A Defence of Poetry," Bernstein attends to the words and language in an effort to make a point about the political, and, I would argue, ethical value of poetic language.

defenses. In fact, the conversation that informs "A Defence of Poetry" invokes ongoing, traditional attacks against poetry—attacks that fault poetry with not contributing to knowledge or welfare. Moreover, Bernstein's poem dramatizes the continued question of poetry's relevance in the late 20th Century.[45] I would also argue that, like previous poetic defenses, "A Defence of Poetry" illustrates a poetics of provisionality. The charge against poetry provides the condition for Bernstein's argument in which poetry's necessity, and anticipation of future value, arise out poetry's purported weakness. First, for example, the charge that postmodernist poetry is nonsensical inspires Bernstein to use a nonsensical technique as the basis for "A Defence of Poetry." While Bernstein disagrees ideologically with the connotation of the word "nonsense," he jumbles letters and syntax nonsensically in order to convert poetry's supposed weakness into poetry's essential strength. Second, the formal freedom that poetry can exercise enables Bernstein to illustrate his claims in context. While Bernstein argues logically within the course of the poem, he uses style and form reflexively in order to suggest the indispensability of formal experimentation to poetry's political value. Third, the notion that formal experiments can foster greater sense-making capacities allows Bernstein to believe in the ongoing need for nonsense. As Bernstein mistypes consistently throughout the poem, he undermines meaning and authority in order to insist on close reading as a step toward demystifying ideology. While poetry may not

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[45] In Volume One, Chapter One, of *Opposing Poetries*, Hank Lazer posits that the theme of poetic crisis characterizes many of the considerations of poetry during the 1980s. He cites among others, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, Alan Williamson, James E.B. Breslin, Charles Altieri, Donald Hall, Charles Bernstein, Stephen Fredman, Mary Kinzie, and Clayton Eshleman. Similarly, Christopher Beach tackles this question in Chapter 1 of his book *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution*.

have the impact of a political speech, poetry can attune future generations to different ways of understanding and describing the world.

I also argue that Bernstein's "A Defence of Poetry" engages the four-fold model of poetic responsibility—a model provisionally informed by M.H. Abrams's four orientations of literary criticism. First, the focus on "sense-making" in "A Defence" invokes the mimetic mode of poetic responsibility. A poem that *makes sense* challenges "the simulation of sense-making," what amounts to the effects of "decitfullness, manifpultaion, the / media-ization of language" (Bernstein, *My Way* 2). Such a poem works against a limiting view of the world—a view shaped almost entirely by hegemonic discourses. Second, the use of nonsensical form in the poem invokes the pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility. A poem that utilizes *nonsense* challenges the "convnetionally / methods of *conveying* sense" (1). Such a poem assists with a reader's ability to consider and decipher the flow of discursive information in all texts. Third, the reliance on a singular voice recounting a dialogue evokes the expressive mode of poetic responsibility. A poem that relies heavily on the personal pronoun, but that incorporates the words and ideas of others, complicates a singular, expressive voice and sustains "competing, completely sensible, / readings" (2). Such a poem acknowledges, but problematizes the view that poetry can ever really represent a pure subjective flow. Fourth, the centrality of a reflexive content reveals the objective mode of responsibility. A poem that emphasizes reflexivity places formal concerns at the centre of "prosdodic, thematic and discusrive / enactcemnts" (1).[46] Such a poem maintains the relevance of

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[46] I do not offer this series of proofs to suggest that Language writing manifests a synthesis of modes as much as to posit how this brand of writing engages the ethical imperatives laid out in the history of poetic defenses. Indeed, Language writing

rhetoric, genre, and orthography to broader questions of political, social and ethical meaning.

Chapter in Brief

The way that "A Defence of Poetry" engages the four modes of poetic responsibility demonstrates an ethics of provisionality and anticipates how Language writing, in general, engages the four modes. These four ways, I argue, correspond to some of the basic tenets of Language writing discussed in the bulk of this chapter. I have begun this chapter with an explication of Bernstein's poem in order not only to continue the discussion of poetic defenses, but also to position Bernstein's "A Defence" as an alternative to Pinsky's "Responsibilities of the Poet." This chapter represents a thorough discussion of how Language writing offers an alternative to, but no less viable continuance of, the poetic defense. Below I compare the objective mode of the Language poets and the objective mode of such poets as Allan Tate and Robert Pinsky. I then provide a short history of Language writing, outlining its four major tenets—tenets that I describe as: provisional realism, provisional activism, provisional lyricism, and provisional formalism. Next, I discuss how four exemplary Language writers navigate these four modes of responsibility. I discuss Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein because these poets represent the Language writers whose work has been the most widely discussed in an academic setting. All of these writers consciously engage a tradition where the question of poetry's ethical status

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strongly resists and challenges these traditional views of poetic and theoretical orientation as, I hope, becomes evident in this chapter.

remains central. [47]   These writers also represent the two geographical centres of

Language writing: Silliman and Hejinian hail from the Bay Area, and Andrews and

Bernstein from New York. When considering these four emblematic figures, I argue

that the major overlapping tendencies in Language writing exemplify an ethics of

provisionality.[48]

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[47] In suggesting that these writers have entered the mainstream, I mean that they have collected, annotated and published the majority of their critical work in books by academic presses, that they attend and participate in academic conferences, and that they teach in or engage with the academy. Ron Silliman represents the largest exception to this list in part because New York's Roof Books publishes *The New Sentence*. Still, The National Poetry Foundation at the University of Maine has published his anthology *In The American Tree*. Also, while he worked in academia for the best part of the 1980s, he has worked in the IT industry since 1989. Bruce Andrews teaches International Politics at Fordham University, and Northwestern University Press has published his collection *Paradise and Method: Poetics and Praxis*. Lyn Hejinian teaches at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California Press has published her book *The Language of Inquiry*. Charles Bernstein teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard University Press has published *A Poetics*, University of Chicago Press has published *My Way*, and Northwestern University Press has published *Content's Dream*.
[48] Tim Woods, and G. Matthew Jenkins consider the ethics of Language writing within a larger discussion of the relationship between twentieth-century innovative poetry and continental ethical theory. Both, in fact, draw on Levinas almost entirely. While both Woods and Jenkins gesture to the four modes of responsibility, they do not examine the ethics of Language poetry in these foundational terms. They do, however, both note the surprising absence of ethics in discussions of Language writing and attempt to rectify this omission. Tim Woods, in his book *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002), focuses on the "discourse of responsibility" in the primarily Objectivist poetics of Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen (1). The relationship between experiment and ethics amounts to what he calls "a poetics of the limit," which he defines as a poetics that attempts to resist "totalization" (10) in order to maintain a sense of interpretive, imaginary possibility: "the basic ethical imperative of looking for ways to prevent language from destroying and distorting the object that it represents" (11). Woods asks a series of important questions that inform both Jenkins's subsequent study and my own:

> In what ways can formal experiments with language be said to have an ethical
> dimension? What are the ethical responsibilities of a "language"-centered
> poetry? Of what, finally, does an ethical poetry for the late twentieth century
> consist and what does it look like? (Woods 2)

G. Matthew Jenkins, in his book *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry After 1945* supplements the work of Tim Woods by considering three generations of

In the next major section of this chapter, I explicate four poems by these

Language writers. Each explication demonstrates one of the four modes of poetic

responsibility. I have selected poems from the 1982 *Paris Review* "Language Sampler"

edited by Charles Bernstein. In the "Language Sampler," Bernstein collects pieces by

himself and the three other writers discussed here (among others). While it does not

represent the first "anthology" of such writing, this collection does indicate the clear

differences among the signature work of these writers, at a transitional moment in the

reception of Language writing.[49] I would argue that publication in the *Paris Review*

represents an initial entry of Language writing into what Bernstein calls "official verse

culture" and into the conservative canon associated with the literary defenses traced in

the previous chapter. I begin my explications with Ron Silliman's poem "Blue,"

describing it as a mimetically responsible poem. In "Blue," Silliman responds to the

world by collecting fragments of discourse and observation that resemble, but do not

naïvely depict, the sometimes sensible and sometimes incoherent texture of experience.

I refer to Silliman's approach to the world as a "provisional realism." Next, I examine

the selection from Bruce Andrew's long poem "Confidence Trick," describing the

selection as a pragmatically responsible poem. In this selection, Andrews responds to

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innovative writing, including Objectivists, like Oppen and Charles Reznikoff, but also
more recent writers like Edward Dorn and Robert Duncan, as well as Susan Howe and
Lyn Hejinian. Jenkins contextualizes each of these writers within the "ethical-
linguistic" turn of philosophy. He also argues for poetry "as a 'way of thinking
ethically' that takes poetic form … as bearing ethical meanings" and he imagines an
engagement with innovative form as an "invitation to ethical relations with alterity in
writing" (Jenkins xii).

[49] The earliest collections of Language writing include Ron Silliman's selection "The
Dwelling Place: 9 Poets" in *Alcheringa* (1975) and Bruce Andrews's selection in *Toothpick*
(1973). Compared to Bernstein's selection in *The Paris Review*, these early collections by
Silliman and Andrews cater to an audience co-evolving and familiar with the writers
therein.

the reader by evoking discomfort and anxiety that incites an exploratory self-consciousness about the text. I refer to Andrew's response to the reader as "provisional activism." Third, I consider Lyn Hejinian's poem "Province," describing it as an example of an expressively responsible poem. In "Province," Hejinian responds to lyrical subjectivity by offering an "I" constituted by socially-inflected perceptions rather than an autonomous essence. I denote Hejinian's problematization of the poetic voice as a "provisional lyricism." Last, I read Charles Bernstein's poem "Playing with a Full Deck," describing it as an objectively responsible poem. In "Playing," Bernstein responds to the text by invoking an anachronistic diction and misleading syntax that demonstrates the difficulty of even poetic language to describe the ineffable. I refer to Bernstein's attention to the textual object as a "provisional formalism."

In Chapter One, I have limited the core of my discussion to prose defenses. But, in this Chapter, I include close readings of poetry in an effort to provide a context for my discussion of Post-Language poetics in the following chapters. Part of the project of Post-Language writing not only entails exiting the shadow of Language writing, but also entails describing the indebtedness of contemporary writing to Language writing. Both Language and Post-Language writers explore a concomitant relationship between poetic theory and poetic practice—what Bruce Andrews calls "praxis." An emphasis on praxis, I argue, is a provisional gesture. Poetics often provides a necessary means of legitimacy or accessibility for poetry, just as poetry provides a necessary extension or illumination of poetics. Language writers and Post-Language writers do not necessarily privilege poetics over poetry (or vice-versa); poetry and poetics condition each other in overlapping ways.   Put otherwise, one may anticipate the other, and, working together, they may anticipate discoveries in other discourses. As shown in Bernstein's "A

Defence of Poetry," politics motivates this blurring: When poets challenge the conventions of discourse, whether theoretically or poetically, these poets draw attention to the relationship between language and ideology. Of course, the projects of Language writing and Post-Language writing are more than just political. As I discuss below, the responsibility that they show toward the world, the reader, the poet and the text expands these projects to include both politics and ethics.

A Provisional History of Language Writing

In the history of poetic defenses, Language writing occurs simultaneously with the transitional mode of objectivity—a mode that I associate with the arguments of Robert Pinsky. In fact, Language writers participate in the objective mode of poetic responsibility in similar ways to Allan Tate and Robert Pinsky. For Tate and Pinsky, as for Language writers, the poet does not adhere to a realism or expressionism that would tie the poet to the present sociopolitical milieu. In Tate's view, poetic responsibility amounts to an acknowledgement that "the human condition must be faced and embodied in language" (*Collected* 405). He argues that the language of the poem must make the poet face "belief and experience" (404). In other words, the responsible poet does not simply reflect the world, or his personal experiences, but generates an object of knowledge about "the human condition." In Pinsky's opinion, by comparison, poetic responsibility hinges on the realization that "society depends on the poet to witness something, and yet the poet can discover that thing only by looking away from what society has learned to see poetically" (12). Pinsky posits poetry's "materials and means" (12), especially poetry's subject matter, as the crucial aspects, for which the poet must be responsible. In other words, the responsible poet does not simply react to the world, or reiterate poetic themes, but must discover new content and new forms.

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Inevitably, poetry remains at a distance from activist politics and didacticism for both Tate and Pinsky. Similarly, Language writers do not prescribe overt political activism in the content of their poetry, but they do engage in a politically-oriented poetics. In contrast to Tate and Pinsky, however, Language writers emphasize the material aspects of language itself, not just as vehicles for meaning or sense, but as ideologically charged signifiers that must be wrested from their conventional contexts. The descriptive term "Language," in Language writing, indicates that these writers locate the objective responsibility of poetry in politicizing language's fundamental units.

Language Writing in Brief

In 1975, Ron Silliman publishes an essay in *Alcheringa* magazine, accompanying an early selection of works by writers who would later be known by the moniker "Language" poets.   He opens his essay, "Surprised by Sign (Notes on Nine)," with the following statement: "What connects these [Language] writers, beyond my *impression* of a connection is what I take to be a community of concern for language as the center of whatever activity poems might be …" (118). Although Silliman's opening represents an early articulation about this "community," Silliman's statement appears consciously tenuous, with its personal disclaimer and its general vagueness. Writing in 1984, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein provide a clue as to why Silliman expresses this tenuousness about identifying a specific agenda in the work of the poets in *Alcheringa*. Andrews and Bernstein open their collection of Language poetics, titled *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, with a slightly expanded definition of Language writing: "Throughout, we have emphasized 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. All of these

remain at issue" (ix). When Andrews and Bernstein render language's fundamental

means and material susceptible to interrogation, we get a clearer sense of what Silliman

means when he describes "Language" poetry as "whatever activity." Opening the

definition of "Language" to "whatever activity" leaves nothing uncontested about the

role of language in poetry and discourse. In effect, what so-called Language writers

share is a consensus about the provisionality of language practice, in general, and of

poetry, in particular. Even while Language writers consider poetry and poetics as

necessary for interrogating the relationship between language and ideology, Language

writers must also admit to the paradox of their project. Any consideration of the

ideology behind language must occur in that same language, so any critique will

inevitably condition that consideration: every critique is reflexive. Inevitably then, any

critique will also anticipate the next poetic endeavor.

Language writing represents what Charles Bernstein might call a "provisional

institution" (*My Way* 145). Bernstein uses the term in referring to the small presses and

reading series that provide a context for alternative literary communities subsisting

outside the "dominant media institutions" (146). Language writing has begun as the

result of such "provisional institutions," and, like them, Language writing has

developed as the result of a socially conscious literary community. In reality, both

"institution" and "community" are misnomers because they imply a coherence that

these writers have historically avoided in their own descriptions. "Provisional,"

however, is a useful term because "provisional" evokes a sense of anticipating needs

and a sense of fulfilling them under particular conditions—a situation which more

accurately describes the inception of so-called Language writing. The term

"provisional" also proves useful because accounting for Language writing, and its

history, in any generalized way is a highly contentious endeavor. Even the denotation

"Language" presumes a singular movement or school of writing that many find

problematic.[50] Michael Greer, for example, argues that Language writing represents an

"academic" moniker resulting not only from the work of larger presses, publishing

what "was previously scattered about in small press publications reaching primarily

local audiences" (336), but also from the accounts in "several critical articles attempting

to negotiate the problematic terrain of "[L]anguage poetry'" (335). In fact, the

descriptive term "Language" originates with the performative

"L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E"—a title taken from the magazine edited by Charles Bernstein

and Bruce Andrews between 1978 and 1981 in New York City, and from a subsequent

collection of the first three volumes in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. *The*

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book collects work by many writers, including West Coast

writers. Writers like Barrett Watten would argue that Language writing begins in the

Bay Area with the publication of *This* magazine in 1971, before the advent of the

"Language" designation.[51] Regardless of exact origins, little magazines and reading

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[50] See Ben Friedlander's "A Short History of Language Poetry" for a succinct discussion
of this contentiousness, particularly regarding the earliest displays of Language-
oriented writing. Friedlander argues that Clark Coolidge's work represents the
inception of such writing. Notably, however, most critics agree that Language writing
arises out of an American tradition beginning with Gertrude Stein and William Carlos
Williams. Generally, critics consider the Objectivists, and the Black Mountain School as
more immediate precursors to Language writing. Genealogies of Language writing
exist in number, and do not figure predominantly in my discussion.
[51] In their dangerously academic "Aesthetic Tendency and The Politics of Poetry: A
Manifesto," Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman,
and Barrett Watten opt for a term like "'Our Work'" rather than "Language." They
identify themselves provisionally—both tentatively and conditionally: "*In terms of its
reception,* 'our work' *can* mean the writing of up to several dozen writers *who have been
identified* as part of an aesthetic *tendency* whose definition is *not a matter of doctrine* but of

series in San Francisco, New York and Washington D.C. writing during the Vietnam War era represent the beginnings of Language writing. Coalescence of Language writing as a phenomenon occurs as much by virtue of geography as of ideas.[52] According to Bob Perelman, "the movement has been more united by its opposition to the prevailing institutions of American poetry. . . . [W]riting workshops and creative writing departments with large networks of legitimation—publishing, awards, reviews, extensive university connections" (12). United in opposition, Language writing represents a "provisional institution."

In his essay "What Is 'Language Poetry'?" Lee Bartlett concurs that Language writing grows out of a response to concerns about the academic and industrial institutions of poetry, and these institutions's views on poetry's relationship to the world, the reader, the poet and the text. He also posits that these "prevailing institutions" (Perelman 12) espouse a kind of poetics that Marjorie Perloff labels as "voice" poetry—poetry that originates with assumptions about the "self-presence" of the poet (Perloff, "Language Poetry").[53] According to Bartlett, Language writing emphasizes rethinking "the social implications … of an unquestioning referentiality" (748), investigating the "'reader['s] response'" (750), questioning the possibility of an unmediated language capable of expressing the poet's subjective experience, and

overlapping affinities. Here, *we* stands for a consensus arrived at *for the purpose of this article* among six of its members on the West Coast" (emphasis added 261).
[52] Ron Silliman claims as much in his introduction to the anthology *In the American Tree*. In that introduction, titled "Language, Realism, Poetry," he partly credits the rise of magazines like *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as well as Bob Perelman's talks series to the "consequence of the number of writers in one place with related concerns having reached a critical mass" (xix).
[53] Perloff cites Ron Silliman's essay "Language, Realism, Poetry" where he discusses the challenge to a "speech"-based poetics (xvii). Such a poetics arises out of Charles Olsen's Projective Verse, as well as more traditional verse forms.

foregrounding "the text as text" (749). In general, the avenues explored by Language writing parallel those dominant concerns in the history of poetic defenses. The concern with "referentiality" invokes questions of mimesis. The matter of "'reader response'" raises questions of pragmatics. The concern with "voice" raises questions of expressivity. And, the attention to "textuality" implies questions of objectivity. For the way that Language writers engage these different questions, I have provided four terms: provisional realism, provisional activism, provisional lyricism, and provisional formalism.

Four Provisional Modes of Poetic Responsibility

Provisional realism represents a mimetic mode of poetic responsibility. For Language writers, a provisional realism challenges a traditional mimetic view that treats reality as an easily knowable phenomenon, somehow independent of both experience and language. Provisional realism does not aim to capture the world as it is or even as it could be; rather, provisional realism attempts to provide a representation of the world as the collision of constantly shifting contexts. A poem, operating in a provisionally realist mode, depicts the fragments of experience, thought, conversation, and knowledge that comprise a person's engagement with the world. Provisional activism represents a pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility. For Language writers, a provisional activism critiques a conventional pragmatic view that imagines the reader as a passive recipient of information, edification or pleasure. Provisional activism does not aim to instill or advocate virtue; rather, provisional activism attempts to provoke the reader, activating and motivating the reader to interpret culture critically. A poem, operating in a provisionally activist mode, combines goading and irritation with instruction and prodding, all of which serve to prompt a more interpretative response

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to the world. Provisional lyricism represents an expressive mode of poetic responsibility. For Language writers, a provisional lyricism problematizes a Romantic, confessional, or expressive view of subjectivity—a view that posits the imagination or an emotion core as the source for poetry. Provisional lyricism does not aim to preserve an autonomous subjectivity; rather, provisional lyricism attempts to consider the existential or psychological subject as a construction mediated by experience, language, and ideology. A poem, operating in a provisionally lyrical mode, diminishes the singular dimensionality of the subject in favor of a more collective, processual or fluid subjectivities. Provisional formalism represents an objective mode of poetic responsibility. For Language writers, a provisional formalism diverges from the traditional objective view that emphasizes the poem as an autonomous text, the formal devices of which do not innately carry any ideological value. Provisional formalism does not aim to maintain the self-sufficiency of a text, governed intrinsically by literary convention and device; rather, provisional formalism attempts to draw attention to the materiality of language by reconfiguring language outside of its usual contexts of meaning. A poem, operating in a formally provisional mode, alters, parodies or explodes conventional form, syntax or morphology, drawing attention to the ways that such linguistic structures can mask ideology.

The Mimetic Mode in Language Writing

Ron Silliman critiques the mimetic mode of poetic responsibility in explicitly Marxist terms. He defines the traditional mimetic mode as "the subjection of writing (and through writing, language) to the social dynamics of capitalism" (Silliman, *New Sentence* 8). Under capitalism, all materials of exchange, including words, are commodities. Silliman argues that commodification results in the separation of signifier

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and signified, displacing a word's "gestural use"—a use that indicates the relationship between a sign and its immediately material correlative. The increase in abstraction results in what Silliman also calls "the disappearance of the word" and "the invention of the illusion of realism" (12).[54] "What happens," Silliman writes,

> 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 expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality. (10)

When Silliman associates an increase in narrative capacity to "the illusion of reality," he implies that narrative stresses the continuity of plot, rather than the complexity of story; plot, like realism, tends to repress details in an effort to create an "expository, descriptive and narrative" coherence. Actual material reality does not corroborate such coherent "illusions." In response, Silliman prescribes a mode of poetic responsibility that returns to the signifier over the signified. Such a move intervenes on behalf of a more provisional realism. In order to subvert the drive to describe or narrate reality in deceptively simple language, Silliman advocates new poetic forms that sustain a

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[54] Silliman's concern with abstraction recalls Plato's concern with mimesis, in that both abstraction and imitation can be politically subversive because mimesis and abstraction can distance language from material reality and knowledge.

presence of attention to the material reality occurring on the page, and less to the world

beyond the page.[55]

Unlike Silliman's Marxist attack, Bruce Andrews attacks the traditional mimetic

mode of poetic responsibility in far more general political terms. Andrews

characterizes the mimetic mode as reactionary in nature, passively taking "[t]he world

as the basis" (Andrews, *Paradise and Method* 22). Under this mode "writing becomes an

activity largely determined in its coordinates by the coordinates of that world, as it is"

(23). Andrews further identifies mimetic writing as a "complacent literature" (22)

dependent upon "assumptions of reference, representation, transparency, clarity,

description, reproduction, positivism" (16). In terms similar to Silliman, Andrews

renders "reference" and "description"—the heart of conventional mimesis—as

provisional by referring to them as "assumptions." Andrews even notes that "clarity"

(16) is a characteristic aim of the traditional mimetic mode. In a classical realism

"[w]ords are mere windows" (16). Realistic writing amounts to "just the stylish

representation of some given reality" (110). Ultimately, Andrews equates this mode of

poetic discourse with a failure to recognize that language does not simply correspond to

the world, but that language also constitutes the world. In contrast to the poetics of

complacency, Andrews, imagines that poetry should strive to diminish referentiality.

Moreover, poetics must strive to question "who controls [a given] reality and who

controls its exclusions and inclusions as well as its accepted representations" (110).

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[55] In another essay, Silliman uses the notion of "intervention" to discuss the role of
poetic form and to challenge what I describe as the mimetic mode of poetic
responsibility. He writes: "The relation of the poem to the world is not simply
accumulative, any more than it is reflective or expressive. The perfection of new forms
as *interventions* to nature. The purpose of the poem, like that of any act, is to change the
world" (Silliman, "Wild Form").

Such an investigation into how reality manifests in various media, particularly

literature, challenges any simple or naïve view about what actually constitutes reality.

Lyn Hejinian confronts the mimetic mode of poetic responsibility in more

abstract and phenomenological ways than either Silliman or Andrews. Instead of

relying on terminology like "referentiality" or "representation," for example, she uses a

far more accessible term like "match" when considering questions of mimesis. Poetry,

she writes, arises out of the failure of language "to match the world" (Hejinian,

Language of Inquiry 56). This failure or incapacity "permits us to distinguish our ideas

and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other" (56). Poetry, for

Hejinian, provides a context to record these changing distinctions. But, as a record,

poetry only imparts a provisional representation: the knowledge that a poem might

provide about the world is conditional and temporary, based on a fleeting moment.[56]

For Hejinian, a poem provides a "[d]escription … [that] is simultaneously exploration,

discovery, and communication. It gives information not just about the world but about

the describer's place for the moment in it" (204). Poetry, in other words, offers

information about the world that Hejinian characterizes as "transitional, transitory" (2).

She writes, in fact, that poetry problematizes "conventional notions of 'aboutness'" by

which she means that poetry refracts rather than reflects anything definitive about the

world (2). A provisional realism, however, takes responsibility for the world by

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[56] Combining the momentous with the momentary is another way of understanding what a poem offers—a poem both creates and records a moment:

> It is the task of poetry to produce the phrase *this is happening* and thereby to provoke the sensation that corresponds to it—a sensation of newness, yes, and of renewedness—an experience of the revitalization of things in the world, an acknowledgement of the liveliness of the world, the restoration of the *experience* of our experience—a sense of living our life. (Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry* 344-345)

attending to the changing conditions of the world as it is individually and collectively

experienced.[57]

Charles Bernstein critiques a mimetic mode of poetic responsibility in his claim

that "political writing becomes disoriented when it views itself as description and not

discourse: as not being *in* the world but *about* the world" (*Content's Dream* 20). In other

words, a traditional mimetic mode irresponsibly enforces, what Bernstein calls, "[a]n

imperial clarity for an imperial world" (25). Such a mode, oriented toward

unquestioning representation and referentiality, depicts a simplified and dogmatic

"official version of reality, in which ethics is transformed into a moral code & aesthetics

into clean shaving" (25). A poetry and poetics that neither complicate nor refuse such

"official versions" also fail to provide alternative descriptions. "There is so much more

we can do," Bernstein prompts, "than simply underline the fact—& describe the

conditions—of our alienation, of the loss of the world's presence to us" (29). In contrast

to a poetics based on passive reflection, Bernstein advocates a provisional realism that

does not imagine the world as preconstituted, but as reimaginable, and full of

"materials to be worked with" (Bernstein, *Content's Dream* 71).[58] As Bernstein attacks the

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[57] Hejinian's consideration of how poetry only partially reflects the world pertains to an optimism about affecting the world in very provisional ways:

> The fact of the matter is that the world requires improving (reimproving) every day. … Victories are particular, local, and almost always temporary. To improve the world, one must be situated in it, attentive and active; one must be worldly. Indeed, worldliness is an essential feature of ethics. And, since the terms poetics names not just a theory of techniques but also attentiveness to the political and ethical dimensions of language, worldliness is essential to a poetics (*Language of Inquiry* 31).

[58] Considering Emily Dickinson's poem "I would not paint—a picture," Bernstein writes in his essay "Artifice and Absorption":

> The poem
> enacts an "impossible" preference not to represent

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inertia of mimesis proper, he suggests that poetry should represent—"to make audible" (*A Poetics* 184)—the new, the repressed and the imagined aspects of experience. He reinvigorates the weakness of mimetic poetry by asking poetry both to portray "those dimensions of the real that cannot be heard" (184) because they have been "hidden or denied" (1) and to represent "new reals that have never before existed" (184). In Bernstein's reinvisioning of the mimetic mode of poetic responsibility, poetry provides a perspective upon the world as it exists and as it could be; this he makes clear in the following statement: "The promise of the return of the world can (& has always been) fulfilled by poetry" (*Content's Dream* 29).

The Pragmatic Mode in Language Writing

Ron Silliman critiques the traditional pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility by reconfiguring the role of the reader. Silliman suggests that, in the traditional pragmatic mode, poetry operates didactically, delivering information to a passive recipient. In contrast, Silliman offers a model of pragmatic responsibility that involves less reception and more activity. Silliman states:

> The primary ideological message of poetry lies not in its explicit content,
> political though that may be, but in the attitude toward reception it demands
> of the reader. It is this "attitude toward information," which is carried
> forward by the recipient. It is this attitude which forms the basis for a
> response to other information, not necessarily literary, in the text. And,
> beyond the poem, in the world. (*New Sentence* 31)

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the world or look at it as if it were a
representation—that is, something one can
look out *onto*—but to dwell *in*, *on*, be of. (*A Poetics* 25)

Rather than carrying forward a message, readers carry forward an awareness of how

texts demand a kind of reading that then shapes a reading of other kinds of texts.

Silliman adds that once readers are aware of how the text's formal aspects dictate how it

might be read, readers can also develop awareness of how their responses can condition

the meaning of the text.[59] For Silliman, Language writing provides a context where the

reader can develop such an awareness. "The function of [Language] writing," Silliman

suggests, " … would be to make the reader aware of the role of projection as a response

to form in the constitution of the reader as a subject" (183). "Projection" is a term

Silliman uses to indicate how readers might provide contextual material when making

sense of a text. In other words, reading is never exhaustive, but only provisional. Once

readers bring their immediate contexts to bear on the constitution and meaning of a

text, the poem has empowered these readers as subjects. Ultimately, this increase in

agency represents the goal of provisional activism.

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[59] Silliman describes a text's devices as those forms of a poem that manifest particular readings. Devices, he defines, "in the Russian Formalists' sense" (Silliman, *New Sentence* 110). For the Russian Formalists, a device is "any part of the writing which perceptibly alters and thereby shapes, an individual reader's experience of the text" (110). As part of the overall Language writing project, Silliman calls for "a theory of the device" to help increase a reader's pragmatic responsibility (110). Such a theory would consider how a text's devices enable the transfer of ideological material. How devices carry ideological material works on a level with how genres carry ideological material, particularly in the way that both structures elicit certain expectations from readers, and how both structures actively prescribe certain subjects for exploration. Silliman speaks to this in an Interview:

> The question of what is appropriate content is mainly conventional. People tend to have things in the world that they are taught to view as meaningful. All the rest, of course, continue to exist in the world; they acquire meanings that often become the repositories of emotional responses, responses that at first glance may seem irrational but that are actually the consequence of societal input. We don't articulate our responses to these objects because we have not been preconditioned to recognize their contents. Exploring the territory seems to me to be far more important … ("A 1982 Interview")

Like Silliman, Bruce Andrews challenges the traditional pragmatic mode of

poetic responsibility by reorganizing the power relations between a text and the reader.

Unlike Silliman, however, Andrews uses the economic terms "consumer" and

"producer" to describe different readerly orientations. Andrews classifies the

traditional mode in terms of "concrete effects on an audience" where a reader consumes

meaning passively (*Paradise and Method* 50).[60] In opposition to this characterization of

the traditional mode, Andrews offers: "READING: not the glazed gaze of the

consumer, but the careful attention of a producer, or co-producer. The transformer.

(capacitators? resistors?) Full of care. It's not a product that is produced, but a

production, an event, a praxis, a model for future practice" (12). Andrews transforms

the consumer model of reading by insisting on a "careful attention" to the text, an

attention that results in reading as a "production." As opposed to a "product," the

result of this "careful attention" entails something individual and reflective of the

reading context. In other words, the result of reading is far more provisional. This

transformed vision of reading also provides "a model for future practice"—a model that

does not end with textual reading. Andrews draws a parallel between the way that we

read and the way that we live in the world. "We're supposed to be pulled in by

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[60] I have cited this classification somewhat out of context. Andrews originally uses it to describe and critique the pragmatics of conventional political literature, but I believe that Language writing, for Andrews, represents not simply a challenge to the pragmatics of conventional political literature, but also to the pragmatics of conventional literature. See the following for the original context of Andrews's use of "concrete effects":

> Conventionally, radical dissent & 'politics' in writing could be measured in terms of communication & concrete effects on an audience. Which means either a direct effort at empowering or mobilizing—aimed at existing identities—or at the representation of outside conditions, usually in an issue-oriented way. So-called 'progressive lit'. (*Paradise and Method* 50)

literature," he writes, "just like we're supposed to be absorbed in the social status quo. As readers" (138).[61] Inevitably, Andrews asks: "What if we thought about socialization as a matter of reading? And what if we thought about Reading as socialization?" (142). Such a speculation enables Andrews to posit an alternate pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility—a mode in which texts facilitate a reading practice against socialization. Ultimately, Andrews suggests that the formal innovations of Language writing incite a careful reading that evokes action and agency. As such, Language writing represents a provisional activism.

Lyn Hejinian's engagement with the pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility entails a complication of the traditional division between reader and writer. Hejinian "rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies" (*Language of Inquiry* 43). Hejinian envisions a revised role for the reader, a vision that also complicates the view of the reader as recipient or consumer.[62] Hejinian offers a glimpse into this revision in a statement about her poetics. She writes that her poetic work "foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent composition by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product" (43). Like Silliman and Andrews, Hejinian avoids thinking about poems or readings as products; for Hejinian, her poems are provisional objects and reading

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[61] Andrews writes: "To the Reader. You're trained to *not pay attention* systematically, socially, so that 'it' can pay better attention to you—can get to you, can make you up" (*Paradise and Method* 141).
[62] Poems, Hejinian suggests, allow "readers the opportunity to participate—first and especially because poetry tends to encourage readers to subvocalize the text (enunciate it to themselves—sound it out), but second because poetry generally doesn't over-explain itself" ("Roughly Stapled").

them is a provisional endeavour. Reading enacts what she calls "subsequent composition"; but that subsequent composition is not a product, it is the articulation of a process. Defining reading as a kind of writing process contrasts with a traditional pragmatic definition of the reader's role. Revising the role of the reader also enables Hejinian to describe how writer, text and reader interact as a "community" (35). According to Hejinian, an act of writing anticipates and "summons" a "community" of readers for whom the text makes sense, "even if . . . it is not a present but a past . . . or future community, consisting of those whose past or future capacity to understand, that is being invoked" (35). In a revised pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility, readers represent an interactive contingent who "provide advocacy": "support," "challenge," and "stimulus" (35). Ultimately, Hejinian subverts the hierarchy between reader and writer by creating work that challenges the reader with "subsequent composition," an open call for participation in a provisional activism.

In the same vein as the other three Language writers mentioned, Charles Bernstein engages the pragmatic mode of poetic responsibility by renegotiating the relationship among the reader, the text and the world. Unlike traditional theorists of a pragmatic mode, Charles Bernstein posits the text itself as the "map or model whose final constitution requires the reader's active response" (*Content's Dream* 236). "This concept of reading," he adds, "extends beyond the text into the world, into the realm of reading human culture" (236). In other words, readers do not take away an allegorical lesson about how to operate in the world, but a reading model about how to "interpret the world" (233). For Bernstein, the formally difficult work of Language writing does not offer a predetermined set of markers about how to interpret such difficulty; as a result, such work initiates the reader into self-consciousness about how meaning gets

made in all discourse. This initiation has two effects, Bernstein argues. First, "[t]he text formally involves the process of response/interpretation" that "makes the reader aware of herself or himself as producer as well as consumer of meaning" (233). The reader's responses constitute a portion of the text's meaning; for without recourse to standard interpretive methods, a reader must reflect inward. Second, "[the text] calls the reader to action, questioning, self-examination: to a reconsideration and remaking of the habits, automatisms, conventions, beliefs through which, and only through which, we see and interpret the world" (233). The reader discovers that the methods and demands of reading a difficult poem transfer to a reading of broader "texts," such as the culture or the world. For Bernstein, a pragmatically responsible poem is a poem that can raise a reader's self-consciousness about how meaning gets made in texts and in culture.[63] When such a poem makes a reader reflect on his or her role as a producer, the poem has enacted a provisional activism.

The Expressive Mode in Language Writing

Ron Silliman couches his challenge to the expressive mode of poetic responsibility in a critique of literatures that propagate an ideal of "universalism" (*New Sentence* 172). For example, Silliman concentrates his critique on those who "identify their own cause" with an "invariably universalist" project such as "freedom" (172). A "universalist" project tends to diminish difference, identity, and subjectivity, and, hence, a poetry that confronts, what he calls, "the myth of universalism" (174) must

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[63] "My art is just empty words on a page if it does not, indeed, persuade," Bernstein admits; the poem fails "if it enters into the world as self-justification or self-flagellation or aesthetic ornamentation rather than as interaction, conversation, provocation (for myself and others)" (*A Poetics* 223-224).

concern itself with examining and sustaining "the subject, that 'I' which both speaks and reads the text" (173). This "'I'" of which Silliman speaks is not aligned with an abstract Universalist cause, but with individual, social and material experience. In contrast to an expressive tradition, like that of the British Romantics who champion the Imagination, Silliman turns his attention toward "the capacity of language to constitute a subject (that self which, in the most literal sense, asserts and experiences subjectivity)" (174). For Silliman, expressivity amounts to a function of language, rather than a reflection of an imaginative or emotional core. Silliman responds to a traditional expressive view by stating: "Individuals do not exist" and "One's writing is one writing" (57).[64] Silliman does not deny subjectivity, only the idea of a subjectivity prior to language. Ultimately, he posits that a responsible expressive poetics attends to the conditional nature of individual subjectivities as they exist in poems themselves. In all, such a poetics espouses what I call a provisional lyricism.

Bruce Andrews critiques the "expressivist vocabulary" (*Paradise and Method* 91) in, what he calls, a "Romantic Ideology" (90). Andrews admits: "Any call to construct, as poetry's center, an atomized & decontextualized subject is a call to active innocence, a refurbishing of Romantic Ideology" (90). Like Silliman, Andrews attacks the possibility of an unmediated subjective core, and assumes that there are no authors, but only author functions. Andrews asks: "If the subject resides in language, which itself forms a remarkable body of disunity & displacement & decentering—then how could

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[64] Silliman intends the use of "[i]ndividuals" and "one" here in terms of the romantic subject, but also in terms of his own particular poetic project: "I'd say that the voice in my works is the product of the language that appears there. … not … that voice of psychology in any traditional sense, an 'address' in the sense of a Zip code. This voice is constituted through a lot of exterior information" ("A 1982 Interview").

such an entity, *au naturel*, lay a legitimate (unembarrassed) ground for poetry to stand

on?" (89). Andrews recognizes the disingenuousness of an "innocent,

decontextualized" subject outside of language, but Andrews moves further to suggest

how even a subjectivity in language presents a problematic starting point for a

responsible poetics. In response, he advocates "moving beyond the conventional ready-

made vehicle of the subject" (51), by which he means a subject unmediated by social

relations or language.[65] Rather than dismiss the subject entirely, however, Andrews

posits the notion of a "self-position," particularly in poetry (143). I would describe a

"self-position" as a provisional view of the self, a conditional subjectivity. A "self-

position" provides a context from which one might investigate alternate subjectivities,

ones not predicated on the social, cultural and political discourses that try to fix

identities (143). "Poetry," Andrews argues, "*can* be an expression of what you aren't"

(145).[66] Ultimately, Andrews considers poetry a viable context for the exploration of

alternate "self-positions." "Self-positions" undercut a traditional Romantic expressivity

and demonstrate one possibility of a provisional lyricism.

　　　Like Silliman and Andrews, Lyn Hejinian challenges the expressive view of

poetic responsibility by critiquing the Romantic model. She insists that "subjectivity is

not an entity but a dynamic" (*Language of Inquiry* 203).[67] By this she means that

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[65] Andrews turns to deconstruction as the logical sensibility for investigating the "ready-made subject" and a move beyond it: "[Deconstruction] could suggest how poetry can show the figurative & rhetorical & relational nature of a subject in language—a subject that, in spite of everything, cannot refrain from attracting fervent claims to the contrary (reassuring claims to unity, substantiality, freedom from context, or transcendence by means of inwardness and internalization" (*Paradise and Method* 90).
[66] Similarly, Andrews posits: "The fiction of the self is a failure of the imagination" (*Paradise and Method* 144).
[67] Hejinian claims that the "Language movement is unusual" because of

subjectivity not only depends on context, but also changes with experience. "Our

individuality," Hejinian writes, "is at odds with the concept of some core reality at the

heart of our sense of being" (201). She contrasts the contingency of the self with the

Romantic vision of the self. In fact, she maintains that the Romantic model has "tended

to produce a banal description of the work of art as an expression uttered in the artist's

'own voice,' issuing from an inner, fundamental, sincere, essential, irreducible,

consistent self, an undemonstrable but sensible entity" (201). In response to claims of

essence or irreducibility, she offers the terminology "self" and "person" (201)—

terminology that helps to clarify what she means when she calls subjectivity a

"dynamic" and not an "entity." She defines the "self" in traditional terms: "the essence

of each single human being, the sole and constant point from which the human being

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> its insistence on the social—its insistence on recognizing and/or
> producing social contexts in and for poetry. This takes place in opposition
> to the romance of the solitary individualist …. And while debunking the
> figure of the poet as a solo egoist, the Language movement has
> undertaken intellectual rigor within the social; it has produced a
> challenging, strenuous, and sometimes anxious social milieu" (*Language of
> Inquiry* 171).

Elsewhere, she writes of the correlation between "prior definitions of literature" and a
"narrow world view": "A significant component of this canonized world view, of
course, was the romantic, unitary, expressive self, the 'I' of the lyric poem, and several
factors in Language writing challenged and perhaps by now have, at least in certain
quarters, undermined the viability of this simpleminded model of subjectivity and
authority" (329). Finally, in an interview with Larry MacCaffery and Brian McHale, she
observes:

> [T]he romantic version of the poet is not very exciting anymore or at the
> moment. It seems extremely limited, solipsistic. The question that I often
> ask myself, that I feel I *have* to ask myself is, "Are you contributing
> something with all this writing?" And if I just felt I was contributing 'me,'
> the answer would be no, that's not a relevant contribution. It would be
> stupid and limiting to enshrine myself as some unitary voicing of the
> world as if I were a representative person, which I'm not; *nobody* is living
> in such a complex culture as this. It seems as if anything that I would say
> as me alone is simply not very novel. ("A Local Strangeness" 134-135)

can truthfully and originally speak" (202). She defines "person" in provisional terms:
"the exercise of possibilities … amid conditions and occasions" (203). In Hejinian's
version of an expressive mode of poetic responsibility, the poet is responsible for
representing the "person" rather than expressing the "self"; emphasizing the "person"
implies a provisional lyricism.

Charles Bernstein extends the critique of the expressive mode of poetic
responsibility by challenging, what he calls, the "private" (*Content's Dream* 28).[68]
Bernstein begins his critique by offering a brief history of the expressive mode. The
expressive mode, according to Bernstein, begins as a response to the proliferation of
"scientism."[69] Opponents to "scientism," and its "imperial reality" (28), have embraced
and celebrated the prominence of "subjectivity" or, more specifically, psychological and
emotional experience (27). Bernstein continues:

> The poetic response to the imposition of an imperial reality has been to
> define subjectivity … as exalted. The image of the poet as loner &
> romantic continues to condition this response. An unconscious strategy of
> contrariety develops—that the official manners & forms are corrupt &
> distorted & only the private & individual is real. (28)

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[68]Bernstein also refers to the "private" as "Romantic sincerity" (*A Poetics* 221). He
rebukes "Romantic sincerity" by aligning it with the "phallocratic voice." Any
insistence on an unmediated expressive voice comes under fire: "I would speak of a
phallocratic voice of truth and sincerity as one that hides its partiality by insisting on its
centrality, objectivity, or neutrality—its claim to mainstream values; a voice that opts
for expedience at the expense of depth, narrative continuity at the expense of detail,
persuasion at the expense of conviction" (Bernstein, *A Poetics* 223).
[69] He borrows this term "scientism" from Jürgen Habermas: "'Scientism' means
science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we no longer understand science as
one form of possible knowledge but rather must identify knowledge with science" (qtd.
in Bernstein, *Content's Dream* 19).

For Bernstein, the rise of a "confessional mode" of poetry in the United States in the middle 20th Century represents a point when "the private" becomes more conventional and less authentic (79). By "confessional," Bernstein is obviously referring to American poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and others who have developed a poetics of intimacy and exposure. "An outpouring of the 'private,'" Bernstein claims, "has made the confessional mode more and more rhetorical" (79-80). In other words, Bernstein considers confessionalism to be a conceit or a genre, rather than an authentic divulgence. For Bernstein, an expressive mode of poetic responsibility must entail "breaking away from habitual psychological or literary tracks, from automatic or predetermined patterns" all of which inhibit the full complexity of experience (72). The formal experimentation of Language writing provides one means of breaking from "confessional" or "private" modes. By breaking from those modes and preserving subjectivity Language writing demonstrates a provisional lyricism.

The Objective Mode in Language Writing

Ron Silliman develops his version of an objective mode of poetic responsibility in his treatise "The New Sentence." "The New Sentence" represents Silliman's attempt to reinvigorate the objective mode by politicizing poetic form. The traditional objective mode maintains a focus on the autonomy of the poem, in which meaning is conveniently fenced within formal boundaries. In contrast, Silliman recognizes that "'meaning' does not stop conveniently at the border of the text" because ideology does infuse all facets of language (111). Nevertheless, works of the "New Sentence" do limit readerly "attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below" (91). Such works challenge the traditional object-nature of the poem by relying on the prose sentence and the paragraph as basic units of composition,

over the traditional poetic line and stanza (91).[70] For Silliman the attention to "language" at the level of the "sentence" has a political meaning beyond the poem's borders, in that such attention draws attention to the ideology of poetic forms. For example, Silliman argues that reclaiming the sentence for poetry initiates a kind of class critique. "'Educated' speech," Silliman argues,

> imitates writing: the more "refined" the individual, the more likely their utterances will possess the characteristics of expository prose. The sentence, hypotactic and complete, was and still is an index of class in society. Accordingly, the function of this unit within creative prose proves essential to our understanding of how a sentence might be "new."
>
> (*New Sentence* 79)

Ultimately, Silliman's version of a provisional formalism focused on the ideology of the sentence as a form because the sentence—used in everyday discourse, as well as conventional literary and non-literary prose—assumes a level of authoritative clarity that requires investigation.[71]

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[70] Language writing, particularly works of "The New Sentence" operate against convention, particularly in terms of poetic models. Such challenges represent a provisionality by attempting to provide for a particular need. As Silliman states:
> The work of each poet, each poem, is a response to a determinate coordinate of language and history. Each writer possesses in his or her imagination a subjective conceptualization of this *matrix* (inevitably partial, inevitably a distortion), usually termed the tradition. The locus of the work to be written is felt as a blind spot, a primal lack toward which the writer is driven. This is the essential truth in the cliché that poets write only those poems which they need. Each successful poem abolishes (but only for a time) the lack and subtly reorganizes the structure of the subjective matrix. (*New Sentence* 13).

[71] In order to make poetry a more viable means of social critique, Silliman would argue that the sentence, a unit so familiar in everyday and even specialized discourse, must be reclaimed for use by poetry, for no other reason but that speech-acts come in these

Bruce Andrews explores the objective mode of poetic responsibility by centralizing "questions about *the nature of the medium*" (*Paradise and Method* 16). In the traditional objective mode, the material and formal levels of language serve the semantic register. Readers treat words as signs, and attend more to the signified, a word's meaning, than the signifier, a vehicle for that meaning. In Andrews's version, form is content and the materiality of language becomes the predominant semantic dimension. Form doesn't simply serve to reinforce meaning but must be taken as meaningful on its own terms. "So language becomes the content and the event," Andrews writes; "The words don't have to be (primarily) (just) transparent signposts to something beyond. Nor can they" (*Paradise and Method* 3). Andrews calls the language of a poem both "content" and "event" in order to stress how language is the vehicle for content, how language can be the subject of the poem and how context comes to play a role in shifting attention from a stabilized content toward a conditional event. As Andrews makes clear: "Meaning is not produced *by* the sign, but by the contexts we bring to the potentials of language" (9). He also makes clear that, even though typically the signifier serves the signified, they are distinct, and we can shift attention back to the signifier. To do so opens the signifier up to new meanings, in new contexts. Andrews argues that when contexts, rather than the pre-determined meanings, dictate our approach to texts "meaning will insist on spilling *out of* the closed circuit of the sign, to

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forms: "It is at the level of the sentence that the use value and exchange value of any statement unfold into view. The child's one-word sentence is communicative precisely because (and to the degree that) it represents a whole. Any further subdivision would leave one with an unusable and incomprehensible fragment" (*The New Sentence* 78).

reach or *act on* the world (not only as it is, but as it could be)" (19).[72] In other words, context forces signs to accommodate new meanings; when poets force signs into new contexts, language changes and so must the way that we use language to consider the world. In Andrews's objective mode of poetic responsibility, he accentuates the role of the signifier in order to validate actual material context; this accentuation demonstrates a provisional formalism.

Lyn Hejinian critiques the objective mode of poetic responsibility in her essay "The Rejection of Closure." In her essay, she differentiates between a "'closed text'" and an "'open text'":

> We can say that a "closed text" is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity. In the "open text," meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have been taken into the dimension of the work.
> (*Language of Inquiry* 42-43)

The "closed" text resembles the view of a poem in a traditional objective mode. Hejinian rebukes this type of view by claiming elsewhere that "a poem is not an isolated autonomous rarefied aesthetic object" (323). Hejinian takes care in defining the "open" text in very conditional terms. While "the elements of the work are maximally excited," they are not disordered, and while "ideas and things" exceed "argument," they do not desert it. The "open" text balances between "an impulse to boundedness" and "an

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[72] This parenthetical remark recalls Aristotle's and Sidney's claims about poetry's value, when compared to history or philosophy

encyclopedic impulse" (42). She elaborates on this difference as "a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it" (41). For Hejinian, writers should not strive to achieve absolute coherence nor should they aim to present unbounded formlessness. Rather, writers have a particular "responsibility" (Hejinian, "A Local Strangeness" 136) to invent or discover forms that "make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power" (Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry* 47).[73] In Hejinian's objective mode of poetic responsibility, form provides the promise of a coherent structure for the organization of "raw material," but such "material" ultimately conditions that structure in the process of organization. This process of formalizing raw material suggests a provisional formalism.

Charles Bernstein's consideration of the objective mode of poetic responsibility begins with "taking responsibility for the text" (*Content's Dream* 420). "To take responsibility for a text," he instructs, "is to understand that all texts are rhetorical, are involved with persuasion" (413). This claim that "all texts are rhetorical" expresses the traditional objective mode because the claim suggests that reading and writing begin with a careful consideration of the devices, tropes and figures of language. But,

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[73] Many refer to this balancing with the paradoxical term *generative constraint*. Hejinian acknowledges the productive nature of this paradox in an Interview:

> [The use of external devices for generating form] provides a container for this great wide swath of potential experience that's going by. Since you're always born in the middle of this and you stay in the middle of it, the question of where to begin and where to stop raises itself as a problem. An invented form allows one to begin anywhere—the form says begin now and then the form says stop now. ("A Local Strangeness" 140).

Bernstein also argues that taking responsibility for the text means working to achieve an "idleness" or "a writing that is just for itself" (82).[74] More specifically, the poem is an "event" where the formal aspects of the poem provide the poem's energy and meaning. In such works, for example, the words

> are not used to describe events in the world that have already occurred, in life or in fantasy, or intended to be about some thing else; it being primarily a question of attention, of not wanting to attend to bringing forward a memory of an idea or an event, all external to the poem itself (to the act of writing), but to attend to the internal event that is taking place in it. (50)

Ultimately, for Bernstein, an objective mode of poetic responsibility is about paying "attention" to the activity of composition rather than paying heed to previous generic constraints, poetic themes or even referentiality itself. Creating works that emphasize the act of composition highlights "the medium of writing" and renders that medium "as maximally open" to "what can be thought, what can (might) be" (35-36). Attending to language at the "threshold of its / coming to mean" suggests one possibility of a provisional formalism 52).

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[74] Bernstein uses the term "artifice" to account for the *idling* poem as opposed to the realist object. "'Artifice,'" he defines as "a measure of a poem's / intractability to being read as the sum of its / devices & subject matters (*A Poetics* 9). "Artifice" flies in the face of the autonomous New Critical poem, while at the same time radicalizing such autonomy by making "the act of writing," rather than the performance of meaning, the focus.

Four Language Poems and the Ethics of Provisionality

Provisional Realism in Ron Silliman's "Blue"

Of the works by Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein collected in the *Paris Review* "Language Sampler," the fourteen paragraphs that comprise Ron Silliman's poem, "Blue," most markedly interrogate a traditional mimetic mode. "Blue," I argue, demonstrates a provisional realism.[75] On their own, two paragraphs of conventional realist narrative bracket the poem, between which are interspersed far more disjunctive anti-narrative paragraphs. Unlike the coherent hypotaxis of the first and last paragraphs, the interspersed section presents a paratactic syntax that disrupts an easy flow of images and language. Put otherwise, the paratactic quality of "Blue" does not provide a clear or totalized vision of the world. Instead, as "Blue" moves from sentence to sentence, the poem offers brief glimpses into different contexts that collide. Over the course of the poem, however, Silliman returns to these contexts, creating a multitude of semi-coherent strings, just as he returns in the end to the realist narrative. The title of the poem, "Blue," implies a connection between the two different modes, in that the title anticipates both the sky in the first paragraph, and the mundaneness of details in subsequent paragraphs. So as "Blue" builds its own series of revolving images, reading the poem demands an elongated and associative attention. In other words, reading the poem replicates a kind of catalogue of how a day's events might unfold in the retrospective imagination; the experience of a day out in the world is quite personal, convoluted and complex with partial observations, conversations and questions. Ultimately, the contrast between the more standard realist sections and the

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[75] "Blue" also represents the second book of Silliman's ongoing poetic project *The Alphabet*, and first appeared in Silliman's *ABC* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1983).

more disjoined sections demonstrate the difference between realism and reality, or a mimetic realism and a provisional realism.

The line that begins the poem does not simply initiate a conventional narrative, the line also alludes to an historical critique of novelistic realism by the poet Paul Valéry. Here is the first paragraph in its entirety:

> The Marchioness went out at five o'clock. The sky was blue
>
> yet tinged with pink over the white spires which broke up the
>
> east horizon. The smell of the afternoon's brief shower was still
>
> evident and small pools of clear water collected in the tilt of the
>
> gutters, leaves and tiny scraps of paper drifting in the
>
> miniature tides which nonetheless caught and reflected the
>
> swollen sun, giving the boulevard its jeweled expression. (Silliman,
>
> "Blue" 84)

Silliman appropriates the first line from Paul Valéry. In conversation with Andre Breton, Valéry suggests that this sentence represents an example of why Valéry could never be a novelist (Sayre 1191). The first sentence, and its constituent paragraph, serve to parody novelistic prose because such prose assumes a narrative transparency that moves us swiftly through language and scene.[76] Valéry objects to such prose because, in

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[76] Silliman contextualizes the inspiration for *Blue* and for his use of Valéry in an interview with the poet Gary Sullivan. There, Silliman states:

> *Blue*, for example, was inspired by a walk that Gil Ott and I took around Manhattan one day, mostly down Orchard and Hester Streets, but the initial sentence of that work, "The marchioness went out at five o'clock," was Valéry's example of why he could not write fiction. So that work consciously constructs a certain amount of narrative – you can follow the marchioness all the way to the restaurant. In addition to the writing question – the problem of prose – Valéry was important because he once

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Silliman's words, it does not "pool" or "break up" the horizon of our attention, like "the

tiny scraps" of poetic lines. Interestingly, the water imagery in the paragraph acts as a

kind of mimetic trope, which the rest of the poem disavows in its representation of

reality. In subsequent paragraphs, the poem makes an abrupt shift away from narrative.

The second paragraph begins, for example: "Government was therefore an attitude"

(Silliman, "Blue" 84). Despite the "therefore," this line neither follows from the

previous nor anticipates the next, but the "Government" of the text does shift as rapidly

as an "attitude." So instead of narrative coherence the poem delivers observations of

mundane details: from a "camel" at a "fence" to the "smell" of "eucalyptus" and the

attraction of a "car," from the telling qualities of genitalia, the mundane activity of

"folding flyers," and the pride in playing "Badminton" to the "grease" and "tire marks"

on the "road," from the "rust" on an "old truck door," the "yellow leaves" on a "fern"

and the finished playing "record" to the "buzz" of "the dryer" (84). Among the series

of observed details, Silliman adds: "The number of objects is / limited" (84) as if to

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> started to write a sequence of prose poems to have been called *The*
> *Alphabet* but stopped after composing *ABC* – not coincidentally the title of
> the first volume published by *Tuumba* in '83. ("Ron Silliman Interview")
In his entry on "The Avant Garde and Experimental Writing" in the *Columbia Literary*
History of the United States, Henry M. Sayre goes further into the literary origins of
Silliman's use of Valéry. Sayre calls "Blue" a "pastiche of Claude Mauriac's *nouveau*
roman, La Marquise sortit a cinq heures." Sayre goes on to say that Mauriac was inspired
by Valéry's statement to Andre Breton about why he, Valéry, could never write a
sentence like "The Marchioness went out at five o'clock." According to Sayre:
> Mauriac wished to convey in the novel a sense of time in passage that
> Valéry, musing on eternal verities and azure spaces, would hardly have
> appreciated. The novel, therefore, takes place in a restricted physical and
> temporal space: it tells us fragments of the histories of everyone who lives
> on or passes through the Carrefour de Buci (the intersection of five streets
> on the Left Bank of Paris) from five to six o'clock one summer afternoon,
> including a scrap of conversation from an airplane flying overhead. (1191)

remind readers that the poem does not issue from an omniscient consciousness, but from a swath of life, lived through experience and in language.

While the accumulation of individual objects and images in "Blue" is indeed limited, we, as readers, lack an external context with which to understand the references of some of those objects. The fifth paragraph begins, for example, almost mid-conversation in a domestic scene:

> Longer ones demand a new approach: there's not enough
>
> water for a second cup. These crystals are useless on a sunless
>
> day. More than that, the fence is apt to give, pulling free of its
>
> posts. ... (Silliman, "Blue" 84)

Despite any possible links between the first two sentences, the third sentence is from another context altogether, albeit from earlier in the poem. Even if one were to develop a taxonomy of the objects, they do not cohere into a simple and self-explanatory categorical network or narrative. The seeming randomness of objects and observations suggests that "Blue" re-presents a reality with an unpredictable nature—"apt to give" at any moment—the way that the course of any day unwinds, particularly in our associative memory. Most of the objects in the poem relate to the quotidian contexts and activities that consume most of our lives, but they also resonate reflexively. References to vehicles, for example, serve as metaphors for metaphor itself. The "car," the rusty "truck door," the "grease" and "tire marks" on the "road" from the beginning of the poem correspond to experiences described in the middle of the poem, such as "[t]he glove compartment [that] never held a glove" (185) and "the hood [that] never will quite shut" (185). Sentences and details do not flow in a narrative sense: they act as "useless crystals" or empty signfiers, like the glove compartment without any glove.

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Still, as signifiers, they do resonate with the evidence of use: rust, grease and marks. Even though "Blue" demonstrates a provisional realism by capturing a moment or observation as they might be thought or encountered, the poem also demonstrates a provisional realism by making language itself the true reality in the poem as though our experience with the vehicles of meaning are as real as the supposed experience represented.[77]

Following the progression of paragraphs and sentences after the first paragraph, the kind of world that the poem depicts is a panorama or mural, rather than a clear snapshot. In other words, the poem exemplifies a provisional realism because it provides a sense of the discrepancies between how different people encounter the world: the details of one person's day do not necessarily overlap with another's. But, there is a cross-section of an entire world depicted here, in part because the poem does reference an "I," a "you," a "we," a "they," a "she" and a "he." While each pronoun may have a single referent, there isn't any indication that this is absolutely true; the identities behind each pronoun only provisionally cohere. Sentences like "I am writing in shadows. Don't you worry about acces- / sibility too?" (Silliman, "Blue" 85) indicate

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[77] In an interview with Sinda Gregory, Ron Silliman explains that he avoids "larger structures" like character and plot because they tend to distract the reader from an attention to the text as a present experience. He states:

> A work built around those structures ensures that the reader's attention is always going to be defused by having to pay attention to what was going on three pages earlier and having to wonder what will be occurring four pages from now. This tends to decenter the consciousness and focus of the reader so that she is not experiencing the "presentness" in the work. This diffusion violates my experience of the world. Even though I am often thinking about a whole series of things and people, those thoughts occur continuously in the present. There is no such thing as a continuous past, such as the aorist tense of fiction, which is a fiction—that tense is precisely what is fictive about fiction. (Silliman, "A 1982 Interview")

that the pronouns point to words themselves as agents in the poem. While the narrative world that begins the poem might purport to offer an accessible view, the word-details in the poem only offer shadowy references. Near the end of the poem, when Silliman writes, "[t]he back of the television / faces the window" (85), he suggests that we have a doubly-mediated access to the world. The partiality of experience and the filters of language mediate our perspective on the world. By the final paragraph, the Marchioness returns as does the conventional narrative style: "At the arched door of the restaurant she checks her watch, a / delicate gold bracelet dangling from her wrist" (85). In an ironic gesture, Silliman encloses the poem within a traditional mimetic episode, as if enclosing reality within the functioning of language itself. But, next to the glints of real world images and bits of observations, the impressionistic narrative seems far less realistic. The interior of the poem replicates the continuous and simultaneous intake of stimuli that constitute our reading of the world at any given moment. As such "Blue" enacts a responsibility for the world as it is in the most quotidian moments and as it is in the most quotidian of language.

Provisional Activism in Bruce Andrews's "Confidence Trick"

The excerpt from Bruce Andrews's "Confidence Trick," in the "Language Sampler," demonstrates a critical shift from the conventional pragmatic mode to, what I am designating here, a provisional activism. "Confidence Trick" is the last section from one of six long poems in Andrews's full-length work *Give Em Enough Rope* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1987). In the five prose paragraphs that comprise this excerpt, Andrews discomfits and goads the reader by performing a kind of "nervous enema" ("Confidence Trick" 89) on a body politic infused with capitalism. Andrews floods his poem with a kind of post-enema material, what he refers to as "*tory crap*" (89) and

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"*capitalist shit*" (90). Andrews constructs a poem that defies the traditional pragmatic

mode—a mode intent on providing pleasure or instruction. Andrews mocks this mode,

referring to it as a "convent wire" (89) or "idiot phone" (89). As opposed to delivering

affective or insular messages, Andrews writes a poem that resembles a "crawling

chaos" (90), which induces "motion sickness" (89) with its syntactic, lexical and

imagistic disjunction. He often relies on sexualized and scatological imagery with an

aim to disgust or provoke, an experience confirmed by the disjunctive composition:

improvised and punning phrases follow ungrammatical and decontextualized

sentences, hinged together by long dashes, semi-colons and commas. In all, the poem

operates on a "squalid" (90) and messy register that evokes more visceral responses

from readers. As it critiques a conventional pragmatic mode, it also activates levels of

interpretation not necessarily theorized or warranted by traditional practices of close

reading.

The title suggests that the poem is a con game in which the reader is the mark.

For Andrews, however, this holds true for all poetry and so he makes a point of

providing readers with this information in his title. In the opening of the poem,

Andrews indicts the frequency of poetry written "*About* heart" that contrives to "keep

[our] hearts in line" rather than inspiring us to "rave on, to do & more" (89). He mocks

such poetry by referring to it as a "fake histrionic breast self-examination" with a "Neo-

gothic beat" (89). This correlation between a poem's "sentiment" (89) and its

"language" (89) serves to remind readers that the aggressive tone and pace of

"Confidence Trick" is perhaps more heartfelt than any conventional confessional lyric.

And yet, the poem almost welcomes ambivalence and repulsion as a readerly response:

"I think I m going to get a really sunny declension laced with stabs of politicized

savagery" (89). As Andrews announces early on, the poem is "distinctively all drums"
rather than confession, proposition, or narrative. The poem represents a kind of
improvised spewing of expletives and insults, or the output of a neurotic machine.
While all poems are "[m]achines in motion" (89), "Confidence Trick" keeps its
machinery exposed—its "rubber belt up front" (89)—in order to let on about itself as
just another trick. When Andrews lodges critiques of poetry in self-reflexive moments,
he shows the provisional nature of poetry—its necessity and its limitations. He shuns
poetry "*About* heart" and solicits disgust because, as he writes at the end of the third
paragraph, "Would take more than a sentence for the purpose" (89). For the purposes
of social, economic, or political change, we don't need a complacent poetry, but an
activating and provocative poetry.

     In the middle section of the excerpt, Andrews continues to take self-conscious
jabs at a traditional lyrical model with his own delinquent and anxious flows. The
fourth paragraph begins: "Big generation not about to go away to listen to my insults—
Black tie talkathon" (Andrews, "Confidence Trick" 89). Andrews does not imagine that
Tradition and its public will accept his grandiose diatribe. Despite a level of self-
consciousness, he feels compelled to shirk more conventional responsibilities as a kind
of provisional act: "Juggernaut cop out ahead of itself especially Velvets-like" (90). In
this passage, Andrews characterizes his poem as irresponsible, only then to compare his
own poetics to the influential experimental rock music of The Velvet Underground—a
band notably ahead of its time. Andrews does not commit to a model of poetry because
of its "health & efficiency" (89), but because of its difference and unpredictability. In a
poem where the "voice is quavery" (90) and "polyglots are adrift" (89), the reader
cannot easily find her way into the poem, but must stay on its surface in attending to

her own responses. The poem does not absorb the reader in its "self-interest goo" (90), but perpetuates an experience of exclusion and of feelings that poetry does not normally permit. "Confidence Trick" attempts to garner "dirty looks" rather than "bound" and "gag" (90) its reader with prosodic techniques. The hope, the confidence, which Andrews puts into his poem he compares to how "depictions yellow jacketed become a little more normal" (90). In one sense, "Confidence Trick" provides a model that aggravates and stings like yellow jackets, rather than comforts like "depictions." In another sense, the poem operates on, and advocates for, a register like the racy nineteenth century French novels, bound in yellow dust jackets.

In the final section of the excerpt from "Confidence Trick," Andrews offers less critical "depictions" of a traditional lyric model, and a more optimistic embrace of his own provisional activist model. In the middle of the last paragraph, Andrews sets off the word "shockabilly" in a rare use of parentheses (Andrews, "Confidence Trick" 90). This term probably best describes Andrews's method, particularly in light of its allusion to the early 1980s avant-garde rock band Shockabilly, which reworks classic rock, bluegrass, and jazz standards in a nonsensical and noise-driven collage of sound. Indeed, Andrews rethinks standards both in terms of his method and its eventual reception. To open the last paragraph, Andrews seems to rework the classical logic of catharsis: "Squalid with pity no squalid with piety" (90). Rather than evoking pity and fear, the poem commits to expressing and evoking disgust and anger with its outlandish form and content, exemplifed in a line like "Bathroom sex can count assorted percussion" (90). "Confidence Trick" aims for a perverse intimacy with its readers and continues to insist that whatever animus the poem musters will translate into political activism, from the level of reading and writing to the level of public

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protest. In the closing lines of the poem Andrews writes: "Test my knowledge of life in general—I dunno—Void—That protozoa" (90). Ultimately, the poem does not offer "knowledge of life" or provide a moral lesson, but somehow its failure to do so provides a new energy for the reader. As a provisionally activist poem, "Confidence Trick" forgoes comforting, placation, or edification, in favour of prompting a generative disgust, a transgressive attitude about one's sociopolitical milieu.

<div align="center">Provisional Lyricism in Lyn Hejinian's "Province"</div>

Lyn Hejinian's "Province" represents an unusually short sample for a poet most known for her long, book-length works. Nonetheless, this uncollected poem demonstrates an investigation of subjectivity in line with her most well-known book, *My Life*. "Province" demonstrates, what I call, a provisional lyricism, a revision of the traditional expressive mode of poetic responsibility. In "Province," Lyn Hejinian utilizes a series of fifteen tercets (and a single closing line) as a framework to explore a series of "corrugate perceptions" by an "I" who claims to "recede in a structure of feeling" (Hejinian, "Province" 109, 108). Rather than foregrounding a coherent voice or subjectivity, these "perceptions" wrinkle, buckle, and fail to adhere seamlessly to an "I" or to fit "reality neatly," such as in the following line: "Every turnip strives to be a man" (109). The "I" in the poem locates itself, on the one hand, within a general "structure of feeling"—what Raymond Williams defines as the manifestation of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (Williams 132). The "I" in the poem also recognizes itself, on the other hand, within a specific "structure of feeling"— which Hejinian describes as "derogatory and prolific" (Hejinian, "Province" 108). Williams sees a poem, or other artwork, as expressing a certain structure of feeling, but Hejinian "corrugates" the meaning of Williams's concept. Hejinian suggests that the

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lyrical "I" has its own 'structure of feeling.' In other words, the flow of perceptions,

that characterize both the "I" and the poem, problematize the notion of a stable,

autonomous subjectivity. The "I" is, in effect, a province—a singular but dependent

state, a product, and a producer, of the socioeconomic order that language ultimately

mediates. The terms "derogatory and prolific" used by Hejinian to describe a

"structure of feeling" suggests a subjectivity whose singular status is diminished, in lieu

of a status made more multiple by a flood of perceptions. Overall, the perceptions in the

poem depict images of provisional structures that shift and change—images that

illuminate the ways that language and knowledge render subjectivity constantly in

process. To borrow Raymond Williams's words, the poem offers the lyrical subject "in

solution" (133), or, as a flood of perceptions structured through and by language.

"Province" begins with a series of perceptions, mostly water-based images, that

reveal active and restless forces, working against provincial structures, all of which

culminates in the "I" that recedes in a "structure of feeling." The initial lines begin a

corrugation, a patterning of imagery that connects but does not cohere smoothly. In

fact, the metaphor with which Hejinian begins with contains layers to its possible

meaning.

> The town is a whistler
>
> turn on a rock
>
> The water runs a working curve (Hejinian, "Province" 108)

"[A] whistler" might signify a bird, a marmot, a person or even a machine. If the

"town" could be any of these, as the metaphor suggests, the poem begins with both a

provincial and a provisional structure. While Hejinian refers to "[b]irds and neighbors'

radios" further in the poem (109), this initial indeterminacy sets the poem off on its own

"working curve" and sets up a series of restless images of destabilization (108). "Puddles fill[ing] a fresh safety" and "[s]unsets swarming / an igloo" constitute observations about the natural instability of water (108). As the first part of the poem continues, Hejinian moves from contingent structures like "[p]rovince," "town," "puddles," "igloo" and "safety" to a subjective experience: "A taste never rested / architecturally horizontal between tides" (108). Here, Hejinian refers to an actual, possibly sensual, perception that may linger but does not stabilize, neither within a poetic line, the most readily apparent "architecturally horizontal" structure, nor within the "tide[s]" of social norms. This focus on restlessness and activity leads to a kind of conclusion: "Perhaps affinity is the 'maverick'" (108). In scare quotes, "'maverick'" suggests a provisional word choice, but the word also suggests a provincial entity— something isolated. Within the line, the word serves to question any natural or original inclination, like water's "affinity" for changing forms. While nature may include affinities, our own affinities and tastes as they come to define us, occur though a process of socialization, and they inevitably evolve. When Hejinian writes that "I recede in a structure of feeling" at the end of stanza four, she suggests that as affinities and tastes shift so inevitably does subjectivity.

In the second portion of the poem, Hejinian offers perceptions that dramatize how language shapes subjectivity relentlessly. The elusive whistler of the first stanza returns as the "birds and neighbors' radios" that "deftly with a board / refill the room" (Hejinian, "Province" 108). Like the image of the puddle filling from stanza two, this filling image presents a force—of sound and word—effecting another provincial structure, the "room" that is identity or subjectivity. Hejinian considers language as both a structure and a force in this portion of the poem. She writes: "Fate strikes while

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one sleeps / encyclopedic syntax" (108). Reading with enjambment, we find an image

of the generalized subject—the "one" who succumbs to the ultimate force of

inevitability, a force that Hejinian associates with the structuring of language and the

subsequent "'reading [of] meanings'" (109). An "encyclopedic syntax" connotes both

the structuring of language as it shapes our knowledge of everything and the

structuring of language as it serves in the delivery of facts. In the next stanza, where

Hejinian writes of "[c]urricular luck / in an apparent withdrawal," she suggests that

the seemingly transparent organization and delivery of knowledge participates in the

constitution of subjectivity. When Hejinian adds in parentheses at the end of this

stanza, "(that which went without saying)" (108), she alludes to ways in which

language shapes us unconsciously.

In the third and final portion of the poem, Hejinian continues to provide

perceptions on language, knowledge, and subjectivity, and to advocate a more

provisional view of them. In stanza nine, for example, she writes:

> A random stone raps the shadow
>
> With one interest light corrected dreams
>
> Themes read as Greek (Hejinian, "Province" 109)

While Plato believes that we can pierce "the shadow" of mere appearances and know

Truth in its essence, Hejinian writes that "[t]he scale is closed" for measuring

knowledge in that way (109).[78] Instead of a scale, Hejinian suggests a "span" that "has

an instinct for ellipses" (109). In other words, the images of openness, restlessness, and

dynamism serve to undercut any firm notions of a foundation for knowledge or

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[78] These lines seem to offer an oblique allusion to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from Book VII of *The Republic* (514a-517c).

subjectivity. Only a very provincial knowledge is available. Hejinian orients her

attention away from the "patience of a panoroma"—an imaging that stabilizes

perception and knowledge within a narrative depiction—toward a "subjunctive

strangeness"—an imagining that destabilizes knowledge within a hypothetical scenario

(109). Hejinian wishes to dissolve those "[c]anons of resemblance" that would measure

our subjectivity and knowledge through universal absolutes, for even, as she writes,

"[a] return on your identification / threatens evolution" (109). Just near the end of the

poem, when Hejinian reports that her "corrugate perceptions raise trajectories," we

recognize that the "I" in the poem is more a field of activity than a truly autonomous

entity. The recessed "I"—the provincial heart of the poem—constitutes one model for a

provisional lyricism because such a model demonstrates a subjectivity mediated by

language, knowledge, and even fate.

Provisional Formalism in Charles Bernstein's "Playing with a Full Deck"

Compared to the other three poems from the "Language Sampler" discussed

here, Charles Bernstein's poem "Playing with a Full Deck" is the most explicit

demonstration of a provisional formalism.[79] The poem lounges in the sensorial textures

of polished literary discourse and explores the evocative limits of language. In the three

stanzas of the poem, Bernstein appropriates and contorts traditional metre, formal

diction and antiquated syntax to portray language on the verge of ineffability.

Bernstein pushes words from one part of speech to another in an effort to extend the

meaningful possibilities of language, demonstrating all of the "flagrant" tricks

contained in the poet's deck of cards (Bernstein, "Playing with a Full Deck" 119). In

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[79] The poem appears originally in the book *Resistance* (Windsor, VT: Awede Press, 1983).

other words, the poem evinces a maximal use of artifice, or what Bernstein calls a "Logic of imposture" (118). For Bernstein, artifice foregrounds the very material qualities of language, specifically language's ability to engage the senses. For example, the poem is dense with evocative, but not necessarily referential words, composed of "the slater / Letters oak-lined portion" (119). Bernstein riddles the poem with references to the senses, such as smell, touch, and sight. Sonority is the poem's most pronounced quality, evident in the very first line: "Else everyone leaving leave to say" (118). In addition to "dot[ing]" (118) on the sensuality of language, the poem also articulates a "pleading" (118)— a lament for language too often evacuated of its sensuous qualities. In that sense, the poem's title also suggests that, contrary to the seemingly nonsensical wordplay, the poem is in rational command of its reflexive argument. "Playing with a Full Deck" enacts the sensuousness of language at the threshold of meaning, if only to argue for the reinvigoration and celebration of language's sensuous materiality.

In the first stanza, Bernstein demonstrates language both at its aural and oral limits within a literary paradigm. That first line of the poem is dense with a repetition of sounds that seems almost to stammer.

> Else everyone leaving leave to say
> What sway would, not that urnal
> Bishops, jarred as lurid tenses
> Smell of, quiet untokened
> Bends heft to aspirate
> Logic of imposture (Bernstein, "Playing with a Full Deck" 118)

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Not only does the language flee by virtue of the alliteration, but the poem also portrays language on "leave," deviating from the "sway" (118) of the "urnal / Bishops" (118). "[U]rnal / Bishops" suggests an allusion to the "authority" (118) of Cleanth Brooks and the New Criticism. The struggle to brandish something new, something "untokened," in poetry outside of the "chaliced" New Criticism proves troubling (118). The images of physical exertion and the double meaning of the word "aspirate" also depict this struggle to articulate. So, ironically, the poem begins by exploiting the material and evocative textures of poetic language in order to "exhume" such language and remove the "smocks" that dampen poetry's "molten" quality (118). But, I think that embracing the "Logic of imposture"—of dressing up the language to "redress" language— exemplifies provisionality (118). Poetry is only possible because of our ability to momentarily disengage it from referentiality in order to distort and reconfigure the relation between signifier and signified.

In some very basic sense, language continuously confronts its own ossification, and yet, poetry serves to help reinvigorate language. Stanza two begins by exploring this ossification, in a layered and rhythmic display.

> Which sieves of, harden
>
> Layer's mist or jauntless seeming
>
> Claim of motion, startled (Bernstein, "Playing with a Full Deck" 118)

The syntax hunkers a bit, by virtue of the punctuation, as if simultaneously hardening and resisting movement. These lines also depict the clash between movement and stasis, that dynamic at the heart of language, in which the signifier only provisionally stabilizes the signified. Words are like "sieves" because words cannot contain the fluidity of meanings; instead, words filter reality, straining it through their history and

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prior meanings. Words also seem to "harden" meanings, plagued by a "jauntless seeming." Of course, words can also be "jarred" or "startled" by poetry (118). In the latter half of the second stanza, in fact, the poem dramatizes how poetry works by "prean[ing] language (118).

> Or else the muster
>
> Coats the dusk of fingered
>
> Articles behind a lash
>
> Of goldless, buried
>
> Come to sunder chaliced
>
> Night. (118)

Sometimes a worn language of "fingered—/ Articles" with a dubious past is available, but ultimately poetry can "exhume" what is "buried." In fact, the poet "decked with sight" and "compost credulous / Light" must work in "luckless fashion" to "deck the doors" of language with renewed life (118).

The third stanza opens with a meditation and celebration of poetry, existing in tension between language as vehicle and language as material: "for make believe / Or stammer" (Bernstein, "Playing with a Full Deck" 119). The stanza begins with a threshold image, like the sieve in the second stanza.

> What chainlink beckons, held in
>
> Hand, for pleading bleeds the
>
> Finer augur's talon. (118)

The "chainlink" image connotes both the articulations of language as material—"in / Hand"—and the constrained threshold through which meaning arrives like signs from the "augur's talon" (118). The interrogative that begins the stanza also suggests a choice

between a language held in "Hand" and a language used for "pleading"—the latter of which seems detrimental. The "augur's talon" refers to a Roman prophetic figure who makes predictions based on the flight of birds, and so bleeding that talon would be a detriment to the possibility of prophecy. The poem supports the choice of liberating the word, in a "[g]leam of … unbridling" (118-119). In fact, the poem closes by choosing to "pare the suction" that would otherwise "bleed" language dry, preserving the capacity of poetic language to resist ossification (119).

> Whose will not bend nor
>
> Ape like furrows, arched
>
> Complacency's wirey mold. (119)

Rather than the structured "arch" of complacency, poetry embraces the provisional shape of a "diffused arc" (119). Ultimately, poetry can render language open, and can pry language's material and formal aspects apart from language's semantic vectors. For Bernstein, this rendering is poetry's responsibility, particularly under a provisional formalist rubric.

Conclusion

In my discussions of Language poetry and its orientation toward the world, the reader, the poet and the text, I have relied on four terms that suggest how Language poetry continues to defend and taken responsibility for poetry. Ron Silliman's "Blue" demonstrates a provisional realism at work in the way that the poem contrasts a conventional realist mode with a mode that attempts to represent the world in its most contingent moments. At each sentence, we are not getting the "illusion of realism" (Silliman, *New Sentence* 12), but a new context—a cross-section of life as it might be happening right now. The excerpt from Bruce Andrews's "Confidence Trick"

demonstrates a provisional activism at play in the way that the poem defies offering pleasure or edification in favour of one that provokes disgust and bafflement. In each turn of phrase, we are not led to consume meaning, but respond to how the goadings of the text correspond with our own disillusionment in the world. Lyn Hejinian's "Province" demonstrates a provisional lyricism with a lyric "I" submerged within both "corrugate perceptions" and a "structure of feeling"(Hejinian, "Province" 108). In each line, each stanza, we witness a subjectivity at once mediated by language and knowledge, as well as open to dynamism and flux. Charles Bernstein's "Playing with a Full Deck" demonstrates a provisional formalism in the poem's illustration of a "writing that is just for itself" (Bernstein, *Content's Dream* 82). In each contortion and exploitation of literary language, we see writing at the brink of the ineffable, attempting to contend with and represent the evocative limits of language.

While I have argued that each of these four Language writers best represents a particular mode of poetic responsibility in their work from the "Language Sampler," they each enact his or her own individual, though overlapping, attention to the other modes. Also, each of the four poets attempts to provide poetry with an extended life by challenging its traditions and its capacities. I cannot overstate how such a challenge originates in a political investigation that entails questioning assumptions about "referentiality" and "aboutness," reorienting the agency of the reader, challenging the unity and fixity of the subject, and prioritizing the materiality of language. Whether or not these endeavours culminate in an effective politics, the political intent demonstrates an ethics—an attempt to take responsibility for how poetry engages world, audience, poet and language. Inasmuch as Language writing might seem to deconstruct naïve notions of world, reader, subject, and the text, such poetry takes responsibility for these

four valences of writing by insisting that ideology infuses language and that language

mediates our access to the world, the reader, the subject, and the text.   Language

writers not only critique conventional modes of poetic responsibility, but they do so by

recognizing, and rendering, the core concepts of those modes as provisional. First,

Language writers treat these concepts as necessary: these concepts require serious and

continued investigation. Second, Language writers treat these concepts as conditional:

these concepts evade comprehensive knowability or representation.   Thirdly, Language

writers treat these concepts as anticipatory: these concepts take shape in the act of

composition and the act of reading. In the following chapter, I discuss the legacy of

Language Writing in the development of a Post-Language phenomenon—a

phenomenon that extends the provisional rendering of poetic responsibility and

assumes the ethical posture of the poetic defense.

CHAPTER 3: THEORIZING A POST-LANGUAGE POETICS:

THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Prologue:

Juliana Spahr's "Circle Out": An American Post-Language Defense of Poetry

"Circle Out" by Juliana Spahr appears in the volume entitled "Technique" from *Writing from the New Coast*, a double issue of the literary journal *o•blék* featuring work by "new and emerging writers" published in 1993.[80] "Circle Out" represents a manifesto, what with its many "Declarations" and the document serves as a defense of poetry. Spahr organizes her manifesto into two parts, the first of which is a series of quotations, and the latter, a series of declarations. The essay begins with an epigraph taken from Galileo, in which he claims: "'Philosophy is written in this grand book—I mean the universe—which stands continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures'" (Spahr, "Circle Out" 145). In the initial portion of her essay, Spahr cites not only Galileo, but also Percy Bysshe Shelley, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Gertrude Stein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—all of whom reference circularity in their respective citations.[81] In the

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[80] "Writing from the New Coast" was also a conference held at SUNY-Buffalo in the Spring of 1993.

[81] The logic to Spahr's choices of writers does not follow one based on historical descendence or linear influence, but rhetorical association. In "A, B, C: Reading Against Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein," Spahr writes:

> Literary criticism likes to cluster around reading of connections—Coleridge and Wordsworth as the beginnings of romanticism; Hawthorne and Melville as the beginnings of the American renaissance; Pound and Eliot as

second half, Spahr delivers a series of "Declarations" about the value of poetry,

including statements on the polysemy of poetic language, the challenge of formal

constraint, and the necessity of changing perspective—all of which Spahr articulates

with reference to circularity. Spahr grounds her own descriptive citations and

prescriptive declarations in a larger discourse on circularity taken from science,

literature, and philosophy. At the same time, Spahr invokes the ancient quarrel

between poetry and philosophy—a quarrel that has inaugurated the call to defend

poetry. Spahr uses the theme of circularity in her small catalog of examples to suggest

the similarity between poetry and philosophy, a similarity that serves simultaneously to

disarm the quarrel and to suggest that poetry participates in a larger practice of

understanding the universe. Spahr widens the circle of relevance among disciplines,

effectively *circling out*, in an effort to argue on behalf of poetry.[82]

The body of "Circle Out" begins with a quotation from Shelley's "Defence of

Poetry" where he claims that poetry "'is at once the centre and circumference of

knowledge'" (Spahr, "Circle Out" 145). Spahr's invocation of Shelley suggests that we

read her manifesto not only in the spirit of Shelley's defense, but also as a contemporary

contribution to the history of poetic defenses. At the same time, Spahr's quotation of

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the beginnings of modernism. These connections are used to establish
schools, similarities. But with such a systems, a canon of exclusion has
been created, a history of authority. (281)

In response to this "reading of connection" she posits a "reading of against," which she
defines as reading "across time …. jumping boundaries, cultivating associational
connections" (281).

[82] According to the *Dictionary of Video and Television Technology*, "circling out" denotes
the opposite of circling in, such that as an "optical effect" a pictured image broadens
from a singular point to overtake another diminishing image (Jack and Tsatsoulin 52). I
will be interpreting Spahr's title more liberally, but the logic of an expanding vision
correlates both the actual and my interpreted definition of "circle out."

Shelley operates as a premise around which statements by Dickinson, Donne, and Stein constellate. Shelley's statement argues that poetry is both generative and synthetic—poetry both "creates new materials of knowledge" and "engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order" (Shelley, "Defense" 510-511). But when Spahr cites Dickinson's often-quoted "'my business is circumference,'" Spahr does not do so in order to substantiate Shelley's statement, but instead to extend the meaning of "circumference," suggesting that poetry can also operate at the limits of knowledge and expression itself (Spahr, "Circle Out" 145). Or when Spahr cites Donne's compass image from "A Valediction," she finds that the image effectively traps the female figure inside a more mobile male one, a discovery that Spahr uses to politicize Shelley's original meaning of centre and circumference. When, finally, Spahr cites Stein, who states "'my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but the movement inside,'" Spahr suggests that Stein's statement demonstrates "the way words are full of meaning" (145), a demonstration of poetry's generative impulse that Shelley does not necessarily broach in his own defense. In all, the series of citations expand, or circle outward from, Shelley's defense in a way that supports Shelley's belief that poetry must refresh our view of the world.[83]

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[83] As a short discourse on poetry and circularity, Spahr's examples demonstrate her preference for, and defense of, what I might call, "circumferential poetry." In a way, Galileo's theory of a helocentric model presents a challenge to a certain vision of centricity that one might argue parallels how Dickinson's and Stein's poetics present a challenge to a phallocentric model. Spahr defends poetry for its ability to *circle out*—to maximize possibility and complexity and avoid the gravitational pull of "sedentary" meanings, paradigms or models ("Circle Out" 145). This is why she reads Stein's statement, even Stein's "'rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'" as a testament to "the way

Spahr's reading of Stein takes a philosophical turn when Spahr cites Wittgenstein and Emerson in the second half of the first section. Spahr associates "the way words are full of meaning" with "[t]he way in Ludwig Wittgenstein's words 'the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need'" (Spahr, "Circle Out" 145). Here, Spahr relates poetry to an ethical imperative—a "'real need'"—suggesting another means of defending poetry. One "axis of reference" ties the meanings of words to a dominant, centralized discourse, one that maintains the conventions of literature, upholds the machinery of capitalism, or perpetuates the habits of both racism and sexism.[84] An alternate "axis of reference" relates the meanings of words to "'our real need,'" one that reconsiders the conventions of literature, investigates the machinery of capitalism, and challenges the habits of both racism and sexism. For Spahr, poetry explores this alternate "axis." Poetry maximizes the referential potential of words by rotating around an "axis of reference" rather than by maintaining a fixed position along such an axis. Poetry does not work by stabilizing some essential meaning at the core of a word, but by navigating the circumference of meaning. I would argue that to explore the limits of language in a poem, motivated by "'real need,'" charges poetry with the responsibility of providing insights into how all language uses interweave in the construction of reality. As the first section of "Circle Out" closes, Spahr cites Emerson to suggest how poetic language, in its tendency to

words are full of meaning" (145), rather than as a demonstration of the way that words are finite in meaning.

[84] In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests that attending to a "real need" (46) means philosophy should orient its language practices toward an "everyday use" and not a "metaphysical one" (48). Philosophers should not work so hard to represent what Wittgenstein calls a "crystalline purity" (46), in pursuit of the "essence of language" (43). Rather they should work to describe what they know and learn, by examining and understanding the "workings of our language" (47).

circle outward into new meanings, models the very structure of nature. The circle, Emerson instructs, "'is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world...Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning'" (145). Spahr associates Emerson's infinite concentricity with Stein and the sense of "the word as ... endless ripples" (145). Spahr suggests that poetic language sustains the fullness of meaning in a way that allows us to rotate an "'axis of reference'" and investigate Galileo's "'grand book'" of the universe or Emerson's "'cipher of the world'" (145).

In the "Declarations" section of "Circle Out," Spahr continues on the theme of circularity paying particular attention to the relationship among language, form and perspective. "All that poet does is in a circle," Spahr announces as her first declaration ("Circle Out" 146). To this she immediately follows with: Every word is a circle, "defined by another word" (146). At one level, the image of the poet in a circle indicates a return to Spahr's observation about Stein and the polysemous nature of words—"the way words are full of meaning" (145). At another level, the image of the poet in a circle suggests "the problem of the artist" and the question of poetic form—"to draw 'by a geometry of his own, the circle'" (146). Spahr addresses this problem by declaring: "One must give into form but not insist on its perfections" (146). By this she refers to the way that drawing a circle perfectly freehand resembles finding a poetic form perfectly conducive to content; such forms are illusory like the "circle of ulloa" (146).[85] But, while perfect form may be impossible, Spahr suggests that innovating with

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[85] According to *A Dictionary of Hallucinations*, the circle of ulloa, or ulloa's ring, refers to a physical illusion in which a white, or even rainbow-like, ring or arch manifests in the fog or clouds that are opposite of the sun (523). The illusion often includes smaller

form remains a "necessary" imperative because such pursuits expand one's

perspective—"the scope of the rotating body as Leonardo da Vinci pictured it and the

circular depth of the telescope's sight" (146). Despite poetry's imperfections, poetry can

explore and expand the meaning of words, thereby providing alternate perspectives on

the world. For Spahr, the pressure that poetry can exert on language is poetry's ethical,

and ultimately, defensible aspect. When she writes at the end of her declarations that

"the poet's task" is "the lying word," Spahr does not advocate deceit, but the

preservation of a language that continues to circle out in the production and

enhancement of knowledge. "Interlocking circles build a cloth," she writes to close her

defense: "This is called knitting. … It is the healing of the leg, the growing of the foot"

(146).

As I have stated previously, the fact that Juliana Spahr invokes Shelley's

"Defence of Poetry" in "Circle Out" demands that we read her manifesto within the

history of poetic defenses. The first half of "Circle Out" scrutinizes Shelley's

proposition, acknowledging that the relevance of poetry requires reiteration. This

staging, therefore, provides the opportunity to make declarations about the poet's

"problem" and "task"—both of which entail taking responsibility for, and defending

against, the forces that would nullify, dismiss or attack poetry (Spahr, "Circle Out" 146).

Spahr assumes such a responsibility when she argues that poetry keeps our language

open enough to represent the capriciousness of experience and the complexity of the

world. Spahr supplements Galileo's suggestion that we can understand the universe

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circles or arches within, in which the observer finds herself at the concentric centre of
the vision (523). Spahr's choice of this figure suggests the elusiveness, and even
illusory quality, of perfect form, but also the highly personal nature of discovering an
appropriate form for a poem.

though the language of mathematics. For Spahr, we can understand the universe not only by relying on all disciplines available—science, philosophy and poetry—but also by ensuring that our language can represent the relations among the discoveries of these disciplines. Inevitably, poetry and poetics work to maintain the viability and flexibility of language. As our experience of the world changes, perhaps even widens, epistemologically and politically, poetry can assist us in articulating those changes—a response that can further shape our future experiences as rational and political beings. Spahr's defense of poetry in "Circle Out" rests on an ethical foundation because poetry demonstrates a practice that can help articulate and shape our responses to the political in more constructive, rather than reactionary, ways.

Spahr's defense also demonstrates an ethics of poetry by relying on the three elements of provisionality: the necessary, the conditional, and the anticipatory. First, the central issues of "Circle Out"—the "business" of poetry (Spahr, "Circle Out" 145), the "problem of the artist" (146), and "the poet's task" (146)—revolve around the ability of poetry to express language at full capacity, so that language might better accommodate the changing conditions of experience. But by reconsidering and reasserting these foundational issues—as though a perpetual precariousness threatens poetry's necessity—Spahr portrays poetry under pressure to defend itself. Second, the associative nature of Spahr's argument—a logic that she uses to correlate the "circles" of Galileo to the "rose" of Stein and to the "axis" of Wittgenstein (145)—demonstrates that poetic uses of language help keep our perspective both expansive and flexible. By choosing this associative method to relate scientific philosophy to poetry—a relationship that bridges the different notions of circularity among Galileo, Stein and Wittgenstein—Spahr models the conditionality of poetic language, capable of accessing

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a more holistic understanding of the world. Third, the figure of the circle as a metaphor

for living—a figure that Spahr refers to in the phrases "to live too much in a circle" or

"to go full circle" (146)—suggests the danger of imprisoning repetition. By offering the

circle as a primary symbol for living—a symbol that also applies to our perspective as

we live—Spahr recognizes the past as a possible impediment to, but inevitable

condition for, future progress. In all, Spahr suggests that poetry maximizes the

potential of language to mean and that poetry, therefore, maximizes the potential of its

users to understand and live in the world.

While Spahr charges the poet with the responsibility of preserving the "lying

word" over the "sedentary" word ("Circle Out" 146, 145), she also demonstrates a

provisional engagement with the four models of poetic responsibility: the mimetic, the

pragmatic, the expressive, and the objective. First, Spahr cites both Galileo and

Emerson in an effort to argue that poetic language can help provide an understanding

of the "'universe'" and the "'world'" (145); in fact, both Galileo and Emerson suggest

that to comprehend the world we must consider it figuratively, particularly through its

"'characters'" or "'emblems'"—most notably the circle (145). As Spahr argues, poetic

language circles outwardly—an operation that empowers poetry with the ability to

represent the world more fully, but not completely. Second, Spahr uses an associative

structure in "Circle Out"—a structure that models a kind of reading practice that

should serve to educate readers; indeed, Spahr's method demonstrates how reading

against genealogy and chronology can produce "'new materials of knowledge'" as

(Shelley, "Defense" 510). As Spahr demonstrates, a circular, rather than linear, logic

enables one to relate seemingly disparate ideas—like the references to circularity by

Shelley, Dickinson, Donne and Stein. Third, Spahr avoids emphasizing the poet's

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lyrical voice as the centre of any circle; in fact, when Spahr reports that the artist's

problem entails drawing "'by a geometry of his own, the circle'" this does mean

discovering a unique voice ("Circle Out" 146). As Spahr suggests, the poet's task is

more formal than expressive—adherent to language itself rather than to the subjective

voice. Finally, Spahr obligates the poet to preserve the "lying word"; in fact, Spahr

suggests that both the "problem of the artist" and the "poet's task" entail a

consideration of formal issues. As Spahr argues, formal measures are not simply

aesthetic, but also ethical when they respond to questions of "'real need'" (145)—how

such measures continue to broaden both our perspective and our ability to describe

such a perspective.

Juliana Spahr's "Circle Out" demonstrates the "provisional" markers of a poetic

defense—the necessary, the conditional, and the anticipatory. Her defense also engages

the four modes of poetic responsibility in ways that do not simply adhere to those

traditional modes but offer provisional interpretations of them. In the following I want

to explore more fully how Spahr's generation of writers expand these four provisional

modes and how this exploration provides a working definition for a Post-Language

poetics. Despite the relative recentness of Language writing, a newer generation has

defined itself against such precursors in ways influenced by, and critical of, the

Language phenomenon. "Circle Out" is one such example of Post-Language writing,

and I have begun this chapter with an explication of Spahr's manifesto in order not only

to continue the discussion of poetic defenses (as I have in the two previous chapters),

but also to position her piece beside, and against, Language writing. Like Language

writing, "Circle Out" continues to treat issues of representation, audience, subjectivity

and form as contestable areas: representing the experiential world is not simply a

reflective process of description; affecting the would-be reader is not simply an osmotic scenario of education; expressing a lyrical voice is not an unproblematic flow of subjectivity; and, accentuating the materiality of language is not a disinterested display of imagery. Like Language writing, as well, "Circle Out" also continues to emphasize issues about the politics and ethics of language: experimenting with the structures and contexts of language itself constitutes an exploration of, and challenge to, the way that ideology infuses the very structure of language.

According to Mark Wallace, the term "Post-Language" indicates the undeniable influence of Language writing's most important insight on a younger generation: "[L]anguage structures inevitably affect, and are affected by, the politics of cultural production" ("Definitions"). Of course, this insight arises out of Language writing's initial investment in the challenges that Post-structuralist theory levies against all areas of language practice. Beyond the influence of this general insight, however, Wallace suggests that the reliance on literary theory constitutes the first major difference between Language writers and Post-Language writers. Wallace contends that Post-Language writers do not so easily embrace literary theory: "[L]iterary theory often seems a dominant discourse of academic and literary power." As the second major difference, Wallace suggests that Post-Language writers sometimes "use genres and forms often explicitly rejected by some [L]anguage writers" such as "narrative, lyric, spirituality, and a poetics of the everyday." As the third major difference, Wallace suggests that Post-Language writers represent a "broader geographical spectrum" than the Language writers—a spectrum that leads to more explicit explorations of "identity politics from specific cultural positions." Overall, Wallace believes that "Post-Language" represents the tendency of a younger generation of writers who apply the

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lessons and techniques of Language writing, howsoever religiously or skeptically, to areas of cultural practice unpursued by the original Language writers. For Wallace, and similar critics, Post-Language writing represents a hybrid sensibility.

I agree with Wallace's characterization of the Post-Language phenomenon, but I also argue that Post-Language writing represents a provisional form of Language writing. First, for example, Post-Language writing carries Language writing forward into emerging sociopolitical contexts. This move renders the potential value of Language writing as conditional. Second, Post-Language writing applies Language writing techniques—such as those that reconfigure semantic, syntactic or generic structures—under different textual conditions. Such techniques remain necessary tools for unhinging our language from the contexts and discourses that aim to deceive, misguide or oppress us. Third, Post-Language writing amalgamates Language-based concerns and techniques with more mainstream forms and themes. This amalgamation does not enact a break from Language writing; this amalgamation gives Post-Language writers the freedom to anticipate their responses to changes in the sociopolitical and technological landscape. I concur with Mark Wallace who argues that Post-Language writing does not emerge "from the limitations, or the failures" of the Language writers, but does emerge from the unrealized potential of the Language project ("L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E"). But, Post-Language writers either launch or exploit criticism of Language writing as a means of defending their own practice. Since such criticism takes aim at the theory-driven, intellectual experiments of Language writing, I believe that Post-Language writing grounds its intentions less in the politics of poetic form, and more in the politics of actual life—whether that politics addresses the realities of industrial downsizing, labour relations, terrorist attacks or racial identity.

Chapter in Brief

In the remainder of this chapter I examine the continued influence of Language writing on certain contemporary American writers, including Mark Nowak, Rodrigo Toscano, Juliana Spahr, and Harryette Mullen. First, I examine recent scholarship that attempts to conceptualize contemporary poetry after Language writing. My discussion examines the particular chronological lineage of the term "Post-Language," along with alternate designations such as "third way," "Post avant," and "hybrid."   I pay special attention to considerations of the relationship between ethics and poetics in these conceptualizations, and how each of these considerations evinces the three aspects of provisionality: the necessary, the conditional, and the anticipatory. After charting the critical literature, I then examine Nowak, Toscano, Spahr, and Mullen, all of whom exhibit the four major tenets of Language writing, discussed in the last chapter: provisional realism, provisional activism, provisional lyricism, and provisional formalism. I align each writer with one of the four tenets and discuss their criticism within this context. Part of designating these writers as "Post-Language" suggests that they continue to assert the values and agenda of Language writing; but, my intention is not to chart an inheritance as much as to explore the most recent permutations of provisionality. Mark Nowak's documentary prose poem "$00 / Line / Steel / Train" from his collection *Shut Up, Shut Down* (2004), demonstrates a provisional realism in its collage of "real" materials: photograph, testimonial, text, commentary, and lyric. Rodrigo Toscano's long fragmented poem "non-confidential memos" from his book *The Disparities* (2002), exemplifies a provisional activism in its series of instructional materials: "memos" of education, provocation, and confusion. Juliana Spahr's long lyric poem "Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003" from her book

this connection of everyone with lungs (2005), demonstrates a provisional lyricism in its record of experiential materials: daybook type entries from individual and collective experience. Harryette Mullen's book-length lyric text *Muse & Drudge* (1995), exemplifies a provisional formalism in its quatrains of wordplay-ful materials: puns, idioms, sounds, and song.

Just as Language writers have challenged the traditional modes of poetic responsibility by rendering them as provisional, so too do Post-Language writers extend this provisional effort. In part, Post-Language writing represents an attempt to redress the oversights of Language writing, particularly in their general exclusion of issues like race and gender. Perhaps, as Daniel Barbiero argues, Post-Language writers do not necessarily strive to break from Language writing, but, instead, they use the tools and lessons of Language writing as provisions. Barbiero writes: "For at least some of the emerging avant-garde, the contingency of their position within an already constituted field—and not the dismissal of that contingency—is precisely what allows them to get the better of, by using to advantage, the forms and structures of the past(s)" (85). Post-Language writers operate provisionally within traditions already established in the poetic culture. Language writers often pair their manifestos, statements or defenses with their poetry, but not simply as explicative aids for the poetry itself. Instead, these writers maintain the necessity of breaking down generic distinctions between creative and critical discourse. Mark Wallace suggests that we see manifestos issuing from both Modernist and Postmodernist writers because both sets of these writers strive to "equate the forms of poetry ... to a form of cultural and political life" ("Toward" 191). I discuss Post-Language writers who not only issue manifestos, defenses or critical articulations, but who also exhibit this tendency of equating poetry

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and politics in their creative work. I have not restricted my choice of writers to the farthest margins of the poetic field.[86] As with the four Language poets discussed previously, these Post-Language writers straddle a certain line between "official verse culture" and "avant-garde poetics."

<center>**A History of American Post-Language Writing**</center>

Assessments of so-called Post-Language writing occur in ways that illustrate how many literary movements coalesce. Like the "Preface" to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, like the introduction to Zukofsky's Objectivist anthology in *Poetry* magazine, or like the introduction to Bernstein's "Language Sampler" in the *Paris Review*, concepts of a Post-Language writing have arisen in the introductions to, and collections of, new writing.   A number of anthologies published from the early 1990s to the present come with prefaces or introductions by editors who attempt to speak to a common ground among the various writers assembled. Examples include: *Writing from the New Coast* (1993), *A Poetics of Criticism* (1994), *The Art of Practice: Forty-Five Contemporary Poets* (1994), *An Anthology of New (American) Poets* (1998), and, most

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[86] Three of the four writers that I discuss here hold academic jobs, and all have earned mainstream accolades. Nowak is an Associate Professor at Washington College in Maryland, and his book *Shut Up, Shut Down* earned the following honours: It earned a James Laughlin Award Finalist, a Minnesota Book Award Finalist, a Balcones Poetry Prize Finalist and *a New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice. Toscano works for the Labor Institute in New York City, a non-academic organization that helps facilitate worker education, and labor organization around the country. He has, however, presented at various academic conferences, such as the MLA Annual Convention. His most recent book *Collapsible Poetics Theater* won the National Poetry Series Award in 2007. Spahr is an Associate Professor at Mills College in Oakland, California. The University of California publishes her book *this connection of everyone with lungs*, and her book *Response* won the National Poetry Series Award in 2001. Mullen is a Professor at UCLA, and her collection, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, also published by the University of California was a finalist for a National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, and Los Angeles Times Book Prize.

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recently, *American Hybrid* (2009).[87] While a collection like *A Poetics of Criticism* (1994)

includes essay-works, the earliest formulations of a Post-Language phenenomenon are

almost entirely in poetry anthologies. Collections of critical works represents a more

recent tendency, including *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* (2002),

American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language (2002), *Assembling*

Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally (2003), *Avant-Post* (2006), and

American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics (2007). Moreover, small magazines

and journals, including *Poetics Briefs* and *Apex of the M*, present both critical essays and

creative work. Another important and current context for the ongoing discussion of a

burgeoning Post-Language poetics is online, in the blogosphere. Specifically, a vibrant

dialogue about the "Post-avant" appears on the Poetry Foundation's Harriet blog and

continues to foment debate. Among the critical introductions to anthologies and the

essays in collections, newer writers attempt either to identify the original tendencies of

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[87] Lisa Jarnot's preface to *An Anthology of New (American) Poets* echoes Steve Evans's
introduction to *Writing from the New Coast*, and subsequently Evans cites Jarnot in his
essay "The American Avant-Garde after 1989: Notes Toward a History." Both Evans
and Jarnot insist on a social milieu marked by crisis that gives rise to a commonality
among so-called Post-Language writers. Jarnot also claims that the anthology she co-
edited with Leonard Schwartz and Chris Stroffolino includes writers working in a
synthetic rather than derivative relationship with previous experimental traditions (1).
The writers collected therein share an inherited sense of Language writing's general
tenets, but also a "renewed interest in the continuity of traditions" (2). Dennis Barone's
and Peter Ganick's Introduction to *The Art of Practice* is definitely marked by
provisionality. They begin, for example, with the following statement: "The work as a
way of research for what will come next. The art of practice" (xiii). Not only does this
opening suggest an orientation toward the future, but this opening also suggests a level
of conditionality more thoroughly elaborated in the rest of the Introduction. As
examples, they pose: "The work herein work, but it does not complete" (xiii); "Poetry
as of this date, is yet unfinished, remains infinite; not frozen" (xiii); "Description never
fulfills, is never omniscient" (xiii).

contemporary writing or to offer critiques of previous avant-garde traditions, most notably Language poetry, in an effort to define a Post-Language avant-garde.

This general overview of Post-Language writing follows a chronological trajectory. Overall, I do not follow explicit considerations of Language poetry's legacy, or touch on more esoteric designations of the contemporary avant-garde after Language Poetry.[88] While these designations have never taken hold like the more broadly sweeping "Post-Language," "Post-avant" or "third-way" monikers, all of them embrace hybridity as a value—an attempt to work more provisionally by melding both conventional, lyrical techniques and experimental, poetic innovations. The publication of Norton's *American Hybrid* in 2009 suggests a pivotal moment in the defining life of a Post-Language poetry because this publication represents the entry of a Post-Language sensibility within a broad poetic and academic community. In the following, I trace the genealogy of a Post-Language writing, much as I have done in my short history of Language writing itself. In fact, the inception of a Post-Language writing follows a similar trajectory to the founding of Language writing. Both movements begin as articulations within small magazines, and then larger anthologies, only to be considered in more detail by academic collections. I begin with an examination of the prefatory work by Steve Evans and by Mark Wallace—critics who describe the foundations for a Post-Language phenomenon. I then move to a series of short statements on the subject "After Language Poetry" written by a small number of American poets, published

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[88] For considerations of the legacy of Language writing, see Mark Wallace's and Jefferson Hansen's dialogues in *Poetics Briefs*. For examples of original designations for contemporary writing, see Leonard Schwartz's "transcendental lyric," Kristin Prevallet's new investigative poetry, Elizabeth Willis's "late lyric," John Noto's "new synthesis," Lew Daly's poetry of spirit, and Stephen Burt's "elliptical poetry.".

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originally in the Swedish magazine *OEI*. Then, I consider the framework of two academic collections—*American Women Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* and *American Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century: The New Poetics*—both of which collect poetry and poetics by Post-Language writers. I then discuss the phenomenon of the Post-avant-garde as it has arisen online in a discussion mainly among the poets Reginald Shepherd, Christian Bök, Robert Archambeau, Josh Corey, John Gallaher, and Paul Hoover. Finally, I treat Cole Sweson's and David St. John's introductions to *American Hybrid* as the canonization of Post-Language writing in American poetry. While the overall definition of Post-Language writing remains inflected by a number of perspectives, I argue that Post-Language writing ultimately elaborates a poetics and an ethics of provisionality.

<p align="center">**Foundations of Post-Language Writing: Steve Evans and Mark Wallace**</p>

As a prefatory remark to his "Introduction to *Writing from the New Coast*," reprinted in the collection *Assembling Alternatives*, Steve Evans clarifies that the *New Coast* collection "was by intention provisional and of necessity prospective" (11).[89] Evans does not simply reiterate a point about the tenuousness of a group formation; he offers a point about a shared sensibility between both the editors of, and the contributors to, *Writing from the New Coast*. While Evans does not use the term

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[89] Evans elaborates on this notion of provisionality with a qualification: "[R]ather than documenting an accomplished fact, [the anthology] projected a possible future on the basis of evidence perceptible but as yet inchoate in the present" ("Introduction"11). Evans seems prompted by the original foreword to the Presentation volume of *New Coast*, written by Peter Gizzi. Gizzi also uses the adjective "provisional" to describe the collection: "This is not an anthology but the result of six month's work. It is provisional in that there are many other young poets working hard and demanding to be read" (Gizzi, Foreword). Gizzi also alternately describes the "new coast" as a "provisional shore."

"provisional" in the original introduction, he does characterize New Coast writing in provisional terms. First, Evans claims that a tradition of innovation represents one given, while the work in *New Coast* incorporates two different, though not opposing, traditions—a "tradition of radical linguistic practice" and a "tradition of radical social practice" (17). The first tradition represents a legacy inherited in part from Language writing, but the second represents a legacy inspired in part by political decolonialist movements (17).[90] For these poets, the influence of the second tradition—which aligns poetry with "a radical, a reconstituted, and virtually unrecognizable ... *humanism*" (14)—makes poetry a necessary force in the world. Second, he claims that the generation of poets collected in *New Coast* "propose poetry as a practice of nonidentity" (15), by which he means a poetry that refuses to identify with an "already established" tradition of innovative poetry (16).[91] Rather than a complete refusal, however, this generation of poets "discern[s] the given, in order to negate and transform it" (16). These poets invest themselves in the project of rendering "the given" as conditional and putting it to new uses. Third, Evans claims that "[i]f the first imperative of politics is to seize control of potentiality, to impose discriminations between the … really possible, and the merely wishful, the first impulse of poetry is to contest this imposition" (19).

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[90] In another essay, "The American Avant-Garde after 1989," Evans discusses the deviation of "Post-1989" writers from Language poetry. He writes, again in provisional terms, that what "Post-1989" writers share is a "perceived rehabilitation of lyric forms, musical values, and direct address—all in tacit contrast to the previous generation's penchant for abstraction and hostility to lyric practice" (Evans, "Avant-Garde" 92). 1989, Evans cogently argues, represents a pivotal political, economic and creative moment, and much overlap exists between these so-called "Post-1989" writers and "New Coast" writers. In any case, Evans impresses that both sets of writers value the ethical far more than Language writers do (89).

[91] According to Evans, the source of this poetics of nonidentity is a hatred and distrust of capitalism and the commodifying effects of capital on social, political and cultural situations.

The core of poetry's responsibility to contest a repressive politics exists in poetry's ability to imagine alternative schema—to rethink "the actual from the standpoint of the possible" (14). The poets in *New Coast* demonstrate an ethical responsibility, not simply for the present, but also for the potential future, and as such, this orientation makes them anticipatory. While "New Coast" designates a particular body of writing, rather than an attempt to name a movement, Evan's essay does conceptualize contemporary poetry after Language poetry.

The legacy of Language poetry explicitly consumes the attention of the poet and critic Mark Wallace.[92] His 1995 essay, "Emerging Avant Garde Poetries and the 'Post-Language Crisis,'" stands as a kind of self-described defense of Post-Language writing. Near the end of the essay, Wallace considers Steve Evans's argument that Post-Language writers do not identify specifically with a previous tradition: If Evans is correct, Wallace asks, what is the point of attempting to account for this current generation of writers? In response, Wallace equates a "description of emerging avant garde writers" with "a defense of their value" (Wallace, "Emerging"). While Evans sees the crisis facing avant garde poetry as broadly sociopolitical, Wallace sees the crisis facing avant garde poetry as egoistic. A failure to identity oneself with, or against, a previous generation may jeopardize one's significance. Still, Wallace identifies this crisis of identity as a central and productive characteristic of Post-Language writing: It is an "intense multiplicity of poetic purposes and formal concerns that marks emerging

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[92] Many of Wallace's essays, spanning the years 1995-2002, represent a refining of ideas around the definition of a Post-Language writing. The most clear, and polished, example of how one might generalize a Post-Language writing occurs in his essay "Definitions in Process, Definitions as Process/ Uneasy Collaborations: Language and Postlanguage Poetries" published in *Flashpoint Magazine*.

writers as a generation distinct from their predecessors."[93] Here, Wallace reimagines

the supposed weakness of Post-Language writing—its lack of identity and its recourse

to multiplicity—as Post-Language writing's strength, in a gesture typical of the poetic

defense. Here also, Wallace relies on a provisional sensibility, evident throughout his

discussion on the subject of Post-Language writing. First, Wallace argues that the

possibility of multiple forms enables one to meet the need of refiguring "forms that

have historically been used to promote repressive cultural activity" ("Toward" 196).

Second, Wallace suggests that the exigencies of the present condition a poet's need to

have available "all conceivable formal possibilities" ("Emerging"). Third, Wallace

argues that the availability of multiple forms, both past and present, enable one to

anticipate or conceptualize "what might possibly exist" ("On the Lyric" 2). Ultimately,

when Wallace concludes that "what one does with a form is the key ethical component

of writing" ("Toward" 196), he draws an important correlation between the diversity in

Post-Language writing and the ability of Post-Language writers to remain responsive to

political and ethical circumstances.

After Language Poetry: 10 Statements

A 2001 issue of the Swedish magazine *OEI* features ten responses to the question

of "innovative poetry in America after Language poetry," eight of which are American

and two of which are Canadian (Lundgerg, et al.). The Americans include Stacy Doris,

Peter Gizzi, Kenneth Goldsmith, Jennifer Moxley, Jena Osman, Juliana Spahr, Brian Kim

Stefans, and Chet Wiener. On the one hand, they all tend to agree with Goldsmith's

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[93] Wallace refers to this in later work as "the free multiplicity of form" (see his essay of the same name in *Telling it Slant).* Presented as a kind of utopian ideal, not simply for the avant-garde, but for all contemporary poetry, Wallace's notion of a "free multiplicity" represents a kind hybridizing prescription for present and future poets.

assessment that "Language poetry serves as a vast reserve of permissions" ("After").

On the other hand, many of them also acknowledge a certain amount of anxiety about

the legacy of Language writing, as such work has the reputation of being "the last avant

garde" (Doris) or "the end of innovation" (Moxley). Overall, however, the opening of

the field by Language writing enables these writers to practice what I call a provisional

poetics. First, these writers consider poetry as a necessary and responsible activity.

Language writing provides useful tools for pursuing subjects that the Language writers

did not explore. Brian Kim Stefans agrees with Juliana Spahr, when she writes that new

writers advance "the concerns and intents of [L]anguage writing to discuss race and/or

sexuality more directly" (Spahr, "After"). Second, these writers value poetry that draws

on all means necessary: all traditions, genres, media and disciplines are resources and

conditions for poetic use. Techniques of Language poetry provide one set of means,

while technologies available today present new possibilities for poetry. Jena Osman

and Kenneth Goldsmith use the term *hybrid* to describe the mixture of these possibilities

in contemporary avant-garde practice (Osman; Goldsmith "After"). Third, these writers

invest their energy in poetic experiments that both represent the contemporary state of

poetry, and create possibilities for future forays. While Language writing, and other

schools of writing, present immediate influences, these influences also represent tacit

hurtles that require transcending. Jennifer Moxley, and Peter Gizzi, tend to agree with

Juliana Spahr's assessment that Post-Language writers share a common need to find

"the best formal solution to express this particular historical moment in such a way as

to expose its logic (or illogic) at every linguistic level" (Spahr, "After"). A practice

oriented toward finding "the best formal solution" not only describes Post-Language

writing, but epitomizes a provisional attitude toward poetic traditions and schools.

Lyric Meeting Language and the New Poetics

In the Introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2001), Juliana Spahr reports that the collection arises from the "Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry" Conference held at Barnard College in the Spring of 1999.[94] Together with the 2007 publication of a similar volume, *American Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century: The New Poetics*, these two texts represent the entry of a Post-Language writing onto the academic stage.[95] Still, the editors of both collections describe the contents in

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[94] Marjorie Perloff's essay "After Language Poetry" was the keynote address at this conference. She included a much revised version in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. In the revised essay, Perloff traces a trajectory of Language poetry from its earliest formulations to the early 1990s, at which point she argues that its original tenets become "transformed"—either assimilated or critiqued—"even as their force remains implicitly operative today." Perloff describes the "lasting contribution of [L]anguage poetics," suggesting that "language theory reminded us that ... there was actually something at stake in producing a body of poems, and that poetic discourse belonged to the same universe as philosophical and political discourse." Perloff relies on this notion of earnestness to evaluate the best that a Post-Language writing has to offer. On the one hand, Perloff faults much contemporary "innovative" writing with an inability to handle critical theory in a useful way (as the Language writers do). What she calls "'soft' theorizing" interferes with the necessity of reaching an audience about "specific issues." On the other hand, Perloff faults Language poetry with the failure to address "specific issues" like "questions of gender or race." What Perloff identifies as "compelling" about Harryette Mullen's work is more important than whether or not Mullen's work is "innovative." Ultimately, Perloff valorizes two types of contemporary work that engage our most modern technologies: visual poetry and "'differential poetry'" "'[D]ifferential poetry'" operates across different media as a hybrid genre.
[95] *American Women Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century* includes work by and about Rae Armantrout, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Lucie Brock-Broido, Jorie Graham, Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Brenda Hillman, Susan Howe, Ann Lauterbach, and Harryette Mullen. This line-up represents less of an overlap between a mainstream and experimental tradition, as Graham might be the only so-called mainstream poet in this list. The contents of *The New Poetics* are perhaps more disparate and diverse than *Where Lyric meets Language*, despite the fact that *The New Poetics* collects more strictly avant-garde tendencies in contemporary American poetry. *The New Poetics* includes: Joshua Clover, Stacy Doris, Peter Gizzi, Kenneth Goldsmith, Myung Mi Kim, Mark Levine, Tracie Morris, Mark Nowak, D.A. Powell, Juliana Spahr, Karen Volkman, Susan Wheeler, and Kevin Young. The book is provocatively organized so that beginning with Mark Levine, en route to Kenneth Goldsmith, covers quite the distance between poetic practices.

provisional terms. Spahr, for example, seeks to avoid "stak[ing] a boundaried territory"

or "suggesting a new movement" (Spahr, "Introduction" 10). Instead, she aims to

continue the dialogue initiated at the Conference, embrace a hybrid sensibility and,

celebrate a variety of innovative poetries.[96] In *The New Poetics* volume, Lisa Sewell

qualifies that the "new" in the book's subtitle "designates the advent of a poetry that is

vital and energized, but also notably various" (1). Comparatively, *The New Poetics*

demonstrates an ethics of provisionality more so than the previous volume. First,

Sewell makes claims for the necessity of this new poetry: it "counter[s] the lament that

the field is in crisis, or that poetry as a genre no longer matters" (1), and, perhaps more

importantly, it continues the "project of extending the poem into external social and

political worlds" (3). Second, Sewell explains the conditional nature of how these poets

operate, informed by, but not contained within, Language poetics: "[These poets] bring

into play whatever seems useful, deliberately and self-consciously engaging with the

lyric tradition but also questioning that tradition through techniques of disruption,

diversion, and resistance" (3). Third, Sewell intimates the anticipatory mode of these

poets when she suggests how this generation is "coming into its own" and meeting the

demands of the present with all resources available—from "[i]nnovative, materialist

poetic practices" to "multicultural poetries of identity politics" (3).

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[96] In the Introduction to *Where Lyric Meets Language*, Spahr makes a viable and easily overlooked point about the so-called division in contemporary poetry between the experimental and the mainstream: "This collection begins a dialogue between the two often falsely separated poetries of language and lyric. The unevenness of these two terms, one a social grouping and the other a genre, remains a sign of some dissonance even as critics often pit language and lyric against each other with straw-man models" (Spahr, "Introduction" 11).

Post-Avantism

Chronologically, the term "Post-avant" appears as early as 2002 in a casual,

allusive use by Ron Silliman on his blog.[97] In 2003, Joan Houlihan holds an "email-

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[97] Silliman consistently uses the term "Post-avant" on his blog in opposition to what he has coined "The School of Quietude," without ever providing thorough-going definitions of either. In a blog post from September 2002, Silliman discusses attending two different poetry readings in Philadelphia by writers he identifies as part of "alternative or Post-avant traditions" (Silliman, "September 21, 2002.) Silliman also posits a "third way" between these two extremes. To trace the full extent of Silliman's reliance on this terminology would far exceed the space of a footnote, but I want to offer some examples of Silliman's allusive and, perhaps, illusory use of these terms, in the ten plus years of his blog's existence. In part, he fails to define any terms explicitly, but instead maintains the energy of the division in American poetry between convention and experimentation. He notes that "my approach tends to be strategic" ("January 5, 2004"). With a nod toward the provisional nature of his terminology, he continues: "I deploy categories when & where I think they will do some good, and only to the degree that they might accomplish this" ("January 5, 2004"). According to Seth Ambramson, Silliman's categories have failed miserably to either account for the history of American poetry, or appropriately characterize the once and ongoing division. In any event, Abramson's response to Silliman provides a far more detailed account of contemporary poetry (See his two part response to Silliman).

In what follows, I trace Silliman's obtuse uses of the terms "Post-avant," "school of quietude" (SoQ), and "third way." On December 3, 2002, Silliman writes: "What makes poetry of the schools of quietude 'accessible' is only that they have been institutionally ingrained for a century (or, in some ways, far longer), mostly in high school & undergraduate curricula." Elsewhere, he refers to the SoQ as practicing "paleopoetics" ("January 5, 2004") and exhibiting "neophobia" ("July 7, 2010"), both of which indicate the already, always familiar or academic intention of such poetry. On June 14, 2003, Silliman writes of the difference between the "School of Quietude" and "Post-avant":

> What these poetries [SoQ] have in common, with a very few exceptions (virtually all from the vicinity of ellipticism), is consistency of viewpoint, narrative or expository lines that are treated as unproblematic, language that integrates upwards to meta-levels such as character, plot or theme. Most of these poetries are set up to avoid at all costs that which the Russian Formalists called ostranenie & Brecht later characterized as the alienation- or A-effect, the admonition to make it new, make it strange. ... Post-avant poetries, whether happy-go-lucky Actualism, furrowed brow langpo, or the Post-Oulipo linguistic pyrotechnics of a Christian Bök, all have this in common.

On January 4, 2004, Silliman writes more precisely of the "Post-avant":

assisted discussion" on the subject of the contemporary avant-garde titled "Avant, Post-

Avant, and Beyond."[98] The extensive consideration of the term "Post-avant" does not

occur, however, until Reginald Shepherd's attempt to define it on the Poetry

Foundation's Harriet Blog, on February 6, 2008. Shepherd strives to "pin down a term

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> I prefer Post-avant precisely because the term acknowledges that the model of an avant-garde – a term that is impossible to shake entirely free of its militaristic etymological roots & that depends in any event upon a model of progress, i.e., teleological change always for the better – is inherently flawed. The term however acknowledges an historical debt to the concept & recognizes the concept as temporal in nature – the avant-garde that interests me is a tradition of consistently oppositional literary tendencies that can be traced back well into the first decades of the 19th century, at the very least.

On September 14, 2007, Silliman writes of a "third way":

> [Graham Foust] is one of the younger poets who strikes me as having moved toward a Post-militant American poetics, neither Post-avant nor Quietist. Which in a way is what Third Way poets, from Bob Hass to Forrest Gander to Ann Lauterbach to Jorie Graham have been advocating for years now. But the Third Way has always struck me as predicated upon the existence of the other two. Younger poets today I think have more of an opportunity of learning from all worlds without having to sign up & pick sides. And that in turn will itself impact how writing gets done, going forward.

This "third way" is the product of various poets making "oppositional" choices about what poetry should do and be, in either of the two other schools. Silliman suggests that such factiousness plagues the SoQ, but it is also inherent to the so-called multiplicity of the New American poetries and prevalent in the so-called contemporary poetry scene. In any event, "third way" only denotes a level of hybridity already conceptualized for perhaps fifteen years prior.

[98] Houlihan organized an email discussion as a response to the number of rejoinders that spoke out on Houlihan's essay "Post-Post Dementia." The essay is a scathing indictment against what Houlihan calls her "an examination of the trend toward non-sequiturial poetry in some leading contemporary journals" specifically *Fence* and *Slope* (Houlihan, et al. "Avant, Post-Avant, and Beyond"). That essay represents just one of seven in a series she titles "How Contemporary American Poets Are Denaturing the Poem" (written between 2000 and 2005). The subsequent email discussion, a series of individual answers rather than a dialogue, includes responses from a mixture of poets and scholars—Oren Izenberg, Norman Finkelstein, Stephen Burt, Alan Golding, H.L. Hix, Kent Johnson, and Joe Amato. Questions concern the existence of a contemporary avant-garde, the difference between avant-garde and experimental, the role that indeterminacy does or should play in poetry, the pleasure of reading paratactic poetry, and the future of poetry (Houlihan, et al. "Avant, Post-Avant, and Beyond").

much-mentioned but seldom specified" in an essay titled "Who You Callin' 'Post-Avant'?"[99] Shepherd defines "Post-avant" in overtly provisional terms in a revised version of his original blog post:

> Post-avant ... poets can be described as writers who, at their best, have imbibed the lessons of the modernists and their successors in what might be called the experimental or avant-garde stream of American poets ... without feeling the need (as so many other poetic formations have) to pledge allegiance to a particular group identity ... or a particular mode of proceeding artistically. ("Defining")[100]

This definition represents the commonly held belief by commentators on the "Post-avant"—a belief that contemporary innovative poetry lacks the militancy of historical avant-garde, such that, rather than "programs," we now have "projects" (Shepherd,

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[99] His essay garnered two weeks of intense banter and discussion, which ultimately led to fruitful responses on the subject around the blogosphere. For example, despite what seems to symptomatic of miscommunication and a misreading of tone, the correspondence between Shepherd and the poet Ange Mlinko does provide an important point about contemporary "avant-garde" writing, in that there isn't the same kind of pervasive political vision today as there was in the middle of the 20th Century, with the New American poetries and even the Language writers. Shepherd went on to include many of the pertinent responses in his revision of the essay titled "Defining 'Post-Avant-Garde' Poetry" posted on his own blog. Shepherd cites or credits Robert Archambeau, Christian Bök, Joshua Corey, John Gallaher, and Paul Hoover among the catalysts for his revision. Imporantly too, Silliman, and Houlihan respond to Shephered by offering links to their own contribution on the subject.

[100] In the introduction to his anthology, *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries*, Shepherd describes the work there as "lyrical investigations" (xi). Such poetry combines "lyric enchantment and experimental interrogation" (xi) without following directly from the historical avant-garde. While he mentions the anthology and the term "lyrical investigation" in his revised essay on the "Post-avant," he does not equate the lyrically investigative and the post-avant. His revised essay attempts to understand a wide swath of conceptualizing about contemporary poetry, while maintaining a sense that a division between poetic schools is no longer efficacious or accurate.

"Defining"). In fact, the tendency toward 'projects' rather than 'programs' suggests a

commitment to provisionality. On one level, the eclecticism of the "Post-avant,"

combining vanguard devices and traditional sensibility, can enable one to respond to

the contingencies of the contemporary moment, without the burden of traditions acting

as an impediment to future poetic projects.[101] On another level, the eclecticism of the

"Post-avant," transcending the divisiveness in the politics of poetry, can help us to

reorient poetry's ethical and political obligations, from considering the future of poetry,

to considering a future for poetry.[102] In other words, the "Post-avant" is not about

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[101] The predominant use of "Post-avant" online rather than in print suggests something about how to define a Post-Language poetics, in that technology represents both an undeniable influence on, and resource for, contemporary poets. Also, what blog posts, blog comments and even email discussions share is a degree of provisionality. Unlike essays submitted for peer review, these attempts to account for the state of contemporary poetry exhibit a kind of urgency in spirit, if not in emotion, as though all of the respondents feel incumbent to assess and solidify the state of the art, viewing poetry as a necessary practice. At the same time, as Shepherd believes, the relative absence of the term in print indicates "how separate the two realms often are" (Shepherd, "Defining"). While Shepherd implies that academic-print culture suffers from a kind of belatedness, on the one hand, Christian Bök suggests that the urgency to define the "new" demonstrates a kind of naïve impatience, on the other. In Bök's response to Shepherd, titled "Late Past the Post," Bök states:

> I have studiously avoided the use of the moniker "Post-avant" to describe any of the work by my peers, if only because I think that the overuse of the prefix "Post" in a lot of Postmodern commentary never actually indicates the foreclosure of a particular, historical paradigm, so much as the prefix indicates our impatience that such a persistent, conceptual heritage has not yet been transcended—and thus we preemptively do so, long before we have yet constructed a much more innovative radicalism to replace it.

[102] Robert Archambeau refers to the ethics of this eclecticism as "negative legislation." More thoroughly, he posits: "[T]he project of the Post-avant negative legislator: it refuses to judge, prescribe, or assume a position of moral authority (except, of course, inasmuch as such refusals are a kind of moral position)."

breaking with the past so as to advance into the future, but about embracing the past so

as to enable a future for poetry as a responsible discourse.[103]

Hybridity

In her introduction to *American Hybrid*, Cole Swensen opts for the term "hybrid,"

over "Post-avant," or "third way," because she claims that the work collected in the

anthology covers a broader range, "particularly [from] the more conservative end of its

continuum" (*Hybrid* xxi).[104] She also notes that the "trend toward hybridization was

actually led by writers of earlier generations" (xxii)—writers like Barbara Guest, whom

Swensen includes in the anthology. Still, the publication of this anthology by Norton

may provide legitimacy to the idea of a Post-Language phenomenon.[105] In other words,

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[103] In his response to Joan Houlihan's question about the future of poetry, in "Avant, Post-Avant, and Beyond," Alan Golding writes speculatively, even skeptically, about a "contemporary avant-garde" and its orientation toward the future. He suggests that such a phenomenon

> is likely to be more diverse, in race, gender, ethnic, class, and any other terms, than earlier avant-gardes. As a result, its suspicion of rhetorics of control and domination is likely to be even more profound than the anti-institutional skepticisms of earlier movements, and so perhaps it will be less inclined to propose itself as The Future of the Poem. (Houlihan, et al.).

[104] Swensen's response to Stephen Burt's inclusion of her as an "elliptical poet" offers a sense of her her own thinking about hybridity (Swensen, "Elliptical Poetry" 64-67). In the same vein, Ron Silliman attests that Swensen represents "the epitome of a third way poet in today's cultural landscape" (Silliman, "April 24, 2007").

[105] Paul Hoover's Norton published *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994) provides a similar kind of legitimacy to a wide range of poetries that he insists is most accurately called "Postmodern," rather than "'experimental'" or "'avant-garde'" (xxv). Hoover's anthology represents an academic acknowledgement of writers already established in their own circles, including the Language writers. Swensen's and St. John's anthology might represent a similar acknowledgement, as St. John notes, in his introduction, how every writer in *Hybrid* has published at least three books by 2005 (xxviii). The diversity of poetry collected in *Postmodern American Poetry* is not the same, however, as the heterogeneous sensibility of hybrid poets. Hoover, in fact, suggests that indeterminacy is the major overarching sensibility of the so-called Postmodern writers in his anthology.

Norton validates Swensen's and David St. John's intention to collect writers from across an ideological divide—a divide with roots in a long-standing division in American poetry.[106] If Language poetry espouses a "model of the poem as an event on the page," and more mainstream poetry espouses a "model of the poem as a vehicle for conveying thoughts, images and ideas" (xviii), then Post-Language poetics resemble Swensen's so-called hybrid poetries—both of which come after Language poetry, but that also attempt to overcome Language poetry's literary politics. I argue that overcoming such a divisive politics constitutes a shift toward an ethical, and ultimately, provisional poetics. This attempt to transcend Language poetry's commitment to the immanence of the poem also manifests provisionality in three ways. First, hybrid poets balance a double "social obligation" of "renew[ing] the forms and expand[ing] the boundaries of poetry ... while also remaining committed to the emotional spectra of lived experience" (xxi).[107] This commitment to both poetry and to experience does not just serve to maintain "poetry's continued relevance" (xxi); this commitment also maintains poetry as a necessary challenge to the *mediazation* of language.[108] Second, hybrid poets incorporate a "wealth of tools" from both the "'conventional'" and the "'experimental'"

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[106] Swensen spends the majority of the introduction's early moments tracing this division, even going so far as to suggest, with Paul Auster, that this division begins in a clash of sensibilities between a British Romanticist poetics, and a European modernist poetics (Swensen, *Hybrid* xvii). I would refer to this division as complex, because, as Swensen reiterates, the legacy of Beat poetics provides a model taken up by more mainstream poetic programs by the late 1970s and 1980s, while Language writing explicitly challenges the commitment of a Beat poetics to the primacy of voice (xix).

[107] Swensen does make clear that hybrid poetics include a growing attention to issues of gender, multiculturalism and internationalism (*Hybrid* xxv)

[108] I echo Charles Bernstein's use of "mediazation" from "A Defence of Poetry," in which he poses nonsense poetry as a challenge to political rhetoric. Swensen, in her introduction, refers to such rhetoric as "the canned speech that has become so prevalent in this age in which fewer and fewer people control more and more of the media" (xxi).

schools (xxi) in order to meet these ethical obligations. This reliance on a diverse set of tools does not just serve to demonstrate a "combinatory new" poetic (xxi); this reliance also evinces a "willingness to acknowledge the limits of human knowledge and to refuse to let them be limiting" (xxii). Third, hybrid poets deemphasize the "external differences ... among poets and their relative stances" (xxvi) in an effort to transcend the division in American poetry. This disregard for the camp model does not serve as another vanguard gesture, in breaking from the old; this disregard demonstrates an orientation toward a present and ongoing fight "for the integrity of language in the face of political and commercial misuse" (xxvi).[109]

Four American Post-Language Poets and the Poetics of Provisionality

Frames of the World:

Mark Nowak's Documentary Poetics as Provisional Realism

Mark Nowak is the author of three books of poetry—*Revenants* (2000), *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009)—as well as an academic instructor, a labour organizer, and an editor, most notably of *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*. As a self-described "poet-activist" (Nowak, "Chronicles"), Nowak exhibits a Post-Language sensibility, by not only forwarding an anti-capitalist agenda, as many Language writers have done, but also by attempting to extend the political potential of an innovative poetics. "In place of a solely literary textual praxis grounded in Marxism or related ideologies [Nowak] argues for a radical restructuring of the social formations produced by, and the product of, cultural workers in the age of neoliberalism and late

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[109] This fight also extends across media, as Cole Swensen acknowledges when she discusses the importance of other artistic forms, the internet, and translation to the hybrid aesthetic.

capitalism" (Nowak, *Workers* 22). In other words, poetry and the poetry workshop can

be, what Nowak calls, a "cultural adjustment tactic" (10). When poetry is "de-linked"

(23) from the academy and introduced into the workplace, the factory floor or the union

hall, poetry can serve as a means of dialogue and expression, and not as a means of

propaganda like so much political poetry does.[110] Ultimately, poetry is a highly

responsible activity for Nowak, both in its capacity to "'recognize and record'" and to

"'form and inform'" (Nowak, "Notes II" 334).[111] In an effort to meet this ethical

responsibility, his "*writing*" evinces an eclectic mix of modalities—a combination of

"dialogue and dialectical materialism and documentary and drama" as well as

"history" (334). In his equal embrace of different means and different "schools" of

poets, from Muriel Rukeyser to Jeff Derksen, Nowak demonstrates a hybrid, and

provisional, poetics.[112]

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[110] Nowak shares a similar distrust of academic poetry—what he refers to as the MFA industry—with the Language poets. His concern with the "MFA industry" compares to Charles Bernstein's concern with "official verse culture" but also with the Frankfurt School concern with the "culture industry." But, whereas the Language poets may have focused on the surface features of traditional and academic poetries for the political implications of such poetries, Nowak focuses more on the broader concerns within what he also refers to as the "neoliberal language industry" (Nowak, *Workers* 7). This broader term, "neoliberal language industry," refers to the broader effect of neoliberalism on the production, and distribution of not just literature, but information—from individual writers, and literary institutions, to libraries, bookstores, and copy centres.

[111] Nowak often cites the pair "'recognize and record'" as his poetic imperative—a term borrowed from C.L.R. James's text, *Facing Reality*.

[112] In an interview with Alan Clinton, Nowak discusses his disinterest in adhering to particular forms or genres. Nowak states:

> As a sort of literary compass, I keep turning back to Eduardo Galeano's "Preface" to his *Memoria del fuego* (*Memory of Fire*) trilogy: "I am not a historian. I am a writer who would like to contribute to the rescue of the kidnapped memory of all America …I don't know to what literary form this voice of voices belongs. *Memory of Fire* is not an anthology, clearly not; but I don't know if it is a novel or essay or epic poem or testament or

For Mark Nowak, poetry has the versatility to accommodate different measures of discourse, and that versatility makes poetry a necessary and ethical force. In other words, poetry's capaciousness enables poetry "to provide" for us in an ethical manner. Exploring the possibilities of "alternative and agitational modes of grammar and syntax" make poetry both necessary and promising (Nowak, "Notes" 238). As Nowak writes: "The questions poets need to be asking today are vital to us all: What is the relationship between a US-controlled agenda for globalization ... and the future of language and the imagination amidst ubiquitous privatization?" (237). As much as Nowak considers the present world, from a global and local perspective, he also contemplates a "future for poetry" (236) and a kind of poetry, to quote Adrienne Rich, "'not drawn from the headlines but able to resist the headlines'" (236).[113] In all, Nowak's poetics reveal the three aspects of a provisional poetics, while also demonstrating what I have called in the previous chapter, a provisional realism. In what follows then, I want to explore the poem "$00 / Line / Steel / Train"—the first of five sections from Nowak's book *Shut Up Shut Down*. I argue that his poem provides a Post-Language alternative to a traditional naïve realism—the kind of naïve realism that aims to depict and describe the world in unmediated and simple terms.

"$00 / Line / Steel / Train" is a twenty page poem containing eighteen sections. Each section has a numbered title that refers to a photograph from Bernd and Hilla Becher's *Industrial Façades*—a photographic collection of shut-down factories and

chronicle or… Deciding robs me of no sleep. I do not believe in the frontiers that, according to literature's customs officers, separate the forms." That passage always seems, to me, a perfect place from which to begin.

[113] Rich's statement comes from her essay "Defying the Space that Separates" from *Arts of the Possible* (New York: Norton, 2001).

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warehouse fronts from all across North America and Europe. The text of each section

resembles a Japanese haibun, with a prose portion followed by a short lyric section.[114]

The prose section contains bolded testimonial excerpts from those who have lived,

worked and suffered in the steel industry in Lackawanna County, New York. Nowak

includes a Works Cited at the end of the poem to provide sources for these testimonies.

He juxtaposes the bolded, testimonial sections against the unbolded commentary and

personal anecdote. The short poem that closes each section either reflects some

contingent detail from the photograph or condenses the commentary in an elliptical

fashion.[115] The first line of the poem instructs us about the poem's structure: "The basic

form is the frame; the photograph of the factory predicts how every one (of the

materials) will get used" (Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* 11). In fact, the poem contains

various frames and frameworks that condition our engagement with the text. On the

surface, the pages that contain each poem, and the pages that contain each photograph

act as frames. In the numbered poems, the documentary excerpt, the authorial

comment and the critical lyric all provide different frameworks for accessing the reality

represented; the corresponding photograph that accompanies each numbered poem

also frames each individual poem within a visually evocative context. Deeper yet, the

parentheses that cordon off commentary, interrupting the flow of text provide a kind of

emphatic frame. Deepest yet, the testimonials, comment and anecdotes serve as

individual frames from longer, more elaborate sources—transcripts, experiences and

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[114] Nowak claims that the form of Fred Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan* was an influence on the structure of "$00 / Line / Steel / Train" ("Chronicales").
[115] According to Michael Davidson, "In Marxist terms, the relationship of prose to poetry replicates the classic division between superstructure and base, between narrative representations of 'real conditions' and the economic realities sustained by (or interpreted through) those representations" (37).

lives. Although "framing" informs the composition of the poem, the "frame" also

connotes a larger ideological frame, in which the economics and politics of mill life

"predict how every one ... will get used" just like "materials" in a text. In all, the poem

does not offer a seamless, coherent narrative depiction, but a disjunctive series of

interwoven frames of real lives.[116]

In the first four sections, the testimonials explore the conflicted relationship

between work and identity, while commentary and lyric contextualize the testimonials

within a larger cultural critique. From a sense of belonging and solidarity to a sense of

sacrifice and injustice, the testimonial voices portraying a mixture of resignation and

frustration about the distant and immediate past. While the assembled testimonies

produce a kind of "first person plural" out of singular voices (Nowak, "Poetry"),

Nowak makes a point of not portraying a raceless homogeny. In "38.," for example,

Nowak cites an African-American man working in a steel mill where he has faced racial

discrimination (Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* 14). In the portions of commentary, Nowak

aims to preserve the inherent dignity and broaden the scope of these voices against "an

incessant scraping (away)" (11) that might otherwise nullify these voices by confining

them to a history of nostalgia or victimization. In other words, Nowak works to

recapitulate and recontextualize the "Past" in his poem (11). This project draws

attention to discursive "frames"—policies, agendas, attitudes and actions—that have

caused the loss of jobs and the closure of mills. For the black man in "38.," a "working-

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[116] In one the few essays on Nowak's work, David Ray Vance writes: "In addition to
drawing our attention to the ubiquity of industry and the way it formulates an aesthetic
that is seemingly unconcerned with people, by referencing the Becher photographs,
Nowak further emphasizes that all documents, including photographs and including
his own poems, are always incomplete. There is always something left out, excluded"
(348).

class (white) masculinity" (12) might be such a discursive frame. For the "'productive workers'" of LTV Steel in "13.," the manipulation of bankruptcy policies to exact takebacks against union employees might be such a frame (13). While race remains an issue in all of the poem, Nowak aims more broadly at another discursive frame: Capitalism. As Nowak writes to close the first section:

Who knew

the crisis

from the conditions—

presumably

the Capital [Who] (11)

This short poem suggests that the workers do not differentiate the 'crisis' from the 'conditions' because the 'crisis' exists in the 'conditions' themselves; the danger of mill work, and crisis of mill closures, for example, effect workers's lives daily. The crisis, however, extends further, to include capitalism. In Nowak's short poem, "Who" is not simply a generic pronoun but an ascription, an attribution of responsibility. In the second quarter of "$00 / Line / Steel / Train," the face of this "Who" includes LTV Steel, but also Bethlehem Steel and US Steel (Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* 15, 16). Nowak cites testimonials from ex-steelmill workers (working for these companies), but also from an unemployment caseworker (17) and a female mill worker (18). As in the first section, testimonials express a binding relationship between identity and work. The caseworker, for example, reports that "**We try to strip them bare** (steel/workers), **and then show all the ways to look for a job—**" (17). As the figure of speech intimates, and the parenthetical insertion insists, steel is not simply material one works with, but

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is the framework for an identity—clearly marked by gender, race, and class. While some of the commentaries include anecdotes about Nowak's grandfather, as if to provide a deeper sense of authenticity to the documentary frame, Nowak also continually reminds us that "[a] picture in a frame is (still) the object here" (17). His insistence on the frame suggests the shifting nature of his vision—a vision that evokes reality, among a variety of frames and scales—including the photographs that actually depict closed mills and factories. Nowak presents reality—in pictures, testimonies and statements—as part of his critical framework, in which he can expose the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism; take, for example, the following citation: '"The 'hot' economy created three million jobs in 1996, about half of them paying minimum wages (and half of those temporary or part time)'" (17). In the lyric that closes "89.," Nowak frames the irony of this neoliberal reality from the window of an Amtrak train:

Where is

dispossessed

from the window

of the Am/trak

Empire Builder (16)

Dispossession might be the overarching experiential frame in the testimonials of "$00 / Line / Steel / Train." Against the loss of jobs, the loss of benefits, the loss of homes and the loss of identity, however, many of the voices still express the value of solidarity and collectivity—values that no doubt build empires. In the third quarter of the poem Nowak juxtaposes testimonies of dispossession against those of collectivity. "154." begins, for example, "**Forty years of hard work and what have I got to show for**

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it? Nothing” (Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* 20). In contrast, the subsequent section,

“160.” begins “**The men knew that they were risking their jobs in the walkout…but**

they had got worked up to the point where this didn't seem so important…” (21). In

his commentary, Nowak summarizes this struggle quite succinctly with an emphasis

both on individual experience, and collective action: “Get work. Get (worked) over.

Get up, get worked up, get working (together) again” (21). Even more broadly than a

labour dispute, he contextualizes “[t]his struggle” (19) as one against “Capital”—that

“[Who]” from the first section (11). In “148.,” he suggests his own particular struggle

against Capitalism: “[I]n each and every instance, to make history within the conditions

of Whose frame” (19). ‘Making history’ connotes both doing something unprecedented,

poetically and discursively, but it also connotes doing something politically. Nowak

seeks to transcend “‘recogniz[ing] and record[ing]’” as C.L.R. James would have it; he

wants collective change. In the closing poem of “186.,” Nowak delivers a clever point

about the history that he wants to see made—the history that does not hold us back but

pushes us forward to better conditions.

<div style="margin-left:3em">

History, the arrow

pointing   past

[inside this frame]—

interest at 2.9% for What

we can't afford in the first place (22)

</div>

The last two lines of this poem represent an irony that Nowak impresses

throughout “$00 / Line / Steel / Train,” but that becomes particularly poignant in the

last quarter of the poem. For all of the investment and sacrifice articulated in the

testimonials, the ultimate result is disillusionment. In fact, the returns on such investments and on attempts to improve conditions yield physical, material and psychological losses. In the testimonial that closes "$00 / Line / Steel / Train," one worker states: "**Every day you put your life on the line when you went into that iron house. Every day you sucked up dirt and took a chance on breaking your legs or breaking your back. And anyone who's worked in there knows what I'm talking about**" (Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* 28). While an integrity infuses these words, an innate tragedy also informs them. Such a tragedy extends beyond individuals, however, into whole communities and across generations as shown in the testimonial of "222.": "**When we were kids we thought the steel mill was it.** ... **We just couldn't wait to get in there. When we finally did get in, we were sorry.** ... **It wasn't what it was cut out to be**" (26). These testimonials illustrate the difference between two frames of reality—between those who have "**worked in there**" and those who "**couldn't wait to get in there**." For Nowak, these testimonials demonstrate not only a personal, material reality, but also far more pervasive, global one—evincing a deeper systemic crisis. The end of the poem, for example, frames this pervasiveness: "[T]he (goddamn) frame is used is used is utterly used against us and by us and upon us and for us is used is used in the present (past) future (form) we are used yet users yet used" (28). In a kind of frustrated Steinian prose, Nowak forgoes a "singular, totalizing viewpoint, or ... absolute truth" in favour of a far more convoluted frame of reality (Vance 346). While the poem is more documentary than didactic, Nowak does provide an imperative at the end:

The Local must

engage

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past

            its past (Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* 25)

        The photographs, testimonials, commentary and lyrics that comprise "$00 / Line

/ Steel / Train" provide a framework for imagining *a* world, rather than *the* world.

These partial perspectives offer a vision that transcends the local. Without their sources

being identified directly, the testimonials speak to universal experiences not only

among steel workers, but among other industrial workers as well.   Still, the excerpting

of testimonials throughout the poems preserves the integrity and reality of those

experiences, grounding Nowak's poem in actual political stakes. Nowak's framework

for a provisional realism differs from Ron Silliman's framework in this way. In "Blue,"

Silliman represents the world as one might find it in the snippets of language heard

while walking down the street. He frames a highly detailed but unspecified world

within a traditional realist narrative about a Marchioness. But, Silliman aims to critique

this conventional realist framework by juxtaposing it with particular, yet quotidian

experiences that do not cohere into a narrative. More so, Silliman aims to critique uses

of language that assume a certain transparency and that fail to heed the ideological

underpinnings that structure our discourses. In $00 / Line / Steel / Train," Nowak

represents the world in pieces taken from testimonies and histories, as well, as from his

own experience and commentary. He frames a highly detailed, but specified world

within a documentary framework in order invite readers into the realities of those who

have lived and suffered. Nowak does not aim to critique realistic uses of narrative

language, but to critique the system of capitalism that has caused the closure of mills,

the loss of jobs and the destruction of lives. While neither Silliman's poem nor Nowak's

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poem is a complete vision—remaining but a provisional glimpse—Nowak's poem ultimately provides access into a world with actual sociopolitical stakes. Silliman's picture of reality asks us to attend to the uniqueness of sentences on the page, not necessarily to the images that those sentences evoke, whereas Nowak's picture of reality asks us to attend to the effects of capitalism in the world, not simply as capitalism operates in the structures of our language. By using poetry to represent that world, Nowak enacts a provisional realism.

Memos to the Reader:

Rodrigo Toscano's Intervening Poetics as Provisional Activism

Rodrigo Toscano is the author of six books of poetry— *Partisans* (1999), *The Disparities* (2002), *Platform* (2003), *To Leveling Swerve* (2004), *Collapsible Poetics* Theater (2008), and *Deck of Deeds* (2012). He works at the Labor Institute in New York City, as an educator and coordinator for labor unions and labor organizers. He navigates between two seemingly disparate realms— that of experimental poetry and that of political activism. In a statement for the "Dissenting Practices" Symposium held at Georgetown University in February 2003, he differentiates between the "working-poet" (the "intra-literary") and the "social-actor" (the "extra-literary) (Toscano, "A Border"). Toscano represents a hybrid of these two figures, and, in doing so, demonstrates a Post-Language agenda. With the Language writers he recognizes that "social control … depend[s] on linguistic constructions" (Toscano, "Unzips"). In particular, the "corporate domination of all facets of life" concerns Toscano (Toscano, "A Border"). Such domination reveals "a deep social crisis" marked by "a lack of relevant (democratically arrived at) information" and "a generalized undemocratic treatment of most issues." To combat this crisis, Toscano proposes a "[d]issenting practical poetics,"

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which not only intervenes within a broader cultural milieu (as the Language writers propose), but does so by relying on all aesthetic means necessary (n.pag). In fact, he insists on shedding any "pieties" in favour of a far more provisional approach; such pieties include notions "[t]hat 'voice' is 'dead,' that 'textual critique' is 'cryptic,' or that 'lyric' or 'narrative' is essentially 'passé'" (Toscano, "Unzips"). For Toscano, poetry has a particular revolutionary responsibility—not only to enact a "discursive break-out" in its own tradition, but also to provide for the "world-at-large-culturally" (Toscano and Knight; Toscano, "A Border").

For Rodrigo Toscano, poetry can intervene in the world in an ethical fashion because of poetry's experimental potential. Toscano refers to poetic experiments as forays into "purposed precariousness" (Toscano and Knight). Such terminology bares the definition of provisionality, combining a desire to meet a particular need, without the assurance of, or desire for, foreseeable outcomes. In an interview with Leonard Schwartz, Toscano offers that, in "poetic discourse," a poet can allow "allegedly high philosophic discourse to bump up against the demotic, or everyday kind of speech" ("Bumper-car effect"). Such experiments are unpredictable, but ultimately ethical, because they challenge "the way that language structures" reality—on issues of class, race or gender. Toscano also suggests that poetic experiments attend to broader cultural questions; he asks, for example:

> ... [H]ow can
>
> an experiment ever be an experiment,
>
> without it *first* being an impediment
>
> to some element
>
> of some cultural-aesthetic

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covenant? ("re-opening")

In other words, poetic experiments must not simply register as "new" within a poetic tradition, but must show cognizance of the contemporary sociopolitical climate, and, further, they must intervene against what Toscano calls an "imperative (pre-scribed?) Future" (Toscano, "A Border"). For Toscano, poetry is not only a necessary enterprise; it is also highly conditional and anticipatory: poetry must provide space for alternate futures. Toscano desires to intervene between the world and his audience, for any change that can occur begins with an activated public. In what follows, then, I examine his long poem "anti-confidential memos" as a Post-Language example of a provisional activism, one that aims to goad and provoke, rather than to comfort or to reassure.

Toscano's long poem "non-confidential memos" is from his full-length collection *The Disparities*. Each of the four parts of the poem contains seemingly disparate fragments of text separated by asterisks. Fragments are sometimes single words, juxtaposed phrases, cumulative lists, or enjambed flows. On the one hand, the poem resembles "a series / unresolved" (Toscano, *The Disparities* 79) in the sense that it does not necessarily coalesce into an unswerving and conclusive narrative or message. On the other hand, the poem evinces a "complete involvement" between "each / discrepancy" (65) in the sense that Toscano intends the poem to activate readers as citizens in an overall provocative fashion. The word "memos" indicates the divulgence of information about the day-to-day operations of a particular business. In this context, the business is the business of living in the world as a social agent. As memoranda then, each section and each interior fragment serves to inform, instruct, and remind—to activate readers as self-conscious citizens. In effect, each piece works doubly as singular memorandum and as part of collective memoranda. The "non-confidential" aspect of

the title of the poem also suggests that Toscano intends these memos to "circulate" (69) broadly, publicly. But, within the scope of a provisional activism, "non-confidential memos" is not an explicitly didactic poem. The sparseness of language in the poem inspires a close attention to the "word freight" (69) of each line, each section and each choice, some of which are unnerving and difficult, but which also attempt to inspire self-conscious reflections about the danger of passivity in reading and living. In a world inundated by a corporate model, these memos do not program readers to ensure the smooth flow of operations; instead, these memos challenge readers to wrench themselves from a complacent attitude. "Comply?" Toscano asks (66). He answers:

> [S]how up
>
> give
>
> (rave)
>
> rev
>
> up (66-67)

The poem's first memo—its first instruction—is a reflexive display about the effect and benefit of readerly disorientation. The memo informs us that finding oneself without the immediate tools for interpretation, without a protocol, can create an impetus for change.

> 1
>
> wrenched from
>
> also wrenches
>
> *
>
> reconstitution
>
> *

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could be good

could be bad

it's (Toscano, *The Disparities* 64)

The first line is seemingly incomplete, except when read in coincidence with its second line. We ask, "wrenched from what or where?" only to find that the poem itself has wrenched us from our comfortable readerly protocol. The next two memos indeed dramatize that feeling of being "wrenched from." Toscano suggests that being "wrenched from" one's usual position as reader and citizen can initiate a process of change outside oneself—a risk that could be "good" or "bad." If we 'reconstitute' our intentions in reading poetry and acting in the world, we can bring "tomorrow / directly / beside" rather than *in* the future (66). Later in the section, Toscano adds that we often confront "censors" that inhibit the "disjunctures" that motivate change (68). The poem does not "censor" its own "disjunctures," and it resembles a series of "constituted" fragments—"unmodestly / attached" (69). Of course, Toscano aims to maintain such disjunctures as a means to 'wrench' the reader and motivate action. When Toscano urges "let them know you want / 'poetry'" (65), and "tell them you want / motive" (68) he expects readers to assert their own desire, not only for beauty, for freedom of thought, but for accountability.

In section two, the poem continues in a further reflexive vein, with a sustained intention to activate the reader.

[S]peak

tweaked

wires

flaring

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re-spool (Toscano, *The Disparities* 69-70)

Each memo does resemble a "tweaked wire," a loose end even, but it is the insistence to "re-spool" that corresponds to a readerly action—an action that the reader cannot achieve so easily. The poem almost experiences glitches in its machinery—a "wrench" (71) in its works that "feels like industry" (71)—with memos like the following: "flack / fuck" (70), "out / out" (71-72) and "thwack / thwack" (72). These lines exhibit a "flaring" aggression that does not "re-spool" but repeats and insists; these lines issue "from the barrel of" Toscano's activist poetic agenda (72). The repetitive quality of these insistences represent what Toscano might call "concreteness" (70) or what Sianne Ngai calls "raw matter" (108). "Language's raw matter," she defines as "(flow, gush, outpouring; inarticulate sound; something between a groan and a cry; ouch, help, no; woo, braah; smiles and shouts)" (108). "Raw matter" has no propositional value, she notes, and their "rhetorical force comes from elsewhere, and is perceived differently: as *insistence*—that which solicits a *response* from the other in the form of pure affect or noise" (108). For Toscano, these "raw matter" memos hope to elicit responses that a conventional poetics does not allow, something between a speechlessness and, what Ngai calls, a "disgust" (108). Of course, Toscano would not advocate speechlessness, but, rather, something more active. He would advocate a conscientious "seeking" or reading about how language structures our thinking (Toscano, *The Disparities* 72). As he asks near the close of the second section:

[F]or who

world

in the world

forms

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forms (73)

Here Toscano addresses the reader to consider the "forms" of discourse and the powers
that enable them. Can we, Toscano asks, reform the world by changing the forms of its
discourses?

In the final two sections of "non-confidential memos" (the third section is
disproportionately short), the poem is at its most incongruous and ideological. Here,
Toscano addresses readers as "'citizen[s]'" (Toscano, *The Disparities* 75).   The third
section begins, for example, with the following memo:

> [A]nd so
>
> mull
>
> a candidate
>
> for will
>
> -less
>
> minstrelsy (74)

Mulling here mockingly alludes to a kind of passive reading evoked by a facile text,
what he also refers to as "rigged map" (74). A political "candidate" like a blackfaced
minstrel performer asks us to believe, but these figures always demand our closer
consideration. In its fragmented disjunctivity, the "memos" serve to disrupt any kind of
propagandizing or steamrolling rhetoric, and to break up what Toscano refers to as "to
– ta – li – ta – ri – an / cuisine" (75). He alerts readers to the relationship between the
structuring of language and the language that structures the everyday, just like the
"shirt on your back" and "the chair you're in" (75). Of course, the everyday that
Toscano envisions includes economic and ecological realities: the "union went
thataway" and the "green plastic melts" (78). Just prior to concluding, Toscano

provides a "blurt[ed]" (75) catalog of single words/short phrases that exceed two pages (79-81). From "spork" (80) to "thunk it" (80) to "fear" (81) to "stack" (81) this list does not produce a cumulative context; in fact, the "context / meanwhile / snoozes" (71). This list represents the kind of language that we encounter everyday, but the individual words do not serve to express content as much as provide opportunity to resonate outside of the text. According to Toscano, the list helps to "prepare" the reader to "deal with words as epiphenomenal 'political' episodes in the 'world'" ("Re: oops"). How such words resonate politically or personally dramatizes a disparity between "an evolving existence and variously perceived realities" (Alcalá)—a disparity that is also the lesson of the poem's final memo:

> [D]on't get stuck
>
> with your pluralistic
>
> prejudices
>
> *
>
> someone
>
> must lose (Toscano, *The Disparities* 82)

The irony is that cultural pluralism aims to disable prejudices, to neutralize difference within a broader framework of sameness, what Toscano calls the "artificial cessation of contradictions" ("Unzips"). Getting stuck in a pluralism may be as dangerous as getting stuck in one program, but avoiding pluralism means committing to a particular point of view, at least provisionally. Overall, Toscano's memos challenge the reader to break from complacent patterns of engaging texts in the world by asserting one's "'agency'" and "seeking" change" (Toscano, *The Disparities* 76, 73) .

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The shards of text that serve as memoranda in "non-confidential memos" are examples of what Toscano calls "discursive break-out[s]" (Toscano and Knight). These singular words and columns of text, what with their sparseness and disjunctivity, challenge both conventional memo formats and conventional poetic stanzas. These shards also provide examples of what Toscano calls "purposed precariousness" in the sense that they do not provide the reader with easy to follow instructions. In other words, the memos are urgent attempts to prod the reader, to "wrench" the reader, from a civic complacency; for ultimately, memos are, what with their unwanted and unexpected arrival, immensely irritating. In an overall sense, Toscano's desire to "wrench" the reader is similar to Bruce Andrews's intention to goad readers in "Confidence Trick." But, while Andrews's poem evokes a more visceral response from readers, from disgust to rage to confusion, Toscano's poem invites immediate action, from taking to the streets to consciously evaluating political candidates. In one sense, the different forms of Toscano's poem and Andrews's poem can account for how these poems attempt to elicit these different responses. Andrews's blocks of text manifest excess and flow, whereas Toscano's memos demonstrate constraint and concision. In another sense, different social contexts for Toscano's poem and for Andrews's poem provide a reason for why these two poems function differently. Andrews's background in political science and the academy infuses his work, such that he wants to alienate readers and disturb a certain discursive register existing in such academic contexts. Toscano's investment in labour politics infuses his work, such that he does not want to alienate, as much as inform and inspire his readers to work actively in the world. In terms of a provisional activism, both poets desire readers to engage politically with all

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registers of language, but Toscano grounds his work in the exigencies of everyday agency.

Daybooks of the Collective:

Juliana Spahr's Political Lyric as Provisional Lyricism

Juliana Spahr is the author of four books of poetry—*Response* (1996), *Fuck you-Aloha-I Love You* (2001), *this connection of everyone with lungs* (2005), *Well Then There Now* (2011)—and a book of prose *The Transformation* (2007). In addition, she has published a number of chapbooks, written a book of literary criticism—*Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (2001)—and co-edited essay collections such as *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary* (with Joan Retallack, 2006) and *American Women Poets in the Twenty-first Century* (with Claudia Rankine, 2002). She is also a professor at Mills College. Of the four American poets discussed in this chapter, Spahr offers the most scholarship on contemporary writing after Language poetry. I have, for example, cited her introduction to *American Women Poets*, and her statement "After Language Poetry," both of which discuss the influence of Language poetry, and the existence of a hybrid sensibility, in contemporary writing. In her statements on contemporary writing, Spahr advocates attempts to transcend the division between "conventional" and "experimental" poetics. She reimagines the "conventional" and the "experimental" as "local poetries, written out of specific moments, out of specific locations with very specific concerns" (Spahr, "A Conversation"). Such reimagining casts convention or experiment in provisional terms: the exigencies of a particular context dictate that various, even contraposed, poetic and critical means must be available for use. Spahr's early poetic essay, "Spiderwasp or literary criticism," explores

this provisional sensibility in both form and content.[117] In it, she notes that "for literary criticism to have any hope of being anything that does necessary work it must be capable of juggling many different things" (Spahr, "Spiderwasp" 418). In other words, for Spahr, poetry is a pluralist field where the private and the political, the poetic and the critical, and the experimental and the conventional must interface under an ethical rubric.

Hybridity—whether bridging genres, politics or poetics—represents a central aspect to my claims about the ethics of Post-Language writing, and Juliana Spahr's approach to poetry represents a key illustration of both hybridity and a provisional sensibility. In an interview with Joel Bettridge, for example, Spahr states:

> To be at all interested in poetry means that at one point or another one
> had to declare an allegiance or an interest in how humans love things
> because that discussion takes up so much of the genre. And I like the
> political lyric because I see it as arguing that we must approach our
> politics with as much devotion as we approach beloveds. ... [P]oetry

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[117] The essay is a poem that is a reflexive exploration of what literary criticism is and what should do according to Spahr. In the essay she writes from an ambiguous or double-serving "he or she" subject. Spahr aligns the way a "pepsis wasp" uses a "tarantula," with the way lovers interact and with the way a person engages a text. As she writes:

> He or she wants to make this complexity of relation—this complexity
> where one thing has dominion and understanding over another thing all
> in one moment but in another moment the another thing has dominion
> and understanding over the thing—into a metaphor for how we encounter
> works and worlds. He or she wants to explain the recent events in his or
> her life as a comparison for what happens when one writes literary
> criticism. ... For the events in his or her life keep getting more and more
> elaborate, the connections with other people get more and more elaborate,
> and he or she is not sure how he or she feels about this elaborate. (Spahr,
> "Spiderwasp" 418)

For more examples of hybrid genre of criticism see *A Poetics of Criticism*.

> retains an aura of political usability in our culture ... because it often mixes
> intimacy with politics.

I believe that ethics inflects Spahr's notion of a "political lyric" because the lyric's point of departure is interpersonal rather than civic. Keeping poetry capacious enough to accommodate two seemingly disparate registers—the conventional and the experimental—also enables poetry to infuse political and public discourse with intimate and private experiences. While the political impact of that infusion may not always be quantifiable, the ethical intention remains quite clear. In a poetics of provisionality, poetry's conditional nature—represented in part by its potential for hybridity—makes it capable of meeting personal and political needs, thereby making poetry necessary. For Spahr, poetry is necessary because it can articulate a "philosoph[y] of connection" between genres, discourses, or people (Spahr, "Poetry").[118] And when Spahr writes that she wants "more poetries of connection in the future," she espouses the anticipatory quality of a provisional poetics—a poetics oriented toward meeting future needs.

Spahr's attention to the relationship between "intimacy and politics" hinges on moving beyond the traditional autonomy of writers and readers into a larger interconnected world.[119] In other words, Spahr seeks, and experiments with, "models of intimacy that are full of acquaintance and publics" (Spahr, "Poetry"). According to

[118] Spahr's essay, "Poetry in a Time of Crisis" exists in a variety of versions. The one that I am citing has been subsumed in more recent drafts, and no longer exists readily online.

[119] In her essay, "All Together / Now: Writing the Space of Collectivities in the Poetry of Juliana Spahr," Kimberly Lamm makes a key point about Spahr's aim to push lyric poetry beyond the dynamic of a private expression directed at an individual reader: "Historical events that traumatically punctuate time remind us of the collective dimensions of experience; but when readers enter the space of poetry, still fixed by the model in which a reader encounters the writer's lyrical expression, this knowledge is difficult to sustain" (133).

Kimberly Lamm, this search represents an "ethos" of "[s]haping and tracing

connections within collectivities" (133). This ethos is especially apparent in the name of

Spahr's 2001 collection *this connection of everyone with lungs*, a book written in the wake

of September 11, 2001, and amidst the preparation for an American invasion of Iraq.

The book itself consists of two long poems. The second poem, "Poem Written from

November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003" explores a dialectic between "private intimacies"

and "public obligations" (Spahr, "After"). The poem is a kind of daybook that traces

the progress of an "I" and her "beloveds" as all three encounter both the tragic and the

mundane news in the Post-9/11 world. As much as the poem attends to the daily news,

the poem balances this attention with the intimate life of the speaking "I." This "I" also

speaks as a "We," with the voice of her mute "beloveds." In attempting to explore this

balance between an "I" and a "We," an individual and a collective existence, Spahr

engages a mode of poetic responsibility that I refer to as provisional lyricism. The poem

does not forgo an individual expressive subject, but questions the autonomy of such a

subject, and extends it to include an intimate, collective "We."[120] "Poem Written from

November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003" contains fifteen separate day-poems, but I

examine the last six, beginning on February 15, 2003, a day when marches and protests,

against the eventual invasion of Iraq, occur throughout the world. This day-poem

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[120] In *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*, Spahr explores
this idea further in work by Gertrude Stein, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Harryette
Mullen, and Teresa Hak Kyung Cha. In the introduction to that text, she notes that
"[b]y 'connection' here I mean works that present and engage with large, public worlds
that are in turn shared with readers. I mean forms of writing that well represent and
expand changing notions of the public, of everybody. And I mean forms of writing that
take advantage of reading's dynamic and reciprocal nature" (4-5).

represents the moment when the "I" and the "We" reach beyond their "private intimacies" and confront their "public obligations."

In the "Note" that actually begins the daybook Juliana Spahr offers a personal anecdote about the ensuing poem—a gesture that assumes a traditional expressive subject. According to Spahr, the poem expresses a desire "to think about what I was connected with, and what I was complicit with, as I lived off the fat of the military-industrial complex on a small island [Hawai'i]. I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically" (Spahr, *this connection* 13). The poem begins then with an entry for November 30, 2002, an address to her "beloveds," who are the speaker's domestic partners: "Beloveds, we wake up in the morning to darkness and watch it turn into lightness with hope" (15). This first address to her "Beloveds" must include the possibility that these "beloveds" also refers to readers. In one sense then the poem immediately tenses between an intimate, domestic place and a global, virtual space. That broader space is both planetary and virtual in the sense of a global ecology and ecosystem, on the one hand, and in the sense of a global information network, on the other. Between "December 8, 2002" and "January 13, 2003," the speaker is speechless, and she describes this experience as a collective speechlessness. In the poem "January 13, 2003," Spahr begins with a series of lines—"We do not speak"—in which the lyrical voice of the poem expands again. Shortly after these reflections, in "February 15, 2003," the collective speechlessness changes into collective action.

"February 15, 2003" begins: "Here is today. / / Over eight million people marched on five continents against the mobilization" (Spahr, *this connection* 53). Spahr lists not only countries, where millions protested, but cities where thousands protested.

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"Even we on this small island gathered," Spahr writes, as she scales back from the "millions." Against the catalogue of mobilized citizens around the world Spahr juxtaposes "other things [that] happened" (55). In a kind ticker tape of news, we discover:

> Dolly the cloned sheep was killed yesterday owing to premature aging.
>
> A bomb exploded an Israeli tank and four were killed.
>
> ...
>
> Child protection campaigners called for the removal of Polanski's *The Pianist* from the Oscars because of the fugitive director's child sex conviction. (55)

"This is the stuff of the everyday in this world," Spahr writes in the next poem, "March 5, 2003" (56). Even while an "I" relays these headlines, each byte of news is a statement issuing from a different "We." As Kimberly Lamm astutely notes: "We" is not necessarily inclusive. Collectivities are contested as much as they are shared" (134). Collective and individual identities are diverse, diffuse, and provisional. The decision to kill Dolly, to bomb an Israeli tank, and to protest Polanski's film all represent collective measures, but the politics and ethics in each decision do not necessarily align, and the "I" in the poem does not shape her persona by articulating alignments with or against them. She participates in a world composed of such collectivities, but while she remains relatively anonymous, she is not innocent or unaffected.

In "March 5, 2003," Spahr intertwines her levels of identification, as an "I," as part of an intimate "We" and as part of a more expansive "We." In a portion of the poem that invokes the title of the entire book, she writes: "This burning, this dirty air we breathe together, our dependence on this air, our inability to stop breathing, our

desire to just get out of this world and yet there we are taking the burning of the world

into our lungs every day where it rests inside us, haunting us, making us twitch in our

bed at night despite the comfort we take from each other's bodies" (57). She progresses

from a global "We"—"of this world"—to a private "We"—"in our bed." Both "We's"

must contend with a dirty air, a dirty air that connotes polluted discourse, environment,

and news. Spahr registers a collective sense of anxiety about world events, and a

specific sense of powerlessness and even complicity. She wonders about "[t]he

unanswerable questions of political responsibility": what "we could do" and how to

"act despite the lack of answers" (58). She takes comfort in a "glimmer" of hope

evinced by protests depicted in "[p]icture after picture, crowd after crowd" (59). By the

end of the poem, Spahr finds comfort in reconfiguring her own domestic intimacy in

more communal terms: "I imagine the bodies of friends in the crowds of various cities,

feel moments of connection with the mass as I imagine it down to individuals" (60).

While Spahr does not relinquish the singularity of the "I" here, she does seem to offer

her "I" as inhabitable, as one that lends itself to identification. Any reader might

imagine herself thinking through these scales of connection.

  Spahr does not destabilize the autonomy of the lyrical "I" by pluralizing its

subjectivity or by foregrounding its fluidity.[121] Despite the resemblance of the "I" to

Spahr herself, its gender and race remains unannounced, as if to emphasize human-ness

over other essentialisms. At the same time, the "I" and "We" subsist in a class where

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[121] For a critical context of work in this vein, see Spahr's early essay, "Resignifying
Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*" (*American Literature* 68.1 [1996]: 139-159). In it,
she explores Hejinian's deployment of the personal through the lens of theorists like
Gloria Anzaldúa and Judith Butler. This essay provides an informative basis for
Spahr's own exploration of subjectivity in *this connection*.

the basic necessities are not at issue, and where the access to free time and information are unimpeded. In a way, the neuter quality of the "I" demonstrates its complicity with the ideology of neoliberalism's political and economic projects. But, Spahr ackowledges her own potential complicity in the "Note" at the beginning of "Poem" and again in the entry for "March 11, 2003"—a poem where she writes: "We sleep with levels of complicity so intense and various ..." (Spahr, *this connection* 61). Spahr really does not so much test the limits of the lyrical "I" as much test the limitations of the "I" itself, the "I" that exists in the world. In the poem "March 11, 2003," for example, she writes of resisting "the alone" (63):

> Bush keeps saying he will go at it alone if he has to.
>
> Huge protests continue, protests without alone and against alone.
>
> It is the word alone, beloveds, the word alone. (Spahr, *this connection* 61)

The word "I" is the de facto signifier of aloneness, and so it may be the aloneness of the "I" that Spahr pushes against in "Poem."   In "March 16, 2003," the "I" combats aloneness by spending time at the beach with her beloveds. "But the beach," she writes, "on which we reclined is occupied by the US military so every word we said was shaped by other words" (67). For Spahr, to "speak of birds and their bowers" is also "speaking of rolling start and shock and awe" (67) because both acts of speaking share the same language. In that sense, it is "the word alone" that both connects us and stretches the autonomy of any "I."

In the closing entries for "Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003," the war occupies the collective imagination within the poem because war has finally begun: "[W]e wake up and all we hear in the birds' songs is war" (Spahr, *this connection* 68). Spahr floods the poem with the particular details of war machinery, and

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the gossipy trite details of what constitutes news. In this way, the intimate "We" in the poem have binged on the news, and then attempt to purge—or as Spahr comments, "we can't keep the words M1A1 Abrams battle tanks, M2A3 Bradley fighting vehicles, M6 Bradley linebackers, and Humvees from stumbling out of our mouths" (73). Under a conventional expressive rubric, the lyric voice articulates a certain degree of control, but in the entry for "March 27 and 30, 2003" the voice can only report from a perspective of powerlessness. Despite "reports of our protests" (70), and those from around the world, Spahr expresses "a huge sadness ... because of our inability to control what goes on in the world in our name" (71). Like the "I" that the reader might relate to, Spahr constructs the nameless and faceless "We" as another relatable identity. As such, that "We," and the "I," are provisional rather than absolute. Both pronouns do originate in a personal and intimate context, and they provide a voice that can accommodate a shared, but not necessarily universal, experience. To close the poem, Spahr writes: "Fast combat support ships, landing crafts, air cushioned, all of us with all of that" (75). Although that "us" may seem sweeping, it actually serves to connect rather than collect.

The daybook entries and news bytes that comprise "Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003" offer a voice for both individual and collective experiences in a Post-9/11 world. The voice of these poems is neither universal nor global, but the perspective that it keeps certainly is. The voice navigates individual anxieties, which a domestic "We" and a collective "We" both undoubtedly share. As such, Spahr infuses the political milieu of a particular moment with intimate details of private life; the entire poem oscillates between these registers. Spahr's model for a provisional lyricism differs in some sense then from Lyn Hejinian's. In "Province," Hejinian's lyrical subject "recede[s] in a structure feeling" (108), so that Hejinian de-

emphasizes a static subjectivity, in order to accentuate the flow of lived and ongoing experience. Like the identity of Hejinian's receding subject, the identity of Spahr's "I" arises out of practical experience in a certain "structure of feeling." Still, the "I" remains individual in "Province," where as in Spahr's poem, the "I' reaches out beyond to identify as part of a connective "We" without losing a certain geographical and emotional identity.   In Hejinian's poem, she poses the "province" as a model for the subject, in which subjectivity has no essence, but Hejinian does not pursue the political ramifications of this model in her poem. In Spahr's long poem, however, Spahr poses the "We" as a model for the subject in the context of actual political conditions. In a provisional lyricism, like Spahr's, the lyrical voice is not the expressive vehicle for a solitary imagination, but is the dramatic register for individual and collective experience. In fact, using a lyrical register to push beyond individual experience into the collective constitutes an ethical drive for poetry, one that enacts an expressive mode of poetic responsibility.

Stanzas to the Form:

Harryette Mullen's Salvaged Poetics as Provisional Formalism

Harryette Mullen is the author of four books of poetry—*Tree Tall Woman* (1981), *Trimmings* (1991), *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), *Muse & Drudge* (1995), and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002)—and a book of essays, *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be*: *Essays and Interviews* (2012). She is also professor of English at UCLA. In her essay, "Poetry and Identity," Mullen charts how the reception of her work has tended to position her as a "'formally innovative black poet'" (27). On the one hand, she finds that her race places her at the margin of an "avant-garde" tradition, and, on the other hand, her experimental style locates her at odds within an African-

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American tradition. She feels comfortable at this intersection, however, despite being critical of what she calls an "aesthetic apartheid" (31). Her hybrid aesthetic also demonstrates a Post-Language sensibility. Language poetry influences her work after *Tree Tall Woman*, particularly in her attention to the political edge of language's materiality. As Mullen remarks in her essay, "Imagining the Unimagined Reader": "My inclination is to pursue what is minor, marginal, idiosyndebased [sic], or aberrant in the language that I speak and write" (202). Mullen pursues the abject of language—what she also calls its "'unconscious'" (202)—in language's surface manifestations. Any aspect of language that avails itself of manipulation represents workable material, including the colloquial, the idiomatic, the pidginized, the foreign, the archaic, the sensual, the commercialized and the paranomastic. But, in her effort to salvage—to unearth, rework and recast the latent content of a collective cultural language—she also infuses her poetry with a racially- and sexually-inflected identity politics. In this way, Mullen pushes textual politics in a direction mainly uncharted by the original Language writers.

Perhaps surprisingly, Harryette Mullen describes the intent of her work in an ethical, rather than political, manner— a manner that I argue reveals a provisional sensibility. In an interview with Cynthia Hogue, for example, Mullen describes avoiding an "instrumental" politics in favour of what she calls a "spiritual" or "visionary politics." In other words, she orients her practice toward an "unborn," rather than a contemporary, audience, in the hope that her work has the longevity to sustain ongoing investigation. Elsewhere, she cites this orientation as the reason for avoiding a "singular style or voice" and focusing on the materiality of language instead (Mullen, "Imagining" 203). Forgoing a stable and lyrical "I" allows her to appeal to a

broader audience, and allows her to use language in a way untied to the exigencies of a particular time, place or personality. As she notes in the interview with Hogue: "Language is not so instrumental. Language is not so intently focused on reality. Language is not so much a tool of persuasion to move people to think, act, behave, in a particular way, to focus their energy on a problem that exists now." To consider one's future reader, in a future where poetry is still written and read, is ethical because such a consideration demands a future where the political climate still affords freedom of access and expression. As such, Mullen's speculative politics demonstrate not only the anticipatory component of a provisional poetics but also the conditional component. To imagine a language against the grain of instrumentality, a language freed in part from the narrow vectors of mimetic, pragmatic or even expressive intent, makes poetry more fortuitous and polyvalent. Moreover, to conceive of language working in this way, at the limits of "political reality," is ethical because such a conception distances language from its complicity with unjust, ignorant or naïve discourses.

Harryette Mullen's brand of provisionality arises from her taking responsibility for a shared cultural language, rather than from an attention to her immediate reality, her contemporaries or herself. Inevitably, her poetics illustrate what I call a provisional formalism. In other words, she views language in a very material fashion, even describing her practice as one of recycling (Mullen, "Imagining" 202). She remarks in an interview with Calvin Bedient about the material nature of her poetry: "I want to push my work ... beyond transcription, beyond the mimetic reproduction of speech or the oral tradition. I'm trying to transform the materials of orality into text and into a very dense and complexly allusive writing practice" (656). Textuality enables Mullen to place in relief those discourses about orality that presume authenticity and originality.

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In her book-length poem *Muse & Drudge*, for example, Mullen juxtaposes the oral-based tradition of the blues against the text-based tradition of the lyric—both of which aim for a genuine expression of personal experience and emotion, but which also originate from two different historical and literary contexts. In effect, she shows how the text can push the voice beyond its original scope and context. *Muse & Drudge* is a long serial poem that eschews narrative and linearity, in favour of a shuffled composition. According to Mullen, the poem represents a series of "verses" sung by a chorus of women, one of which she identifies as "the lyric poet" Sappho and another of which she identifies as an "iconic black woman" Sapphire (Mullen, *Recyclopedia* xi). While the poem explores and complicates a division between lyric inspiration and domestic drudgery, embodied in the voices of these two female figures, poetic language itself remains ultimately thematic.

The language of *Muse & Drudge* operates between two linguistic registers: on the one hand, the poem utilizes allusions that situate language as essentially referential; on the other hand, the poem employs wordplay that situates the language as basically material. Certainly this binary represents another way of considering the title of the poem, among the other, more racially and sexually informed interpretations that Mullen and her critics suggest.[122] My sense is that this poem also investigates differing attitudes about the origin of poetic language. Mullen describes this difference in three ways: the "synthetic" vs. the "organic," the "artificial vs. the "natural," and the "human" vs. the "divine" ("Imagining" 202). She tends to value the former in each

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[122] In fact, I do not mean to foreclose on those readings of the poem, but rather, I want to examine language at work in the poem, in order to argue that *Muse & Drudge* does exemplify a provisional formalism.

case, though these vying orientations play out in *Muse & Drudge*. I want to consider these different orientations by examining an extended excerpt from the beginning of the poem. First, I focus on a broadly structural vision of the text—"how a border orders disorder" (Mullen, *Recyclopedia* 108); second, I look at those moments where the language engages the muse—"signs in the heavens" (129)—and where the language considers the drudge—"blurred rubble slew of vowels" (144). Overall, the poem evinces a commitment to the "human" element, to the formal conditions of existence, and to the materiality of the word on the page, where the "humble materials hold / vestiges of toil" (109).

First of all, then, each page of the poem contains four quatrains: in effect, each page, and each quatrain resembles the next and demonstrates a highly artificial structure. As Elizabeth Frost notes, these quatrains might gesture equally to the Sapphic stanza and to a blues verse (468). The poem maintains an alternating rhythm between these two registers, and Mullen herself acknowledges this tension between the apparent "continuity" of repetitious form and the seeming "discontinuity" of the traditions that form invokes ("The Solo" 654). She notes that "[t]he quatrains and the use of rhyme are things that help people, things that make a poem look orderly, make the poem seem familiar, that give it elements of convention that people can deal with while they are reeling from the unfamiliar and incoherent" (Mullen, "Interview"). Mullen even alludes to this conceit in the following stanza from the poem:

> [E]dges sharpened
> remove the blur
> enhance the image
> of dynamic features (Mullen, *Recyclopedia* 117)

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The overarching form of *Muse & Drudge* is ultimately synthetic in that it invokes the "dynamic features" of two traditions simultaneously, but also, in that it belabors a formal constraint—a constraint with "edges sharpened." Put otherwise, the poem exhibits a provisional form that enables Mullen to hybridize the lyric and the blues. Through a revisionist gesture she offers an "enhanced" but not necessarily clarified "image" of both registers. Importantly, the epigraph from Callimachus that initiates the poem suggests something about Mullen's inspiration. The epigraph reads: "Fatten your animal for sacrifice, poet, / but keep your muse slender" (97). As such, the skeletal structure of *Muse & Drudge* is "slender" with its narrowly cast pages and short lines, but its contents are rich in wordplay, sonority and allusion.

　　　　The first stanza of the poem combines a punch of music and pun that immediately hybridizes a lyric and blues tradition, and that thematizes the materiality of language:

> Sapphire's lyre styles
>
> plucked eyebrows
>
> bow lips and legs
>
> whose lives are lonely too (Mullen, *Recyclopedia* 99)

Sapphire serves as muse and poet here, both as a sign for the embodied lyric—the text—and for the lyric agent—the instrumentalist. But, the onomatopoeic punning of "plucked" and "bow," along with the alliteration and rhyme command as much attention. In a later stanza, Mullen combines the inspired lyric with the blues riff again:

> [F]igures of lit wicks
>
> time to make a switch
>
> rumba with chains removed

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folkways of the turf (107)

Here the "figures of lit wicks" connotes both lyric tradition and lyric inspiration, both of

which represent one defensible "turf" in arguments about theories of poetry, and both

of which might benefit from an infusion of a "folkway" or improvisational sensibility.

The assonance, rhythm and alliteration here illuminate the material quality of the

language as well. Furthermore, in another stanza, Mullen expands the "folkways of the

turf" and returns to the lyre-playing poetess:

> [M]use of the world picks
>
> out stark melodies
>
> her raspy fabric
>
> tickling the ebonies (115)

Here the linebreak doubles the meaning of "picks" to return to the "pluck" and "bow"

of the first stanza, images that suggest that the "muse of the world" is not divine but

human and empowered. Importantly, too, the muse's "raspy fabric" implies textual

language rather than a spoken voice, and, as much as "ebonies" revises the racial

connotation of ivory piano keys, "ebonies" also connotes the materiality of letters on the

page. For Mullen, the lyric and the blues represent two provisions for her poetics, and

each provides the other with new life. But, the formal and flexible dimensions of

textuality also provide her with an opportunity to enact a scene of integration, both

poetically and politically.

The stanzas that comprise *Muse & Drudge* invoke two ways of thinking about the

origin of poetic language: the human and the divine, even perhaps the slave and the

master. On the one hand, Mullen offers "rag dolls made of black scraps / with pearl

button eyes" to describe the blues sensibility of constructing a text (Mullen, *Recyclopedia*

109). Mullen pieces her stanzas together with language in a black font that leaves the white spaces around them free. This register signifies labouring with language—handling it, manipulating it, even coveting it to make it one's own. On the other hand, Mullen offers "cruel emblems and secrets / divulged only to the adept" to describe the classical notion of an inspired text (129). Mullen also finds her inspiration in the esoteric quality of language itself, in language's capacity to allegorize and allude. This register signifies thinking with language—invoking the ethereal muse that delivers riddles and parables. Ultimately, Mullen wants to problematize this division, and bring each to bare on the other.

Near the end of *Muse*, Mullen alludes to subsequent project of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, where language itself is the ultimate inspiration:

> [I]n a dream the book beckoned
>
> opened for me to the page
>
> where I read the words
>
> that were to me a sign (174)

Here the sign is not a divine one but a linguistic one. Still, Mullen invokes two different cultural traditions in *Muse* in ways that also take on overtly racial and sexual overtones. Images of slavery and toil haunt the language that Mullen puts to work. This aspect of her poem, and of her poetics in general, constitutes the difference of her provisional formalism from Charles Bernstein's provisional formalism. As Bernstein toys with "fingered / Articles" and Mullen bemoans "agonizingly worked surfaces," both poets demonstrate a love of language's material qualities (Bernstein, "Playing" 118; Mullen, *Recyclopedia* 104). All language carries ideology, but when Mullen salvages language from two seemingly disparate cultures and recasts it, her project deepens the

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significance of Bernstein's attempt to liberate language at the material level. While

Mullen's stanzas foreground the sonorous and homophonic beauty of language, they

also reassert the value of a cultural language that has experienced domination.

Bernstein dramatizes the struggle of language to mean, and evokes the material

qualities of language in order to recast our attention, but the political implications of

this project remain in the abstract, and perhaps are unapplied. Mullen capitalizes on

the material qualities of language in order to investigate the realities of female African-

American experience, in a way that grounds the practices of Language writing in a

particular cultural identity. Like Bernstein, Mullen takes full of advantage of language,

rendering it open to manipulation; but, Mullen ultimately does so to provide a cultural

language with new life, and this is where she demonstrates a responsibility for the text.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussions of Mark Nowak, Rodrigo Toscano, Juliana Spahr and

Harryette Mullen, I have charted their respective contributions to four provisional

modes of poetic responsibility. In one sense, I see these writers as reimagining and

reinvigorating the four conventional modes—modes that I have discussed in Chapter

One. In Mark Nowak's "$00 / Line / Steel / Train," we see a form of provisional

realism—a form also evident in Ron Silliman's "Blue." Like "Blue," Nowak's poem

challenges conventional realism by diverging from a narrative realism, offering instead,

a fragmented document. Nowak delivers a documentary realism that provides an

intersection of testimony, anecdote, commentary and lyric. Each "frame" of the work

does not depict a still image so much as present a partial and localized perspective on a

broader systemic crisis. In Rodrigo Toscano's "non-confidential memos," we see a

version of provisional activism—a version also evident in Bruce Andrew's excerpt from

"Confidence Trick." Like "Confidence Trick," Toscano's poem defies a readerly complacency by eschewing a comfortable lyrical grammar, posing instead, a series of cryptic instructions and imperatives. Toscano delivers a disjunctive series that provokes a combination of curiosity, confusion, laughter, and reflection. Each "memo" does not command a specific task, so much as demand personal responsibility for one's role as a citizen. In Juliana Spahr's close to "Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003," we see a variety of provisional lyricism—a variety also evident in Lyn Hejinian's poem "Province." Like "Province," Spahr's "Poem" confronts the autonomy of the lyrical subject by forgoing its usual singular form, focusing, instead, on a more socially-inflected subject. Spahr delivers a number of daybook entries that convey an intersection of individual experience, poetic reflection, domestic interaction, and world news. Each entry does not play witness to an individual consciousness, so much as it plays witness to a subjective experience of feeling connected to an intimately domestic, intimately global "We." In Harryette Mullen's poem *Muse & Drudge*, we see a kind of provisional formalism—a kind also evident in Charles Bernstein's "Playing with a Full Deck." Like "Playing with a Full Deck," Mullen's poem frustrates the delivery of poetic content by avoiding a prosaic register, exploiting, instead, the thickness of language's aural and oral materiality. Mullen provides a series of shuffled stanzas that employ wordplay in order to integrate the muse's lyric, the diva's blues, the poet's plight and language's evocativeness. Each stanza does as much to ring with its compact music, as it does to intertwines the lyric and blues tradition within a larger cultural history.

In another sense, though, I see Nowak, Toscano, Spahr and Mullen actualizing a Post-Language version of the four provisional modes. Like Language writing, Post-Language writing accepts that challenges to conventional poetics can affect the politics

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of poetry—a politics that involves the obligation to reflect or recast the world, to edify or amuse the audience, to express or evoke the imagination, and to objectify or emphasize the textual. Post-Language writing also accepts that the formal measures of Language Poetry can help articulate a politics *in* poetry—a politics that involves the investigation of concrete social conditions that affect the lives of people.[123] Mark Nowak and Rodrigo Toscano both participate in the organized labour movement, and Nowak, in particular, uses his work within that realm. Juliana Spahr and Harryette Mullen both consider how subjectivity gets refracted through issues of war, geography, race, and history. As much as all of these writers might be politically inclined in their poetics and poetry, my sense is that these writers are not unacknowledged legislators, but, to quote George Oppen, they are "legislators of the unacknowledged" (267). In other words, these writers strive to instigate radical political change, to the effect of impinging on the political reality at a personal, local, national, and global scale. These writers invest as much in the political reality around them, as they do in the potentiality of experimental poetic discourse. Unlike their predecessors, they heed what Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues: "[R]adical form does not mean anything about actual political agency; those processes may intersect but they are not synonymous" (20). These Post-Language writers do, however, open and maintain a discursive space where poetry can exist to investigate and complicate the ways that the forces of politics shape lives. These writers provide responses that not only serve to inform, but also provide models for our own responses to the political. In effect, these writers operate in an ethical fashion. The compelling nature of their projects serve as defensive measures on behalf of poetry's

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[123] I borrow the distinction between a politics *of* and a politics *in* from Jed Rasula's essay of the same name in *Politics and Poetic Value*.

value, and on behalf of us as citizens.

In the next chapter, I turn to a Canadian contingent of Post-Language writers, including Jeff Derksen, Rachel Zolf, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Cain. Unlike the scholarship that underscores the influence of Language writing on younger American writers, less work exists to describe the role of Language writing in Canadian avant-garde poetry. Most of such research pertains to the attendance by Language writers at the 1985 New Poetic Colloquium and to the development of the Kootenay School of Writing—a writing collective that includes Derksen and Robertson. I explore a line of thinking, however, that suggests that the Kootenay writers appear not out of the shadows of Language writing, but perhaps from under the same sun. This line differentiates one contingent of Post-Language writers in Canada from their American counterparts. I also explore another line of thinking that locates a coterie of Toronto-based writers, including Zolf and Cain, within a Language-influenced framework. This line relates another contingent of Post-Language writers in Canada to their American counterparts. I aim in the following chapter to trace a heritage of so-called Post-Language writing in Canada—a heritage that does not simply erase the border between Canada and the U.S. but that respects the existence of a unique avant-garde tradition in Canada. In the chapter on Language writing, for example, I have abstained from discussing Steve McCaffery, the only Canadian member of the Language movement, in an effort to understand him within the Canadian context. While the term Post-Language applies generally to a North American phenomenon of contemporary avant-gardist poetics, the term tends to include Canadian writers and American writers under the same umbrella, one that originates perhaps too much within an American poetic tradition.

CHAPTER 4:

THEORIZING A POST-LANGUAGE POETICS: THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Prologue:

"Coasting": A Canadian Post-Language Defense of Poetry

"Coasting," by Jeff Derksen, appears in *Writing from the New Coast*, a double

issue of the literary journal *o•blék*, collecting the proceedings from the 1993 Writing

from the New Coast Conference. A version of "Coasting" also appears in *A Poetics of

Criticism*, a collection of essays that explore "alternative modes of critical writing—

essays in dialogue, essays in quotation, essays in poetry, essays in letters" (Spahr et al

7). The revised version includes the contributions by the three actual presenters at the

conference—Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw, and Catriona Strang.[124] As the preface to the

revised version suggests, "Coasting" represents a manifesto on behalf of the Kootenay

School of Writing (KSW)—"the only writer-run center in Canada"—to which Derksen,

Robertson, Shaw, and Strang all belong (Derksen, et al 301). Despite a "collective"

authorship, however, "Coasting" does not boast a homogenized platform (301). In fact,

the altered version maintains the personal pronoun of Derksen's original claims, while

including the plural pronoun to reflect additional claims. As the authors argue in the

preface: "Community is not an agreement to share a style" (301).[125] For these writers,

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[124] Derksen left the conference "unexpectedly" and could not deliver the paper, so in its final form, "Coasting" presents additional contributions by Robertson, Shaw, and Strang intermixed with the original statements by Derksen (Derksen, et al 301).
[125] For a fulfledged interpretation of this aphorism, consider the following passage from Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden's introduction to *Writing Class*:

community *is* an agreement to challenge the metaphysical and "political assumptions" of discourses and to act "heretical[ly]" toward those assumptions, exposing their contradictions and ironies (301). In total, "Coasting" is a series of juxtaposed statements—some poetic, some polemical, some autobiographical, some quoted—in defense of a poetic practice capable of investigating assumptions about the world, about reading, about subjectivity and about textuality.

In scattered claims throughout "Coasting," Derksen, Robertson, Shaw, and Strang demonstrate that irony provides an invaluable tool for such an "interrogatory" poetics (302). Such irony is present in the very title of the piece. On the one hand, the title "Coasting" alludes to presenting at the "Writing from the New Coast" Conference. On the other hand, the title suggests a body moving without exertion or resistance. Overall, "Coasting" is quite ironic because the manifesto argues for an antagonistic poetics rather than for a complacent one. For the authors, "irony" serves as a "context stripper" (302): "The authoritative word cannot tolerate irony, for irony, by pointing to competing contexts, shows the reductions necessary in propping up authority" (303). Although the authors do not cite him directly, Mikhail Bakhtin describes that the "authoritative word" represents the discourses of moral, religious, and political institutions (341-344). When irony "lay[s] bare the context of meaning" (303), this exposure challenges the claim to exclusive, or narrowly-defined meanings. The

> What held KSW writers together has less to do with specific social ideals or shared notions of the communitarian good, than a critical sense of language itself as a prime constituent of community in general. In other words, community operates here as an effect of language, rather than the other way around, as more traditional writing and arts might assert. To define or even imagine a sense of community without proper consideration of the language used within it risked confusing shared social values with ideology. (5-6)

authors employ irony when they cite the following: "'Patriot' missiles bomb Baghdad

on the night Clinton's inaugural festivities begin" (302). The authors juxtapose the

clearly patriotic festivities of inauguration and the seemingly patriotic festivities of

destruction. In a reductive view, the imperialist- and capitalist-driven act of bombing

Saddam Hussein does not interfere with the democratic- and liberal-centered act of

celebrating Bill Clinton. This short statement of fact, and the quotation marks around

"Patriot," expand the context for understanding and both demonstrate what freedom

and democracy cost in the West. The authors see poetry as a platform for exposing such

ironies; but the authors also believe that "[t]here are possibilities for irony to go past

being a 'trope that works well from within a power field but still contests it' ([Linda]

Hutcheon)" (302). A poetics can contest a "power field" by illustrating ironies at the

level of ideas, but a poetics can also employ irony at the level of form. The authors

subscribe to the notion that disrupting the flow of syntax and logic—effectively

disjoining and rejoining language 'ironically'—also disrupts the political assumptions

inhering within those structures of language.

At the beginning of "Coasting," the authors attack the "assumption of a common

world" and a "common humanity" (Derksen et al 301, 302). In the authors's view such

assumptions are problematic because they efface the "specificity" of an individual's

political circumstances (301). The assumption of commonality, the authors argue,

demonstrates "the luxury of the landed" (301). Being "landed" or "enfranchised"

implies feeling naturalized within a particular cultural milieu, in which one can

implicitly forget about the political details of one's identity (301, 303). According to the

authors, the "landed" propagate universalist views of history and literature—views that

the authors liken to a "an unencumbered brush stroke from the flatbed of a railroad

car" (302). In order to challenge "assumption[s] of a common world," the authors

suggest that poets must investigate "language systems—literary genres, visual

representation, the practice of historiography" (302). By this the authors mean that

poets must examine how "artistic and abstract systems" construct our understanding of

the world, and must expose how such constructions often propagate "patriarchal"

agendas (301). Furthermore, poets must attend to what is "liminal" in our "language

systems"—what such systems expel, suppress, repress or ignore (302)—not simply to

make the world more "perceivable," but to expose the political agendas in those

systems (302). In other words, attending to the "liminal" does not simply raise

consciousness, but enacts the beginning of a "politics of transformation and resistance"

(302).

When the authors state that their work investigates the politics of signifying

systems, the authors engage a primary concern of Language writing. Language writers

believe that ideology not only informs the content and forms of communication, but

also the transactional model of communication itself. Language writing problematizes

a traditional writer and reader relationship by creating texts that force the reader to

actively produce meaning, rather than passively consume information. Such texts often

utilize the "liminal" elements of discourse—the nonsensical, the obscene, the non-

expressive, the disjunctive—in an effort to help readers take responsibility for the

construction of meaning. The authors of "Coasting" claim that viewing readers as

"'agent[s] of production'" implies "utilitarian values" (303). Steve McCaffery, the only

Canadian Language writer, also articulates this claim.[126] He states: "Language writing

should be encountered at the bifurcation of ... two orders of value: productive utility on

the one hand, and sovereignty on the other" (McCaffery, *North of Intention* 157). In the

first order, we "produce a reading" and in the second order, we "proceed further in the

textual experience of the unreadable" (157). The authors of "Coasting" refer to this

second order as a "node of excess" and, like McCaffery, find this order to be a viable

"space of desire and political potential" (Derksen, et al 303). Derksen, Robertson,

Strang, and Shaw suggest that their work confronts the limits of discourse, exploring

"nodes of excess," in an effort to activate the reader as both a producer of meaning, and

as a political agent.

For the authors of "Coasting," excess represents both an object of their research

and a quality of their work. Moreover, the authors consider excess as a characteristic of

subjectivity. Subjectivity exceeds the moment of writing and the scope of

representation—what they call a "constructed clarity" (303)—because subjectivity is not

an identity with a "boiled down center" (303), but a process with a "partial" and

"momentary" existence, like "jello in a willow tree" (301). This view of subjectivity

leads the authors to distrust "sincerity" (302) and "authenticity" (303), and to advocate a

poetics in defiance of a lyric voice issuing from a solitary, poetic imagination. "When

we speak of excess," they report, "we do not hearken to a reactionary expressionism:

we are uninterested in elevated or enervated feeling and emotional authenticity per se,

but in the study of the limits of discursive systems figured as impossibility—a space of

desire and political potential" (303). In other words, the authors see their poetry as

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[126] See McCaffery's essay "Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy"
in *North of Intention (*pp. 143-158).

investigating subjectivity as much as representing subjects. In fact, poetry "provides options to limited definitions of subjectivity" (302), by which the authors mean two things. First, poetry represents a counter-discourse in which marginalized subjects, or so-called "proscribed autonomies" (301), can both explore and articulate their experiences. Poetry can mark the specificity of a subject's experience as a sexually, racially, and socioeconomically determined being—determinations that hegemonic discursive systems often circumscribe in the name of a "'common humanity'" (302). Second, poetry also represents a discourse in which subjects can both inhabit and explore alternate identities (302). Poetry can depict the provisionality of subjectivity, as an inhabitable, rather than as a completely determined, position—a position that enables agency in a way not readily available.

Along with their view of subjectivity as complex and processual, the authors espouse that poetic texts must demonstrate a commensurate complexity (Derksen, et al. 301). Interrogating "language systems" (301)—systems that construct how we perceive the world and how we imagine our own subjectivity—includes the production of alternate models and even anti-systemic texts. Anti-systemic texts utilize a form and logic in opposition to our conventional 'language systems.' The authors of "Coasting" refer to their anti-systemic poetics as "[w]ork[ing] at the level of signification" (302). The presentation of "Coasting," for example, as a series of disjointed sentence-length paragraphs continuously displaces the reader's point of reference and destabilizes her ability to build a coherent meaning hypotactically. The text demonstrates a "shifting from code to code"—a shifting that disallows "unification" among the text's collective declarations, personal statements, credited citations and ironic observations (301). In other words, the text does not refer to a single context, but "wobble[s]" between

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discursive registers. Overall, "Coasting" articulates a poetics of "'constant information activity'"—a poetics that registers not only the complexity and specificity of the information that inundates us, but also the complexity and provisionality of our engagement with such information.[127]

In "Coasting," Derksen, Robertson, Shaw and Strang report that their poetics transgresses "conventional pieties" in an effort to explore the "frontier of the present" (302). The authors stake a claim for a project that they do not necessarily find already available, and they offer "Coasting" as a defense of this developing project. The authors do not, however, title their work as a defense, nor do they invoke defensive language. Still, "Coasting" does respond to both Modernist and Language poetics— poetics that represent precursors in the struggle to break from 'conventional pieties.' First, the authors state: "'[T]o make the stone stony' or to make the world perceivable and other ocular metaphors are no longer the imperative of poetry" (302). Making the "stone stony" refers to a belief of the Russian Formalists that artistic responsibility requires defamiliarizing everyday materials in order to improve our perception of them.[128] Second, the authors state: "[It] is not enough to lay bare the contexts of meaning" (303). Stripping the "contexts of meaning" alludes to a belief of the Language writers that poetic responsibility involves reclaiming language as material by

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[127] While I cannot find a specific source for "'constant information activity,'" the term refers to Information Science, and an account of how we become informed, which includes not only a desire or need for knowledge, but the sources and channels for how information reaches us. As a model for poetics, 'information activity' suggests a manipulation of the sources and channels of information in an effort to better deliver knowledge. See Brian Vickery's brief description "What is information activity" in "Meeting the Challenge" (*Information Science in Transition*, ed. Alan Gilchrist, 2009).
[128] See Viktor Shklovsky's essay "Art as Technique."

sabotaging an easy referentiality.[129] The authors of "Coasting" acknowledge the goals

of defamiliarization, and 'context-stripping,' even as the authors wish to expand these

modes. The authors acknowledge the possibility of pushing these goals and techniques

further, as part of a larger project to make the "enfranchised … recognize their

complicity" in maintaining oppressive political situations (302). While the authors

reassert a suspicion of 'official verse' poetics and an appreciation for a poetics of

"excess"—both of which figure heavily in Language writing—the authors desire a more

specific, political investigation (of gender most notably) that moves beyond textual

politics and enters activist politics.[130]

Like other defenses of poetry, "Coasting" demonstrates a provisional poetics.

First, when the authors proclaim themselves to be "feminists" intent on "interrogat[ing]

the social construction of gender in language systems," the authors imply that

Language poetry may have left this subject undeveloped (302). The limited exploration

of gender by the Language poets does not suggest a weakness, so much as create the

condition for a Post-Language project.   Second, when the authors mention that one of

"the imperatives of poetry" entails challenging the "authoritative word," the authors

suggest that poetry has a primary ethical and political responsibility (302). The poetic

investigation of ideology initiated by the Language poets does not provide a model to

mimic, so much as provide a point of departure for a "compelling and necessary"

project (302). Third, when the authors dedicate their work to opening a "space of desire

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[129] See Bruce Andrews *Paradise and Method*, particularly the essays "Text and Context" (pp. 6-15) and "Revolution Only Fact Confected" (pp. 137-152).
[130] "Official verse" is Charles Bernstein's term, and "excess" refers to McCaffery's work. See Bernstein's essay "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA" in *Content's Dream* (pp. 244-251). Also, see McCaffery's essay "Bill Bissett: A Writing Outside Writing" in *North of Intention* (pp. 93-109).

and political potential," the authors suggest that poetry may respond to present sociopolitical conditions, but such a response really creates the possibility for an improved future (303). The defiance of "conventional pieties" by avant-garde poetics does as much to break from the past as it does to anticipate the needs of a future public (302).

Like Charles Bernstein's "Defense of Poetry" and Juliana Spahr's "Circle Out," "Coasting" also defends a particular poetic intention by engaging with the four modes of poetic responsibility in provisional terms. As much as "Coasting" evinces an aesthetic in line with Language writing, "Coasting" also expands the original premises of the Language movement. I offer "Coasting" as exemplary of a Canadian contingent of Post-Language writing. Like Language writing, "Coasting" investigates the experiential world as constructed rather than to be represented; "Coasting" advocates models of reading based on the active investigation of context rather than the passive consumption of information; "Coasting" appreciates a capacious and flexible model of subjectivity rather than investing in an expressive, stable subject; "Coasting" emphasizes poetic form as politically meaningful rather than sustains form as an aesthetic vehicle. "Coasting" also imagines a poetics of responsibility, one that applies the lessons of Language writing to actual political stakes—gender, in particular. In the following, I want to explore more fully how Canadian writers like Jeff Derksen and Lisa Robertson, as well as Rachel Zolf and Stephen Cain, explore the four modes of poetic responsibility and how this exploration provides a working definition of a Post-Language poetics in Canada. While Language writing has influenced avant-garde poetics outside of the United States, a sustained account of such influence, particularly in Canada, does not exist. Moreover, a younger generation of writers is already

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attempting to define itself in ways that show both the influence, and the criticism, of the Language phenomenon. The Kootenay School of Writing, represented in part by the work of Derksen, and Robertson, offers one such example of a Post-Language writing in Canada, and I have begun this chapter with an explication of "Coasting" in order not only to continue the discussion of poetic defenses (as I have in the two previous chapters), but also to position "Coasting" beside, and against, Language writing.

Chapter in Brief

In the remainder of this chapter, I historicize the presence of Language writing within a broader North American context, suggesting how Language writing inflects Canadian experimental work. I also pay attention to the way that experimental work in Canada confronts the four modes of poetic responsibility. First, I provide a short and partial discussion of innovative writing in Canada after 1960, in an effort to suggest a parallel genealogy between a Canadian Post-Language writing and an American Post-Language writing. Both the Language writers in the U.S. and the Tish movement in Canada originate as responses, though quite different, to the writers in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* anthology. Canadian Post-Language writing, unlike its American counterpart, is a transcultured product of both Language-oriented poetics and the Tish movement. Second, I provide a brief discussion of Steve McCaffery, the only Canadian member of Language poetry. (I have omitted McCaffery in my chapter on Language Writing in an effort to discuss him within his own Canadian context). McCaffery's stewardship of "Politics of the Referent," a special issue of the Canadian journal *Open Letter*, represents a principal moment in the early years of Language writing. Third, I turn to the Kootenay School of Writing and the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium, featuring members of the KSW alongside Language Writers. This cross-fertilization does not

simply represent a handing of the torch, but a formative juncture in inaugurating a Post-Language poetics in Canada. Last, I turn to more contemporary discussions of a Post-Language writing in Canada with Christian Bök's and Karen MacCormack's contributions to the *After Language Poetry* issue of OEI. Both Bök and MacCormack suggest that that the future of innovative writing consists of turns to interdisciplinary hybrids.

After my historical survey, I examine criticism and poetry by Jeff Derksen, Rachel Zolf, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Cain, all of whom provide variations to the four provisional modes of poetic responsibility, first articulated by the Language writers: provisional realism, provisional activism, provisional lyricism and provisional formalism. I align each writer with one of the four tenets and discuss their criticism within this context. Part of designating these writers as "Post-Language" means that these writers continue to value Language-oriented methodologies; but, I do not chart an inheritance as much as explore the most recent permutations of provisionality. Jeff Derksen's long catalogic poem "Interface," from his collection *Dwell* (1993), demonstrates a provisional realism in its rearticulation of fragments: observation, news-making, and statistics. Rachel Zolf's book *Human Resources* (2007), exemplifies a provisional activism in its collage of discourses: appropriated corporate discourse, autobiographical fragments, online database materials. Lisa Robertson's first section, "Men Deft Men," from her book *The Men* (2006), demonstrates a provisional lyricism in its forays against patriarchal lyrical structures: the poetic line break, the prose block, the lyric book. Stephen Cain's two poems "American Standard" and "Canada Dry," from his *American Standard/ Canada Dry* (2005), exemplify a provisional formalism in their constraints on language: erasures, puns, recombinations, and translations.

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A Brief History of Language Writing and Canada

In his study comparing the Kootenay School with its experimental forbearers, the Tish poets, Christian Bök posits: "Even though both coteries follow a parallel heritage .... the relationship between these two coteries involves no genealogy of hereditary succession" ("Tish and Koot" 97-98). In fact, Bök argues that the KSW represents an agonistic response to the Tish movement. So, when members of the KSW ask how do they "transgress nation," they are also asking how do they transcend Tish (Derksen, et al 303). Tish represents a group of writers—Frank Davey, George Bowering, Jamie Reid, Lionel Kearns, and Fred Wah—who have published *TISH: A Poetry Newsletter, Vancouver* in the early 1960s. While the inspiration for the newsletter comes from a desire to publish and share one another's work, *TISH* also results from excitement about reading Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, in Warren Tallman's class at UBC in the 1950s. Moreover, visits to Vancouver by the poet Robert Duncan, published in Allen's anthology, spurs excitement among the young Canadians. Such excitement culminates in the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, where a number of Black Mountain poets, including Duncan, share the proverbial stage with some Canadian writers. While I do not intend to rehearse the history and poetics of the Tish movement in any more detail, they do present a truly North American poetics. In general, Tish reveals "an anti-lyric, speech-based, processual, open-form poetics combined with a historicized approach to the local" (Butling, *Writing* 50). This poetics originates in part with Charles Olson—a poet who both the Language writers in the United States, and the Kootenay School in Canada have challenged. I would argue, in fact, that the Tish poets demonstrate a poetics that preserves much of the conventional modes of poetic responsibility. In orienting themselves toward the local and the factual—what Frank Davey calls "the

social fabric of [the poet's] human settlement" ("Introduction" 19)—the Tish poets offer

the poem as a subjective, though no less mimetic, approach to the world. In modeling

their work on a projectivist aesthetic—what Jamie Reid calls a "discharge of

unretainable energy" (79)—the Tish poets deliver an affective, though not necessarily

assimiliable, gift to the reader. In proffering a poetics open to the immediacy of

experience—what Warren Talman calls "a direct *projection* of the inner reality" (67)—the

Tish poets still validate an organic and unmediated notion of subjectivity. Also, in

espousing an open form poetics—what David Dawson calls "a poem [as] an expanding

structure of thought" (26)—the Tish poets do not push beyond the formal and generic

aspects of language to consider what the next generation in the U.S. call "the politics of

poetic form."

    While the Tish phenomenon represents the beginning of long-standing careers

for Frank Davey, George Bowering, and Fred Wah, Tish's legacy extends into the next

generation, where these writers have come to mentor some of the younger poets. Frank

Davey's magazine, *Open Letter*, also represents a key outgrowth of the Tish movement.

Since 1965, *Open Letter* continues to offer scholarship on both Canadian and

experimental literature, including two recent issues on the Kootenay School of Writing

(2010) and Lisa Robertson (2011). But in accounting for the role of Language writing in

Canada, *Open Letter* represents a key component in two significant ways: First, it

publishes the reports of the Toronto Research Group—a collaborative investigation of

poetics by Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol; second, it publishes the "Politics of the

Referent" in 1977—an inaugural collection of poetic statements by "language-centered"

writers.[131] "The Politics of the Referent" collects "attempt[s] ... to bring to a wider [read

Canadian] audience theoretical notes on language-centered, de-referential writings"

(McCaffery, "The Politics of the Referent" 60). Such notes present seminal work by

McCaffery, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Charles Bernstein. McCaffery's "The

Death of the Subject," Bruce Andrews's "Text and Context," and Charles Bernstein's

"Stray Straws and Straw Men" all appear in the *Open Letter* symposium.

Steve McCaffery's critical and theoretical efforts embody a central place in a

history of Language writing, both from an American and a Canadian perspective. His

early essay, "The Death of the Subject," still stands as a lucid introduction to the tenets

of Language-oriented work. Moreover, his remarks reinforce the ways in which

Language writing posits provisional challenges to traditional views of poetic

responsibility. Overall, he argues that Language writing's "main thrust" is "political,

rather than aesthetic" (McCaffery, "The Death of the Subject" 62). He writes, for

example, that "writing must stress its semiotic nature through modes of investigation

and probe, rather than mimetic, instrumental indications" (61); writing must alter "the

socially defined functions of writer and reader as the productive and consumptive poles

of the commodital axis" (62); writing must "show the essential subjectless-ness a text

might be" (61); writing must "stress the disemotional and dereferential possibilities of

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[131] The Toronto Research Group (1973-1982) desires to alter "the textual role of the
reader"; to extend "the creative, idiomatic basis of translation"; to "jettison the word in
favour of more current cognitive codes"; and to provide "a material prose that would
challenge the spatio-temporal determinates of linearity" (McCaffery, *Rational Geomancy*
9). In this list of motivations, McCaffery only hints at the spiritual qualities of the TRG
project, particularly in the reliance on geomancy as a model of translation, but such an
inclination carries an ethical weight for a project that would otherwise seem parallel to
the cognitive and political scope of the Language school. See also Peter Jaeger's
chapter, "Geomancy," in *ABC of reading TRG* (pp. 48-53), as well as Caroline Bayard's
discussion in *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec* (pp. 60-65)

language as fragmentary, yet intensely direct experience" (61). Furthermore, he makes an important qualification about the politics of Language writing: by politics, he does not mean "an issue of extralinguistic concerns to be discussed by means of language, but one of detecting the hidden operation of those repressive mechanisms that language and the socio-economic base actually share" (*North of Intention* 150). This perspective culminates in his model of "general economy"—a model intended to help differentiate between the legibility of conventional literature and the illegibility of Language writing. Works of "general economy" present "language as an opacity to direct experience," and therefore, they defy easy consumption (24); such texts manifest an excess in defiance of "the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value with its privileging of meaning as a necessary production" (203). In Marxist terms, McCaffery proposes that Language work confronts the referential nature of the sign because referentiality operates within an economy of exchange and an economy of utility. Both economies occlude language's material origins and maintain language's ideological engagements.

In 1982, Steve McCaffery's reasserts his role in bringing Language poetry to Canada when *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine republishes the "Politics of the Referent" issue of *Open Letter* as a supplement. As Carolyn Bayard suggests: "One derives from these exchanges between *Open Letter* and *L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E* [sic] magazine the sense of a new North American community of Post-modernists, of a different generational phenomenon" (60). Unfortunately, Bayard fails to elaborate on her observation. Unlike the Tish generation—a generation of writers seen as a derivation of the New American poetics—the Language generation arises in Canada at nearly the same time as it does in San Francisco and New York. Still, general assumptions that Language writing comes to Canada and asserts an influence only after the fact continue

to pervade accounts of experimental writing after Tish. As Christian Bök notes, similar

creation stories abound about the influence of the New American writing on Tish, and

the influence of Language writing on the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW), in which

both Canadian strands of writing emerge only after the American presence at seminal

conferences (1963, and 1985 respectively) ("Tish and Koot" 97). According to Jason

Wiens, whose dissertation contains one of the few assessments of Language writing's

place in Canada, the KSW begin by addressing concerns that critics usually attribute to

the subsequent influence of Language writing on this younger group. Wiens argues

that "the relationship between generation" demonstrates "an affirmation of already

existing practices" rather than "one of direct influence" (113).

In 1983, the closure of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, British

Columbia prompts the Kootenay School of Writing to open its proverbial doors (despite

lacking any actual doors to open). In 1984, a second "campus" also opens in

Vancouver. Founding members of the Vancouver campus include Tom Wayman, Jeff

Derksen, Gary Whitehead, Calvin Wharton, and Colin Browne. While the KSW

continues as a writer-run centre devoted to all aspects of the literary arts, its inception

also owes much to the political milieu of British Columbia in the 1980s.[132] Furthermore,

the poetic concerns of the KSW continue to exhibit an overt political consciousness, of

both local politics, as well as global politics. In its original mandate, the school's

founders describe the "school" in terms that reflect an ethical commitment to the

immediate community:

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[132] See Klobucar's and Barnholden's introduction to *Writing Class* for a general overview
of this milieu. Also, see Jeff Derksen's essay, "Kootenay School of Writing in the
Expanded Field: Retrofitting and Insider Knowledge," in *Annihilated Time* (pp. 285-30),
as a specific retrospective.

The Kootenay School of Writing is a response to the failure of most public institutions to serve their artistic communities. It stands in opposition to the concept of 'cultural industry' in its recognition that theory, practice, and teaching of writing is best left to working writers. To this end, the School represents a new hybrid: a form of parallel gallery and centre of scholarship, open to the needs of its own constituency and alert to the possibilities of all disciplines that involve language. ("About KSW")[133]

The fact that the KSW opposes the "'culture industry'" helps to identify the KSW with what Charles Bernstein refers to as a "provisional institution"—an institution and pseudo-institution existing at the margins of dominant cultural and commercial formations.[134] The mandate to remain "open to the needs of its own constituency and alert to the possibilities of all disciplines" demonstrates an ethics of provisionality. The commitment to meeting actual needs by maintaining an openness to all available means also demonstrates a hybrid sensibility evident in other Post-Language sensibilities.

In their provisional manifesto of the Kootenay School of Writing, "Coasting," Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw, and Catriona Strang include a telling question: "How can a generational identity transgress nation?" (303). In a general sense, the

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[133] I am tempted to pursue the use of "hybrid" in their description because of that term's importance to discussions of Post-Language writing, and also because of that terms's resemblance to the notion of praxis advocated by Language writers like Bruce Andrews.
[134] See Bernstein's essay "Provisional Institutions: Alternative Presses and Poetic Innovation" in *My Way* (pp. 145-154). According to Klobucar and Barnholden: "[T]he school's deliberate failure as an institution … constitutes its unique cultural and literary value" (2). In other words, under a rubric of provisionality, the strength and contribution of the KSW comes as the result of its weakness as an accredited institution: to properly address the needs of the community, the institution had to fail. Moreover, the "primary aim [of the KSW] is to *provide* an open space where writers can develop and direct their own work outside all mainstream cultural institutions" (emphasis added 5).

question is an open call for contemporary poets to not only transcend, but to resist, the "anthropological tropes of national literature" (302). Such tropes tend to underestimate the localized, existential, and sociopolitical factors that inform a generation's poetics and politics. In another sense, the call expresses a desire by the authors to transcend a very provincial notion of Canadian literature and to challenge a very nationalist notion of Canada. Even while the authors express a desire to "transgress nation," they also report: "Our reading of the New American poetics … was a process of transculturation, as we came to them first through the [Canadian] Tish poets, who include Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, Gladys Hindmarch, Fred Wah, Jamie Reid, Frank Davey, Dan McLeod, Lionel Kearns, and David Dawson" (301). This tension, then, between a desire to "transgress nation" and to acknowledge "national literature" suggests one of the differences between Canadian and American Post-Language writing (303, 302). The KSW, and Canadian Post-Language writing in general, represents a transcultural "hybrid" that takes North America as its critical framework—reflective of a Canadian political and cultural milieu that simultaneously defines itself with and against an American political and cultural milieu.[135] While I believe that the Post-Language phenomenon is truly North American in spirit, the term "Post-Language" still smacks of an American tendency to which Canadian writers are hurrying to catch up to.

Take, for example, critical considerations of the relationship of the KSW to Language Writing. Critics draw parallels between the KSW and the Language

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[135] While it may present itself as convenient term to use, I do not employ the term "Post-national" because of Frank Davey's already existing coinage. In *Post-national Arguments*, Davey uses it to describe a tendency among Canadian novels after 1967—novels that espouse an apolitical retreat and favour a universalist humanism, over an overt concern with intrinsic political processes. I would use the term in an opposite fashion.

movement because of the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium in Vancouver; most critics

characterize the presence of the Language writers as "nudg[ing] a new cohort of

Canadian poets into open flower" (Andrews, *Paradise and Method* 93). Participants at the

Colloquium include Americans Bob Perelman, Michael Palmer, Barbara Einzig, Ron

Silliman, Susan Howe, Michael Davidson, Diane Ward, Charles Bernstein, Bruce

Andrews, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, and Barrett Watten. Canadian participants

include Michel Gay, Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Sharon Thesen, and Steve

McCaffery. In his unpublished dissertation, however, Jason Wiens rehearses various

claims by Ann Vickery, Russell Smith, Andrew Klobucar, Michael Barnholden and,

George Bowering, all of whom make a point about the effect of Language writing on the

younger, yet-to-be established KSW poets (113-115). According to Russell Smith and

Ann Vickery, the KSW poets represent a spin-off of the Language movement. Smith

refers to the KSW as a "Canadian bastion" (R5) and Vickery calls them a "new

generation" (129). Klobucar, Barnholden, and Bowering provide more comparative

assessments, implying influence over correspondence. Klobucar and Barnholden refer

to the "touchstone" of Ron Silliman's *New Sentence* (29), and Bowering describes the

relationship between the KSW and Language as corollary to the relationship between

the Tish poets and the Black Mountain School (136). By contrast, Wiens argues that

"prior to the 1985 colloquium [KSW] writers such as [Colin] Browne and [Jeff] Derksen

were pursuing idiosyncratic projects that shared ongoing concerns with the projects of

many of the American participants at that conference" (126). The core of his argument

rests on explications of early and later work by Browne and Derksen (116-126).

According to Wiens, Browne's "language-oriented" concerns occur simultaneously with

the early formulations in *This* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and Derksen's politically-

oriented focus occurs throughout even Derksen's earlier more lyric-driven work. In any

case, both poets demonstrate a "language" aesthetic and politics before the 1985

Colloquium. Wiens also speculates that the use of the term "Post 'language' writing" in

one of the conference's promotional posters demonstrates a scenario of cross-

fertilization rather than the passing of a baton (128).

By the 1990s, Post-Language writing in North American flourishes again. Only

eight years after the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium—which Jeff Derksen notes was "the

first large-scale international gathering of the Language writers" (*Annihilated Time*

160)—the 1993 Writing from the New Coast Conference features a younger generation

of writers, including members of the KSW. This conference represents one point of

inauguration for a Post-Language poetics in North America.   Also, in the mid-90s

another coterie of poets began to emerge, who, like the KSW, extend the project and

concerns of Language poetics. This group that Owen Percy cleverly labels as the

"Coach House Coterie" (60) represent a group of writers who either publish with, or

participate, in Coach House Books. While the UBC poets have published the *Tish*

newsletter, and the KSW poets have published *Writing*, both of which exhibit an over-

arching poetic and political sensibility, the Canadian poets publishing in Coach House

do not necessarily exhibit a consistent poetics. Still, the press has consistently

demonstrated an "adventurous" and "innovative" aesthetic ("About Us"). Also, many

of the poets publishing with Coach House by the turn of the 21st-Century have studied

with Steve McCaffery at York University. Moreover, Stephen Cain (a student of

McCaffery's) and Rachel Zolf, whom I discuss in the last section of this chapter, publish

with Coach House, as have the two Canadian writers who have contributed to the 2001 collection "After Language Writing," by *OEI* magazine.[136]

Christian Bök and Karen MacCormack represent the two Canadian voices in that exposé, and like their American counterparts, they suggest that what follows Language Poetry is inevitably a hybrid aesthetic. Bök claims that Language writing has "exhausted the field of experimentation," and yet the imperative to innovate remains ("After"). Crediting Darren Wershler-Henry—an editorial consultant at Coach House and fellow writer—Bök argues for the creation of "an unholy hybrid" that "exploit[s] the lessons of Langpo on behalf of some other, as yet unimagined, practice"—a practice that ultimately draws from a "socially relevant lexicon" like science. Bök continues: "[W]ith the impossibility of composing something totally innovative, we may have little choice but to pick through the rubble of the past, ... fuse old parts with new ideas ... into a contradictory set of unpredictable regenerations ...." Of course, Bök does not simply imagine "fusing aesthetic concepts with technical conceits," but also advocates moving toward a model of poetry that "no longer expresses our attitudes as much as it processes our databanks." In other words, the kind of hybridity that Bök imagines requires relinquishing our conventional models and sources for poetry in an effort to allow more "socially relevant" disciplines to dictate our future models and sources.

Karen MacCormack credits Language poetry with "destabiliz[ing] [her] own formulae and habits" but does not necessarily see herself within the Language tradition. Like Bök, who imagines infusing poetry with other more socially visible or culturally viable models, Karen MacCormack claims a "primary importance" for a "productive

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[136] See Christian Bök's *Crystallography* and *Eunoia*, as well as Karen MacCormack's *At Issue*.

exchange between poetry and other disciplines" such as architecture. She recognizes the division between schools of "formal constraint" and schools of "lyric," but that the "discomfiture" of that division may affect healthy and productive possibility. In fact, a sufficiently hybrid poetics does more than exploit "similarities between innovative practices" or poetics. Both practices must challenge each other in an effort to break from the "habitual"—and provide "mutually challenging engagements." MacCormack certainly does not foresee a Post-Language writing in as dramatic or controversial terms as Bök, but their shared notion of interdisciplinarity suggests that poetry must continue to maintain its relevance, not simply as an aesthetic practice but as an ethical one. Post-Language writers have a particular responsibility to learn the lessons of Language writing, apply them as necessary, and break from them into expanded fields "beyond the purview of literary expertise" (Bök, "After").

Four Canadian Post-Language Poets and the Poetics of Provisionality

Relinking the World:

Jeff Derksen's Rearticulatory Poetics as Provisional Realism

Jeff Derksen is the author of three books of poetry—*Downtime* (1990), *Dwell* (1994), and *Transnational Muscle Cars* (2004)—and one book of criticism *Annihilated Time: Poetry and Other Politics* (2009). He is also an editor—most notably of "Disgust and Overdetermination," a special issue of *Open Letter,* and "Poetry and the Long Neo-liberal Moment," a special issue of *West Coast Line*; as well, he is a professor at Simon Fraser University. As a central figure in the Kootenay School of Writing, Derksen believes that the KSW "rearticulates" Language writing, redeploying Language's "devices and tactics" as conditions for a Post-Language poetics (*Annihilated Time* 161). In other words, Language writing provides a "politicized poetic methodology

adaptable to the particular crisis in the public sphere" (161). "For the language writers," Derksen writes, "language is structured like society and therefore normative syntax, genre expectations, and even the word are hegemonic forces that fix language into a replica of repressive social relations" (139). Informed by this view, Derksen offers a poetics of "rearticulation," in which he takes aim at the discursive language that circulates around us daily and that perpetuates 'repressive social relations.' Rearticulation suggests a process of dislocating, dislodging, or decontextualizing discursive statements and reconfiguring, recontextualizing, and re-articulating them. While sometimes Derksen lifts text and re-embeds it in his poetry (re-stating texts in a re-located, discursive context), he also jumbles different discursive statements, re-linking them in order to critique discursive syntaxes and lexicons. Such a poetics relies on exploiting what he terms the "hyper-referential" (Derksen, "A Conversation" 125). Derksen floods a poem with rearticulated information in an effort to create a constantly shifting context.

In a talk titled "Poetry and Social Relations: Recent Rearticulatory Practises," Derksen provides an in-depth explanation of his cultural poetics of rearticulation—a method that also demonstrates a poetics of provisionality. In this talk, Derksen describes a poetics of political art—an art that performs necessary, ethical work. He writes:

> The role of political art in the past has been to clarify social relations and
> contradictions, to either remove the cloaking mystery of ideology or
> represent what is not represented by the dominant culture. With the shift
> from imagining ideology as an accepted falseness to a constructing and
> constructed effect, political art can now be asked to make ideology

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tangible, to make ideology ideological. This is a shift away from an

aesthetic materialist approach which sought to make material or objects

tangible, to reintegrate them into life by somehow returning them from

alienation. Now, at this contingent moment, social relations and

ideological sites are so complicated and entangled that any attempt to

clarify them would be a reduction; rather this critique in reverse would

engage in the complications of social relations by showing the links

between the subjective, the everyday, and the most widely circulated

ideological sites and nets. This is a move to a relational conceptualism in

cultural production. ("Poetry")

Derksen acknowledges the complicated, complicitous nature of making ideology

visible, and so he argues that his "re-articulations" offer only provisional exposures of

"this contingent moment." At the same time, Derksen admits that attending to the

effects of ideology also requires "point[ing] to the horizon of alternatives" for how we

might see the world and understand it (*Annihilated Time* 37-38). Such projects are, as

Derksen claims, "present and anticipatory" (38).

In what follows I explore Derksen's long poem "Interface," from *Dwell*. The

poem provides a Post-Language alternative to a traditional naïve realism—a realism

that aims to depict and describe the world in simple, unmediated terms. "Interface"

serves as a kind of Postmodern news, a kind of ticker tape parade, or an assortment of

bumper stickers and billboards seen while driving. In the poem, Derksen describes the

poem's fragments as functionless "[s]mall, polished engine parts" (*Dwell* 6). Specifically,

the poem offers four different structural registers—anecdotal, observational,

quotational and statistical—all of which demonstrate language mediated by what

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Derksen calls the "[d]ominant tropes" of capitalism, imperialism, and ethnocentrism (17). These "tropes" mediate our access to the world, from a bodily and subjective scale to an institutional and objective scale. Derksen does not simply appropriate and rearticulate discursive material within the poem randomly; each line is an articulation "overlapping and lapsing" in ways that avoid taking "in all perspectives" (Derksen, *Dwell* 5, 7). In his statement for "Interface," in *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Derksen describes the structure of the poem into two ways: First, the fragmented form "set[s] up contradictions and overdeterminations between the sentences, but also within the sentences, word to word; second, the fragmented form "work[s] toward conjunction: to link or articulate the local, the national, and the global as a reaction to the disarticulation or severing of these sites or territories in the ideology of globalization" (462). While this intention sounds both ambitious and abstract, the window imagery throughout the poem suggests that Derksen wants to look at the world in terms of its mediated nature, as "[a] layered invention" (Derksen, *Dwell* 6). "Interface" demonstrates a provisional realism, dramatizing a tension that is evident in the following lines: "I look out my window and see history *versus* I look out my window and see a window" (5). In other words, Derksen problematizes views of the world that fail to see its constructedness as an interface, rather than as a "transparent frame" (4). His poem does not simply highlight the ideological nature of language, however, but exaggerates its mediated quality to make ideology more ideological.

The first type of rearticulated material riddled throughout "Interface" includes anecdotal statements that demonstrate how ideology mediates subjectivity. While a majority of these statements originate with the first person "I," some include the plural "We," suggesting how ideology infiltrates not only our subjective identifications, but

also our social alignments. In the first line, Derksen locates subjectivity at the centre of

a contradiction, between political and personal commitments: "I needlessly mapped an

occasion, splitting my support, serving myself" (*Dwell* 1). In Louis Althusser's terms,

ideology interpellates us as subjects and ideology mediates agency, making our

capacity to 'map' activity a nearly 'needless' endeavor. As Derksen writes later in the

poem:

> The demographics preceded me.
>
> …
>
> The structure I hate also hates me, but it makes me, and that's where the
>
> problem starts. (2)

Ideological structures, manifesting in demographic mappings, for example, dictate not

only how we operate in the world, but also how we see the world. The title of the poem

originates with a line that suggests how discourse shapes our access and performance in

any context: "Interface of self and place passes me through a translation machine" (3).[137]

As much as "place" effects changes in subjectivity, we are also "socially saturated

sign[s]" that "carry context" with us because ultimately we are subjects in language (10,

17). Derksen makes this point most clearly in the middle of the poem: "My body's

attached to my leg, to a genetic history, to a parallel sentence structure stretching over

the horizon" (14). The anecdotal statements do not simply register dismal conclusions,

however; these statements also rearticulate reality by exploiting our interpellation

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[137] I do not intend an unproblematic conflation of "place" and context. For any
discursive context is always tied to a particular place, whether personal, local, national
or global. As Derksen writes: "Cultural production as an articulatory practice can also
operate on a variety of levels and intersections; ranging form the structural to the
subjective, from the discourses of the social to the positions of the cultural field"
("Notes")

ironically and humorously. For example, "I won't say that the imperialism placated me, but the stroking of the consumer goods really calmed me down" (7). Such statements register farcically, highlighting Derksen's awareness of our complicity in a world mediated by militarism and capitalism.

The second type of rearticulated material in "Interface" includes observational statements; without any identifying pronoun to ground them in subjective experience, these statements exhibit a kind of "quirky formality" that anticipates the quotations and statistics that also riddle the poem (Derksen, *Dwell* 5).[138] The core of these observational statements pertain to the ironies that pervade both military rhetoric and action. Derksen writes, for example, of the duplicity in such rhetoric: "The language of war at this juncture is an aim, a name" (10). Playing homophonically in this line, Derksen continues throughout the poem to address how the names for war, the titles for operations, cover up the actual aims of war. Consider the following examples:

> "Urgent Fury" wasn't the movie, but the code name: Grenada 1983. (5)
>
> A highly developed national sense of irony was in place by 1942: Canadian raid on Dieppe was code named Operation Jubilee. (11)
>
> "Operation Comfort" lacks irony in not recognizing an alternative system: comparative literature without the comparative. (13).

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[138] These statements represent the majority of lines throughout the poem, but they also represent the most diverse set, and so I have only explored the "core" group within this set. Another notable set includes what Derksen refers to as "Anxiety punctuated by time" (*Dwell* 10) in which neoliberal politics attempts to effect our sense of history and time.

Operation Desert Shield, Operation Just Cause, Operation Rolling Thunder,

Operation Success, Operation Martyrdom, Operation Should We Be Doing

This? (15)

The first two examples indicate that they pertain to Grenada and World War II

respectively, but the last two pertain to the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. Derksen

rearticulates these titles to expose both how the rhetoric of operational titles distance us

ironically from the reality of those operations, and how the uses of such language

inevitably haunts future uses of words like 'comfort' or 'just.' Derksen punningly coins

the term "air-superiority writers" (11) to suggest how military rhetoric manipulates the

airwaves of language-use, like the air-superiority fighter jets that control enemy air

space.

The third type of rearticulated material in "Interface" includes quotations. The

quotations register a higher degree contradictory and ironic character than the faux-

anecdotes and observations because the quotations inevitably have real sources.

Without citing those sources explicitly, however, Derksen exposes the world as it comes

to us so often through news and advertisements. Derksen quotes from mainly

economic, political, and military sources, like the first two registers in the poem, but

these rearticulations strip the quotations from their original context. The quotations

move, in effect, further away from the subjective anecdote toward the language of

discourse itself. While the first two registers show our experience post-mediation, these

quotations provide an opportunity to consider the immediacy of ideology as it begins

shaping our thinking and experience at the level of news. Early in the poem, for

example, Derksen quotes a line with many possible sources: "A strike that tries to

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'inconvenience the public as little as possible'" (4).[139] Rooted in labour union policies,

this line suggests a level of overdetermination and irony in the way that strikes do arise

out of public inconvenience, on the one hand, and do cause public inconvenience on the

other, despite the intention of the rhetoric.[140] Derksen offers another passage that

arrives both out of the news, and out of rhetorical strategizing: "The translation process

that begins with 'Harvesting the necks of the infidel aggressors' (5).[141] This quotation

originates with the propagandizing of Iraqi radio during the first Gulf War, maintaining

the strength and resilience of the Iraqi military against western forces. The word

"translation" here takes on an obviously ironic sense because translation normally

suggests rendering from one culture into another culture, but in this instance, the world

"translate" understates how politically and culturally wrought such rendering might

be. Finally, two quotations from the end of the poem expose the duplicity of political

discourse around the first Iraq War. Both originate with "General Schwarzkopf's

verse," as Derksen calls it elsewhere in the poem (12): "'I honestly want to restore

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[139] This statement represents the general response by union officials of the AFL-CIO
about the intended effects of any particular strike. See the official statement by an
United Auto Workers (CIO) representative about the General Motors strike in 1945
(*Deseret News*, November 21, 1945). Also, see the official statement by an Oil Workers
International Union (CIO) representative about the Utah Oil Refining Company Strike
in 1952 (*Deseret News*, April 28, 1952).
[140] Other economically-tinted quotations occur at the beginning of the poem. Derksen
cites a kind of post-NAFTA sentiment: "'We can see a day when borders will mean
nothing more than knowing where to cut your lawn'"(*Dwell* 2). Without an original
source, this quotation draws an eerie resonance about the progress of a global political
economy. In two similar quotations, Derksen provides insight into the aims of
capitalism: "'We may not have all the right answers, but we have the right car'" (9);
"'*The* car is *a* [sic] extension of you'" (15). Derksen rearticulates these commercial
pitches into the poem in an effort to make the ideology of capitalism quite visible—that
capitalism negates intelligence and identity in order to perpetuate itself.
[141] In an article in the *New York Times*, from February 26, 1991, Alan Cowell, writes:
"Iraqi troops, the official radio said Monday, were 'starting their harvest of the necks of
infidel, corrupt and impudent aggressors in the epic of the mother of battles.'"

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Kuwait's international borders'" (16); "'Racism has no place in the battlefield'" (17). These quotations resonate with a level of irony so blatant that a word like "honestly" feels completely evacuated. In fact, due to its "clarity of tone," this quotation ultimately lacks what Derksen calls "formal innovation" (12). In other words, rearticulating quotations like these illuminates the kind of duplicity that their original context masks, and lessens what Derksen calls the "dupe quotient"—that percentage of us who accept press releases and official statements at face value (1).

The fourth and final type of rearticulations in "Interface" include facts and statistics that dramatize, in one sense, how abstractions can mediate and filter our access to information about the world, and, in another sense, how language "can contain and represent the violent rupture of reality" (Burnham 37). Scattered throughout "Interface," Derksen provides a series of statistics: "Soviet Union 24.9%" (*Dwell* 1), "United States 18.3%" (1), "Great Britain 17.1%" (4), "France 8.9%" (6), "China 6.3%" (8), "West Germany 5.4%" (10), "Italy 5.4%" (11), "Japan 3.5%" (13), "Sweden 2.5%" (14), and "Poland 2.3%" (16). While these statistics appear decontextualized, Derksen does provide a clue, alluding to "domestic arms needs" earlier in the poem (3). Specifically, the statistics pertain to the percentage of a national budget spent on the military. Jason Wiens rightly suggests that this list maps (perhaps 'needlessly') "a certain global hegemony or division of powers at the apex of the Cold War" (233)—a way of understanding the world in a highly limited way, with what Derksen elsewhere refers to as a "deaf ethnographic point of view" (*Dwell* 5). Derksen also offers more elaborate statistical and factual data, scattershot throughout the poem. Much of this data pertains to the first War in Iraq. For example, Derksen reports: "The percentage of blacks in the U.S. Armed Forces is higher than many other industries—this was talked

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about as a progressive step" (6); "More American soldiers were killed by accidents during the build-up than by either the Iraqi army or so-called friendly fire" (9). The statistics and data in "Interface" help provide specific access to the world—a world structured and controlled by military-industrial collusion. At the same time, ironically, the specificity of this information leaves us feeling alienated and ignorant—always already mediated by the flow and organization of information.

Near the end of "Interface" Derksen writes: "The space between *dismal* and received knowledge is where 'popular culture' steps in" (*Dwell* 16). With his rearticulatory program, Derksen intervenes in, and provides a perspective on the world, in which ideology mediates both our subjective and objective access. In other words, Derksen does not capture the world in any more necessarily accurate or focused way, but he does categorize how the world comes to us through various discourses— political, commercial, and statistical. Derksen avoids simply "putting 'the world' into the text" and, instead, depicts the world constructed by our own complicity in it ("Notes"). While he may not alleviate the dismal so much, he may provide an alternative to the "'popular culture'" that tends to mollify or even propagate "received knowledge" rather than contest such knowledge. For Derksen, cultural practitioners carry the burden of being in, and critical, of the world. Poets and critics cannot operate outside of the apparatuses that maintain ideology; rather poets and critics must work systemically from within.[142] Like Ron Silliman's disjunctive alternative to a realist

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[142] In "Poetry and Social Relations" Derksen criticizes the "historical avant-gardist notion of resistance being tied into an aesthetic refutation ... as if it is the aesthetic role of poetry to imagine a site outside of ideology." A poetics that is not "sufficiently ideological" might oppose and critique social structures, but it does not change them. Derksen moves away from the "outsideness of ideology and social structures" toward

narrative with a partial and fragmented series in "Blue" or Mark Nowak's documentary framing of testimonial, commentary and research in "$00 / Line / Steel / Train," Jeff Derksen's rearticulatory appropriation of political, military and commercial discourse provides a partial, and illuminated, view of the world. All three examples never cast a picture of the world unmediated by discursive frameworks, whether personal, literary, political or economic. Unlike Silliman, however, both Nowak and Derksen consider actual political stakes.

<p style="text-align:center">*Irritating and Stimulating the Reader:*</p>

<p style="text-align:center">*Rachel Zolf's Investigative Poetics as Provisional Activism*</p>

Rachel Zolf is the author of four books of poetry—*Her absence, this wanderer* (1999), *Masque* (2004*), Human Resources* (2006), and *The Neighbour Procedure* (2010)—as well as an editor and critic. While she is a proud university dropout and autodidact, she also currently teaches at the University of Calgary. Overall, Zolf's work evinces a powerful intersection of textual experiment, politics, and ethics. Her most recent work, for example, includes coordinating a collaborative MFA project titled *The Tolerance Project*, in which participants donate poetic texts as DNA (each with its own barcode), and then uses strands of this DNA in new poems that create an evolving, but traceable, archive—a kind of text modeled on humanity itself. The title of the project evokes an ethics in which Zolf imagines poetry operating on and off the page, as a dynamic and collaborative process—a process composed of embracing its own diversity. The

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the interior where he can examine discourses, and subsequently decontextualize and re-articulate their discursive fragments. This movement too recalls Bruce Andrews imperative to return to the "internal circuitry" of language (Andrews, *Paradise and Method* 50). Maintaining a critical stance from the inside, I might also characterize Derksen's realist poetics as a poetics of grappling with his complicity: to "understand, debunk, ridicule and shine a harsh light" (Derksen, *Annihilated Time* 252).

motivation for the project comes in response to the limitations that Zolf sees in the

tradition of documentary/ethnographic poetics. Prior to her most recent book,

Neighbour Procedure, and *The Tolerance Project*, Zolf has aligned her project with, what

Kirsten Prevallet calls, a "Relational Investigative Poetics" (Zolf, "A tenuous we" 2).[143]

Prevallet and Zolf describe such a project in ethical terms that move beyond a poetics of

witness or ethnographic description. Zolf states:

> [I]t may be part of the job of the poet to ... translate—to "carry" a scene,
>
> issue, conflict or meaning (however fragmentary) "across" spaces. Part
>
> of the task involves taking apart solidified language and knowledge
>
> forms to make them portable and using the documentary lens of the
>
> poem to examine the various rhetorical strategies that these sites and
>
> media employ to make and shape meaning. ("A tenuous we" 2-3)

Zolf's belief that the "rhetorical strategies" of language make meaning and that poetry

can expose those strategies, and even challenge them, extends the tenets of Language

poetics. At the same time, Zolf locates herself in a Post-Language position, when she

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[143] See Prevallet's "Writing Is Never by Itself Alone: Six Mini-Essays on Relational
Investigative Poetics." She describes this poetics as follows:
> Extending the document to meet the poem is one way to engage the
> contradictions and complexities of seemingly utilitarian language, whose
> presence then allows the poem as a freestanding yet rhizomatic entity to
> come into contact, into relation, with a larger social and personal history. If
> "the world" is a large mass of people existing in constant negation and
> exchange—both interpersonally and via the networks of communication—
> with products, places, plants, animals, and vocabularies then an investigative
> poet manifests these exchanges. Through form, poetry becomes a way of
> close reading the documents that affect the consciousness of our times.
I would argue that using poetry in an effort to "relate" and therefore "investigate" the
"documents" and the experiences of our lives compares to the impetus of Jeff Derksen's
rearticulatory poetics.

speaks of moving beyond other "overarching Language poetry dictates"—dictates like evacuating the subject from the poem ("A serpentine").

While Zolf may generalize about Language poetry, her desire to maintain and investigate subjectivity, without necessarily preserving the autonomy of the subject, does defy the authoritative objectivity of a traditional ethnographer. As a poet and researcher, Zolf values a more vulnerable subject position. Zolf also describes her poetic responsibility in such provisional terms (even her descriptions exhibit a provisional quality). In an interview with Heather Milne, for example, Zolf claims: "I think one of the key potential functions—if we were really to give it a function!—of poetry is that it can help people to let go of the desire to know completely and [to] completely control the environment, and perhaps rather it can lead them to open up to a sense of mystery" (189). While she describes a word like "mystery" as clichéd, she also uses the term "catachrestic" to indicate how the limitations of our "language" force us to confront language's inadequacy as the conditions for the discovery of new "meaning." ("A serpentine"). In one of her few published essays, Zolf suggests how catachresis in poetry involves poetry's capacity to accommodate "competing knowledges," allowing them to mutually inform one another. She writes:

> The reality that few of us in today's world can escape the position of
> occupier or occupied, and the competing knowledges these relations
> produce bear more scrutiny from poetry. A practice that is not a quest for
> final truths but a critical inquiry into how "other" knowledges and
> borderlands are constructed—a poetry that imagines new ways of
> thinking about and across spaces through the fluidity of the document ("A
> tenuous we" 4)

Poetry is not only ethical, but necessary, because it does not elide, but rather complicates the relations between "competing knowledges"—knowledges that each assume a particular set of "'simple truths'" (4). I would argue, then, that Zolf's project demonstrates an ethics of provisionality—both in its approach to the conditionality of language and in its attitude about poetry as a politically-charged documentary practice.

Rachel Zolf's third book *Human Resources* constitutes a Post-Language alternative to the conventional pragmatic text by enacting a provisional activism. Rather than provide a "moment of grace, … or cordial for your soul" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 76), the book pushes the "'piss-off' factor" (64), interspersing instructional lists to the would-be writer of business communication, with an often frenetic and irritating "mishmash" of theory-speak, corporate-speak, and computer-generated poetry, all originating from "mankind's chaosphere" (25, 46). The poem, in effect, functions as a "hyperdocument assault" on the reader (22). Hyper indicates both the freneticism of Zolf's delivery and to her reliance on three online databases: WordCount, QueryCount, and the Gematria of Nothing.[144] Zolf channels language in excess, as though she has "drill[ed] down through [her] inbox queued up for deterritorialized release," spewing language in "heterogeneous aggregates" (47, 50). Zolf also inserts superscriptive and numerical references to the three databases—databases that register word value based on use-frequency, search-frequency or Hebraic numerology. *Human Resources* both documents

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[144] When Zolf performs work from *Human Resources*, she does so at a frenetic pace. In an interview with Joel Bettridge, she notes the motivation for both the form and the subsequent delivery:

> One fairly obvious reason I read from *Human Resources* at an accelerated pace is to evoke our too-sped-up culture. I want listeners to feel disoriented, feel their hearts race in surprise and perhaps anxiety as they attempt to follow along and reach for meaning that may not be easily consumable as sound bites. ("A serpentine")

and explores the value of language—language coopted, polished, and ultimately

devalued by the preponderance of corporate and advertising jargon. The book testifies

to the belief that the "task of poetry" does not entail "distil[ling] language to its essence

and hold[ing] up and onto a shiny perfect bauble of truth" (Zolf, "Irritating and

Stimulating" 29). Rather, poetry should "gather up and make meaning of what's left

on the ground after we're done our primping and prettifying"—the kind of adorning

that accompanies corporate copy and ad-speak (29).[145]

In each of the book's ten sections, Zolf begins with an instructional poem, followed

by a prose poem, lineated poem, and generated poem. The instructional poems parody

the "'plain speaking'" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 4) advice offered to writers of corporate

copy—a form of writing in which language operates in service to the market, and where

the market ends up programming the writer herself, that ultimate human resource.[146]

The prose poems that follow demonstrate an immediate and excessive "overtime of

content" in defiance of the concise economy of the lists (39). While the "stitches" are

"barely" noticeable in the prose, the lineated poems literally show Zolf "com[ing] back

to her sentences" (30), although she continues to explore excess thematically. The

computer-generated poems serve to counteract the instructional poems because Zolf

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[145] In his review of *Human Resources*, K. Silem Mohammed, observes:
> [W]hile it is valid to object that anyone can slap together a jumble of
> computer code, spam text, and instant messaging slang and call it a poem, it
> is more useful to acknowledge that such materials really are a significant
> portion of what the poet now has to work with, and that if one is truly
> interested in contemporary poetry, one must reckon with these materials--or
> rather, their application—in a way that is neither superficially celebratory
> nor blindly dismissive.

[146] According to Holly Dupej, the "'how tos' of the writing process imply an almost
oppressive power teaching, or, more appropriately, programming the writer to create
output as perfectly efficient and predictable as a software program" (148).

inputs language from the prose and lineated poems into the generator, just as the instructions would otherwise program the writer. According to Joel Bettridge, Zolf's book enacts a poetics in opposition to the "logic of advertising, where writers and editors clarify and parse language down, not in order to provide information or shed light on an idea, but in hopes of compelling action—shopping, coveting, succumbing to impulse" ("Review"). Opposed to this compelled action of the consumer, Zolf desires "reader involvement, which means getting a reaction, not giving a recitation" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 40). Indeed, "succumbing to impulse" not only recites but fulfills what advertising hopes to achieve. *Human Resources* forces readers to respond to language "attentively," and to "enter the poem and flounder in words" (76). Ultimately, Zolf admits to the reader that there is no "at-hand solution for your vocabulary work," no lesson "set in stone," except to maintain an ongoing recognition that eloquence and concision do not constitute or exhaust the full value and meaning of our words—those human resources that we rely on daily (76).

The instructional lists to writers begin realistically with an excerpt from an editorial in the *Harvard Business Review*—an excerpt that also serves an epigraph to *Human Resources*: "Because literature concerns itself with the ambiguities of the human condition, it stands as a threat to the vitality of the business executive, who must at all times maintain a bias towards action" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 3). Coming at the beginning of a book of poetry, this epigraph establishes an irony that infuses subsequent instructions to writers and readers. Collectively, these lists parody instructions that exhort writers to develop a directness and clarity of language—a language that begins "selling in the first line" (45) and ultimately "help[s] the economy" (81). The first poem, for example, that informs the reader to "Start here," also instructs:

"No adjectives, adornment or surfeit of meaning … . All excess excised save the discrete pithy moment" (4). Similar instructions, titled "How to write a title" (27), and "How to write persuasive body copy" (45), demand writers to avoid "cleverness" and "'If' statements" (27), to "Stick to the surface" and "Heed the Clarity Commandment" (45). Paradoxically, other instructions advise writers to look for "inspiration" in "quotation," "aphorism," "euphemism," "slang," "idiom," "colloquialism," and "one liners" (33). While these sources might provide pithiness, they also open language to contexts that muddy the possibility for clarity and the desire to "Be acceptable in every social and religious culture you operate in" (63). The instructions force readers to consider what it might be like to actually write in the direct service of capitalism, while considering the other ideologies that such instructions propagate. In the final instruction, for example, about "reasons to become a writer," Zolf states: "Writers help the needy: A recent fundraising package I wrote for an evangelical adoption agency generated $30,000, exactly what we needed to save children from being aborted" (81). Despite the most strident efforts to constrain language through instruction or commandment, language will always deliver ideology, and will always exhibit ambiguity and excess.

The prose poems that follow the instructions mark an immediate contrast to the economy and dry satirizing of the lists. The prose poems, in fact, represent a kind of "regular column on diarrhea," originating from the "author's proprietary machine-mind™" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 58, 95). They operate as amped up meditations on work, critical theory, and capitalism—meditations that inevitably implode rather than cohere logically. They, as Zolf suggests, portray "multiple clashing thought-vectors too much to contain" ("A serpentine"). In the first prose poem, for example, Zolf writes:

Given enough input elements, a writing machine can spew about anything:

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> private jets, exquisite gardens, off-shore banking havens, the Great
>
> Ephemeral Skin, how much we love our passionate[Q8992] francesca snazzy prat
>
> employees, how you breathe life into our Mission, Vision, Values … (*Human*
>
> *Resources* 6).

Here, Zolf refers to both the poetry generators she uses in other poems in the book, but also to her own "machine-mind" that recombines a mash of references to life under capitalism, in which the wealthy possess "jets" and "gardens" and the middle-class provide "passion" and "snazziness." Zolf also mentions Lyotard's notion of the "Great Ephemeral Skin" in reference to her own personal engagement with critical theory, in particular, discussions of the libidinous body—a trope that riddles the text, and that touches on the theme of excess. The prose poems maximize input, excessively spewing, in a way that dramatizes how poetry harnesses ambiguity and polysemy. The prose poems that closes the book translates the first instruction about writing in "'plain language'" (4), rendering that first poem into correspondent numerical values from WordCount's catalog of use-frequency. On the one hand, the numerical translation demonstrates words as a series of values, or words taking on a "commodity form" (40). On the other hand, the numerical translation demonstrates words as a series of functionless symbols, or words that "can't be utilized" (20). Zolf ultimately empathizes with the reader's plight, but Zolf wants us to maintain awareness that "[t]here is no writing that is not in economic w383 love w384 with commodity form, and there's stuff coming at me in all directions" (70).

The lineated poems, each split into four quatrains, that face the prose poems contrast the prose by effectively "chunk[ing] it down into various links" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 5). The stanzas do not however serve to "send out platitudes brick by brick"

(91). In fact, the lineated poems, and each sentence-length stanza within, represent "fractured surfaces" without formal coherence (64). According to Zolf, the lineated poems take their inspiration from the paratactic methods of Language writing, by which she means that the stanzas demonstrate a "new sentence" aesthetic, with a de-emphasis on syllogistic flow and an emphasis on internal torque ("A serpentine"). In the first lineated poem, for example, Zolf writes:

> New performance weightings a bit of a moving target the future liability of make this sing.
>
> Just to make sure we're speaking the same language we no longer have to use this caveat existing amounts grandfathered. (*Human Resources* 5)

On the surface, Zolf shuffles together investor jargon with the instructional innuendo of business writing, in which she "extracts" the "communication" in favour of "pure gibberish" (21, 65). Concrete meaning may remain "a moving target," as well, but she wants to rearticulate the language that we all share, and make that language "sing." In the most pivotal lineated poem, Zolf quotes Anne Carson, from *Economy of the Unlost,* in an effort to consider how words in the service of capitalism devalue or waste language: "'What is lost when words are wasted?'" (31). Zolf continues with her own question: "Which words are gathered, the wasted or the lost?" (31). Zolf answers by gathering both, appropriating and rearticulating the wasted language of capital, but also infusing her book with the language most often queried, but so often excised: "fuck Q1 sex Q2 love the shit god i penis cunt" (36). Part of gathering both "wasted" and "lost" language relates to the undercurrent theme of Zolf's own relationship to the Jewish faith. In light of the bodies "wasted" and the language controlled under the Nazi regime, Zolf gathers both the "wasted" words and effected bodies under Capitalism.

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The final mode in *Human Resources* includes computer-generated poems—poems that appear, ironically, as the most traditionally lyrical.   The generated poems reconfigure and condense the book's key diction, such as "excesses," "reaction," "plain language," "ambiguous," and "hyperdocument." According to Zolf, these seven poems arise from Lewis LaCook's Markov-chain based Flash poetry generator, in which an algorithmic process recombines a catalog of inputted words to form the semblance of poems (*Human Resources* 93). Such generators partially disengage the writer from the act of composition, except that Zolf's choice of words act as the "human resources" that the generator manipulates. Unlike the instructions for business writing, that serve to program the writer, the software for a poetry-generator does not follow the logic of the market; such software creates writing that has no utility, except the pleasure of poetry. Take, for example, this excerpt from one of the generated poems:

> of Jew producing inside plain language.
>
> interlacing through libidinal economy because
>
> I narrative gathering amid poetry machine. coming
>
> as if plain language excess interlacing (69)

In its intentionless and recombinatory algorithm, the generator articulates the logic and form of *Human Resources*: Both "inside plain language" of business communication and "amid [the] poetry machine" of her mind, and the Flash poetry generator, Zolf provides a poetry for the 21st century—a poetry "that reflects today's realities" (21) on the one hand, but harnesses the "ambiguities" (83) of language on the other.

In her essay, "Irritating and Stimulating," Rachel Zolf asks: "What actually engages the reader in the process of reading—the prospect of a taste of epiphany and transcendence at the bottom of a well-wrought four-stanza urn or a jump in the muck of

indeterminate, anti-absorptive multiplicity and a dirty wrestle for meaning" (28). Of course, Zolf does not provide any incentive or guarantee about reading "attentively," except for the possibility of the "indeterminate" coming "alive," which is not the same as becoming determinate (Zolf, *Human Resources* 76). Like Bruce Andrews's undifferentiated gush of linguistic excess in "Confidence Trick," Zolf wields a "[p]en [that] drips with piss, shit and violation" as her lines "discharge some of that pulsion trapped in linguistic structures" (Zolf, *Human Resources* 8, 16). Also, like Rodrigo Toscano's constrained columns of cryptic memos in "anti-confidential memos," Zolf's "regular column" (54) of implosive prose stimulates, even as it irritates. Unlike Andrews, however, Zolf does not necessarily believe that "the unreadable drive[s] the reader from consuming to producing" (74). More like her Post-Language compatriot, Rodrigo Toscano, Zolf believes that "language isn't revolutionary enough": "Poetry can't stock food banks, warm bodies or stop genocide" (74). While *Human Resources* traverses several modes with its hyperdocumentary impulse, enacting a provisional activism with its suggestion to "suckle a dangerous thoughtform" (56), the ultimate stakes are in the real world where the reader is the witness to the uses and abuses of language. "Ultimately," Zolf quips to the reader, "you'll be the funnel here at the brink" (74).

Textualizing the Subject:

Lisa Robertson's Feminist Poetics as Provisional Lyricism

Lisa Robertson is the author of seven books of poetry—*XEclogue* (1993), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), *The Weather* (2001), *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (2003), *The Men* (2006), *Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip* (2009), and *Nilling* (2012). She is also an editor, translator and an educator, though she does not

hold a permanent institutional position. She is also a member of the Kootenay School of Writing and often collaborates with conceptual artists. Overall, her work investigates the potentialities of genre, forcing generic boundaries to accommodate her complex political and poetic agenda. She has a tendency to work with the book as a unit of composition, in which she can explore and reimagine both the geometry and geography of literary forms, challenging the sexual and political implications of those forms.[147] Such reworkings demonstrate Robertson disregarding any obligation to traditional constraints of such genres. For Robertson, tradition, subjectivity, and gender are all constructions that can be done, undone and re-done—played with.   As with other KSW writers, then, she takes aim at discursive structures like canons and traditions, particularly when they perpetrate oppressive and patriarchal ideology. Though criticism often locates Robertson's work within the Language tradition, she tends to dismiss that connection, as in an interview with Sina Queyras, where Robertson states:

> I don't see L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E as a camp. So I can't be associated with it. Mine is a different nationality, a different generation, a different politics. I feel more conditioned by the FLQ [Front de libération du Québec] than by the language poets. I read many of their works and sometimes drink with some of them, but for me, as for those poets

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[147] These terms come from Susan Stanford Friedman:

> This geometry of forms—long poems, big poems—may itself be the displacement for a geography of forms—the territorial imperative of literary history to map literary *landscapes*, canonize *centers*, chart pathways to *horizons*, define *margins*, patronize the *boundaries*, and dismiss what is beyond the *pale*—to exercise, in short, the tyranny of categorical *boundaries*, to declare what is inside, what is outside, *us* and *them*. (722)

themselves I think, poetry is not bound by movements, periodicities and

canons. Poetry is a continuity fueled by political passion.

Robertson's statement evinces a Post-Language sensibility in two ways: First, she

identifies Language writing as a generational and national phenomenon, to neither of

which does she belong; second, she identifies her own writing as continuous with a

variety of others, the commonality of which is a shared view of poetry as politically

meaningful.

Part of Robertson's scepticism about affiliating with any "camp" comes from a

dislike for what constitutes the contemporary avant-garde. In an essay titled "My

Eighteenth Century," she states: "I'm beginning to think that current avant-garde

poetry practise, with its tendency to defend a narrow range of primarily paratactic

method [sic] at the expense of a richly figured field of rhetorical techniques, might

methodologically entrench deeply banal structures and pedagogies of gender" (389).

While this is not an attack against Language writing per se, Robertson does proceed to

suggest an alternate model of avant-gardism, a model that invokes both provisionality

and hybridity. As she writes in the close of the essay: "Method, whether paratactic,

ironic, fragmented, aleatory, or reflexive, must remain open for use" (396). Moreover,

Robertson suggests "[t]he deployment of rhetoric" as a means for maintaining and

openness about subjectivity and poetics:

The deployment of rhetoric, of language's social appearing, lends a

provisional autonomy which could meet or deflect the adjudicating

compulsions of gendered, institutional power. Foregrounding the

enunciative rhetorics and artifices of language does not dismantle or blast

apart structures of authority, nor does it solidify the identity of an extra-

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ideological margin. But by presenting identity in language as a social

artifice, as always already for the joy or judgment of both speaker and

auditor, we structure multiply affective identificatory sites, emotive

spaces that frame knowledges for the duration of our mimetic contracts.

We don't need to eradicate identities or methods. They reveal themselves

textually as unnatural, available, mercurial. (393)

Not only does Robertson reference provisionality in her description of subjectivity but

her description of how to confront "institution power" suggests that the necessity of

poetic practices, infused with "rhetoric" and capable of "presenting identity in

language" inevitably demonstrate an ethics of provisionality. In another essay, "The

Weather: A Report on Sincerity," Robertson refers to this "provisional autonomy,"

equipped with rhetoric, as capable of enacting a "delusionary politics" in the sense of

maintaining a speculative, though no less subversive, sensibility, rather than a reactive

and confined one. Ultimately, she imagines a poetics of responsibility that "describe[es]

current conditions" as well as "pos[es] futurities ("The Weather").

Lisa Robertson's, *The Men* investigates the role of subjectivity in the tradition of

formal lyric. [148] In a poet's note accompanying a sound recording of her reading *The

Men* Robertson reports:

The Men explores a territory between the poet and a lyric lineage among

men. Following a tradition that includes Petrarch's sonnets, Cavalcanti,

Dante's works on the vernacular, Montaigne, and even Kant, I am

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[148] Lynn Keller, in her study of long poems by women suggests: "[T]he long poem's
openness to sociological, anthropological and historical material renders it particularly
useful for poets eager to explore women's roles in history and in the formation of
culture" (14-15).

compelled towards the construction of the textual subjectivity these

authors convey—a subjectivity that honours all the ambivalence, doubt,

and tenderness of the human. Yet I remain angered by the structure of

gender these books advance. ("Test Reading")[149]

In contrast to the title-subject, *The Men* utilizes the first-person "I," emphasizing a

singular subject posed against a collective. Robertson's notion of "textual subjectivity"

presents a significant bridge between considerations of gender and genre. In the poem,

itself, she alternates between lyric poems and prose poems, as if to confuse the lyric

subtitle itself. In a statement about her poem *Debbie: An Epic* Robertson describes how

"genre" asserts "pressure" on the "internal structures of subjectivity, gender, history

and memory" (487). In exploring genres then, she seeks to "reconfigure" the "rhetorical

or stylistic codes whose effect of authenticity has been sanctioned by tradition" in order

to turn them into provisional "questions" or "temporary pleasures" (487). Robertson's

textual subject "lightly embod[ies] the renewed, political potential of a lyricism" (487).

The potential of light embodiment is appropriate for describing the voice in "Men Deft

Men." Robertson playfully interrogates and exploits rhetorical positioning in order to

insert a female voice into a patriarchal tradition. She demonstrates a provisional

lyricism by lightening the weight of the subjective "I" so that it can traverse the lyric as

so many male voices have done before..

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[149] Her concern with the representation of the female subjectivity in Renaissance texts is not unique; like her acknowledgement of the muted or absent textual subjectivity, Moira Baker also points out that certain canonical texts "focus upon the agency of the male poet" or assert "his subjectivity as a poet" while rendering textual females "a passive instrument or voice who mouths the sentiments of another in ways that delight him but render her an object: without her own voice, desires, or subjectivity" (9).

The poem begins in a kind of incantation to "men": "Men deft men mental men of loving men all men" (Robertson, *The Men* 9). This repetition of the word, marked by a certain metrical cadence, serves to empower the lyrical voice with its playfulness—poking fun at the "men." Playful as this is, Robertson makes clear that her intent is also quite serious because, as she writes: "What we refer to as men is any / Communication we begin to perpetrate" (11). In these opening lyrics, her playfulness also connotes a certain familiarity with "men"—a familiarity that undergirds her power. She denotes her familiarity in noting experiences of "[c]onceptual recognition" and a "[p]revious palpability." This familiarity helps shape the "problematic politics" that she enacts in developing her "Sweet new style" (9). But, in the second lyric, the narrative "I" arrives and asserts a firmer textual presence:

> Each man—I could write
>
> His poem. He needs no voice
>
> But what would I take from it. Our facades are so
>
> Minor. What would I begin to say
>
> If his words were
>
> My poem. (10)

In this appropriation of the lyric voice, by a female figure with only a minor facade, the speaker begins to inhabit the poem normally offered from the male viewpoint. In the following truncated lines the speaker inhabits a chauvinist rhetoric and claims it for herself: "The men's / Cocks / And their faces"; "Men sweet and smooth / Men auditorialy ignored" (10). In these first two pages, the poet moves from outside, as an implied speaker, to the inside, and there Robertson's narrator is the agent-subject in the poem. And in a boastful posture, the narrator even ignores the men and deflates their

masculinity. In a rhetoric that she calls "speak[ing] expensively," the narrator

addresses the men confidently and refers to her "poem" as "A purple scarf / of men"

(10). She is, in effect, trying on the clothing of a masculine viewpoint, occupying the

male gaze in order to turn it back on the male body.

Reducing the men to the level of the text, or as "conjugations" throughout the

poem, Robertson's narrator aims to create something "factless" and "spurious" as

opposed to perpetrating (Robertson, *The Men* 12). In the second set of lyrics, the

narrator suggests the kind of perspective that the men tend to perpetrate and that her

poem defies:

> The men change limited constructs into easy patterns. They determine on
>
> it. They point to the picture and they nurture their hearts. They find time
>
> to analyze conditions frequently. Men's commands are laminated by
>
> other methods—at the end of his frontiers there is left a free, indifferent
>
> and neutral space which is the sexuality of the men and they suffer. (15)

Here, the speaker critiques a reductive and monocular view of the world that has

become "laminated" and solidified. Opposed to this view, the narrator asserts a far

more provisional picture:

> There is no concrete
>
> Or eternal thing there.
>
> We form attachments. And then we
>
> Go visiting. (16)

For the narrator, a proper view of the world, even of subjectivity, just visits rather than

gets laminated. Or, as the narrator suggests, "I pour into the style / Of the manikin"

(16); as opposed to a firm identity, the narrator embraces a rhetorical style that is

ultimately empowering. Beyond simply speaking of "them," to show authorial control, she textualizes "them": "The/ Men are enjambed" (17). The reflexive gesture about creating her poem is both playful and ironic, flaunting with the showy ease of a sleight of hand, but importantly, "it is no trifle" (18). Any act of composition, in any textual act, manifests a degree of subjectivity.

In the final third of "Men Deft Men," the narrator exhibits an awareness of the dialectic between the patriarchal voices of formal tradition and the voice of a feminist agent provocateur. She narrates this consciousness:

> They are both sublime and
>
> Beautiful, delicate
>
> And copious, rolling and touching
>
> And rubbing one against another
>
> In their most serious actions
>
> But nothing makes them men
>
> But their word in the new-found world. (18)

In what Robertson calls "conjugations" (14) the poem playfully juxtaposes a sensuous, almost feminized, re-vision of patriarchy with the duplicitous verbal contract of the colonizer.   And while it is "their word" that "makes them men" and thus subjects, Robertson's poem is an equalizing act of self-authorization, and thus an assertion of an-other subjectivity—a kind of "sweet new style" (9) in which "[t]he men / Flow down / The pen" (20). Moreover, in lines that faintly echo Virginia Woolf— "The Men have a house/ Of rooms and time/ To walk through them" (21)—Robertson's narrator recognizes the necessity of using "rough verse" to make her own space and to touch[] the men who stopped / [her] tongue" (26).

Throughout "Men Deft Men," the narrator asserts her subjective agency in deliberate acts of textualizing "men" and pushing back against the density of patriarchal discourse. Even though the narrator describes a strong degree of physical contact with the men, this interaction remains textual, rhetorical and even abstract. Robertson's narrator enacts a "language without identity"—a lyrical voice with a provisional autonomy ("Interview" 380). As Robertson suggests: "Our institutions are interested in insisting that the subject is in need of identity, but if you look at the subject from the point of view of mobility, and the point of view of discourse, and the point of view of ethics, the subject opens as being one of the most exciting political terrains" (380). Undoubtedly, Robertson's narrator is mobile and active, and not without pathos, but she is as much a textualizing force, a textual subjectivity. Robertson's narrator has more in common with the subjective presence in Lyn Hejinian's "Province"—who recedes in a "structure of feeling"—than with the multiple subject in Juliana Spahr's poems after September 11, 2001—who navigates between a singular and collective sense of subjectivity. But, when Robertson defines the textual subject as manifested in a rhetoric or style, Robertson offers the most provisional of lyric voices, in part because subjectivity might simply be a "style" of being, particularly when constructed in language. By offering a subjectivity based on activity rather than identity, Lisa Robertson delivers a model of provisional lyricism.

Constraining the Text:

Stephen Cain's Recombinatory Poetics as Provisional Formalism

Stephen Cain is the author of four books of poetry— *dyslexicon* (1998), *Torontology* (2001), *American Standard/ Canada Dry* (2005), and *I Can Say Interpellation* (2012)—as well as a collaborator in a series of micro-fictions, *Double Helix* (2006), written with Jay

MillAr. He also co-authored *The Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages* (2006) with Tim Conley. Until 2005, he was the editor of *Queen Street Quarterly* and he currently teaches at York University. He works in textual, visual, and sound poetry, and I align him with the "Coach House Coterie"—a loose collection of poets who gravitate around and publish with Coach House books in Toronto. Appropriately, then, Cain's doctoral dissertation examines Coach House Press—the precursor to the current Coach House publishing body. Cain typically works under a constraint-based poetics and imagines the poet's responsibility as "cultural recombinator" (Cain, "Poetics Statement" 52). He writes that "with the deluge of stimulus in late industrial capitalistic society presenting subjects with an indistinguishable blur of data, the poet's role is to filter the gold from the dross and recombine the immensity of information into new aesthetic forms" (52). Part of this effort to recombine cultural materials into poetry consists of "unit[ing] the street with the tower or the underground with the mainstream" in a way that levels the "hierarchy of values" so manifest in cultural production (54, 52). As such, Cain's intention falls in line with the politics of the Language Poets, in the sense that he believes that cultural production reproduces social striations, but when one reworks the language in cultural production, one confronts those striations. While Cain, perhaps ironically, does not align himself with the Language or Post-Language tradition, his poetics suggest an obvious inheritance. While he may not participate in the "movement" he may simply participate in the "genre" (53). In general, I argue, his recombinatory method exhibits a hybrid and Post-Language sensibility—utilizing all means and materials necessary.

　　　Stephen Cain imagines the poem as a democratic space in the sense that the poem can contain an amalgam of high aesthetics and pop culture, but at the same time,

this capacity enables poetry to "represent 'reality'" in a condensed, albeit contingent fashion (Cain, "Poetics Statement" 52). Cain is not a realist, or mimetic poet by any usual definition of those terms, but he does imagine poetry as capacious enough to withstand the contradictions of contemporary culture in a way that provides access to those contradictions in a concentrated frame. In his reliance on poetic constraints Cain endeavours to push himself to "think in different ways." As Tim Conley describes in a review of Cain's book *Torontology*, "For all of his language games, seemingly arbitrary technical constraints, and fondness for the abstract, Cain is remarkably an autobiographical poet. ... He is exploring the farthest limits of his individual identity looking for those points of seepage and leakage between himself and popular consciousness" (32). In some real sense, Cain not only investigates culture, but documents his own engagement with it. His poems inevitably contain a record of where "popular consciousness" seeps into his own consciousness. In an interview with Jordan Berard, Cain suggests that despite using constraints he also relies on a more conventional lyric approach to revise: "I suppose where I differ from traditional Oulipo ... is that I use the constraint to generate the poem, but then often abandon the restriction at the editing stage. The finished poem then has some elements of constraint, but also the 'organic' element of creative and 'free' intervention." Overall, then, Cain treats poetry as a necessary social and personal practice, in which he relies on constraints to render that social and personal language as conditional. In other words, he demonstrates a provisional poetics.

Stephen Cain's book *American Standard / Canada Dry* consists of ten series of poems each operating under a different conceit. Cain brackets the book with the two title poems in an effort to create a border zone where culture and history between the two

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nations inevitably collide. "American Standard" relies on conjunctive puns to capture the contradiction and overdetermination of United States history and culture. "Canada Dry" (by definition) relies on no conceit, although appearing to, and provides a lyrical cross-section of Canadian culture.[150] These forays into and against constraint suggest how Cain engages a provisional formalism. In what follows, I examine Cain's first poem in the sequence, "American Standard" and the last "Canada Dry." "American Standard," in particular exhibits many of the qualities of the other works in the book, and it exploits a Language aesthetic—resembling the material resonances of Charles Bernstein's work, and exhibiting the impassioned pace of Bruce Andrews's work. Cain attempts to capture American culture within the lexicon of its specific history, politics and culture, without reliance on narrative, explanation, or chronology. The title of the poem refers to the merger of two different companies to form American Standard, a company that makes toilets. American Standard comes from the merger of the American Radiator Company and the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company (Cain, *American Standard / Canada Dry* 113). In a similar way to creation of the company title, words in the poem occur at the merger of two meanings. Like the entire book, this poem consists of ten parts—each of which is a block of condensed prose—and each of which contains puns that simultaneously hold words and propel them forward. By emphasizing the materiality of language in a bombast of sound and sense—in what he calls a "poetry of puke poetics of pus" (12)— Cain's poem enacts a provisional textuality.

In the first block, Cain delivers a swath of text that captures American culture at

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[150] According to Paul Fournel, a Canada Dry text "has the taste and colour of restriction but does not follow a restriction" (118).

the intersection of the commercial, religious and political: "[N]ike victory mike makes righteous war against drug lords of slaves history blind faith guns christ black tower power plays tools for fortunate sons of freetown diamond ballast ring rangers bait lovers of fossil fools ... (Cain, *American Standard / Canada Dry* 10). The language expands and contracts around puns and allusions, so that we get "nike" serving as both a mythological goddess and a brand name, in which more than likely the commerical logo is victorious over the myth. Certainly, "mike" refers to Michael Jordan—the consummate Nike endorsee—but "mike" also rings with "might" which "makes right" or "righteous war." Cain offers a dense matrix that capitalizes on an allusive system of references. In the second block, the language continues to indict: " ... sons of sam new world orders genocide small pox pine box ridge pelts or oil offensive operation infantile narcisissm dislocate a queer shoulder to a wheel tied fences white picket cotton masters hoods as heroic coors light" (10). Here, Cain uses the language to collapse time, between the "new world" exploration of Columbus, to the introduction of small pox and the removal of Native Americans, to the saga of Leonard Peltier. These lines also bring into proximity the hate crimes perpetrated by the KKK and the hate crime against Matthew Shepard who was beaten and tied to a fence to die because he was a homosexual. The line "queer shoulder to a wheel" also invokes a line from Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"—to which Cain responds in the rhapsodic, flowing lines of his own long poem.

In subsequent blocks, Cain continues to deliver his catalogue of dark history in an effort to defy its suppression. In fact, the poem stands in defiance of a "right wing idiom" that aims to "keep quips quiet no dissent unless commodified irony's" (Cain, *American Standard / Canada Dry* 12, 11). The irony of commodification seems especially

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present here, as Cain delivers: "[A] swastika manson monroe so doctrinaire e pluribus gluteus maximus" (12). Riffing on a motto from the United States seal, Cain's poem defies "e pluribus unum" by exploding any unified culture and showing the contradictions at its very heart—suggesting that sex and death are doctrine. Cain wants to flatten the connections between cultural elements, as if to show the culture in its absolutely overdetermined state. Unpacking some of density, we find, the swastika on Charles Manson's forehead, linking with Manson's name used by the shock-rock performer Marilyn Manson, who takes his name by doing exactly what Cain does throughout the poem; Marilyn Monroe's name connects to the nationalist Monroe Doctrine of 19th Century America, that connects with the motto on American money. Cain even alludes to Canada in the poem with reference to the "artful dodgers drafty ducking," and " ... can nada rid us of a fascist in the belly full of bilge a bestial bed mate state" (13). As the blocks continue they offer a far more angry indictment against the US, in lines like "new romans the world awaits your fall" and "you think we don't what you're to here with bull shit excuse for democracy just doesn't work" (14). In some sense the poem becomes more lucid and less lurid as it progresses and the anger increases. But, the language itself shows the duplicity in all bits of language.

The final poem in the book, "Canada Dry" serves as a foil to "American Standard." "Canada Dry" is a much shorter series of stanzas, each of which is four lines long. According to Cain:

> Each stanza of "Canada Dry" … opens with a homophonic translation of a
> well-known Quebecois poem (commenting on the predominance of
> Anglophone poetics in Canada) and concludes with a homolinguistic
> translation of a well-known Modernist Anglophone Canadian poem

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(commenting on the politics of translation in Canada). (n.pag)

Examining one of the stanzas, for example, Cain employs a playfulness with the language:

> There's none serving ten
>
> With toques touted to Trenton
>
> For a Bilingual Tim Donut
>
> For the hate stint stinging its part (*American Standard / Canada Dry* 109).

Not only is the poem replete with Canadiana, but with the sources of the first and last lines, we can see Cain's intention to play with the political milieu in Canada.

Whereas "American Standard" performs a kind of running commentary on, and indictment of, American culture and politics, "Canada Dry" serves to show how Canada is "complicit" with many of the same issues in the United States (Email Interview). Moreover, the conceit of the "Canada Dry" text—in which a text only resembles a procedural product—suggests that Canada itself, let alone the poem, resembles a facsimile of the United States. The poem ends, for example, with the line that "we have acquired the way of strangers," as if you to suggest that Canadians must confront questions about what is genuine and what is derivative in Canadian culture (*American Standard / Canada Dry* 110).[151] While the poem catalogues definitively Canadian cultural icons and locations, the poem poses those representations as bubbly and light, like the champagne of ginger ales that Canada Dry boasts. These aspects don't seemingly have the weight of the events and figures in "American Standard."

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[151] This line originates with Al Purdy's suggestion that "we must enquire the way of strangers" (76)—a suggestion that informs Cain's desire in "Canada Dry" to recombine facets of Canadiana in strange ways, as a form of *ostranenie* or making strange.

And despite the inherent literary and linguistic politics that Cain invests in his translations, the poems allusions and idioms undercut the seriousness of those political aspects. So, the poem feigns, on the one hand, that it is "free and dumb" (110)—playfully riddling nonsensical language and Canadiana, but on the other, presents Canada in need of asserting itself strongly, i.e. taking back its "liquor laws controlled by the Crown" rather than sipping at ginger ale.

While "Canada Dry" suggests the seeming innocuousness of Canadian culture and politics, "American Standard" connotes the kind of standard plague of American cultural history: a kind of dark, shadowy cast. While both poems present one Canadian's view, articulating a personal, critical response, these poems present culture in facets, in bits of language that resonate in their recombined displays. The expansion and contractions around particular words create hinges in history. Still, Cain tends to thematize a cultural-historical politics more than Charles Bernstein in "Playing with a Full Deck" or Harryette Mullen in *Muse & Drudge*, and yet they all exhibit a provisional formalism—one that capitalizes on the materiality of language to do necessary ethical work. While Bernstein offers an example of language at the near ineffable, and Mullen offers an example of language at the interstices of poetic traditions, Cain offers us language as the essence of American and Canadian history and culture themselves.

Conclusion

The four Canadian Post-Language poets that I have discussed here do not easily imagine themselves as assuming the reins of the Language tradition. These writers do continue to provide reassessments of traditional versions of poetic responsibility, by approaching those versions with a sense of provisionality. These poets, in effect, defend Language writing's approach to the world, the reader, the poet and the text, but they do

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so with a productive level of variation. Derksen's rearticulatory work embraces the disjunctive methods of Ron Silliman, and examines actual political stakes like Mark Nowak. Like these writers, as well, Derksen's poetry reflects the world at both an objective and a subjective scale, but unlike the others Derksen demonstrates our complicity in a world where capitalism, militarism and ethnocentrism invariably mediate both scales at the level of language. Rachel Zolf's investigative work embraces the irritating pulsions of a writer like Bruce Andrews, and riffs on the poem as an instructional device like Rodrigo Toscano. Similar to these writers, as well, Zolf's intention toward her audience must include a combination of stimulation and irritation, but unlike the others Zolf uses different conceptual models and computer-generated forms to achieve this task. Lisa Robertson's feminist poetics challenges a model of the autonomous subject in a similar way to both Lyn Hejinian and Juliana Spahr. Like Hejinian's and Spahr's model of the subject, Robertson's exceeds both autonomy and stability, but unlike the others Robertson explores a subject with agency enough to appropriate the male gaze. Stephen Cain's recombinatory work embraces a love of language's materiality like the writing of Charles Bernstein and Harryette Mullen. Along with Bernstein and Mullen, Cain manipulates language in order to capitalize on language's sonorous and punning capacities, but unlike the others Cain utilizes a vast array of conceptual constraints to explore, celebrate and critique the shared language of a North American political and cultural landscape.

According to Caroline Bayard, in her study of experimental poetry in Canada and Quebec, the Canadian avant-garde demonstrates "the capacity to fuse and celebrate what has been previously separated; that is, narrative from textual process, pleasure from scientifically established assertions, representations from non-representational

elements" (4). This characterization defies the logic and temporal movement of vanguardism, but in a way that seems not only appropriate for characterizing experimental Canadian poetry, but Post-Language writing in general. Pauline Butling makes a similar observation about "radical" poetries in Canada. She forgoes the avant-garde moniker in favour of what she and Fred Wah refer to as a "'re poetics'"— "*re*defining, *re*writing, *re*claiming, *re*articularting, *re*inventing, *re*territorializing, and *re*formulating" (Wah 203). Butling elaborates:

> Re posits lateral, spiral, and/or reverse movements rather than the single
> line and forward thrust of avant-gardism. Re disarticulates the forward
> imperative (as in disconnecting the links between cars on a train) and
> rearticulates by jumping the tracks and hitching up trains that have been
> sitting idle or are rusting away on abandoned tracks. (*Writing* 21)

In one sense, avant-gardist works, whether Pre- or Post-Language, in Canada do often demonstrate a hybrid of Canadian and American influences. In another sense, hybrid tendencies, whether cultural or methodological, in such avant-gardist works do not abrogate the value of such works. We should not, in other words, see the Post-Language phenomenon in Canada as either ahead of the pack, nor derivative, but as Butling suggest, a "guerilla action" (19). We must begin to see reconfigurations of the avant-garde like Butling's as the beginnings of an ethical account of the avant-garde. The stakes for experimental work in Canada, however, are not only about formal innovation, or about transcending the parochiality of Canadian Literature, but also about maximizing ethical and political impact through an embrace of the provisional.

CONCLUSION

"What is needed is a poetics of poetics; that is, a defense of the ethical grounding of poetics" (Bernstein, *Attack* 78)

Debriefing

In this dissertation, I have explored a theory of provisionality doing so in order to contextualize Language writing and Post-Language writing within the history and genre of poetic apology. Provisionality subsumes three terms—conditionality, necessity and anticipation—all of which account for both the dynamics of this history and the arguments on behalf of poetry. Just as changes in the philosophical, religious, sociopolitical, scientific, and literary contexts provide the conditions for attacks, so also do attacks against poetry condition and necessitate defensive responses. As M. H. Abrams, and, more recently, Hazard Adams, argue, defenses inevitably "adopt the terms of [their] attackers" (Adams, *Offense* 64), but rather than becoming trapped within those terms, defenses also operate by recasting purported faults into strengths—a recasting process that provides the condition for an aesthetic and ethical definition of poetry. Defenses, then, operate as temporary measures, contingencies in the ongoing definition and valuation of poetry. While defenses reiterate older arguments and theories, relying on the authority of previous apologies, defenses also anticipate the next phase in the life of poetry. Defenses also argue that poetry is speculative, offering explorations not necessarily of what is already the case, but alternatives to the way things are and the way that we understand them, both in terms of life and art. In other words, poetry not only provides a means to examine the distant and immediate past, but also a means to consider the future; poetry can respond to the world as it has

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unfolded, and poetrycan take responsibility for the world as it unfolds. Collections of literary theory interweave poetic defenses among aesthetic and critical treatises, but what seems to get partially obfuscated is how poetic defenses represent a unique genre that frames poems as acts of responsibility.

I have revised M. H. Abrams's four orientations of literary theory by applying them solely to poetic defenses and by reframing those orientations as "modes of poetic responsibility." In the Classical and Medieval eras, a critic like Aristotle insists that poetry be responsible for representing the world. In the Renaissance and eighteenth century, a critic like Sidney demands that poetry be responsible for benefitting its audience. In the nineteenth century, a critic like Shelley requires that poetry be responsible for expressing the imagination. In the twentieth century, a critic like Tate mandates that poetry be responsible for maintaining an autonomous existence. This brief outline of defenses appears more often in historical summaries without a sense of thoroughness or completeness. In contrast, I have considered not just the four major modes, but also four transitional modes, which Abrams glosses and absorbs into his four orientations. For example, I have examined defenses by Boccaccio, Dryden, Arnold and Pinsky because these writers offer provisional glimpses of the modes that follow. In other words, Boccaccio both rehearses Aristotle's speculative premise and anticipates Sidney's didactic notion; Dryden revises Sidney's didactic notion and anticipates Shelley's expressive focus; Arnold retains Shelley's metaphysical impulse and anticipates Tate's disinterested position; and Pinsky accepts Tate's disinterested position, but what Pinsky anticipates has yet to unfold completely because he is a contemporary apologist. Pinsky's belief that poetry must respond to the "unpoetic" (12) —to those forms and themes that readers do not immediately associate with

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poetry— suggests a progressive impulse beyond even Pinsky's work, but an impulse that the avant-garde accepts whole-heartedly.

In Chapter 2, I have provided a discussion of Language writing as an avant-garde formation that participates in a tradition of defending poetry and that pushes Pinsky's sense of poetic responsibility more radically. On the one hand, Language writing exemplifies the objective mode of poetic responsibility because Language writing attends to the primacy of the text—treating language as both a repository for cultural meanings and a catalog of concrete things. On the other hand, Language writing trancends the objective mode because Language writing adheres to an agenda of cultural critique. By treating language as material in itself, rather than as a vehicle for transcendent meanings, Language writers pry language loose from its ideological underpinnings just long enough to expose such ideology and to show the beauty of language stripped bare. Language writing also involves revisions of the other modes of poetic responsibility in an overall effect that demonstrates provisional forms of poetic responsibility. The traditional modes provide conditions for their own critique, and Language writing enacts such critiques primarily by deconstructing the assumptions of those modes. Ron Silliman explores a provisional realism that takes aim at narrative and prosaic depictions of the world. Bruce Andrews explores a provisional activism that takes aim at complacent and disengaged attitudes toward reading. Lyn Hejinian explores a provisional lyricism that takes aim at essentialist and autonomous models of subjectivity. Charles Bernstein explores a provisional formalism that takes aim at referential and absorptive forms of textuality. Working in these provisional modes, Language writing provides an alternative to Pinsky's defense of poetry, not so much because Language writing offers a contrasting example to Pinsky's call that a poet's

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responsibility entails both "preserving" and "changing" poetry (12), as much as because Language writing offers a more radical attempt to empower poetry as an ethically and politically critical force, challenging the previous models of poetic responsibility.

In Chapter 3, I have provided a discussion of American Post-Language writing as the most recent brand of poetics that participates in a tradition of defense. Like their immediate precursors, Post-Language writers articulate provisional modes of poetic responsibility—modes that reflect the theoretical and formal insights of critical theory and avant-garde poetics. Unlike their precursors, however, Post-Language writers articulate provisional modes that reflect the concrete and political stakes of lived experience and historical events. Post-Language writing also incorporates forms, techniques and sensibilities from more conventional poetics, perhaps in an attempt to optimize how poetry might take responsibility for political realities and for personal, readerly realities. Commentators like Mark Wallace (and more recently Cole Swensen and David St. John) refer to this amalgamation of avant-garde and conventional means as an experiment in "hybridity." Hybridity represents a provisional sensibility because hybridity suggests a poetics conditional, flexible, and capacious enough to explore subjects from a multiplicity of responsible modes. Post-Language writing embraces hybridity in an attempt to rectify the critiques against Language writing by actualizing Language writing's abstract politics, and keeping poetry responsive to actual needs. Mark Nowak, for example, tackles economic downsizing and steel mill closures though a documentary lens that includes testimony, commentary, and lyric. Rodrigo Toscano inspires readerly partisanship and engaged citizenship though fragmentary memoranda that incorporate questions, incitements, and imperatives. Juliana Spahr examines singular subjectivity and collective response to 9/11 through a journalistic

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meditation that includes personal statement, collective statement and excerpted reportage.   Harryette Mullen intertwines the inspired lyric and aroused blues of her own African-American experience through stanzaic versification that includes puns, rhymes and allusions. Each one of these writers imagines poetry as a responsible activity in the investigation of the world, whether that world reaches us through others, through ourselves or through texts.

   In Chapter 4, I have provided a discussion of Canadian Post-Language writing as a contribution to a predominantly American discourse about contemporary experimental poetry—a discourse that requires constant assessment. First of all, Language writing represents a phenomenon determined almost exclusively as geographically and poetically American, with origins in New York, San Francisco and Washington D.C. Second of all, Post-Language writing represents a phenomenon determined geographically and poetically as North American, without the same narrowly defined origins as Language writing.[152] While Language writing includes only one Canadian member, Post-Language writing includes Canadian contingents (with the Kootenay School of Writing, and the Coach House Coterie as two major examples). In my discussion of the Canadian Post-Language sensibility, I address two poets from each contingent, discussing how they extend the provisional modes of poetic responsibility. Jeff Derksen, for example, strives to access the world through its discourses, by rearticulating commercial and sociopolitical data in a logbook of ironic facts and factoids. Rachel Zolf strives to engage the reader through provocation by

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[152] In his recent essay for *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Charles Bernstein makes a claim for an expanded field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing that includes not only more contemporary writers, but more geographically diverse ones as well. See Bernstein, "Expanded" 281-297.

manipulating theoretical and corporate instructions in a combination of computer- and

self-generated lyrics. Lisa Robertson strives to empower the female subject by

objectifying phallocentric and literary discourse in a series of lyrical forays. Stephen

Cain strives to embolden the materiality of language by recombining American history

in an overlap of satirical and illuminating puns. Like their American counterparts,

these Canadian Post-Language writers engage Language writing as a resource,

ultimately, for the investigation of situations with actual political stakes—from our

engagement with the news, occupational discourses, and our own subjectivity to

sociopolitical history itself.

　　While I have suggested that scholarship about Post-Language writing occurs

mostly in an American context, and that such scholarship requires recalibrating, I do so

in part because of the effects of 9/11 on North America. The events of 9/11 and the Iraq

War have tightened the political and economic border between the U.S. and Canada, on

the one hand, but, on the other hand, such events have also intensified a transnational

awareness that many Post-Language writers have engaged prior to 9/11. Moreover, the

hybrid poetic sensibility that informs the Post-Language phenomenon runs counter-

intuitively against any attempt to isolate hybridity politically or geographically. The

Canadian poet Jeff Derksen suggests that after 9/11 most expectations of poetry

emphasize poetry's instrumental potential as a means to soothe or to provide access to

understanding. This instrumentalization, Derksen suggests, "not only limits the role of

poetry, but it also radically reduces of the *forms* of experiences and forms of knowledge

that September 11 has generated" (*Annihilated Time* 65). In defiance of this limiting role,

Derksen states: "North American poetry cuts against the unified and unifying roles it

was being asked to play after 9/11, and similar to properly political forms of agency,

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poetry and poetics is a system of communities with access to different sets of resources, cultural capital, actual capital, and opportunities for coherent and contingent actions" (71). In other words, Derksen suggests that a politically and ethically responsible poetics after 9/11 can only arise from a socioeconomically, geographically and technically diverse community.

While September 11, 2001 does not stand as an inaugural point in the development of a Post-Language writing, the tragic events of that day have resulted in responses that highlight the ethical functioning of poetry. Derksen, like fellow Post-Language writer, Juliana Spahr do not deny that poetry must mollify us in times of crises, but they do see a value in poetry that exceeds this function, one in which an ethics of poetry does not simply constitute a response to our political reality after the fact, but one in which an ethics of poetry takes responsibility for our political reality by somehow shaping the future of that reality. Poetry in a time of crisis demands a critical poetry—critical in the sense of urgent and attentive, as well as investigative and problematizing. Times of crisis call for a provisional poetics in the sense that provisionality registers how poetry constitutes both a necessary and imperative response, but one highly determined by the contingencies of the moment. Such poetry does not provide closure, in the sense of affecting an emotional or psychological resolution to a traumatic event, but opens the present to further investigation. "Viewing poetry in a time of crisis doesn't help to put an end to the crisis," according to

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Herberto Yepez; "it only helps to make poetry (again) a possible solution, a praxis that can really mean something good for the culture it belongs to."[153]

Andy Gricevich argues that times of crisis like September 11th necessitate that we embrace our vulnerability—that we leave aside the desire for definite answers, or correspondent retribution, in favour of a provisional sensibility. He states:

> 9/11/01 opened a narrative, and the demand that one support the "war on terror" appeals in turn to a demand for narrative closure. The story will end in a state of total security, and the process that's to take us there (through so many distracting subplots) involves rigorous administration of "justice," pre-emptive defense, and a bold display of invulnerability. … A refusal to be represented in terms of this demand, or to parrot the architects of such representation, a rejection of the desire for this closure, a freely chosen, resolute affirmation of one's vulnerability—these seem to me to be crucial responses to the events and the discourse of the present.

Affirming one's vulnerability does not mean resigning oneself, however, but engaging in a proactive "vulnerabilism"—an ethical stance attuned to the political realities that make us all susceptible to terrorist attack, but, at the same time, responsible for

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[153] Yepez continues in this passage with a poignant skepticism about an ethical poetics during critical times. He claims:

> [V]iewing poetry in a time of crisis puts the emphasis on the time of crisis, erases the fact that the institution of poetry is part of the crisis itself. … I think instead of thinking how poetry can help in a time of crisis, think how poetry has collaborated for the production of a crisis, how that production of a crisis makes a culture risks [sic] itself, and thus having to strengthen the strategies to perpetuate itself using the institution of crisis as an excuse.

A provisional poetics never intends to solve, but rather to problematize both the assumptions of the sociopolitical context, and of the poetic context. Yepez insists that poetics must include a level of reflexivity about how poetry colludes with, or critiques, the politics that give rise to crisis. I believe that insistence is an ethical one.

investigating the politics that solicit such attacks, if not also challenging the rhetorical closure that such politics enact. In other words, vulnerabilism is a provisional gesture, an attempt to articulate the politics and aesthetics of the avant-garde within an ethical framework. As I have argued in this dissertation, Language and Post-Language writing represent the most provisional, perhaps the most vulnerable, strain of poetics, and what this dissertation confronts is that the ethics of avant-garde writing, as opposed to its politics, yet remains to be fully articulated.

Prologue to a Manifesto for an Ongoing Poetics of Provisionality

 "Ethics start when you don't know what to do, when there is a gap between knowledge and action, and you have to take responsibility for inventing the new rule which doesn't exist" (Derrida 32).

Throughout this dissertation, I have contextualized Language writing and Post-Language writing within the tradition of the poetic defense because these contemporary forms of writing maintain that poetry must take an ethical responsibility for the world, for the audience, for the producer, and for the text. These forms of writing respond to these elements, first by deconstructing how previous modes of responsibility have envisioned these elements; and second, by offering provisional modes that might better respond to these elements in the postmodern moment—a moment in which contingencies and interpretations replace absolutes and assurances. By discussing how Language writing and Post-Language writing participate in a very canonical tradition of poetic defenses, I have also defended these avant-garde practices and the provisional modes that these practices enact. While poetic defenses demonstrate provisionality throughout their history, provisionality culminates in the avant-gardist tendencies of

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Language writing and Post-Language writing. Therefore, locating these types of

writing within a history of the poetic defense serves to defend the ethos of the

contemporary avant-garde.[154] In fact, I would argue that defenses share with the avant-

garde manifesto a dependence on the three aspects of the provisional: the necessary,

the conditional, and the anticipatory.

In his recent study of the avant-garde manifesto, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx,*

Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes, Martin Puchner suggests that manifestos operate under

the influence of "two conflicting tendencies": "[P]erformative intervention" and

"theatrical posing" (5). On the one hand, manifestos demonstrate a degree of

"performativity" in the sense of J. L. Austin's performative speech acts—words that

perform actions, as vows at a wedding ceremony do.[155] On the other hand, manifestos

demonstrate a degree of "theatricality" in the sense of unauthorized articulations—

words that feign authority, as the acting in dramatic presentations do. Summarizing

Austin, Puchner states: "Speech acts must battle and conquer the threat of theatricality

in order to become speech acts" (25). Like a poetic defense, a manifesto occurs by

necessity, out of an imperative to enact some necessary effect. Enacting that effect,

however, often remains highly conditional, because the possibility of success depends

upon "borrowing from an authority [that the defense or manifesto] will have obtained

in the future" (25). Like poetic defenses, manifestos generate their strength out of this

contingency—what Puchner calls "a point of weakness": "Since the manifesto speaks

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[154] I realize that "avant-garde" represents a fully loaded term with historical, theoretical and ethical resonances. While I do not intend to rehearse theories or definitions of the avant-garde, I do intend to discuss the appropriateness of the term, within a context of the manifesto, for future discussions of the provisional.
[155] See J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*.

from a point of weakness, it must hope that the presumption of future authority, the

projective usurpation of the speaking position of the sovereign, will have effects and

consequence" (26). Inevitably, then, both defenses and manifestos orient themselves

speculatively, in a "future perfect construction": "[A]uthority will have been provided

by the changes they themselves want to bring about" (24). Ultimately, both defenses

and manifestos have one eye assessing the present with the other anticipating the

future.

I do not intend to pursue this comparison between the defense and the manifesto

much further, except to suggest that poetic defenses following the Post-Language

phenomenon must inevitably demonstrate a poetics of provisionality, negotiating

between the "performative" and the "theatrical."[156] In other words, inheritors of the

ethical tradition that I have outlined here may have to balance the authority of the

performative with the vulnerability of the theatrical. They may have to combine

criticism and speculation, didacticism and inquiry, commitment and amenability.

Puchner suggests as much when he argues that art of the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries represents an "art under the sway, perhaps even in the shadow, of the

manifesto" (71). He continues:

> The manifesto is an exceptionally charged genre, poetically and politically,
>
> and therefore becomes the place where the most pressing issues and

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[156] According to Puchner's definition, "manifesto art" would not entirely resemble a
provisional poetics. He describes "manifesto art" as "an art forged in the image of the
manifesto: aggressive rather than introverted; screaming rather than reticent; collective
rather than individual." (6). Aggression might characterize a provisional activism, and
collectivity might characterize a provisional lyricism, but neither characteristic wholly
applies to all provisional modes of poetic responsibility.

> questions faced by twentieth-century [and twenty-first century] art,
>
> including the relation to the audience, to society, to politics, indeed, the
>
> whole conception of what an artwork is or should be, are being dogmatically
>
> as well as symptomatically worked out. (71)

Puchner posits the term "manifesto art" to describe an art wholly informed by the energy and poetics of the manifesto, and I think that "manifesto art" does participate in a broader history of poetic defenses, just as more recent examples of poetic defenses resemble manifestos. I would like to close then with a manifesto of provisional poetics—a manifesto that considers the future of the four modes of poetic responsibility under a provisional rubric.

Manifesto for an Ongoing Poetics of Provisionality

Provisionality describes, above all, an ethical imperative for poetry and art not only to act in response to political realities, but hopefully to impinge on those realities. First of all, a provisional poetics operates out of necessity. As Andrew Joron writes: "A kind of topological fold or failure (called a 'catastrophe' in mathematics) precedes the emergence—constitutes the emergence—of the New. If poetry 'makes language new,' then it must be defined as the *translation of emergency*" (3). A provisional poetics becomes appropriate when, in the face of emergency—unfamiliar knowledge, unassimilable experience—we must still respond. When critical moments, whether personal, or political, necessitate a response, a provisional poetics reflects the momentary, and momentous details of those crises.

Second, a provisional poetics manifests out of conditionality. As Susan Schultz writes:

> This is our impasse, this not knowing how to proceed, the lack

Of language as symptom of an oppressive disorder, but I want

To revalue this impasse as a crucial moment of opportunity,

Of exception, a point of launching from old languages,

Which strangle, into new organizations of words. (21)

A provisional poetics becomes appropriate when, in the face of impasse—of inadequate language, of insufficient forms—we must still respond. When existing models, whether antiquated, or compromised, inhibit a response, a provisional poetics accommodates the contingent, and temporary qualities of the impasse in newer models.

Third of all, a provisional poetics enables the anticipatory. As Joan Retallack writes: "What we need is a robustly nuanced reasonableness, one that can operate in an atmosphere of uncertainty, that gives us the courage to forge on, to launch our hopes into the unknown—the future—by engaging positively with otherness and unintelligibility" (22). A provisional poetics becomes appropriate when in the face of the unknown—the untested, the improbable—we must respond. When new discoveries, whether experimental or enigmatic, court skepticism, a provisional poetics values explorations of potentiality, over exercises with precedents.

A Provisional Realism for the Future

A provisional poetics will continue to distrust conventional or naïve realisms that attempt to re-present the world as capturable, or narratable, in seamless swaths. A provisional poetics will provide access to information, documenting and witnessing the world coming through in a mediated fashion by our various media, digital and analog. Such a poetics may take the "always already" as its temporal point of departure, but the lack of immediacy or the lack of proximity to some essential reality provides an opportunity to re-mediate the facets of experience and knowledge. Re-mediation

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suggests a re-articulation of the materials of experience, but also a remedying of the kinds of perspectives that attempt to pass themselves off as "real," as unmediated by discourse, or that uphold and preserve injustice. Provisional realist projects take responsibility for, and do not simply deconstruct, all perspectives—naïve, partisan, and cynical. A provisional poetics will undoubtedly push media, generic, and disciplinary boundaries in an effort to accommodate the ephemerality of our linguistic, aural, visual, and even tactile experiences. As one possibility, a provisional realism might resemble the kinds of interfaces that we see when we confront the front page of Yahoo, where a combination of breaking and past news, image and video, blend with what is trending on Twitter. In other words, a provisional realist work might combine the archival capacity of the blog with the aesthetic shaping of the collage. A provisional realism might utilize the burrowing logic of Google-based procedural poetry, providing access to the world as the world is known on the Internet, but open those procedures to include pictorial, video, and audio streams. Inevitably, however, a provisional realism will continue to arrive via the whims of the poet himself.

 After the Russian poet, Ilya Kukulin, we might consider the possibility of a new documentalism, three forms of which he describes below:

> The first includes poems in which the objective to create a particular kind of reportage, a report on a nonfictitious event, is declared either openly or indirectly. Thus the reader's trust in the author is based squarely on the report's nonfictitious nature, while the event's "genuineness" becomes, in some sense, an additional prerequisite for perceiving it aesthetically. The second tendency includes collages made from other people's texts, which are regarded as the manifestation of another consciousness and as the incursion

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into the text of another social and psychological reality. The third tendency
could be called combined or synthetic—it is based on existential lyrical
utterances provoked by documents which are either cited or, paradoxically,
"produced" through the signs of their own absence, that is, through
indications to the effect that such a document could exist (a kind of
"shadow" of the document). (595-596)

Documentalism does not provide objectivity, but provides instead a reality filtered
through the social and psychological lives of oneself and others, as these lives collide
and engage. In other words, a provisional realism of the future will explore the
collision of our variously mediated subjectivities in a view of the world as entirely
conditioned, and conditional, incomplete and ongoing.

<div align="center">A Provisional Activism for the Future</div>

A provisional poetics will continue to temper the edicts that poetry should edify
and delight. A provisional poetics will provide goadings, provocations and
instructions, prompting critical thought and action, outside of academic exercise. Such
a poetics will strive to inform, but it will not assume a "readership" as much as embrace
a "thinkership" (Goldsmith, "Conceptual"). Still, such a poetics will provide a kind of
documentalist delivery of knowledge about the world, with an aim of helping us to
make sense of the world either by challenging or supporting our own experiences.
Poetry must offer us opportunities and models for ways of thinking, for ways of
organizing the material of our lives, but not without concerted effort on our part as
readers. Poetry offers a reconfigured perspective, if not the possibility of a response to
the way that ideology infuses our language down to the smallest material. A
provisional activist poetics will not necessarily propagandize or take a political

platform or agenda as its impetus, but will illuminate how politics overdetermines our language, in both language's quotidian and discursive forms. Such poetry will not dictate; it will not recite. Poetry must analyze, just as it must help us synthesize: It must break language and information from their discursive contexts, to shed light, to reconfigure that material not simply in aesthetically pleasing ways, but in order to produce linkages that offer a kind of paratactic knowledge, a knowledge by accident and by experiment, rather than by pre-determined logics. A provisional activism will provide texts that do not simply provoke thought about how to read, but provide texts that prompt a change in thinking itself. The difference is "between 'openness' as a property of a text and *opening* as a process, an action that a poem might perform as part of a reading of it" (Gricevich). A provisional activist poem might move beyond both informing and prompting toward a more interactive model—a model that requires collaboration in order to manifest—a poet's theatre not simply witnessed but participated in.

   According to Charles Altieri, a viable avant-gardism that offers challenging texts must offer them not simply as opportunities to make meaning, empowering readers as so-called producers, but as opportunities to reflect on ourselves as "thinkers." "Undecidability cannot be primarily semantic," Altieri writes:

> The basic undecidability is ethical—not a matter of what things mean, but of who we become in our dealings with those meanings or efforts to mean. We need enough meanings on enough registers to feel the pressures of demand and possibility, which, in turn, test how we will engage what we encounter. Then we have the kind of undecidability where selves are tested and responses prove inseparable from responsibility. (641)

In other words, when "responses prove inseparable from responsibility" Altieri means that we do not simply read with an eye toward interpretation, but toward reflexivity, toward a combination of how we respond to the material and to the act of reading in a manner that does justice to that material. Provisional texts open readers not simply to an engagement with indeterminacy, having to discover the way to proceed in the process, but also to an engagement with the limitations of our thinking and feeling habits.

A Provisional Lyricism for the Future

A provisional poetics will continue to question the autonomous, essential subject as a source of inspired genius and inspiration. Such a poetics will provide a continued sense of the subject as mediated and constructed, but not without the agency, flexibility and choice provided by an inhabitable poetic voice or style. Subjectivity, within poetry, remains a possibility, a process and a virtuality that allows one to account for a history of experiences, while embracing one's ongoing experience at every contingent turn. Lyricism and expressionism under a provisional rubric also entail using the practice of poetry to push oneself beyond a certain behavioral, creative or psychological pattern. Provisional poetics offers an opportunity to move from a poetics to a "poethics" as Joan Retallack argues. "Poethics," as Retallack conceives it, is a provisional gesture in the sense that poethics challenges the view that poetry can reflect the world at a distance. Rather, poetry always bears ethical responsibility for the world. Poetry, she suggests, "is a practice with a discernible character (ethos)" (11). Poetry upholds certain values or challenges them, helps maintain certain perspectives or provides alternate ones. In terms of subjectivity within poetry, then, Retallack writes:

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Poetics without an *h* has primarily to do with questions of style. Style is the

manner in which your experience has understood, assimilated, imprinted

you. …Your poethical work begins when you no longer wish to shape

materials (words, visual elements, sounds) into legitimate progeny of your

own poetics. When you are released from filling in the delimiting forms.

(38)

A provisional lyricism will inevitably reflect how the "unintelligibilities of the

developing contemporary" come to bear on one's experience of self and how that

changed experience of the self gets filtered into the text (38).

A provisional lyricism of the future will strive less to preserve or represent

authenticity and will strive to find forms that reflect our "posthuman" subjectivity as

Cary Wolfe calls it. According to Brian Reed, who quotes Wolfe: "[P]osthuman"

subjectivity refers to

the "embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its

biological but its technological world," such that it is "impossible to ignore"

its "imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks."

The label "posthuman" can sound threatening or off- putting—are we

talking about the end of the human race?—but Wolfe clarifies that the

"post-" in "posthuman" serves the purpose of "decentering," that is, making

us think more carefully about how personal agency in the twenty-first

century is increasingly shaped by a process of "coevolution" between bodies

and technologies. (Reed 773)

Posthumanity suggests the further mediation of the lyric voice not only by the language

of others, appropriated and redacted, in expressive and pseudo-expressive ways, but by

apparatus like poetry generators, search engines and online translators. Such mediation reflects not only the entrenchment of technology, but provides a model for constructing selves in a more provisional way. So, a provisional lyricism of the future will reflect the inevitably shared experience of being "imbricated," however differently that imbrication occurs depending on race, class, gender or sexual orientation. A provisional lyricism of the future will manifest in more collaborative and interactive works, not ones that attempt to overlook differences of identity, however, but ones that take aim at forces that effect us collectively. As social and political events drive people to the streets together, issues of solidarity, and mutual dependence will reflect how the lyric gets reformulated and occupied by, not one, but multiple voices.

A Provisional Formalism for the Future

A provisional poetics will continue to foreground the material aspects of language, through emphasis on typography and sonority, as well as language's ideological aspects. Such a poetics will strive to balance political tendencies with poetic techniques as Benjamin argues in "The Author as Producer," where he insists that writers must develop formal apparatuses that best articulate and provide insight into the content. A provisional poetics will respect the historically fraught nature of language, but also its forgiving capacity for reclamation, neologism, and perversion. Such a poets will espouse multi-media and virtual projects, which also provide collaborative possibilities for "readers" to produce: not simply to make meaning out of texts, but to make their own texts, their own poetry out of such vehicles. A provisional poetics will also continue to embrace the kinds of disjunctive methods that allow for "elements from disparate contexts [to] bang and rub against one another" (Gricevich). Printed text limits the extent to which such juxtaposition and parataxis can occur, but

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with the rise of more fluid technological means, we will begin to see manifest in actual

poetic experiments "materials enter[ing] the poem, … transformed by the formal

context and the proximity of other materials; at the same time, the workings of the

poem itself chang[ing] in response to these new elements" (Gricevich). In other words,

the poem will begin to resemble a kind of cellular model, but not simply as constraint or

a conceit, but as a model for how discourses shift our language everyday in the

laboratory of the street, classroom or workplace.

According to Stephen Voyce, the current trend and the future for poetry, among

other arts and disciplines with any interest in the proliferation of new ideas,

demonstrates an embrace of an open-source poetics. He advocates the term

"commons" and suggests that the "commons" represents a particular practice among a

growing community that will and needs to continue growing.   Writing the commons

indicates "a practice … that foregrounds the communal construction of artistic artifacts,

disturbing the boundaries we assign to the private and the public, the owned and the

shared, the closed (424). The future of poetry and of a provisional poetics will inevitably

demonstrate a textuality that eludes authorship and authority, even originality entirely,

for the sake of representing language as a common, shared medium. Voyce continues:

> The responsibility of the avant-garde will … require an activistic obligation
>
> to create and fortify public domains of open source knowledge, to challenge
>
> excessive restrictions placed on language and information, to bring forth
>
> marginalized knowledges from a position of inaccessibility to the public at
>
> large, and to produce *and share* artistic tactics and works that challenge
>
> intellectual property. That which is at stake is nothing less than open
>
> accessibility to culture. (427-428)

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In other words, a provisional formalism of the future will continue to highlight the beauty of language as material—haunted and callused, recyclable and renewable—while also striving to archive and preserve physical and virtual texts themselves, outside the clutches of copyright law, and censorship.

Epilogue

What seems to be at stake finally is the definition and existence of the avant-garde, in the sense of an avant-garde that takes as its guiding force a responsibility for culture. My sense is that any faction of the vanguard, Post-Language or post-avant, inevitably espouses an ethical poetics. As Charles Altieri suggests: "Work can meaningfully offer itself as avant-garde as long as the density and scope of refusals in the aesthetic realm create hope that the emerging forms of aesthetic consciousness can also modify what counts as the social imaginary—and, hence, can provide possibilities for changing how societies function" (632). If poets are to continue to expand the possibilities for what constitutes a poem, thereby continuing to defend poetry, these definitions and defenses will no doubt continue to demonstrate provisionality as a set of characteristics and as a sensibility. As a history of apologies show, moreover, definitions and defenses are investments in the history and future of poetry—investments that begin with the belief in poetry as necessary. Poetry and other art can capture, albeit momentarily, our responses to the world, to others, to ourselves, and to discourse. But, poetry's forms can never completely contain these responses. While the political and social reality also condition the forms of our responses, these responses are at once temporary and transitory, and we constantly need new forms that allow us to re-present this provisional material. We also need new forms that will provide perspectives on our conditions—perspectives that will inform us how to change our

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conditions. We must continue striving to organize our language differently, to experiment with it syntactically, grammatically, visually, in an effort to better take responsibility for the world and our experience of others in it.

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