‘UN-HACKNEYED SOLITUDES’: RECYCLED FRAGMENTS AS LYRIC VOICE IN THE POETRY OF MARIANNE MOORE, ELIZABETH BISHOP, AND SYLIVA PLATH

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This dissertation by Laurel Rayburn is accepted in its present form by the Department of English as satisfying the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Laurel Rayburn was born on March 31, 1978 in Arcata, California. She graduated cum laude from Harvard College in 2000 with a concentration in English and earned her Ph.D. in English from Brown University in 2012. While at Brown, she received a University Fellowship (2003-04) and a Graduate Student Dissertation Fellowship (2009-2010). She taught a range of literature and writing classes at the Brown University, Patten University at San Quentin Prison, and the Harvard Extension School. She attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the summer of 2004 as well as several fiction writing classes through the Brown Literary Arts Department. She has presented her work on lyric voice at conferences in both the United States and abroad and is currently writing an article on Elizabeth Bishop’s “echoing” poetics. She lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and continues to teach in the Writing Program at the Harvard Extension School.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE Lyric Hospitalities: Description and Voice in Marianne Moore’s Poetry</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO ‘To be here, like them, and overhear’: Echo in Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetry</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE ‘Stuck in the Jaw’: Lyric Reiteration in Sylvia Plath’s Poems</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTERWORD</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

I. Whose Voice?

My dissertation argues that lyric is best defined as an indirection of voice rather than the subjective experience of a persona. In his critique of the legacy of New Criticism, Jonathon Culler claims dramatic monologue is still the primary mode through which we read poetry; in presenting the experience of a subject, dramatic monologue has eclipsed the aspects of “lyric” which would render it distinct from narrative. Resisting this trend, my project extends and puts pressure on the theorization of lyric as offered by Paul de Man, in which figures of voice—particularly apostrophe and prosopopeia—confer animation through trajectories of calling. Following de Man, I regard the invocative mode as signaling lyric, and yet my project shows the complications inherent in its identification. The poets I read—Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath—show that voice trajectories are indirect precisely because words arrive in poems already recycled. Every word carries within it its history as a constituent of other discursive contexts, a history that always conditions the trajectories of voice the poem can make. The repetitions inhering in the laws of poetic form necessarily compete with the banalities of linguistic recycling, even as the poem depends on such reused words for its very existence. If de Man’s lyric “I” is recognized for its ability to call to a “you,” then my poets show that the “I” must involuntarily listen to more than the “you” which is of its making. Indeed, the calling “I” also listens to the excess of sound whose origin cannot be traced.
My project defines lyric as a trope rather than a category of poetic genres, but this is not to claim a simple segregation of the tropological and the normative. The site of the repeated word or sound in poetry is often the aspect of the poem that marks its constraint: such repetitions instantiate rhyme structure, refrain, and meter. If the repetitive patterning of words and sound is understood to mark the genred aspect of the poem, such words simultaneously carry histories of past genres. The repeated word functions to sound the voices contained within it—an invocative gesture—even as what is invoked is the normative trace necessarily constituted by the word’s history. In this way, I argue that the repeated word performs the proximity of the tropological and the normative, calling attention to their easy elision and displacement. In its reiterative sounding, the word addresses *itself*, and in making such a call, it is vulnerable to the same indirections that de Man’s figures of voice more overtly enact. If apostrophe assumes a subject calling to an absent presence, the repeated word acts as an instance of auto-ventriloquy; in calling to itself, it becomes both subject and object of animation. The word’s literal replication is thus concurrent with the voicing of its history and futurity; it is necessarily out of time with itself. Such a temporality makes visible generic fragments that cannot be identified prior to the poem’s coming into being. “Genre” names the normative trace that exists as a silent or latent presence which only the poem’s unfolding can make visible. Genre thus returns in my argument as an involuntary animation conditioned by the poem’s formal limitations, but not coextensive with them.

Elizabeth Bishop’s memoir of Marianne Moore, “Efforts of Affection” provides an anecdote that—while it doesn’t makes use of literal word repetitions—demonstrates
the implicit, conflicting trajectories of voice that is the concern of my project. In recounting stories of their trips to the circus, Bishop at one moment describes Moore reuniting with a snake:

That day I remember that one handsomely patterned snake, writhing about in a glass-walled cage, seemed to raise his head on purpose to look at us. ‘See, he knows me!’ said Miss Moore. ‘He remembers me from last year.’ This was a joke, I decided, but perhaps not altogether a joke. (126)

Moore’s declaration is enough to create ambiguity for Bishop. The “knowing me / remembering me” which would endow the snake with human consciousness returns in Moore’s poetry, in which her animals at one moment “know,” “recognize,” and speak, and in the next show behavior that can only be attributed to membership in their own, “native” species. The snake, then, already presents us with a problem of taxonomy that Bishop herself is not sure how to read. Moreover, if it can be said in the logic of Moore’s world that “handsomely patterned” snakes are capable of “remembering” their visitors, it is also true that “handsomely patterned” announces itself as a Moore-ian description. The aesthetic regularity indicated by “handsomely patterned” would be a likely description of Moore’s verse more generally—a “patterning” on the page. Like “compression is the first grace of style,” which takes its source from a writing manual in order to describe a snail, “handsomely patterned” would describe the markings on a page as easily as they do the “text” of the animal’s scales. But of course, the words “handsomely patterned” are ostensibly Bishop’s. Already inflected with a Moore-ian idiom, this language suggests that one enters into the habitation of the circus snake with words generated from elsewhere—in this case, the “elsewhere” is Moore herself.

And yet, “handsomely patterned” is decidedly not an attributable quotation. The language calls attention to itself as that which seems to have been replicated from Moore,
but presumably, was not. Moore’s quip about the snake occasions the animation of words that appear to belong to a voice that within Bishop’s account, did not utter them. That is, the animation which personification would imply (that the snake might remember, recognize, or speak) is subordinated to a second animation latent in Bishop’s description: the “voice” of Moore’s poetic craft. That Moore’s voice emerges from Bishop’s description challenges the neutrality of “description” itself by placing the question of authorship at its center. The presence of a voice that does not speak the description, but nonetheless is animated by the descriptive words is necessarily a peculiarity; in fact, this bizarre kind of voice animation is typical of Moore’s poetic aesthetic. Indeed, as I will argue, the potential for a descriptive register to animate as voice—to invoke a presence other than its object of description—is fundamental to the poetry of both Moore and Bishop.

The appearance of an outside voice is treated more explicitly at the end of Bishop’s essay. Bishop confesses an inability to bring closure to the memoir. Instead, she recounts a vision of the letter ‘M’:

I have a sort of subliminal glimpse of the capital ‘M’ multiplying. I am turning the pages of an illuminated manuscript and seeing that initial letter again and again; Marianne’s monogram; mother; manners; morals; and I catch myself murmuring, ‘Manners and morals, manners as morals? Or is it morals as manners?’ (156)

Like the lunette in her poem, “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” Bishop here gets “caught in the toils of the initial letter” (57). Language seems to arrive from outside of her consciousness (produced perhaps by the “glimpse of the capital ‘M’ multiplying) at the moment when she fails to end the essay, or make a discursive closure. This desire for what we might expect to be a general statement instead produces a single letter, language at its most fragmented. In this way, the genre presenting itself as memoir
is disrupted by the fragments that make up its material—alphabetic letters themselves. The letter ‘M’ in particular as Moore’s monogram suggests the way Moore’s language explicitly eclipses Bishop’s, but it is also only this act of eclipse that occasions Bishop’s “I” to reassert itself as that which “catches.” The attention the repetitive words call to themselves is the occasion for Bishop to differentiate her language (“I catch myself murmuring…”) from that which appears to come from outside herself (“manners as morals, morals as manners…”). Involuntarily, she listens to words that she can’t get rid of. The bizarre temporality of inner speech renders Bishop in communication with an echo—the ‘M’—prior to her realization that she has become her own addressee.

In Bishop’s story, the moment in which language is displaced calls attention to the inevitability of linguistic recycling. In the sections of my introduction that follow, I examine the way such reiterated fragments constitute lyric voice in poetry. In “Lyric Studies Now,” I trace recent critical history on the lyric. I show that the habit of reading the “speaker of the poem” as a fictional subject still persists as a legacy of New Criticism. At the same time, accounts of lyric in the last ten years have tried to distance themselves from the ideologies of the New Critics by resisting the “specialness” ascribed to lyric. Refusing to read lyric as trope, such accounts end up leveling genre or reducing genre to historical context. Specific poetic strategies—including figures of voice, sound repetition, rhyme, meter—become readable only for their relationship to a speaking subject or a historical context (imagined as preceding the poem or existing outside of it). Reading

1 This last anecdote gives my first reading more credibility, then, in suggesting that the murmuring ‘M’ may be a figure for the way Moore’s language lives in Bishop’s voice more generally.

2 If the ‘M’ here functions as a visitation from an alphabetic letter, it also makes an appearance in Moore’s “Marriage,” a poem which can be considered a prototype of her collections of verbal fragments: “Turn to the letter ‘M’ / and you will find that / ‘a wife is a coffin’” (67). Lest we be too quick to equate the “M” with Moore’s monogram, her notes attribute “a wife is a coffin” to Ezra Pound, in another shift that resists any attempt to posit a singular speaker.
“voice” for its capacity to represent rather than animate, recent criticism has in turn refused to read those poetic effects not readily assimilable to symbolic representation. This assumption has driven debates about what constitutes the “modern” in criticism of twentieth-century American poetry in particular. Finally, I turn to a summary of Simon Jarvis’s work on “verse thinking,” which moves beyond the problem of voice-as-representation; Jarvis instead theorizes that the least legible parts of verse are the site of its historical record. What Jarvis reads as “history,” I understand as specifically generic history. Lyric, in my terms, tracks a history of linguistic norms—norms only made audible through sound repetition, rhyme, and reiterated fragment.

In “Lyric Address: The ‘I / you’ Amidst Echoing Words,” I turn to the problem of the lyric “I” more specifically and return to Paul de Man’s claims for lyric as connected to figures of voice. I follow de Man in arguing that “lyric” is associated with the invocative mode, but resist reducing lyric to the explicit presence of apostrophe and prosopopeia. While preserving the invocative function, I depart from de Man in identifying such function exclusively in these tropes. I argue that a theory of lyric must account for the function of both figures of voice and sound repetitions. De Man’s reading of Baudelaire’s “Correspondences” demonstrates the theorist’s interest in rhetorical function but leaves unexplored sound echoes and word-for-word reiterations. De Man’s project of tracking sites of lyric invocation is compromised by his failure to read echoing sound, a primary means through which poetry creates animation. In turning to reiteration as the site of invocation, I show that such repetition performs its own invocation through “auto-ventriloquy.” The call and response structure is not limited to the “I” / “you” pronouns, which always run the risk of calcifying as subject and object positions.
Echoing sound constitutes the lyric mode insofar as it distances voice-trajectory from voice-as-representation.

“Calling Out and Calling Attention” begins with Denise Riley’s claim for Echo as the “initiator of the ironic.” Riley insists that simple reiterations neutralize the symbolic function of a word. I argue that reiterated words, in calling attention to themselves, also “call out” to their own generic histories, sounding that history at the same time they generate new norms of comparison. In this sense, lyric “voice” cannot be tracked back to a speaking “I” but begins in echo itself. It is for this reason that I follow Riley in refusing to ascribe a mournful affect to the loss of the “I” as speaking subject. Echoing language functions in three ways: first, it unravels semantic sense, turning the word into nonsensical sound; secondly, it allows the word to act out alternate symbolic meanings or shifts its rhetorical function; and thirdly, it generates a norm of comparison within the poem. In interrogating themselves, such words take on the form of address. I outline the distinction between the apostrophic and interpellative address in order to show that apostrophe’s tendency to “call attention” redirects interpellation’s trajectory. I then read Bishop’s poem “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” to show that both the apostrophic mode and the reiterative refrain resist producing a subject through an interpellative hail. My reading of the poem plays out Jarvis’s claim that verse is most historical when its sound becomes least legible as representation. Naming and alluding to historical personae becomes an occasion to shift the historical valence away from Bishop’s poetic predecessors and toward an affective history of sound.

In my final section, “Recycled Words,” I argue that this moment where sound or reiterated fragment becomes least legible is the very site of its voicing. Moore, Bishop,
and Plath do not so much make the ordinary new through re-arrangement or re-contextualization, but instead track the linguistic history of the words that make up their poems. In this sense, their poems are not so much constituted by recycled objects as they are performing the process of recycling itself. My reading of Stevens’ “The Man on the Dump” exemplifies this difference. The poets I read are not invested in re-arranging worn-out images, but in sounding the history of such worn-out-ness; all the while they create competing systems of constraint through their poems’ own production of norms. Moore’s “Armor Undermining Modesty” demonstrates such competition when the dead language of advertising is denied a voice at the moment the poem’s words call attention to their own echoing language. Moore’s expression “unhackneyed solitude,” drawn from this same poem, is ultimately a figure for how I understand the lyric mode. The word “unhackneyed” sounds a history of linguistic force even as its semantic meaning refuses its reproduction. The “solitude” of the single “I” speaking is recuperated as a process made through the social history of linguistic cliché—of ordinary echoes. The final paragraphs of my introduction summarize how this lyric mode is specifically exemplified in the poetry of Moore, Bishop, and Plath, whose work is the subject of the following chapters.

II. Lyric Studies Now

The pedagogy of lyric poetry is constantly insisting (and readers are constantly forgetting) that the ‘I’ in the poem should be called the ‘speaker’ or the ‘person,’ and should not be conflated with the biographical author. Many poets have made a point of considering this ‘speaker’ as a function of the poem, and not the other way around. (Johnson, Persons and Things 15)
If lyrical language insists that the speaker is an effect of language—in Johnson’s words, a “function of the poem, and not the other way around”—then lyric studies in recent years attest to the difficulty of holding this as a critical assumption. The history I trace below suggests a logic behind the frequency of “forgetting” that the lyric “I” is other than a consolidated subject—fictional or biographical. Recent criticism on lyric is still responding to the privileged place of the lyric poem as it was instantiated in the twentieth-century first by the high modernists and then the New Critics. T.S. Eliot’s argument for an impersonal aesthetic nonetheless casts him as an authorized writer of literary history; the New Critics would follow his lead. As one critic would note, “The echo of Eliot in [Cleanth] Brooks’ first sentence, ‘Every poet that we read alters to some degree our total conception of poetry’ suggests the extent to which Eliot’s own program for literary history has been taken over by Brooks” (Hosek and Parker 282). The privilege of dramatic monologue among the Moderns would lead to the imperative to read any poem’s “I” as fictional persona. In this way, dramatic monologue became the dominant figure in reading and identifying poetry, and as Virginia Jackson has recently emphasized, the New Critical anthology would become fundamental to the leveling of all poetry into “lyric.” The collection Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism published in 1985 attempts to go “beyond” two approaches it claims are the legacy of New Criticism: the program of treating the literary text as an isolated artifact or object, dismissing concern with the author’s intention and reader’s response; and the tenet of the text’s organic wholeness, its reconciliation of tension or diversity into unity (Hosek and Parker 12). Jonathan Arac notes in particular, the way (then) contemporary theories of reading would resist upholding the “I” as subject: dramatic monologue “can neither as a poetic practice or as a
critical artifact ignore the threats to the ‘self’ and to ethics that have marked
poststructuralist theory, whether in the deconstruction of Derrida…or in the Marxist
Political Unconscious of Fredric Jameson” (Hosek and Parker 345). The collection thus
attempts to theorize lyric as other than or “beyond” the short, fetishized text that
constituted the quintessence of the literary for New Criticism.

Such an ideology of the lyric text has proven difficult to challenge, however.
Marjorie Perloff critiques the anthology’s blatant dependence on canonized poems,
arguing that the anthology assumes rhetorical terminology and the word “lyric” itself, to
have “transhistorical, typological validity”: the critics “too often fail to take into account
that the writing of lyric poetry is itself a mode of production that undergoes change. Thus,
the New Critical emphasis on the poem as autotelic object is ironically preserved”(Poetic
License 17). 3 From one perspective, the critical persistence of the claim for the
“transhistorical” is due to the way lyric is figured as a break from narrative time, a critical
conception that is often elided with the lyric “I”’s lack of historically specific identity.
“Lyric” is accused of being most ideological precisely at the moment that the “I” loses
any historical identity. Catherine Gallagher has recently traced the way literariness was
defined in its “refusal of sequential integration” from Shelley to the Modernist novel:
“Like knots of impacted, concentrated, dense language; paradoxes, ambiguities, and
indeterminacies; self-reference and repetition—all the language that seems to cross back
and forth over itself and consequently, to thwart forward movement—come to epitomize

3 As articulated in Poetic License, the book in which Perloff responds to Lyric Poetry: Beyond New
Criticism, Perloff’s bias for experimental forms, however, hardly provides a more rigorous definition of
lyric; in reading contemporary poems as a “disruption of the linguistic and syntactical order,” she would
seem to want to break with form altogether. She goes on to frequently makes use of the word “lyric”
throughout the text, invoking a term she has claimed is un-useful in its connotation as a “timeless and stable
product.” She thus omits any explanation for how or why she would need the term to begin with.
the literary. In short, the formalism of brevity, forever proferring new temporalities of the moment, belongs right at the heart of our profession” (323). Gallagher’s analysis thus gives us some sense of how “lyric” would come to be regarded as the most “literary”—and thus, the most embroiled in the ideology of canon-formation—both because of its (assumed) brevity as well as its putative ability to “arrest” time. Northrop Frye at one point takes a practical approach in defining “lyric” as “anything you can reasonably get uncut into an anthology” (31), emphasizing again the perception of lyric as necessarily compact. Earl Miner implies that lyric is that which stills temporal sequence when he declares that lyric is what, at its greatest “intensity,” “arrests” both narrative and drama; lyric thus appears to be most quintessentially itself when it is the business of halting the function of other literary modes.

Sharon Cameron’s *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* is an extended argument that such an arrest constitutes the definition of lyric as a genre. Cameron ambitiously reads Dickinson’s poetry as an exaggeration of qualities that, for her, constitute the characteristics of a transhistorical lyric genre. Defining voice in lyric poems as that which “cannot be in the poem except in contradistinction to action” (88), Cameron figures voice as synonymous with “presence,” through which “comprehension” of action or a “response” to action, can be known (89). At the same time, lyric represents a desire to be free of a temporality that is always only ephemeral:

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4 Gallagher explores the paradox of locating “form” (even in long narrative genres) as that which opposes length: “Often under the very banner of temporal consciousness, ours has become a formalism not of durability, but of ephemerality” (308). This is an interesting word choice in the context of Marianne Moore’s poetic practice. Moore’s mother famously warned her against publishing work that seemed “ephemeral”; it is an irony of literary history that critics seem all but unable to write on Moore without claiming that her craft relied on “ephemeral” sources—verbal fragments taken from newspapers, advertisements, and magazines.

5 See John Guillory’s “Ideology of Canon-Formation,” which takes T.S. Eliot’s relationship to New Criticism as its model (Guillory).
Voice (or as I have been calling it, presence) breaks through the linear sequence of events, offers a temporary escape by refusing the only alternatives, alternatives that are, at the same time, inadequate ones. Yet the temporary escape that is really no more or less than presence afforded the provisions that guarantee its existence—unbounded by both past and future—suffices. (88-89)

Such a statement finds several iterations throughout the book as Cameron figures lyric as that which knows itself to be only a “temporary escape” from temporal sequence. And yet, Cameron implies the transcendence of such escape in the language of “uprising” (218) or a vision “ris[ing] above [the world]” (219); lyric “may be regarded as a suspension of time that makes time bearable” (219). Such a figuration tends to encourage the conflation of lyric with the transcendent; indeed Cameron figures the lyric as involved in an oscillating “struggle” between such transcendence and the “shocking certainty of its disappointment”: the “deathless world of no time is a world we lose by merely waking up” (260).

Whether or not Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism was successful in moving beyond the autotelic quality New Criticism accorded to the aesthetic object, there can be no doubt that the essays collected still privileged “lyric” as a term for a formal category or effect. Twenty years later, PMLA published a conversation on “lyric” in which many contributors sought to divest the term of any critical agency.⁶ Of all the essays included, Culler’s alone argues for the persistence of “lyric” as a mode of study. Published in the wake of Virginia Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading, the conversation in many ways dovetails her longer study, which objects again to the ideology she sees as coextensive with a transhistorical claim for “lyric.” Jackson’s argument is based on the premise that literary criticism in the twentieth-century has made “lyric” in its own image. In particular, she argues that New Criticism made “the lyric”

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⁶ Rei Terada’s repeated disdain for “lyric’s specialness” is somewhat representative in this regard.
what it is by publishing poems in anthologies, de-contextualized from their original publication history. Isolated from their modes of production, such poems were simultaneously presented as absolutely “unmediated.” In this way, New Criticism’s claim that the poem’s only context is the occasion of its own reading was produced by its own act of de-contextualizing; this made the text into an artifact always beyond history and thereby, “lyric.” What Jackson calls “de-contextualizing” extends to how we’ve come to read the pronouns of any text we’ve named as lyric. The New Critical tendency to read the “I” of poems as a “fictional persona” rather than “historical persona,” for Jackson is only more evidence of the separation of the poem from its “moment of production” (70).

Jackson diagnoses contemporary lyric studies by claiming that poetic genres have been supplanted by “an imaginary model of the lyric—a model perhaps more constraining, because so much more capacious” (13) than those that would have been recognized by literary editors of the nineteenth-century. She emphasizes the way that we read “lyric” as itself a transparent genre; that is, we have failed to see or read as genre insofar as we fail to interrogate the assumptions that have led us to recognize a given poem or written artifact as lyric. In making every poem a “lyric,” genre has lost all

7 Jackson notes that if we read texts as private document—as letters, diaries, scraps of scribbled paper—we tend to ascribe historical personae to pronouns (in contrast to our reading of “lyrics” in which “I”s and “you”s are always, in her terms, fictional personae). The way we posit personae has everything to do with the history of publication, as we are more likely to read “private” and “literal” ascriptions into the pronouns of personal documents: “once the lyric is printed and opened to lyric reading, those public and private associations and their literal and figurative certainties are reversed” (70). Jackson’s project resists understanding the “you” of a poem as addressing the reader because it cannot fit within her schema: this gesture only takes language out of a publication context. I depart from Jackson in refusing to regard “historical persona” as the exclusive other to “fictional persona”; neither are “public” and “private” are the only axes through which we can understand textual reception. My position seeks to dissolve the reading that would necessarily recognize a “speaker” within the poem to begin with, a position possible if we understand language as animating and reanimating on its own. The ability of language to “lodge” dissolves the difference between “I” and “you”; the “I” of a lyric poem becomes the “I” of the reader when she repeats the poem in her mind. In this understanding, the “I” of the speaker is impossible to fix; the “I” has always anticipated its morphing into another’s “I” and will always be both personal and impersonal (or transpersonal) at the same time. This “I” undoes the shifts between historical and fictional personae that Jackson calls for by its ability to be hosted in spaces that publication context cannot account for.
meaning. Jackson’s solution, however, is a project of recovery that refuses to understand genre as other than historical occasion or publication context. In fact, her project is in many ways based on the idea that the disavowal of such publication and historical reading contexts is the very means by which genres disappear. Lyric is an “imaginary model that has lost the texture of reality we associate with “various modes of poetic circulation” (7).

Jackson’s work is symptomatic of the persistent impulse in poetry studies to undo the idea of “lyric” as an aesthetic object hermetically sealed off from social and historical forms. In the 2008 PMLA discussion, Yopie Prins and Rei Terada go further in resisting

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8 Jackson juxtaposes lists of poetic genres (now bygone in her view) with lists of what she terms “various modes of poetic circulation,” the mediums in which poems were published in the nineteenth century:

[I am simply] proposing that the riddles, papyrae, epigrams, songs, sonnets, blazons, Lieder, elegies, dialogues, conceits, ballads, hymns, and odes considered lyrical in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were lyric in a very different sense than was or will be the poetry that the mediating hands of editors, reviewers, critics, teachers, and poets have rendered as lyric in the last century and a half. As my syntax indicates, that shift in genre definition is primarily a shift in temporality; as variously mimetic poetic subgenres collapsed into the expressive romantic lyric of the nineteenth century, the various modes of poetic circulation—scrolls, manuscript books, song cycles, miscellanies, broadsides, hornbooks, libretti, quartos, chapbooks, recitation manuals, annuals, gift books, newspapers, anthologies—tended to disappear behind an idealized scene of reading progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression. (7)

The lists of lyric genres and modes of publication connect rhetorically, conflating the process by which genres disappear with a disavowal of publication context. Both kinds of lists in her prose function to contrast with an idealization: the many genres are supplanted by “lyric” and the many modes of circulation by the “idealized scene of reading” (7). Jackson’s lists reproduce the “capacious” quality that she herself identifies with the category “lyric” in the twentieth-century; they enact the abundance she desires to convey: a specificity without end. If Jackson is arguing against the reading encouraged by the highly mediated New Critical anthologies or editions—which, in her terms, paradoxically represent the highest degree of mediation while presenting the poems as unmediated—the form of her lists attests to the endlessness of mediation itself. While each item proclaims its specificity, the list itself undoes this effect by suggesting that each is subject to the same formal function. Her lists thus level the varied reading contexts and genres whose variation is the foundation of her argument. Jackson displaces the “imaginary model” of the lyric with an imaginary plurality, perpetually iterating.

9 Oren Izenberg’s recent work, for instance, makes use of the idea of “conceptual art” to argue that poetry must be defined as other than an “aesthetic object.” In establishing “poetry” in the twentieth century as an “ontological project,” Izenberg reads poems that he likens to “non-poems” in the sense that they “negate the very idea of aethesis as the privilege and destination of poetry” (11). He suggests that amidst “our
the nomination “lyric” as a kind of “radical of presentation” (Frye 275) or a discursive mode. Terada, for instance, in her eagerness to level “lyric” with all other literary and cultural objects of analysis, seeks nothing more than its “dissolution” (199). Terada’s informal idioms perform the denigration that is the object of her argument. In narrating her own experience reading “lyric,” she authorizes herself as one hailed by its “power” only to triumph over the same power through a bored disavowal. By the end of her article, she’s remarking, “let’s let ‘lyric’ dissolve into ‘literature’ and ‘literature’ into culture, using a minimalist definition of ‘culture’ from which no production or everyday experience can be excluded” (199).

century’s extreme failure to value persons adequately—or even perceive persons as persons” (2), such non-poems “formulate an ontological wish for accounts of personhood not susceptible to loss or risk” (22). In displacing the definition of poetry as “aesthetic object,” however, Izenberg leaves unclear what constitutes a poem; “aesthetic object” becomes a straw man for Izenberg to refer to a self-enclosed literary text which resembles nothing so much as the legacy of New Criticism. “Poem” in a positivist sense becomes synonymous with “aesthetic” signified by implacable boundedness, and the more fundamental “ontological” is set against “aesthetic.” Although the distinction between “aesthetics” and “form” is a much larger debate, my position assumes that “form”—which includes but need not be limited to purely “aesthetic” form—is a necessarily the way that poetic texts become relevant to “forms” outside of the immediate site publication or reading.

10 Prins, like Jackson, argues that critics should “take into account generic shifts in the production and circulation of poetry and [insist] on the cultural specificity of genres rather than [assume] the continuity of the lyric as a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon” (233-234). Rei Terada directly lauds Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery for the way it “places the problem of lyric firmly within the perception that lyric is there to be read” (198). While this group of critics rightfully calls our attention to the place the historical reader occupies in ascribing genre, they also assume the historical reader as the only formal agent in the textual encounter. This particular kind of historical approach takes away the text’s ability to make its own history through its formal commitments.

11 Curiously, while uninterested in pursuing “lyric’s specialness,” she at the same time narrates an autobiographic encounter with what she, in a different context, derides as lyric’s “power” (197). She begins by stating, “I’ve been waiting a long time for the release from lyric ideology” (196) and proceeds to narrate an experience of captivation by Bill Knott’s poem, “Goodbye”: “I was hypnotized and perplexed by their seeming authority. All of the poems [in her Pocketbook of Modern Verse] had a perplexing authority, in fact, but theirs was the most perplexing because I was so little able to explain to myself what they were appealing to” (197). Terada then follows this narration with a claim of her own disinterestedness. Her response was that she “did not need to learn how” this “mystique” could be explained; she needed to learn “why” (her italics, 197). Terada thus leads to a “hypnotic” and “perplexing” scenario only to disavow that it should be of any interest. Her “why” is itself perplexing for it seems altogether unclear how “mystique” (which would seem to gesture toward curiosity) is so quickly transformed into the boredom that “why” would imply (why would one bother to explain this anyway?). Indeed, she later claims “it’s helpful to reach a point where you don’t care whether something is lyrical or not” (198), which, along with her anecdote, frames “lyric” as a kind of adolescent stage of development.
Two alternative models of genre thus emerge. First, for Jackson, “genre” becomes conflated with “modes of poetic circulation”; Jackson thus cannot account for that part of genre that asserts sameness over historical time. In assuming that genres disappear with reading contexts, Jackson assumes that history makes genre, privileging the consideration of “genre formation historically” over historical formations, generically. In Jackson’s account, this moves the lyric “I” closer to a consolidated subject, insofar as Jackson’s solution to the “fictional persona” of the New Critics is to resurrect the “I” as “historical persona.” Secondly, Terada calls for a doing away with genre altogether. This critical move to level lyric with any other text (Terada’s “cultural” or “everyday experience”) dangerously conflates the hierarchies instantiated by any literary or cultural form with the necessarily ideological record of their reception. The call to do away with the latter (that is, to exclude nothing) is not only impossible, but misrecognizes the site of hierarchy itself. The history of literary canon-formation—the myriad ways in which genre has been ascribed and made to do ideological work—is not undone by reimagining the texts that make up that canon as absent of form. Bemoaning lyric’s “specialness”—or in Terada’s case, infantilizing it—and performing its obliteration in no way undoes the hierarchies that literary and cultural forms inevitably produce. Instead, the attempt to level the ideological work of any text (“let’s let lyric dissolve into literature, and literature into culture…”) risks the production of a reader who, blind to the text’s formal constraints, will necessarily be blind to her own reading’s ideological complicity.

The models represented by Jackson and Terada both deny the text any formal agency. Jackson’s rush to generate more historical context bypasses the text’s understanding of the past and future of its form. Terada’s leveling of generic difference
occludes the text’s own participation in normative hierarchy. In the twentieth-century American context, critical accounts of lyric’s relationship to genre has been limited by an ideology of newness that can be traced back to Eliot’s and Pound’s canonizing gestures. The same dichotomy, variously articulated as monologic / dialogic, solitary / social, or traditional / experimental, has led to various arguments over how voice is represented in poetry. This question, however, blatantly bypasses the crucial premise of lyric voice itself: that what is important about voice is decidedly not its representation. Critics such as Marjorie Perloff and Gerald Bruns have perpetuated an idea of the modern as necessarily aligned with experimental forms, reproducing Pound’s program to obliterate rhetoric altogether. This version of the “modern” values the breakdown or breaking apart of a monologic speaker (a speaker repeatedly aligned with the Romantic poets). The inclination to move beyond lyric as merely aligned with a solitary speaker has resulted in the critical production of a multiplicity of speakers. Accounts of Modernist poetry in the nineties often cited its “heteroglossic” qualities, invoking Bakhtinian terminology to read poetry, assuring that poetry, like Bakhtin’s novel, is likewise comprised of voices from various socio-cultural milieu.

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12 Johnson articulates this succinctly as follows: “The complete thought [the poet] utters is not ‘X is Y,’ but ‘I invoke X… He doesn’t even have to say anything about X. He merely has to ring it’” (9). While Johnson’s short description suggests the privilege of apostrophe as the figure of speech of lyric modes—a privilege I am attempting to question—the resistance to representation (“not ‘X’ is ‘Y’”) is absolutely consistent with my understanding of lyric voice.

13 Pound famously denigrated the whole of the nineteenth-century as a “rather blurry, messy sort of period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of period” (45). He goes on to describe what (he hopes) poetry in the twentieth-century will become: verse without “rhetorical din and luxurious riot” with “fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it” and “free from emotional slither” (46).

14 See Jacob Blevins, ed. Dialogism and Lyric Self-Fashioning and Marianne Shapiro and Michael Shapiro, “Dialogism and Addressee in Lyric Poetry.” Cristanne Miller’s Questions of Authority makes a claim for Moore specifically as a heteroglossic poet: “For [William Carlos Williams and Moore], a heteroglossic, pluralist, anti-imperialistic (anti-specular) presentation or intertext of voices acts as a didactic tool of participatory education. No singular or unambiguous voice instructs, but the poems push oppositionally
from the nineteenth-century lyric—consistent with the turn toward culturalism and identity politics—preserved the idea of the speaker as subject even as it claimed a pluralist aesthetic or politics. As I hope is clear from my argument, positing the monologic speaker against dialogic speakers (aligning them respectively, with the Romantic lyric and the Modernist or post-modern text or poem) obstructs the distinctions that are lyric’s native concerns and instead reads poetic device only for its ability to shore up consciousness, whether individual or plural. Mark Jeffries has eloquently articulated the obstructions produced by the rush to make lyric “dialogic”:

Whether lyric can be said to be monologic or dialogic is perhaps less relevant...than is the unstated, normative, and ideologically freighted premise behind writings both for and against the dialogism of lyric that dialogism is a desirable quality in a text. As defenders of lyric, [Marianne] Shapiro and [Michael] Shapiro labor to find dialogism within lyric texts because they view the presence of dialogism as a positive evaluative criterion. Their success suggests that, if sought, evidence for particular ideological formations can be found.” (204)

Such “labor” is thus makes poetic style into a “flag” or “banner” for an ideological position. Jeffries’ critique implies the way dialogism has been put to use in the service of pluralism: a critical trend consistent with the recovery of “other modernisms” that accompanied the literary turn to cultural studies. The resistance to formal resistance itself is marked by the way “social” or “intersubjective” are invoked as rallying cries to argue for poetry’s cultural relevance. This gesture is most always accompanied by misreading lyric forms as representative voices—“voice” as pluralism has prized it.

toward change” (6). The effort to read Moore pluralistically is a misreading on many accounts, but most generally in its assumption that Moore’s many verbal artifacts constitute represented voices.

15 Simon Jarvis uses these words to refer to grafting a particular politics onto a poetic form or device. See also Mutlu Blasing, Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry for a critique of this overwhelmingly common assumption in the criticism of twentieth-century poetry.

16 For a particularly extreme example, see Michael North, Reading 1922 as a study that levels formal distinction of genre for the sake of a capacious inclusiveness of cultural texts.

17 See Susan Stewart’s Poetry of the Senses for a more nuanced account of poetic “intersubjectivity.”
In his work on “thinking in verse,” Simon Jarvis resists and responds to both Terada’s and Jackson’s arguments while simultaneously moving beyond the question of voice as representation. Of the *PMLA* roundtable, Jarvis notes that “meter and rhythm, were, mostly, the elephants in the room” (923). Following Adorno, Jarvis posits “technique” as “the way in which art thinks and the way in which the work of art most intimately registers historical experience” (931). In asking how meter and rhythm think, Jarvis critiques a kind of historicism which would privilege the context surrounding verse to the means verse itself has of making context:

(T)he history of verse thinking is not the same as the history of representation in verse thinking. Indeed, those representations very often are written just so that the persisting part-infantile…or even perverse…elements of verse thinking, its embarrassing overinvestments in mere clicks, pitches, and echoes, should be concealed or rationalized. (932)

In this way, Jarvis resists the conflation of poetic history with the *record* of poetic history. To read for the “part-infantile,” “perverse” elements of verse is not the same as making claims for the “specialness of poetic language” (933); rather, as he argues, it allows us to access a mode of thinking that is “non-identical with that of (say) prose fiction or political or economic history” (933). Jarvis doesn’t take up “lyric” as a key term, but he nonetheless laments the “default priority of hermeneutics over poetics in the study of poetry” and the way the “aesthetics of verse continues overwhelmingly to rely on the logic of mimetic relationship to paraphrasable content” (933). Moreover, he refuses making an entire metric schema serve a political function, lamenting that we still have few ways of reading for prosody that refuse to make meter and rhythm into a “badge” for a particular ideology (933).
Jarvis proposes instead that verse constitutes its own system of logic. The terminology of “thinking” enables a position for prosody that neither transcends historical time, nor is reducible to other disciplinary or generic assumptions. Meter and rhythm have a historicity that cannot be equated with historical context. Jarvis’s resistance to making “style” into a badge for a given politics leads him to de-privilege that aspect of poetry most legibly or overtly attached to particular historical circumstances. Instead, verse is a “repertoire” that is not a set of “fixed effects” but rather a “quasi-system of local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on or develop” (934). Versification as a “secondary repertoire” competes with and complicates any intellectual “design” for a poem, implying as well that such verse effects compete more generally with an historical reality understood as prior to their coming into being. This is what I take him to mean by his claim that the “historical force” of verse-thinking “may at any particular juncture depend upon rendering the meta-communications of verse less immediately legible…so that verse can be reanimated as a repertoire of historically and affectively saturated paralinguistic gestures” (932). Jarvis’s argument thus maintains that versification is read most effectively when we resist reading for legible argument, political claims, or social relevance; the historicity of verse is best apprehended at the site where it appears least historical.

My argument for lyric’s relationship to genre depends upon the way poetic figures of voice perpetually resist calcification as subject positions. I extend Jarvis’s claims to examine their implications for considering lyric’s relationship to genre. “Genre” is neither reducible to historical context, but nor is it a stylistic flag that fixes its normative

18 Within the context of his argument, “secondary” does not connote “de-privileged” so much as it does “posterior.” It is the aspect of verse that comes into being within the poem, in contrast to the poem’s initial design, or any concept or argument the poet might intend (934).
effects prior to the moment of the poem’s unfolding. Genre exists in a latent capacity at the level of the fragment, word, and repeated sound. Jarvis’s “verse repertoire,” as an articulation of “local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on or develop,” (my italics) suggests the way the words of a poem sound forward and backwards at once. Within the terms of my argument, what is “taken on” is the history of the word, including both its history of becoming a norm and its history as entrenched in various normative structures. What is “developed” is the set of norms that the poem makes in its own formal patterning. In this way, what the “prosodic gesture” develops is likely in competition with, or acting as a resistance to, the history of the words it has “taken on.” At the same time, it is only through the development of the prosodic gesture that the words’ histories can sound. Genre thus persists as a silent or latent presence that the poem’s own prosodic strategies evoke.

Contemporary poet Barbara Guest illustrates this point succinctly in her poem, “words.” In its opening lines, words themselves are figured as seekers of both infinite space and a means of lodging:

The simple contact with the wooden spoon and the word recovered itself, began to spread like grass. the word entered its continent eager to find another as capable as a thorn. (Rankine and Spahr 188)

The journey of the word thus begins with its recovery from “woodenness”; this history of the word is a history of contact with cliché. The word’s future is thus associated with a “recovery” from banality, accomplished first by “spread[ing] like grass” and “enter[ing] its continent” and then by finding a means to re-lodge, to function like a thorn—to get stuck inside a foreign object. Healing from woodenness is not fully accomplished by endless spreading, but requires the enclosing capacity of the thorn. The poem thus
presents two images of constraint: the woodenness as a kind of deadness, and the thorn as a means of sticking indefinitely. The thorn thus figures Jarvis’s “verse repertoire” insofar as it offers a competing constraint to that of the word’s history. Its constraint is decidedly of a different kind; the word’s lodging (as thorn) is what gives it futurity at the same time that its history as both wooden and spreading is recorded.

III. Lyric Address: The ‘I / you’ Amidst Echoing Words

‘Love should be put into action!’
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo
tried and tried to confirm it. (Bishop 8)

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds. (Plath 161)

Jarvis’s theorization of “verse” rather than “lyric” diverts the problem of the “I” altogether, implicitly assuming the “I” becomes an effect of language equal to any other word. Indeed, the consolidation of the “I” as speaking subject counters Jarvis’s aim; this “I” would obstruct the way “verse can be reanimated as a repertoire” in occluding the very aspect of the poem that resists assimilation to narrative forms. In one sense, I follow Jarvis in displacing the significance of the “I” with any repeated word or sound. At the same time, the lyric “I” literalizes a call that makes overt the connection between poetry and other forms of address—most obviously, Althusserian interpellation. In the twentieth-century American context, the success of advertising depends largely on both animating the inanimate and the call to a consuming “you.” The lyric “I / you” are necessarily entrenched in the Althusserian hail, and as such, provide a means of putting pressure on its logic. The very effectiveness of interpellation suggests that the “I” is
perpetually “forgetting” its construction in language. The function of the lyric “I” as that
which tugs at the guise of the persona makes visible and challenges advertising’s
dependence on the continual re-consolidation of a desiring subject. Barbara Johnson’s
interest in lyric address, for instance, is based on the assumption that the desire to
animate is connected to late capitalist reification. That the lyric “I” has been
traditionally thought as a phenomenalization of voice is, in this account, the source of its
relevance. Although de Man’s thought is often equated with dismantling the presence
voice would posit, he in fact begins with the assumption that, “the principle of
intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice” (58).
There is no getting around the fact that the lyric “I” necessarily voices, no matter how
much we remind ourselves that the “I” itself is an effect of language. The “I” insists again
and again on its singularity—what Denise Riley calls a “spasmodic site of space-time
individuation and its mocking promise of linguistic originality” (The Words of Selves 85).

The “I” and the “you” instantiate a temporality of lyric that persists as a perpetual
present—the very temporality disavowed by Jackson’s model of historical critique. Such
a temporality is in part accomplished through apostrophe and figures of voicing
themselves; by catapulting an “I” and “you” into circulation, such figures announce the
occupiable status of both pronouns. However “occasional” a poem may be, any reader’s

19 In noting the pervasive use of rhetorical figures of speech to confer animation (apostrophe, prosopopeia,
personification, anthropomorphism), Johnson draws a connection between such figures and the desire to
resist “a decline of humanness and thingification that go on all the time and have only accelerated with
commodity capitalism” (2008, 23). This in no way prohibits capitalist culture from appropriating such
figures: while “prosopopeia may sometimes seem contrived and old-fashioned in poetry, it is robust and
necessary in advertising, where speaking things seem to be de rigueur” (18). Johnson hints here at an
interesting critical history of avoiding such figures of animation. Jonathon Culler’s “Apostrophe” from
1981 conjectures that (at that time) the trope had gone unread due to its tendency to be embarrassing (The
Pursuit of Signs 135–154). Johnson’s apologies for the critical study of prosopopeia in 2008 suggest to me
that its association with commodity culture has rendered it not only more contrived, but also infantilized,
associated with the ideological blindness of the commodity rather than its critique.
voicing of a poem constitutes herself as its “I” or “you”; the poem’s “speaker” thus becomes a category much more fraught than dramatic monologue might have us imagine. That the “I” and “you” are occupiable by the reader suggests lyric’s pronouns as a site of palimpsest, uttered for the purpose of superimposition or displacement, their function to speak many temporalities simultaneously. Culler argues that the addressed “you” functions above all to place the act of lyric speech in the lyric present and to accentuate the paradox of poetry, that evokes immediacy while adopting a temporality of deferral, as it repeats itself for readers in a future not even imagined, and articulates an attitude whose appropriateness future audiences of readers are to judge. (“Lyric, History, and Genre” 85)

This is not a surprising claim given the way that Culler has developed de Man’s work on apostrophe; the “I / you” structure of address is what instantiates lyric as such. One of de Man’s most prominent legacies in poetry criticism is his claim for apostrophe and prosopopeia: “the figure of address [apostrophe or prosopopeia] is recurrent in lyric poetry, to the point of constituting the generic definition of, at the very least, the ode (which can in turn be seen as paradigmatic for poetry in general)” (Hosek and Parker 61). What appears to be the intention of the claim—to connect the invocative mode to lyric—is muddled in de Man’s shifting terms which slip from “lyric poetry” to “ode,” to “poetry in general.” As I hope to show, such confusion is consistent with de Man’s perpetual unwillingness to equate trope and genre; in this case, the indirection caused by his slipping terms exists at the heart of what would be a definition. His “stutter” if we can call it that, suggests his resistance to reducing a relational structure of voicing to a recognizable norm.20

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20 In “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric,” de Man will resist the gesture of taxonomy more overtly, in claiming that “lyric is not a genre,” and “generic terms such as ‘lyric’ (or its various sub-species ‘ode,’ ‘idyll,’ or ‘elegy,’) as well as the pseudo-historical period terms such as ‘romanticism,’ or ‘classicism,’ are
Culler’s understanding of “lyric,” however, seems to go beyond the temporality rendered in the lyric “I” and “you.” His claim for lyric memory is related, but not reducible to, the timing of the invocative mode. Culler distinguishes “poetic memory” from narrative by claiming that “to remember poems at all is to remember some of their words, isolated phrases perhaps, which stick in your memory, you don’t know why. The power to lodge bits of their language in your mind, to invade and occupy it, is a salient feature of poems, a major aspect of their being” (xii). While Culler seems to elide “poetry” and “lyric,” my point is merely to note that here, the “I” and “you” aren’t fully responsible for lyric’s portability—its tendency to travel in unpredictable directions beyond the time of its publication, reading, or enunciation. Here, lyric’s capacity to “occupy” would seem to be larger than what I have termed the “occupiable” positions of the “I” and “you.” The voicing reader, then, is not merely a palimpsest with the speaker of the poem, or even the poem’s “you,” but is caught within a power struggle in which she is inevitably forced to become a listener to the very lines she thought herself to be voicing. And yet, it would seem that this “power” cannot be attributed to the simple presence of an “I” or “you” in her reading. In the anecdote at the beginning of my introduction, the language addressing itself to Bishop was nothing more than “manners as morals, morals as manners.”

The generality of Culler’s claim for “lyrical language” is made on behalf of a larger argument for poetry’s place in literary studies. But it calls attention to an aspect unexplored in de Man’s theorization of lyric. De Man’s aim in demystifying linguistic structure would seem to have no claim on poems’ “power to lodge bits of their language

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always terms of resistance and nostalgia, at the furthest remove from the materiality of actual history” (1984, 262).

21 The “occasion” for the lines I’ve cited was an address to the ACLA.
in your mind.” At the same time, such “lodging” might be said to haunt de Man’s essay, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric.” As Johnson has noted, de Man’s readings in this essay are “haunted by Ovidian presences,” especially female figures: “Echo is lurking behind every mention of Narcissus, while one of the recurring cruxes [in de Man’s reading of] “is whether there is human substance in a tree” (190). For my purposes, it is enough to note that de Man’s essay is rife with word “echo” itself, although consistent with Johnson’s noted omission, the word’s lower case ‘e’ indicates its disavowal of “Echo” as Ovid’s female figure. My reading of the essay proposes that such “echoes” may have something in common with Culler’s “lodging language.”

But de Man’s essay starts from a different place altogether. He begins by exploring a potential conflation of trope with normative assumption. Reading Nietzsche’s assertion that “truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms,” de Man pauses over the last term in the enumeration. Whereas the first two are “tropes,” de Man claims that “anthropomorphism” is not: “trope” must be distinguished from “anthropomorphism” on the basis that the former designates a “proposition” whereas the second is an “identification on the level of substance”; it is “the taking of something for something else that can be assumed to be a given” (241). As Johnson paraphrases, “[Anthropomorphism] is not the name of a pure rhetorical structure [as are metaphor and metonymy] but the name of a comparison, one of whose terms is treated as a given (as epistemologically resolved). To use an anthropomorphism is to treat as known the properties of the human” (2008, 190). Thus, for de Man, if “trope” is on the side of rhetoric, then “anthropomorphism” bears a similar structure as trope and yet obliquely makes a normative declaration. While “genre” is a term de Man rejects,
“anthropomorphism” is nonetheless the means through which normative values are expressed. In response to Nietzsche, de Man writes, “truth is trope; a trope generates a norm or value; this value (or ideology) is no longer true. It is true that tropes are the producers of values which are no longer true” (242). If trope appears always vulnerable to generating a normative value, its conflation with anthropomorphism (as a figure that ascribes a value or norm) makes it “untrue” not in any substantive way, but because it has ceased functioning as a trope. Its taking itself to be a trope would be the site of its untruth. In this way, de Man’s interest is not “critical schemes that deny certainty in themselves” [“trope”] but “their disruption by patterns that cannot be reassimilated to those schemes” [“anthropomorphism”] (240).\footnote{22 See Cynthia Chase, “Double-Take: Reading Derrida and de Man Writing on Tropes” in Redfield for an extended discussion of this passage as de Man’s attempt to “undermine the significance of trope” (28).}

To track such “disruptions,” de Man proceeds to read Baudelaire’s “Correspondences” and “Obsession.” As others have recounted,\footnote{23 In the discussion above, I am obviously indebted to Barbara Johnson’s reading (2008, 189-197); see also Peggy Kamuf’s description of “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric” and Virginia Jackson (2005, 100-109).} de Man’s argument hinges on the close reading of “comme” in “Correspondences.” The poem depends on “comme” to establish a symbolist ideology, as “comme” designates the analogical or metaphoric relationship between two entities. In its English translation, the lines read, “There are some perfumes fresh as a baby’s skin, / Mellow as oboes, verdant as prairies” (Trans. Johnson, 2008, 192). “As” or “comme” here functions to knit together two entities: perfumes are as baby’s skin, for instance. For de man, this figure of speech “[states] the totalizing power as metaphor as it moves from analogy to identity, from simile to symbol and to a higher order of truth” (248). The “comme” “does its work properly and clearly, to achieve the figure of speech” (248); it functions to “transport” or
connect the terms of the poem to a higher unity. This symbolic unity, however, is disrupted in the last lines of the poem, when the word “comme” shifts syntactically. “Comme” here does not signify an identity, (in which one entity is like or as something else), but instead means, “for example,” or “such as”:

—And others, corrupt, rich, and triumphant,
  With all the expansiveness of numerous things,
  Like ambergris, musk, benjamin, incense,
  That sing the transports of spirit and sense (Johnson, 192).

Here, the line which names other perfumes “like ambergris, musk, benjamin, incense,” enumerates rather than creates an identity. “Perfumes are like…perfumes” is not a metaphorical structure. For de Man, this syntactic shift in “comme” (here translated “like”), generates the threat of “aimless enumeration” (254). The symbolic transcendence is obstructed by the possibility of endless repetition of terms. Moreover, the suggestion that perfume is a figure for “song” means that the “comme” of the last line undoes the possibility of lyric as “song.” This is accomplished by de Man’s claim that the last “comme” is a “stutter”: “the suggestive identification of ‘parfum’ with song, based on common resonance and expansion, is possible only within a system of relays and transfers that, in the syntax if not in the stated meaning of the poem, becomes threatened by the stutter” (254). The syntactic shift thus disables the poem’s claim to “song” by displacing “common resonance” with mechanical enumeration.

De Man thus reads the “stated meaning” of the poem against the threat of the grammatical stutter. What he leaves out, however, is the repeated sounding of “comme” itself, the way in which the grammatical stutter may or may not work against the stated sound in the poem. That “comme” stumbles into a syntactic shift—in which it outs itself as linguistic structure—clearly depends on its reiteration. “Comme” has to recycle itself
in order to do what de Man wants it to do. De Man’s syntactic palimpsest—comme as making both metaphor and endless enumeration—oddly enough registers for him as “stutter,” but not because it performs a repeated enunciation of sound; the aural dimension of the literal echo of “comme” is not the site of “stutter.” On the other hand, the moment of the poem that begets enumeration—the “comme” meaning “for example” or “such as”—produces an “echo” for de Man, but only in the figurative sense. For de Man, enumeration “echoes” insofar as the grammatical position reiterates. The many names of different perfumes constitute an echo, but the exact repetition of the word “comme” does not.24 “Sameness” for de Man is limited to grammatical sameness rather than an aural repetition or the visual repetition of the letters on the page.

For de Man to claim the initial symbolism in the poem, he has to show that indeed there is a prior difference to the terms that “comme” enjoins. The “comme” does not “upset the balance between difference and identity it is assigned to maintain” (248). But his reading of the following lines is questionable on this score. The lines read, “Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent… / Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.” De Man claims that achievement of the “figure of speech” (of metaphor) is accomplished because “it is not actually the case that an answer is an echo; no echo has ever answered a question except by a ‘delusion’ of the signifier—but it is certainly the case that an echo sounds like an answer, and that this similarity is endlessly suggestive” (248). Interestingly, de Man must make the case for the difference between “echo” and

24 The distinction between these two types of sound repetition (on the ear and on the page) are significant given that the three poets I examine have different means of “sounding” such likeness. Moore’s “inaudible” rhymes can nonetheless be “heard” on the page. Margaret Holley has described them as “perceived with the eyes on a written text or not at all. They are not available to the ear alone, and hence do not affect the spoken rhythm of the lines…. Instead, they discover for us the rhymes hidden in practical language without audibly or rhythmically foregrounding those rhymes” (150).
“answer” in order for his reading to hold. The perfumes, colors, and sounds must reply to one another like echoes; for the metaphoric structure to be functioning, they cannot themselves be echoes. If de Man begins his essay calling attention to the way Nietszche’s “metaphor, metonymy, and anthropomorphism” elides the function of its terms, it would seem that his reading of Baudelaire overlooks a similar aberration: perfumes and colors would require a metaphoric transfer to accomplish an “echo,” but it would seem that sounds do, in fact, literally echo one another. If this is so, then the “stutter” of the metaphoric transfers that de Man locates in the last “comme” of the poem, can be relocated to a much earlier site. The grammatical “stutter” would coincide with the incompleteness of a metaphor which seeks to posit difference between “echo” and “sound.”

De Man’s exception to the impossibility of echoes “answering”—“no echo has ever answered a question except by a ‘delusion’ of the signifier”—is peculiarly left unexplored, especially given that the shifting syntax of “comme” would seem to be an instance of the “delusion of the signifier.” In fact, it is at this moment in the essay when he footnotes “Echo” herself as such an exception. In privileging grammar over sound, de Man must keep “Echo” consigned to “echo.” “Echo,” the Ovidian figure, oxymoronically, voices a literal echo that de Man’s figurative echo necessarily conceals. As others have noted, de Man’s own writing shifts from English to French upon his identification of the syntactic shift: “Ce comme n’est pas un comme comme les autres” (149). De Man thus enacts a literal echo in order to demonstrate the figurative “echo” of the enumeration that follows the last “comme.” Like Echo banished to the footnotes, here literal echo is contained within the foreignness of the momentary slip into French. At the same time, de
Man’s echoing “commes” are that part of the text most obviously asserted; it requires no semantic translation both to see “comme” echoing on the page and hear the repetition of its sound. Bishop’s “The Bight,” which I examine in Chapter 2, can be read as a response to both de Man’s excision of echo as well as his reading of “Correspondences” more generally. The poem suggests that the possibility of echo as a call-response structure—the possibility that echo is indeed an answer—at the very least, redirects voice. Certainly, the word “correspondence” itself presses the question, in confusing the activity of communication with mere resemblance. An echo’s “correspondence” to an initial utterance can imply mere imitation or the suggestion of call and response. The chapters that follow are interested in the implications of this latent possibility. Voice refuses to oppose response and echo, but instead, names their proximity and dramatizes their potential to function as one in the same.

IV. Calling Out, Calling Attention

Calling out, calling myself, and being called are all intimately related incarnations of the flesh of words. The materiality of language is packed through and through with its own historicity…. There is nowhere beyond interpellation for us. (Riley 2000, 111)

Contrary to de Man, Denise Riley takes serious the possibilities intrinsic to Echo’s non-agency as the voice of the already-sounded. In her effort to “drag Echo back to the side of hope” (157), Riley shows how word-for-word reiteration always has the capacity to initiate the ironic, or in de Man’s words accomplish the “delusion of the signifier.” A word is made strange by the very fact of its reiteration, which dissolves its semantic meaning into nonsensical sound. As such, reiteration neutralizes the word’s
symbolic function. Echo thus demonstrates the way “iteration can explode a category from within” (157), necessarily undoing the semantic meaning of the utterance; by literally resounding the sound, the sound’s history as not-yet-symbolic, is voiced. Riley’s own figurations elevate Echo from her status as “half-dead” and “voicing dead gorges” (107) to that of both interrogator and object of interrogation: “The word has the inbuilt capacity to interrogate itself, a latent capacity sparked into life by...truncated repetition” (157). While Riley claims that such a process reduces sense to nonsense, she also, somewhat paradoxically, recuperates that nonsense as “novel sense” (157). It is through the very mechanism of being nonsensical that the word’s normative history can shift.

This paradox figures a poem’s capacity to track both the nonsense of the word’s history as sound, and the sense of the word’s history with other discursive types. Moreover, all of this is accomplished through yet another paradox: the present sounding of the reiterated word means that it represents itself as nothing if not the same. And yet, it is in this very replication that it voices its history as other than its present iteration. It is on the one hand, “monologic,” in the sense that it refuses to be anything other than what it is, and yet, in this very refusal, it changes. So too does the lyric “I” as an instance of the reiterated word, become a figure of all the histories that are voiced within it. This is the recuperation of sociality—the very site that appears the most monologic. In a slight rewriting of Riley, its lyric dimension or mode is dependant on hosting the explosion of the word from within; precisely, the poem cannot function without allowing in the histories of the words and sounds latent in its materials.

The echoing word thus accomplishes several formal feats at once. Although such functions are difficult to segregate, a preliminary taxonomy may help clarify my poets’
more specific investments in echo. First, an echo dissociates the word from symbolic fixity, rendering the word nonsense. Such nonsense on the one hand ironizes the word’s present iteration. As we will see especially in Bishop’s poems, reiterations accomplish a de-meaning as they slough off the word’s present context. On the other hand, nonsense tracks a history of its own—generally a history of sound—that has preceded the word’s various entrances into various discursive types. (The very possibility that the word can mutate symbolically depends upon a prior regression to “nonsense.”) The word does not travel from one discursive norm to another without passing through nonsense. If we recall Guest’s poem, for instance, the “word” enters a “continent” and “spreads like grass” prior to its re-lodging.) Secondly, the echoing word registers the symbolic history of the word once it has been recuperated from nonsense. This aspect of iteration tracks the various identities the word has taken on in its history. Following Guest’s figures, this function of the reiteration is to communicate the word’s past as a “contact with the wooden spoon”; it communicates a history of being a fixed identity (as opposed to an indiscriminate or nonsensical “spreading”). This aspect of repetition is perhaps most easily observed in Moore’s poetry; as what she called “flies stuck in amber,” her verbal fragments refuse to simply dissolve their identifications with other discursive constraints. And thirdly, the word’s status as reiterative makes a new norm for the poem itself. It plays its part as a repeated site that the poem itself generates, constituting the poem’s own system of sameness and difference: its own system of values or norms. All of the poems I read use repetition in this way, and indeed, it is difficult to imagine a poem that could function otherwise. Plath in particular, however, expresses an urgency that marks an effort to
outpace the normative history of the words which are her materials. The poem’s formal identity overtly competes with the history of formal constraint it necessarily takes in.

Riley complicates de Man’s understanding of apostrophe and prosopopeia by arguing for the agency of the one turned to stone. De Man’s “latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia” is that “in making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (78). If the “you” is animated, then it also has the power to displace the “I” as the voice of the poem, as the lyric speaker itself. The “I” that calls to invoke presence anticipates that a success will lead to his own muteness, which within de Man’s logic, is also death in stone. In this way, de Man posits a logic of competition that renders the two presences inevitably and perpetually risking “mute responsiveness” (Johnson, *A World of Difference* 185). Riley’s Echo, on the contrary, gets up after getting knocked down:

Suffering a literal petrification, becoming rock herself, she is turned to stone until only her voice remains. Then how can her misery support the faintest optimism? Just as being repeatedly physically knocked around will rapidly teach you the anticipatory reflex of covering your head, so being verbally knocked around will also generate its avoidant reflex against the blow. The harsh word has somehow to be turned back on itself. (*The Words of Selves* 161)

Riley’s optimism at Echo’s every turn suggests that there is no place where ventriloquy won’t persist. In this way, de Man’s model of displacement is rendered affectively amiss in its presupposition of mourning. Of course, Echo will not be the last female figure to resound words upon the calcification of death. Plath’s “Lady Lazurus” puts more pressure on the assumption that the eclipse of the “I” voice is a necessary muteness:

I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick worms off me like sticky pearls.
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call. (245)

The “I”’s death performance is simultaneously the making of a hard surface, such that the seashell’s only relationship to a voice is to throw it back on itself. The calls of the others thus begin as an echo: “call and call.” Plath’s lines challenge Culler’s assumption that lyric “invocation” instantiates the lyric poet’s “vocation.” Rather, vocation—the “I”’s “call” of the last line—is rendered through bouncing sound. If the outside attempts at animation or resurrection are rendered an echo in the phrase, “call and call,” their failure is not their death but the echo’s redirection. The lines “I do it so it feels, I do it so it feels…” reiterate such that the accumulation of sound itself leads to Plath’s more-apathetic-than-victorious, “I guess you could say I’ve a call.”

While Culler has acknowledges that the lyric address is a “call” that also “calls attention” to itself, Riley goes further in pursuing the consequences of that claim. If lyric address in the de Manian sense can be understood as a ventriloquism, Riley regards the voice of the “I” as a kind of auto-ventriloquy: “[this is] a piece of auto-ventriloquy, my repetition to myself of whatever authoritative positioning I’ve caught from the world to ‘make mine’ on my own behalf” (The Words of Selves 43). This rite is “not cause for despair” as it doesn’t constitute “inexplicable and lamentable submission to the law” (The Words of Selves 43, my italics). For Riley, in fact, auto-ventriloquy goes so far as to become the means through which Althusserian address undoes itself. Like the Subject

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25 Johnson defines address as a ventriloquism accomplished through “giving voice” (30).
who hails in Althusser’s formulation, so too is apostrophe a form of “active naming”26; as utterances that invoke, both rely on tropes of performativity.27 And yet, while Althusser’s call presumably functions seamlessly, apostrophe mostly fails as an “extraordinarily arrogant ambition.” The hyperbole through which the lyric call functions guarantees that it will perform extravagantly. Where Althusser’s call calls a subject, apostrophe calls attention back to itself. If lyrical language and interpella
tion share a formal ambition, lyric makes visible the way ideology’s structure must always guard against a potential swerve in directionality.

Apostrophe’s most extraordinary capability is its failure to function as description. By definition, apostrophe animates. Were the animated entity to acknowledge itself to be the name that it was called, such acknowledgement would retroactively out the whole process as an act of describing rather than invoking. Any trace of already-beingness signals the absence of apostrophe altogether. Interpellation, on the other hand, functions by eliding the descriptive and invocative. While the apostrophic call and interpellation share the same structure of temporality, interpellation is invested in obliterating the temporality that is the mechanism through which it functions. Riley shows how the Althusserian hail depends on an anteriority whose suppression is the source of the confusion. Althusser writes his piece of “little theoretical theatre” only to undercut it with an obliteration of temporality: “The timing of the turn is deliberately wiped out by its creator’s insistence that all of this happens simultaneously” (79). This contradiction is

26 Culler writes, “In locating lyric value in a certain performativity, I have essentially treated it as an active form of naming, which performatively seeks to create what it names, and may fail or succeed in this extraordinarily arrogant ambition” (“Lyric, History, and Genre” 879).
27 Riley calls attention to the way that Althusser’s “puppet show in the street” makes for a “powerfully distracting vignette,” making visible the way Althusser depends on dramatic scene in spite of the way that he imagines interpellation as “always-already” present (The Words of Selves 79).
derived from interpellation’s “anterior future perfect tense” in which “you become what, hearing yourself called, you acknowledge yourself to be” (35). Interpellation thus depends on suppressing the temporality that would make visible the distinction between calling new presence and re-naming that which has already assented to being named as such. While the interpellative call assumes, “you become what, hearing yourself called, you acknowledge yourself to be,” apostrophe is not apostrophe if it includes such an acknowledgement. Apostrophe confers a name, but it doesn’t assume knowledge. In this sense, the only way apostrophe succeeds is by producing a response that is other than that which it has called. If it were possible to locate a failed moment of interpellation, such a failure would constitute apostrophe’s success.

In one sense, as the call that calls attention to itself, apostrophe bypasses interpellation in its frequent disinterest in the response of the “you.” In “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” Bishop demonstrates the way “calling attention” does not necessarily coincide with the desire for the addressee’s response. The poem announces itself as an address, and yet, quickly confuses the terms through which such a call is possible. As an invitation to a historical persona, the poem appears to welcome Bishop’s mentor. Explicitly, it posits all of Manhattan as ever-generous, ideal host, and yet, this image of the City is only generated by the anticipation of Moore’s arrival. The “invitation”

28 While Riley will look at anteriority as a characteristic of language more generally, she also interestingly suggests its more specific relation to rhyme:

In the flash of interpellative recognition, a second’s indeterminacy bangs closed. It’s like that briefly open temporality of rhyme, where a shadow is cast backwards on the ear by the anticipated rhyme which falls somewhere between the uttered word and the approaching word yet to be articulated. The whole affair runs only be means of a settling retrospect in which the machinery of the achieved rhyme—like the syntactical devices of interpellation—will usually close down that suspended instant, which had to have been momentarily held ajar. (The Words of Selves 35)

29 This is how I understand Culler’s comment that “we know too little about apostrophes to assert what actually happens when apostrophe succeeds” (The Pursuit of Signs 153). Culler doesn’t explore interpellation explicitly here, but my reading above suggests that ideology’s power is in making the failure of interpellation nearly unthinkable and certainly un-identifiable.
allows for the giganticism of hyperbole itself to take “flight,” calling attention back to itself rather than to Moore’s persona. The premise of hospitality animates the host as the world described in the poem takes on the eccentricity of a most eccentric guest:

Enter: two rivers, gracefully bearing
countless little pellucid jellies
in cut-glass epergnes dragging with chains.
The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged. (82)

Such objects as “pellucid jellies” and “cut glass epergnes” evoke the kinds of accoutrements one might encounter at the home of Moore and her mother, or perhaps even more likely, in one of Moore’s poems. Moore’s name itself seems to shifts the terms under which she may be welcomed.

At the same time, the poem creates a tension between Moore’s exacting aesthetic and the hyperbolic world her invitation has generated. Bishop’s poem borrows its form from Pablo Neruda’s elegy, “Alberto Rojas Jiminez Vienes Volando.” In so doing, the “invitation” shows its direction to be compromised from the start. Neruda is “invited” simultaneously with Moore and the terms of Bishop’s address to Moore in part ventriloquize Neruda. While Moore is the announced addressee, the formal debt of the poem is to Neruda. Moreover, the very site of invitation—the words “please come”—replicate Neruda, making this an invitation twice sounded. If the refrain is the site through which Bishop hosts Neruda, it is also the site most insistently lodged in the poem—the aspect of the poem most ambitiously seeking to make itself remembered word-for-word. The opening stanza alone repeats the refrain three times, beginning, “From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning, / please come flying. / In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals, / please come flying…” (82). The effect produced by what becomes an almost compulsive repetition mocks the poem’s own figuration of
Moore’s “inaudible abacus” and “soft uninvented music” (82, 83). The refrain doesn’t merely inscribe Neruda; its continued reiteration draws the words away from any past context and renders them objects in themselves. The aspect of the poem replicated from the past poet is the site most likely to dislodge itself from its context of signification; it instead makes meaning through the very predictability of rhythm and sound produced through repeated iterations. Invoking the signature of Neruda, Bishop simultaneously refuses a connection between personae as historically fixed entities and linguistic utterance. The palimpsestic site of the poem is not the “I” as Bishop / Neruda, but instead, the refrain which with every iteration calls more attention to itself, becoming more and more detached from the context of its arrival. Bishop’s refrain thus turns ventriloquy into auto-ventriloquy.

Moreover, whereas Neruda’s “vienes volando” could be read in the indicative mood, Bishop’s shift to the invocative, “please come flying,” means that the compulsive reiteration reiterates address itself. The translation renders what could be a description an unequivocal invocation; it outstrips description. And as address repeats itself, it turns, away from Moore, then away from Neruda, toward sound that makes its own contingent mutations. While neither Moore nor Neruda appear to respond, at least within the lines of the poem, the address invokes an excess at the site of this absence. The near mechanical repetitions of “please come flying” arguably produce an irritability often conferred by language that lodges in the mind or the ear. Animating at unpredictable times, such irritability marks the distance of the “I” from its own language, the resistance to its being pulled into or out of identification. The affect itself, however, makes a historical trace that connects the poem to the genre of the advertisement: a form that depends on the
production of lodging—mostly irritating—language. The refrain appears to imitate a form that would be remembered as addressing itself to “you.” In this way, the address that would ultimately slough off both Moore and Neruda, makes a history of genre through affect itself.

IV. Recycled Words

American, which dogs and cats can speak (Moore 61)

Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change….
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (Stevens 202–203)

In a reference to the co-optation of the word “language” by the “Language Poets,” Charles Wright wrote in a letter to a fellow poet, “What have we been doing all this time, anyway, Barking?” Wright’s rhetorical question jabs at the “Language Poets’” self-described avant-garde aesthetic as assuming a closer affinity toward the “linguistic.” Calling attention to the ideology of newness which necessarily defines any avant-garde movement, Wright reminds us that there is nothing new about language itself. And yet, “barking” has an interesting resonance alongside the line from Moore’s poem “England” quoted above, in which she associates the language of “American” with that which “dogs and cats can speak.” This line leaves us in the position of Bishop as she responded to Moore’s visit with the snake: we decide, “it is a joke” but then, “perhaps not altogether a joke.” Moore’s line responds to the self-profession of newness of her own historical moment; Ezra Pound’s campaign against rhetoric imagined that it could obliterate all representation in favor of a more immediate “presentation.” On the one hand, Moore’s
response suggests that poetry should resist Poundian esotericism; at the same time, the language of dogs and cats is not the same as a worn-out or dead language. Instead, a *language* of cats and dogs suggests the urge to *make representation* out of sound that has not been perceived as such. If dogs and cats “speak,” they recognize the sounds they make as calls. In this way, Moore’s line doesn’t suggest “American” as worn-out language, but rather a system of meaning which, perhaps, sounds like noise to the overhearer. That which is most familiar as noise—barking and mewing—is not the raw materials for poetry so much as it is the stuff whose mode of representation poetry understands.

The poets I read actively resist the presumption that the voice of the “I” can outdo that voice which is the historical record of the words that surround it. It is a cliché in itself to note that American poets in the twentieth-century are self-conscious of their words as rife with cliché, idiomatic speech, and colloquialisms. Moore, Bishop, and Plath, however, challenge the assumption that words are made new through de-contextualization or re-arrangement. These assumptions have become critical clichés articulated as Moore’s “collage” aesthetic, Bishop’s extraordinary amidst the ordinary, and Plath’s confessionalism. As listeners to the echoes of their own words, the poems I read attend to repetition’s record of words as banalities, a process that doesn’t make words new so much as it recuperates or memorializes the social life of language.

“Making new” presumes breaking a norm, but the poems I read instead make visible the normative traces of language as they are consistently voiced against the alternative constraints which the poem makes as it comes into being. Echo’s place in all this is as an obstruction to a legible trajectory of voice. While such an indirection of address is
likewise accomplished through apostrophe and prosopopeia, Echo by definition does not have her own voice. Echoing guards against the risk of forgetting the words’ constitution in language, a risk always inevitable for the “I” or “you.” As a crucial function of a lyric “repertoire,” echo is that which, in Jarvis’s terms, “thinks” by voicing backwards. Here, there is no glimmer of the persona which takes itself as a given—the boy Narcissus whose doom is to “know himself.” As truth-teller for language, Echo is the means through which the poem is reminded that the “I” itself—as a self—is what must be forgotten.

Echo tells the truth of truth’s history as trope in Wallace Stevens’ “The Man on the Dump.” The poem appears to celebrate the “dump” as a repository of rich sensory experience, privileging a poetic craft that self-consciously makes use of worn-out images. Change is “felt” only when such images announce their identifications as re-used: “One grows to hate these things except on the dump” (202). The last line, however, distances itself from any sensory image at all: “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.” An echo which is also an answer, “the the” is de Man’s decided impossibility. “The the” over-performs the grammatical excess that Pound so earnestly sought to excise from the poetic line, doubling the commonest of articles. And yet, the function of the word “the” is to introduce a singularity. Indeed, in the line quoted, it modifies “truth” itself. “The the” therefore replicates the word that both signals empty excess and has been in the service of an epistemological declaration—the givenness “truth” professes. Such recycling has little to do with re-presenting images in a de-familiarized context; in this echo, the poem makes visible a trace that is both the excess of rhetoric and the history of the word as it becomes fixed in epistemological claims. Pound’s filler becomes the object of

description; “the” is a noun modified by its own “the.” The poem, in sounding “the the” thus also renders its own system of norms. “The the” not only calls attention to “truth’s” history as a trope, but it simultaneously “calls”—as rhyme structure does—to other sites of sound in the poem. “The the,” for instance, asks to be thought in comparison to “The Man on the Dump.” Begging for comparison with its other sound likenesses, “the the” is part of the poem’s mechanism of creating sites of sameness and difference—of instituting its own system of values.

Poetry in the twentieth-century American context puts pressure on the limitations de Man sets for echo insofar as the logic of the advertisement depends on echo-as-response. If advertising is a call to the consumer, its ambition is to reproduce itself in the consumer’s voice. Given the inevitability of recycling the language of advertising, the poets I read compete with this call-response form by meeting it on its own terms. This self-consciousness is clearer in Bishop and Plath, whose sound echoes are heard on the ear, in contrast to Moore’s silent rhymes. “Armor Undermining Modesty” is, however, one of Moore’s few poems to make use of aural rhyme. The poem takes in scraps of advertisement in order to out the mechanism through which they function, while also competing with them through its own capacity to make a sound that calls attention to itself. As I will show in Chapter 1, Moore’s poem first demonstrates the way advertising’s interpellation functions by making itself silent, and secondly, creates a sound that would call attention to its silence by overriding it. In the second scenario, the lines mark the way the ad has been conferred a face but no voice: it is a “the pale-ale-eyed impersonal look / which the sales-placard gives the bock beer buck” (151). In marking the silent “impersonal look,” however, the line produces an echoing sound over
and through that silence. Moore doesn’t de-familiarize the advertisement by placing it in a new context so much as she doubles the advertisement’s dependence on echo; she produces an echo in contradistinction to the advertisement’s potential voice, at the very moment the advertisement would voice, but doesn’t.

“Solitude” in this poem suggests lyric’s contradistinction to the contours of voice and silence that the advertisement produces: the site of the second advertisement’s would-be echo is not the site of the poem’s echo. In this sense, “unhackneyed solitude” suggests the way in which lyric doubles silence by displacing it, or by superimposing it with its own sound. “Unhackneyed solitude” thus figures for lyric in the following way: it both bears the history of cliché, while simultaneously refusing to represent the same. The lyric “I” is not made plural by representing other voices. It is, however, made social by bearing the trace of its history as “hackneyed.” Its decided “solitude” inheres in this refusal of representation; as we will see in the case of Moore’s poem, the refusal to let the advertisement for “bock beer buck” voice itself is also a refusal to re-present it. The poem’s “unhackneyed” is decidedly not “hackneyed”; neither is it “hackneyed”’s opposite in any clear sense. It is, instead, both a signal that the poem traces a history of force in language and an acknowledgement that the poem’s contours of voice and silence depend on perpetually re-directing the same.

In my first chapter, I show that Moore has been misrecognized as other-than-lyric because we have resisted reading her description as indirection of voice. I argue that Moore’s relationship to naming and voicing is best understood through the trope of

31 Riley reminds us, “a cliché is not to be despised: its automatic comfort is the happy exteriority of a shared language which knows itself perfectly well to be a contentless but sociable turning outward toward the world” (Impersonal Passion 4).
hospitality, which, as it has been theorized by Derrida, troubles the question of the address itself. While Moore’s silent rhymes cannot be equated to aural echoing, her repetitions nonetheless participate in a structure of calling that makes visible the close proximity of description and invocation: in Derrida’s terms, the identification of the stranger and the refusal to fix the stranger by the same. In Moore’s poems, failed description doesn’t merely critique the possibility of description but also produces its own excess. On the one hand, the poems announce themselves as descriptive only to have her many objects—animals, curiosities, artifacts—frustrate description’s intention to render them such. At the same time, insofar as description fails, the words that would describe animate their own histories as participants in other generic forms. Moore’s lyricism is thus revealed in the way her poems inscribe genre at the level of the word, taking on a chiasmic structure in which the described objects become a means for the descriptive words to sound their own histories. In this sense the poems are infinitely hospitable to the history of the words that constitute them. Moore’s penchant for collecting and arranging verbal citation overtly announces the recycled status of the linguistic fragment. At the same time, her ethic of acknowledgement to outside sources refuses to authorize authority itself. I resist the common critical assumption that Moore’s outside “voices” function to represent themselves and instead argue that such fragments create instead an ever-shifting hierarchy of various discursive histories. If such a hand-off of discursive forms constitutes “voicing,” “voice” becomes an historical record of other genres. The authors of Moore’s verbal fragments are rendered dead in their own language, but such deadness animates a discursive history that is the trace of its social participation, even as it is not the voice of the subject.
If calling in Moore is analogous to the address of hospitality, Bishop’s lyric address shares a formal structure with cliché, advertisement, and idiomatic speech. My second chapter argues that Bishop’s poems displace an ideology of newness by privileging address as echo. Bishop’s poems continually refuse to ascribe novelty of any kind, arguing against the possibility of a break from history that governed Modernist assumptions. This is observed especially in the dissolution of her “I” and “you,” which, by announcing their perpetual re-placability, challenge dramatic monologue as a figure of distinguished, individual consciousness. Such “I”s and “yous” also challenge the logic of competition that de Man’s ascribes to prosopopeia; if all is echo, the threat of losing a voice is neutralized. Bishop shows that the site at which historical form makes its replication legible is simultaneously the site most likely to dis-lodge from any context at all. This is enacted both in her use of traditional genres as historical forms and in her poems addressing historical personae. Her linguistic conservation expresses itself as a consistent effort to slough off context in order to make words de-mean, to de-generate from their normative status in an effort to obstruct the site of historical legibility. Distinction thus reemerges in the variable functioning of echo itself. Indeed, Bishop’s “I” is the site of lodged language—both overspent idiom and that which has the potential to recuperate the social life of language. As their formal repetitive patterning unfolds, her poems test how discursive histories and futures may animate through word-for-word reiterations. Bishop’s overt use of apostrophe figures an analogous relationship between lyric address and the form of Althusserian interpellation. As the reading of Riley above suggests, Althusserian ideology functions through a temporal gap that guarantees that the subject acknowledges herself as the one she knew herself to be; she thus renders the
invocation a description. In tracking the indirections of voice trajectories, Bishop’s echoes insistently resist this collapse.

In Chapter Three, I read Plath’s echoes as an effort to hyperbolize the normative structures that necessarily constitute her poems. Plath’s poems announce the normative constraints of social institutions more overtly than either Moore’s or Bishop’s. If her reiterations index constraint, the poem itself generates norms that seem to outpace the normative structure it inevitably must turn to for its materials. When Plath’s words repeat, they gain a compulsive momentum that seems to rush toward death, annihilation, or even mechanical failure. Such reiterations signify a hyper-generic presence; in returning to the word again and again, they perform an oversaturation of sameness, an over-doing of formal enactment. Perpetually stuck, the language appears destined to repeat itself until it dies out completely. If Bishop’s reiterations ironize, Plath’s convert irony into aggression in an effort to compete with the word’s history within a social institution of norms. Plath’s poems rush to generate their own sets of norms in an effort to kill off the normative life of their constitutive parts. I read Judith Butler’s Antigone’s Claim alongside Plath’s poetry to theorize genre as trace or fragment. While Butler investigates the possibility of queer kinship, the fractured norms she traces are made explicit in the disrupted temporality of Plath’s lyric address.

In the most general sense, the following chapters argue that echo, reiterative words, and recycled fragments constitute lyric voice. Such patterns of repetition insist that the “I” is not the only privileged site of linguistic instigation or initiation. In calling out to themselves, reiterative language animates latent generic histories, positing a theory of genre at the level of the word. Linguistic history is not merely an endless play of the
signifier, but also a history of force, cliché, deadness, compulsion, and fixedness.

Animating linguistic traces is thus not an occasion of endless morphability, but a tracking of latent normative values. At the same time, as Moore, Bishop, and Plath all suggest, the poem's repetitions do not only track a history but generate its own pattern of “verse effects”—its own set of values.
CHAPTER ONE

Lyric Hospitalities: Description and Voice as Guests in Marianne Moore’s Poetry

I. Introduction

He can talk, but insolently says nothing. What of it?
When one is frank, one’s very presence is a compliment
—Marianne Moore, “Peter”

I become aware before the end of a poem that Miss Moore and I have parted company somewhat further back. Sometimes, as in ‘The Jerboa’ the author has her say and retires, leaving you in the company of some curious little rodent.
—John Ashbery, “Straight Lines Over Rough Terrain: Marianne Moore”

Poetic figures of voice such as apostrophe and prosopopoeia have long been understood to assume subject-object relationships. In addressing an inanimate or dead object, for instance, the figure of apostrophe assumes an addressee who may or may not respond. In endowing the inanimate with a voice, prosopopoeia takes for granted that such an inanimate thing occupies the position of a speaking subject. Such figures find their corollary in chiasmic structure, since the presence of both addresser and addressee implies that voice travels in one direction only to be potentially reversed. In this chapter, I argue that such a process of voice-reversal is essential to understanding the relationship between voice and descriptive modes in Marianne Moore’s poetry. These two modes are often difficult to distinguish in Moore and “voice” here is a particularly vexed term, in

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32 According to Michael Riffaterre’s reading of Paul de Man, prosopopeia—a figure that directly endows the inanimate with a voice—finds its corollary in chiasmus, since a voice implies an addressee who may or may not respond: “chiasmus, the symmetrical structure of prosopopoeia, entails that, by making the dead speak, the living are struck dumb, they too become the monument. Prosopopoeia thus stakes out a figural space for the chiasmic interpretation: either the subject will take over the object, or it will be penetrated by the object” (Riffaterre 112).
part due to Moore’s penchant for culling texts from other sources. Ultimately, I show that her poetry challenges Paul de Man’s theory of lyric, precisely because for Moore the descriptive function can never be isolated from figures of voice.

Such chiasmic reversals are especially visible in Moore’s own subgenre, the “animile.” These poems are characterized by the introduction of a relatively unknown creature to the reader and the celebration of the creature’s unique qualities. As poems of praise, they approach the genre of ode, but are also filled with bits of natural history, facts, and legend, and are often marked by metaphoric leaps that seem to bypass realistic portrayal altogether. Most significant for my argument, Moore’s animals in these poems refuse to be mere objects in an object world. One of her shortest and most famous animiles, “To A Snail,” begins by quoting a manual on rhetorical style: “If ‘compression is the first grace of style,’ / you have it” (275). On the one hand, the quotation marks in these lines indicate a voice arriving from outside the poem, the importation of language from elsewhere. Although often elusive, Moore’s notes here tell us that the cited line has come from a translation of Demetrius on Style and we may thus reasonably conclude that they represent the voice of another author. On the other hand, although the quotation marks assert that these words didn’t originate with Moore, their function within the terms of the poem is not to sound the voice of a speaker. That is, they serve to describe the snail rather than represent a voice for the sake of its own representation, or give “hearing.” Upon its entrance into the poem, the “voice” of the translator thus speaks only to communicate that the snail embodies the words, “compression is the first grace of style”; it speaks only insofar as Moore makes it serve a descriptive function.
And yet, while this presumably outside voice is reduced to a descriptive mode, another kind of voice is simultaneously animated. This second kind of voice is associated with the address to the snail: the figure of apostrophe. As an ode to a small, hard-shelled creature, the poem makes the snail its addressee, suggesting its potential animation; the snail is endowed with the capacity to listen and, perhaps, respond to its addresser. Within the poem, the snail suddenly seems a more likely candidate as a second speaker than the translator of *Demetrius on Style*, and the site of animation is thus displaced. For deconstructive critics, the function of apostrophe as an animating trope is what qualifies it as the quintessential marker of lyric forms. Following de Man, Jonathan Culler writes, apostrophe does what “fictional representations of plausible speech acts” can’t do: “its empty ‘O,’ devoid of semantic reference, is the figure of voice, a sign of utterance, and yet, as a *figure* of voicing, quite resistant to attempts to treat the poem as a fictive representation of personal utterance” (40). The artifice of the apostrophic figure distances it from “voice” as the fictional representation of a subject and aligns it instead with hypothetical and impossible speech acts precisely because it ascribes voice to the inanimate. This lyric mode is then opposed to the descriptive, which unlike lyric, functions as declarative language, “actualizing a system of signs” or rendering objects in their object status.

My suggestion is that the status of the lines above as both voice and description puts pressure on the assumption of this opposition. Moore’s quoted fragments on the one hand look like a collection of many voices: her poems are in many ways constituted by a hand-off of voices from magazines, natural history textbooks, style manuals, and newspaper clippings. And yet, this account is limited insofar as it understands voice as
emerging from a fictional or historical subject. The words “compression is the first grace of style”—both descriptive in function and “compressed” within an apostrophe—are at the same time directed toward the potential speech of the snail, re-animated at a different site altogether. In fact, this very contact disallows description from ultimately fulfilling its function; it becomes less declarative and more contingent. In the epigraph above, Moore begins by describing the cat in her poem “Peter”: “He can talk, but insolently says nothing. / When one is frank, one’s very presence is a compliment” (44). Here, the description of the cat’s lack of “talk” is cut short by his own “frank”-ness and “presence.” The possibility that Peter can “talk” represents what I will call the lyric potential of the poem. Although Moore’s animals are not always endowed with speech, the possibility that they may animate at any moment directs the way the descriptive mode functions.

Thus, for Moore, even in a poem in which prosopopoeia or apostrophe are not explicitly invoked, this chiasmic relationship often directs its formal potential, such that descriptive language is subject to the same logic that applies to the figure of voice within the chiasmic structure. Without occupying speaking positions, these figures nonetheless direct speaking positions available within the poem. The fact that the cat “insolently says nothing” renders him a silent addressee rather than an object to be described. And if his presence is a “compliment,” he is in a sense speaking back to his describer. Here, the descriptive mode seems to be usurped by the communicative presence of the cat’s

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33 As I hope is clear, my argument includes the assumption that Moore consistently frustrates attempts to read lyric as dramatic monologue alone in which the “I” is a fully formed subject speaking. In this way, my readings contrast with Margaret Holley’s definition of lyric as she details the extent to which we might think of Moore as “lyrical”: “the lyric as a genre is usually identified with the sense of a single speaker, a self that is the imagined source or medium of the poem’s intended message. That self is a kind of persona, a fictional character created by the discourse, and to the extent that a poem yields this sense of a person speaking to us, we may say that it enters the lyric mode” (Holley 115). The lyric “I” cannot be equated with fictional character or personhood because it is precisely lyric’s mode that renders it a trope, an artificial convention, frequently bypassing the idea of personhood altogether.
“frank”ness and “compliment”; as if to render his describer function-less, Peter takes his place in the poem as “company,” his silent presence, “speaking” in a sense, for himself.

The possibility of a voice given to the voiceless object thus suggests that actualizing an object through the descriptive mode is checked by that object’s potential to speak itself. In the position of host, lyric renders the declarative contingent. The lyric potential of the poem shifts the working of description, such that figures of voice and the descriptive mode begin to function in similar ways. Here, description is directed toward Peter in a way that elicits his presence. Although the descriptive mode does not explicitly speak to another (as apostrophe does), in Moore’s poems, the frequency with which it is subject to correction suggests its contingency; moreover, the descriptive mode also anticipates correction from the direction of the very object it describes. This does not necessarily mean that the object itself speaks—in fact, most of the time it does not—but the tendency for description to “actualize a system of signs”—to render an object its object status—is put in check by the poem’s tendency to make visible that part of description which will not lay still. Description accords an object its object status and yet, within the space of the poem, the possibility always exists for the object’s voice to displace the descriptive mode altogether.

In the following two sections, “Capsizing” and “Bad Hosting,” I read two of Moore’s “animale” poems (“The Pangolin” and “The Frigate Pelican”) to show how description is frustrated through the recycling of descriptive words; such recycling reveals the latent presence of various voice trajectories. The poems enact Derrida’s idea that hospitality “gives time” by invoking repetition in such a way that various generic and syntactic word histories are sounded. In my third section, “Silent Residences” I show
how Moore’s poems “The Steeple-Jack” and “Silence” thematically connect silent voice to the problem of inclusion and exclusion. These poems substantiate my claim that Moore’s confusion of descriptive and lyric modes is best thought through the problem of hospitality. Moore’s particular means of linguistic conservation reveals that hosting is as much about the voices that cannot be “heard” as it is any positive gesture of inclusivity. Finally, my last section, “Mis-Setting Voice and Silence” transitions from Moore’s silent “voicings” on the page to Bishop’s aural echoes by way of Moore’s poem “Armor’s Undermining Modesty.”
II. Capsizing

This is the double law of hospitality: to calculate the risks, yes, but without closing the door on the incalculable, that is, on the future and the foreigner.


…in fighting, mechanicked / like the pangolin; capsizing in disheartenment

–Moore, “The Pangolin”

Consistently, Moore’s animals figure a space of animation that lyric accords the descriptive at the threshold of the poem. Like the cat in “Peter,” Moore’s poems are marked by a formal possibility of invoking the figure of voice even as they refrain from doing so; in this sense, silence directs voice as much as voices do. Such sites of silence render a contingent address that shares a formal relationship with Derridean hospitality. For Derrida, the structure of hospitality is founded on the impossibility of addressing the other without constituting this address as condition, law, or practice: “Hospitality consists in doing everything to address the other, to accord him, even to ask him his name, while keeping the question from becoming a condition, a police inquisition, a blacklist or simple border control” (Parallax, 7). In this way, hospitality is the “question of the question”: how to address another such that the address “resists processes that derive their sustainability from the very fact of othering itself” (Dikec 244). As we will see, Moore’s poems refuse to “sustain” themselves by such other-ing, but pose the question of the other only to shift the terms through which it can be thought. In “The Pangolin,” which I read in the paragraphs that follow, the problem of such “sustainability” is explicitly rendered in image of the “simpletons” who believed the pangolin a “living
fable / whom the stones had nourished, whereas ants had done / so” (118). Moore’s corrective (“whereas ants had done so”) makes visible the structure of othering that her poems consistently resist.

Derrida’s “break with hospitality by right” (25) suggests the absolute difference that haunts recognizable difference, the latter associated with identity papers, names, country of origin. Moore’s extended notes ostensibly make available the sources of her many verbal fragments, and yet, the persistent inconsistency of her quotation marks undoes the “recognizable difference.” Instead, her notes suggest a disavowal of any claim to represent another—and the disavowal that any other would represent her. The disavowal of description within her poems functions in the same way, shifting the possibilities of address at the very moment the object of description would solidify as represented. Such shifts are figured by hospitality’s temporality, which “requires that I give place to [the stranger], that I let place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive and take place in the place that I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names” (25). Derrida challenges us to imagine that the “them” being offered “place” is also not necessarily a “them”; they are not only given place, but they are also “taking” place. The pun suggests that that the guests take the space of the host, perhaps, but also that their “guestness”—or even their identity as persons—is called into question. “They” are not identifiable nouns; they are instead in the process of becoming upon their arrival.34

34 In a special issue of Paragraph on hospitality, the editors emphasize this element of temporality especially. They argue that the critical interest in transnationalism and global migration has led us to exaggerate hospitality’s spatial or geographical relevance. Hospitality has been put to use in the service of an ethics that would address diasporic conditions, post-colonial migrations, and the crossing of national boundaries. The temporality of hospitality suggests another layer of its complexity altogether. As one critic writes, “the Other as a figure of futurity is what constitutes the ‘unconditionality’ of the welcome…. Not to seek a return on one’s investment in another, in this way, breaks out of the closed circuit of what can be
“The Pangolin” expresses this process of becoming in showing the limits of
description. It begins as an observation of the animal, a detailed description and praise of
the armored “true ant-eater” (117). As many critics have noted, this poem begins by
welcoming in the language of natural history, a kind of scientific prose foreign to
poetry\textsuperscript{35}; the first line, “Another armored animal” seems to borrow the language of a
natural history text as though the poem to follow were an encyclopedia entry describing
one animal among others of similar kind. “Precise” detail suggests a close-up lens:
“scale-lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity” (117). The poem is typical of Moore in
that she takes an object strange to her reader and begins by introducing it. It is at this
level that the poem invites the reader to read it as description. At the same time, the poem
quickly shifts in ways that call our attention to the boundary of description. And
ultimately, description itself becomes part of a shifting, circular context; it shows itself as
always embedded within a chiasmic structure. As if to call attention to the grammatical
hierarchy at work in any description, the poem enacts a kind of syntactic overturning
such that the descriptors turn into objects to be described and objects described take on
the role of descriptors. By the end of the poem, the pangolin turns to “like a pangolin,” a
figure invoked merely to describe a new object altogether: “man” (119).

As with so many of Moore’s poems, here too the poem shifts lenses abruptly,
moving from the close-up view to a kind of global distance. Thus, a description of the
pangolin, “rolls himself into a ball that has power to defy all efforts to unroll it,” appears
in close proximity to a wide-view lens description like “Leonardo Da Vinci’s replica”

\textsuperscript{35} For extended readings of “The Pangolin” in particular, see Reddy; Molesworth in Willis; and Hadas.

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In the latter instance, the language matches the innovation of the pangolin’s strangeness with the bizarre, unexpected language of its own, reaching outside the pangolin’s habitat for words to describe it. Here there is a displacement across time and space, but also a generic displacement, as if Moore has exhausted the limits of one generic utterance—the natural history text—and must reach for another—in this case, the epic mode we associate with such allusions. Moore marks the limits of description as well at the level of grammar. Words invoked in the service of description are understood as contingent in terms of their syntactical position; description in the poem is never fully codified. A word that enters the poem as a descriptor—with an adjectival status—shifts such that it does not perpetually “serve” the nouns of the poem. The word “grace” functions in this way; in fact, the pangolin itself becomes a figure for how the word circumambulates. Early in the poem, the pangolin is described: “serpentined about the tree / he draws away from danger unpugnaciously” (117). As a figure “serpentined,” the pangolin embodies that which spirals; it at once nearly returns again and again to the same site on a circle’s circumference, and yet it insistently moves vertically or laterally as well, defying the sameness of the original circle’s circumference. As a very specific—and very spatial—understanding of repetition with a difference, the spiraling action of the pangolin “describes” the logic of the poem’s linguistic repetitions.

The first instance of the word “grace” in the poem appears when the pangolin (“serpentined about the tree”) is said to be “keeping the fragile grace of the Thomas- / of Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron vine, or / rolls himself into a ball that has / power to defy all effort to unroll it” (117). The “fragile grace” describes the wrought-iron vine, which in turn describes the movement of the pangolin about the tree.
Here, “grace” is a modifier of the vehicle of which the pangolin is the tenor; although “grace” appears as a noun, it modifies the object that itself functions as the vehicle in the metaphoric structure—at least twice removed from the pangolin itself. And yet, as we will see, the word “grace” will “serpentine” about the poem, initially invited in by the observation of the pangolin, but eventually rolling back on itself. The serpented pangolin and wrought-iron vine in this way figure the transposition of words themselves. “Grace” reappears two more times before it temporarily loses its adjectival status and gains the status of a conceptual idea, an idea which in turn displaces the pangolin as the poem’s central object of meditation. From its first iteration, the variations of the word “grace” move closer and closer to the body of the pangolin itself. If the first instance describes the wrought iron vine (which in turn describes the pangolin), the second appears in adjectival form, modifying “tool,” an appositive for the pangolin tail: “The giant-pangolin- / tail, graceful tool, as prop or hand or broom or ax” (118). In its third iteration, the pangolin’s “form” is “made graceful by adversities, con-versities” (118). Here, the word “graceful” finally describes the pangolin itself, and yet, as near as it has moved to the poem’s ostensible object of meditation, this very nearness seems to reverse its syntactic status. In its next iteration, it has usurped the pangolin as the poem’s object of meditation: “To explain grace requires a curious hand” shifts the poem’s attention to just this proposition (118). In this way, the word “grace” functions like the animal that disappears and reappears as it “works down the tree,” a spiraling action that describes intermittent reappearances in different locations.

“Grace,” then, as means of describing the pangolin, refuses to stay in its place, refuses its status as mere means to an end. As the poem plays out all of the syntactic
possibilities of this word, it also calls attention to the way that description itself refuses its role in “actualizing a system of signs.” Like a spiral growing narrower, “grace” consistently moves toward the body of the pangolin until the proximity of its distance collapses the position of each. In a complete syntactical overturning, the poem turns its attention away from the pangolin to contemplate grace itself. Moreover, this shift of attention is accompanied by accumulated connotations of the word “hand,” which renders the writer’s hand indistinguishable from the pangolin’s tail limb. When Moore writes that “to explain grace requires a curious hand” (118), the meaning of “hand” is immediately confused. The poem has referenced “hand” twice already; in the second instance, it has been in the service of describing the pangolin’s tail, “a graceful tool as prop or hand or broom or ax” (118). At a certain moment, then, the tail’s use is “hand”; in some sense, the “curious hand” that grace requires is actually the tail—an object which is not at all a writing hand and the very object which absolutely distinguishes the two mammals of the poem. The undecidability of limbs (hand and tail) suggests the way that Moore refuses a subject position that would define an object, but constructs a constant spiral of observed and observer, where their distinction is visible one moment and confused the next. The writing “hand” that would be said to describe the pangolin might just as likely be the pangolin’s tail; the object “actualized” by description at a certain moment is positioned as the writing subject. In fact, the confusion of “hand” will be one of the first indications that man will displace pangolin as the tenor of the metaphoric structure.

In the terms of my argument, the poem insists that description itself will animate. In this formulation, “grace”’s directional aim toward the pangolin is met with the defenses of an “armored animal,” defending itself against description. The pangolin
doesn’t speak in this poem, but it works back on “grace” such that “grace”’s presence in
the poem cannot remain staid; both reliant on and resistant to its own description, the
pangolin insists that its description both remain within the poem and consistently be
reformulated. This is the play of Moore’s re-imagined chiasmic structure. Within space of
the poem, it is not the figure of voice that renders a speaker mute or dead, but the object’s
simultaneous reliance on and resistance to description that changes the descriptive voice
itself; ultimately, this reliance and resistance renders it impossible. “The Pangolin” as a
lyric here follows Derrida’s logic of the host: to calculate the risks at the same time that it
refuses to close the door (6). Like the guest with baggage, the descriptive word’s latent
contents cannot be seen until it has already been welcomed inside. With “grace,” the
poem makes “use” of a presence that is not altogether known by asking it to voice the
variations that make up its syntactical history and future. The pangolin does not itself
speak, but it makes description speak as the pangolin’s strangeness requires, morphing
from one moment to the next.

If description may traditionally be considered to accord an object its object status,
it affiliates well with armored animals, the part of the form hardened, resistant to
manipulation. Like the snail with its home on its back, Moore’s “armored” animals are
endowed with their own mobile castles—their bodies themselves fortifications against the
outside world. I have suggested that description is animated by the poem until it is
rendered impossible, a moment that aligns with various syntactical and generic
overturnings of the poem. Such a moment occurs when the poem shifts from
contemplating the pangolin to contemplating grace:

Pangolins are not aggressive animals; between
dusk and day they have the not unchain-like machine-like
form and frictionless creep of a thing
made graceful by adversities, con-

versities. To explain grace requires
a curious hand. If that which is at all were not forever,
why would those who graced the spires
with animals and gathered there to rest, on cold luxurious
low stone seats—a monk and monk and monk—between the thus
ingenious roof-supports, have slaved to confuse
grace with a kindly manner, time in which to pay a debt,
the cure for sins, a graceful use
of what are yet approved stone mullions…(119)

The latent “uses” of grace are made explicit when the poem reaches its generic
and descriptive limits. When it shifts from the pangolin to contemplate grace, the lines
continue to repeat variations on the word: these “confusions” of “grace” function in
contrast to how we expect descriptive language to behave; here, one is never sure when
the language will turn from serving something outside to serving itself. The re-
positioning of words conserve their forms such that “that which is at all” is confused with
“that which is forever.”

If the lyric gives voice to the voiceless as Michael Riffaterre and de Man would
have it, and that voice itself renders the poem’s speaker a monument, these lines attest to
different formulation of animation. Here, the pangolin, the “form and frictionless creep of
a thing / made graceful by adversities, con- / versities” returns in the form of those
animals that “graced the spires” of the monk’s “ingenious” work, the unnamed cathedral.
The pangolin is all at once multiplied, generalized into “animals” and turned to stone. It
also becomes, like an adjective, that which adorns, or “graces.” Having never spoken to
begin with, the pangolin may not be said to have been “struck dumb,” and yet at the same
time, it has been rendered un-describable. This turn to stone is not accompanied by the
loss of voice, but instead by the loss of the pangolin’s status as the (central) object of
description. Significant for my argument, then, is that as description reveals its own positional contingency, it reaches a point of impossibility in which its object ceases to be an object, but is conserved in a new form. This process also seems to insure the pangolin’s eventual return to the poem.  

Thus far, I have suggested that a “host” in this poem may be identified with the object that invites in descriptive words whose contingency leads to a chiasmic reversal. And yet, iterations of the hospitality relationship may be identified in terms of generic types as well. The poem suggests that words carry with them latent generic remnants as well as syntactic positions. In fact, the syntactic pliability the poem celebrates allows words to produce their own ousting from a given generic context; “graceful” in these lines shifts the poem from a natural history text describing an anteater to speculations on divinity. These shifts seem to take place through what might be thought of as microcosmic speech acts: within the house of “The Pangolin,” the utterance of a word seems to call forth its latent contexts. For Moore, there is no object whose description will not also be an injunction to “explain” the words that object has invited in. The strangeness of Moore’s objects call for these words to multiply outward into other contexts, histories, and forms. Generic distinction is marked by the mobilization of these latencies.

The shift from the fifth to the sixth stanza, cited above, moves the poem from what I have been calling a natural history text genre to what appears as a philosophical proposition. The pangolin itself figures the boundary between internal and external,

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36 This return is rendered through another syntactical reversal. The adjective “machine-like,” initially invoked to describe the pangolin, returns as a noun in the line, “A sailboat / was the first machine.” The very utterance of machine seems to resurrect the pangolin, as the poem remembers the previous association it made. The line continues: “Pangolins, made / for moving quietly also, are models of exactness” (119).
boasting a “grit-equipped gizzard” that allows it to ingest foreign elements such that “simpletons thought [it] a living fable / whom the stones had nourished whereas ants had done / so” (118). How, though, are genres digested by the poem? As readers, we may receive these lines as warning that genres that enter the body of the poem do not necessarily function the way we may predict. The simpleton sees the stones go into the body but tracks its passage incorrectly. The shift in literary modes is accomplished with a hybrid word itself—“con- / versities.” Straddling the stanzas in a kind of hyper-enjambment, the word suggests both the space between generic utterances and their mutual subjection to the ghost of Moore’s syllabic law—a law only enacted in poetic contexts. That the syllabic is preserved at the moment of generic exchange perhaps suggests the sustained position of the poetic as host. As we may have expected, the monstrous reproduction is accomplished in part through sound rather than sense: “Adversities / con- / versities” enacts the “form and frictionless creep”; that is, the poem makes a hybrid word in part to create a frictionless sound—the repetition of the ending “versities.” The split of “con- / versities” functions as a threshold across which a new form may pass.

“Conversities” may also be read as a variation on the word “converse.” As a kind of proposition, “converse” calls us back to the word “prop,” one of the “uses” of the pangolin tail. I would like here to connect back to Riffaterre’s interest in the “suppositive” as the mode that marks lyric forms and of which prosopopeia is an example. If

37 We may notice in these lines as well that the possibility of a “living fable” would likely include animals that could speak, another indication that we may read the pangolin’s not speaking as nonetheless retaining the possibility—or perhaps the form—of voice.
38 Margaret Holley suggests that in Moore’s revisions the remnants of her syllabic system “occasionally…show like bones through the contours of the free verse” (47), a formulation which calls attention to the persistent presence of a latent formal interior.
prosopopeia gives a voice to the voiceless by mere convention, here “conversities”

welcomes in a latent genre, enacting the same kind of artifice and subject / object reversal

that is enacted with figures of voice. Ultimately, the shape of the poem will take on a

chiasmic form in which tenor and vehicle displace one another: originally the pangolin is

described as having “certain postures of a man” (119), whereas eventually, the man is

described as “in fighting, mechanicked / like the pangolin; capsizing in disheartenment”

(119). If man is the “writing - / master” he nonetheless cannot write the pangolin without

the pangolin writing him as well: in the end the man is described: “Consistent with the /

formula: warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few hairs—that / is mammal.

There he sits in his own habitat” (120). The overturning of these grammatical positions

within the poem suggest as well the way the position of the writer is overturned by one

without a voice. Nonetheless, the pangolin, who never speaks, redirects the description

that both gives him existence and renders him written by another.

The hospitality relationship is fitting to consider in the context of a creature for

whom the potential intrusion of another allows him to be figured the way he is. The

pangolin is described as “unhurt,” “unintruded,” “not aggressive,” words that describe it

in relationship to its recoiling from another’s presence. “The Pangolin” argues that words

exist for the sake of a relationship, within a grammatical hierarchy and a contingent

generic context. If grammatical laws presuppose assymetrical relationships, so too does

the law of hospitality. If, in one sense, Moore’s hard-shelled animals have been read as

inhospitable to the outside world, their relationship to many discursive utterances

suggests hospitality in its purest form: the willful consent to take in the other knowing

that ultimately, one’s status may be displaced. Armored animals are also endowed with
the unique potential to “capsize”; as such, they enact the purest form of hospitality, underbellies exposed, roofs and floors turned upside down. This is the problem enacted at the level of the word in any generic utterance: the word “grace” within the context of natural history displaces the generic utterance itself, such that the un-uttered contexts or states of grace usurp the place of host. The word “grace” is not within quotation marks in the poem and therefore not marked as originating from the outside, but its operations suggest that entrances and thresholds exist in several iterations in the poem. In my reading, the outside presence marked by citation and allusion calls attention to the way that every word carries with it its own baggage, its own outside presence within it; as such, a logic of intertextuality extends through every part of the poem. In this sense, the outside that one knows is always in tension with the outside that has yet to be.

III. Bad Hosting

Pure hospitality consists in welcoming whoever arrives before imposing any conditions on him, before knowing and asking anything at all, be it a name or an identity ‘paper’…. [it] consists in doing everything to address the other, to accord him, even to ask him his name, while keeping this question from becoming a ‘condition,’ a police inquisition, a blacklist, or simply border control.


As I have noted, Moore’s “animile” poems make up a sort of subgenre of Moore’s other lyrics. While these poems approach the genre of ode, and yet, figures of apostrophe and prosopopeia are rarely foregrounded and most often absent altogether. As in “The Pangolin,” they often are marked by swerving description, enacting the ethic represented by Moore’s famous line, “What is more precise than precision? Illusion” (151). These poems figure a space of animation that the lyric accords the descriptive at the threshold of
the poem. In addition, Moore’s penchant for welcoming otherness—strange animals or strange text—often positions her as guide or host for the reader. We might even say this expectation is intrinsic to the subgenre of “animile.” Such expectation is perhaps what led John Ashbery to figure Moore’s aesthetic in terms of “parting company”: “I become aware before the end of a poem that Miss Moore and I have parted company somewhat further back. Sometimes, as in ‘The Jerboa’ the author has her say and retires, leaving you in the company of some curious little rodent” (Vincent 90). Ashbery thus figures Moore as a kind of bad host; his response to the poem suggests that even without an “I,” Moore’s voice can be felt to move closer and further away from the reader. Moore secures the company of Ashbery and jerboa, afforded because Moore’s “say” is no longer heard. Although the jerboa does not speak, “presence” is redefined through a shift of voices.

In my reading, Moore’s bad hosting opens a space for animating the unexpected—the things the guest does when the host has gone to bed, accommodating herself in a way she could not with the host in the room. The next poem I will look at asks how to address the guest such that the questioning itself does not turn into a condition. “The Frigate Pelican” explores many of the same problems as “The Pangolin,” particularly in the way it frustrates the expectations of what description should be. Eventually, however, unlike “The Pangolin,” this poem will present the possibility of

39 As I hope is clear, my argument includes the assumption that Moore consistently frustrates attempts to read lyric as dramatic monologue alone in which the “I” is a fully formed subject speaking. In this way, my readings contrast with Holley’s definition of lyric as she details the extent to which we might think of Moore as “lyrical”: “the lyric as a genre is usually identified with the sense of a single speaker, a self that is the imagined source or medium of the poem’s intended message. That self is a kind of persona, a fictional character created by the discourse, and to the extent that a poem yields this sense of a person speaking to us, we may say that it enters the lyric mode” (115). The lyric “I” cannot be equated with fictional character or personhood because it is precisely lyric’s mode that renders it a trope, an artificial convention, frequently bypassing the idea of personhood altogether.
animals speaking, foregrounding the problem of voice explicitly and asking the reader to consider how the operation of description morphs in the presence of prosopopeia.

“The Frigate Pelican” like “The Pangolin” is another “animile.” This poem too begins with what appears to be a description of the animal only to frustrate the expectations of what description should be. The poem immediately foregrounds the problem of description in its opening line: “Rapidly cruising or lying on the air there is a bird” (25). As in “The Pangolin,” here the description seems to revise itself, and yet, it is unclear whether this revision describes a change in the object world or a change in the position of the speaker. The first possibility suggests that the object world shifts—the pelican “rapidly cruises” in one moment of time and “lies on the air” in another; the second suggests that the description itself is shifting. In the latter reading, the image revises itself in what could be an endless pursuit of the accurate rendering of an object-world. Here, the bird is not changing, but the language misses its mark the first time and persists forward with a second option (“or lies on the air”) to make itself more closely constitute the object it describes. Does the description of the bird foreground its own accuracy (offset by the pelican's flightiness), or its inaccuracy (offset by the pelican's stability)? In just the first line, the poem seems unclear what kind of movement it will track: the shifting of the object world—in which case the descriptive mode would “actualize a system of signs”—or the shifting of description itself—in which case, every utterance would arrive announcing its own contingency, and at the same time calling attention to the presence of a speaker, or one doing the revising. The poem’s object of meditation itself is thus undecidable; will the poem explore the bird itself or how to speak
description? The poem eventually meets the impossibility of doing one without other with the possibility of the pelican itself speaking.

The ostensible object of meditation in the poem—the frigate bird—is associated with thievery insofar as it both steals from others to feed itself and collects stray objects that he then puts to creative use. The way Moore makes use of language from elsewhere—allusions and citations—suggests that the bird figures her allusive aesthetic; the bird’s behavior reflects the way the poem is put together. The enjambment of the first stanza takes on an ethical quality when the bird is called “unconfiding”; for Moore, the suspension of grammar that enjambment literalizes can be read as a resistance to “confiding.” In the beginning of the poem, the bird “realizes Rassela's friend's project / of wings uniting levity with strength,” (25) in a line that alludes to Samuel Johnson. The words “wings uniting levity with strength” are a direct quote from Johnson’s novel, although they are not marked as such in the poem. Here, an outside voice poses as mere description; immediately, description enters the poem as stolen goods. As a thief, then, Moore puts the stolen object on display, calling attention both to what has been acquired and the lost original context of her verbal objects. In Susan Stewart’s understanding of the “pickpocket” as a figure for allusion, she suggests that the scene of pickpocketing is an “event that slips out of its frame, leaving only an absence, and empty pocket, as its trace” (1128). Likewise, allusions are fragments “slipped” from their original frame, traces of absent original contexts. The allusion constructs literary tradition insofar as it is literally a selection of a past text through which the primary text is in part to be understood. Because allusion presents the possibility of tradition as well as the mark of
absence, it is “simultaneously a revelation and a concealment by which tradition is manufactured” (1128).

Allusion as theft mobilizes a structure of revelation and concealment, a condition that gives meaning to Moore’s depiction of the pelican as “the unconfiding frigate-bird [that] hides / in the height and in the majestic / display of his art” (26); in refusing to mark her citations, Moore confuses her sources with her “own words.” In the case in which the stolen good is also description, it at once poses as the key to knowing both the object of the poem and another absent context. And yet, the poem critiques a system that would value the secrets it has positioned as the privileged unknown. Instead, it proposes “unconfiding” as a value in itself, a value that refuses the terms of address that would position one voice responding to another, one animated directly by the other. The poem instead celebrates spontaneous shifts in direction and voices emerging from unexpected places. Early in the poem, the frigate bird is contrasted with the predictability of domestic animals. He is

unlikely the more stalwart swan that can ferry the woodcutter’s two children home. Make hay; keep the shop. I have one sheep; were a less limber animal’s mottoes. This one finds sticks for the swan’s-down-dress of his child to rest upon and would not know Gretel from Hansel. (25)

The allusion to the end of a Grimm Brother’s fairy tale in the middle of the poem’s own progression argues the poem’s distance from such a story: the swan serves as a convention of the fairytale plot, and as such allows for the tale to end. One effect of the allusion is to distinguish the frigate bird also from other animals as speakers. “Make hay; / keep the shop. I have one sheep” are not established as voices until after their utterance;
knowledge of their origin is delayed until we read “were a less limber animal’s mottoes” and we can recognize them as other than the descriptive voice of the poem. As with the pangolin, which was proclaimed not “a living fable” (118), here, too, the frigate bird is defined against the speaking animals of fairytale forms. And yet, in both cases, the distinguishing characteristics of Moore’s animals leave unclear what exactly their relationship is to voice; their very contrast with “living fables” suggest that Moore’s animals also have qualities of animation beyond the facts of natural history. The simple mandates of the other animals take on the status of clichés, moving in one direction like the ferrying swan, without obstructing the forward movement of grammar. The pelican, whose movements are described above these lines in enjambment, embodies a kind of agile movement that seems to defy the descriptive register that would contain it. The allusion to the swan as an agent of narrative closure—ferrying children home—and one who knows the children’s names, suggests a kind of allusive aesthetic that would also construct a narrative of literary history. Identified with the safety of home rather than the dangers of inhospitality in the witch’s house, the swan also figures the safety of known, finished narratives.

But the swan is picked up by the poem a few lines down; once associated with the one-directional, with safety, “home,” and endings, the swan reemerges as a possessive adjective to describe—oddly enough—the pelican’s own child: “the swan’s-down’s dress of [the pelican’s] child.” If these children are made of “swan’s-down-dress,” then the figure of the swan has been reclaimed for the body of the baby bird, displaced to a site within the pelican’s own domestic abode. Reduced to synecdoche (“swan” is no longer the animal, but the baby frigate bird’s outer covering), the swan likewise turns from noun
to adjective, grammatically in the service of adorning, but not of naming. The swan, who once knew names, no longer functions as a name, what in Derrida’s terms would express “knowledge of the visitor.” Reclaimed as a descriptor, the swan that entered as a figure for ending itself reemerges to be conserved a descriptor of the pelican’s child. It is also transformed from that which moves laterally—ferrying—to that which exists in simultaneity; the difference is between its placement as the subject of a complete clause—serving a discursive function—and as a component of the “swan’s-down-dress—serving a paratactic function. That which entered the poem seeming to manufacture literary tradition, itself is displaced to description, to a nearly “hidden” site. And yet, the allusion for Moore has animated her description, suggesting that allusion itself moves and changes when it enters into an unknown abode.

The poem shifts its mode completely from a description of the frigate-bird with an ellipses and words that seem to represent the pelican’s own “motto”:

...Festina lente. Be gay
civilly? How so? ‘If I do well I am blessed
whether any bless me or not, and if I do
ill I am cursed.’ (26)

Abruptly, the reader is positioned as overhearing an odd conversation in which neither speaker seems to be responding to the other. In fact, we do not recognize this as a conversation until we read the questions, “Be gay, civilly? How so?” which suddenly call attention to the place of voice on the poem. These questions suggest that the words “festina lente” indicate a separate voice, and for the first time we hear (in the questions) what seems to be the original voice of the poem as voice rather than description. Literally, the origin of the words “festina lente” is the motto of the fifteenth-century publisher Aldus Pius Manutius, whose legacy included the invention of italica type, which of course
is enacted in these very words. In this case, the interrupting voice actually seems to constitute what came before it as voice; with no “I,” and marked by description, the poem prior to the words “festina lente” did not call attention to voice. This interruption is also concurrent with the arrival of a verbal object from elsewhere. If the condition of production for this conversation is interruption, Moore redirects the reader’s attention again when she translates festina lente as “be gay, civilly?” As a mistranslation, these words subordinate meaning to translation's inevitable misdirection, all of which coincides with the emergence of two speakers. The enjambment that opened the poem is reflected again in a conversation whose condition seems to be directional reversals. This conversation ultimately is not interrupted so much as it is impelled or compelled by non-address, by response that comes from afar, or outside the contract under which the conversation seems to have begun.

In fact, the mistranslation reproduces a formal match to the absent, conventional translation. “Festina lente” generally translates as “make haste, slowly.” Moore’s mistranslation, “Be gay, civilly,” matches “Make haste slowly” in syllabic length, rhythm, and grammatical form. By responding in such a way that the form of the utterance is matched while its meaning goes unaddressed, the voice calls attention to the distinction of types of verbal utterance at the moment the poem shifts from a descriptive to a lyric register. Here, we are met directly with the possibility of the pelican speaking; these words foreground prosopopeia, one of the most obvious conventions of lyric, and yet, the possibility remains that these words emerge from a disembodied source. As in “Peter,” this poem leaves open the possibility that the frigate bird can talk. And yet, if he does, he offers no explanation for these words; he does not speak in order to tell his own story or
display his own agency. And yet, this very lack of understanding sends the poem—and the listeners in the pelican’s company—in a new direction altogether, into a maze of questions posing as responses, missing their marks completely. By calling attention to the type of verbal utterance spoken, more than the identity of a speaker, Moore comments on the structure of what I have called a confiding ethic: a system that values revealing the secrets that it has positioned as the privileged unknown. Moore, who disavowed literary precursors, here refuses to identify the site from which one speaks, but instead follows the contours of disembodied words as they shift and change their trajectories.

III. Silent Residences

The “animiles” discussed in the previous pages show the relationship between the descriptive modes and animation insofar as they play out Derrida’s “question of the question.” The poems “The Steeple-Jack” and “Silence” more directly take up the trope of lodging, exemplifying inclusion’s dependence on both exclusion and excess.

In “The Steeple Jack,” Moore’s repeating words theorize the proximity of inclusion and exclusion, tracing the common history of each. While her repetitions do not register aurally, her words nevertheless play out a proliferation of discursive possibility. Moore’s poem, in particular, pivots on “fit,” while, for example, “sea” and “see,” “house,” “you,” and “star,” all repeat themselves through both descriptive and invocative registers throughout this poem. The middle of the poem includes a long list of flora that are “favored by the fog” and therefore appear in this town; what follows after is a list of flora and fauna that do not:

The climate
Is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or
jack-fruit trees; or for exotic serpent life. Ring lizard and snake-skin for the foot, if you see fit; but here they’ve cats, not cobras, to keep down the rats. (6)

The line that ends “Ring lizard and snake-skin for the foot, if you see fit” suggests on the one hand that “exotic serpent / life” has been reduced to footwear. If the shoe “fits,” “your” fashion choice may be a reminder of exotic species. If, however, “for the foot” refers to the feet of a poetic line—which Moore’s syllabic scheme has dictated must include 14 syllables—then, the names of such exotic species, the names of the life that this place cannot support, arrive to make the syllables of the line “fit.” The impossibility of life (or “life” turned to imported shoes) is then the very stuff of formal fit. The word challenges the reader to “see” the “fit” that Moore has constructed with the very elements that shouldn’t exist in a description of such a town. At the same time, Moore’s rejection of traditional meters leads us to question whether her lines contain “feet” at all. “If you see fit,” also indicates that these “feet” can only be seen on the page—not heard by the ear; the fit must be visually observed in the line break that communicates the syllabic form. Even in its beginning lines, “Durer would have seen a reason for living / in a town like this” (my italics), the poem already suggests that apprehension of this town is to be accomplished through sight. Here, then, the “you” takes the place of “Durer” in being called on to visually assess the “fit.”

It is simultaneously significant that “you” appears in this line; former iterations of “you” in the poem up to this point are connected to the descriptive mode: “the sweet sea air coming into your house” and “You can see a twenty-five- / pound lobster” (5). In the latter instance, the poem refuses to question the referential status of the object the “you” sees. With the line, “if you see fit,” however, the “you” appears in order to re-make the
poem, to participate, perhaps, in the labor of the steeple-jack, who rights the disorder of the storm. Description has a vector in this sense; it moves the poem specifically by failing to serve its function, by transferring the authority of what can be “seen” to the “you,” who then must participate in the poem’s rearranging. In a sense, a list of what is “not” in the “town” generates the question of what is not in the poem, highlighting the instability of the poem’s own construction. As the descriptive mode ventures into the territory of what is absent, description itself loses its “footing.” Here, suddenly, the “you” is invoking the nouns of the poem. “You can see” is thus displaced by “if you see fit,” and the authority of poetic construction is transferred to the “you” itself—the very “you” that the poem has promised “can see” the world the poem describes. The poem begins to elide its status as host with the town’s status as refuge. Significantly, the word “jack” first comes into the body of the poem as part of a list of flora which do not exist in the town: “The climate / is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or / jack-fruit trees” (6). Several lines later, of course, “jack” returns as “steeple-jack,” the very subject of the poem’s title. Moore’s tendency here to bring what is outside, in, moves the poem closer to its central figure. The poem suggests the figure “might be part of a novel, but on the sidewalk / a sign says, C.J. Poole, Steeple-Jack.” That the steeple-jack may be part of a novel suggests his kinship with the “jack-fruit” trees, which, just like a novel character, does not exist in the town—and therefore, calls into question what it is doing in the poem. As with the jack-fruit, the steeple-jack is introduced initially by his very potential to not “fit” in this town.

The question of poetic form—Moore’s “foot” which is, after all, less a foot than her own syllabic law—ultimately is connected to formal hospitality by the word “fit.”
The fit of poetic form begs the other—or perhaps, invites the other. “This would be a fit haven for / waifs, children, animals, prisoners, / and presidents…” (7). The “fit” that was a part of the 14-syllable line in the seventh stanza returns nearly at the same site—the 14-syllable line of the eleventh stanza. As I’ve suggested, the first “fit” assists in accomplishing the disruption of the descriptive mode by granting formal authority to “you.” The second instance of the word “fit” precedes a litany which seems, by contrast, perfectly well established in description:

This would be a fit haven for
Waifs, children, animals, prisoners,
And presidents who have repaid
sin-driven
senators by not thinking about them. The
place has a school-house, a post-office in a
store, fish-houses, hen-houses, a three-masted
schooner on
the stocks. The hero, the student,
the steeple-jack, each in his way,
is at home.

Moore tends to welcome into the poem that which the description of the place within the poem excludes. The very types of objects that are declared as outside such description—what “the climate is not right for” and “what might seem the opposite”—nonetheless lodge themselves within such description eventually.

Like “The Steeple-Jack,” the poem “Silence” takes up the same problem of inclusion and exclusion, and yet, this poem relies on a play of voices; description is almost absent completely. Here, voices from other texts themselves function like guests, arriving with the same potential to displace or overturn that we have seen with the descriptive mode. If the poem may be said to exhibit the descriptive mode at all, it is in
the context of an extended metaphor in which the speaker likens “superior people” to a “self-reliant” cat (91). An image of a solitary animal, fastidiously attending to its own needs, the cat may be considered an instance of Moore’s subgenre “animile” in a diminutive form. As a vehicle to the metaphoric structure, the cat that “takes its prey to privacy” in a sense lodges within another kind of poem altogether (91). While this poem has been read in terms of Moore’s relationship to literary history—insofar as she gives hearing to a male tradition in order to undermine it—the cat itself seems to testify to the way Moore’s own aesthetic can be relocated within the words of others. If “self-reliant like the cat” has been read as an allusion to an Emersonian literary history, the animile as—an idiosyncratic form of Moore’s own invention—finds “privacy” within it. As much as Moore seems to be inviting in voices of literary history here, she also may be said to be referencing the originality of her own oeuvre.

And yet, it is this very idea of “one’s own” that this poem will problematize. In my reading, “Silence” thematizes the trope of hospitality that is enacted at a formal level in nearly all of Moore’s poetry. The last line of the poem, “Inns are not residences,” declares an opposition that calls attention to the limits of reception by suggesting that an “inn” will never serve as a permanent home. I read the invocation of “inns” and “residences” as alternate ways of understanding a relationship to words themselves: do words ever achieve the status as “one’s own” or do they function as lodgers, perpetually unattached to any site of original utterance? As I have been arguing, Moore perpetually frustrates the process of locating the sites of speaking positions; in fact, their very contingency serves as a source of animation itself. In welcoming other voices into her

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40 Elizabeth Gregory’s chapter on Moore in Quotation and Modernist Poetry exemplifies this argument in an extended, eloquent reading of “Silence” (Gregory).
poem, Moore in some ways positions herself as “host”; in leaving the last word to herself, she also doesn’t allow the house of the poem to be overrun by the words of others. Most of “Silence” consists of words quoted by the speaker’s “father,” who expounds on the habits of “superior people,” including how they visit and speak. In the last two lines of the poem, referring to the father, the speaker says, “Nor was he insincere in saying, ‘Make my house your inn.’ / Inns are not residences” (91). In declaring what inns are not, Moore calls attention to the limits of the hospitality relationship as it is expressed in the father’s offer. In particular, the last line suggests that hospitality exists simultaneously with its exclusions; here, what the poem invites in and excludes are mutually constitutive.

“Residences” suggests the possibility of ownership, especially since the father has declared that “superior people” “can be robbed of speech / by speech which has delighted them” (91). The idea of “robbing” speech and guarding against the possibility of losing one’s residence suggest the father’s understanding that both words and houses are things to be possessed, and therefore things that also may be seized. If “Silence” ends by declaring that “inns are not residences,” this declaration is also enacted in its form: Moore invites in the speech of others—a woman named Mrs. A.M. Homans and Edmund Burke—in creating the voice of the father. To some extent Moore repeats the injunction of the father to “make my house your inn” by lending space to these voices without risking her own loss of self-possession; she preserves the last line for herself. Moore even outdoes the father’s voice by positioning it in such a way that the space it occupies undoes the meaning it expresses. Moore ironizes the father’s speech by giving him the line that “superior people” can be “robbed of speech” even as his speech takes up all but three lines of the poem.
This displacement of voices is accomplished at another level, however, for the language the quotation marks enclose corresponds to some extent—but not exactly—to the language Moore has acquired from “outside.” Susan Stewart has noted that, within quotation marks, “we see the articulation of a boundary that defines not just the text of the quotation but the supposed discourse of originality that surrounds it” (1134). I have read Moore as a cautious host, refusing to allow her house to be overrun by preserving the last line for herself, a gesture that appears to create a “discourse of originality.” And yet, when we consult Moore’s notes, we discover that in some cases, her “own words” are within quotation marks and the words of others are outside quotation marks, suggesting that breakdown of ownership altogether. The roles of guest and host are foregrounded only to be elided; the voice of the other which at first appeared to displace the voice of the poet shows itself to be confused with the “discourse of originality” and therefore undoes the way we must consider “originality” itself. Moore thus demonstrates the way a concept of language from elsewhere, from another, depends on an idea of authorial originality; if we recognize what is within her quotations as another’s speech, we also recognize that which is outside of quotations as her “own.” It is this very expectation that she subverts in her notes’ explanations of the words’ origins. What the father has “said” was in fact, partly Mrs. A.M Homans, partly Edmund Burke, and partly Moore herself; as much as Moore invites others’ voices into her poems, the father’s voice is thus not his own either. And yet, the poem read alongside its notes asks the reader to participate in this process of asking whose is whose, of assigning language to an identity and then undoing the certainty of that assignation.
This displacement of voices, however, is complicated by the very way Moore understands the relationship between guest and host; while an “outside” voice enters the poem, it both instantiates the boundary between inside and outside, and also troubles this boundary at the same time. Readings of “Silence” tend to be limited by the tendency to read dramatic monologue as the dominant, organizing device of the poem. In my reading, the dramatic monologue, as a figure that actualizes the identity of a speaker as well as the site from which he speaks, is undone by the very way words animate themselves. As in “The Pangolin,” the lyric form ousts words themselves from their present positions, giving them lodging, but not “residence.” In this way, our tendency to read the poem as the “father’s” words—or Moore responding to the father—is complicated by the way she foregrounds the intrinsic impermanence of any speaking position. Like Moore’s animals who resist their own description through their potential to speak, rather than speech itself, here too animation is borne through silence’s potential to out itself. The image of the cat that I have read as a diminutive “animile” is perhaps a more likely candidate for “originality,” the moment in the poem that foregrounds an idiosyncratic form more than the contents of a fictionalized voice speaking. Insofar as the cat is a figure for form itself—Moore’s animile, silent but also asserting itself as a form repeated in multiple iterations—it suggests the value of spatial contours as much as verbal content.

Most significantly for this poem, the silence of clichéd language calls attention to itself as that which may be re-cycled. The speaker outside of the quotation marks, often identified with Moore herself, or the female poet, actually responds to what is not said by father-speaker. In yet another displacement, Moore quotes Burke word for word in an injunction that can be read as a revision of the cliché, “make my home your home.”
Instead, in Burke’s words, “make my home your inn,” “inn” displaces “home,” a displacement “silences” the word we would have expected. In selecting out this revised cliché, Moore chooses to repeat exactly that which is not repeated ad infinitum, but something very close. What is worth repeating, therefore, is that which is near to what is always repeated; in fact, it is its closeness that makes it literally re-markable. Moore calls attention to the way that singularity may be borne more from selected repetition than using “one’s own” words. “Make my home your home” never originates in the mouth of the one who speaks it, whereas “make my house your inn” preserves some quality of originality, even as, in Moore’s reiteration, it is marked as being from the voice of another.

The displacement of “home” for “inn” replicates the process Moore has enacted in her quotations; she has marked language as belonging to a subject only to refuse the possibility of permanent belonging, placed language securely within a structure of ownership only to disavow that structure. When Burke’s line appears, the word that seems to be most his “own,” the word that marks the difference from cliché, is “inn,” which is of course followed by the final line, “Inns are not residences.” And yet, by this point in the poem, the letters “i-n-s” have already been inscribed three times: “The deepest feeling shows itself in silence; not in silence, but restraint. / Nor was he insincere…” (91). The word “inns,” which seems to have been generated by Burke’s remark, was actually inside the poem the entire time. When the last two lines draw our attention back to these instances of letters, we can see how the same letters lodge themselves in ways that not only undo their meaning, but also their very ability to make themselves audible. And yet, their visual assertion—the fact that we can distinguish i-n-s

82
with our eyes without necessarily hearing its sameness across different words—suggests the way words lodge in silence. Literally, “ins” lodges twice “in silence.” The poem here seems to de-privilege the content of outside voices and relocate the space of silence that these very voices animate. That the last few lines of the poem revise one another—
“shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint” and “make my house your inn. /
Inns are not residences”—suggests again the way that words lodge rather than reside, constantly moving on to new positions. And “inns” occur in the least likely contexts; in a word like insincere we find “inns,” suggesting that this word cannot help but declare its function as accommodation at the same time its meaning declares it is disingenuous or deceitful.

Silence suggests not only the absence of speech, but also the anticipation of speech as the space between words. If “ins” does indeed lodge in silence, it is likened to Moore’s own rhyme patterning. Like the “ins” that remain hidden until we go searching for them, Moore’s rhymes are heard “on the page” rather than “on the ear.” Their unstressed lines do not make rhyme readily obvious, but the reader persists in seeing rhyme as well as hearing rhyme in unlikely places. “Silence” makes a near rhyme with “residences,” but it is not nearly as aurally detectable as it is visually. In the closeness between “silence” and “residences,” Moore thus marks a boundary between what may be heard aloud and what may be heard only in silence. Again what may be heard in silence gestures toward the lyric mode—toward those sites or spaces that may speak at any moment, whose potential to speak shifts the contours of the speech all around them. Although “Silence” makes use of bits of speech rather than description from a natural
history textbook, it thematizes the limits of a hospitality that nonetheless is dependant on discursive inclusiveness to be brought into existence.

IV. Mis-Setting Voice and Silence

While the majority of Moore’s poems are unmetered such that her rhymes are best heard on the page, “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” reconfigures Moore’s relationship to aural repetitions. One of Moore’s few poems to use aural rhyme, it also includes two fragments of advertisements in order to suggest a more vocal kind of address. This poem marks a transition to my second chapter; its interest in aurally sounding repetition connects it to Bishop’s incantatory reiterations, such as those that I observed in my introduction: “please come flying, please come flying, please come flying” (82). In Moore’s “Armor’s Undermining Modesty,” sound calls attention to itself, getting in the way of the address that the words of the advertisement might convey. Moore exchanges the silent potential of Peter the Cat for the more overt animation of publicity, which, in this poem, “says nothing” but nevertheless speaks in a more insidious way. In the following paragraphs, I trace the way that the sound Moore’s poem creates in describing the advertisement voices the history of how the advertisement itself appears to not be voicing.

I showed in my introduction the way Moore’s “unhackneyed solitude” figures lyric mode. “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” makes several references to “hack.” “Unhackneyed solitude” appears at the end of the poem after a concatenation of images and musings which seem to have little to do with one another: a description of a moth’s wings, the image of the origin of “our mis-set alphabet,” a critical account of poetry’s
weakness, reminiscences on knights. The poem’s first interest in “hack” appears earlier in
the poem:

Once, self-determination
made an ax of a stone
and hacked things out with hairy paws. The consequence—
our mis-set
alphabet.
Arise, for it is day. (151)

The “hacked things” of this stanza thus prepare us for the “unhackneyed solitude” of the
final lines:

I should, I confess,
like to have a talk with one of them about excess,
and armor’s undermining modesty,
instead of innocent depravity.
A mirror-of-steel uninsistence should countenance continence,
objectified and not by chance,
there in its frame of circumstance
of innocence and altitude
in an unhackneyed solitude.
There is the tarnish; and there the imperishable wish. (152)

The first two lines cited above as well as the last line are set to meter in a way few of
Moore’s lines are. Moreover, “I should, I confess, / Like to have a talk with one of them about excess” suggests that such poetic device might be considered “excess”; indeed, the
doubling of the “I”s is excessive for Moore as would be any inclination toward
“confession.” My reading of “unhackneyed solitude” however depends on Moore’s use of
two scraps of advertising. The first enters the poem unmarked as an advertisement,
eclipsing the history of its ideological function; only a thorough reading of Moore’s notes

41 John Vincent has read these lines for a commentary on reflection: “[Her] reflection in its ‘unhackneyed solitude’ is the figure for an ideal vision of oneself in another…. The reflection we see is, this poem underscores, a reflection. It always bears the tarnish of its own non-self, non-other status” (86–87). While this reading seems plausible enough, I locate “unhackneyed solitude” more specifically as a figure for the relationship between lyric voice and recycled language. Indeed, while Vincent reads the previous images of the poem as “meandering” until the “focus” is brought to bear on the last lines of the poem, (87) I suggest instead that the poem is about the “mis-set alphabet” which is its constitution.
tips the reader off to its history as the “hackneyed” verse of capitalism. This is the axiom, “Arise, for it is day” quoted in the first citation above. Moore’s notes tell us that this was the motto of the John Day Company, a printing press, but it is unquoted in the poem itself, eliding its allegiance to any other discursive context. The second advertisement is silent in a different way. This is the “pale-ale-eyed impersonal look / which the sales-placard gives the bock beer buck” (151). An advertisement for beer, it nonetheless doesn’t speak its own voice: it is only a visual, an “impersonal look.” (As a “look” the ad’s image as a face anticipates the “mirror of steel insistence [which should] countenance / continence.”)

The image arrives in the poem after Moore’s famous lines, “If tributes can cannot / be implicit, give me diatribes and the fragrance of iodine…”, suggesting its association with “diatribe” even as it is merely a passive “look.”

The first advertisement thus suggests that the poem itself is silencing the advertisement, hiding its status as advertisement from the reader. The second posits the advertisement as announcing silence; it is conferred a face, but is nonetheless reduced to a “look.” If the first advertisement is so hackneyed we can’t see it for its history, the poem makes the second “unhackneyed,” not by appropriating the voice of the advertisement, but by overriding its silence with sound. The garbled echoes of the words—“pale-ale-eyed” and “bock beer buck”—produce a sonic excess literally in the “face” of the advertisement’s silence. As if anticipating the power of prosopopeia itself, the thick consonants of “pale-ale-eyed” “bock-beer-buck” voice-over the voice that would be the beer’s, redirecting the sound that would address the consumer before the face of the beer can find its voice.
This juxtaposition makes an argument for how we might read the last lines in Moore’s poem, in which she imagines a “mirror-of-steel’s uninsistence” (a visual reflection or silent echo) displaying “unhackneyed solitude” (152). “Pale-ale-eyed” also calls attention to “eyed” even as it refuses to vocally address a consumer. This increases the likelihood that we see “eyed” in the word “unhackneyed” at the poem’s end. A visual echo, the “eyed” in unhackneyed renders “pale-ale-eyed” a call. Even as the poem describes it as a “look” rather than a voice, it will be “re-called” by the poem’s last lines. We then see “unhackneyed” as both constructed and endowed with facial features: an “eyed” constitution. “Eyed” becomes an instance of the mis-set alphabet: an over-determination that would give face to dead language. The history of the eye / I is in this way traced through visual repetitions: silent echoes. My chapter began by showing that Moore’s descriptive mode calls into question the de Manian opposition between description and invocation. This is accomplished in part by Moore’s interest in animating silence—or an un-actualized voice—without animating a literal voice. If description has a vector or a voice, it also has the potential to re-direct the “voice” of sites of dead language, including clichéd speech and advertisement. Such indirections of voice exemplify “un-hackneyed solitude,” the way in which lyric tracks the various trajectories of public language without representing voices emerging from the same.
CHAPTER TWO

“To Be Here, Like Them, And Overhear”: Hearing Echoes in Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetry

And Echo
Caught at the syllables as if they were precious:
‘I’m here,’ she cried. ‘I’m here’ and ‘I’m here’ and ‘I’m here.’

--Ted Hughes

How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain.

--Elizabeth Bishop

I. Echo as Inner Speech

In the last chapter, I argued that the form of the call and response is closely connected to de Man’s theorization of lyric invocation. The Romantic poet’s apostrophic call is a way of securing his status as lyric poet, invoking a “you” in order to make a listener for himself, to secure the poet’s “I” itself as a speaker. For de Man, as we have seen, the potential animation is simultaneously the threat latent in prosopopeia; the animation of the (dead or inanimate) “you” implies that “the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (78). The allure of the deconstructive interpretation is in part the claim for an “I” and “you” that are both mutually constitutive and potentially reversible. At the same time, the threat of displacement itself suggests that voices have the capacity to represent themselves as themselves. While I maintain that the invocative signals a lyric mode—that the lyric impulse is to call presence into being—the recycling inherent in linguistic repetition suggests that voice is proliferated far further than this “I” /
“you” structure maintains. Voice is not merely displaced by another; various trajectories of voicing complicate the two-way structure de Man describes.\(^{42}\) This returns us to de Man’s subordination of Echo, which we now understand as concurrent with the assumption that turning to stone is as good as death-as-ending. De Man’s tale of voice ends with such a petrification. My chapter, in contrast, inquires into what the stone-as-echo might itself accomplish. Insofar as de Man assumes figures of voicing to take on a “symmetrical structure,” he elides the “you” that is “mutely responsive” with the “I” “struck dumb.” And yet, his formulation ends with the “I,” “struck dumb,” failing to pursue the consequences of the “I” as “mutely responsive.” As I will show, Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry seeks to make an “I” that is a witness to the way its voice ceases to represent itself. Echo’s turn to stone is thus re-read as the speaker-turned-listener; she continues to pose the question: what can be done with a voice that can’t voice itself? Bishop’s echoes as receptive, “enforced passivity” figure a perpetual listening as lyric impulse.

Denise Riley’s theorization of “inner speech” helps to explain how Bishop’s speaker-listener is motivated by attention rather than the idea of an original utterance. Riley’s “inner speech” combines J.S. Mill’s pervasively cited definition of poetry as “discourse overheard” with Barbara Johnson’s description of apostrophe as ventriloquism. As is obvious by its very name, “inner speech” relocates overhearing within the “I” rather

\(^{42}\) In assuming that one voice must overtake the other, the deconstructive reading makes lyric voice a potential site of competition, locating a primary difference between the “I” and the “you” it animates. Preserving the “you” as an other, such a reading explains lyric invocation without challenging the category of the outsider—the “you” who is not the “I”—itself. Insofar as the de Manian reading asserts that the “you” is a potential threat to the “I,” it relies on a logic of competition that renders the two presences in an inevitable agon. Such competition figures difference in such a way that one presence must displace or overtake the other. In this sense, the apostrophic call as it has been understood by de Manian critics relocates Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence thesis within the poem itself, rather than at the level of literary history.
than between two or more subjects. Inner speech as “overhearing” also emphasizes the repetition and reiterations that are its condition: the “I” listens to whatever has been dredged up from the world, akin to Bishop’s “jawful of marl.” Language speaks the voice of the “I” in the same way a ventriloquist makes the dummy speak. As such, ventriloquy is “not only a passing and banal companion to any inner voice, but is its incisive constituent” (Lecercle and Riley 20). It is in fact, “our main mode of speaking”:

> It’s present in the ordinary experience of overhearing myself speaking inwardly in a well-formed voice whether as an outcome of switching my attention onto my inner speech or of feeling it to have risen and swum forward to claim my attention. (20)

The dual function of inner speech thus suggests attention is reversible: the “I” can attend to it intentionally or it can claim the “I”’s attention. (Apostrophe, as we have noted, functions similarly, as a call that would necessarily call attention to itself.) It is this latter function that suggests the capacity for the “I” to witness the linguistic history of the pronoun. Riley seeks to restore for the “I” of inner speech some semblance of authority even as she knows herself to be constituted in language. This leads Riley to resist the pessimistic tone of poststructuralism’s death of the subject. In “cutting out the inner” of the subject, language is concurrently figured as “quintessentially evanescent” and that which “[drifts] towards verbal ectoplasm” (Lecercle and Riley 39). Thus, while Foucault reads being in language as simultaneous to the subject’s disappearance, Riley posits the “I” as both “constituent of and witness to”:

> This speaking listener is certainly stripped of authority and is de-dramatized by the ambiguous topography of her inner speech. But she is also both a condition of and a witness for the enacted materiality and historicity of language, rather than, like Foucault’s fading subject, being in herself a disappearing act. (Lecercle and Riley 39)
The lyric ‘I’ as witness to the history of language, functions similarly. Bishop’s poems turn the “I” as speaker into a “speaking listener,” such that the “I” loses itself as dramatized subject, even as the poem gains its capacity to listen: the “I” is reinscribed in the silence that is the poem’s attentiveness to its own history. It is in this sense that the idea of displacement becomes unthinkable for Bishop. Instead, she restores the function of mute and stony death conferred by de Man’s prosopopeia. While her stony surface is not reanimated as persona, Echo maintains her listening capacity as “enforced passivity” (Riley, *The Words of Selves* 66). Riley strives to show how the un-originality of language is not a loss to be mourned. In underscoring the example of Samuel Beckett, she suggests that linguistic recycling is neither a sublime silencing nor an all-destructive deluge of impersonal noise. Beckett, the arch-inscriber of inner speech on the page, is not remotely headed towards the lure of silence, or the impersonal streaming of language as the vanishing point of the speaker. His work keeps steadfast to the stubborn presence of language in its utterer, in all its monotony and attrition; and ‘not by the burgeoning silence or aporia, but through a quiet dedication to itself.’ This voice without a mouth still stirs in the head. (Riley, *The Words of Selves* 66)

This “quiet dedication” to cliché itself, to an ever-present conversation with ordinary banality, for our terms, re-negotiates the vocation of the Romantic lyric poet such that his great ambition appears more like Echo’s (dubiously optimistic) persistence. Displacing the “I” as one’s own self speaking as well as the silent oppression connoted by de Man’s “frozen death,” Echo marks her own history of violation while all the while enduring as witness to the linguistic fragments thrown in her direction. Such a “calling” de-pathologizes the speaker who lacks her own voice, the voice without a mouth.

Lyric does not imply inner speech conferred with a form insofar as “form” is understood as a static pattern of constraints—a rhyme or meter structure, for instance.
Instead, lyric takes up the very same formal feature of inner speech: it expresses the “condition of and witness for the enacted materiality and historicity of language.” If specific poetic forms announce themselves at the outset as what have been recognized as lyric’s subgenres (sestina, villanelle, ode), these constraints necessarily superimpose one set of norms over the many other norms that the poem competes with and produces. Sestina and villanelle, for instance, assume echo as a formal commitment. They “assume” insofar as they take echo for granted as form and “assume” insofar as they take it on as a mantle. This latter sense suggests that there is nothing intrinsically stable about the code of repetition itself. The givenness of the echo is not merely a givenness, but also an anticipated effect, in the same way that a costume anticipates effecting identity. Such is the difference between the code—the poetic recipe—and the poem’s form. The latter suggests that form comes into being through the reading of the poem, during which process the announced laws of the poem become only one history of constraint and contingency which are the poem’s (and the reading’s) constitutive parts. This is another way of saying that the announced laws are not the primary site of constraint for the “voice” (as singularity or interiority). The voice as an effect of language is constrained and produced through the history of the materials which are its making. Poetic forms such as sestina and villanelle initiate the inscription of this historical record but do not have the power to decide from the outset how such a history will emerge.

Elizabeth Bishop has not been prone to the attacks accorded to Echo: that of mere reiteration. On the contrary, her initial reception lauded the particularity of her detail. As Lee Edelman has recounted it, Bishop was figured “female” insofar as she was committed to the “literal.” He notes that both Moore and Bishop were “championed for
their careful observations, their scrupulous particulars, their characteristic restraint” (92–93). Such “readings place her in a clear relation to the literal reality her work is said to register” (93). While the literality of echo might not conflate with the literality of “careful observation” or regionalist particularity, both share the assumption of reflection as the poet’s primary device. Edelman keenly observes that such readings have the effect of seeming to be “already placed or inscribed within [Bishop’s] work, within her meditations on the way in which questions of placement and appropriation necessarily inform the very act of reading” (93). Here, claiming “literalness” is a blindness that Bishop’s poems have already registered as such. In more recent critical history, Bishop has been read as asserting a (feminist or otherwise subversive) voice amidst her characteristic “restraint.”

This trend can be traced back to Adrienne Rich’s account of Bishop’s poetry, in which she registers her ambivalence in identifying Bishop as precursor. Rich notes that praise for Bishop did not register “her struggles for self-definition and her sense of difference” (125) and reads Bishop’s “outsider’s eye” as generated from her lesbianism. Such claims would shift Bishop from scrupulous describer to perpetual outsider, and she would be read more and more for signifying complexity of perspective. If literal detail made Bishop into a minor female poet, then the originality of her perspective as outsider nonetheless has its own limitations. As the

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43 This critical trend has taken many forms, one of the most significant being to re-inscribe Bishop as biographical subject in what might be seen as the impersonality of her “I.” In just one example, “Cruoe in England” is relentlessly read as an autobiographic description of Bishop’s own isolation. See Chisasson. Bishop’s oft-quoted line that she wished to be a “minor Wordsworth” has led her apologists to read her poems (against her own claim) as decidedly un-minor. Heather Cass White’s beautiful reading of Bishop’s “calling” as lyric poet nonetheless reinscribes this assumption that Bishop’s poems are motivated by finding a voice, in the Romantic, positivist sense of the term.

44 This work associates Bishop with her status as outsider, both autobiographically and in the content associated with her poetic “eye” and “I.” Bonnie Costello’s Questions of Mastery for instance, argues that Bishop’s work communicates a “desire for mastery and the dangers and illusions to which such a desire is prone” (Costello 2). David Perkins likewise emphasizes her subversive use of perspective: the “selecting, coloring, ordering, unifying…in which every poet must engage, are suspect” and “Bishop gives the illusion of finding no symbolism or moral in her material” (377).
perpetual figure for the outsider, Bishop becomes a voice made to serve a political function. And while that voice perpetually finds any discursive mastery suspicious, it nonetheless reproduces mastery as it solidifies as voice. In codifying the position of “outsider,” this criticism nonetheless reduces Bishop to a position. Privileging positionality as the most significant aspect of Bishop’s work necessarily assumes the speaking “I” as directing a particular perspective, even if that perspective is the “outsider’s.” I show instead that Bishop’s poems challenge positionality as itself a priority for ideological critique. Bishop’s poetry consistently produces the un-authority of the “I,” not only by making visible perspective’s contingency, but also by asserting that the idea of a “speaker” can only be thought insofar as she is “speaker-listener” both.

In the first section that follows, “Echo’s Irony and the Sound of Silencing,” I show how echoing language calls attention to sites of linguistic silencing by producing sound over and against it. In “Deprivation and Sounding Prescription,” echo becomes a means of de-contextualizing imagistic meaning in order to strip a word’s semantic meaning to sound itself. “Echo Excised” shows the way that Bishop argues against de Man’s figures of voicing as displacing one another. If de Man’s voices are either victorious or mute-dead, Bishop’s echoing words suggest that there is never a moment in which listening ceases; in both “The Bight” and “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” echoing words persist as a means of redirecting voice. In “Echo’s Work,” my reading of Bishop’s “Filling Station” re-imagines “tinklings and jinglings,” not as that which can be reduced to advertising, but instead, as a means of tracking an affective history of sound. My last section, “Echoing Cliches,” returns to Riley’s inner speech as a way of understanding the “I” as constituted by lodging language.
II. Echo’s Irony and the Sound of Silencing

But what is the relationship between ideological reproduction—the instantiation of the subject-as-norm—and inner speech? Certainly inner speech is a means through which the “I” is interpellated, but interpellation is notoriously best able to function when it doesn’t call attention to itself. Jonathan Culler’s suggestion that lyric functions as “lodging” language is relevant here. Culler distinguishes between a narrative “memory of understanding and assimilation” that “you have made your own and can reformulate” and lyric memory as “that which you repeat, parrot-like, as something foreign that has become lodged in your mind, a piece of otherness” (“Comparing Poetry” xii). If Riley suggests that ventriloquism is the “incisive constituent” of inner speech in general, what appears to the “I” as language “lodged” (originated from elsewhere) suggests that it has a more specific claim on our attention, a particular relationship to attention, that inner speech in general does not. With the case of lodging language—that which in Riley’s words “[swims] up to claim my attention”—the “I” not only confronts her constitution by an outside, but likewise reproduces herself as an inside: as that which the lodging language is not. Often irritatingly persistent, lodging language as that which the “I” desires to excise thus serves effectively as negative interpellation. Like interpellation more generally, it functions through the suppression of its temporality. By the time I realize I am cohabitant with lodging language, the outside / inside lines have already been drawn.

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45 Culler goes on to claim that “to remember [poems] at all is to remember some of their words, isolated phrases perhaps, which stick in your memory, you don’t know why”; the stuckness itself is a “major aspect of their being” (xii).
Echo’s own capacity for irony, however, complicates things. On the one hand, echo-as-lodging language registers a norm that the “I” accepts or rejects. That lodging language is always an echo is clear, but the very fact of its reiterative nature does not mean that it is necessarily merely a norm. While the “I” may call an inner self into being by espousing it or rejecting it, her attention to echo as echo shifts the means through which it functions. Sestina and villanelle illustrate well echo’s relationship to instantiating normative identity. Demanding not only a rhyme scheme but the repetitions of words themselves, they internalize Culler’s lyric memory. Depending on a replication of the same at the level of the word, sestina and villanelle make a model of normative memory within them. Their insistence on replicating words within the poem means that they map sameness and difference on their own, as if internalizing how generic norms between texts are made. As maps of reiteration, such forms decide on their own what parts of their text are repeatable. Villanelle and sestina thus track the reproductive process within themselves. And yet, the very fact that their sites of sameness are literal repetitions means that they ironize in such a way that “sameness” becomes confused. Echo’s capacity for irony renders the most lawful of traditional lyric “genres” those that nonetheless make most visible (and audible) the contingent effects of replication. As I have noted above, the form knows that the map of its repetitions will never be concurrent with the history of normative structure it makes available.

Bishop’s famous villanelle “One Art” demonstrates this irony. Because the reiterated sameness is their source of irony, such forms suggest that the site of replication is also the site of greatest instability. Because generic replication is involuntary, reading the most legible sites of generic sameness and difference occludes an accurate
understanding of the mechanics of its reproduction. To this end, Bishop’s “One Art” argues for villanelle’s capacity to reproduce through losing the very meaning it declares. Famously, “One Art” ironizes its claim that “losing isn’t hard to master”:

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
So many things seem filled with the intent
To be lost that their loss is no disaster

As the poem progresses, the repetition of lines similar to the first and third above, insures that their sincerity is ultimately lost:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
The art of losing’s not too hard to master
Though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster. (178)

The poem thus simultaneously loses the lines’ meaning at the exact rate that it insists on their preservation, word for word. Moreover, that the poem is “filled with intent / to be lost” suggests the way that villanelle itself carries with it the anticipation of its own lost-ness, its own capacity to ironize its declared meaning and detach from that context. “One Art” thus asks not only what kind of losing happens through repetition, but also how form comes into being in its own negative aspect. Returning relentlessly to the site of sameness, the poem tests what will change when context is refused again and again. In this sense, the laws of reiteration that the villanelle requires, merely initiate a conversation that understands recycling itself as the generator of conflicting normative utterances. Like Riley’s Beckett, they “keep steadfast to the stubborn presence of language in its utterer, in all its monotony and attrition.”

Attention as it is understood within the context of lodging language decides the moment at which inside and outside are constructed. The critical assumption of Bishop’s status as “outsider” renders the inside / outside divide firmly in place, but her poetry
shows instead the process through which attention itself is made. If language lodges as “foreigner,” its appearance occludes language persisting in latent, silent form. At the same time, such latencies have the potential to be made available in the persistence of inner speech. The presence of lodging language anticipates the perpetual sounding of that which has not yet announced its status as available for recycling. In their desire to make of themselves an echo, Bishop’s reiterative words express the ambition of their own futurity. At the same time, echoing language sounds a history of normative silencing. In “Chemin de Fer,” echoing language not only calls attention to itself, but also enters as a character in the poem, anthropomorphized. The echo the poem names, however, does not itself produce echoing words in the poem, although the echo is paraphrased in the last line. The poem begins with an “I” walking along a railroad track, “where the dirty hermit lives,” and ends with the echo’s response to the hermit’s cry:

The hermit shot off his shot-gun
and the tree by his cabin shook.
Over the pond went a ripple.
The pet hen went chook-chook.

“Love should be put into action!”
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo
Tried and tried to confirm it. (8)

The poem thus refuses to duplicate (echo) the line “love should be put into action,” although it narrates that such an echo has taken place. At the same time, the consistent meter creates a sing-song quality and as the poem approaches its ending, echoing words multiply, some as end-rhyme and others, not. Insofar as rhyme structure depends on the echo of word-endings, the poem has created and upheld that particular expectation. But then, the echoes exceed the design, reproducing within the lines themselves: The “shot-
gun shot off,” the “hen went chook-chook.” Perhaps most significantly, the very last instance of end rhyme in the poem is an exact repetition: “conf –(irm it)” repeats exactly the sound, “hermit.” Echo is thus twice dislocated from where she ought to be, first moving within the lines, and secondly, multiplying the sameness of the end rhyme by reproducing the word “hermit” in full. All this doubling is significant given that the poem has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been read as a commentary on solitude, connecting Bishop’s biographical persona to the figure of the hermit.46 In the first stanza, the “I” of the poem reflects of the railroad tracks that “the ties were too close together / or maybe too far apart” (8). If the poem produces a sing-song echo approaching “jinglings and tinklings,” it also describes the isolation of solitude and an ambiguous desire for sociality. Riley, in passing, recounts a historical moment hermits were hired as decoration, to roam the landscapes of 18th century estates (Lecercle and Riley 8). The “dirty hermit” of “Chemin de Fer” can hardly be called “decorative.” In fact, he instead cries out against sentimental trappings: “love” without action.

If Riley’s hired hermit rendered solitude decorative, the last lines of the poem suggest the replication at the heart of that decorative status: a doubling that wrenches solitude from itself. The hermit as object of the wealthy landowners’ gaze shifts to the hermit as an aural reflection. Heather Cass White notes that Bishop, “skeptical of masculine crowing in all its forms,” makes such skepticism “palpable in her near-parodic hermit, firing his gun at nothing” (123). And yet, if the hermit is a parody of that which would seek to obliterate sentimentality, then neither is he ousted from the poem. On the

46 See Brett Millier’s reading of “Love should be put into action!” as referring to homosexual desire (178). Heather Cass White’s argument on Bishop’s lyric vocation reads the poem as a sign of the author’s early skepticism toward the power of invocation she nonetheless admired in Wordsworth: “The profound solipsism of Bishop’s image [of the hermit] reflects in part her constant anxiety over her own ability to say anything of importance” (124).
contrary, the poem blatantly commits to his recycling. The poem neither “confirms” in approving of the semantic sense the hermit would express or in reiterating his sound, but nor does it suggest that, in Cass White’s words, “the hermit is mournfully serenaded by his own echo” (124). As with de Man’s impulse to relegate Echo to his footnotes, so does Cass White misread the fate of the hermit by failing to read the literal echo. Cass White’s account is accurate as narrative summary; indeed, she articulates the account the poem has offered: the echo could not fulfill the hermit’s desires. Whatever the hermit hears as fictional persona, however, the poem never sounds a “mournful serenade” of “his own echo.” In fact, this is the very site the poem silences in its refusal to replicate the hermit’s words.

The “shot-gun’s shot” enables a site of attention in the poem that, in the way I’ve suggested for lodging language, is also a potential site of interpellative closure. At the same time, the poem resists this closure in the conflicting trajectories that the poem’s echoes take. As one who “tries and tries,” the echo of the last line is anthropomorphized in her attempts at “confirm[ation].” The echo thus poses as an answer—albeit, not the one either the echo or the hermit want to hear. Its unwillingness to re-sound the hermit’s line preserves the poem’s own structure of rhyme and echo, as a rhyme or repetition of the word “action” would violate the poem’s commitment to the ABCB rhyme structure. This commitment to its own structure of echoes thus subordinates the attention that the hermit’s shot-gun demands. If the shot-gun’s firing shares with lodging language the demand for attention, the poem’s mode of listening is neither to accept or reject the terms through which that attention has been demanded. The poem, recognizing the hermit as

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47 In trusting the narrative account of the poem, Cass White can only read the echo as a failed response, colluding with de Man’s resistance to reading an echo as “answer.”
himself a parody, reproduces the parody as linguistic construction: echoing “hermit,” within “confirm it,” the poem hoists the parody back into circulation as linguistic material.

The poem thus proposes an “action” for the “I” of inner speech that is both an attentiveness to echoes and a listening to itself. In re-sounding its own words, the poem shifts that which would announce itself as its loudest voice. The “shot” of lodging language—those words swimming up for our attention which would lay claim to the “I”’s attention—silences as well. Here, the word “shun” persists (unsounded) as that which is both overrun by the shot-gun’s hard consonants and that which would echo from “action.” In occasioning the word without sounding it, the poem offers a record of the shot-gun’s violence itself: the history of silencing (of shunning) that enables the obvious sites of attention to manifest. The poem’s explicit refusal to ironize the hermit’s speech shows that the moment of vocal attention (the hermit’s cry) is not the trajectory of voice that is most significant. In un-sounding “shun,” the poem on the one hand refuses to understand voice as representation—as something that should or should not be “shunned.” In narrating what the echo does—that it “tries and tries to confirm”—the poem diverts us altogether from the prospect of making or displacing a speaker, and instead proposes an examination of listening or attention itself. As an attempt to confirm the hermit’s words, the echo’s failure to do so honors difference—a difference both symptomatic of linguistic powerlessness and that which gives the hermit an afterlife in language. The poem thus tracks two moments of silencing. First, Echo’s mythic curse means that as a personification, she is unable to confirm the hermit’s cry. And secondly, the poem’s echoes themselves track how silencing is always more than absence of the subject’s speech. In refraining from “shunning” the hermit’s words, the poem shows how histories
of linguistic force persist as silent presences. Echo’s enforced passivity nonetheless makes available the contours of such silence.

III. Deprivation and Sounding Prescription

If echo is the quintessential ironizer, Bishop’s formal repetitions consistently seek to undo language from its position or context, as “One Art” clearly shows. Such undoing persists even in Bishop’s poems that are not sestina or villanelle, however. Simon Jarvis has argued for Wordsworth’s poetic as a strategy of deprivation, the “power of his poetry as resting on subtraction” (Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song 28). Such an interpretation applies to Bishop as well:

The removal of everything which is adventitious to a description, all this does not in the end leave us with the impossible dead letter, with perfected literalness, but rather forces us right up against that in language which will not be made absolutely literal: the way in which the steadiest description still sounds a prescription, the way in which a norm, or a value, or a meaning, echoes in what is apparently the most naked and simple ‘is.’ (Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song 29)

If Bishop’s echoes ironize their content, they also “sound the prescriptions” inhering within it, as shown in the example of the hermit above. The accumulation of reiterations turns the word into an object in its own right, “wrenching it into a novel sense or a nonsense” (Riley, The Words of Selves 157), but such a process has equal capacity to

48 Contemporary poet Katie Ford, in reading what she regards as Bishop’s “compulsive” repetitions, explains compulsion as a device of unsaying: “If an image can act as corrective for [a] trouble, the poet will use it again and again until the wrongly said is unsaid, until the obsessive trumps the habitual, dislodging it, acting as a ‘splinter.’” Although my argument resists dependence on psychological models, I do claim linguistic reiteration as a device itself. Ford connects this with the mystical tradition of “apophatic” modes of speech: that which would say by unsaying, “knowing it would be a great act of misspeaking (bad judgment) to use language to assert an ontology—human, divine, and otherwise.” A kind of “linguistic self-suspicion” thus renders repetition as a means to asserting the unsayable. The “apophatic” mode is paired with “kataphatic language, or the language of affirmation, declaration, and saying, because an apophatic statement presupposes a kataphatic one. In other words, something must be declared before it can be undeclared. Said before it is unsaid” (Ford).
animate the history of norms inhering within the word as its latent usage. It is perhaps for this reason that Riley’s metaphors betray the violence at the heart of reiteration: the word is “wrenched” from context and “interrogates” itself. If the dream of the repeated word is to absent itself of context completely, this process of disappearance also records the history of the word’s normative valences.

More particularly, Bishop makes a habit of depriving the legibly new of its newness. A practice that does not merely deprive innovation of its privileged force, it also tracks the way innovation comes to be read as such. “Questions of Travel,” for instance, begins by questioning the desire for novelty, the desire to “[watch] strangers play in a play / in this strangest of theatres” (93). The poem eventually lists the images “it would have been a pity” not to have experienced, one of which is listening to the rain, “so much like politician’s speeches: / two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence” (94). Bishop’s travel poems call attention to the normative frame through which any traveler necessarily ascribes sameness and difference. In this instance, the sound of the rain is not superimposed with an image from “home,” necessarily; the rain is not apprehended through the frame of reference of another locale. What is superimposed is slippery rhetoric itself: the rain is compared to already-dead language. (The potential transnational reference to politicians’ oratory may in fact be better understood as another local image, given that Brazil’s larger geographic context is known for orating dictators). If Bishop describes dead language echoing in the rain, the poem does not dismiss the rain as dead-language. In fact, making the rain into “unrelenting oratory” inscribes the history of description itself as ideological language. The poem suggests that positing newness or particularity through description always relies on suppressing the means by which such
newness was made. The politician’s “relentless” oratory, in figuring ideology’s refusal of silence, calls attention to the way that any metaphor for the rain will necessarily produce the same.

This deprivative practice critiques Modernist literary history as produced by Eliot and Pound. If these poets relied on a caricature of what came before to cast themselves as innovators, Bishop, writing on the fringes of Modernist experiment, shows how caricature has come to be identified as such. Bishop’s reiterations do not signal a dead tradition so much as they “undertake to answer in the same tone of voice” (Bishop 76). Re-sounding rather than displacing, the poems wager that by reflecting on habits of attention they can shift the way norms are reproduced. A kind of inverse of “Questions of Travel,” Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses” announces a particular but familiar setting, but once again puts pressure on the descriptive authority of the literal image. The first stanza describes a decline in population, the old man waiting for the fish to come in, the details of a landscape nearly abandoned. Often identified as one of a set of Bishop’s regionalist poems about the North East and noted for its “realistic” detail, the poem—and especially the first stanza—makes use of narrative conventions that signal its participation in a

49 John Brenkman has articulated the problem “equating innovation with form-breaking” as projecting a “caricature of the forms supposedly being broken…. However, innovation is not in essence form-breaking, because innovative artworks are form-making and actively creating conventions” (818–19). De Man’s claim for history and modernity’s mutual dependence is also relevant here: “Modernity and history relate to each other in a curiously contradictory way that goes beyond antithesis or opposition. If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process” (151).

50 Bishop’s critique of innovation’s blindness speaks to a problem that persists in critical conversations about genre. Genre inquiry, as it has been promoted by comparativist literary critics such as Wai-Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins, has yet to theorize the problem of how any part of a given text is identified as genred. Dimock’s readings, for instance, rely on tracking moments of “lyric” embedded in epic, but don’t go so far as to theorize why any moment is recognized as lyric. She therefore leaves unquestioned how any aspect of the text comes to be visible as “genre” in contrast to innovation or particularity. The Modernist assumption that texts oscillate between the new and the old, the experimental and recycled forms is thus perpetuated (W. Dimock, “Genre as World System”)(W. C. Dimock, Through Other Continents).
genre connected with an objective world. At the same time, images as specific and singular as “cleated gangplanks” and “capstan” are juxtaposed with the repetition of simple descriptive words (“net,” “iridescent,” and “silver,” to name a few). Such repetitions do not serve an overall rhyme pattern as they would in villanelle or sestina, but appear haphazard. The effect is such that the lines appear to defy new descriptors and every motion forward—any new word—is accompanied by a respective step back—the reiteration of a word we’ve already read. The reuse of such words seems to imitate the repetitive, cyclical actions of this fishing village, the way every new action and every new image are actions or images already done or seen before. It also serves the elegiac tone of the poem, as the repeated words act like remnants leftover from a past action.

This kind of repetition serves a revisionary logic; a means of revising its own images, it carries a word or phrase into the image’s next iteration. It is this kind of carrying that signals the way lyric language reproduces beyond the page, signals as well the way that de-contextualizing is a slow process of losing rather than following a narrative logic of accumulation. Like the “cleated gangplanks,” the poem’s repetitions allow the images to secure themselves by attaching to those that precede them. Such is the relationship between the fishes’ “coats of mail” and the “flies,” for instance. The wheelbarrows are “plastered with creamy iridescent coats of mail / with small iridescent flies crawling on them.” “Coats of mail,” literally suits of armor with overlapping metal plates, seems here to capture the way in which the scales of fish skin overlap one another, the end of one scale obscuring the origin of the next. So too do the images function like coats of mail, with “iridescent” forming the space of their overlap. In “Questions of Travel,” Bishop’s traveler will ask, “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to
imagined places, not just stay at home?” (94). For Bishop, a mind that requires the allure of newness—the illusion of difference—is a mind with little imagination. As the inverse of these lines, the first stanza of “At the Fishhouses” enacts—in this case, at the level of the word—the imagination required in order to stay at home. Here, the repetition of a word is a means of re-knowing what we thought was the same, a “staying at home” at the level of grammar. “Iridescent” is the perfect word to embody this idea, since it describes the way in which a single object is known differently from different angles or at different moments. This repetition could be said to function as much as a norm of comparison as it does a physical descriptor; that is, its significance is its function in exemplifying sameness and difference in addition to the image it references. In this way, I am suggesting that Bishop’s word repetitions are a kind of microcosmic enactment of how genre functions. “Iridescent” (not unlike “herring,” “wheelbarrow,” “scales” elsewhere in this stanza) comes to act as a readable convention that the particular (“coats of mail,” “flies”) can then be read against.

The third stanza begins with an anaphora that we only discover to be such fourteen lines later. The line “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear” is followed by twelve lines dramatizing a scene between the speaker and a seal, before that line is repeated again. Certainly, these lines can rightfully be read as dramatic monologue. Here, the “I” appears for the first time and the speaker becomes a character in her own fiction; the “I” is a person who does and says things in an objective world, not a world that must be conjured up by her own making. In the kind of depictions of subjects we associate with prose fiction, she supplies the reader character traits: the seal “was curious about me. He was interested in music; / like me a believer in total immersion” (65). Here, though, the
narrative references a lyric mode. In particular, these lines narrate singing rather than sing
themselves: as if playing on the social ritual of ancient Greece, the speaker casts herself
as lyric singer while the seal plays the role of the judging audience. But of course, the
lines in this poem are a *narration* of a public singing ritual rather than the singing itself,
an address to a third party about an address to the seal, and thus foreground the
distinction between the novelist (who reports experience) and the poet (who conjures
experience through his song).

As the poem progresses, however, it makes clear its intention to lose a sense of a
speaker altogether. In fact, by the time we arrive at the last lines of the poem, there is no
“I.” The speaker of the poem identifies herself as a “believer in total immersion,” a line
that fills the kind of expectation of character development or motivation. And yet, at the
same time, belief in “total immersion” seems to be exactly that which undoes a subject
position. A few lines later, the “merging” of “immersion” is reiterated when the speaker
describes the seal’s tendency to “suddenly emerge / almost in the same spot” (65). Indeed,
reporting on discourse addressed is “almost” the same (but not the same) as discourse
addressed. And by the final lines of the poem, the poet will emerge herself in *almost* the
same spot, shifting slightly from naming her “belief in total immersion” to animating
“you” to enact such an immersion. Indeed, immersion is what is at stake for the “you” at
the moment she is spoken: “If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache
immediately, / your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn…” (65). The
“I” who is the believer in total immersion and the “you” would burn her hand, are more
and more difficult to distinguish.
If the first stanza of the poem invokes a kind of specificity pervaded by sameness, then by the third, the repetition begins to gain momentum. The repeated individual adjectives and nouns in the first stanza—which as I’ve suggested can sound as if they are a choice against the use of a thesaurus—give way to the repetition of full phrases. Although I’ve hoped to show that the repetitions in the first stanza construct a logic for the stanza as a whole, their placement appears haphazard and their sound, idiosyncratic. As a whole, the poem seems subtly to accumulate a sense of sameness until, by the final stanza, the anaphora is the dominant trope of the poem, and the predictability of the poem is relocated from a visual register to an aural one; the emphasis on silver images and the ubiquity of fish scales in the first stanza give way, finally, to the lull of the anaphora, compelling through meter rather than through imagery with a real-world counterpart. The definition of “lull” as to “relax in vigilance” is particularly apt in this poem, where the reader has been provided such specific visual imagery in the first stanza, and the anaphora at the end seems to all but disappear the setting of the fishhouses. Such a disappearance, of course, is performed at the same moment that the “I” and “you” begin to move toward one another.

IV. Echo Excised

It is not actually the case that an echo is an answer; no echo has ever answered a question except by the ‘delusion of the signifier’. [See Ovid’s version of the Narcissus story; *Metamorphoses III.*]

—Paul de Man

De Man’s resistance to listening to Echo as “answer” implies a disciplining of sound itself. Culler’s conjecture that literary critics fail to read apostrophe because it is
embarrassing perhaps still holds true today\textsuperscript{51}, but we might reread de Man himself with this idea of embarrassment in mind. Not at all embarrassed to read apostrophe, the possibility of embarrassment may nonetheless provide insight into de Man’s own reluctance to read for sound. Jarvis’s critique of dominant theories of rhyme demonstrates the way sound itself is excised when it appears as feminine, infantile, or trifling. He notes the way such theories strive to make rhyme something other than “jinglings or tinklings.” This is in part accomplished through defining rhyme as only that which is recognizable through meter: “sonic replay which does not play an organizational role in the composition of the poem is not rhyme” (3). Jarvis’s critique makes a complex claim in re-positioning rhyme’s historicity. In short, he shows that a tacit fear of rhyme’s potentially fetishistic qualities has driven rhyme theory’s tendency to make rhyme do the “serious work” of the imagination.\textsuperscript{52} Rhyme has been “cleansed” of its evasive, infantile, or illegible utterances. By putting it in dialogue with semantic sense, rhyme theory has restored it to a history already determined by that semantic sense. Jarvis tracks the way reading rhyme has generally depended on opposing the sensory and logical only to show their “wedding,” without which the “alogical, including the non-semantic and non-syntactical bits of rhyme words, has no aesthetic value. It is just stuff, a corpse, waiting to

\textsuperscript{51} See Culler’s essay, “Apostrophe” published in an early form first in 1977 and collected in 1981. (J. D. Culler, \textit{The Pursuit of Signs} 18–43)
\textsuperscript{52} Canonical rhyme theory, in Jarvis’s account has both “metricized” and “logicized” rhyme. The former suggests that “rhyme” only counts as such if is recognizable as meter. “Metricalization” for Jarvis implies that rhyme’s effects are intended and properly announced such that their “work” can be understood as an engagement with logic, which is by design rather than through evasion. “Logicization” implies that rhyme must be restored into a relationship with the semantic sense of the poem. So, for instance, John Hollander writes of Wallace Stevens, that rhyme does “imagination’s work and not the jingling and tinkling of evasions” (qtd in Jarvis, 29). Both “meter” and “logic” imply “thinking” that has occurred prior to the poem’s unfolding. “Meter” refers us back to the authorial design of the poem; “logic” suggests semantic sense understood to be separable from a-logic or non-syntactic meaning. The critical denial of “evasion” or the “infantile” is itself ideological in the way it has occluded the history of sound: for Jarvis, the logicization of rhyme’s “jinglings and tinklings” leads to rhyme’s “falling silent…as it tends to the condition of the pure sign, the badge, its body [retreating] from audibility” (19).
be given life by the soul of logic” (“Why Rhyme Pleases” 32). In this way, the critic rescues rhyme from any retreat into incantation, fetishism, or solipsism. Jarvis understands this critical effort of restoration as itself that which kills the history of sound. Reading rhyme this way privileges the moments it is most historically “legible,” which belies the history rhyme itself makes when it appears least likely to assimilate to any historical account. Jarvis’s debt to Adorno is clear, as the force of his argument derives from suggesting that the very part of rhyme which has gone un-read is the site of its historicity.

In poems that do not announce themselves as sestina or villanelle, echo tends to play the part of that which is childish, evasive, and mere “jinglings and tinklings” in the way Jarvis describes. Echo’s involuntary habits mean that it is likely to be excised from theories of rhyme: echo is often just that “sonic replay” that cannot be attributable to the “organizational role of the poem.” As I noted in my introduction, de Man’s resistance to reading literal sound echoes suggests not only his inability to account for the genres of advertising, but also the function of advertising to make itself an interlocutor through echo. Advertising jingles lodged as inner speech attest to the way in which the “I” responds to advertising’s “call.” Moore’s aesthetic, as we have seen, makes verbal fragments recognizable as having a history of constraint in generic types other than poetry. Genre-as-fragment is perhaps less immediately recognizable in Bishop’s poems, but if this is the case, it is perhaps because we are less likely to recognize “genre” as that which is aurally embedded as inner speech. Bishop’s generic fragments include linguistic

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53 Indeed, as I have tried to show, Bishop’s “One Art” shows that even villanelle’s metricalization itself is no guarantee against “jinglings and tinklings.”

110
clichés, aphorisms, love letters, advertisement, and Romantic poems themselves. The tendency of these forms to affix themselves through aural means recalls Culler’s distinction between narrative and lyric forms. For Culler, while narrative is a mode the reader “makes” her own, the subject / object positions are reversed with lyric: lyric (like the words of songs and advertisements) “makes” itself remembered (“Comparing Poetry” xii). This feat is accomplished in part through the dissolution of the “I” and the “you”: the “I” has already anticipated its morphing into another’s “I” (that of the reader-listener) and will therefore always be both personal and impersonal (or transpersonal) at the same time.54 Perhaps obviously, lodging language also affixes itself through meter and rhythm, a “sonic replay” that complicates Jarvis’s discussion of the metricalization of rhyme even further. The “metricalization” of rhyme in Jarvis’s account suggests a motivation to make rhyme fulfill a prior (authorial or compositional) design: a metered order. And yet, the capacity for meter to lodge itself as inner speech defies that aspect of rhyme that would be contained by design. At one point, Jarvis names those sonic repetitions that defy the metric order of the poem “fugitive rhymes.” I am suggesting that metered rhyme gains this “fugitive status” when it calls attention to itself as inner speech. If, in Riley’s terms, 54 My introduction addresses the way in which my reading of the lyric “I” opposes the historicizing gesture foundational to Virginia Jackson’s work on lyric reading. It is worth noting here that the presence of inner speech itself defies the privileged position Jackson accords publication contexts. For Jackson, de-contextualizing a poem’s pronouns is the very way in which literary history has created what it then recognizes as a transhistorical “lyric.” For Jackson, this constitutes a tautology in which literary history has deemed the poem’s only context the occasion of its own reading, and then named such de-contextualization “unmediated.” Significantly, this has been accomplished through publication histories, in particular through the New Critical anthology, a form that in Jackson’s view, isolated poems from their modes of production while at the same time presenting them as absolutely unmediated. Jackson notes that if we read texts as private documents—as letters, diaries, scraps of scribbled paper—we tend to ascribe historical personae to pronouns instead. What makes a lyric is a text’s fate in the history of publication: “once the lyric is printed and opened to lyric reading, [] public and private associations and their literal and figurative certainties are reversed” (70). Jackson’s project resists understanding the “you” of a poem as addressing the reader because it cannot fit within her schema: this gesture only takes language out of a publication context. Jackson’s position suggests that “historical” personae” are the only alternative to “fictional personae,” an assumption (like the distinction between public and private) which I have hoped to show is detrimental to reading poetry insofar as it prohibits a reading of the “I” as an effect of language.   

111
it “rises and swims forward to claim my attention,” then its function is no longer connected to “design.” It has ousted itself and replicated itself as fragment-fugitive.

Both “fugitive rhymes” and the language that calls attention to itself as inner speech thus function as potential embarrassments. This curious affect perhaps overlays de Man’s story of apostrophe, such that the “I” is not only threatened by stony death but also lacks control over the reproduction of its vocal afterlife. Sonic replays suggest the capacity for normative reproducibility that de Man’s apostrophic structure does not account for. De Man reads Baudelaire’s “Obsession” as an “answer” to his “Correspondences” in part for its privileging of apostrophe over metaphor. Bishop’s “The Bight,” however, serves as an alternative response to “Correspondences.” In this poem, apostrophe does not displace the symbolic ideology of metaphor, but the poem instead mobilizes the normative or contingent possibilities of echoing sound. Bishop puts “marled” sound right in the way of de Man’s prosopopeia structure. By so doing, she questions the way “voice” has been limited to figures of voicing and makes such figures subordinate to the sound itself. As such, she puts pressure on the way de Man recognizes figures of voice as that which emanates from the “I” or the “you,” and not from recycled sound itself.

Many critics have convincingly read Bishop’s poem as a re-engagement or unfinished of the symbolist ideology that—prior to de Man’s reading—“Correspondences” would represent for literary history.55 “The Bight” begins as a description of a dried up bay: “At low tide like this how sheer the water is. / White crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare / and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches” (60). We would have no

55 See for instance, James Longenbach (50–54) as well as Zachariah Pickard (183–186) for more recent iterations of this reading.
reason to make any connection to Baudelaire whatsoever except that the poem quickly
invokes his name to wonder what “one could hear” if “one were Baudelaire”:

One can smell it turning to gas: if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.
The little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock
Already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves. (60)

Bishop here casts Baudelaire as hearing otherness in sound, making sound mean by
naming it as a kind of music presumably unfamiliar to him. In Jarvis’s terms, Baudelaire
figures the way sound is “falling silent…as it tends toward the condition of the pure sign”
(19). As marimba music, sound is already nationalized, already ideological. Baudelaire
returns in the lines leading to the end of the poem, as the word “correspondences”
appears. On the bight, “white boats are still piled up”

Like torn-open, unanswered letters.
The bight is littered with old correspondences.
Click, click. Goes the dredge
And brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues
Awful but cheerful. (60-61)

As a rewriting of symbolist poetry, the proliferation of “likes” imitates the structure of
“Correspondences” but undoes the transcendent unity proposed by the first poem. The
system of similes and metaphors is instead “untidy”; perhaps most to the point, the white
boats are “still piled up… / like torn-open, unanswered letters. The bight is littered with
old correspondences” (60). All “correspondence,” whether the transport of boats or the
transport of letters, is arrested. And yet, the last few lines of the poem, quoted above,
suggest the persistence of the lyric poet, working with whatever “marl” the dredge turns up.
Such a reading suggests one of the many ways in which Bishop rewrites the Romantics. At the same time, Bishop’s many “likes” disappear by the end of the poem and instead, are replaced by literal echoes. The poem challenges us to hear differently than we would hear Baudelaire as the echoes appear without metrical legitimation. “Click, click” returns us to the “perfectly off-beat claves” at the beginning of the poem, “echoing” figuratively but also creating its own literal reiteration. If “click click” figures a typewriter, it gives voice to both the dredge and a mechanical generator of letters. In a poem without an “I,” the only voice in the poem is a reiterative word, which nonetheless is connected to the construction of poetry. Baudelaire’s “commes” turn into “click, click.” The literal echo then “brings up a dripping jawful of marl. / All the untidy activity continue / awful but cheerful” (61). In fact, the “click, click,” of the typewriter-dredge, turns up a sludge of sound: “jawful-marl-all-awful-cheerful.” The repetition of the sounds “all” and “full” produce a “jawful” of muddy consonants. The poem is literally absent of apostrophe, but the “click-clicks” give a “jaw” to echo itself. The poem challenges the authority of grammatical figures of voicing by conferring the last words to a jaw of sound; the jaw decidedly doesn’t speak itself, but it nonetheless makes a mouthful. The “awful” suggests that “untidy activity” inspires speechless wonder; “untidy activity” itself becomes a kind of voice that would make for itself a listener. The loss of the “j” in “jawful,” which renders “awful,” turns the detail of the “jaw” into the sound “awe” or “aw.” In this way, the very fact that “jawful” has preceded “awful” superimposes the semantic meaning of “awful” with the authority of sound; that is, we hear the repetition as a priority over the word’s meaning. The most significant semantic claim “awful”
makes is its “aw,” its open-mouthed sigh that is simultaneously a silencing of words-as-
voice. 56

Bishop famously chose the last line of this poem to be her epitaph, a detail relevant both because her poem is about “unanswered letters” and because in the terms of my argument, she responds to de Man. The epitaph is de Man’s figure for prosopopeia—which is itself a figure for autobiography. In a much-cited passage, de Man reads

Wordsworth’s Essays Upon Epitaphs as

evok[ing] the latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death. The surmise of the ‘Pause, Traveller!’ thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one’s own mortality but also our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead” (1984, 78). 57

Bishop’s chosen epitaph—“awful but cheerful” is clearly not an apostrophe; it doesn’t explicitly call to the passerby as “Pause, Traveler!” does. At the same time, it both sounds speechlessness (“aw”) and figures frozenness (“awe”); it contains within it the effects de Man claims for the epitaph. Does Bishop’s chosen epitaph thus function like de Man’s? In the terms of the poem, an epitaph appears like an “unanswered letter”; prosopopeia as voice conferred strikes the addressee dumb, suggesting breakdown of correspondence. And yet, in this poem, the “unanswered correspondences” are followed by the line “all the untidy activity continues.” Activity persists in the midst of the uncertainty. After all,

56 It is interesting to note as well that the sound repetition emerges only from a “jawful of marl”—the solid obstruction in the mouth producing the “speech” of sound. The first instance of the word “marl” in the poem appears toward the beginning in conjunction with the word “protrude”: “White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare” (60). The closeness of “protrude” to “produce” is made evident upon reading the last lines of the poem, when “marl” becomes that which fills the jaw, which both “protrudes” from the mouth and produces the proliferations of “awe-all-full” sounds.

57 It is my sense that this line is often misread by treating the first “death” as if it were written “the dead.” That is, the line asserts not that a dead person or dead consciousness speaks, but rather that “death” itself speaks. The tendency for de Man’s apostrophe / prosopopeia to be put to use to revive a subject is contingent in reading the entity to be animated as a subject waiting to come into being rather than as a voice that persists in announcing its distance from subject-as-personhood.
the poem has left unresolved whether the ships will ever again function as "correspondences"—as effective vehicles; the “white ships piled up” are “not yet salvaged, if they ever will be” suggests the uncertainty of death, the latent potential for animation in the frozen figure.

“Activity” thus proceeds in the space of uncertain death, unrestricted to the correspondence between epitaph and passerby. If the white boats piled up figure the uncertain resolution of the call and response structure (who will be struck dumb or turned to stone? Whose voice will outlast?), then the “piled up” sound of the poem’s final lines functions as the “activity” that would “continue.” “Awful but cheerful” rewrites the poem’s description of the bight’s piled up ships as a summer walk through a cemetery, an optimism amidst (uncertain) death. (After all, the dead speak through their epitaphs). If “awful but cheerful” is to be resurrected as epitaph, it renders epitaph itself as layered with untidy sound—“dredge, jawful, marl, all” (60-61). In this way, the epitaph that would produce mute frozenness simultaneously produces sound correspondences that respond to each other. “Cheerful” speaks back to the connotations of “awful” as “astonishing” or turning to stone by suggesting the resurrection of the sound “ful.” The reproduction of “fullness”—the overproduction of sound—undermines the mute deadness that prosopopeia would confer. Re-directing the voice that would render the passerby frozen, the liveliness of the echoing sound makes muteness-as-stone contingent; it makes the passerby into a less threatened listener. The inscribed tombstone offers an optimism in its last word that is the persistence of (marled) sound as source of redirection.
Bishop makes the question of an echoing grave more explicit in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance.” In this case, an echo occasions the shift from a descriptive to invocative register, suggesting, as we saw in many of Moore’s poems, the way the optative mood inheres in the descriptive. The words that we thought were (merely) descriptive of a grave transform as voice, suggesting that neither description or deadness may be as voiceless as they appear. The poem begins by suggesting that no experience of travel can rival the illustrations in the Bible referred to in the poem’s title. The famous first line, “Thus should have been our travels” leads to a description of the page layout and arrangements of the book’s illustrations. The second part of the poem moves to a litany of places traveled, an enumeration self-conscious of its own limiting form. The list is broken finally by the traveler’s resigned comment, “everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” (58). This line initiates a shift in the poem from the description of a visiting to what becomes a kind of visitation conferred through reading. “Seeing,” we find out, is available through the medium of illustrations in a way that was not possible in travel; the last lines of the poem reveal the vision of the “old Nativity” that could not be seen “while we were at it” and is only realized in the book’s pages.

The poem hinges on the word “open,” a word that ironically moves the poem from an “open” form (the litany of travel) to the apostrophic convention. The word “open” serves as a command to “open the book,” but also enacts the way the poem “opens” itself to the history of the word. This is easiest explained by starting with the beginning of the poem, with the lines, “Thus should have been our travels: / serious, engravable” (57). “Engravable” signifies something close to “lodge-able” in that it refers to a space or surface in which something will potentially imprint or embed itself. The poem, however,
reminds us that “grave” is already embedded in “engravable”: by the time we read to the
end of the litany of travels, the “I” of the poem sees

a holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin
open to every wind from the pink desert.
An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
with exhortation, yellowed
as scattered cattle-teeth;
half-filled with dust, not even the dust
of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there. (58)

“Engravable,” a word that enters the poem as descriptor of the titular book, lodges
danger inside of it. If “engravable” describes a capacity to lodge, then the fact of “grave”
within it enacts the fear of what may enter. Moreover, it suggests the consequences of
openness generally—that taking in one thing, one will also necessarily be taking in what
one cannot yet see—or hear. The “open grave” figures for that lack of protection, an
inevitable disorder initiated by whatever is brought inside. This is because what appears
inside (grave within ‘engravable’) actually proves to unsettle the notion of inside and
outside altogether: the grave is “open to every wind.”

In fact, the more specific description of the book’s “engravings” is
metamorphosed in the passage above. The poem’s earlier section describes the words and
pictures of the book as follows:

Granted a page along or a page made up
of several scenes arranged in cattycornered rectangles
of circles set on stippled gray,
granted a grim lunette,
captured in the toils of an initial letter,
when dwelt upon, they all resolve themselves. (57)

A lunette, familiarly the Muslim crescent moon, also refers in architecture to a
half-moon shaped arch—often the space of the arch above a door. This image, then,
appropriately marks a threshold space—the shift from the pictures of the book to the
text’s de-familiarizing materiality, the representations that become “stippled gray,” and
later, “the lines / the burin made” (57). This threshold space then becomes, in the lines
referring to the grave, the “keyhole-arched stone baldequin / open to every wind” (58).
And yet, in this first instance of this threshold, we have the reassuring lines, “when dwelt
upon, they all resolve themselves.” The lines refer to a directed visual attention toward
the initial letter of a sentence, decorated and enlarged. The “initial letter / dwelt upon”
also suggests the poem’s logic more generally. Bishop’s repetitions dwell upon their
words until their many historical configurations have been played out and redirected the
utterances of the poem significantly. The involuntary aspect of the word’s reverberation
is provoked by attending to it, by voicing its sameness. In voicing “open,” the poem
replicates the site of the poem where inside and outside are most obviously conflated (as
instantiated in “open grave”) as a means of shifting the “I” or “we” of the poem to a
listening “you.”

In contrast to de Man’s reading of “comme” in Baudelaire’s “Correspondences,”
in which the security of metaphoric images turns to enumeration, here the poem shifts
self-conscious enumeration into an image. The introduction of the repeated line “open the
book,” calls the image of the “old Nativity” into being:

Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and.’
Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn’t we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it? (58)

“Open the book” thus functions as both apostrophe and anaphora. Such
repetition allows the poems to close; it represents a kind of attention that is firm, that
refuses to wander. In this way, the literal echo functions quite differently than the
figurative “echo” of de Man’s enumerations. But neither does the literal echo confer a
symbolist unity. In calling attention to itself, the reiterative address makes visible its
status as writing in a book. The poem shifts from looking for new sites, to listening for
the word (always lodged within it) on which a discursive shift can hinge. The direction to
“open” in Bishop’s poem comes from a voice without a subject, but it also references
another address that is similarly vague in its disconnect from a particular subject position:
In Augustine’s *Confessions*, right before the moment of the narrator’s conversion, he
hears a “sing-song voice of a child,” and yet, the identity of the addresser and the
direction of the address is unclear:

> I was suddenly asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most
> bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard a sing-song voice of a child in
> a nearby house. Whether it as the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again
> and again it repeated the refrain "Take and read, take and read." At this I looked
> up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to
> chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. (177–
> 78)

Bishop’s “Open the book…Open the big heavy book,” then, reproduces the
refrain “take and read, take and read,” and the revelation in Bishop’s poem is likewise
manifested by opening the book to a random page—by reading outside of chronological
order. The origin within Bishop’s book is not only already contained within a book, but it
also is figured through another textual origin—Augustine’s *Confessions*—that likewise
tells of a revelation in a book. Address itself is the content that this concatenation of
mediation carries, suggesting that the two “yous” addressed in Bishop’s poem (the
implied “I” within the poem who hears the instruction, and the reader) are already
superimposed over the “you” of the invocative “take and read.” Neither Augustine’s nor
Bishop’s “refrains” are voices connected to particular speaking subjects; moreover, they are not exclusively addressed to any subject in particular. That the invocative in this poem is also intertextual suggests the way that “I” and “you” slip away from the idea of originating from any speaker at all. The possibility of their lodging in the poem is concurrent with their dislodging. While for de Man, Baudelaire’s repetition of “comme” ends in grammatical stutter of enumeration (a figurative but not literal echo), here the echo of “open,” and “open the book” renders a disjunctive history through apostrophe. Indeed, given that the “initial letter” is what the poem “dwells upon,” it offers a history by way of an “O”—the sign of the vocative and the first letter of “open.” Listening intently to the descriptive words it has taken in, the poem repeats “open” back again, calling attention to it in such a way that it shifts into a call of its own. Such recycling makes “open” into an active verb, and then, a voice that is listened to. In this way the poem “travels” to a place of receptivity, the echo itself having occasioned the shifts in grammar that de Man would privilege.

V. Echo’s Work

“To demonstrate the power of the signifier, de Man speaks about his native language, illegitimacy, perhaps his mother.”

--Barbara Johnson

Somebody
arranges the rows of cans so
that they softly say:
Esso-so-so-so
To high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.

--Bishop
If, as I have argued, lodging language is an echo that calls attention to itself, this attention makes the interpellative call all the more explicit. I assume that the failure to “call attention” is concurrent with the success of ideology’s smooth functioning. This is not to say that “calling attention” by itself critiques ideology, but that it makes a gap in the temporal suppression that ideology depends on. How do we account for the advertising jingle as lodging language? For Jarvis, the excision of “jinglings and tinklings’” from rhyme theory suggests the failure to read a history of sound. At the same time, Jarvis concludes that advertisement jingles are the very epitome of sound-as-ideology.58 The advertising jingle’s “call” is not for the sake of calling attention to itself, but succeeds when it has called the desiring subject into being as consumer. (We recall the hermit’s cry for “action” outside of language). Apostrophe, by contrast, seeks to call into being that which cannot yet be a subject—that which cannot yet be “as” anything. As I have noted in my introduction, de Man’s apostrophe is highly unsuccessful, so much so that it is almost defined by its failure. In this sense, the distinction between the call of advertising and the call of apostrophe could not be greater, but their formal resemblance suggests their confusion.

If voice emanates from site other than the mouth of a speaker, then this indirection is often repressed in advertising. The prosopopeia that would confer voice to commodity objects is necessarily interested in suppressing its status as a figure of voicing. Bishop’s “Filling Station” makes visible the “arranging” of the commodity object’s call; in so doing, it reveals both domestic labor and the sounds of the mother tongue as the site

58 Jarvis recounts a hypothetical assault of auditory branding. Sitting in front of the television, it “breaks in”: “A glowing logo (the death mask of logos) shines out, and simultaneously, a new musical element breaks in upon me: the acoustic trademark, music’s very coffin…Every last part of skin must be made symbolic. The ear is to be branded from the inside” (“Why Rhyme Pleases” 41).
of the brand name’s historicity. In this way, Bishop responds to those who would excise “jingling and tinkling” sound by enacting the way such sound cannot be equated to the prescribed ideological work of the commodity fetish.\textsuperscript{59} Flaunting sound that “jingles and tinkles,” Bishop’s “Filling Station” fills its lines with excessive sound. The poem is both absent of female characters and filled with artifacts of women’s work, complicating Pound and Eliot’s poetic history that would dismiss the literary nineteenth century as feminine sentimentality. Here, the most significant products are not those of the Ford assembly line. Instead, the poem reproduces “oil,” a medium that “softly” calls to automobiles. “Oil” pervades the lines as both word and phoneme, oozing out everywhere as Jarvis’s “fugitive sound,” and never constituting the clean-break of an end rhyme.

It is all too easy to read the poem as a direct retort to Pound’s admonition against slippery rhetoric: “Consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap” (7). The medium by which the automobiles run—the slipperiness of the oil—suggests the rhetorical excess at the heart of the poetic line’s functioning. In the stanza, Bishop describes and formally enacts an assembly line of domestic work—that which embroiders, waters, and arranges:

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Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
Or oils it, maybe. Somebody
Arranges the rows of cans
So that they softly say:
Esso-so-so-so
To high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all. (128)
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\textsuperscript{59} Bishop’s poem clearly responds to the masculinist rhetoric of Pound and Eliot as well. Although Pound’s excision of traditional poetic forms cannot be equated with the interests of rhyme theory more generally, the rhetoric he invokes his project of “cleansing the line” certainly bears resemblances. (It is perhaps telling that Hugh Kenner is one of Jarvis’s sources of “dominant rhyme theory.”) Pound’s repugnance for traditional poetic forms seeks to
The anaphoric echoes—“Somebody…Somebody…Somebody”—on the one hand create the anonymous repetition of the factory worker’s line; like the worker, the pronoun “fills” the same “station” in each line, grammatically enacting the same function four times over. But the rhythm of the poem does not imitate the mechanized time of the factory, nor does the sound of the poem suggest the loud noise of the conveyor belt. Moreover, this assembly line produces only superfluous words.

The anonymous “Somebody / arranges the rows of cans / so that they softly say / Esso--so--so--so / to high-strung automobiles” (128). Bishop anticipates the distillation of “so,” through her repetition of “Somebody,” and then, right before the “Esso” line, in the proliferation of “s-o” sounds: “so,” “softly,” and “say.” Consistent with Bishop’s efforts to slough off meaning through the repetition of sound, these lines lead us to the most vague of “filler” words: “so.” And yet, it is the isolation of the same that is what the cans “say.” Voice has never been made so banal. “So” is the word which would make a “match” the poem warns of in its first lines: “Be careful with that match!” As a figure for slipping words or lines, the pervasive oil suggests the potential power (explosion, even) of simile or metaphor. We are thus back to Baudelaire’s “commes,” which as de Man shows, are not as transportive as they appear. Like “comme,” “so” takes on different grammatical functions, not the least of which is to announce comparison. As conjunction, in the line “so that…”, “so” signifies the excess of grammatical connectivity that Pound

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60 Bishop’s poem generally subverts the machine aesthetic valorized by the Pound tradition. As recounted by Hugh Kenner, Pound would locate his myth of origins in the innards of the machine, its points of compression embodying the rudimentary force of a thing. Flaunting the worn-out rhetoric Pound sought to excise from poetry, the poem enacts an assembly line through the very formal elements that Pound rejected. While the inner workings of a factory for Pound represented precision, hard and crisp lines of energy, the most efficient isolation of force, Bishop’s lines effect the opposite; repeating the vagueness of “somebody,” and imagining the new product as located in the domestic rather than created out of technological innovation, Bishop transforms Pound’s assembly / poetic “line” into a parody of his own manifesto against formal technique.
would flush from the poetic line. The “Esso” line in the poem imitates the assembly line, but produces a product that is not a thing, but already a replacement of a thing (a pronoun) or a connection to a thing (a conjunction). Like de Man’s enumeration, the mechanical reiterations of grammar appear all too clearly.

The banal vagueness of “so,” however, invites further examination. In contrast to de Man’s enumerative list, the literal echo of “so” produces a more overt sound-effect. (In fact, “Esso” itself nearly echoes the harder “Echo.”) The line as literal echo re-writes the brand-name advertisement without excising it. Like the villanelle that announces its “intent” to lose its meaning, so too does “Esso” lose its proper name, truncated as its first syllable is cut off. In this way, the word’s history as brandname is tracked, even as the poem refuses to replicate the normative value ascribed to it. At least this is how it appears on the page. What we hear is still uncertain. The line reads “Esso--so--so--so.” Are we to pronounce the letters “s” and “o” (saying “es-oh” or “esso” four times) and reading the line as eight syllables? Or, are we to read the word “so” three times after the brand name “Esso,” making a five syllable line? The standardization of the assembly line, and by extension, the smooth functioning of the advertisement, is challenged when the line length itself is called into question, when it is unclear just what has been cut. The entrance of the advertising brand name “Esso” seems to itself confer a confusion of syllables, the distinction between syllables and words made oily.

This uncertainty, moreover, is produced at the moment the word is pared down to its most banal form. The softness of the sound—whichever way it sounds—suggests the word’s retreating from its symbolic associations and instead accumulating an affective

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61 This possibility suggests that we would also hear “SOS,” a kind of calling which renders the advertisement itself as pure sign, its meaning fixed, but fixed differently than the branding of the commodity.
history. The sound retreating into itself creates a lulling effect, but this cannot be reduced to the delusion of the consumer. Not only has the poem guarded us against taking care with a “match”—that which would conceal its “arrangement” as figure—but arrangement itself is what turns the cans toward a different addressee: “high-strung automobiles.” The history of linguistic softness as inevitably reducible to oily advertisement is rewritten when excess itself does domestic work: “Somebody waters the plant, or oils it maybe…Somebody loves us all.” Excess or echo itself does “trifling” work while all the while refusing the sonic regularity of the line and the compressive efficiency of the machine. Such a refusal need not be equated with the evasions of commodity culture. The poem figures excess of sound as that which cannot be separated from any “somebody”’s history in her own language: “oi,” “oh,” “so.” Such phonemes track that which is generally un-hearable to any “I” in language. The poem traces the word’s unmaking (from “Somebody” to “softly” to “so” to “s-o”) which is also the history of “somebody” in her own mother tongue.  

VI. Echoing Clichés

That Bishop’s “I” refuses to lay claim to particularity or any innovative presence is perhaps nowhere more clear than in “Crusoe in England.” Whereas in “Filling Station” the form of advertisement was occasion to sound word histories, in this poem, Crusoe himself speaks in the clichés of colloquial speech. Written as a dramatic monologue, the

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62 Mutlu Blasing argues that “the experienced effect of an individuated speaker lies in an experience of linguistic materials that are in excess of what can be categorically processed—an experience guaranteed by the formality of poetry. The lyric works with material experience of the somatic production and reproduction of words as sounds and sounds as words, whether spoken, written, or read” (27).
poem paradoxically casts itself as the speech of one subject. And yet, Bishop’s “Crusoe” understands the “I” of inner speech as disconnected from individuated experience. Crusoe’s inner speech is filled with banalities and boredom as much as pathos; caricature and cliché inevitably deny the “I” its pronounced particularity even as they take company with it. Although “Crusoe in England” is often cited as a narrative poem, it persistently imagines the way in which language lodges. In an oft-cited set of lines, Crusoe is found reciting poetry to his iris-beds:

The books
I’d read were full of blanks;
the poems—well I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
‘They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss…’ the bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
When I got back was look it up. (164)

The ellipses mark an absence which only one single word could fill: “solitude.”

The kind of memory lapse that Bishop represents is one that no narrative context will recover. On Crusoe’s island, in which there is “one kind of everything,” a forgotten word forever remains forgotten; there is no substitute that can recuperate the poem except the text of the poem itself.

Of course, the missing word—“solitude”—is that which would seem to define Crusoe’s experience itself. In this case, then, what is forgotten, absent, is the very word that would describe an experience as it happens. The absence thus foregrounds a moment

Dramatic monologue as figure of speech values the “I” as a *theatrical* subject representing his experience, including the experience of thought itself. Dramatic monologue thus shares with soliloquy the assumption that it reveals the inner lives of persons, priding itself on showcasing complexity of motive, thought, and emotion. To the extent that any theory of lyric assumes the contingency of the “I” as a subject, it resists privileging dramatic monologue as a necessary feature of the lyric mode. Dan Chiasson has argued that the impersonality of Modernist poetry nevertheless shares with confessional poetry the investment in dramatis personae.

See Chiasson (65) and Joanne Feit Diehl in Lombardi (43).
at which experience is rendered un-figurable: it is the very experience that Crusoe is presently having (one of solitude) that cannot be remembered at the moment of its occurrence. The suggestion that Crusoe would later “look it up” suggests that “solitude” is out of time with its experience. The language lodged in Crusoe’s memory does not behave according to narrative context, but on the contrary, absences the very word that would seem to center the narrative itself. In the midst of Crusoe’s tale, this lodged language—and lodged absence—usurp narrative context in such a way that “context” is relegated to a future reconstruction of the past. (Crusoe will “look it up” when he gets home). Moreover, the forgotten word suggests that inner speech is *absenced of solitude*. The perpetual hand-off of linguistic clichés that constitute Crusoe’s “voice” would suggest that the absence of solitude as an apt description.

In Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” these lines appear in the final stanza, the present tense in contrast to the past tense that has preceded it, surprising the reader that the whole of the poem has been the memory of an emotion “recollected in tranquility.” In Bishop’s poem, they arrive as potential company for Crusoe, or more precisely, as a kind of language that will allow for company—a language in which he may communicate with his iris-beds. The desire for a lodging word that may be uttered at will is thus a contradiction in terms, for it is the word’s capacity to lodge that also insures its distance from the “I”’s intention to control its reproduction. Here, this desire for the lost word is connected to a desire for company: that of Wordsworth preserved in consciousness and that of the iris beds that become an audience for lyric address.

And yet, the audience has been produced by Crusoe: “iris beds,” which seem so concretely rendered as part of this scene, are not iris-beds at all. In the previous stanza,
when he is remarking the “one variety of tree” (163), he adds that “Snail shells lay under these in drifts / and, at a distance, / you’d swear they were beds of irises” (164). It is thus, at the moment when the speaker renders the shells irises, that the “you” appears—“you’d swear”—and yet, what the “you” sees is actually what the “I” of the poem is seeing; that is, Crusoe himself views the shells as iris-beds. This conflation of “you” and “I” is all the more significant since the later stanza reports the addressee as a figure Crusoe himself has made: Crusoe reports to be reciting poetry to the iris-beds, but the iris-beds are a figure of his own invention. Are these shells, then, or iris-beds? The poem itself seems to have forgotten the process through which it has conferred identity. Or, perhaps the identity has been conferred so successfully that there is no trace of its occurrence. The “i” of the “iris” in any case echoes Crusoe’s “I,” his own pronoun already lodged in the name of his addressee.

The desire, however, for lodging words is questioned in the very next stanza, in which the possibility of word-for-word memory leads to, at worst, “hurting,” and at best, getting “on [one’s] nerves” (164):

The goats were white, so were the gulls, and both too tame, or else they thought I was a goat, too, or a gull. 
_Baa, baa, baa, and shriek, shriek, shriek, baa...shriek...baa..._I still can’t shake them from my ears; they’re hurting now. The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies over a ground of hissing rain, and hissing, ambulating turtles, got on my nerves. (164)

When Crusoe suggests here that such onomatopoetic language is unwelcome, he marks a distinction between the kind of language fit to be recited to iris-beds and a language that one only wishes to forget. Crusoe’s desire to remember “solitude” and
aversion to the “baas” and “shrieks” mark the same lack of control over this kind of language that lodges as foreign within the mind of the host. The idea that the goats and gulls potentially recognize Crusoe as one of themselves also suggests the possibility that their calls are addressed to him. Here, Crusoe seems to register the danger of address: in part, the repetition of “goats” and “gulls” results from the possibility of Crusoe being positioned as addressee. The lack of distinction among kinds—the possibility that Crusoe is a gull or goat—is connected both to being addressed when one doesn’t want to be and the consequences of this unwanted address. That is, the undesired possibility that “I was a goat, too, or a gull” is the very condition that leads to not be able to “shake” language from one’s “ears,” that produces “hurting now.” Crusoe thus shifts in one stanza from addressee to one of many potential addressees, and it is the uncertainty of this latter position—from which Crusoe hears “questioning shrieks” and “equivocal replies”—that generates the reiterative inner speech. Indeed, this repetition also threatens Crusoe-as-narrator: all he can tell is his inability to manipulate what he wants to hear in his own head.  

Crusoe thus figures for the problem of how any “I” is, as in Ted Hughes rendering of Echo, “catching at the syllables.” Crusoe suggests the very problem of inner speech: the extent to which any “I” is both witness to address and entangled within its very structure. Is Crusoe describing address, or is the address producing him? In any case, the echoes of “baas” and “shrieks” that can’t be shaken is shaken from the poem eventually, when Crusoe displaces one kind of lodging language for another. The status of the last line of the stanza—“got on my nerves”—suggests that the reproduction of clichéd or

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65 The goats and gulls here potentially make their audience in the same way Crusoe has. If Crusoe makes snail shells into iris-beds, in order to access Wordsworth’s lines, then so too do the goats and gulls make Crusoe into one of them to generate a listener for their calls.
idiomatic speech has restored perpetual linguistic recycling. In this way, Crusoe responds to the very particular occasion in which language lodged in his head—the experience of being alone on an island and mistaken for goats or gulls—with language that is most overdone or least particular. As an echo of another’s words, such colloquialisms render Crusoe’s “I” the site of transpersonal, public language. The longing to be free of memory altogether is remedied through yet another echo. Indeed, the site of the poem that appears most monologic—the “I”—is the very site of echo, cliché, the site that recuperates the social life of language.

My readings show the way that Bishop’s poems continually de-privilege singularity by generating echoing sound. Bishop’s reiterations suggest that muteness or death-in-stone is the condition, rather than the death, of lyric voicing. In the epigraph from “In the Waiting Room” at the beginning of my chapter, the echoes in “here” and “overhear,” suggest an equivalence between presence and listening (rather than presence and voicing). It is in this sense that I read Bishop’s echoes as figuring a “quiet devotion” to worn-out words: all the clicks, jingles, shrieks, baas, and clichés that constitute lyric as an unfolding of sonic history.
CHAPTER THREE

“Stuck in the Jaw”: Lyric Reiteration in Sylvia Plath’s Poems

In September 1950, when Sylvia Plath left her family home to go to college, she would write the following in one of her letters sent to her mother:

If only I can unobtrusively do well in all my courses and get enough sleep, I should be tops. I'm so happy. And this anticipation makes everything super. I keep muttering, ‘I'M A SMITH GIRL NOW.’ (S. Plath and A. S. Plath 48)

The lines describe what seems to be the author’s understanding of a self-made transformation; the “I” imagines herself as all of a sudden something different than she was before. The words, “I’M A SMITH GIRL NOW” are not only repeated in her “mutterings,” but also in other sections of the letter. In repeating the words, the “I” of Plath’s letters also repeatedly inhabits a new category, calling herself into being as a kind or type, insisting on her belonging. In this case, such a new identity catapults her into a well-worn social norm. At the same time, in a construction that would become familiar to Plath’s readers, the declaration, “I should be tops” contradicts the desire to be part of a more general category. The lines attest to an impossible—and perhaps annihilating—desire to be both the proto-typical member of the group—a “SMITH GIRL”—as well as the one who would stand out from the group—“tops.” Unwilling to be one or the other, the sentences refuse to imagine that she may not be able to occupy both identities at the same time. Instead, she imaginatively occupies an identity made visible by a role that has
been defined prior to her inhabitation of it, and an identity which would seem to exceed any given identifiable role. Such a practical impossibility is complicated further by Plath’s very insistence in her repetitions, “I’M A SMITH GIRL.” How does this declaration change through its reiteration? Does it move the “I” to inhabit the normative category more fully, or does the very reiteration make more tenuous the relationship between the “I” and the norm? If that is the case, might the repeated insistence, (always in capital letters) “I’M A SMITH GIRL” in fact figure the desire itself to be “tops” or “unobtrusively do well” at the same time? That is, might the reiterated declaration produce a contradiction that the norm itself cannot contain?

Plath would revisit this same paradox many years later in her poem, “Mushrooms.” As one of Plath’s only poems written in the first-person plural, the “we” represents the point of view of the title subject. As they take form together, like the “SMITH GIRL,” the mushrooms declare an “unobtrusive” aggression: “We are meek, / we are edible, / Nudgers and shovers / In spite of ourselves” (139). The mushrooms take form, “quietly” and “discreetly,” but nonetheless with “hammers” and “rams” “[h]eaving the needles, / The leafy bedding” (139). Although the subjects of the poem—the mushrooms themselves—appear to be breaking boundaries or crossing thresholds, the poem is written in a strict syllabic verse. Clearly appropriating Marianne Moore’s style, Plath’s lines are each five syllables. While the lines maintain their clearly demarcated boundaries, the mushrooms declare, “our kind multiplies,” announcing their intended proliferation even within the lines’ syllabic limitations. If the reiterated line above ostensibly announces a harmony between the individual and the norm, (“I AM A SMITH GIRL”), here the reiterated line suggests the way this transformation (the mushrooms coming into being) is
both more than can be contained—it must be iterated again—and within the bounds of the syllabic law:

   Bland-mannered, asking
   Little or nothing.
   So many of us!
   So many of us!

The profusion—“so many of us”—is described in five syllables in one line; on the one hand, then, the mushrooms refuse to breach the form they are inhabiting. At the same time, this obedience to the form is kept, but appears to be not enough to represent the multiplying mushrooms. As though the first iteration of “so many of us!” couldn’t say enough, it bears repeating. The second iteration attests to the way that the mushrooms both maintain the syllabic structure and oversaturate the poem at the same time. The proliferation of sound alongside the exact replication on the next line, attests to the lack of space of the syllabic structure. As the language reiterates, it nonetheless refuses to overrun the formal structure, but makes space for itself within it, calling attention to the function and limitation of the syllabic line.

The following chapter will explore the function of reiterative repetitions in Plath’s poetry and their relationship to normative structure. Plath’s repetitions do not afford the same kinds of shifts that Moore’s and Bishop’s do. In one of the earliest essays written after her death, George Steiner would describe this aspect of Plath’s poetry in terms of “an insistent obviousness of the language and beat” or “elisions and monotonies of deepening rhyme” (309). When Plath’s words repeat, they gain a kind of compulsive momentum that seems to rush toward death, annihilation, or even mechanical failure. In the way that I have defined lyric, such reiterations may be read as a hyper-generic presence; in returning to the word again and again, they perform an oversaturation of
sameness, an over-doing of formal enactment. Perpetually stuck, the language appears destined to repeat itself until it dies out completely. (And yet, for Plath, death is never the end.) One thinks of T.S. Eliot’s lines, “This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends, Not with a bang but a whimper” (80). The cadence of the words, their triple iteration, the simplicity of their monosyllables—all of these qualities insure that the words will repeat themselves in the minds of the reader long after she has finished the poem, and repeat themselves in unexpected, unpredictable ways. The language which announces the world’s demise enacts the same through its repetition, suggesting the paradox that endings are most properly called into being through perpetual reiteration. In the slightly different example of Plath’s letter, we wonder whether the reiteration “I AM A SMITH GIRL” in fact undoes the viability of its very claim.  

If literary genre has been understood as a strategy or choice an author makes, as the site of authorial control (or the site of the authority of literary history), Plath’s poems suggest the inevitability of the normative to speak her. Her speakers do not choose their own words so much as the words choose them. And yet, in reiterating, the words exhaust themselves. Such an exhaustion expresses a overdetermination of generic presence, but at the same time produces a contingency that is the word’s afterlife. More so than Moore’s or Bishop’s, Plath’s words make visible the burden they carry, which is their generic history. While the norms at play in any word are necessarily fragmented, in Plath’s poems their status as norms, with all the limitations implied by that term, is consistently made visible. Plath’s poetry is highly conscious of the limitations of the normative as it is

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66 Eliot’s lines seem to announce the very effect that repetition can have (“This is the way…”) whereas Plath’s reiteration in this case does not anticipate the way its effect might loosen its semantic claim.
articulated by any number of social institutions, kinship structures, traditional poetic
genres, or the history of medicine. On the one hand, Plath’s reiterations index a
constraint—that which would prevent voicing, a site of stuckness. At the same time, her
poems oversaturate the normative structure with their insistent, “obvious” sound
repetitions. Such a practice hyperbolizes the norm itself in such a way that its effects
must shift. If her reiterations index constraint, the poem itself generates norms which
would seem to outpace the normative structure it inevitably must turn to for its materials.

In pursuing the relationship between repetition at the level of the word and form
more generally, my argument resists a large body of Plath criticism which has been
driven by narrative assumptions. The seemingly endless search for Plath’s psychic
identity has led critics to read her work as narrative, even when they are reading the
poems themselves. Sandra Gilbert, in fact, would argue that the myth that had become
Sylvia Plath’s work had, by the late 1980’s, taken the form of the nineteenth-century
domestic novel.67 Reading backward through Plath’s suicide, criticism of Plath’s work
has been difficult to disentangle from the reproductions of the author as a novelistic
subject. Early critical claims that the poems Plath wrote in her last six months represented
the culmination of her life’s achievement only further spurred biographical readings.
Hughes would call Plath’s Ariel a psychic “rebirth,” and a “birth of her real poetic voice”
(qtd. in Bronfen, 9). The legacy of this reading has proven difficult to displace. Elizabeth
Bronfen, in assessing the “myth” of Sylvia Plath, has commented that “[by] postulating
that the importance of her poems lies in registering this psychic development from falsity

67 More specifically, Gilbert argues that Plath’s work took on the shape of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre;
both are the story of an imprisoned protagonist liberated from enclosure by the repressed Other within.
to authenticity,” Hughes “gave birth to…our inability to sever her psychic life from the body of writing she brought forth” (9). The birthing metaphors which appear all throughout Plath’s criticism suggest the way that this body of work is caught in narratives of development, but also hint at the metamorphic tropes that I discuss below.

Hughes’ claim for an authentic voice was complicated further by the fact that, as her editor, he had published a version of Ariel that departed from Plath’s written plan for the book. This perceived misuse of editorial power only spurred a proliferation of competing narratives that would seeking to recover Plath’s true life history. Early feminist criticism, while it criticized the fact that Hughes had presumably reformulated Plath’s intentions, ultimately abetted the idea that a true voice was possible to uncover. In insisting on attaching voice to a particular psyche, the debates around Ariel entrenched themselves further in the biographical. One of the most significant was Marjorie Perloff’s argument, published after Plath’s Collected Poems came out in 1981, that Hughes’ version of Ariel animated an entirely different narrative of Plath than the one implicit in Plath’s own conception of the book. The selection and ordering in Plath’s Ariel, Perloff argues, comprise a narrative that implicates Hughes much more explicitly in Plath’s mental struggle. Hughes’ version by contrast, conveniently pathologizes Plath: “Indeed, [Hughes’] arrangement implies that Plath’s suicide was inevitable (‘I have done it again’),

68 Ted Hughes’ role as both Plath’s estranged husband and editor of her posthumous work inaugurated a critical history that would always be initiated by his editorial judgment, and therefore, archival controversy. In Bronfen’s words, what might necessarily “appear as a strategy of self-protection” for Ted Hughes and the Hughes estate can likewise look like “a manipulative strategy” intended to “assure the Estate of the self-representation it seeks to maintain” (20). That the inception of the archive was produced simultaneously with such explicit withholding has only perpetuated the critical assumption that Plath’s life is a secret to be unlocked.

69 Plath had diligently identified and numbered all the poems that were to comprise the volume; Hughes revealed in his introduction to the Collected Poems that the version of Ariel he had published following her death was a different volume. While his introduction plays down the differences between the two, Perloff rightfully reveals his editing and omissions to be more significant than he claims. As a recent essay on Ariel points out, however, Plath’s plan for the book was generated months before her death and it is impossible to know whether, had she lived, her choices for the volume would be the same (Brain).
that it was brought on, not by her actual circumstances, but by her essential and seemingly incurable schizophrenia. Or so the critics have interpreted it for the past two decades” (“The Two Ariels: The Re-Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon” 11). Plath is thus read (after Hughes) as accepting death after exhausting all passion; on the contrary, Perloff insists that Plath’s *Ariel* sequence emphasizes “struggle and revenge, the outrage that follows the recognition that the beloved is also the betrayer, that the shrine at which one worships is also the tomb” (16). From here, Perloff refigures Plath’s persona as passionate and struggling, and therefore, one with which “we can” identify: “for as long as the poet can struggle, as long as she still tries to defy her fate…the reader identifies with her situation: the ‘Cut Thumb’ is not only hers, but ours” (16).

For Perloff, Plath is successful so long as she creates a situation in which identification is possible; such is the version of the poetic voice that Perloff must recover from Hughes’ self-exculpating narrative. Of course, by producing a rival persona, Perloff fails to question the category of the biographical subject itself—along with the presence of its consistent voice. In reading the sequence of poems, Perloff reads a narrative. In this way, Plath’s psychic truth continues to take on narrative form. We might ask whether the obsession with Plath’s biography has more to do with narrative seduction than the event of the suicide itself. If we can read Plath’s poems for the lyric mode—and I argue that we can—this aspect of her texts is continually upstaged by the biographical, the novelistic, the fantastic myth.

In fact, Plath’s poem “The Disquieting Muses” can be read as staging the way that lyric reiteration resists such narrative genres. The title refers to three presences with darning-egg heads who become the speaker’s silent “company” and source of the poetic
voice (76). Uninvited guests, the three are “sent” by one whom the Mother has excluded from the speaker’s christening: perhaps an “ill-bred aunt” or “disfigured and unsightly cousin” (75). Throughout the poem, the Mother’s euphemistic world is contrasted with the “long shadows” of the disquieting muses who refuse to leave the speaker’s side. They figure the paradox of a presence that requires attention, but refuses to voice itself. With darning-egg heads—an ekphrastic rendering from a Giorgio de Chirico painting—they are “mouthless,” “eyeless,” and animate only to “nod and nod and nod” (75). As a kind of negative form, they nonetheless both constrain the voice and allow for its intelligibility in the first place; the speaker attests, “I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere / From muses unhired by you, dear mother” (75).

These “heads like darning-eggs” attest to form’s inability to be excised. Whatever stories the mother tells, those ladies, “[break] the panes,” figuring the banished presence that returns uninvited and silently aggressive. Darning eggs generally are put to use to hold the form of a sock while it is stitched and then taken out once the stitching is completed. Here, the form overstays, suggesting not that it serves that which would be formed by it, but persists as excess, a solid presence. Moreover, the fact that a darning egg would temporarily take the place of the “foot” suggests the way these objects both serve the feet of the poetic line and, in refusing to leave, render it over-full. This is manifested in the reiterating words they appear to generate. The ladies are sent “with heads like darning-eggs to nod / And nod and nod at foot and head / And at the left side of my crib” (75). The triple repetition of the words “nod” and “and” creates an oversaturation of sound even as it describes a silent presence. In this way, the muses’ silent, stony animation presses the poetic line to give voice to its presence, but also to
over-voice; it both renders the shape the voice can take and assures that that shape will oversaturate.

In this way, silence is the source of the proliferation of reiteratives. And yet, as the reiterations accrue, they resist the genre of the Mother’s fairy tales:

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother whose witches always always
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head. (75)

The mother’s euphemistic fairy tale ending has no power to “rid” the speaker of the nodding ladies, a detail that suggests the impossibility of narrative displacement. Instead, by asserting their perpetual presence, the poem competes with the normative structure the mother has created—the “bubble” that produces an inside in order to exclude. The repetition of the Mother’s clichés are expressed in the sing-song rhythms of the poem, in the speaker’s “Mother, Mother,” the “always, always” and the “flowers and bluebirds that never were / Never, never, found anywhere” (76). Rendered as reiterative words, the mother’s clichés are invaded by the lady darning-eggs, these stony, speechless objects that figure the death at the center of the Mother’s euphemisms—the exclusion that founds her stories. In their silent reiterative presence, they confront the perpetual narrative device of gingerbread witches; their silent “nod and nod and nod” matches and outlasts the mantra the mother has taught her children: “Thor is angry: boom, boom, boom!” Thus, while the nodding ladies are that which the Mother would exclude, they also reiterate in such a way as to compete with the normative structure of the euphemized nursery rhyme, agitating at the same time that they are the source of the speaker’s “learn[ing].”
Although I have emphasized the way that Plath’s literary history has fallen into narrative bias, the claim for a consistent voice is perhaps the most important for understanding how the possibilities for Plath’s lyric mode have been circumscribed. In his introduction to *The Collected Poems*, Hughes describes Plath as “shedding old poems for new ones” (13); “her evolution as a poet went rapidly through successive moults of style, as she realized her true matter and voice” (16). While Hughes ascribes a metamorphic impulse to Plath, he nonetheless undoes its potential futurity by announcing its endpoint. Moreover, her true matter and voice are figured as that which is recovered once the poet has broken out of all her old skins—that which would constrain her. In dichotomizing formal technique and the personal, Hughes articulates a common assumption that Plath’s emotive impulse resists form altogether. Plath’s work is then understood as a kind of purging, more personal because it is a spontaneous overflow of feeling. In response to this assumption, Deborah Nelson helpfully draws attention to an early journal entry in which Plath includes a to-do list that includes the instruction, “Be stoic when necessary and write.” Nelson points out that it appears as “one entry on her list, not two.” Thus,

Evidently, poetry might be about feeling, but she did not imagine it to be an outpouring of feeling. These two distinctions are essential to rethinking Plath’s oeuvre…. The presence of more intense feeling and more intimate suffering [in *Ariel*] should not lead us to assume that Plath changed her mind about the craft involved in turning feeling and experience into poetry. (22).

Nelson thus helps us resist the inclination to read Plath’s work as excessive feeling that would displace form altogether.²⁰

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²⁰ It is worth noting that in order to argue against the description of Plath’s work as “an outpouring of feeling,” Nelson has to resort to “stoicism”; the affect which would oversaturate has to be replaced with no affect at all. The conservation of “form” then is conflated with psychic control, the ability to rein in emotion, or identify as “stoic” in the face of extreme feeling.
Jacqueline Rose’s *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, published in 1992, put pressure on the opposition between the consolidation of an “I” (in Plath’s case, often coincident with the biographical subject) and the claim for formlessness. In a move that would turn most of Plath’s critical history on its end, Rose accedes to Hughes’ own account of Plath’s status as a necessary “fantasia” and begins her argument inquiring into the functioning of that fantasy, rather than re-playing the critical desire to separate fact and fiction. She identifies feminists writing on Plath as “inherit[ing] the framework they seek to reject” (3). In particular, the misogynist responses to Plath are replicated in two strands of feminist criticism, namely the “reading of women writers which bemoans the lack of—or attempts to retrieve from them—a consistent and articulate ‘I’, and one which celebrates linguistic fragmentation, the disintegration of the body and sexual identity… ‘écriture feminine’” (26). The positions represent two kinds of sexual politics: “a battle of the sexes, meaning a battle between unequivocally gendered and sexually differentiated egos, or a disintegration into a body without identity, shape, or purpose, where no difference, and no battle can take place” (27).

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71 In a controversy surrounding the defacement of Plath’s grave, Hughes had written a letter to *The Independent* claiming that “the truth [most specifically, of their marriage] simply tends to produce more lies…. The Fantasia about Sylvia Plath is more needed than the facts” (Qtd in Rose, 66).
72 Rose’s analysis may be rearticulated as a problem for Plath criticism after post-structuralism. My sense is that Plath’s oeuvre has been rendered psychically and historically adolescent by a climate that would take the disintegration of the subject for granted. What has been regarded as Plath’s directness or inhibition, in its attachment to a subject, appears as an old model of feminism. Even in 1977, Perloff was reading Plath’s as an historically limited voice which would wane with second-wave feminism: Plath’s “imaginative world” was essentially “a limited voice” and the “example of her life with its tension between success and suffering [was] a tension peculiarly representative of her time and place” (qtd.in Bronfen, 14). Ellen Rooney has described the contemporary inclination to speak feminism at the same time that anger is disavowed and displaced. Taxonomizing feminist narratives based on their modes of address, Rooney’s first type is the “You would have been so angry story” in which the speaker disavows her own anger while simultaneously ascribing it to her addressee (4). My suggestion is that this more recent impulse to disavow anger along with the persistent tendency to read Plath’s ‘I’ as an angry subject leaves her oeuvre appearing antiquated. Janet Badia has recently argued that Plath’s status of a writer is inextricably linked to the value (or lack of value) attributed to the “cult” of Sylvia Plath—her female readers, often figured as adolescent and pathological themselves (Badia).
trapped in identifying Plath’s “I” as a female subject with all the “battle” that entails, a position that refuses to allow her to question the status of the subject itself. On the other hand, “no battle can take place.” I understand Rose’s figure of the “battle” as articulating a resistance to normative structure which is foundational to any kind of feminism. If the formlessness implied by the disintegration of body, voice, and subject, has no means of resisting, is there a theory that would assume the persistence of form even as it refuses to calcify the subject?

One strand of recent criticism on Plath responds to this problem in emphasizing her metamorphic tropes—a reading that, as is evident from above, Hughes himself articulated in 1981. Unlike the example from Hughes, however, these readings refuse to resolve Plath’s metamorphoses as a teleology toward a consistent, “true” voice. Instead, in locating within the poems an “I” subject desiring release from one form to another, they claim Plath as “protean.” Bronfen articulates this assumption as follows: Plath’s “concern with discarding an old shape and practicing the art of protean transformation…touches upon the question of prosody in that it is here duplicated by Plath’s resilient ability to abandon an overused poetic style in favor of a new, invigorating one, once the early form was conceived as a confinement” (64).

Undoubtedly, the metamorphic is a central trope, and yet, Bronfen’s argument here for formal morphing produces new assumptions. “Protean transformation” figures change as both complete and as an act of agency; it assumes a clean division of selves: one “I”

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73 Unsurprisingly, Rose cites Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic* as the representative model of this feminist position.

74 This agency is evident insofar as “protean” is often juxtaposed with “possibility.” Susan Van Dyne, for instance, notes Plath’s mermaid as an “embodiment of female gender with protean possibilities” (9). Mary Lynn Broe’s *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* extends this reading to a book length study; although it was published in 1980, the “protean” designation still persists in contemporary criticism (Broe).
turns to another “I.” Given that Proteus exemplifies an all-powerful capacity for shape-shifting, we might question why he is identified as Plath’s mythic precursor rather than Daphne, or any of Ovid’s figures whose metamorphoses is neither of their choosing nor altogether complete. Moreover, Bronfen’s suggestion that Plath’s metamorphoses are motivated by discarding “form[s] conceived as confinement” reinstates form as that which one can escape. Perpetual shape-shifting is conceived as a means out of constriction rather than a concatenation of constriction. Form is that which constricts in one moment and “invigorates” in the next. The “protean Plath,” of her own accord, moves back and forth between Rose’s oppositions (from consolidated “I” to disintegration), but this figuration hasn’t yet considered how these two positions put one another in crisis. These readings cannot account for the function of the repeated word, the reiterative sound, in Plath’s poems, which attest to an inaccessibility of endless morphing. The idea of infinite shape shifting misses how the words “stuck in the jaw” (22) themselves make meaning.

While my argument responds to this vein of Plath criticism, it also addresses more general conversations on literary genre. Recent criticism theorizing genre study, has in fact depended on metaphors that resemble the “protean.” Conscious of following Derrida’s “Law of Genre,” such criticism, in attempting to problematize generic hierarchy, would seem to do away with generic “law” altogether. Wai Chee Dimock begins a recent discussion of epic and the novels of Henry James by “keeping [Derrida’s]

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75 As an object of patriarchal exchange, Daphne’s only mode of resistance to apprehension by Apollo is to beg her father to “dissolve her gracious shape” (24). Her metamorphosis is thus not a choice, not accomplished by her own agency, and only manifested through the constraint of a patriarchal structure. Although she takes the form of a laurel tree, the depiction suggests that the consciousness of her form as a maiden still remains: her nodding suggests a dubious “consent” (25). As I will suggest, Plath’s work consistently figures metamorphoses as partial transformations or as necessarily contaminated by reversions.
objections in mind,” and therefore, “invoking genre less as a law, a rigid taxonomic landscape, and more as a self-obsoleting system, a provisional set that will always be bent and pulled and stretched by its many subsets” (*Through Other Continents* 73–74). For Dimock, the rejection of “law” and “rigid taxonomy” would seem to be a means of broadening the terms through which world literature can be thought, an effort to think literature apart from historical period and national borders.76 At the same time, imagining genres as “runaway reproductive process: offbeat, off-center, and wildly exogenous” (Introduction, 1379) denies formal hierarchy altogether, and therefore cannot see the power dynamics at play when one form comes into contact with another. The shift in metaphors invoked to talk about genre communicate an effort to re-conceptualize it beyond notions of classificatory schema. Whereas biology and evolution, family, institutional networks, and speech-acts were at one point “conceptual analogies” invoked in twentieth-century genre theory,77 Dimock’s “runaway reproductive processes,” echoes the perpetual changeability of the protean metaphor. Moreover, Dimock’s metaphors themselves are protean. Genre is a “digital database” (1379), a “fractal geometry” (76), a “pool” where epic and lyric “swim” (1379). The impulse to keep looking for a new vehicle to serve a metaphoric structure in which “genre” is tenor assumes the same kind of perpetual shape-shifting that Plath’s critics identify.

In its effort to theorize an ever-widening field of world literature, such a theory of genre is in fact limited by its claims for limitless reproduction—a reproduction that bears none of the restrictions or consequences implied when we figure genre as a set of “laws.”

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76 Dimock’s (idealized) genre studies imagines literature “not segregated by periods or nations, the fields of knowledge [featuring] long backgrounds as well as minute evidence, with texts both ancient and modern and groupings both large and small, understood to be prenational in their evolutionary past and transnational in their geographic spread” (1389).
77 See Fishelov (1–2).
In this way, the effort to make genre limitless undermines the very means of its functioning. Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim* is not explicitly a theory of genre, but it nonetheless can be read as a critique of the kind of endless reproducibility figured by Dimock. In inquiring into the structuralist legacy of kinship, Butler must take seriously the idea of “law” itself as a set of conditions or restrictions. At the same time, Butler seeks to locate what forms of life may be made possible at the site of that law’s aberration. If Bronfen observes one form constricting as the next “invigorates,” Butler imagines that a single form may accomplish both functions at the same time. As I hope to show, Butler’s conception of kinship and its perversion finds an analogy in my understanding of lyric. Insofar as lyric’s traditional law-abiding genres (sestina, villanelle, sonnet, etc.) are generalizable or transposable, they function like kinship structure. At the same time, the presence of such traditional forms persists as sound reiterations, repetitions of words, and rhyme, even in poems that do not ascribe to the “rigidity” of their generic laws. How, then, do we read for genre? These fragments of generic history perhaps figure what Butler would call “the law of the instant”; such sites of repetition represent a struggle between the reproduction of normative structures and the reiteration away from any kind of law at all. Although Butler is reading the critical history of a tragic drama, her interest in the simultaneity of form’s constriction and its potential perversion suggest the kind of palimpsestic constructions that lyric modes make possible.

Butler’s argument explores both the persistence of kinship structures as access to social intelligibility and the viability of speech acts to counter the norms of patriarchy as they are expressed by the laws of the state and the laws of kinship. Reading Antigone as representing “kinship’s fatal aberration” (15), Butler critiques what she identifies as the
critical tendency to rewrite “contingency” as “immutable necessity” (6): a structuralist legacy that has “elevated kinship positions” to “a certain order of linguistic positions without which no signification could proceed, no intelligibility could be possible” (20). Antigone represents kinship in its “deformation and displacement” (24); her speech act invokes the law while at the same time stilling its reproduction—a condition that challenges the law as that which is generalizable. In placing fatality at the center of the law’s perversion, Butler’s Antigone negotiates stakes similar to Plath’s. The speech act itself approximates the conditions under which voice comes into being in Plath’s poems. In particular, Antigone’s “avowal” in language is reminiscent of Plath insofar as its enunciation is concurrent with its appropriation of the law:

[Antigone’s] claiming becomes an act that reiterates the act it affirms, extending the act of insubordination by performing its avowal in language. This avowal, paradoxically, requires a sacrifice of autonomy at the very moment in which it is performed: she asserts herself through appropriating the voice of the other, the one to whom she is opposed; thus her autonomy is gained through the appropriation of the authoritative voice of the one she resists, an appropriation that has within it traces of a simultaneous refusal and assimilation of that very authority. (73–74)

The avowal that requires a sacrifice of autonomy is a familiar construction in Plath’s work, and yet, I hope to show that this construction does not only exist between voices as they are attached to recognizable character (a “Daddy” or “Mother,” for instance). Like Antigone’s speech act, the lyric “I” is an avowal that nonetheless depends on a normative structure for its enunciation. In its eagerness to distinguish one “I” from the next, Plath criticism has failed to account fully for the varied traces lodged within the “I”—a

78 Antigone’s response to Creon constitutes for Butler an appropriation of “the voice of the law”: she not only “does the deed…but she also does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it, thus appropriating the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself” (11).
palimpsest which in Plath manifests as fatality or crisis, and thus puts pressure on the normative traces that themselves constitute it.

Butler’s critique of the calcification of linguistic positions is a resistance to the Lacanian assumption that the Symbolic is necessarily singular while that which occupies it, plural.⁷⁹ She goes onto question the “liberal gesture” that persons of any gender can couple as parents, but that inevitably the two will occupy the positions of Mother and Father. Instead, Butler questions, “What are we to make of an inhabitant of the form that brings the form to crisis? If the relation between the inhabitant and the form is arbitrary, it is still structured, and its structure works to domesticate in advance any radical reformulation of kinship” (71). In Butler’s argument we can sense the limitations of imagining “form” as a container in which positions (or contents) are filled. Putting pressure on the “immutable necessity” of kinship as law thus leads her to dismiss what she terms a “pure formalism” (71), one conceived as a neutral entity that may be occupied by infinitely alterable social forms. Instead, form “domesticates” in advance, suggesting both its constrictive qualities and its power in creating intelligibility. The “domestication” that is Butler’s term for how form determines symbolic possibility is what I argue resists the imagined “protean” possibilities of Plath’s metamorphoses. The shifts from one form to the next are constrained by the very normative laws contained within any form that sets about to change itself.

“The Stones” [from “Poem for a Birthday”] for instance, would seem to narrate the speaker’s being patched or put together. And yet, even at the very beginning of the

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⁷⁹ Butler shows how the Lacanian symbolic positions “enjoy a quasi-timeless character” even as the social forms that occupy them alter. The Lacanian assumption accords symbolic status to the Mother and Father figures that “do not cede to the demands for social reorganization” (20). In this way, the symbolic operation that any social form can accomplish is already fixed. Butler obviously is critiquing this perceived calcification.
poem, with the line, “This is the city where men are mended” (136), the repetitions undermine any sense of moving from one form to the next. “Mended” re-voices “men,” sending us back to the first iteration of the sound. The word itself defies what the presumed operation (or mending) would achieve—the restoration of a form prior to violation. That is, “mended” is not identical to “men” even as it re-uses its first letters, suggesting the line does not restore the word to its previous condition, but leaves it altered. The “-ded” creates not only a different word than “men” but also adds the sound of “dead” to the previous iteration. “Men-dead” undermines the declared improvement that “mended” would imply, suggesting deadness at the heart of transformation. The lines at the end of the poem ironize the idea of newness itself:

Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.
The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new. (137)

The “nurse” and “curse” rhyme suggests that the handmaiden of the metamorphosis must be thought simultaneously with the constriction of fate. At the same time, the “uniform” of the first line cited casts a suspicion on the idea of turning into a new form at all; form as a singularity (“uni-”) portends a lack of malleability. The three short sentences that make up the last two lines defy the fluidity associated with perpetual shape-shifting. Instead, “itch” creates a stop midline which calls attention to its anomalous sound—a sound more “new” than the word “new,” whose sound we have already heard in “do.” Moreover, the line, “there is nothing to do” suggests not only a
resignation to change, but also the possibility that there is no way to get rid of the “itch”—that the “itch” will perpetuate indefinitely. It is here that the poem refuses to let us know how we are to understand the change the last sentence declares; it is unclear whether “there is nothing to do” signifies an inability to stop the “itch” or whether it suggests a moment of waiting—a neutral stasis prior to the metamorphosis. This possibility of the former renders the last line disingenuous, since “good as new” is belied by itchy mendings. At the same time, “I shall be good as new” reflects a kind of colloquial speech or cliché that announces itself as anything but “new.” As a recycled line, it attests to the reiterative born with any new form—an old itch. In this sense, transformation is destined to reiterate in a way that works against the very change it would announce.

Out of time with itself, the metamorphosis also disrupts a recognizable normative structure. If the change in form is itself is not readily identifiable—if the extent or limits of the change are not coincident with the site that announces the change—then any replication of normative structure is likewise proliferated at unexpected sites. Butler shows how, because Antigone is the product of an incestuous union, she occupies several kinship positions at once (72); the post-Oediapal “dilemma” is one in which “kinship positions tend to slide into one another” (67). Antigone thus speaks from a position that she decidedly cannot claim as a singularity, even as she persists with that intention. She is aberrant to a model in which one position (a symbolic singularity) can be occupied by anyone (plurality) at various times. This is because her relational status does not change over time, but is plural in the sense of including various positions all at once.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{80} As Sharon Cameron notes in a helpful footnote in her book, \textit{Lyric Time}, Emile Benveniste has rearticulated the grammatical distinction between “singular” and “plural” as a distinction between “strict”
occupying the terms of kinship, she necessitates a shift in how such positions may be thought; in fact, she necessarily calls the idea of positionality itself into question. Butler notes that Antigone continues to use the term “brother” as if it could signify a singularity—as if it referred to Polyneices alone—and yet, as the Chorus attests, she has more than one brother; in Butler’s words, she “cannot reduce the nomenclature of kinship to nominalism,” and this is a “promiscuity” that “desire suffers in language” (77).

Antigone’s attempt to make her brother into a singular object is defied by the relational status that “brother” enunciates. Although, on the one hand, Antigone’s claim is a “law of the instant,” she is powerless to obliterate transposability itself.

The lyric “I” is constituted by the aspect of the “I” as relational signifier as well as the singularity any “I” presumes to enunciate. The speaker’s very inability to control its transposability gives new valences to transposability—the law of genre—itself.

Antigone’s enunciation of “brother” oversaturates insofar as it references more than Antigone desires it to; the kinship position is spoken even as the speaker believes herself to be speaking its very perversion. At the same time, her refusal to use the proper name attests suggests the necessity of garnering authority from the way the normative term signifies. While the lyric “I,” in the terms I’ve described, takes on palimpsestic form, Plath’s reiterations insist on making literal the way in which any word is always “amplified,” caught up within its own structures of kinship, a hyper-occupation that

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person and “amplified” person, respectively. Benveniste writes that the “we’ is not a multiplication of identical objects but a junction between the ‘I’ and the ‘non-I’”; therefore, the “verbal person in the plural expresses a diffused and amplified person” (Cameron 270). “Amplification” connotes the oversaturation that I am attempting to describe; Plath’s lyric voice is not the voice of more than one subject speaking simultaneously as much as it is a kind of simultaneous sounding that voices fragments of various norms and perversions at the same time. Benveniste’s “diffused and amplified” person expresses both different trajectories of voice articulated at the same time as well as the way such fragments potentially oversaturate at the moment they are enunciated. Amplification as I am using it thus suggests the loudness of the norm that persists even at the site of the voice’s diffusion.
disrupts the normative structure it speaks within and yet, assures that the normative structure of some kind will persist. The synchronic plurality of the word is the way in which the normative ceases to be readily identifiable—the enactment of the form in crisis.

As I have shown in previous chapters, the compression of lyric modes allows for a simultaneity that presumes to speak many temporalities at once. In this sense, lyric resists the very process that would render transformation through time, a sequential movement from one form to the next. Instead, its palimpsestic potential assumes neither that generic shifts happen linearly, nor that one form remains static upon its entrance into another. Rather, the lyric moment can figure metamorphosis out of time with itself—two or more forms articulated simultaneously whose boundaries do not dissolve so much as put one another into crisis. “Lady Lazurus” exemplifies this kind of reiterative voicing I am describing. The following lines appear toward the end of the poem and suggest the way that the poem generates its own repetitions—its own norms of comparison—in response to the norms that it is inheriting from the words that make up its materials. I read the address to “Herr Doktor” as the “I”’s response to the figure of the psychoanalyst:

So, so Herr Doktor,
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern. (224)
The “I” identifies herself as the product of the Doktor’s life work, both as an artistic masterpiece (“opus”) and as financial success (“valuable” and “pure gold baby”). If indeed the “doctor” is the psychoanalyst, then the “opus” that is his life’s work would refer to the rewriting of the speaker’s psyche or life history. Such an “opus” has presumably been made of the speaker’s own words and yet, “I am your opus” plays on the finished quality of that work. To say “I am” in this instance suggests a re-identification that is now outside of the Doktor’s control. In a kind of double translation, she now claims it as her own, in the process disavowing the Doktor’s signature. This is accomplished in part through the accrual of repetitions that finds its pinnacle in “shriek.” To the extent that the Doktor has created an opus, he has also created the “shriek,” that which undoes all intelligibility which the “opus” would confer. In this way, the reiterations de-complete the Doktor’s opus.

This de-completion is a means of moving the form to a crisis. In this way, the momentum of the reiterations “so / so,” “herr / herr,” “I am / I am,” and “turn / burn / concern” accomplish the “shriek.” If the line “melts to a shriek,” undoes the intelligibility of the opus, the melted form also appropriates the language of the Doktor: “do not think I underestimate your great concern” shifts the lines from the direct sparring of the monosyllables to a disingenuous, hyper-polite discourse. The shriek that undoes the form of the “pure gold baby” thus “turns and burns” and garners its authority from the very same system of discursive power it undermines. The “shriek” and the voice of the Doktor emerge from the same “I.” If the “I” is protean—and we could argue that its melting and re-emerging suggests it—the form produced through the melting nonetheless speaks the Doktor’s words after the “I” “turns,” resisting the sequential logic of the “protean”
formulation. It is only after the “I” “melts with a shriek” that it speaks, “Do not think I underestimate your great concern”; the posterior form thus comes into being in order that the anterior form (the Doktor) can activate.

The lines directly prior to this moment in the poem enact the over-determination of normative structure at the level of the rhyme:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart
It really goes.

A there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. (244)

If rhyme is lyric law enacted, then here that law oversaturates: “charge / scars / charge / charge / large / charge” is just the beginning. With “charge” at its center, the hyperbolized rhyme scheme is concurrent with the reiteration of a word withdrawn from a legalistic discourse. Although the poem leaves unspecified what kind of “charge” it is referencing exactly, here it seems to connote both monetary payment and the public accusation of a crime. The latter definition suggests that the invocation of law is concurrent with the most simplistic rhymes—one that has led so many to read Plath as invoking the rhythm of nursery rhymes. Enacting their largeness, their overabundance, the rhymes become an advancing obstacle to the viewing of the body that the poem’s lines announce. A speech act, a public “charge” is also an accusation that the law has been broken. The repetition of “charge,” then, becomes an oversaturation of the (legal) law’s enactment, rendering its boundaries susceptible to slippage.
The repetition of “Herr” as a title, also invokes the normative only to exaggerate it, putting pressure on the word to dislodge its authority:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

The professional address, repeated, is then displaced by “Beware, beware,” which diminutizes the title within the word: we hear “herr” in “beware.” The generic no sooner echoes within the speaker’s “beware,” than it turns to “hair” and “air.” The “herr” is not only the signifier of a male gender (reversing the hierarchy of the title), but it also is the air of the poem, the means through which the speaker enunciates. In this sense, the poem outpaces the normative that makes up its materials. Before “Herr” can mark its authority, the repetition of the word dislocates its form.

That the reverence for the normative (“herr”) is rearticulated as a warning to the same, (“beware”) suggests that repetition itself interrogates the norm that it voices. This dislocation through repetition puts pressure on what Butler calls the potential “sovereign lock” between the law and its perversion. This is, for Butler, an unnecessary legacy of structuralism:

This form of dialectics produces the satisfaction that the law is invested in perversion and that the law is not what it seems to be. It does not help to make possible, however, other forms of social life, inadvertent possibilities produced by the prohibition that come to undermine the conclusion that an invariant social organization of sexuality follows of necessity from the prohibitive law. (68)

If perversion is structuralism’s “satisfaction,” this suggests an end to thinking it can reconfigure itself, a contentment in having succeeded in figuring the limits of progressive
possibility (or, in the terms of literary genre, perhaps “innovative” possibility). Butler thus argues that this thinking calcifies or “locks” the relationship between the perverse and the normative. The way law and perversion have been successfully theorized as mutually constitutive has undermined the possibility of variable “social organization” by locking in place the symbolic codings that would position normative / perverse as in static relation to one another. In my terms, this is still a problem of identification, in which we can only identify the normative as a site perpetually juxtaposed with the perverse in its mutual constitution, but which nonetheless preserves both terms as static positions. This is the same problem that is replicated in genre analysis, which has depended on identifying the normative at one site and the innovative at another. In a helpful endnote, Butler posits a third term that is neither that of “inhabitation” nor “assimilation”: “I am not suggesting that the perverse simply inhabits the norm as something that remains autonomous, but neither am I suggesting that it is dialectically assimilated into the norm itself. It might be understood to signal the impossibility of maintaining a sovereign lock on any claim to legitimacy, since the reiteration of the claim outside of its legitimated site of enunciation shows that the legitimate site is not the source of its effectivity” (94-95). The calcification of the positions of perversion and law is improbable precisely because of reiteration’s dislocating tendency. If the reiterations of the law displace it from its site of legitimacy, the power of that legitimate site is itself challenged.

That the reiterative resembles disintegration so closely, however, suggests that form persists in unpredictable ways precisely at the moment it would seem to be killed off. Butler presses us to ask whether we can merely accept Antigone’s fate as the triumph
of the normative structure over its transgressors, or whether Antigone’s fatality creates a fatality for that same structure, whether her death gives rise to other possibilities of social organization. In “Daddy,” Plath plays out the fatality of words themselves, a compulsion for deadness that defines clichéd language. Linguistic stuckness itself produces affirmation in this poem. Although the “I” claims she “could never talk to you,” and “could hardly speak,” the line at which the tongue gets “stuck” becomes a fulcrum for the poem more generally:

I could never talk to you
The tongue stuck in my jaw

It stuck in a barb wire snare
I could hardly speak
I thought every German was you
And the language obscene (223)

Here the tongue is stuck in her “jaw” but we also hear “ja”—“yes” in German. At the moment the “I” claims stuckness, this very obstruction utters an affirmative, which is also a “language obscene.” The word “jaw” thus becomes a fulcrum on which the lines turn. We hear “yes,” and the language of the violator-victimizer simultaneously. We also (almost) hear “jew,” which will follow in the next stanza, prefigured by the “jaw.” The silencing is the means by which the “yes” comes through, all the while marking its history as a site of violence. On the one hand, the speaker cannot voice the word “I,” but at the same time the repetition of “ich” suggests that she can. The repetition multiplies the “I” translated in the German tongue. The four “ich”s suggest a stuckness in this foreign “I.” “Ich” is simultaneously “I” in German, not “I” in English, and the repetitive babble of a child yet to enter into a symbolic system. This very gesture, away from consolidation of identity, allows for generic reformulation. In enunciating “ick, ick, ick, ick,” we make
Plath’s “Ich, ich, ich, ich” into childlike speech. In this instance, then, “I” is associated with language as it is acquired as well as what is excluded, disavowed, the site of disgust.

The poem is perhaps not so inclined to get “through” as it is to mark the sites of blockage. The swastika, for instance, is “so black no sky could squeak through.” The squeaking, like “ich, ich, ich, ich,” figures the sounds of pre-linguistic utterance, while the overdetermination of the word “swastika” the very way in which it can be nothing other than an ideological symbol equated with genocide—suggests the lack of spaciousness in which words may reconfigure. The sky, on the other hand, figures the malleability of words that would allow them to traverse, to cross, to get “through.” The poem repeatedly returns to the banal words of its end rhyme: “you,” “do,” “jew,” “through.” If such repetitions may be understood as sites of stuckness, they are also the very condition of utterance that makes the poem possible. The poem exists in order to someway “get through” to the “you” of its address. As the poem returns again and again to “you,” that reiteration becomes a site through which history may be siphoned. “You” becomes associated with the insistence of “oo”—and “ew”—again an utterance of disavowal or disgust. It becomes a palimpsest for Fascism as well as a word aligned with commonly repeated words (the common words “do,” “through,” and “shoe”) as well as a figure for nonsense (“gobbledygoo”).

The poem plays with the sound “do” as it voices the German word, “du,” which translates to English as “you.” When Plath writes “do” in English, she simultaneously voices “you” in German; she is thus forced to utter “you,” every time she wants to express the agency that “do” would imply. In some sense, then, the word “do” doesn’t do. It continually calls to the “you” even as it insists on its own agency, as in the line, “I do, I
do.” If we hear “du” in this line, the I and you are juxtaposed in a way that undoes a clear subject position altogether. This line also makes the marriage vow into a mechanical action, especially since the word “do” is so common to this poem. When the speaker looks for the place where “you / Put your foot, your root,” she tells us “the name of the town is common. / My Polack friend / Says there are a dozen or two” (223). The Polish town thus figures the way that Plath is among common words; like the town, they have themselves become an uncertain destination as well as an uncertain site of roots or origin. The geographic uncertainty of the town is associated with the way the speaker “could not talk to you.” As much as this poem has been read biographically, the lack of certainty around the proper name can be associated with the way Plath must play out common words until they are exhausted (“do,” “you,” “through”). In its inability to locate the town, the poem cannot seem to locate a proper name. Or, perhaps more precisely, the proper name itself has reproduced to the point that its singularity is unrecognizable. This reproduced (and yet unuttered—we never know what the name of the town is)—name, runs the poem over with a virtual space of travel, threshold, and calling—a general lostness. When the proper name reproduces, its ability to name at all is lost, and yet this absence seems to get displaced and re-voiced in the many confusions of “do,” “you,” and “through”—the sites of commonness that are sounded.

The repetition of commonalities suggests a desire to kill off words altogether, to make language into cliché. Generating a hyper-rhyme, these lines enact the oversaturation of normative structure that is concurrent with its fatality. Butler will suggest that Antigone’s claim reiterates beyond her death, but it is through such lyric
forms as Plath’s that this “beyond” can be enunciated. The reiterative word sounds the traces of past and future norms, which can never be restored to narrative coherency.
AFTERWORD

Studies in twentieth-century American poetry are still mired in the critical opposition between traditional and experimental poetic forms. This opposition, clearly articulated in 1982 in Marjorie Perloff’s article, “Pound / Stevens: Whose Era?” has taken on various forms that have failed to question its basic assumptions in any substantial way. Perloff’s initial argument—that “modernism” is represented as either a break from Romanticism (Pound) or the extension of it (Stevens)—laid the foundation for a criticism that would continue to read experimental poetics as necessarily politically progressive and the presence of formal law or constraint as regressive. This assumption seems so absurd as to be hardly worth debating, and yet critical accounts of twentieth-century poetics still obsequiously respond to this critical history. Clearly, the manifestoes and ideological claims of the “Language” poets have played a large role in securing such critical assumptions. It is perhaps a great irony of poetic history that we have dichotomized the terms “lyric” and “language.” One would be hard-pressed to argue for “lyric” in such a way that it opposed linguistic materiality. The effort of recent anthologies of contemporary American verse have to challenge this opposition is a welcome relief, but the claim to “hybridize” itself suggests just how embedded their opposition has become in our critical assumptions.81

My project’s exploration of “lyric” necessarily assumes lyric’s instantiation in a twentieth-century American context. The consciousness of language as always recycled,

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public medium is only intensified in the twentieth-century. I have defined lyric as a mode of language that calls out to itself, sounding its own history of normative participation, and generating new valences of value (shifting norms of comparison) through this same call. My argument for “generic fragments” seeks to respond to the problem of ideological labeling by tracking genre as that which is animated through the poem’s unfolding, rather than what is recognized prior to any reading. This is not to deny the formal effects of writing a poem as a sonnet, ode, villanelle, etc., but to (1) suggest that such effects are not determined prior to their particularized instantiations, and (2) preserve two separate, but necessarily implicated, understandings of poetic form—what Jarvis calls the poem or author’s “intellectual design” and the poem’s “verse repertoire,” the latter referring to the entire set of prosodic effects that cannot be anticipated in advance by generic label or rhyme or meter scheme.

Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath, in poetry criticism of the last thirty years or so, have been variously enlisted to represent an alternative tradition of female poets. My intention in reading these three poets has never been to instantiate this claim. The emphasis on authorizing certain poets or preserving alternative traditions in the twentieth-century ultimately responds to mode of canonicity prescribed by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, without questioning the terms of any canon’s reproduced exclusions. On the contrary, I selected these poets because they demonstrate a complex relationship to voicing that has little interest in displacing old traditions with the new ones. “Voice” in the poems I have read is neither opposed to silence nor to recycled language. Moore’s animales show that animation is generated through repetition of words. Bishop’s echoing sound produces over and within sites of non-voicing. Plath’s voices hyperbolize to such a
degree that they rush toward their own mechanical failure. For all three writers, there is
never a moment when voice in its positivist sense triumphs over either reiterative sound
or silence. My project attempts to imagine lyric modes as separate from the threat of
displacement, whether that be the Modernist model of literary history or de Man’s
argument that the “I” / “you” constitute competing voices that necessarily render one of
the two, mute.

It is a contingency of my project that the poets I read identify as female. The
figure of Echo, however—as well as what Simon Jarvis calls the “part-infantile…or even
perverse…elements of verse thinking, its embarrassing overinvestments in mere clicks,
pitches, and echoes”—does imply a gendered history. Although my interest is not in
representing female poets (which would be an odd ambition for a project that has resisted
the representation of consolidated voice itself), my project quite clearly values those
aspects of verse that have traditionally been suppressed or repressed by discourses of
mastery. I have noted Jarvis’s claim that rhyme theory has traditionally dismissed or de-
privileged those aspects of sound that cannot either be traced back to a poem’s
intellectual design or made to display metric mastery. The close proximity that figures of
voice and echoing sound have to the advertising industry suggests their feminization and
infantilization. Jonathan Culler has argued that our reluctance to read apostrophe can be
traced back to an embarrassment at its connection to the infantile. This affective register
of figures of voice and sound itself has historically been marginalized to what Jarvis cites
as “the serious work of the imagination.” My aim in this project has been to read sites of
reiterative words and sound as pieces in a conversation that lyric occasions a poem to
have with its own constitutive materials. Restoring them to semantic sense or an
intellectual design that explains a poem’s meaning betrays the very history the poem seeks to sound.

The critical clichés surrounding Moore, Bishop, and Plath figure their poetry as motivated by making the ordinary new through re-contextualization, re-arrangements, or shifts in perception. Such a horizon of newness only obstructs these poets’ careful investigation of the history and futurity of their materials, which is always their object of meditation. I thus distinguish the poems I have read from the collage aesthetic, perhaps performed most obviously in *The Waste Land*. Eliot’s design ensures that the poem makes meaning through the logic of juxtaposition or parataxis, but the fragments he assembles are recognizable as representing various types of discourse or texts. Eliot’s first title for the poem, “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” attests to the poem’s aesthetic logic. This kind of representative display is quite different from Moore’s means of generating various voice trajectories; Moore, as I have shown, deprives her source texts of any recognizable identity, and instead, confuses speaking positions with description. In many cases, Bishop and Plath seek to deprive positive voice of any representational capabilities through reiterative echoes. These efforts to make the word de-mean or de-contextualize strip the word of its semantic associations even as they sound the normative valences that constitute its history.

Jarvis’s understanding of rhyme schemes or the “intellectual designs” of poems helps to articulate how recycled fragments are not merely materials re-arranged or re-contextualized. In fact, all three of my poets, in various ways, lay claim to design or announced forms; this aspect of their poetry is not the site that should be subject to claims of historical valuation—“traditional” or “innovative”—but rather, regarded as the
condition that allows a poem to sound a historical record at all. Such a record includes the
history of linguistic force, normative values, clichés, as well as infantile and illegible
nonsense. In Jarvis’s terms, this historical re-cycling is made available through the
“admission” of a rhyme “formula,” without which we have no way of thinking in verse:

The great philosophical systems have their formulas, autopilots which keep the
machine in motion even when thinking may temporarily not in fact be taking
place; the great rimaria, rather than exposing the formula only inadvertently,
where the apparatus hits a bump, instead hold the formula out to us, admit to it as
though admitting that thinking is never all our own work or a matter of finding
that impossible quiddity, the distinctive personal voice, but that it is, rather, the
question how we shall in the right way lose our voices into those of the dead and
of the unborn. (20)

The poems that I have read demonstrate the “admission” to a formula in the
announcement of their formal constraints, but also in their self-consciousness toward
recycled language. Their “quiet devotion” to sounding and re-sounding worn-out words
argues that lyric voice is best understood as a perpetual process of listening, a perpetual
commitment to witnessing echo’s answers.
WORKS CITED


