

WORD OF MOUTH:  
GOSSIP AND AMERICAN POETRY

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WORD OF MOUTH:  
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“Word of Mouth” divulges the dynamic relationship between gossip and twentieth-century verse, placing particular emphasis on the queer sensibilities expressed and engendered by a lyric negotiation of gossip’s risks and pleasures. Over the course of an introduction and three chapters I examine what I call lyric gossip—a subgenre of lyric poetry, modeled on the discourse of gossip—primarily as it appears in the work of Gertrude Stein, Frank O’Hara, and James Merrill. At first blush, gossip’s ostensibly frivolous talk about others would seem at odds with a lyric poetry commonly understood as serious, subjective, solitary expression. Yet the poets I consider make significant use of the often-disavowed gossip that circulates about them and their work, turning to the rhetorical strategies of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as the “precious, devalued arts of gossip” in part to address shifting conceptions of privacy and publicity, self and community, and talk and technology, and in part to illuminate and reinvigorate lyric precepts and practice. More than simply mapping a curious poetic mode, I find in their lyric gossip a peculiarly rich vantage from which to spy twentieth-century poetry more broadly, including larger questions of agency and relationality that inform figures of poetic address, voice, speaker, and tone. Throughout “Word of Mouth,” such questions arise especially from queer cultural contexts in which the vexed issues of sexuality and style coalesce around both the idiom and figure of the gossip. Of course, not all gossip is queer, but all gossip, by virtue of its motivating interest in the non-normative, potentially entails

queer effects. The poets in my study pursue such effects, exploring how phobic sexual suspicion can paradoxically limn queer possibility—how repressive gossip can become a vehicle for the performance of alternative sexualities and concomitant meditations on alternative modes of lyric practice.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chad Bennett received a B.A. in English with departmental honors and university distinction from Stanford University, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a Ph.D. in English with a minor in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Cornell University.

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Like the poets whose gossip occupies the pages that follow, I too must name names: Roger Gilbert supervised this dissertation, providing invaluable feedback, encouragement, and advice; and Debra Fried, Ellis Hanson, Douglas Mao, and Nicholas Salvato likewise offered crucial suggestions and motivation throughout the project's various stages. I am grateful for their contributions. For assistance with archival research I also thank the respective staffs at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library and the Washington University Libraries Department of Special Collections.

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## INTRODUCTION

### “GOSSIP IS MORE INTERESTING THAN POETRY”

Ours is an age of gossip. Buzz, chatter, dish, gab, hearsay, schmooze, tittle-tattle: proliferating social scientific research on idle talk has ensured we have it on good authority that such various species of gossip account for at least two thirds of everyday conversation.<sup>1</sup> And certainly gossip’s voracious presence in daily life only grows if, in addition to face-to-face interaction, one considers mobile phone calls and text messages, email exchanges, social networking sites, and the unprecedented transfer of information across global, online communities, mobilized in part by computer networking protocols known as “gossip networks” (whose design mimics the exchange of gossip). Over a century after Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis famously worried about the fate of privacy when “numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that ‘what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops,’” modern culture—from the talk of the town to the gossip column, from the telephone to Twitter—has been marked by an extraordinary and increasing ability, and desire, to spread gossip rapidly and widely.<sup>2</sup>

Thus to announce in a study of twentieth-century verse that “gossip is more interesting than poetry” must appear either a lament or a provocation. Yet I intend it as neither; rather, I mean to highlight and question the persistently posited opposition between gossip and what we might think of as “the closet” or inner room of lyric poetry and its definitive effects of deep subjectivity. For most commentators it has

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<sup>1</sup> See Nicholas Emler, “Gossip, Reputation, Adaptation,” in *Good Gossip*, eds. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 131. The finding that “about two thirds of our conversation time” is devoted to gossip has been, as Kate Fox writes, “consistently repeated across a wide range of settings, ages, and social backgrounds.” See Kate Fox, “Evolution, Alienation and Gossip,” *Social Issues Research Centre*, 2001, web.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis, “The Right to Privacy,” *Harvard Law Review* 4 (December 1890), 193. Warren and Brandeis here quote the biblical New Testament, Luke 12.3.

seemed that an interest in gossip disrupts or even precludes a legitimate interest in poetry, as if the lyric's hushed tones can only be drowned out by gossip's din. From among the abundant anecdotal evidence of this view, consider the following passage from a May 2009 article in *The Daily Telegraph*, appearing in the midst of the scandal surrounding the election for Oxford University's prestigious chair in poetry:

Byron: womanizer. Coleridge: drug fiend. Pound: fascist sympathizer. Yeats: snob. Crane: alcoholic. Keats: smackhead. Kipling: imperialist. Hughes: another womanizer. Poe: married a 13 year-old. Verlaine: jailed for shooting one of his friends. Lawrence: pervert. Betjeman: had a bit of a temper on him, apparently. And don't let's get started on John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. The booze, the sexually transmitted diseases, the mistresses, the page boys . . .<sup>3</sup>

This article, entitled "An Oxford Poet Slayed by Gossip," emerges from its ellipsis' gossipy swoon to bemoan the violence done to poetry in the name of gossip: "All of these men, our anonymous epistolary guardians might grudgingly concede, knew a thing or two about putting words together, chopping them into lines and all that carry-on."<sup>4</sup> Yet none of them, the author wagers, would be able to overcome the talk that would today find them unsuitable for the Oxford position, even though such gossip, it seems, has nothing to tell us about "all that carry-on" that is poetry. This common stance is not without reason. But don't let's get started on how, beneath the disdainful tone, the article itself revels in the poetry world gossip it ostensibly critiques, muddying the very line it seeks to establish between improper dish and proper verse.

Nearly fifty years earlier, in his 1962 introduction to the second edition of the influential anthology *New Poets of England and America*, Robert Pack similarly grumbles that an American poet proves "interesting to the public . . . if he drinks himself to death, if he undresses at a poetry reading, or if he takes part in a presidential

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Deacon, "An Oxford Poet Slayed by Gossip," *The Daily Telegraph* 15 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

inauguration, but not for what his poems say or for their quality.”<sup>5</sup> Complaining that the American public’s shift in attention “from the poem to the personality of the poet” reflects the troubling “assumption . . . that gossip is more interesting than poetry,” Pack himself assumes that one could neatly distinguish between the two—at precisely the historical moment when not only many of the poets his introduction critiques but also those it valorizes are busy calling such distinctions into question.<sup>6</sup>

Given how gossip, at first blush, indeed appears anti-lyrical, to propose an affirmative relationship between gossip and poetry might seem a dubious effort: ostensibly frivolous talk about others sits uneasily next to a lyric poetry commonly understood as serious, intensely subjective expression. Whereas gossip revels in its many voices—as it spreads it accumulates voices, suggesting an increasingly untidy, increasingly collaborative authorship—the lyric poet is most often seen as going it alone, as in John Stuart Mill’s influential assertion, “All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps for these reasons, scholars interested in gossip’s relationship to literary language have turned predominantly to the novel, a more obviously social genre.<sup>8</sup> But none of this has stopped readers or poets from casually thinking of poems as gossipy. “Gossip exalts in poetry,” declares Robert Frost.<sup>9</sup> “All art is based on gossip,” avers W. H. Auden.<sup>10</sup> And in Frank O’Hara’s poems art-world gossip, or

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Pack, introduction, *New Poets of England and America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Donald Hall and Robert Pack (New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 177.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1833), in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), 349.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks’ *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), for instance, the definitive work on gossip’s relationship to literary language, tellingly omits poetry from its survey of gossip and the novel, drama, published letters, and biography.

<sup>9</sup> Frost’s remark is from a 1956 lecture, as qtd. in Stanley Burnshaw, *Robert Frost Himself* (New York: G. Braziller, 1986), 253.

<sup>10</sup> W. H. Auden, “In Defence of Gossip,” in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Volume 1, 1926-1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 427.

what he calls “dishing art,” blurs into poetry, “the dish that’s art.”<sup>11</sup> As the chapters that follow show, the stubborn critical desire to rescue poetry from gossip—a desire that in some cases entails an attempt to save poetry from itself—seldom asks how poets might engage gossip *in their poems* as a prevalent competing discourse, a rhetorical model, or a source of inspiration for lyric meditations on private and public, self and community, talk and technology, and the subjectivities that emerge from the charged intersections of these concepts.

Such questions about the productive role played by idle talk in poetic making motivate my study of the significant relationship between the art of gossip and the twentieth-century American lyric poem. Over three chapters placing particular emphasis on the queer sensibilities expressed and engendered by a lyric negotiation of gossip’s risks and pleasures, I examine what I call lyric gossip—a subgenre of lyric poetry, modeled on the discourse of gossip—as it appears in the work of Gertrude Stein, Frank O’Hara, and James Merrill. Rather than simply experiencing their respective cultures’ gossip as a threat to lyric decorum, these poets make use of the often-disavowed dish that circulates about them and their work, turning to the rhetorical strategies of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as the “precious, devalued arts of gossip” in part to address shifting conceptions of privacy and publicity, and self and community, and in part to illuminate and reinvigorate lyric precepts and practice.<sup>12</sup>

Stein, O’Hara, and Merrill each want to inhabit and reimagine—without rejecting—the lyric mode, and many of the texts I examine under the label lyric gossip can accordingly seem to push the boundaries of what we might see as lyric. Each poet

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<sup>11</sup> Frank O’Hara, “Brothers,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>12</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: The University of California Press), 1990, 23.

exploits gossip's ability to destabilize normative categories, and the categories of literary genre are no exception. Stein's writing notoriously explodes generic classifications; O'Hara antagonized the poetry world with his seemingly anti-poetic poems; and Merrill begins his poetic trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* by self-reflexively worrying his decision to cast his project in verse: "Admittedly I err by undertaking / This in its present form."<sup>13</sup> For these authors the poetic engagement with gossip occasions meditations on the lyric genre, such that lyric gossip entails gossip about the potential queerness of lyric. My first chapter, for example, demonstrates how Stein's long, difficult poem *Stanzas in Meditation* reworks lyric address by cultivating surprising affinities between gossip's objectifying "They" and lyric's paradigmatic, overhearing auditors. Chapter Two explores how O'Hara complicates mid-century confessional poetics and the critical ideal of a poetic speaker by advancing instead a poetics of gossip and a lyric talker. And my final chapter argues that in *The Changing Light at Sandover* gossip provides Merrill with a method and motivation for his poem's provocative sounding of the problem of tone and the queer possibilities, as much as limits, of lyric interiority. More than simply mapping a curious poetic mode, then, I find in lyric gossip a peculiarly rich vantage from which to spy twentieth-century poetry more broadly, including questions of agency and relationality that inform figures of poetic address, voice, speaker, and tone. Engaging as a modern mode of self-fashioning the gossip so often seen as damaging to autonomous selfhood, Stein, O'Hara, and Merrill share an interest in the cultivation and circulation of subjectivities based not in the constitutive self-expression commonly associated with the lyric, but instead in the fraught pleasures and uncertain agency of gossip's objectifying talk about others, and the vivifying anticipation of in turn becoming the object of gossip oneself.

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<sup>13</sup> James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 3.

Focusing on these poets' gossip, specifically, brings into relief the implications of such objectification—both negative and less expectedly positive. Stein's, O'Hara's, and Merrill's poetic gossip, as I will show, typically has been subsumed within broader discussions of talk, dialogue, or conversation. But a prevailing critical emphasis on conversational mutuality, respect, and manners effaces both the difficulties and the pleasures of gossip's unauthorized appropriations, exclusions, and use of others, often imagining a stabilizing parity for talk in fact characterized by rapid shifts and disparities in agency. All gossip is a form of conversation, but not all conversation is gossip. Unlike the ideals of decorum and mutuality that govern conversation, gossip depends on an absent other whose necessary exclusion from the scene of gossip enables its intimacies. Gossip—can we think of it as conversation's rowdy younger sibling?—thrives on its (often charmingly) bad manners and hierarchical play; its authority obtains in speaking *of* as much as *to* others. Yet conversely, for the poets I consider gossip's objectifying talk also strangely animates its objects' agency, as if to be for these poets is first to be gossiped about. Throughout their gossipy poems they anticipate becoming gossip themselves; their poems' lyric "I" flirts with the third-person, looking forward to a reception context in which their lyric gossip will itself become the stuff of gossip.

Bringing the insights of queer and lyric theory to bear in historically situated readings of these poets' work, I argue that the idea and practice of gossip can reframe understandings of the poetics and politics of lyric personhood. Each of my chapters thus presents a case study of a poetic project that approaches the lyric as a potentially queer space of both subjectivity and sociality. Departing from the critical tendency to organize the study of American poetry principally in relation to schools of verse, my emphasis on gossip constellates twentieth-century American poetry anew by telling tales out of school, as it were—establishing, if not quite an alternative genealogy of

American poetry, a network of more modest but no less significant queer affinities among poets of disparate styles and movements. While individually the chapters enter into the critical discussion about the part played by talk in the work of the poet at hand, together they survey key moments in an ongoing poetic conversation with and through gossip's multi-voiced discourse, one that has fueled innovations in lyric form.

This poetic conversation with gossip is not exclusive to America, nor to the twentieth century—although my account of lyric gossip is delimited by century and nation, it is not so by necessity. But neither is my framework arbitrary: gossip's checkered history in twentieth-century America provides a particularly rich context for exploring the relationship between modern understandings of the lyric and modern forms of sexuality. The formal questions with which the chapters that follow are occupied arise from queer cultural contexts in which the vexed issues of reputation, sexual identity, and style coalesce around both the idiom and figure of the gossip. If the first half of the last century presents a parallel history of poetry's uneasy codification as lyric and of the uneasy codification of modern sexual identities, gossip suggestively blurs these two histories, most evidently, as I will detail in my second and third chapters, in the McCarthy era's gossipy conflation of the queer, the un-American, and the artist. Of the work I consider, only O'Hara's is composed in the midst of the postwar culture of heightened suspicion surrounding sexual and artistic identity. Yet *Stanzas in Meditation*, written in 1932, and *The Changing Light at Sandover*, the first installment of which was not published until 1976, are each also indelibly marked by this period in American history toward which they reach—whether forwards or backwards. The source material for *Sandover*, like the queer experience it narrates, dates from 1953, and Merrill's lyric gossip challenges and finds pleasure within the gossip-laden, Cold War unease that haunts his poem. Stein's *Stanzas*, meanwhile, is not published until 1956, when its reception by poets like John

Ashbery draws out its interest in how homophobic suspicion can paradoxically limn queer possibility—how repressive gossip can become, for the queer poet, a vehicle for the performance of alternative sexualities and for meditations on alternative modes of lyric practice. Compare *Stanzas*' opening lines—

I caught a bird which made a ball  
And they thought better of it.  
But it is all of which they taught  
That they were in a hurry yet  
In a kind of way they meant it best<sup>14</sup>

—with those of Ashbery's pronoun-filled poem about gossip, homosexuality, and the McCarthy era, "The Grapevine":

Of who we and all they are  
You all now know. But you know  
After they began to find us out we grew  
Before they died thinking us the causes

Of their acts. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Read through the anachronistic lens of Ashbery's mid-century grapevine (a "word-of-mouth network of 'fruits,'" as John Shoptaw puts it<sup>16</sup>), *Stanzas* becomes a central text for the lyric gossip that flourishes in American poetry during the 1950s and 1960s and its queer interest in, as Stein asks, what happens "If I name names if I name names with them."<sup>17</sup>

By *queer* I mean not so much the expression or representation of lesbian or gay identity as the baffling of sexual or gendered identity categories and of normative categorization more broadly. The "rich, unsystematic resources" of what Sedgwick calls the "nonce-taxonomic work represented by gossip" hold out precisely this

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<sup>14</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*, in *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 316.

<sup>15</sup> John Ashbery, "The Grapevine," in *The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>16</sup> John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*, 322.

potential for a more nuanced account of gender, sexuality, and desire than identity categories tend to offer, and in this sense gossip enables the queer energies of Stein's, O'Hara's, and Merrill's lyric gossip and its challenges to social and poetic convention.<sup>18</sup> Of course, not all gossip is queer, but all gossip, by virtue of its constitutive interest in the non-normative, potentially entails queer effects. Many of these effects—of, for instance, fleeting, unauthorized spaces and subjectivities—derive from gossip's status as both a performance in the theatrical sense and as performative in the sense of speech act theory and the theories of performativity drawn from it. Numerous theorists of gossip point out that it involves a kind of theatrical performance: “think of it as drama,” Patricia Meyer Spacks writes. “Two characters . . . speaking the language of shared experience, revealing themselves as they talk of others, constructing a joint narrative—a narrative that conjures up yet other actors, offstage, playing out their own private dramas.”<sup>19</sup> Gossip is also performative, its language often depicted as self-actualizing, setting in motion what it ostensibly describes. Its characterization as autonomous language out of control garners generally poor reviews (think of the World War Two slogans warning against gossip: “careless talk costs lives” and “loose lips sink ships”), but from another perspective, gossip's ability to meld saying and doing suggests a vital source of transformative, anti-normative energy.

The idea of gossip as both queer performance and performativity informs my analysis of lyric gossip as a mode of aesthetic self-fashioning, and in the pages that follow I read in Stein's, O'Hara's, and Merrill's work a performance of sexuality that takes place at the level of poetic style. Wayne Koestenbaum emphasizes gossip's queer performativity and the way it can loosen more fixed gender or sexual identities

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<sup>18</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, 3.

when he writes that “Gossip, hardly trivial, is as central to gay culture as it is to female cultures. From skeins of hearsay, I weave an inner life, I build queerness . . . .”<sup>20</sup> If by queerness one means primarily the avoidance or dismantling of normative identity categories, to “build queerness” might seem a paradox. Indeed, if we consider the concept of “nonce taxonomy” Sedgwick advances in *Epistemology of the Closet*, it might seem an appropriate one. In a passage to which my study will recur, Sedgwick introduces gossip as her primary example of nonce taxonomy, a project which seeks to create “space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other.” She writes,

[P]robably everybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape. It is probably people with the experience of oppression or subordination who have most *need* to know [how “people may be like or different from each other”]; and I take the precious, devalued arts of gossip, immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women, to have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one’s world.<sup>21</sup>

Sedgwick is careful to note that gossip is not an essentially female or gay discourse, although historically women and gay men have been “peculiarly disserved by its devaluation.”<sup>22</sup> Instead gossip, for Sedgwick, represents a way of “build[ing] queerness” in all its one-time-only nuance, of meeting “one’s descriptive requirements that the piercing bouquet of a given friend’s particularity be done some justice.”<sup>23</sup>

Sedgwick’s nonce taxonomy shares deep affinities with Roland Barthes’ concept of the Neutral, which emerges throughout his body of work but most extensively in the series of lectures he gave at the Collège de France in 1977-1978.

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<sup>20</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 84-85.

<sup>21</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Barthes sees the elaboration of the Neutral as an aesthetic and “ethical project” which, like Sedgwick’s anti-homophobic inquiry, proposes a manner of eluding the binary thinking that limits what counts as knowledge in Western discourse. Like Sedgwick, he declares: “I want to live according to nuance.”<sup>24</sup> The Neutral, that which “outplays” and “baffles the paradigm,” is his way of doing so, his “*style* of being present to the struggles of my time.”<sup>25</sup> This ethics of style offers “the nonviolent refusal of reduction, the parrying of generality by inventive, unexpected, nonparadigmatizable behavior, the elegant and discreet flight in the face of dogmatism.”<sup>26</sup> Yet gossip, for Barthes, would seem to be the anti-Neutral. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* he writes, “saying ‘he’ about someone, I always envision a kind of murder by language, whose entire scene, sometimes sumptuous, even ceremonial, is *gossip*.”<sup>27</sup> Sedgwick’s gossip conjures “the piercing bouquet of a given friend’s particularity”; Barthes’ gossip fits its subjects into pre-determined categories, enacting “murder by language.” In a fragment entitled “Gossip” in *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes writes further that gossip “takes possession of my other and restores that other to me in the bloodless form of a universal substitute.”<sup>28</sup> So much for nuance!

In Sedgwick and Barthes we find versions of the two typical views of gossip’s ethics. Gossip as nonce taxonomy recalls the view that (as Robert F. Goodman puts it) “the sort of moral judgments made by gossipers cannot be separated from the specifics of particular cases. So enmeshed are such moral determinations in detail that they

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<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press), 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 8, emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 169.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 185.

cannot be fit neatly into a unified moral system or easily generated to other cases.” Gossip as a form of “universal substitute” suggests the view that “a primary emphasis of gossip is upon instances of trespass against a community’s norms. A primary purpose of gossip is to sustain those norms, not to make fine-tuned judgments of every case.”<sup>29</sup> In introducing these two views, my aim is not to set forth for gossip the kind of hegemonic/subversive, structuring binary against which both Barthes and Sedgwick work, but rather to think about how they are much the same view, differently inflected. Sedgwick is attuned to the ways nonce taxonomy is always threatening to get stuck, to become rote, normalizing taxonomy; and however much Barthes wants to attack gossip, his lingering on its “sumptuous, even ceremonial” qualities suggests a concurrent investment in its stylistic and erotic potential, and a way in which one might find nuance within discourses which can tend toward troubling generality.

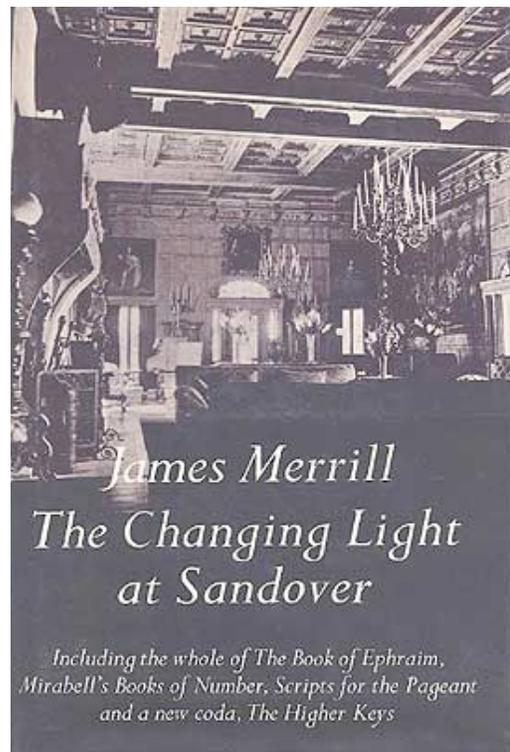
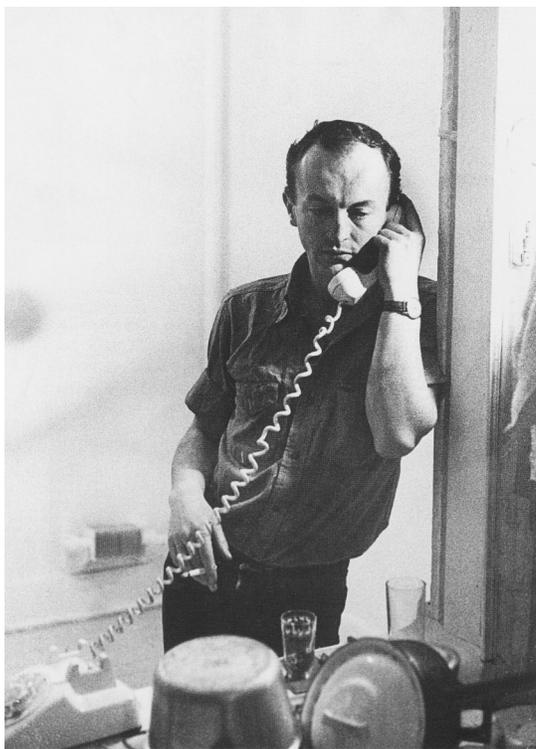
Between Sedgwick and Barthes, then, one might piece together a fuller theoretical account of gossip’s queer aesthetics and ethics. Although my project tends, like its objects of study, toward an affirmative account of gossip, within the poems I consider gossip is never neatly valorized or castigated, and its queer pleasures are inseparable from its quite real risks. Much of the recent critical work on gossip seems caught up in a repressive hypothesis, certain that gossip, a liberating discourse of the subordinated, has been maligned and repressed precisely because of the threat it poses to the status quo. As useful as this work can be, the critical insistence on, as one collection of essays declares, *Good Gossip*, or “The Vindication of Gossip,” can at times seem reductively to declare that *Tomorrow gossip will be good again*. The poets in my study, faced with phobic networks of suspicion and knowingness which implicate and conscript them, cannot celebrate gossip in this way, instead adopting it

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<sup>29</sup> From Robert F. Goodman’s introduction to *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (Lawrence, KS: The University Press Kansas, 1994), 7.

as a discourse that inherently neither subverts nor reinforces power, but that one might take up for any number of purposes. Whether in the dizzying shifts Stein makes between the first and third person, the ambiguous subjective or objective status of O'Hara's gossip about himself, or Merrill's representation of two worlds and their voices, hinging on gossip, each of these poets plays with lyric gossip's distinct ability to slide back and forth between subjectivity and objectivity, pleasurable particularity and violent generalization. In so doing, their poems nourish the liminal formal space between subject and object, a space Barthes might see as the theatrical space of gossip and its violent "scene," or Sedgwick might call a "space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other."

The unauthorized voices and selves of these poems often emerge from such represented and formal spaces of gossip: Stein's *Stanzas* presents formal rooms that house her poem's pervasive dish; O'Hara's poetry at times speaks *as* a queer, urban space of gossip; and Merrill's use of the Ouija board in *Sandover* imagines a world and an architecture from which the voice of his disembodied, otherworldly gossip emanates. The reputations and iconography of these poets are bound up with spaces of gossip: think of the many photographs of Stein posed in her apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus; the image of O'Hara on the telephone in one of his well-documented Manhattan apartments; or the photograph of the ballroom of Merrill's childhood home upon which the ballroom at his fictional Sandover is based, and which adorns the cover of the first omnibus publication of *Sandover* (figures 1-3). The iconographic force of these spaces of gossip stems largely from the way they mirror, and are mirrored in, the lyric spaces of gossip each poet creates. Across these poets' bodies of work we find a fantasy of the transformative space of gossip, in which collected talk floats in and out of the bodies that perform and invariably alter it, thriving on and



Figures 1-3. *Houses of Fame*: Man Ray, “Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, 27 rue de Fleurus”; Mario Schifano, Frank O’Hara, 791 Broadway; The Ballroom at Sandover.

producing ambiguities of agency and interiority.

Throughout my study I return to the idea of a transforming *space* of gossip, and in tracing lyric gossip's emphasis on the gossip as a resonant space as much as or even more than an embodied figure, I draw on depictions of the classical figure of Fame (the Greek Pheme or Ossa, Roman Fama)—goddess of gossip and rumor, spirit of fame and infamy, renown and scandal. When Ovid describes Fame's dwelling at "The limits of the threefold universe, / Whence all things everywhere, however far, / Are scanned and watched, and every voice and word / Reaches its listening ears," he inventively locates gossip's agency not in the goddess herself so much as her "chosen home" and "its . . . ears."<sup>30</sup> And while the house of Fame serves as a seemingly totalizing archive of "every voice and word" ever spoken, this archive functions less as a fixed repository of knowledge belonging to or emitting from a divine authority than a disembodied pool of language which mutates as it is picked up and passed along from body to body. Gossip, that is, appears less a subjectivity than a space of subjectivities. As the house of Fame "reverberates, / Repeating voices, doubling what it hears,"

rumours everywhere,  
Thousands, false mixed with true, roam to and fro,  
And words flit by and phrases all confused.  
Some pour their tattle into idle ears,  
Some pass on what they've gathered, and as each  
Gossip adds something new the story grows.  
Here is Credulity, here reckless Error,  
Groundless Delight, Whispers of unknown source,  
Sudden Sedition, overwhelming Fears.  
All that goes on in heaven or sea or land  
Rumour observes and scours the whole wide world.<sup>31</sup>

As a figure for idle talk, the house of Fame conveys the way in which the voice of gossip preserves and multiplies but can exist independently of a particular, embodied

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<sup>30</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 275.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

subjectivity. Significantly, the “overwhelming Fears” this undermining of stable interiority can produce are accompanied by a veritable orgy of “Groundless Delight,” as free-floating “words” and “phrases” are whispered among a throng that takes pleasure in sourceless knowledge and the possibilities of its performance.

Gossip, which belongs at once to everybody (what *everybody's saying*) and no body in particular (*you didn't hear it from me*), allows for a simultaneous self-assertion and self-effacement, an extravagant stylistic performance into which the self might all but disappear, but out of which it might also emerge. Merrill describes how when writing a poem, “[t]he words that come first are anybody's, a froth of phrases, like the first words from a medium's mouth. You have to make them your own.”<sup>32</sup> O'Hara declares, “the only truth is face to face, the poem whose words become your mouth.”<sup>33</sup> And Stein—gossipy godmother of us all—prepares us to “Expect pages and by word of mouth.”<sup>34</sup> Peopling their poems with gossip's “Credulity,” “Error,” “Delight,” and “Whispers” as they contemplate “Sedition” and “Fears,” Stein, O'Hara, and Merrill claim a strange lyric authority in voicing and becoming the words of others.

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<sup>32</sup> James Merrill, “An Interview with Donald Sheehan,” in James Merrill, *Collected Prose*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 61.

<sup>33</sup> O'Hara, “Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 305.

<sup>34</sup> Gertrude Stein, “An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men,” in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 480.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “IF I NAME NAMES WITH THEM: GERTRUDE STEIN, LYRIC, AND GOSSIP”

So as I say poetry is essentially the discovery, the love,  
the passion for the name of anything.

—Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar”

Why mention names why not mention names

—Gertrude Stein, “Gentle Julia”

#### I. “A CONSIDERABLE DISPLAY OF SORDID ANECDOTES”

Gertrude Stein was a gossip. You didn’t hear it here first. It is hardly fresh news to assert that Stein, chatty doyenne of 27 rue de Fleurus, had a taste for dish, and even less juicy to remark that modernist dish had a decided taste for her. In his 1914 essay instructing the public “How to Read Gertrude Stein,” Carl Van Vechten lovingly emphasizes both “Miss Stein’s piquant love of gossip” *and* gossipy details about her “personality,” “physique,” “garb,” and salon; elsewhere he positions her writing itself as gossip that insinuates its author’s position as “founder” and foremost figure of “the modern movement in English literature”: “With the publication of *Three Lives*,” he writes, “her gossip was disseminated.”<sup>1</sup> The 1932 publication of the bestselling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* confirmed and consolidated Stein’s reputations as a gossip and a writer, ensuring that her fame during her lifetime would have as much to do with the gossip swirling around (and emanating from) her formidable personality as it would with her gossipy and gossiped-about work. In a eulogy for Stein, Van Vechten claims that “in the work of Gertrude Stein her conversation pieces mixed with her landscape, her gossip with her lectures,” reasserting his sense that her gossip

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Van Vechten, “How to Read Gertrude Stein,” *Trend* August 1914, and “Medals for Miss Stein,” *New York Tribune*, May 13, 1923, both rptd. in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*, ed. Kirk Curnutt (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 155, 156, 123.

cannot be considered distinct from her more explicitly literary endeavors.<sup>2</sup> Yet even as Stein has become nearly synonymous with gossip, her readers have often labored to make just such a distinction between “her gossip” and “the work.” We have had critical accounts of the “landscape” and “lectures,” important studies of Stein and dialogue, and even recent discussion of Stein’s “conversation”—but the insistent presence of gossip in Stein’s writing still has not received sustained critical consideration.

Why this lacuna in Stein scholarship? Despite Van Vechten’s example, Stein’s earliest critics almost uniformly denounced her “piquant love of gossip.” *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, a collection of testy rejoinders to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* published in 1935 as a special supplement to *Transition*, set the terms for one strand of subsequent devaluations of Stein’s gossip. I will have more to say later about this pamphlet, in which Georges Braque, Eugene and Maria Jolas, Henri Matisse, André Salmon, and Tristan Tzara muster an impressive supply of impotent outrage and counter-gossip in order to perform mostly trivial factual corrections (e.g., “This incident took place Boulevard des Invalides, not in Clamart”).<sup>3</sup> For now, I want simply to point toward its “unanimity of opinion that [Stein] had no understanding of what really was happening around her, that the mutation of ideas beneath the surface of the more obvious contacts and clashes of personalities during that period escaped her entirely,” and to Tristan Tzara’s characteristic complaint that in Stein’s gossipy, surface-level staging of these “clashes of personalities,” “we witness a considerable display of sordid anecdotes destined to make us believe that Miss Gertrude Stein is in reality a genius.”<sup>4</sup> Two decades later, in his critical hatchet job *Art by Subtraction: A*

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Van Vechten, “Gertrude Stein: An Epilogue,” syndicated column, November 7, 1946, rptd. in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*, 291.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Matisse, in *Testimony against Gertrude Stein, Transition Pamphlet no. 1* (The Hague: Servire Press, 1935), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Jolas and Tristan Tzara, respectively, in *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, 2, 12.

*Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein*, B.L. Reid cites such invective in asserting that Stein's "gossip is character revealing in a rather disastrous way, for it often proves to be grossly inaccurate."<sup>5</sup> Echoing the claim that she fails to apprehend "ideas beneath the surface," and thus fails to dazzle us into believing her a "genius," he asserts that Stein's "autobiographical books" are "[b]y and large . . . chitchat—engrossing as the gossip of an alert and powerful personality," but never "deeper than chitchat level."<sup>6</sup>

If antagonistic critics such as Reid seem to declare of Stein's more immediately accessible work *there's nothing more to it than gossip!*, the many champions of this work have tended to take the opposite tack, proclaiming *there's so much more to it than gossip!* These seemingly contradictory positions significantly share a sense of literary value as "deeper than chitchat." Thus in his review in *The New York Herald-Tribune*, Stein's friend Louis Bromfield celebrates *The Autobiography* but warns there is "no use in quoting amusing anecdotes or bits of gossip from the book. These are things which any one can put on paper when he comes to write his autobiography, whether he has ever written a word before or not."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in a favorable review in *The Nation*, William Troy notes that *The Autobiography* "can be enjoyed for its gossip, its fund of wit and anecdotes," but worries that "[r]ead in this way," it will "provide inexhaustible fodder for the newspaper reviewers and abundant, if somewhat superficial, enjoyment for a large section of the reading public. Indeed, it is all too tempting to plunder some of its rarer bits for the purposes of this review; to repeat what Miss Stein has to say."<sup>8</sup> Both Bromfield and Troy bear witness, no less than Tzara or Reid, to Stein's "considerable

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Lawrence Reid, *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1958), 186. Reid describes his book as "an essay in decapitation" (vii).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Bromfield, "Gertrude Stein, Experimenter with Words," *The New York Herald-Tribune Books*, September 3, 1933, rptd. in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*, 65.

<sup>8</sup> William Troy, "A Note on Gertrude Stein," *The Nation*, September 6, 1933, rptd. in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*, 67.

display of sordid anecdotes.” Lest this dish’s “somewhat superficial” pleasures prove “all too tempting” to the critic and potential gossip, one must resist “quoting” its “anecdotes,” or “repeat[ing] what Miss Stein has to say.” *The Autobiography*, here, is of interest, but in spite of rather than because of its gossip. When Richard Bridgman laments that *The Autobiography* “is regarded as gossip, pleasant to read but undeserving of serious critical attention,” or Marjorie Perloff insists that “*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody’s Autobiography* are, in fact, anything but the straightforward, anecdotal memoirs that readers, in search of good gossip . . . take them to be,” we see that even the sharpest and most sympathetic readers of Stein’s popular texts have tended brusquely to move past gossip, as if it were a frivolous, inconsequential aspect of her work proper, and a distraction from any real estimation of the work’s value.<sup>9</sup>

A variation of this response to Stein’s gossip has been to see it as evidence of the degree to which the text at hand has capitulated to the expectations of a middlebrow reading public, and in so doing strayed from the so-called real work found in her more forbiddingly difficult, experimental writing. In this view, the gossip accepted as characteristic of Stein’s personality and popular mode is understood to have little to do with the body of work written not for an audience but for herself, and this work—in its supposed tight-lipped refusal to offer up gossip—is in turn often positioned as critiquing and so redeeming the loose talk of her popular texts. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Stanzas in Meditation*, composed during the summer and fall of 1932, have provided scholars with an exemplary pairing for this critical narrative, *The Autobiography* emerging as paradigmatic of Stein’s gossipy, popular writing, and *Stanzas* representing, just the opposite, an abstract, stubbornly

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 218; Marjorie Perloff, “(Im)Personating Gertrude Stein,” in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, eds. Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 61-62.

self-enclosed meditation—the richly murky, poetic depth lurking below gossip’s sparkling prose surface. Though the texts are undeniably linked (each refers to the other, as when the speaker of *Stanzas* intones “This is her autobiography one of two”<sup>10</sup>), Donald Sutherland introduces *Stanzas* into print in Yale’s series of Stein’s unpublished work by contrasting the austere achievement of “the ‘Stanzas’ at their purest” with that of *The Autobiography*, written “partly for distraction,” and “concrete to the point of gossip.”<sup>11</sup> Over three decades later Ulla E. Dydo similarly professes

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<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*, in *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 390. Further references will appear in the text. This edition of *Stanzas* reprints that which first appeared in *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems, 1929-1933* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956). I quote from this now out of print text of *Stanzas*, based on a revised typescript, despite Ulla E. Dydo’s widely accepted argument that “the text of ‘Stanzas’ in the posthumous Yale volume is corrupt” (Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003], 510). Dydo’s argument is based on her fascinating archival discovery that the second typescript of *Stanzas* consistently replaces the word “may” with “can” (though not entirely). Linking the anomaly of this specific, thoroughgoing revision to Stein’s having found, while going through old papers in the spring of 1932, the manuscript of *Q.E.D.*, her early novel based on her affair with May Bookstaver, Dydo argues that Toklas, who felt this past affair had been hidden from her, became “enraged” and “destroyed—or made Gertrude destroy—May’s letters, which had served as the basis for the early novel. She became, as she put it, ‘paranoid about the name May.’ That paranoia appears to be the key to the revisions of the text of *Stanzas*. Alice Toklas must have initiated the elimination of the words *may* and *May* from the stanzas in the hope of purging the poems of Gertrude Stein of anything suggestive of May Bookstaver” (Dydo, “*Stanzas in Meditation: The Other Autobiography*,” *Chicago Review* 35 [Winter 1985], 12-13). Thus the revisions, Dydo claims, are “a biographical, not a literary, matter”: “the corruptions of ‘Stanzas’ were not a part of the writing process but date to . . . when the poems were being retyped”; but because “the most authoritative text of a work is usually thought to be the latest, most up-to-date revised version,” the Yale edition of *Stanzas* relied on this “adulterated” manuscript (*Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, 501, 510, 490, 491).

I nonetheless cite the Yale edition of *Stanzas* primarily because it is this version of the poem whose effects I want to trace in linking Stein’s poetics of gossip to the mid-century flourishing of the gossip poem. As Wayne Koestenbaum notes, because poets like John Ashbery read the 1956 edition of *Stanzas*, it “has a certain literary-historical importance, whatever its textual inconsistencies” (“Stein is Nice,” in *Cleavage: Essays on Sex, Stars, and Aesthetics* [New York: Ballantine Books, 2000], 310). Even setting “literary-historical importance” aside, though, I contest Dydo’s claim that *Stanzas*’ may/can revisions are textual “corruptions.” There is no evidence that Toklas either made or somehow (but how?) forced Stein to make unauthorized changes to the poem, and Dydo herself notes that the “corrupt” text “includes a number of true revisions” (*Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, 498). In fact the six stanzas published by Stein in the February 1940 issue of *Poetry* are drawn from the supposedly “adulterated typescript” and include instances of the may/can revisions. Why is the text Stein authorized for publication during her lifetime *not* the authoritative text? Dydo’s reading of the may/can edits as “corruptions,” as “biographical” and “not literary,” draws on precisely the neat opposition between gossip and the literary that her intense interest in the Bookstaver affair—what she calls “this intricate biographical melodrama that leaves ‘blood on the dining room floor’ at the end of 1932”—so dramatically undercuts (*Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, 499).

<sup>11</sup> Donald Sutherland, preface to *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems, 1929-1933*, xxiii.

that “[t]he difference between books like the *Autobiography* and books like *Stanzas* is not a difference in subject matter or genre and not a difference in degree; it is a radical difference in kind. The two books do not even sound as if they were by the same author.”<sup>12</sup> “Why,” she asks, “in the summer of 1932, did [Stein] suddenly go in two opposed directions at once?”<sup>13</sup> Bridgman had earlier posed just this question of the breezy bestseller and the posthumously published, crabbed, meditative long poem, influentially concluding that *Stanzas* “was written concurrently with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, as a Steinian apologia for consenting to produce a popular book.”<sup>14</sup> “Having suppressed her scruples,” he concludes, Stein, in “the compromised *Autobiography*,” “set out to satisfy the public appetite for entertaining and understandable anecdotes.”<sup>15</sup> Once again, we are asked to bear witness to a considerable display of sordid anecdotes, for which, now, *Stanzas in Meditation* does penance: “this parallel autobiography redeemed the betrayal,” Bridgman claims; “it rescued Gertrude Stein’s integrity,” proving she “had not sullied herself as an artist.”<sup>16</sup> Stein’s inviting gossip, it appears, compromises her demanding art.

If we turn to the demands of *Stanzas in Meditation*, however, we soon find its endlessly talky speaker—supposedly the voice of a “Steinian apologia” for the gossip of *The Autobiography*—imploing “Let me think well of a great many / But not express two so,” enjoying “That no one had had corroboration,” and wondering “Can they be mentioned” (322, 348, 350). It would seem they can:

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<sup>12</sup> Dydo, “*Stanzas in Meditation: The Other Autobiography*,” 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Bridgman, 213. Though writing shortly before Bridgman’s study, the poet and gossip Frank O’Hara seems to parody this common take on Stein’s career, more broadly, in the one-line entry for “GERTRUDE STEIN” in his poem “Biographia Letteraria”: “She hated herself because she wrote prose.” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 464.

<sup>15</sup> Bridgman, 215, 217.

<sup>16</sup> Bridgman, 217.

I think very well of Susan but I do not know her name  
I think very well of Ellen but which is not the same  
I think very well of Paul I tell him not to do so  
I think very well of Francis Charles but do I do so  
I think very well of Thomas but I do not not do so  
I think very well of not very well of William (356)

“Now think,” we are soon instructed, “how palpably it is known / That all she knows  
which when she goes / They look for him in place of that” (378). Once we begin to  
feel about for it, gossip in *Stanzas in Meditation*—its tone, rhetoric, and pronominal  
dramatis personae—becomes eminently palpable:

This is what I saw when they went with them. (379)

I say this I change this I change this and this.  
Who hated who hated what. (379)

Leave me to tell exactly well that which I tell.  
This is what is known. (392)

How I wish I were able to say what I think  
In the meantime I can not doubt  
Round about because I have found out (392)

Just when they should be thought of and so forth.  
What they say and what they do (414)

Now I wish to tell quite easily well  
Just what all there is of which to tell (419)

I think that if I feel we know  
We cannot doubt that it is so (444)

Can we doubt that we are here in the presence of gossip? Of course, just what kind of  
gossip (what was seen “when they went with them,” “who hated what,” and “what,”  
exactly, has been “found out” or “known”?) remains open to speculation: but it is  
precisely this speculation that motivates the discussion that follows, in which I also  
want to bear witness to a considerable, if mostly unconsidered, aesthetic display of  
sordid anecdotes—to the gossip Stein stages and obfuscates, narrates and dismantles,  
feels ashamed of and revels in, meditates on and becomes throughout her work.

I have lingered on the critical dismissals and disavowals of Stein’s gossip, then, in order to limn the contours of a conspicuous gap in our understanding of talk’s role in her writing. Unlike the broader categories of dialogue or conversation, gossip has lent itself less neatly to those interpretive approaches that *have* significantly engaged the “chitchat” in Stein’s experimental texts—especially the key feminist readings of Stein’s talk as intimate and equal exchange, what Harriet Scott Chessman identifies as a “poetics of dialogue” that “presents an alternative to the possibility of patriarchal authoritarianism implicit in monologue.”<sup>17</sup> The alternative pleasures of gossip—and especially, as we will see, Stein’s gossip—derive from nuanced hierarchies and subtle power plays (who’s in and who’s out of the know) as much as equality, ill will as much as intimacy, self-assertion as much as mutuality, dishy monologue as much as dialogue. (As the garrulous Adele, Stein’s fictional stand-in in her novel *Q.E.D.*, declares, “I believe in the sacred rites of conversation even when it is a monologue.”<sup>18</sup>) Stein’s complex turn toward the specific discourse of gossip, crystallized in narrative form in *The Autobiography*, is just as persistently present in the various literary modes she adopted during the years leading up to it. Rather than the curious premiere of Stein’s trying on the authorial persona of the gossip, *The*

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<sup>17</sup> Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public Is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 3. See also Dana Cairns Watson’s more recent examination of Stein and conversation, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005). Gossip plays no part in Watson’s notable discussion of Stein’s talk, and it appears in Chessman’s examination of dialogue in Stein only in the gossipy realms of the acknowledgments and footnotes, where she indicates Patricia Meyer Spacks’ study of gossip and literary language as an influence on her thinking on dialogue, emphasizing—as Spacks herself does—that study’s account of the “intimacy” of the “relationship” between a gossiping dyad (vii, 205; and cf. Spacks, *Gossip* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985]). Though productive, such an emphasis tends to idealize gossip as a form of engagement, blurring important distinctions between it and dialogue, primarily by effacing the absent other who is objectified by gossip and whose necessary exclusion from the scene of gossip enables its intimacies.

<sup>18</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Q.E.D.* (1903, first published in 1950), rptd. in *Three Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 208. Adele’s bon mot anticipates and brings to mind another, better known feminist and modernist take on conversation, Rebecca West’s pronouncement that “There is no such thing as conversation. It is an illusion. There are intersecting monologues, that is all.” See Rebecca West, “There Is No Conversation,” in *The Harsh Voice: Four Short Novels* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 85.

*Autobiography* instead represents part of an ongoing engagement with the overdetermined figure of the gossip, with the rhetoric of gossip, and with her and her work's own status as the stuff of gossip. *Stanzas in Meditation* thus not only presents a poetic use and consideration of gossip that runs parallel to gossip's presence in *The Autobiography*'s prose narrative, but also continues a project we can see at work in the numerous short conversation pieces Stein wrote from 1914 through the 1920s, pieces repeatedly perforated by the rhetorical markers of gossip—gestures such as “That’s what he said,” “I cannot believe about Julia,” “They had a rich father-in-law to the husband,” “If I told him would he like it,” and “Emily said Emily is admittedly is Emily said Emily is admittedly Emily said Emily is Emily is admittedly.”<sup>19</sup> What did he say? What cannot be believed? Who married well? Emily is admittedly what? In these pieces gossip is everywhere, but everywhere abstracted from a conventional narrative function, suggesting its significant part in Stein’s more overtly experimental, non-narrative work.

To recognize gossip’s formative role in this work raises questions that reconfigure the aesthetic and ethical stakes of Stein’s talk, questions whose import is obscured by the conflation of gossip and her accessible, narrative manner, and, further, by an understandable but ultimately untenable distinction between the popular and the experimental, between “books like the *Autobiography* and books like *Stanzas*.”<sup>20</sup> This chapter pursues two such questions. First, how do Stein’s conceptions of gossip and

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<sup>19</sup> From, in order, “Lockeridge” (1914), “Gentle Julia” (1914), and “What is This” (1918), in *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces (1913-1927)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 178, 197; “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” (1923), in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 506; and “A Book Concluding with as a Wife Has a Cow. A Love Story” (1923), in *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 456-457.

<sup>20</sup> In his July 1957 review of the Yale University Press edition of *Stanzas in Meditation*, John Ashbery astutely designates the difficulties of generically pinning down “books like the *Autobiography* and books like *Stanzas*,” describing *Stanzas* as “this poem that is always threatening to become a novel.” “The Impossible,” originally published in *Poetry* and rptd. in John Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 12-13.

of poetry inform each other? Once we imagine a “piquant love of gossip” as part of, rather than anathema to, Stein’s poetic efforts, her project of embracing and unsettling what she sees as poetry’s constitutive “love” of naming—her attempt “to name the thing without naming its names,” to “mean names without naming them”—takes on the rhetorical charge of gossip and, in turn, her gossip begins to sound lyric notes.<sup>21</sup> Tracing *Stanzas in Meditation*’s oft-noted lyric impulses in relation to its unacknowledged gossipy ones enables an examination of how Stein’s ongoing meditation on gossip—its grammar, rhetoric, and performance—is bound up with her seemingly conflicting meditation on poetic form.

Second, why does Stein turn to gossip? Reading the figure of the gossip both as it manifests itself formally in Stein’s work (that is, as a figure of voice) and as it appears in modernist discussions of literary production suggests how the gossip provides Stein with an authorial model for her queer negotiation of poetic making and literary ambition. While her contemporaries often phobically disavow gossip, Stein finds in it surprising aesthetic and relational possibilities. In her work, gossip serves less as a normative force than a style, a source of pleasure, and a queer mode of aesthetic self-fashioning. To be sure, within Stein’s texts gossip is never wholly valorized or castigated, and its pleasures are inseparable from the quite real ethical risks of a discourse that depends on the objectification of an absent other. Even as *Stanzas in Meditation* is propelled by a current of lyric gossip about various hes, shes, and theys, its speaker is figured forth and objectified “In their and on their account”—a disembodied, gossipy narrative as steadily threatening as it is seductive (319). Courting a productive tension between gossip as potentially malicious naming and gossip as a mode of pleasurable nuance, Stein delights in asking, over and over—as

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<sup>21</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar” (1934), rptd. in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 329, 334, 330. Further references will appear in the text.

will this chapter—what happens “If I name names if I name names with them” (322).

## II. LISTENING FOR GOSSIP: “LADIES’ VOICES GIVE PLEASURE”

What does gossip *sound* like? Though it is never made explicit, I imagine Stein herself posing this question, listening to gossip as a formal model that animates her work as it emerges from and produces the fraught intersection of literature, fame, and queerness. Before turning to *Stanzas in Meditation*, then, it is useful to consider first the answers to this inquiry that Stein ventures in the many short, talk-filled pieces she wrote from 1914 through to the composition of *Stanzas* and *The Autobiography* in 1932. In this writing, usually understood as dramatic and characterized as dialogues or “conversation plays,”<sup>22</sup> Stein establishes both the central terms of a sustained reflection on gossip and the formal and ethical impasses that motivate what I see, in *Stanzas*, as her most extensive meditation both in and on the subject. For our purposes, I take *Ladies’ Voices*, written in 1916 and first published in 1922 in *Geography and Plays*, as exemplary of Stein’s early efforts to theorize and aesthetically enact gossip. The first line of *Ladies’ Voices*, “Ladies’ voices give pleasure,” announces three nearly unavoidable terms for any consideration of gossip’s relationship to modern literary language.<sup>23</sup> As the roughly fifty-line text proceeds, over four quick acts, to play with conceptions of ladies, voices, and pleasure as they appear within the scene of gossip, it soon asks “What are ladies voices”—a multivalent question we might understand as asking after the sound of gossip (307).

Though, as I hope to show, Stein’s gossip displays a specific rhetorical repertoire and tonal range, responses to queries regarding the sound of gossip

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Jane Palatini Bowers, “*They Watch Me as They Watch This*”: *Gertrude Stein’s Metadrama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and Franziska Gyax, *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Ladies’ Voices*, in *A Stein Reader*, 306. Further references will appear in the text.

generally have involved a subtle shift in attention—away from particular qualities of gossip’s speech and toward who is doing the speaking. Thus when we put the question of what gossip sounds like to Western literature, philosophy, anthropology, or religion, we are likely to hear, say, that gossip sounds like a woman. And if we ask, in turn, what this figure sounds like (“What are ladies voices?”), the tautological reply will often be: a gossip. It is as if, in compensation for gossip’s distinctly sourceless, autonomous speech—winged words that, though they move in and out of those who perform them, seem to do so of their own accord—Western culture has generated a crude typology of the gossip, pinning down, in lieu of gossip’s elusive voice, bodies that are gendered (whether women’s talk or masculine shoptalk or scuttlebutt), classed (from servants’ tittle-tattle to society chatter), and sexualized (as in old wives’ tales, the homosexual’s camp dish, or the nosy spinster’s gab).

Yet if we attempt to trace gossip’s image repertoire to its origins, we soon discover, alongside such easily identifiable embodiments of gossip, another figure for the gossip—this one of indeterminate gender and sexuality, a figure that, indeed, though voicing gossip, is less a person than a thing. We find this figure in Ovid’s seminal description of Fame (the Greek *Pheme* or *Ossa*, Roman *Fama*)—classical goddess of gossip and rumor, spirit of fame and infamy, renown and scandal.<sup>24</sup> There is much to be said about Ovid’s brief, astonishing account of the production of gossip and rumor as it relates to reputation: for our immediate purposes, however, most striking is his report’s almost exclusive emphasis on Fame’s house. When Ovid describes Fame’s dwelling at “The limits of the threefold universe, / Whence all things everywhere, however far, / Are scanned and watched, and every voice and word /

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<sup>24</sup> See Book XII of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 275-276. Ovid’s brief description of Fame weaves its way through English poetic tradition, most notably providing the model for Geoffrey Chaucer’s more extensive version, in his c. 1380 *House of Fame*, and through Chaucer, inspiring Alexander Pope’s 1715 adaptation, *Temple of Fame*.

Reaches its listening ears,” he inventively locates gossip’s agency not in the goddess herself so much as her “chosen home” and “its . . . ears.”<sup>25</sup> This home, “[c]onstruced with a thousand apertures / And countless entrances and never a door,” is

. . . open night and day and built throughout  
Of echoing bronze; it all reverberates,  
Repeating voices, doubling what it hears.  
Inside no peace, no silence anywhere,  
And yet no noise, but muted murmurings  
Like waves one hears of some far-distant sea<sup>26</sup>

Just as it seems the house of Fame itself that, eager for good gossip, “scan[s] and watche[s] . . . every voice and word,” it is this endlessly listening architecture and its “echoing bronze” that both records and spreads gossip as it “reverberates, / Repeating voices, doubling what it hears.” Ovid portrays the gossip not primarily as the feminine figure of Fame, nor as a specific identity among the indistinct, gossiping “[c]rowds” that “throng” the house’s “halls, a lightweight populace / That comes and goes” much like the anthropomorphized “rumours everywhere” that themselves “roam to and fro” (275). Rather, he imagines the gossip as a space in which gossip can be collected and staged, a seemingly totalizing archive of “all things everywhere.” This archival space, with its “echoing bronze,” anticipates modern recording devices, and its gossip appropriately becomes not simply something like a lady’s voice, but the static hiss and whirr of such a device as it records gossip, emitting “no silence anywhere, / and yet no noise,” just the disembodied “murmurings” of ambient “waves.”

What *does* gossip sound like? Could we say that the voice of gossip sounds like a tape recorder’s wavering and stiffening magnetic tone, the technological trace of a seemingly passive medium asserting itself? Reading Stein’s talk-inflected work of

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<sup>25</sup> Ovid, 275.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

the late teens and early twenties, Bridgman suggests, “is rather like listening to an interminable tape recording made secretly in a household. Amid domestic details, local gossip, references to failed ambition, to sewing, to writing, recriminations, apologies, and expressions of remorse come passages of intimate eroticism, sometimes quite overt in meaning.”<sup>27</sup> One could argue that the technology of modern culture is here feminized and disavowed, with Bridgman figuring Stein as tape recorder in order implicitly to discredit her authorship by drawing on characterizations of gossip as mindless, female chatter, and the gossip as mere medium for idle talk: a mass produced gadget that can only passively record, never actively create. There is an undeniable force to the claim that modernism often defined itself, and has been defined, in anxious opposition to mass culture and its feminized technologies, including those of gossip.<sup>28</sup> But what interests me in Bridgman’s playful and avowedly positive characterization of Stein’s gossipy writing is something he surely did not have in mind—how, like Fame ceding agency to her “chosen home” and its recording technology, such that *she* becomes *it*, Stein’s authorial agency here both shifts to and derives from “a household” that contains and is conflated with a tape recorder.<sup>29</sup>

The gossip as tape recorder might seem an unlikely—not least because anachronistic—authorial model for Stein. Yet consider the following two segments,

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<sup>27</sup> Bridgman, 149.

<sup>28</sup> See, to begin, Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44-62. Norman Weinstein’s description of Stein’s literary “selections from high society or ladies’ tea parties” as “fascinating . . . exhibitions of the vapidness and mental sloth of such circles” provides one particularly good example of the anxious effort to defend Stein’s “fascinating” art itself from the supposedly idle female talk it voices (Weinstein, *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of Modern Consciousness* [New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970], 73).

<sup>29</sup> Kathryn R. Kent usefully suggests that Stein—specifically in *Tender Buttons*—responds to early twentieth-century American “dystopic fantasies of machine production” and their “nightmarish visions of female reproductivity gone out of control” by “claim[ing] the machine-as-body for her queer project,” celebrating it “as a metaphor for lesbian subjectivity.” See Kent, *Making Girls Into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 131, 151.

retrieved from gossip's "interminable tape recording":

. . . Hideous women. Why do they look like that? You like girls don, don't you? . . . Boring. Oh thanks. Blah, blah, blah, I asked him if he was completely hetero-heterosexual.  
Oh, what did he say?  
He said he doesn't speak about those things. Isn't he smart? Now that's a gentleman.  
Mm.  
You would be a credit to my name.<sup>30</sup>

Did you say they were different. I said it made no difference.  
Where does it. Yes.  
Mr. Richard Sutherland. This is a name I know.  
Yes.  
The Hotel Victoria.  
Many words spoken to me have seemed English. (307)

The first passage, from Andy Warhol's *a, a novel*—his 1968 book comprised of unedited transcriptions of audiotape recordings made in and around the Warhol Factory—actualizes the idea of recording everyday talk, mostly gossip, that Stein experiments with during the period Bridgman describes, here exemplified, in the second passage, by part of the final scene of *Ladies' Voices*. If Warhol's art, films, writing, or celebrity would be unimaginable without the precedent of Stein, the bewildering implications of Stein's life and work in turn would be less resonant without Warhol's canny literalizing of so much of her opaque insight. In this case, Warhol's tape recorder brings into relief Stein's own queer mix of listening technology, domesticity, and gossip. In *THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, we learn that Warhol "didn't get married until 1964 when I got my first tape recorder. My wife. My tape recorder and I have been married for ten years now. When I say 'we,' I mean my tape recorder and me. A lot of people don't understand that."<sup>31</sup> Within this

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<sup>30</sup> Andy Warhol, *a, a novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 60.

<sup>31</sup> Andy Warhol, *THE Philosophy of Andy (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 26. It is worth noting that Warhol's ghost-written philosophy, "extract[ed] and redact[ed]" from his conversation by Pat Hackett, presents a Pop version of philosophy as table talk, a tradition we might trace as far back as Plato's gossip about Socrates.

queer—or not “completely hetero-heterosexual”—domestic arrangement, Warhol claims,

Nothing was ever a problem again, because a problem just meant a good tape, and when a problem transforms itself into a good tape it's not a problem any more. An interesting problem was an interesting tape. Everybody knew that and performed for the tape. You couldn't tell which problems were real and which problems were exaggerated for the tape. Better yet, the people telling you the problems couldn't decide any more if they were really having the problems or if they were just performing.<sup>32</sup>

In Bridgman's remarks, it seems as if Stein's ceaseless attention, like that of a “tape recording,” both captures and, further, produces her work's notable “passages” of “quite overt” queer “eroticism” as they emerge from the background noise of “domestic details” and “local gossip”: indeed, as if “Ladies' voices” give way to “pleasure.” Warhol similarly presents the tape recorder's (here parodically feminine) listening technology as an authorial model (“When I say ‘we,’ I mean my tape recorder and me”) that “[a] lot of people don't understand,” one whose supposed lack of authorial agency proves also a shrewd assertion of it. Warhol's tape machine—indeed, Warhol as tape machine—not only passively records the everyday, but, through attentively inattentive listening, incites the performance of it, such that “a problem transforms itself into a good tape.”

Warhol's example helps us to see how Stein suggests a mode of creative listening anticipating and akin to his when, for instance, in *Q.E.D.*, she describes Sophie's response to Adele and Helen's intimate, gossipy exchanges of their “views and theories of manners, people and things.”<sup>33</sup> “Sophie,” Stein writes, “would always listen with immense enjoyment as if it were a play and enacted for her benefit and queerly enough although the disputants were much in earnest in their talk and in their

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>33</sup> Stein, *Q.E.D.*, 210.

oppositions, it was a play and enacted for her benefit.”<sup>34</sup> As Sophie listens to “earnest . . . talk” “as if it were” the “play” that, “queerly enough,” it is, Stein emphasizes not so much that there are no neat distinctions to be made between performance and reality—though that is one of the passage’s queerer implications—but rather the stylistic pleasures of transforming such distinctions. Sophie finds “immense enjoyment” in listening to something ostensibly “in earnest” “as if it were a play,” and in imagining, in Adele and Helen’s gossip, the pleasures of playing at something as if it were in earnest. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Stein claims this style of listening to gossip, and listening *as* gossip, as her own when she has Matisse—who, we are told, “was a good gossip and so was [Stein] and at this time they delighted in telling tales to each other”—observe, “Mademoiselle Gertrude, the world is a theatre for you, but there are theatres and theatres, and when you listen so carefully to me and so attentively and do not hear a word I say then I do say that you are very wicked.”<sup>35</sup> Like Sophie approaching conversation as “a play . . . enacted for her benefit,” Stein listens as if “the world is a theatre” for her, and this mischievous listening seems as definitive a part of what makes her “a good gossip” as “telling tales.” As our digressive romp from the house of Fame, to Warhol’s “tape recorder,” to Stein’s “interminable tape recording” suggests, gossip’s theatre has often been imagined as thriving on the drama of performative listening, the kind of creative listening that “reverberates, / Repeating voices, doubling what it hears.”

In setting familiar conceptions of the gossip as an embodied talker next to a less immediate sense of the gossip as a type of listener—a “very wicked” figure, particularly attuned to what gossip sounds like and potentially able, even, to generate this sound—I do not mean to replace one with the other. It is in the juxtaposition of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 67, 15. Further references will appear in the text.

the two, I want to suggest, that we discover Stein's "piquant love of gossip," and her attraction to the figure of the gossip as it vacillates between a particular busybody and the disembodied voice of everybody: between a person and a thing, a tale and a tone, talking and listening. Listening, for Stein, is indeed a way of talking: perhaps even a better way of talking, she suggests, than talking itself. The "essence of being a genius," she boasts, "is to be able to talk and listen to listen while talking and talk while listening but and this is very important very important indeed talking has nothing to do with creation."<sup>36</sup> Stein's talk "has nothing to do with creation," but the listening with which it is bound up seems for her constitutive of both the gossip's and the writer's creative efforts to, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes it, deploy "the precious, devalued arts of gossip" for "projects precisely of *nonce* taxonomy, of the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world."<sup>37</sup> Sedgwick's concept of *nonce* taxonomy recalls Stein's gossipy literary attempt, expressed with disarming hubris in "The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*," to "describe every kind of human being that ever was or is or would be living."<sup>38</sup> Stein positions listening as central to this effort: "I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations . . . until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words."<sup>39</sup> In terms resonant with the endless ear for gossip ("every voice and word /

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<sup>36</sup> Gertrude Stein, "What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them (1935), rptd. in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946*, 355.

<sup>37</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: The University of California Press), 1990, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Gertrude Stein, "The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*" (1935), rptd. in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946*, 274.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

Reaches its listening ears”) by which the house of Fame determines reputation, Stein proclaims, “I always have listened to the way everybody has to tell what they have to say. In other words I always have listened in my way of listening until they have told me and told me until I really know it, that is know what they are.”<sup>40</sup>

Stein positions gossip as a style of listening—what she calls “my way of listening”—when, in *The Autobiography*, she gossips with Matisse by listening with such complete absorption that it is also, paradoxically, a kind of distraction: like a tape machine, she “listen[s] so carefully . . . and so attentively” that she “do[es] not hear a word.” Listening, for Stein, enables her mind to drift from hearing “the actual words . . . said” to the still more revealing “movement of . . . thoughts and words.” This distinction—between hearing and listening, the semantic and the semiotic—occupied Stein throughout her career, if most evidently in her lectures and essays of the 1930s. As succinctly expressed in the voice of Matisse, hearing suggests apprehending speech’s intended, referential meaning, while listening entails taking in the *sound* of speech, if not necessarily its sense (“I don’t hear a language, I hear tones of voice and rhythms,” Stein declares in *The Autobiography*) (70).<sup>41</sup> Stein’s listening thus becomes a way of generating and amplifying gossip, a means of turning even the banal exchange of polite conversation into the drama of gossip, as she absents and objectifies her interlocutors by gossiping about them with their “tones of voice.” In this sense, her listening is a kind of *overhearing*, both in that Stein transforms conversation’s direct communication into a gossipy moment of eavesdropping—listening in “with great intensity” as others’ voices unwittingly “tell all that that there

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>41</sup> One should note that, as might be expected, Stein does not consistently employ her distinction between the terms hearing and listening, often using them interchangeably (as she uses the term “hear,” here, to describe what elsewhere she might refer to as *hearing* primarily “language” and *listening* primarily to “tones . . . and rhythms”). Despite this inconsistency, I hope the select examples I present show how throughout her work she attempts to theorize a hearing/listening distinction.

[is] inside them”—and in that she does so by finding more in what is said than is intended, perhaps even more than “the actual words” can support.

We find a similar distinction between hearing and listening in Roland Barthes’ lectures on the concept of the Neutral—the desire for an ethics of style based on “the nonviolent refusal of reduction, the parrying of generality by inventive, unexpected, nonparadigmatizable behavior, the elegant and discreet flight in the face of dogmatism.”<sup>42</sup> Like Stein, Barthes engages the conventions of conversation and the “weariness” of their persistent “demand for a position” through a kind of listening that transforms talk into theatre.<sup>43</sup> When “confronted with a conversation,” he finds it “hard to float, to shift places”: overhearing the “tireless” talk of a visitor, he laments, “*ah, if he could speak a language unknown to me and which would be musical!*”<sup>44</sup> This desire engenders “a means for me to regain control, to retake a grip on myself: no longer to hear [conversation] but to listen to it: at another level, to receive it as a novelistic object, a linguistic spectacle.”<sup>45</sup> Stein, as we have seen, shares Barthes’ desire to discover “*a language unknown to me and which would be musical!*” In *The Autobiography*, Alice recalls of a country-house visit that “Gertrude Stein liked it, she could stay in her room or in the garden as much as she liked without hearing too much conversation” (145). Stein further makes clear, in *The Geographical History of America*, both her dislike of “hearing too much conversation” and her confidence that her kind of listening, in imagining conversation as “a play and enacted for her benefit,” can transform it into “a linguistic spectacle.” She intones,

Now listen. What is conversation.  
Conversation is only interesting if nobody hears.

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<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press), 36.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Hear hear.<sup>46</sup>

Like Barthes, Stein attempts to listen “at another level,” one that exceeds hearing “the actual words” (and one that, in the caesura between the insistence that “nobody hears” and the listening that “Hear hear[s],” literally “reverberates, / Repeating voices, doubling what it hears”). For Barthes, such listening allows the pleasures of talk without being “reduce[d]” by “the other’s discourse (often well meaning, innocent) . . . to a case that fits an all-purpose explanation or classification in the most normal way.”<sup>47</sup> It allows one the queer potential “to float”: “to live in a space without tying oneself to a place.”<sup>48</sup>

If we focus our attention fully, now, on *Ladies’ Voices*, we can see how Stein envisions the gossip as a figure that floats on the sound of dish. Like Ovid’s vision of Fame merging with the house of Fame, Stein’s short play unsettles the gossip as a recognizable identity—ladies whose voices give pleasure—as it figures the voice of gossip as a space of subjectivity: a theatre in which one might “live . . . without tying oneself to a place.” Before considering the voice of gossip, though, we must first establish that the talk represented in *Ladies’ Voices* is indeed best viewed as gossip, and not as belonging to the more expansive categories of conversation, or dialogue, that have so far shaped critical understandings of it. Of course, as is often noted, what the voices in *Ladies’ Voices* speak about—to what the play’s snippets of talk refer—is not entirely clear. But *how* these voices speak suggests that, though we can never be privy to it, their speech is specifically gossip. Each of the play’s four acts advances a scene—or the fragment of a scene—of gossip, most apparently when, in the first act, we find

Ladies voices together and then she came in.

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<sup>46</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1935), rptd. in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946*, 460.

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Very well good night.  
Very well good night Mrs. Cardillac. (306)

This opening exchange appears emblematic of gossip—the kind of intimate talk (“Ladies voices together”) that thrives on the exclusion of others, and would be cut short by another’s presence (“and then she came in”). So, too, the talk in “ACT III.,” in which what seem to be two voices discuss the absent “Genevieve,” who “does not know” that she is the object of gossipy speculation. This gossip sounds sexual, since what “Genevieve does not know” is “That we are seeing Caesar”:

Yes Genevieve does not know it. What. That we are seeing Caesar.  
Caesar kisses.  
Kisses today.  
Caesar kisses every day. (307)

Even if we set aside the erotic connotations of the term “Caesar” in Stein’s body of work,<sup>49</sup> her punning, here, presents an intimate “we” whose intimacy derives from its gossipy surveillance of the absent Genevieve—a playfully imperial “seeing” that *sees her* “kisses,” not only “today” but “every day,” and in this sense repeatedly *seizes her* kisses as the object of gossip. Finally, one senses society gossip—this is notably a play about *ladies*—in the voices of the play’s conclusion, in “SCENE II.” of “ACT IV.,” as they wonder about an unnamed “they” (“Did you say they were different. I said it made no difference.”) and a “Mr. Richard Sutherland” (“This is a name I know”) associated with “The Hotel Victoria,” and we hear them “telling of balls,” “masked balls” (307).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The term “Caesar,” along with “cow” and others, has been identified in Stein’s writing as part of a coded lesbian erotics. The erotic significance of these terms seems hardly coded, though, in passages like the following, from “Lifting Belly” (c. 1915-1917): “I say lifting belly and then I say lifting belly and Caesars. I say lifting belly gently and Caesars gently. I say lifting belly again and Caesars again. I say lifting belly and I say Caesars and I say lifting belly Caesars and cow come out. I say lifting belly and Caesars and cow come out. . . . Lifting belly say can you see the Caesars. I can see what I kiss.” Rptd. in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932*, 435. Susan Holbrook usefully critiques the critical effort to “decode” Stein’s work in “Lifting Bellies, Filling Petunias, and Making Meanings through the Trans-Poetic,” *American Literature* 71.4 (December 1999): 751-771.

<sup>50</sup> *Ladies’ Voices* passes on its gossip of “masked balls” in Mallorca in a later piece in *Geography and Plays*, “For the Country Entirely. A Play in Letters”: “Dear Genevieve. Do say where you heard them speak of the decision they had come to not to have masked balls. / I didn’t say. They always have

Recognizing the talk in *Ladies' Voices* as predominantly gossip makes it difficult to follow those readers who maintain that the “linguistic code among these female speakers is not based on polarity, hierarchy, or (sexual) difference,” and thus claim, “Instead of polarity and dichotomy it is mutuality that determines the aesthetic principle of the conversation between the female speakers of *Ladies' Voices*.”<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, hierarchy appears wherever we turn in *Ladies' Voices*, from the obvious hierarchies of the scene of gossip—the “voices together” that depend on excluded, absent others—to the fine-grained attention to social status that so often motivates gossip, here apparent in the distinctions between married (“Mrs. Cardillac”) and unmarried (“Miss Williams”) women; between those whose names demand a prefix and those who, due to intimacy or class difference, demand none (“Genevieve”); between different ages (“Honest to God Miss Williams I don’t mean to say that I was older”); between nationalities (“there was not the slightest intention on the part of her countrymen to eat the fish that was not caught in their country”); and even between those who are or are not of nobility (“I feel that there is no reason for passing an archduke”) (306-307). Hierarchy is further present in the persistent emphasis on circles of knowledge, on who is and is not in the know (“Does that surprise you,” “You know very well,” “Genevieve does not know it,” “In this she was mistaken,” “This is a name I know”) (306-307). Rather than an aesthetics of “mutuality,” the rhetoric of *Ladies' Voices*, just the opposite, consistently implies “dichotomy” and conflict, whether snapping off lines like “You know very well that . . .,” or “In this she was mistaken,” or buzzing with the bad feeling of terse exchanges such as “Did you say they were different. I said it made no difference” (306-307). At times the

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masked balls. / Oh so they do. / Yes indeed they do.” Stein, *Geography and Plays* (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1922), 233.

<sup>51</sup> Gyax, 48.

play's voices seem explicitly to erupt into argument:

Honest to God Miss Williams I don't mean to say that I was older.  
But you were.  
Yes I was. I do not excuse myself. (306)

If Stein's play opens with "Ladies' voices" that "give pleasure," its final line, "Poor Augustine," closes with a voice granting pity (307). In *Ladies' Voices*, pleasure intertwines with pity, each tied to the hierarchies that are a definitive part of gossip: the pleasures of objectifying someone else by making of them a thing of scorn, or sympathy, or more benign emotional speculation.

Despite, then, the critical tendency to read *Ladies' Voices* and Stein's "conversation plays" more generally as texts in which ladies' voices come together, here they seem to pull increasingly apart. We begin, both in the play's title and first line, with ladies clearly in possession of their voices ("Ladies' voices"), but almost immediately that possession appears less secure, as we discover "Ladies voices together," but free of the apostrophe's yoke. Soon the play asks "What are ladies voices," a question that now wonders not only about gendered speech but about gender (what are ladies?) and speech (what are voices?) themselves, and by the final scene the script can only refer, less than confidently, to "what are called voices" (307). Hence even the play's tiniest punctuation emphasizes shifting hierarchy—perhaps not surprisingly, given Stein's discussion, in "Poetry and Grammar," of various punctuation marks as "purely servile," "powerful," or "imposing" (319). Of "the apostrophe for possession," she remarks that although "the possessive case apostrophe has a gentle tender insinuation that makes it very difficult to definitely decide to do without it," she "absolutely do[es] not like it all alone when it is outside the word when the word is a plural, no then positively and definitely no, I do not like it and in leaving it out I feel no regret, there it is unnecessary and not ornamental but inside a word and its s well perhaps, perhaps it does appeal by its weakness to your weakness"

(317-318). Stein's apostrophe is a form of gossip, marking a "gentle tender insinuation" about a specific, tenuous, hierarchical relationship—one that "appeal[s] by its weakness to your weakness." But "when the word is a plural," as in "Ladies' voices," Stein claims vehemently not to like ("no then positively and definitely no") its more rigid (it is "not ornamental") and collective assertion of strength. In the terms of our discussion, at stake in the trajectory of *Ladies' Voices* from figures of gendered speech to "what are called voices" is the difference between gossip's "insinuation" of hierarchy as a malicious, normative fixing in place—"Ladies' voices" as a universal and static type—and gossip's "insinuation" as a more "tender" assertion of power and of non-normative relations, one whose pleasures derive from its nuanced, small-scale play with, rather than broad reinforcement of, identity and hierarchy.

In describing the pleasures of gossip in *Ladies' Voices*—pleasures which, however intimate, depend on hierarchy as much as mutuality, on gossip's sharp observation of difference and dizzying oscillations between subject and object positions, talking and being talked about—I have so far been proceeding as if Stein's play advances a rather straightforward, mimetic presentation of voices engaged in gossip. But as the play's "Ladies' voices" increasingly disperse, the "gentle tender insinuation" of a register of voice apart from the play's mimesis becomes audible. Dydo describes *Ladies' Voices* as a "play of overheard fragments spoken by women," and though she means that *Stein* overheard these voice fragments in Mallorca in 1916, her comment implicitly points toward the overhearing presence at work in the play's text, as well.<sup>52</sup> For we do not directly overhear the play's fragments of speech, but rather listen to a figure in the act of overhearing them—a figure which, in mediating our access to the play's scenes of gossip is, thus, a gossip. This figure of voice, in fact, is an effect of a technique characteristic of the dramatic experiments in Stein's

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<sup>52</sup> See Dydo's headnote for *Ladies' Voices* in *A Stein Reader*, 306.

“conversation plays”: her incorporation of what sounds like side-text (character lists, act and scene numbers, stage directions) into the spoken text—or, indeed, vice versa, as we will see. Consider the complete opening section of *Ladies’ Voices*:

Ladies’ voices give pleasure.  
The acting two is easily lead. Leading is not in winter. Here the winter is sunny.  
Does that surprise you.  
Ladies voices together and then she came in.  
Very well good night.  
Very well good night Mrs. Cardillac.  
That’s silver.  
You mean the sound.  
Yes the sound. (306)

The play’s first line—“Ladies’ voices give pleasure”—sounds more like description or stage direction than spoken text, especially if read as an imperative, a mood implying a voice that commands, orchestrates, and comments on “what are called voices” throughout the piece. In the text’s next lines, this directing voice seems at first to continue. But if the assertion of an “easily lead,” “acting two” still connotes stage directions, albeit self-reflexive ones, the comments that follow—especially when employing the deictic “Here”—feel increasingly part of the play’s mimesis. It is almost as if an “acting two,” in response to the claim that they are “easily lead,” retort: “Leading is not in winter. Here the winter is sunny.” The next line’s second-person address—“Does that surprise you”—puts the uncertain divide between side-text and spoken text directly before us. Who is this “you,” and who asks about its possible “surprise”? Are both the questioning voice and “you” figures within the mimesis? Is the voice of the side-text here directly addressing, rather than directing or commenting on, the mimesis? Or is this a question from within the mimesis, posed to the voice of the side-text or even the reader/audience, surprised now to find itself being resisted and addressed? Side-text in *Ladies’ Voices* at times seems more clearly to distinguish itself among the play’s mimetic voices (as when it indicates “Ladies voices together

and then she came in,” or pauses to ask, “What are ladies voices”); it also at times seems to cede the stage to these voices entirely (as in those lines that feel like direct speech, such as “Honest to God Miss Williams I don’t mean to say that I was older,” or the whole of the third act’s discussion of Genevieve). Most often, however, the side-text irretrievably blurs with dialogue, particularly at those moments of second-person address in which an interpellating “you” sweeps together diegesis, mimesis, and reader/audience as it oversteps formal boundaries.

For Martin Puchner, Stein’s general technique of mixing narrative side-text or “diegetic fragments” with mimetic “fragments of dialogue” belongs to her anti-theatricalism—part of the way in which she “pits theatrical mimesis and diegesis against one another”—and so the relationship between the diegetic side-text and mimetic spoken text moves mostly in one direction, taking the form of “an intrusion of diegesis into the dialogue.”<sup>53</sup> Yet just as often in *Ladies’ Voices* the dialogue steps into the world of the diegesis, as each points toward and comments on the other. In the passage above, is “That’s silver” stage-direction, or dialogue, or both? What about the reply, “You mean the sound,” or the confirmation, “Yes the sound”? Again and again, the play’s diegetic voice appears both outside of the mimesis and indistinguishable from it, both directing and being directed by it, and we repeatedly hear traces of this exchange:

You like the word.  
You know very well that they all call it their house. (306)

You really mean it.  
I do. (306)

What are ladies voices.  
Do you mean to believe me. (307)

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 110, 109.

Did you say they were different. I said it made no difference. (307)

These instances suggest “an intrusion of diegesis into the dialogue,” but also a possible intrusion of theatrical dialogue into the diegesis: an exchange between side-text and spoken text that becomes structural gossip as the play’s form echoes the pleasurable, hierarchical play of its represented scenes of gossip—one voice talking about and transforming another, only to find itself transformed and talked about in turn. In *The Autobiography*, Stein presents what might be a defining moment for this technique: “Once when she was about eight,” says Alice of Stein, “she tried to write a Shakespearean drama in which she got as far as a stage direction, the courtiers making witty remarks. And then as she could not think of any witty remarks gave it up” (75). Here the stage direction itself becomes the witty remark it announces, comically blurring diegesis and dialogue in Stein’s first dramatic effort.

An instructive inconsistency between the initial publication of *Ladies’ Voices*, in *Geography and Plays*, and the revised text found in Dydo’s *A Stein Reader* highlights the play’s investment in the uncertain imbrication of formal levels. Dydo does not specifically indicate or account for this small change between the two printed versions, but, in an introductory note to the anthology, explains that in *Geography and Plays* “the printed pieces so often do not correspond to the manuscript text and typescripts that we came to distrust this book,” and that Stein’s plays in particular “raise innumerable questions, for ambiguities constantly appear in their formats . . . How is a director to come to conclusions about lists of characters, characterization, spoken words, and stage directions that are all parts of a continuous text?”<sup>54</sup> That any answer to such questions must remain inconclusive is very much the point, and neatly illustrated by the revision that occurs in the opening section, where, in *Geography and Plays*, Mrs. Cardillac appears on her own line, in parentheses, while in the text in *A*

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<sup>54</sup> Ulla E. Dydo, Rosalind Moad, and William Rice, “A Note on the Texts,” *A Stein Reader*, 11, 14.

*Stein Reader* (as we have seen) she is spoken to in the line “Very well goodnight Mrs. Cardillac”:

*Geography and Plays:*

Very well good night.  
(Mrs. Cardillac.)  
That’s silver.  
You mean the sound.  
Yes the sound.<sup>55</sup>

*A Stein Reader:*

Very well goodnight Mrs. Cardillac.  
That’s silver.  
You mean the sound.  
Yes the sound. (306)

Mrs. Cardillac thus drifts out of what would seem to be side-text, which suggests that at least some of the opening scene’s last three lines are to be spoken by her, and into the spoken text, where we possibly do not hear from her at all, and she is only spoken of. She drifts, in other words, from subject to object as she crosses the inexact line between the diegetic and mimetic.

In *Ladies’ Voices*, it is through such stray crossings from one formal level to another that we become aware of the mediating presence of a figure of voice that, I implicitly have been arguing, is the voice of gossip. We might understand this voice as a metaleptic effect. Though in narratological rather than dramatic terms, Gérard Genette’s description of metalepsis—a narrative moment that transgresses the “shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells”—helps to clarify the implications of Stein’s textual staging of a porous boundary between diegesis and mimesis.<sup>56</sup> Genette explains metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe . . . or the inverse,” thus producing “an effect of strangeness.”<sup>57</sup> (Somewhat confusingly for our discussion, in narrative terms “the world in which one tells” is the extradiegetic, and “the world of which one tells” is the diegetic.) “The most troubling thing about

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<sup>55</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Ladies’ Voices*, in *Geography and Plays*, 203.

<sup>56</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 236.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235.

metalepsis,” Genette writes, is its “unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative.”<sup>58</sup> The strange voices that reverberate within the metaleptic space of *Ladies’ Voices* recall those of the house of Fame, another “world in which one tells” that becomes “the world of which one tells,” and indeed, metalepsis’ “insistent hypothesis” could serve as an apt (if somewhat paranoid) description of gossip: for gossip, too, suggests that tales can take on a life of their own, and it, too, is always threatening (or promising) to turn gossips into gossip as they inevitably find themselves embedded in the stories they pass on.

I like to think that Virgil Thomson understood the intrusive, diegetic voice of so much of Stein’s drama as that of gossip when, in staging *Four Saints in Three Acts*, he introduced Commère and Compère, two characters not originally in Stein’s opera, and assigned them, as Puchner explains, “precisely the diegetic parts—narrative, stage directions, commentary—of Stein’s confusing text,” such that the diegesis “acquires a voice, a face, and a figure.”<sup>59</sup> Is this voice, face, and figure that of the gossip? Commère and Compère—French for godmother and godfather—suggest gossip’s still significant etymological roots in the Old English *Godsibb*, or godparent. Stein herself seems naughtily to invoke this etymological link between gossip and godmother in *The Autobiography* when Alice, in the midst of the book’s famously gossipy passages about Ernest Hemingway, recounts that following the birth of his child Hemingway “wanted Gertrude Stein and myself to be god-mothers,” and notes that “[w]riter or painter god-parents are notoriously unreliable” (214). Thus just as her narrative indulges in its most notorious dish, Alice quite literally becomes a gossip.<sup>60</sup> Whether

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>59</sup> Puchner, 112.

<sup>60</sup> Stein also seems to introduce the link between godparent and gossip (and diegesis) when, in “Studies in Conversation” (1923), she presents the following exchange, which we might read as a series of speech tags stripped of their gossipy dialogue: “A god-mother to her her god-mother. A god-father to

the suggestion is Thomson's, or Stein's, or my own, though, as I entertain the idea that gossip sounds like a godmother, I too am guilty of attempting to pin down gossip's elusive voice in a specific, embodied type. Stein, in figuring the gossip not as a recognizable identity but rather the strange and shifting effect of her text's metalepses—those intrusive moments when subjects perhaps become objects, and vice versa; when the world becomes a theatre or the theatre becomes a world—asks us to do just the opposite.

In *Ladies' Voices*, Stein particularly encourages us to attend to gossip as a manner of speech, rather than a particular speaker, through the presentation of a perceptible style of listening that, as Barthes believes, allows one “to float . . . in a space without tying oneself to a place.” The gossip, as a figure of voice that floats through the play's diegesis, listens, we could say, “with immense enjoyment as if it were a play and enacted for her benefit and queerly enough,” it is “a play and enacted for her benefit.” This metaleptic figure, in other words, listens to “Ladies' voices” as if *Ladies' Voices*. *Ladies' Voices*, to be sure, also presents the gossip as a figure of voice describing, arranging, and shaping that which it gossips about—as a voice that picks up, transforms, and passes on the play's mimetic gossip about Genevieve, or Mr. Richard Sutherland. But Stein's gossip is foremost a figure she might describe as talking while listening. Because we most distinctly perceive Stein's diegesis at the moment of metalepsis—at those moments when the mimesis suddenly seems aware it is being overheard—the gossip becomes a figure of voice largely, and rather oddly, made present through a discernible style of listening.

When the text declares “Many words spoken to me have seemed English,” we

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him, his god-father. A god-father a god-mother, her god-mother his god-father, his god-mother her god-father, her god-mother his god-father. So and so. So and so is his god-father. And so her god-mother, as god-mother. God-mother to whom and when.” “Studies in Conversation,” in *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb, Volume I of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 126.

therefore recognize it in part as a self-reflexive comment on a mode of listening focused primarily on sound and not signification, a style that can make the English language only *seem* to be in English (307). In her lecture “Plays,” Stein recalls a formative experience for this style of listening: seeing, at age sixteen, Sarah Bernhardt perform in San Francisco. “[I]t was all so foreign,” Stein remembers, “and her voice being so varied and it all being so french I could rest in it untroubled.”<sup>61</sup> Johanna Frank adduces this memory as evidence for a Steinian “poetics of aurality,” a poetics she claims to find at work in *Ladies’ Voices*, where “the capacity of language to communicate signification is superseded by word-sounds as signifiers that have nothing to do with communication.”<sup>62</sup> In fact, Frank insists, readings of Stein “break down as soon as one tries to impose signification on the word-sounds rather than hear them as just that, sounds.”<sup>63</sup> I agree with Frank insofar as we both see Stein as invested in what happens when “signification” gives way to “word-sounds,” or, in the terms of our discussion, what happens when one stops hearing and starts listening. But for Stein—aware that words can never be “just . . . sounds,” somehow wholly outside of signification—listening is not quite separable from hearing. Even in introducing her primal encounter with Bernhardt, Stein admits “I knew a little french of course.”<sup>64</sup> It is perhaps in the spirit of this “of course” that Barthes, in *Empire of Signs*, tellingly frames his desire “to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity,” as: “The dream.”<sup>65</sup> That this “dream” is unattainable is clear, but it nonetheless has the

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<sup>61</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Plays” (1934), rptd. in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946*, 258.

<sup>62</sup> Johanna Frank, “Resonating Bodies and the Poetics of Aurality; Or, Gertrude Stein’s Theatre,” *Modern Drama* 51.4 (Winter 2008): 511.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Stein, “Plays,” 258.

<sup>65</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 6.

potential to reveal new vistas in one's own language: "a landscape which our speech (the speech we own) could under no circumstances either discover or divine."<sup>66</sup>

We can in this sense also recognize the line "Many words spoken to me have seemed English" as expressing precisely the desire to "impose signification on word-sounds," to divine in an alien version of one's own language meanings one would not have otherwise heard. At its most basic, this is how Stein's wordplay often works, moving from hearing, to listening, and back again as she takes referential bits of interest to her and listens to their tones and rhythms as they insinuate new meanings that one hears in the translation back into signifying speech. We have followed Stein's puns in the third act of *Ladies' Voices*, for instance, along just this trajectory, as "seeing" her becomes "Caesar" and we discover the imperial gaze, and the gossip, that would seize her. I emphasize the way Stein's abstract listening emerges out of *and unavoidably returns to* referential hearing because, though her experimental work is regularly understood to have little, or even "nothing to do with communication," its investment in gossip suggests otherwise. This investment in personal detail of the lives of others is not incidental to her poetics: the Stein who writes of herself, in Alice's voice, "Lipschitz is an excellent gossip and Gertrude Stein adores the beginning and middle and end of a story and Lipschitz was able to supply several missing parts of several stories," or, more simply, "She always liked knowing a lot of people and being mixed up in a lot of stories," cannot be separated from the Stein who insists, "I don't hear a language, I hear tones of voice and rhythms" (203, 81). Nor can the identifiable fragments of gossip represented in *Ladies' Voices* be considered apart from the structure and voice that overhear, resist, refigure, and echo them. As Stein's writing perks its ears at the slightest sound of gossip, and teases it out—sometimes where it would least seem to be—by listening to the further gossip of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7.

sound, the figure of the gossip emerges not as a fixed identity, but a formal space from which one might speak, providing a vital means of “being mixed up in a lot of stories” without being reducible to any one.

### III. A LITTLE BIRD TOLD ME: LYRIC AND THE VOICE OF GOSSIP

Teach me half the gladness  
That thy brain must know,  
Such harmonious madness  
From my lips would flow,  
The world should listen then—as I am listening now.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “To a Sky-Lark”

I wish to remind everybody nobody hears me

—Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*

By the summer of 1932, after years of having “always . . . listened to the way everybody has to tell what they have to say,” Stein seemed increasingly to feel no one was in turn listening to her. In *The Autobiography* she admits, in the voice of Alice, that as the 1920s wore on “Gertrude Stein was . . . a little bitter, all her unpublished manuscripts, and no hope of publication or serious recognition” (197). “Let me listen to me and not to them,” she decides in *Stanzas in Meditation* (343), a poem that often sounds—in its relentless worrying of the pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and articles that dominate its stark lexis—like listening defiantly turned in on itself:

Who should she would or would be he  
Now think of the difference of not yet.  
It was I could not know  
That any day or either so that they were  
Not more than if they could which they made be  
It is like this (379)

It is, in fact, much like this throughout the 164 stanzas, ranging from as short as a single line to as long as several pages, that make up Stein’s ambitious, often inscrutable, five-part meditative poem. Even within Stein’s distinctively difficult oeuvre, *Stanzas* has proven notoriously obdurate. Lyn Hejinian cautions, “to indulge

in exegesis of this particular work is always risky,” and even Dydo, the poem’s most devoted reader, warily wonders how one approaches “a large work whose importance we do not doubt even as it defies analysis, characterization, classification,” concluding, “[b]eyond useful comments on details, most attempts to speak about [it] have failed.”<sup>67</sup> One way that readers have gained purchase on Stein’s intractable stanzas has been to view their resistance as that of lyric and its intensely subjective, private expression. Stein herself seems partly to have understood *Stanzas* as a lyric sequence, describing the poem in a letter as “200 Sonnets of Meditation” and announcing, in its first line, “I caught a bird which made a ball” (316).<sup>68</sup> Sutherland set the tone for later readings of *Stanzas* by glossing this line as “I captured a ‘lyricity’ that constituted a complete and self-contained entity.”<sup>69</sup> Mary Loeffelholz concurs, “*Stanzas in Meditation* foregrounds its claims on the lyric doubly in its title (songs and subjectivity),” and also “in its very first line,” by “throwing out an initial lyric ‘I,’ coupled with the familiar lyric song-bird.”<sup>70</sup> Neil Schmitz, too, hears “the singing bird of lyrical poetry” in this first line, and, nearly paraphrasing John Stuart Mill’s famous assertion that lyric “poetry is *overheard*,” that it is “feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude,” perceives in Stein’s concluding stanza that “[t]he door is open . . . and there she is, introspective, thinking for herself about herself. We are privy to that mental drama.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 360; Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, 506.

<sup>68</sup> Gertrude Stein to Carl Van Vechten, 18 March 1937, in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946, Volume II (1935-1946)*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 537.

<sup>69</sup> Sutherland, xiii.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Loeffelholz, “History as Conjugation: Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* and the Literary History of the Modernist Long Poem,” in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, eds. Margaret Dickie and Thomas J. Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>71</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1833), in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), 348; and Neil Schmitz, “The Difference of her Likeness: Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*,” in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, 124, 128.

For most readers, Stein's inward turn to lyric in *Stanzas* sits uneasily next to her open embrace of gossip in *The Autobiography*: as we have seen, critics have regularly sought in *Stanzas* a lyric antidote to *The Autobiography*'s poison pen. As Schmitz also notes, though, *Stanzas* "at once ironises and transcends the conventional notion of lyricity," presenting "a poetry in which the high-flown meanings of bird and ball are immediately relocated."<sup>72</sup> The connotations of lyric bird and ball are partly relocated, I suggest, within the unlikely realm of gossip. Consider again the poem's first line, as well as that which follows it: "I caught a bird which made a ball / And they thought better of it" (316). Stein's speaker here juggles bird and ball, self-assertion and others' perceptions. But what is at stake in all this juggling? Is the "bird" that of lyric tradition or of gossip (*a little bird told me*)? Does "ball" refer to lyric's self-enclosed world or to the open-ended ball of conversation, with which the speaker might now run? Who are "they," whose better thinking suggests, among other things, their own gossip about the poem's speaker and its authorizing force, as well as their third-person status as the object of that speaker's self-authorizing, lyric gossip?<sup>73</sup> Before entering any further into this poem in which Stein engages the lyric with a gossip's sensibility, we would do well to attend to the bird and ball that flit and bounce not only throughout these stanzas but also Stein's writing of this period more generally, provocatively alighting, for instance, in a 1929 notebook in which she anticipates the first line of *Stanzas* by entering a poem entitled "A Bird," and following it with "A Ball."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Schmitz, 130.

<sup>73</sup> Bernadette Mayer provides one playful answer to this set of questions in her own "Stanzas in Meditation," a poem which smartly passes on Stein's original as if an influential bit of self-reproducing, lyric gossip, slightly garbled with each transmission: "i caught a bird which made a ball / & thought daughter of it," she begins, continuing, "but that's all they said: / get on over quick to the avian way . . ." Mayer, "Stanzas in Meditation," *Scarlet Tanager* (New York: New Directions, 2005), 25.

<sup>74</sup> Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature MSS 76, Box 18, Folder 372.

From one vantage, “A Bird” and “A Ball” each reflects, in simple diction and syncopated rhythm, on Romantic ideals of lyric voice. “A Bird” begins by asking,

II

Was it a bird.

III

This that we heard.<sup>75</sup>

Stein’s conclusion emphasizes the past tense in explaining that the poem’s “she” “was right” to “answer” that “it was a bird,”

IX

Because it was a bird.

X

Which was not any longer.

XI

Heard.

XII

Which was a bird. Heard.<sup>76</sup>

This final line evokes and at first appears to refute the Romantic figure of birdsong as lyric, setting the flat declaration that it “was a bird. Heard” against Shelley’s famous proclamation to the “Sky-Lark,” “Bird thou never wert.”<sup>77</sup> But Stein’s unseen “bird” is present only as a disembodied voice—one that spurs the poem’s query, “Was it a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. The poems within this notebook were posthumously published in *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems, 1929-1933*, where both “A Bird” and “A Ball” appear, along with several other short, individually titled poems, as part of a sequence entitled “For-Get-Me-Not. To Janet.” But in the manuscript from which I quote, it is not clear that these poems, though often in dialogue with each other, are meant to be subsumed as part of a sequence.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “To a Sky-Lark,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 304. Dydo believes “Stein obviously knew Shelley’s ode,” noting that the “skylark recurs frequently in her writing of the 1920s and early 1930s.” Dydo, “Gertrude Stein: Composition as Meditation,” in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, 59n.6.

bird”—and as her ambiguous punctuation suggests, once “not any longer” heard, it is also “not any longer” a bird. In this sense Stein’s bird is as much a “blithe Spirit” of disembodied lyric as Shelley’s bird that “never wert.”<sup>78</sup> Each becomes what is called in “To a Sky-Lark” an “unbodied joy,” a lyric vocal presence dependent on bodily absence, as in Shelley’s well-known representation of the poet as “a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.”<sup>79</sup>

When *Stanzas* begins, “I caught a bird,” it thus heralds a “captured . . . ‘lyricity’” exemplary of Romantic lyric but at the same time in defiance of its unattainable ideal. (Indeed, though Shelley’s skylark and Keats’ nightingale remain “unseen,”<sup>80</sup> *Stanzas*’ aviary contains a “nightingale” [350].) Stein’s impossible catch lays bare a paradox already apparent in Shelley’s figure of the lyric poet, which precisely describes an “unseen musician” supposedly present only in its incorporeal “melody.” A similar, paradoxical assertion of self by effacement characterizes *Stanzas*’ later “wish to remind everybody nobody hears me” (421). This “wish” occupies three significant registers. Most directly, Stein’s speaker here echoes Stein’s desire for literary fame: wishing, because “nobody hears,” that “everybody” would. Or, recalling our discussion of Stein’s “way of listening” as a form of gossip, this “wish” envisions a scene of address transformed into a space of gossip as “everybody” listens but “nobody hears”—as in *The Geographical History of America*, when Stein instructs us to “listen” because “[c]onversation is only interesting if nobody hears.” Or, then again, from a certain angle this “wish” is a lyric one, drawing on Mill’s claim

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 516.

<sup>80</sup> Shelley, “To a Sky-Lark,” 304; John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 236.

that “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.”<sup>81</sup> Mill elaborates, “All poetry is *of the nature of soliloquy*,” such that, in performing lyric solitude, though “we know that other eyes are upon us . . . no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself. The actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he act as though he knew it, he acts ill.”<sup>82</sup> In “remind[ing] everybody nobody hears me,” Stein’s speaker underlines Mill’s dictum and turns it inside-out, as if to say to lyric’s overhearing audience that though they know there is a poet present, they must not act as though they know it. Here again, Stein points up the paradox of nineteenth-century lyric’s demand that the bird-poet reach its “auditors” through the pretense of “sing[ing] to cheer its own solitude.” As *Stanzas*’ speaker earlier admits, “I am interested not only in what I hear but as if / They would hear” (380).

I single out these three registers of “wish” in *Stanzas in Meditation*—the desire for literary renown, for the voice of gossip, and for felicitous lyric performance—not in order to make one paramount, but instead to propose that for Stein each motivates and modulates the others. Both lyric and gossip suggest variations on a model of authorial agency involving self-assertion through self-effacement—one which Stein enacts thematically, rhetorically, and structurally in *Stanzas*. Although gossip’s voice would seem anti-lyrical—an ostensibly frivolous, collaborative exchange worlds away from the solemn introspection of lyric soliloquizing—she intuitively joins lyric and gossip. In “A Bird,” for instance, Stein’s lyric songbird also loosely suggests gossip in providing a topic and a tone but no certain origin for the poem’s conversation, bringing to mind the common phrase indicating the sourceless voice of gossip, *a little bird told me*, in which we see that gossip, like lyric, also leaves “men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician.” In *Stanzas* we repeatedly encounter gossip’s little

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<sup>81</sup> Mill, 348.

<sup>82</sup> Mill, 349, emphasis mine.

bird—a “bird a little very little as little bird”—and its transforming repetitions (370). Like the house of Fame, Stein’s bird of gossip keeps “[r]epeating voices, doubling what it hears”: “I have thought that the bird makes the same noise differently,” her speaker says (327). It also garbles the message: “It is always not only not foolish / To think how birds spell and do not spell well,” we are cautioned (399). Throughout, “the little birds are audacious,” and their rare absence can stifle dish: “not to go into that is not in question / Not when no bird flutters” (416, 420).<sup>83</sup>

Stein’s “ball” also intimates both lyric and gossip. On the one hand, Stein’s bird-made ball, as Sutherland notes, is “a complete and self-contained entity,” a world animated by and within lyric: in the brief “A Ball,” the absence of a purposefully misplaced toy ball (“She had put it . . . So that it was not there . . . Where they had put it”) enables a repeated “call,” suggestive of both a game of fetch with Stein’s poodle, Basket, and the *fort/da* game of lyric apostrophe and its world-making force.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, *Stanzas*’ opening line presents its bird-made ball as talk fueled by gossip, drawing on the sense of the ball of conversation that must be kept up. *Stanzas* often seems to employ “ball” in this sense, as when, after being told “Once in a while they stammer but stand still / In as well as exchange,” we hear “A ball fall” (352).

Elsewhere, the poem’s voluble speaker finds it remarkable that “I often offer them the ball at all / This which they like when this I say” (404). In *Stanzas*, it is gossip as much as lyric that keeps the ball going, allowing Stein’s speaker to say with confidence, “I could go on with this” (396). Gossip too weaves a world out of words, whether by threading together the circles of a given social network or forming, as

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<sup>83</sup> Perhaps another sighting of the bird of gossip in Stein’s work occurs in her lecture “Plays,” when she distinguishes between “story” and “landscape” by describing the “magpies” at Bilignin and how “they hold themselves up and down and look flat against the sky” (267). Here, she positions and celebrates the magpie—the signature bird of gossip—as establishing not so much any particular narrative but rather a theatrical space of gossip: “They the magpies may tell their story if they and you like or even if I like but stories are only stories but that they stay in the air is not a story but a landscape” (267, 268).

<sup>84</sup> Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature MSS 76, Box 18, Folder 372.

Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, “a psychic space like that of Arden.”<sup>85</sup>

Stein’s poem continually changes the subject from lyric to gossip, gossip to lyric, in part because of the transformative capacity of each to *change subjects*. In experiments with gossip like that of *Ladies’ Voices*, Stein explores gossip’s ability to make subjects both into and out of objects, and *Stanzas’* opening lines continue to pursue this formal capacity, now in relation to lyric subjectivity. “I caught a bird which made a ball / And they thought better of it”: the sentence that traverses these lines charts the transformation of a lyric “I” into gossip’s objectified “it.” Yet along the way, it also insistently refigures each object as a subject. The “bird” that is “caught” becomes a subject which “ma[kes].” The egg-like “ball” that is “made” becomes either part of a specific “they” (“bird” and “ball”) that think “better of it,” or as a world “made” out of words (“a complete and self-contained entity”) it is inclusive of, if not synonymous with, an unnamed “they” and their better thinking “of it.” And this objectified, inhuman “it,” in standing in for the sequence of actions which Stein’s “I” has set in motion, dissolves again into the “I” of lyric subjectivity that can relate this past sequence of events and the subsequent 163 stanzas of Stein’s poem. Stein’s opening lines unquestionably engage the lyric, but they also offer a précis of *Stanzas* and its constitutive aesthetic and ethical oscillation between lyric and gossip, subject and object, person and non-person.

What does it mean to turn an “I” into an “it”? How can an “it” become an “I”? And why would one be preferable to the other? In a discussion of personhood and personal pronouns, Barbara Johnson quotes the linguist Emile Benveniste’s reworking of “the ordinary definition of the personal pronouns”: “Person,” he argues, “belongs

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<sup>85</sup> Spacks, 3. Arden appears in Stein’s writings as a primary example and effect of the poetic—and, I will argue, gossip-inflected—effort “to name the thing without naming its names”: “Shakespeare in the forest of Arden had created a forest without mentioning the things that make a forest. You feel it all but he does not name its names.” “Poetry and Grammar,” 334, 330.

only to *I/you* and is lacking in *he*.”<sup>86</sup> “In other words,” Johnson writes,

the notion of “person” has something to do with presence at the scene of speech and seems to inhere in the notion of *address*. “I” and “you” are persons because they can either address or be addressed, while “he” can only be talked *about*. A person who neither addresses nor is addressed is functioning as a *thing* in the same way that being an *object* of discussion rather than a *subject* of discussion transforms everything into a thing.<sup>87</sup>

The “person who neither addresses nor is addressed” and so is “functioning as a *thing*” is, for Barthes, the victim of gossip. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* he avers:

“he” is wicked: the nastiest word in the language: pronoun of the non-person, it annuls and mortifies its referent; it cannot be applied without uneasiness to someone one loves; saying “he” about someone, I always envision a kind of murder by language, whose entire scene, sometimes sumptuous, even ceremonial, is *gossip*.<sup>88</sup>

Gossip reappears in *A Lover’s Discourse*, where, in a fragment entitled “Gossip,” Barthes persists, “The third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the non-person, it absents, it annuls.”<sup>89</sup> Barthes objects to the kind of gossip that fits its subjects into pre-determined categories, enacting “murder by language,” and such gossip becomes particularly insidious when it threatens the particularity of (and desire for) the beloved, when it “takes possession of my other and restores that other to me in the bloodless form of a universal substitute.”<sup>90</sup> In narrating the love triangle of *Q.E.D.*, Stein also suggests the lover’s distaste for gossip’s “possession of my other”: “Throughout the whole of Sophie’s talk of Helen,” she writes, “there was an implication of ownership that Adele found singularly irritating.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 217. As qtd. in Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 169.

<sup>89</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 185.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Stein, *Q.E.D.*, 220.

In *Stanzas*, Stein seems similarly to consider how those necessarily absent from gossip's scene of address become "possession[s]" when she writes,

I wish now to think of possession.  
When ownership is due who says you and you. (441)

Yet, as we have seen in our discussion of *Ladies' Voices*, possession can sometimes be "a gentle tender insinuation," and one can even wish to be objectified, possessed. As Oscar Wilde quips in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, however much Barthes wants to attack gossip, his lingering on its "sumptuous, even ceremonial" qualities suggests a concurrent investment in its stylistic and erotic potential. And though "[p]erson . . . is lacking in *he*," though "'he' can only be talked about," though *he* "absents, it annuls," in *Stanzas* Stein is nonetheless drawn to the "pronoun of the non-person":

No one knows the use of him and her  
And might they be often just tried  
Can they mean then fiercely (397)

What *is* the "use of him and her" and "they"? *Can* these pronouns and the gossip they imply "mean . . . fiercely"? Rather than a "bloodless form of . . . universal substitute," can gossip meet, as Sedgwick suggests, "one's descriptive requirements that the piercing bouquet of a given friend's particularity be done some justice"?<sup>93</sup> *The Autobiography* intimates the pleasure Stein takes in seeing at least "the piercing bouquet" of *her own* "particularity . . . done some justice." She repeatedly describes—in the third person—the pleasures of encountering one's words on another's lips, in the third person: "the newspapers . . . always say, she says, that my writing is appalling but they always quote it and what is more, they quote it correctly,

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<sup>92</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 6.

<sup>93</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

and those they say they admire they do not quote. This at some of her most bitter moments has been a consolation. My sentences do get under their skin, only they do not know that they do, she has often said” (70). Stein lingers on this pleasure, recounting “the first time that anybody had quoted her work to her and she naturally liked it,” and later repeating, “as Gertrude Stein always says to comfort herself, they do quote me, that means that my words and my sentences get under their skins although they do not know it” (101, 244). The insistence of these passages makes clear that Stein’s sentences get under her own skin as much as or more than anyone else’s, and perhaps most “fiercely” when voiced by another. Here, in miniature, is the formal conceit of *The Autobiography*, in which Stein imagines her own story as best told in the voice of Toklas, and Toklas’ story as best told by Stein. As Stein writes in *Stanzas*, “I have often thought that she meant what I said” (405).

Being quoted (“and what is more,” quoted “correctly”) is of course not the same as being gossiped about: but when “the newspapers” use their quotations as evidence that Stein’s “writing is appalling,” neither is it wholly different. Stein’s explicit pleasure in being quoted in such contexts complicates readings of *Stanzas* that characterize the poem’s pervasive “they” as a repressive force against which the poem’s “I” chafes. Bridgman’s influential claim that “they,” though certainly ambiguous, chiefly “represent the normal reading public to whom Gertrude Stein had to appeal in the *Autobiography*,” the “verbal conservatives” who “thought better” of her experimental work, underlies the critical consensus that *Stanzas*’ “I” resists and redeems *The Autobiography*’s capitulation to “them.”<sup>94</sup> But although “they” and their insistently referenced, gossipy “account” hover ominously over *Stanzas*’ “I” (and sometimes “you”), Stein’s speaker both resists *and* courts appearing “[i]n their and on their account” (319). Just as Stein’s anecdotes about being quoted by the papers point

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<sup>94</sup> Bridgman, 214.

toward the disavowed pleasure “they” take in her, and imply the satisfaction she takes in “them,” *Stanzas*’ “I” and “they” get under each other’s skin, and out from under their own. Schmitz notes of the poem’s pronouns, “Switches in designation would seem to occur from phrase to phrase,” and as evidence quotes: “A landscape is what when they that is I / See and look” (437).<sup>95</sup> Stein’s “they,” by no means a stable referent, keeps before us the question of who they are, including the possibility of a “they that is I.” When Stein writes, in the poem’s opening stanza, “In a kind of way they meant it best / That they should change in and on account,” are we to take it that what is “meant . . . best” is the “change” imposed on those who appear “in and on” their “account”? (316). Or do “they” themselves “change” “in and on” their own—or perhaps someone else’s—“account”? Similarly, when the speaker reflects, “Who can be thought perilous in their account. / They have not known that they will be in thought,” is it those who “can be thought perilous in their account” who “have not known that they will be in thought,” or rather “they” whose account it is who “have not known” that they will in turn become objects of “thought” (317)? Who “they” designates is never settled within Stein’s poem, and even the seemingly opposed positions of “they” and “I,” third and first person, keep collapsing into each other as gossip’s objects become subjects, and its subjects become objects. “[S]ometimes,” Barthes writes of gossip, “the mockery of all this, ‘he’ gives way to ‘I’ . . .”<sup>96</sup>

For Stein, the mockery of the third person and its exclusion from the scene of address can produce first-person pleasures. If the “pronoun of the non-person” “mortifies its referent,” this mortification has the potential to make Stein feel not less but more human: it is in being the object of the newspapers’ ridicule that Stein becomes exhilarated by her own voice. Stanza LV, Part V begins, “I have been

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<sup>95</sup> Schmitz, 134.

<sup>96</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 169.

thought to not respect myself,” but nevertheless maintains, “They can collect me. / They can recollect me” (447). The stanza’s concluding couplet suggests why Stein’s “I” consents to being objectified by the poem’s “they” and its ongoing “account,” asserting a close relation between gossip, shame and infamy, and renown: “Shame shame fie for shame / Everybody knows her name” (448). Earlier, when Stein’s speaker declares, “It is very well to know. / More than to know / What they make us of,” the reworked colloquialism evokes “their account” and suggests that the gossipy narrative of *what they make of us* is also “What they make us of” (338). At times this constitutive “account” seems to prey on and create weakness:

She is here when she is not better  
 When she is not better she is here  
 In their and on their account (318-319)

Indeed sometimes the speaker questions the voraciousness of “their account”:

For which they do attack not only what they need  
 They must be always very ready to know.  
 That they have heard not only all but little.  
 In their account on their account can they  
 Why need they be so adequately known as much (319)

Often the speaker seems to reassure us one can do “better than” this account:

Or better than on account of which they much and wish arranged (325)

And gossip’s “account” can even seem to account for and limit one’s agency:

In which on no account might they have tried (391)

But despite Stein’s speaker pressuring the limits of this account (“Let me see let me go let me be not only determined” [352]) and insisting on the unreliability of its narrative and effects (“There is no counting on that account” [328]), despite the poem’s constant awareness that “They have threatened us with crowing,” and its hesitance as to whether “they will enjoin and endanger / Damage or delight,” *Stanzas* repeatedly presents the objects of others’ accounts becoming subjects through these accounts—

presents the fraught pleasures and uncertain power of being objectified by gossip (375). In Stein's poem, gossips become gossip as they "commence in search not only of their account / But also on their account as arranged in this way" (371).

Through her gossip's circuit of communication and its disorienting subject/object shifts, Stein teaches us to listen anew to lyric—to listen, at least, in her "way of listening." For as gossip comes into contact with lyric in *Stanzas*, we find that lyric, too, presents a voice shuttling back and forth in the space between subject and object. Drawing on Mill's assessment of lyric as (in Northrop Frye's later phrasing) "preeminently the utterance that is overheard," Johnson remarks that "The poet is in the final analysis *a subject as an object* for the overhearer."<sup>97</sup> Stein's gossip accentuates this feature of lyric subjectivity—the way lyric's first-person voice has been understood to depend on and necessarily disavow its becoming an overheard object, a voice in and on someone else's account—in order to construct an uncanny lyric "I" that is also an "it." As one proceeds through Stein's stanzas, they can seem much like—to recall another "I" that is also an "it"—Ovid's description of the house of Fame: gossips and gossip drifting about, an indistinct sea of talkers and talk. Occasionally, though, out of the poem's "muted murmurings," pronounced moments of lyric sing out. These intimate scenes of lyric address, in which an "I" speaks directly to a "you," are consistently interrupted—but perhaps also confirmed—by "they." For example, Stanza IX of Part III begins,

Tell me darling tell me true  
Am I all the world to you  
And the world of what does it consist  
Can they be a chance to can they be desist  
This come to a difference in confusion  
Or do they measure this with resist with  
Not more which.

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<sup>97</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 249; Johnson, 9 (emphasis mine).

Than a conclusion. (363)

“Am I all the world to you”? As if in tacit response to this question, “they” arrive, and the speaker’s second-person address to “you”—and indeed, this “you” itself—fades away as the questions subsequently posed seem less immediately intended for a present interlocutor and more generally to imagine “you” and “I” as objects of *their* speculation (“do they measure this . . .”). Even more insistently, though, “they” are conjured as an object of the speaker’s own speculation, the tenor of questioning shifting from *tell me all about us* to something more like *tell me all about them*. The scene’s initial “you” and “I” thus become “they” and “this” as lyric address morphs into gossip both for, and about, an overhearing “they.” The explicit invocation of this “they” seems to sabotage lyric: the relatively regular, four-beat measure established in the first three, tetrameter lines is scattered by the entrance of “they” in the fourth line, and their own evaluative “measure”; and whereas before “they” appear on the scene, it is sonically characterized by the affirmation (“true”) of lyric direct address (“you”), after “they” emerge such affirmation seems uncertain at best. Do “they” represent a “chance” or do they cry “desist”? Do they “resist,” introduce “confusion” and bring this lyric interlude to an abrupt “conclusion,” or, quite differently, does their presence allow for the scene’s successful closure? Is the lyric “*I all the world to you*” (emphasis mine), or are “they” a proper part of what lyric’s “world” “consist[s]”?

Stein approaches these questions again in a similarly heightened lyric passage, this one rising out of the midst of Stanza VII of Part V:

Did I not tell you I would tell  
How well how well how very well  
I love you  
Now come to think about how it would do  
To come to come and wish it  
Wish it to be well to do and you  
They will do well what will they well and tell  
For which they will as they will tell well  
What we do if we do what if we do

Now think how I have been happy to think again  
That it is not only which they wish (410)

This moment of lyric address in fact *looks forward to* a moment of lyric address. It does not say “I love you,” exactly, but rather asserts its intention to do so: “Did I not tell you I would tell,” the speaker says. Stein’s “I” has not come to “tell,” so much as “come to think about how it would do,” or, at an even further remove, “to think about how it would do . . . to come and wish it,” as, indeed, is being done at the moment of speech. Stein presents a scene of meta-lyric address that reflects on and reimagines the necessary conditions of lyric address. When, at the linebreak following the passage’s sixth line, “you” unexpectedly buckles and “They” take its place, their overt presence does not, as one might expect, foreclose the possibility of lyric utterance—rather, it seems to guarantee that possibility. Where “I *would*,” now “They *will*” (emphasis mine). “They” and what “they will tell well” about “[w]hat we do if we do what if we do” prove necessary for lyric’s scene of address: as in *Stanzas*’ emblematic “wish to remind everybody nobody hears me,” Stein’s speaker here advances a “wish” for lyric felicity that perhaps only “they” can grant. “I” and “you” must become the stuff of gossip, something “they will tell well,” if the lyric subject is to become “in the final analysis a subject as an object for the overhearer.” In making the methods of this analysis transparent, Stein turns the scene of lyric address into a scene of gossip about its auditors—a breach of decorum insofar as the lyric “actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he act as though he knew it, he acts ill.” Such bad acting, however, seems less to spoil lyric’s effects—including the effect of lyric subjectivity—than to allow Stein to rethink their terms. Before appealing to *them*, Stein’s speaker implores, “Now come to think about how it would do / To come to come and wish it.” After the passage’s self-conscious invocation of *their* objectifying presence, the speaker reconsiders: “Now think how I have been happy to think again / That it is *not only* which they wish” (emphasis mine). If, for the subject of lyric as

much as the object of gossip, “what we do,” or even “if we do,” can seem to depend on what “they will tell,” *Stanzas* pursues a way to embrace the stylistic pleasures of both lyric and gossip and yet be “not only which they wish”—a way to be made in, but not entirely on their account.

An earlier brief, marked lyric moment in *Stanzas* suggests the ethical stakes of such unlikely self-making. Stein writes,

Can we call ours a whole.  
Out from the whole wide world I chose thee  
They can be as useful as necessity (325)

“Can we call ours a whole”? (“Am I all the world to you”?) Once again, at the fringes of lyric’s “whole wide world,” populated by “we,” “I,” and “thee,” lurks “They.” Stein’s “thee / They” linebreak underscores how easily “thee” might morph into “They” in *Stanzas*. When Stein’s speaker implores, in Stanza XXI of Part IV, “Now fancy how I need you,” it is soon followed by the caveat that “They should fancy or approve fancy” (398, 400). Even further, “This which I reflect is what they like to do / They like me to do,” such that “Fancy what you please you need not tell me so” (401). Though in the rhyme of poetic convention “They” might not seem as much a “necessity” as a “chose[n] thee,” within the revisionary reason of Stein’s gossip poem “They” could prove just “as useful.” But “useful” for or as what? Not simply, I suggest, as overhearing auditors whose unacknowledged presence confirms the success of a self-enclosed lyric world, allowing “I” and “thee” to “call ours a whole.” Stein’s “They” prove useful rather as an acknowledged, objectified audience for the poem’s scene of lyric address, one which enables the pleasures of lyric without strictly reinforcing its norms; as eavesdropping gossips who both objectify *and* animate “I” and “thee” “[i]n their and on their account”; and as the objects of lyric gossip, around which Stein’s poem stages what Barthes might call its “entire scene, sometimes sumptuous, even ceremonial.” As *Stanzas*’ speaker elsewhere affirms,

“they used / To use me and I use them for this” (397). Such use of others, of course, has typically received bad press: “Using people,” writes Johnson, “transforming others into a means for obtaining an end for oneself, is generally considered the very antithesis of ethical behavior.”<sup>98</sup> “Respect and distance,” she continues, “are certainly better than violence and appropriation, but is ethics only a form of restraint?”<sup>99</sup> In *Stanzas*, Stein poses this question in terms of gossip, seeking the possibility of an ethics that does not rule out the potential violence—or stylistic pleasures—of idle talk’s definitive exclusions and appropriations. Can gossip’s damaging pleasures be justly indulged? “[B]y word of mouth,” Stein writes, “Can they please theirs fairly for me?” (383). Can invasive appropriation engender another’s agency? Can “they make this seem theirs,” and yet “conclude that parts are partly mine”? (360, 446). When Stein’s speaker wonders of the “They which is made in any violence,” “Can they be kind. / We are kind. / Can they be kind,” the question seems less one of desired respect, distance, or generosity than of possible affinity between subjects and objects, persons and non-persons, gossipers and gossipees (325, 463).

Johnson emphasizes one common way in which such an affinity might ethically be established: “There seems to be an easy way to treat a thing as a person,” she writes: “address it.”<sup>100</sup> Turning to the rhetorical figure of apostrophe “enables the poet to transform an ‘I-it’ relationship into an ‘I-thou’ relationship, thus making a relation between persons out of what was in fact a relation between a person and non-persons.”<sup>101</sup> (In the vernacular of gossip we might succinctly express this idea: *say it to my face.*) Stein, though, in Stanza XIX, Part III, considers and rejects the possibility of a relational transformation by apostrophe:

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<sup>98</sup> Johnson, 94.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 9.

I have thought while I was awakening  
That I might address them  
And then I thought not at all  
Not while I am feeling that I will give it to them  
For them  
Not at all only in collision not at all only in mistaken  
But which will not at all. (374-75)

Later in the stanza, Stein's speaker more clearly posits this "thought" of "address[ing] them"—and thus restaging the poem's tense I/They as an intimate, lyric I/You—as a possible means of circumventing gossip: "I thought this morning to keep them so they will not tell" (376). But the poem firmly sets aside the possible mutuality of an address to "them" in favor of what we might call being used—"giv[ing] it to them / For them." Instead of speaking directly and specifically to "them," then, the speaker instead voices the stanza to no one in particular: "Now I ask anyone to hear me" (376). As in Stein's "wish to remind everybody nobody hears me," the speaker's request, here, keeps "them" productively lurking at the edges of the scene of address, a tacit presence, spoken to "not at all" yet keenly acknowledged, as we have seen, at those points of limit and possibility where lyric's seams begin to show: "only in collision," "only in mistaken." "[T]hey are not forgotten," Stein subsequently writes, "but dismissed" (451).

Stein's speaker revisits this line of thought in Stanza XX, Part IV, by also flirting with the alternate possibility of being addressed by "them." The stanza begins,

Should however they be satisfied to address me  
For which they know they like.  
Or not by which they know that they are fortunate  
To have been thought to which they do they might (396)

"Should . . . they be satisfied to address me . . . Or not"? The stanza presents two possibilities: on the one hand, an address decidedly not the result of infelicitous "collision" or "mistaken" circumstances, but motivated instead by the certainty of that "which they know they like" and promising the satisfaction of known pleasures; or, on

the other hand, the refusal of this address in favor of the less certain and less autonomous pleasures of being talked about, of “know[ing]” instead “that they are fortunate / To have been thought”—to have been, we might say, an object of gossip rather than a subject in a dialogue. If “the notion of ‘person’ has something to do with presence at the scene of speech and seems to inhere in the notion of *address*,” the refusal of *their* address might seem anything but “fortunate.” Yet Stein’s speaker insists, “This is what I say fortunately”:

There nicely know for which they take  
That it is mine alone which can mean  
I am surely which they can suggest  
Not told alone but can as is alone (396)

Just as the speaker rejects addressing “them,” “feeling that I will give it to them / For them,” here “they” are imagined as “tak[ing]” it as they choose not “to address me.” In preserving the poem’s I/They relationship, what Stein’s speaker self-consciously “give[s] to them” seems to be the lyric solitude, the overheard “melody of an unseen musician,” that depends on this refused address: “it is mine alone which can mean.” Yet although “it is mine alone which can mean,” Stein’s lyric bird requires the ball of gossipy talk to actualize this meaning: “I am surely which they can suggest / Not told alone but can as is alone.” Alone, but “[n]ot told alone”: in drawing together lyric solitude and gossipy sociality, Stein pursues affinities enabled less by the mutuality of dialogue or address than by distinct registers of speech and circles of talk. Elsewhere in the poem, she more explicitly links lyric solitude to the objectification of gossip’s “account,” writing, “I wish I wish a loan can they / Can they not know not alone” (453). Being “alone” becomes “a loan,” something “they / Can . . . not know” but which “I will give . . . to them,” and this pun suggests the economics of gossip’s “account,” which is almost always borrowed, almost always someone else’s private story—but also, perhaps, almost always paid back with interest. Stein’s speaker gives

up what “is mine alone,” knowing in return, “I am surely which they can suggest.” Throughout *Stanzas*, “They can be as useful as necessity” for the poetic voice engendered not by lyric or gossip only, but rather the staged “collision” of the two. “Now a little measure of me,” Stein writes: “I am as well addressed as always told” (433).

#### IV. WITHOUT NAMING NAMES

Far be it from me to throw any doubt upon the fact that Miss Stein is a genius. We have seen plenty of those. Nor that Miss Toklas is convinced of it. To tell the truth, all this would have no importance if it took place in the family circle between two maiden ladies greedy for fame and publicity. But the immense apparatus which has been put in motion in order to arrive at this affirmation finds an obviously noisy echo in the well-known process by which the aforementioned maiden ladies thought they had the right to quote names and tales indiscriminately . . .

—Tristan Tzara, *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*

Now that was a thing that I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name.

—Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar”

One would be forgiven for assuming, given the obviously noisy response to the dish served up by the “maiden ladies” behind *The Autobiography*, that any subsequent discussion of naming names on Stein’s part might involve chiefly a consideration of gossip. Indeed, in February of 1935, while Tzara and company asserted, in *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, their own “right to quote names and tales indiscriminately,” Stein was in the middle of her American lecture tour, delivering here and there a talk which sought “a way of naming things that would . . . mean names without naming them” (330). Her subject, however, was not the risks and pleasures of gossip but those of poetry. Or at least her announced subject: for although “Poetry and Grammar” has long been understood, albeit variously, as a central statement of Stein’s theory of poetry and poetic practice, the rich interplay of lyric’s and gossip’s structures of

address that we have been tracing in *Stanzas* asks us to review both the lecture and Stein's poetics more generally in relation to gossip. The supposition that Stein's ongoing meditation on gossip provides one basis for the retrospective account of a poetics found in "Poetry and Grammar" hinges on the issue of naming. Certainly when Stein's lecture characterizes poetry as defined by "naming"—"now and always," she writes, "poetry is created by naming names the names of something the names of somebody the names of anything" (329)—she positions herself vis-à-vis a longstanding philosophical concern with the appellative function of poetic language, most immediately Ralph Waldo Emerson's declaration, in "The Poet," "The poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's."<sup>102</sup> But when we look to the subject of naming in Stein's work we also see, entwined with such high theoretical interest in the name, an equally pressing exploration of naming within the more commonplace context of gossip and its

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<sup>102</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 456-457. Stein seems also to have an engagement with Emerson in mind when, in discussing "the history of poetry," she invokes that poet most famously interpellated by him, Walt Whitman, as an inaugural figure in modern poetry's attempt "to name the thing without naming its names": "And then Walt Whitman came. He wanted really wanted to express the thing and not call it by its name" (333-334). Throughout "Poetry and Grammar" and its gossip with "The Poet," Emerson himself remains appropriately unnamed; Stein does, however, favorably cite him (and the erotics of his work) in a 1935 interview: "Emerson might have been surprised if he had been told that he was passionate. But Emerson really had passion; he wrote it; but he could not have written *about* it because he did not know about it." See John Hyde Preston, "A Conversation," *Atlantic Monthly* LVI (August 1935): 192. For another account of "Poetry and Grammar" as "a twentieth-century response to Emerson's 'The Poet,'" see Chessman, 82-87.

Given the lecture's implicit conversation with Emerson one should note that, whether or not Stein was aware of it, he is on the record as no fan of gossip. In "Friendship," gossip appears the hallmark of insincere sociality: "Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins. We parry and fend the approach of our fellow-man by compliments, by gossip, by amusements, by affairs. We cover up our thought from him under a hundred folds" (*Essays and Lectures*, 347). In "Worship," gossip is admitted but only as "the coarsest muniment of virtue," and only in its policing capacity: "We are disgusted by gossip; yet it is of importance to keep the angels in their proprieties. The smallest fly will draw blood, and gossip is a weapon impossible to exclude from the privatest, highest, selectest. Nature created a police of many ranks" (*The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VI: The Conduct of Life* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003], 117). And in the late work *Letters and Social Aims*, gossip is dismissed outright: "Why need you, who are not a gossip, talk as a gossip, and tell eagerly what the neighbors or the journals say?" (*Letters and Social Aims* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904], 86).

everyday rhetoric.

In fact the several conversation pieces collected by Stein, along with *Ladies' Voices*, in *Geography and Plays* place gossip at the forefront of their dealings with names and naming. The chattering drama of "Mexico," for instance, exemplifies Stein's repeated inquiries into the social currency of names either brandished or withheld, used alternately to erase or insinuate social distinctions, to acknowledge or assert a position of power and pleasure within a social network. Consider:

Mr. and Mrs. Bing. They had a book. Yes Miss.  
Mr. and Mrs. Guilbert. I mention that name.  
Of course you do.  
Of course you do to me.  
Don't cry.<sup>103</sup>

Or:

Mark Guilbert. How often I have mentioned his name.  
Lindo Bell. I have not mentioned his name before.  
Oh yes you have.  
Charles Pleyell. This is a name we all know.<sup>104</sup>

As Stein asks in another piece from this period, "Why mention names why not mention names?"<sup>105</sup> The gossipy "He Said It" introduces the poet into this debate: not as the Emersonian "Namer," but instead as the "named" object of a tentatively broached scene of literary gossip:

You should always speak the name.  
I don't feel that I can mention it.  
Do you believe in me.  
Are you surprised that you have gone so far.  
To me not to me.  
Insulting yes she is insulting she asks have we ever heard of a poet named Willis.  
Alice has. I have not. She says he belonged to a group. Like Thoreau.  
I am not displeased with the remark.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Stein, "Mexico," *Geography and Plays*, 322.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>105</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Gentle Julia" (1914), in *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces (1913-1927)*, 178.

<sup>106</sup> Stein, "He Said It," *Geography and Plays*, 273.

“You should always speak the name. / I don’t feel that I can mention it”: here, in capsule form, and in the register of gossip, is the dialectic Stein delineates in “Poetry and Grammar” between the desire or even imperative to “speak the name” and the competing feeling that one should not or is not allowed to “mention it.” Here too, we see again poetic subjectivity set in relation to gossipy speculation, the lyric subject-as-object at the level of reception: in order to listen to the “poet,” we must have “heard of” him. Placing these lines next to the lecture’s description of the poetic effort “to name the thing without naming its names” accentuates the difficulty of neatly sorting Stein’s meditations on poetry from those on gossip, and further suggests that gossip informs Stein’s writing—in even its most overtly experimental modes—as both a rhetorical and authorial model (334).

It feels rhetorically fortuitous, then, that “Poetry and Grammar” illustrates Stein’s efforts “to name the thing without naming its names” by citing *Tender Buttons* and “An Acquaintance with Description,” and quoting generously from *Portraits and Prayers* and *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded*, but does not mention *Stanzas in Meditation*. For though of course Stein’s examples, culled from her printed works and mostly available from her and Toklas’ own recently established press The Plain Edition, practically served as advertisements, Stein’s lecture also often seems like an attempt to name her gossip-inflected project and its culmination in the unpublished *Stanzas* without once naming that poem by name.<sup>107</sup> Stein contends in “Poetry and Grammar” that “poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything,” and since “[n]ouns are the names of things,” they form “the

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<sup>107</sup> This is not to imply that those works Stein cites and quotes from are unrelated to gossip—*Tender Buttons* (1914), for instance, with its sometimes delicate, sometimes turbulent eddies of language around “Food,” “Objects,” and “Rooms,” could productively be read as a dishy deconstruction of gossip’s sumptuous, domestic *mise-en-scène* and the pleasures of its intimate cattiness. Instead I want to suggest simply that *Stanzas*, a recently composed product of Stein’s long meditation on gossip and poetic language, is very much on her mind as she writes and delivers “Poetry and Grammar.” See *Tender Buttons*, in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932*, 313-355.

basis of poetry”—but over time and with use nouns become conventional, static, even restrictive (329). “After all,” she writes, “one had known its name anything’s name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new” (330). Because one cannot simply do without names in poetry (“I struggled desperately with the recreation and the avoidance of nouns as nouns and yet poetry being poetry nouns are nouns”), the poet’s task is to find “a way of naming things that would . . . mean names without naming them” (331, 330). As Stein “struggled more and more” with this task, she recalls she “found in longer things . . . that I could come nearer to avoiding names in recreating something,” raising “the question will poetry continue to be necessarily short as it has been as really good poetry has been for a very long time. Perhaps not and why not” (333). Her answer: “If enough is new to you to name or not name, and these two things come to the same thing, can you go on long enough. Yes I think so” (333). Stein’s verse had never gone on and never would go on longer than in *Stanzas*, a poem exhaustively and impossibly seeking to level the difference between what it means “to name or not name,” and in which two years earlier she had announced (*can you go on long enough?*) “I could go on with this,” “I wish to remain to remember that stanzas go on,” and “I wish always to go on” (*Yes I think so*) (396, 359, 423).

Whether anticipating or described by “Poetry and Grammar,” *Stanzas*’ ongoing meditation on what is at stake “If I name names if I name names with them” takes a similarly pronounced, equivocal stance towards naming, with Stein’s speaker evincing equal parts unease and fascination that “Namely they name as much” (322, 321). *Stanzas*’ more evident blurring of naming as gossip and naming as poetic practice helps clarify Stein’s quirky focus, in “Poetry and Grammar,” on nouns as personal names. In the first specific example the lecture provides for the inadequacy of names, Stein turns not to the natural world, as one might expect in a discussion of poetic

naming, but instead to the proper names that populate her circle: “Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul call anybody Alice and they get to be an Alice . . . generally speaking, things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them and so why write in nouns” (313). Later, the possible inadequacy of proper names becomes exemplary of the opportunity and effort to revitalize nouns and naming. “Now actual given names of people are more lively than nouns,” Stein writes, since “there is at least the element of choice even the element of change”: one “may be born Walter and become Hub, in such a way they are not like a noun” (316). As “Poetry and Grammar” negotiates the slippage between nouns, names, and proper names; between the names of things and the names of persons; between an exhausted naming that “does not go on doing anything” and a lively naming and its “element of change”; and between the concerns of poetry (“poetry . . . is a vocabulary entirely based on the noun”) and those of gossip (the satisfactions of describing “Paul” or “Alice”), we hear echoes of *Stanzas*’ lyric gossip (327).<sup>108</sup> How, Stein asks in *Stanzas*, to engage the poetic *and* gossipy pleasures of naming “names with them” without letting such

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<sup>108</sup> In the other significant elaborations of her theory of naming, in *How to Write* (1931) and *Four in America* (c. 1934, published 1947), Stein further explores the poetic, linguistic and philosophical dimensions of naming in terms of gossip, though critics have yet to acknowledge the gossipy textures of these discussions, let alone treat them as significant. In *How to Write*, for example, a discussion of the “name” drifts into chatter about “[t]he Georges whom I have known,” who “have been pleasant not uninteresting,” and also “Pauls Christians Virgils and Williams and even Franks and Michaels and James and pleasures. They can be united in resemblance and acquaintance.” Stein’s “Georges” reappear in the opening pages of *Four in America*, where we again learn “I have known a quantity of Georges, a quantity of Georges. Are they alike. Yes I think so”; soon anecdotal speculation about “Pauls” is adduced to jokingly illustrate the potentially determining power of names: “I have known a great many Pauls. One of them I have even tried to change the name, unsuccessfully. I know just what Pauls are like even though they differ. What are they like. They are alike insofar as it is possible, nobody, that is not any woman ever really loves them. Now just think of that think how true it is. None of them not one of them have been really loved by any woman. They have been married and sometimes not married, and anything can be true of them, but they have never, dear me never, been ever loved by any woman. That is what no Paul can say.” See Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 289; and *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 5. My focus is on the relationship in Stein’s work between gossip, poetry, and naming: for an account of Stein’s theory of names within the contexts of modern philosophy of language and deconstruction, see Jennifer Ashton, “Making the rose red: Stein, proper names, and the critique of indeterminacy,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 67-94.

pleasurable nuance slip into rote and possibly immobilizing categorization? And “[h]ow are our changes,” the poem’s speaker worries in turn, “When they could fix titles or affix titles”? (375). *Stanzas* frequently registers its deep ambivalence about the pleasures and risks of naming names and being named. Given that its speaker allows, “It is very anxious not to know the name of them / But they know not theirs but mine. / Not theirs but mine,” yet also implores, “Be made to ask my name,” is it a lament or boast that “I cannot often be without my name. / Not at all” (363, 457, 365)? Is the query “when where will they name me” eager or paranoid (391)? Similarly, though the speaker’s own refusal to name names is sometimes forceful, as in “I do not wish to say what I think / I concluded I would not name those,” or “It is easy to say easily. / That this is the same in which I do not do not like the name,” the poem elsewhere undercuts the ease of not naming: “I wish to say again I like their name / If I had not liked their name / Or rather if I had not liked their name. / It is of no importance that I liked their name” (375, 439, 451). *Can* naming and not naming, liking their name or not liking their name, “come,” as Stein claims in “Poetry and Grammar,” “to the same thing”? *Stanzas* provides an elaborate record of one poet’s repeated endeavors to achieve a naming without names.

Stein represents one version of this endeavor in the brief Stanza XII, Part II, in which her speaker (speaking perhaps of herself in the third person?) self-reflexively stands apart from and comments on a scene of (poetic? gossipy?) naming and its I/They relationship:

And she will be so nearly right  
 That they think it is right  
 That she is now well aware  
 That they would have been named  
 Had not their labels been taken away  
 To make room for placing there  
 The more it needs if not only it needs more so  
 Than which they came. (349-350)

As “she” and “they” alternate lines and agency, figuring each other in and on their respective accounts, they importantly eschew the certainty (“she will be so nearly right,” “they think it is right”) of pre-determined “labels,” or the kind of presumptive naming in which “the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new.” Rather than reducing the other, to recall Barthes’ concern about gossip, to “the bloodless form of a universal substitute,” this scene’s “she,” at least, removes such “labels” in order “[t]o make room for placing there / The more it needs” as a “thing being alive” and “always new.” Such naming—or not naming—is accretive rather than reductive, allowing for “more so / Than which they came.” As Stein later writes, wishfully, “They will come come will they come / Not only by their name” (416). In response to a normative naming that would try to “affix titles” and “labels” and thus “fix” one in place, Stein pursues in *Stanzas* an alternative naming that could paradoxically “come to the same thing” as not naming. If this pursuit entails an ultimately unsustainable balancing act, the ambivalent demands of such an act nevertheless motivate her poem in its desire—even as it confesses “It is very foolish to go on”—“always to go on,” supplying it and its aesthetic of lyric gossip with a grammar and rhetoric (417).

A quick assay of these features of Stein’s poem clarifies gossip’s significance as a formal model for *Stanzas* and her innovative writing more generally. First, grammar. Against inert nouns (“completely not interesting”) and adjectives (“the thing that effects a not too interesting thing is of necessity not interesting”), “Poetry and Grammar” advocates for more mobile parts of speech: pronouns (“not really the name of anything”), verbs and adverbs, articles, conjunctions, and prepositions (314, 316). Dydo notes that “Poetry and Grammar” explains grammatical “ideas in the stanzas,” and I agree that within Stein’s work, *Stanzas* most nearly anticipates the

lecture's difficult grammar of avoiding names.<sup>109</sup> Proper names are rare in *Stanzas*' drama of pronouns, in which "they refuse names," but indulge lavishly in "[a]rticles which they like" (322); the poem's grammar, almost entirely devoid of nouns and adjectives, is typified in lines like "Or not at all or not in with it," "Not to be with it now not for or," "Which or for which which they can do too," and "For it or for which or for might it be" (319, 359, 383, 398). Such lines might seem impossibly arid, anything but gossipy, but considered in the larger context of the poem's engagement with gossip, their grammar begins to suggest an extreme version of the intimate shorthand of private talk and a rhetoric dripping with insinuation. This is the discourse of "you know who," "I'll leave it at that," or "let's just say," and of the rich innuendo of a well-timed silence—a mode of gossip that revels in saying what cannot be said (while maintaining the deniability of never quite saying it). The extent to which nouns are conspicuously omitted from Stein's lines betrays a similarly compulsive interest in disclosing names that are never conclusively named. *Stanzas* deploys this particular grammar of gossip in a poetry "concerned," as Stein puts it in "Poetry and Grammar," "with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun" (327).

In this sense, Stein's poetic grammar also evokes the elliptical style of gossip columns like Walter Winchell's, which interrupted and linked their items with ellipses that quite literally asked their readers to connect the dots. (The maxim "gossip is the art of saying nothing in a way that leaves practically nothing unsaid" is commonly attributed to Winchell.) Neal Gabler suggests that Winchell's spare, fragmented prose "mirrored the modernistic experiments in high literature then being conducted by Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, Céline and others"; one might venture that Stein's

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<sup>109</sup> Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, 509n.36.

writing in turn bears marks of the gossip columns she read, appeared in, and saved.<sup>110</sup> Some of Stein's works from the early 1930s, for instance, experiment with the use of typography to break the text up into elliptical fragments, full of charged pauses. "We Came. A History" employs equal signs to this effect, reading at times like a Steinian gossip column: "Florence is made to George=Now listen to that.=It does surprise you=Florence is not yet married to George but they have had the dinner of betrothal which was later than noon and a good deal of bother.=<sup>111</sup> Stein seems to want this loud stylistic device to be audible in gossipy bits like "=Now listen to that.=", and in "Winning His Way. A Narrative Poem of Poetry," she similarly uses periods suggestively to score an increasingly nameless narrative "Of poetry. And friendship. And fame" with a syntactical static that prefigures the more subtle nominative gaps of *Stanzas*:

Wherein. They. Mentioning. Never. Think. It told.  
I wish to say. That it never does any good to tell about it. And so. There. Is  
why. There is now when. They know.  
Pleasures. A Name.<sup>112</sup>

Though "They. Mentioning. Never. Think. It told," and though "it never does any good to tell about it," Stein's poetic forays into gossip keep mentioning "it" and telling "about it," enjoying the "Pleasures" of "A Name" that is "Never" named. Stein's periods, like the buzz of "=" in "We Came. A History," navigate and sonically stand in for the passage's denied and avoided content. Will Straw, alluding to the sound of

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<sup>110</sup> Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 80. Items from Winchell's columns are mentioned in Stein's correspondence with both Carl Van Vechten and Thornton Wilder (see *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946*, 392, 410, 444, 588, 614; and *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*, eds. Edward Burns and Ulla E. Dydo [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996], 71); in addition, a variety of syndicated gossip columns appear in those clippings saved by and sent to Stein and collected in the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature MSS 76, Box 145.

<sup>111</sup> Stein, "We Came. A History" (1930), in *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*, 151.

<sup>112</sup> Stein, "Winning His Way. A Narrative Poem of Poetry" (1931), in *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems*, 194. The fifty-page exploration of "fame," "friendship," and "poetry" in "Winning His Way" presages Stein's more extended meditation on these issues in *Stanzas*.

telegraph keys used to mimic the ellipses of Winchell's gossip column when he began his radio broadcast in 1932, notes that the "pulses and gaps of the elliptical gossip column were seen, from the very beginning, to resemble those of electronic or machine-based communication," and understood "as attempts to approximate the sounds of inter-war technologies, as manifestations of modernist sonic sensibilities," the gossip column's suggestive ellipses recall our discussion of the gossip as tape recorder, a mechanized figure whose voice becomes most audible in the technological traces of a listening which gives rise to gossip.<sup>113</sup>

Something of this occurs in also *Stanzas*, which sheds the arguably mannered punctuation of the work of 1930-1931 but still emits, through its grammatical omissions, the subtle noise of the gossip at work. For in the absence of clear subject matter, we *listen* instead to Stein's grammar as it orchestrates the poem's vocal textures, much as we perceive the voice of gossip in the evident diegetic fragments of *Ladies' Voices*. Stein's marked use of prepositions and conjunctions in the poem's first two stanzas sets the tone for what follows, establishing a rhetorical pattern of assertion and qualification that enacts on a micro-level *Stanzas'* large-scale effort to name without naming names. Stanza I is organized around "In" and "But": one third of its 27 lines begin with these terms, and Stein uses them eight more times within the stanza's lines as it moves between statements of enclosure within specific circumstances—often statements of convention—and statements of exception from these circumstances. In the drift from "In a kind of way they meant it best" to "But they must not stare when they manage," or from "And in a way there is no repose" to "But it is very often just by the time . . ." we find both the endlessly intricate speculation of gossip as nonce taxonomy and the welcome (rather than disavowed) contingency of poetic naming, each of which ensure that the naming and not naming

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<sup>113</sup> Will Straw, "Squawkies and Talkies," *Parallax* 14.2 (2008): 29, 27.

of one's world "can . . . go on" (316). Stanza II's driving counterposition of "For" and "Or"—for example, "For which they will not like what there is . . . Or should they care which it would be strange"—works similarly to unsettle authoritative claims for purpose or function with alternatives and afterthoughts that both derail and vivify the poem's language and its objects of attention (317).

As explanations become elisions and claims become caveats, and vice versa, these structures of digression—"Now I have lost the thread," *Stanzas* announces; "I have lost the thread of my discourse" (411, 419)—facilitate a poetry "doing nothing," per "Poetry and Grammar," "but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns" (327). Stein's refusal of naming, so exorbitant it affirms, captures quite well the second major formal feature—the rhetoric of paralipsis—in which we see the influence of gossip in *Stanzas*. Paralipsis, the self-contradictory technique by which one emphasizes what one ostensibly passes over, furnishes Stein's stanzas with a lush rhetorical repertoire of ways to name without naming.<sup>114</sup> More than any other word, the adverb "not," often used by Stein in variations of the paradigmatic paraliptic tag "not to mention," dominates the poem's lexis and plays a determining role in its syntax. One need not mention the array of paralipses common to exchanges of dish ("but you won't hear it from me," or "I really shouldn't say that . . .," or "as for Gertrude Stein's gossip, we won't even go there!") to establish the trope's familiar role in gossip's rhetoric; and the countless negations of *Stanzas'* circular syntax, if not

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<sup>114</sup> The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* defines paralipsis (Latin occultatio or occupatio) as "when we say that we are passing by, or do not know, or refuse to say that which precisely now we are saying"; George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie*, terms paralipsis "the Passager," and defines it "as if we set but light of the matter, and . . . therefore we do but passe it over slightly when in deede we do then intend most effectually and despihtfully if it be invective to remember it: it is also when we seeme not to know a thing, and yet we know it well enough." Puttenham's emphasis on "invective" and on what "we seeme not to know . . . yet we know it well enough," as well as his illustration—four lines of verse in which "I hold my peace, and will not say, for shame / The much untruth of that uncivil dame"—strongly link paralipsis to gossip. See *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, ed. and trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 321; and *Arte of English Poesie*, eds. Gladys Doidge Wilcock and Alice Walker (London: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 232.

all strict instances of paralipsis, generally share in what Susan E. Phillips calls the trope's "capacity for simultaneous disclosure and concealment," steadily generating the paraliptic effects of gossip.<sup>115</sup> The poem's recurrent paralipses are set against, and emerge from, the less ambiguous naming of what "they" directly "say" ("It is what they did say when they mentioned it") (331). While Stein's speaker at times seems to "name names with them," as when we are told, "I will mention it. / She has been very well known to like it," or "It has just come to me now to mention this / And I do it," more characteristic is the claim, "I wish I had not mentioned it either" (443, 445, 413). Not just an expression of regret for naming names "with them," this paralipsis presents an alternative way of naming, mentioning "it" even as it purports to set "it" aside. As Stein's "I" elsewhere declares, "I try to do it and not to do it," and in the emphasis on what is pointedly and extensively *not* said, "to name or not name . . . come"—or at least come close—"to the same thing" (384). Thus the poet acts as "Namer" without ever quite naming—

It is not only that I have not described  
A lake in trees only there are no trees  
Just not there where they do not like having these  
Trees. (359)

—and *Stanzas* uses paralipsis to convey the lyric subject's necessary, yet unacknowledgable, awareness of and ardent interest in overhearing auditors:

Not to be interested in how they think  
Oh yes not to be interested in how they think  
Oh oh yes not to be interested in how they think (421).

Naming by not naming becomes a kind of revisionary doublespeak, a way "I manage

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<sup>115</sup> Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 76. In her discussion of gossip and Chaucer's *House of Fame*, Phillips notes how paralipsis (she uses the Latin term *occupatio*) evades common standards of evidence, "straddl[ing] the border between truth and falsehood, the liminal space where gossip thrives" (77). Though far afield from the concerns of Stein's circle, Phillips' discussion of gossip in the late medieval courtroom suggestively speaks to the emphasis critics of Stein's gossip placed, as we have seen, on "testimony" and "witness."

to think twice about everything”:

Why will they like me as they do  
Or not as they do  
Why will they praise me as they do  
Or praise me not not as they do  
Why will they like me and I like what they do  
Why will they disturb me to disturb not me as they do  
Why will they have me for mine and do they  
Why will I be mine or which can they  
For which can they leave it  
Or is it not (382-383)

“I think I will begin,” Stein writes, “and say everything not something,” such that “What I know is not what I say so” (377, 423).

Recognizing Stein’s gossipy rhetoric of paralipsis complicates the interpretations of critics such as Alison Rieke, who deftly describes how in *Stanzas*, “Stein writes endlessly about it without mentioning it once,” but hastily concludes from this that the poem “has something to hide,” employing a “language of repression.”<sup>116</sup> Rieke’s account of *Stanzas* forms part of what Kathryn R. Kent describes as a tradition of sympathetic readings that seek “to rescue Stein’s texts from charges that they have no meaning and thus no aesthetic or cultural value” by arguing that she “turns to textual difficulty as a way to escape censorship . . . creat[ing] a private language that only she and perhaps Toklas may interpret, and thus protect[ing] the sanctity of their relationship in a closet of her own creation.”<sup>117</sup> Hence for Rieke, Stein’s “sexuality” provides the necessary motive for her supposed “need to speak of herself in enigmas and silences,” explaining why she “declines to speak about her subjects, withholding, in negations and tautologies, privileged and intimate content,” and why, “[w]hen anxiety or uncomfortable feelings try to make their way to the surface of this private language and become public, she buries them”—“[a]s writer

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<sup>116</sup> Alison Rieke, *The Senses of Nonsense* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 61, 64.

<sup>117</sup> Kent, 142.

and as censor”—“in vagueness.”<sup>118</sup> At first blush, Stein’s abstract stanzas indeed might seem to indicate such sexual repression or self-censorship: “How I wish I were able to say what I think,” the speaker exclaims in one instance of the poem’s refrain of countless wishes for expression (“I wish to say,” “The thing I wish to tell,” “This which I wish to say is this,” “What I wish to do to say,” “What I wish to say is this,” and on and on) (392, 395, 408, 418, 436, 438). Yet considered as part of a pattern of gossipy paralipses, *Stanzas*’ many wishes give voice to what they profess only to wish they could say (as in “I wish I could repeat as new just what they do”), or to what they wish they had not said (as in “I wish I had not mentioned which / It is that they could consider as their part”), or to what they wish they did not have to say (as in “Nor do I wish to have to think about what they do not do / Because they are about out loud”) (377, 405, 415). As with the poem’s broader project of naming and not naming, saying and wishing to say ultimately bend toward much the same thing:

This which I wish to say once which I wish to say  
 I wish to say it makes no difference if I say  
 That this is this not this which I wish to say.  
 But not not any more as clear clearly  
 Which I wish to say is this. (449)

When Stein’s speaker says, “I am trying to say something but I have not said it,” it thus seems an expression of pleasure more than failure, the poem’s paralipses suggesting not “something to hide” but something to say, not self-censorship but a sly style of self-expression (439). *Stanzas* emphasizes the unspeakable but is still, as John Ashbery describes it, “a hymn to possibility.”<sup>119</sup> “It is often when it is not stated,”

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<sup>118</sup> Rieke, 66, 68, 85. Edmund Wilson perhaps first suggests this reading of Stein when he concludes that “the vagueness that began to blur [Stein’s work] from about 1910 on and the masking by unexplained metaphors that later made it seem opaque, though partly the result of an effort to emulate modern painting, were partly also due to a need imposed by the problem of writing about relationships between women of a kind that the standards of that era would not have allowed her to describe more explicitly.” See “Gertrude Stein Old and Young,” *The Shores of Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952), 581.

<sup>119</sup> Ashbery, “The Impossible,” 12.

Stein writes, “That at it two or to / That it is better added stated”—lines we might paraphrase: “often when it is not stated . . . it is better . . . stated” (365).

Michel Foucault famously reminds us that “There is not one but many silences,” and in reframing *Stanzas*’ “enigmas and silences,” its “negations and tautologies” as less concealments or disclosures than pleasurable, gossipy play with the power-laden structures of concealment and disclosure, my point is emphatically not to deny the (absent) presence of Stein’s sexuality in the poem, or to admit it but claim it bears little import for Stein’s readers.<sup>120</sup> Rather, I want to suggest the sexiness of Stein’s difficult style itself, considering it as something other than primarily an effort to maintain an inviolate space of privacy, something more than symptomatic of coded, withheld, protected, buried, or censored sexuality.<sup>121</sup> As Stein avows, “Literature—creative literature—unconnected with sex is inconceivable. But not literary sex, because sex is a part of something of which the other parts are not sex at all.”<sup>122</sup> If, straining to make visible the presumed sexual subject matter—the “literary sex”—that supposedly is left unsaid in *Stanzas*, we brush past the performance and palpable erotics of *how* the poem so expressively does not say it, we affirm a less

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<sup>120</sup> Foucault writes, “There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 27. See also Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> A number of seminal feminist accounts of Stein’s style postulate, as Margaret Dickie puts it, “Stein’s self-censorship, the sexual anxiety that drove her tireless experimental writing, the self-judgment that undercut even her most exaggerated celebrations of her sexual power.” See especially Dickie, “Recovering the Repression in Stein’s Erotic Poetry,” *Gendered Modernisms*, 3-25; Elizabeth Fifer, “Is Flesh Advisable? The Interior Theater of Gertrude Stein,” *Signs* 4.3 (1979): 472-483, “Guardians and Witnesses: Narrative Technique in Gertrude Stein’s *Useful Knowledge*,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 10 (1980): 115-127; and Catharine Stimpson, “The Mind, the Body and Gertrude Stein,” *Critical Inquiry* 3.3 (1977): 489-506, “Gertrude Stein and the Lesbian Lie,” *American Women’s Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. Margo Culley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 152-166. While I agree with many of the important, central observations of this body of work, including observations about the risks of lesbian representation during Stein’s lifetime and the importance of Stein’s lived sexual experience for her writing, I ultimately concur with critics like Kent (141-142) and Holbrook, who argue that “the privileging of the referent that inspires a drive to break codes is ill-conceived” when reading work “in which textual eroticism is in play at the level of the signifier” (Holbrook, 752).

<sup>122</sup> Preston, “A Conversation,” 191.

imaginative view than Stein's of what counts as sex.<sup>123</sup> For Stein, sex in "creative literature" has little to do with explicit representation but is instead something, we might say, that one names without ever naming it: it is not simply mimetic, but always "a part of something" else and "really," she explains, "a matter of tone."<sup>124</sup> The "matter of tone" in *Stanzas* is largely a matter of gossip. Sex in these stanzas is one interrelated part of the poem's complex gossip network and its affiliations, a network whose "other parts" include friendships, rivalries, poetry, and fame; but also pronouns, articles, conjunctions, and prepositions; omissions, negations, and paralipses. Certainly, as Spacks writes, "sexual activities and emotions supply the most familiar staple of gossip," but "[g]ossip, even when it avoids the sexual, bears about it a faint flavor of the erotic," generating, even in the absence of explicit sexual subject matter, an "atmosphere of erotic titillation."<sup>125</sup> In *Stanzas*, Stein's "piquant love of gossip" entails—more than any specific content—an erotics of style: a grammar, a rhetoric, and a persona. Thus although the gossipy rhetoric of Stein's infamously abstract poem rarely announces its subjects, it should nonetheless be listened to as a series not of occlusions but of invitations, welcoming us to its queer lyric performance of gossip. In its final stanza, Stein's poem renews its open invitation into the space of both lyric meditation and gossip. "I call carelessly that the door is open / Which if they can refuse to open / No one can rush to close," Stein writes, having offered proleptic thanks, in the single-line penultimate stanza, to those who accept this invitation: "Thank you for hurrying through" (464).

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<sup>123</sup> "One thing which I have tried to tell Americans . . . is that there can be no truly great creation without passion, but I'm not sure that I have been able to tell them at all. If they have not understood it is because they have had to think of sex first, and they can think of sex as passion more easily than they can think of passion as the whole force of man. Always they try to label it, and that is a mistake." Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Spacks, 11.

## V. "I BECOME A GOSSIP"

Under the title "Preliminary Aside to the Reader; Regarding Gossip, and its Pitfalls," Wyndham Lewis set down, in the autumn of 1936, the opening lines of his proposed memoir. "I am about to gossip," he typed. "I am going to be exceedingly 'personal' about certain persons. But this is not at all because I wish to be. It is because of *you* that I descend to these picturesque details."<sup>126</sup> If, as we have seen, Stein's engagement with lyric tradition and dominant understandings of lyric as what T.S. Eliot sums up as "meditative verse," or "the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody," provides one context for Stein's persona of the gossip, the modernist rhetoric surrounding gossip and its role in the literary provides another.<sup>127</sup> Lewis' brief draft preface—ultimately rejected as the project that would become *Blasting and Bombardiering* took shape—has much to tell us about masculinist modernism and its perceptions of the gossip. Much of it, to be sure, is expected: Lewis depicts gossip as the crass *lingua franca* to which the modern writer is pressured to "descend" in order to navigate the anti-intellectual mushiness and passivity of a feminized mass culture. "Ideas the Public does not relish," he complains. "If it is desirous of acquiring ideas, it prefers to come by them *without tears*. It finds it more agreeable to extract them, in small quantities, out of a mass of inorganic and drifting gossip."<sup>128</sup> The previous year's "testimony" against Stein makes essentially the same case as Lewis, underscoring the "[p]itfalls" of becoming, in one's work, a gossip. The witnesses assembled in *Transition* seek to "invalidate the claim of the Toklas-Stein memorial" by emphasizing the figure of the gossip's lack of agency and deluded sense of it: we are repeatedly told that despite Stein's "egocentric deformations" and "clinical case of

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<sup>126</sup> Wyndham Lewis, "Preliminary Aside to the Reader; Regarding Gossip, and its Pitfalls," ed. Thomas R. Smith, *Modernism/Modernity* 4.2 (1997): 184.

<sup>127</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Three Voice of Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 27.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

megalomania,” she was not “in any way concerned with the shaping of the epoch she attempts to describe,” that she “understood nothing of what went on around her.”<sup>129</sup> They dwell on the gossip’s trivial, middlebrow motivations and their threat to the modern artist’s “humanly important enterprises”: “the depraved morals of bourgeois society are now opposed by the strong loathing which is felt by a few rare beings who have posited the problem of man’s destiny and dignity with a gravity that is very different from the attitude which approaches it under the form of certain politely esthetic games.”<sup>130</sup> And, troubled that “Miss Stein expresses herself through the mouth of Miss Alice Toklas,” that she “let herself be told by her ‘secretary,’” they position and disparage the gossip as both feminine and queer—a troublingly “coarse” mimic of normative domestic and literary productivity, cooking up loose talk in her “literary kitchen” and letting that promiscuous prattle, in “the lowest literary prostitution,” spill up and over the brim of “the family circle” of “two maiden ladies greedy for fame and publicity.”<sup>131</sup>

If this phobic embodiment of the gossip is familiar enough, perhaps less so is the way Lewis self-reflexively allows himself to occupy the very role he resists—the way gossip paradoxically supplies the blueprint for his anxious effort to withstand its infectious influence. The contributors to *Testimony against Gertrude Stein* betray no such awareness of themselves as even potential gossips, even though—despite the juridical authority claimed in its title—their pamphlet was received as and consists mostly of its own gossip about Stein and Toklas, and immediately became one more cog in the Stein gossip machine.<sup>132</sup> Lewis, however, introduces his own forthcoming

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<sup>129</sup> Eugene Jolas and Georges Braques, respectively, in *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, 2, 13.

<sup>130</sup> Tristan Tzara, in *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, 13.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>132</sup> For instance, the gossip columnist O. O. McIntyre included, among items on Tallulah Bankhead and the cartoonist Rube Goldberg, the news that “Gertrude Stein may remain permanently in the America she has not known for thirty-two years or at least until the storm of her last book in Paris blows over. The autobiography of her secretary, which she penned, resulted in a pooling of resentment that might

gossip by satirically positioning himself on the verge of becoming a gossip (“I am about to gossip”), and in so doing demonstrates his uneasy intimacy with the pleasures and “[p]itfalls” of the dish he ultimately claims to reject. He performs his own odd mix of a feminized lack of agency (“I become a gossip, in the present instance. . . . I have no choice in the matter”) and bald egotism (“I am out to popularise Pound, to jack up Joyce’s stocks, and to make my own alarming name a little less horrific”); and he affirms his own mass cultural compromises (“I will show what stuff I am made of, and make a hearty picaresque affair full of jolly incidents, of all this highbrow business”).<sup>133</sup> More pointedly, he deploys gossip’s rhetoric with wink, worrying about the consequences “if I betray a suspicious indifference to the great unwritten law of *It isn’t done* . . . For (between ourselves) *I mean to do it*.”<sup>134</sup> And (between ourselves) he does: when Lewis identifies “the trouble” with becoming “a gossip” as “how to overstep that decorous limit without appearing a little disreputable,” the satire of his preface—his reputable disavowal of the gossip he so skillfully and disreputably enacts—provides one solution, suggesting that the gossip draws as much as transgresses the limits of literary decorum, that it is less a subversive figure at the far edge of modernism than an authoritative discourse quietly inscribed at the center of its artistic practice.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, for all his faux-trepidation “Regarding Gossip, and its Pitfalls,” Lewis—hardly known for mincing words when it came to being “‘personal’ about certain persons”—had already made his debut as a gossip on the stage of the modernist memoir. When, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Lewis appears,

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make Paris a bit uncomfortable. Matisse, the great painter, is in a fury. So is Tzara, who daddied Dadaism. And Jolas, publisher of *Transition*. They claim Gertrude has been talking through her funny-shaped hat.” Undated syndicated column by McIntyre, collected in the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature MSS 76, Box 145, Folder 3368.

<sup>133</sup> Lewis, 183, 184, 185.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 186. That this (perhaps too revealing) preface never made it into print provides another, more certain solution to the problem of how to gossip without seeming one.

we are told, “Gertrude Stein rather liked him. She particularly liked him one day when he came and told all about his quarrel with Roger Fry. Roger Fry had come in not many days before and had already told all about it. They were exactly the same story only it was different, very different” (122-123).

Stein, I propose, tells us “exactly the same story” about becoming a gossip as Lewis, Braques, Jolas, and Tzara—among the many others whose names this list might include—only it is “different, very different.” She does not reject their narrative of the gossip, but brazenly inhabits it and the indecorous pleasures of its disavowed persona. Her aesthetic of gossip, her self-fashioning as a gossip, is thus not so much a subversion of artistic authority—though it is that too—but more properly a queer bid for it. Consider the authorial give and take surrounding Pablo Picasso’s 1909 painting “Homage à Gertrude.” Picasso, Alice tells us in *The Autobiography*, “made for [Stein] the tiniest of ceiling decorations on a tiny wooden panel and it was an hommage à Gertrude with women and angels bringing fruits and trumpeting. For years she had this tacked to the ceiling over her bed” (89). Those few critics who have commented on this painting have identified the central presence of Picasso’s panel, an angelic figure bearing a trumpet, as both a biblical herald and a stand-in for Stein.<sup>136</sup> The iconography of Picasso’s painting, though—from the soaring figure’s herald trumpet and posture to the buffeting clouds on which its words take flight—clearly references Fama, classical deity of gossip and rumor (figures 4 and 5). Picasso’s homage, then, depicts Stein as Fame, a goddess of gossip presiding over the divine dish of 27 rue de

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<sup>136</sup> Sarah Bay-Cheng, for instance, links this figure to Stein and identifies it—or to my mind misidentifies it—as “the classical image of the biblical herald—a winged figure with a trumpet.” See *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein’s Avant-Garde Theater* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1. John Richardson does not identify the figure as a herald, but does see Stein in the painting’s “ironical apotheosis.” He writes: “A group of nudes surround a scroll inscribed with the words ‘Homage a Gertrude.’ One of the nudes—not unlike Alice—proffers fruit; another—Gertrude?—blows her own distended trumpet.” John Richardson, “Picasso and Gertrude Stein: Mano a Mano, Tete-a-Tete,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/10/arts/art-picasso-and-gertrude-stein-mano-a-mano-tete-a-tete.html>.



Figures 4-5. Depiction of Fama (detail), from the frontispiece to Alexander Pope's *Temple of Fame: A Vision* (London: Bernard Lintott, 1715); and reproduction of Pablo Picasso's "Homage à Gertrude" (1909), from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Fleurus and boasting the ability to make or break artistic reputation; but Stein's gossip, in his painting, seems to be about herself: the text of the scroll from which she heralds presents an "Homage a Gertrude," as if, more than trumpeting the reputations of others, Stein is preoccupied primarily with tooting her own horn. Yet if Picasso's homage is also a dig, it is one Stein recognizes and affirms. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* she reproduces as an illustration "Homage à Gertrude," making the wily painting an emblem of the text it illustrates, in which Stein simultaneously gossips about others *and* presents gossip about herself through the voice of Toklas. Reclaiming the panel in *The Autobiography*, Stein in effect gossips about Picasso's visual gossip about her gossip.

Here we find the frisson of the sudden shifts and tensions between first- and third-person representations that are, as we have seen, central to *Stanzas'* lyric gossip. We find, too, the concern with renown that often motivates and is the effect of such uncertain negotiations of authorial agency. Fame, Stein seems aware, depends on one's becoming a subject as an object, and somehow maintaining that tenuous balance. Part III of *Stanzas* concludes,

I often think how celebrated I am.  
It is difficult not to think how celebrated I am.  
And if I think how celebrated I am  
They know who know that I am new  
That is I knew I know how celebrated I am  
And after all it astonishes even me. (403)

These lines' terminal refrain—*I am, I am, I am, I am*—punctuates their boastful insistence on the self; but, we are told, Stein's "I" trumpets its own homage in order that "They know who know," as if the speaker's irrepressible "think[ing]" about the self is actualized only by becoming the object of others' "know[ing]," at which point "it astonishes even me." "Once now I will tell all which they tell lightly," Stein's speaker declares in an earlier stanza, suggesting an account of oneself enabled by the gossipy account of others—or "exactly the same story only . . . different, very different" (321). *Stanzas'* speaker continually emphasizes the necessity of this I/They relationship for its motivating interests ("I could have been interested not only in what they said but in what I said. / I was interested not interested in what I said only in what I said" [379]), and in the passage above, when "They know who know" is clarified, "That is I knew I know," we see again the poem's "they that is I" and the role of third-person gossip in its fame-driven, aesthetic self-making.

In depicting herself in *The Autobiography* as a modern version of Fame, Stein thus extends a persona she had already tried on in what Lewis might call the "mass of inorganic and drifting gossip" that is *Stanzas in Meditation*. As *Stanzas'* speaker tirelessly speculates about who will "be seen to come," it is hard not to think of Stein (thinking of herself) as Fame, holding court over Saturday nights at her Paris salon and the reputations of the names there in circulation:

We learned we met we saw we conquered most  
After all who makes any other small or tall  
They will wish that they must be seen to come. (320)

As with Fame, the speaker's gossip "makes any other small or tall," bestows fame or

relegates one to infamy or obscurity. The poem frequently depicts this difficult arbitration of others' reputations: "Might they be mostly not be called renown," the speaker wonders, "Or can they be very likely or not at all / Not only known but well known" (324, 346). In a passage that seems explicitly to portray the art-filled atelier of 27 rue de Fleurus, Stein describes those who come to name and be named within its space of gossip. (John Malcolm Brinnin vividly imagines the scene at "27" as "something between a court and a shrine," where "jockeyings for position went on" while "[i]n the background, over the noise of the teacups, one could hear the sound of rolling heads, the rumble of dead reputations being carted away.")<sup>137</sup> "So much comes so many come," Stein writes:

Tables of tables and frames of frames.  
 For which they ask many permissions.  
 I do know that now I do know why they went  
 When they came  
 To be  
 And interested to be which name. (357)

They "[c]ame here to want it to be given to them," the poem elsewhere tells us (324). Yet if "they came / To be" by being given a "name," it is in turn the fame attached to these names and the speaker's role in their accounts by which Stein's "I" will be known. As in Picasso's rendering of Stein as Fame, as in the claims of the "testimony" against Stein's idle talk, as in Lewis' literary aside regarding the figure of the gossip, *Stanzas'* speaker, in making or breaking others, is primarily concerned with the making of oneself. "I have thought that I would not mind if they came / But I do," the speaker admits. "I also thought that it made no difference if they came / But it does" (391). In *Stanzas'* gossipy persona, perhaps specifically that of Fame, we recognize both another instance of and the interest behind the poem's meditation on

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<sup>137</sup> John Malcolm Brinnin, *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959), 269.

the mutually constitutive I/They relationships of lyric and gossip. For despite “mind[ing]” the potential threat of their expectation or demand that “They can be well enough known,” they are a “welcome” and necessary presence for a speaker granting but “unknown to fame”: “Please be not only welcome to our home” (434, 437).

This invitation into the “home” in *Stanzas* (which recalls Stein’s open, weekly invitation to her Paris apartment) marks out a liminal space, both private and temporarily available to the public—an interior that “I” allows “they” to inhabit, like the gossip’s interiority as it is opened up to other voices, or the lyric interiority coyly staged for its auditors. These are, like the house of Fame, transformative spaces of the subject-as-object—the gossip morphing into disembodied gossip, the lyric subject disappearing into its “unbodied,” overheard song—and in this sense, the poem’s architectural diction (its “home” or “house” and its “windows” and “door” [401, 434; 367, 387; 335; 359, 370, 402, 464]) refers both to the social space of gossip and the formal space of poetry. “Stanza,” of course, is Italian for room, and Stein links her stanzaic structure to the rooms of both gossip and poetry when, in Stanza XXII, Part V, her speaker asks “What is a stanza” (424), and answers:

it is it is just like Italy  
And if it is just like Italy  
Then it is as if I am just like it  
That is make it be.  
There is no necessity to make it be if it is  
Or there is not any real making it do too (425)

Beyond the melding of gossip’s and poetry’s stanzas, we notice here how *Stanzas*’ “I” is conflated with the poem’s structure: “it is as if I am just like it,” the speaker observes of the “stanza,” and though it might appear at first as if “I . . . make it be,” “it” in fact seems to work of its own accord, since “There is no necessity to make it be if it is,” and “there is not any real making it do.” As Stein’s stanzas themselves “make”—“A stanza can make wait be not only where they went”—their “I” begins to

seem almost incidental to, or even the effect of, their “making” (427). Thus Stein writes, “I wish to remain to remember that stanzas go on,” and the speaker’s declaration of “how celebrated *I am*” gradually becomes an insistence that “*this stanza* has been well-known” (359, 414, emphasis mine).

This is the story condensed, we recall, in the poem’s first two lines, which begin with a specific “I” and end with an indefinite “it”; and also in its last two—“Certainly I come having come. / These stanzas are done”—which subtly shift their agency from a singular person to a plural thing (464). It is the story of the poem’s title, as well, which ambiguously announces its stanzas as objects *contained within* the extended meditation of a subject who can only be implied, and also as perhaps themselves a meditating subject—stanzas *in the act of* meditation. *If walls could talk?*—Stein’s rooms, imagined as speaking for her speaker, figure a Fame-like voice of gossip that multiplies and preserves but can “go on” independently of any particular, embodied subjectivity. Stein’s stanzas, in other words, become a space through which one might indefinitely “float . . . without tying oneself to a place.” The pleasures of such a space—in which unmoored subjects might become objects and fleeting persons could turn into persistent things—are not always benign. Stein writes,

Believe me it is not for pleasure that I do it  
Not only for pleasure for pleasure in it that I do it.  
I feel the necessity to do it  
Partly from need  
Partly from pride  
And partly from ambition.  
And all of it which is why  
I literally try to do it and not to do it. (384)

Talker and listener, subject and object, person and thing, bird and ball: as Stein tries “literally . . . to do it and not to do it,” she fashions a queer persona that both enables and is effected by the fraught pleasures of her poem’s gossipy meditation on the ideals of lyric voice, and on one set of norms for modernist authorship. Stein, that is—for

“pleasure,” certainly, but also for “need,” for “pride,” and for “ambition”—becomes a gossip.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THE DISH THAT’S ART”: FRANK O’HARA’S SELF-GOSSIP

I claim them all for my insufferable  
genius my demon my dish

—Frank O’Hara, “A Proud Poem”

#### I. “DEEP GOSSIP”

Fondly remembered as “a terrible (also first-rate) gossip,” Frank O’Hara has seemed to many a poet whose work—talky, bursting with intimate references, peopled with celebrated and obscure proper names and knowingly indeterminate pronouns—is itself “all gossip, local gossip, social gossip.”<sup>1</sup> Just as in friendship he “savored gossip and playful malice,” in his poems O’Hara remains always attuned to, as he writes, “a little supper-club conversation for the mill of the gods.”<sup>2</sup> “[W]hat really makes me happy,” he claimed of his verse, “is when something just falls into place as if it were a conversation or something,” and throughout his conversational poetry he evinces a particular fascination with the stylistic possibilities of idle talk.<sup>3</sup> In a memoir he recalls himself and his circle of fellow poets splitting their time during the postwar halcyon days of American painting “between the literary bar, the San Remo, and the artists’ bar, the Cedar Tavern. In the San Remo we argued and gossiped: in the Cedar we often wrote poems while listening to the painters argue and gossip.”<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, in these poems gossiping, listening to gossip, and writing poetry

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Berkson, “Frank O’Hara and His Poems,” in *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, eds. Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (Bollinas: Big Sky, 1978), 161; and Allen Ginsberg, “Early Poetic Community (Kent State, April 7, 1971)” in *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 149.

<sup>2</sup> John Bernard Myers, introduction, *The Poets of the New York School*, ed. John Bernard Myers (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Fine Arts, 1969), 20; “Rhapsody,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 326. Where clear, further references to poems included in this volume will appear in the text as *CP*.

<sup>3</sup> Frank O’Hara, “Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O’Hara” (1965), in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas, CA: Grey Fox Press, 1975), 21.

<sup>4</sup> “Larry Rivers: A Memoir” (1965), in *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, 512.

intoxicatingly bleed one into the other. “[Y]ou must / work,” O’Hara quietly asserts to himself in one poem, “to make succulent the dish that’s art,” whereupon a voice much like a boisterous party guest barges into the poem to ask: “Are you dishing art?” (CP 75). O’Hara experienced these two voices and their seemingly unique demands—for gossip and poetry, “dishing art” and “the dish that’s art”—not as competing but vitally co-constitutive, each productive of a crucial part of his work and each able to feed the muse he called, not without ambivalence, “my insufferable / genius my demon my dish” (CP 52).

Yet how, why, and to what effect does O’Hara’s dish become poetry, and his poetry become dish? Marking out the extremes of the response to his gossipy poetics, Allen Ginsberg’s oft-quoted elegy for O’Hara hails him as a “Chatty prophet” with “a common ear / for our deep gossip,” while in her review of *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, Pearl K. Bell unhappily wades through “huge trash-heaps” of “poems, full of campy gossip.”<sup>5</sup> These two takes suggest that encountering O’Hara’s poetry entails finding oneself up to one’s neck in gossip, but still uncertain just how “deep” it is. And indeed, considering the extent to which O’Hara’s champions and detractors alike have understood gossip to play a central role in his personality and poetic practice, we know relatively little about the contours of this role and its thematic, historical, theoretical, and especially formal concerns and implications. In her pioneering study of O’Hara, for instance, Marjorie Perloff clears the ground for a rigorous analysis of the poetry by first sweeping away the seeming distractions of gossip. She contends that in the aftermath of O’Hara’s bizarre, early death—struck by a dune buggy on a Fire Island beach in 1966—the artist “became a work of art, and

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “City Midnight Junk Strains” (1966), *Collected Poems 1947-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 459; Pearl K. Bell, “The Poverty of Poetry,” *New Leader*, 10 January 1972, rptd. in *Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City*, ed. Jim Elledge (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 39.

attention was deflected from O’Hara’s real achievement, which was his poetry.”<sup>6</sup>

Quoting in her final chapter the closing lines of Ginsberg’s elegy, she concludes, “This is essentially the mythologized version of the poet . . . the ‘gay’ (in both senses of the word) . . . celebrant of New York and purveyor of ‘deep gossip’”—thus consigning O’Hara’s queer gossip, and our own, to the diversions of the O’Hara myth (185).

When Perloff herself turns to O’Hara’s “intimate talk,” she accordingly proceeds as if carefully letting the hot air out of his brilliantly chatty balloon: noting the poems’ frequent sense of an “ongoing conversation,” she is quick to assure us that “this is not to say, as critics often have, that an O’Hara poem is *just* good casual talk,” and in her reading of “Rhapsody” the poem succeeds “[d]espite its air of casual talk” (26, 27, 29, emphases mine). “[I]nterest in the legend—our inveterate love of gossip—has deflected attention from the poet’s accomplishment,” Perloff insists, and she is, of course, partially right—perhaps as much now, with O’Hara’s star in ascendance, as when these words first appeared over three decades ago (6). But “our inveterate love of gossip” is also precisely what O’Hara’s poetry itself—often at its most accomplished—so brazenly appeals to, making it a love whose insights are difficult to do without.

To be sure, gossip has made revealing cameo appearances in significant assessments of O’Hara’s “queer talk” and his conversational poetics more generally;<sup>7</sup> and any account of his engagement with idle talk has much to learn from important recent studies of the social formations of postwar American poetry, many of which

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<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3. Where clear, further references will appear in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Among the many useful discussions of O’Hara’s talk, see Bruce Boone, “Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O’Hara,” *Social Text* 1 (1979): 59-92; Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 95-99; Stuart Byron, “‘Poetic Queertalk,’” *Real Paper* 24 (1974), rptd. in Elledge, 64-69; Alan Feldman, *Frank O’Hara* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 49-53; Srikanth Reddy, “Digression Personified: Whitman, the New York School, and the Drift of Poetry,” *Literary Imagination* 11.1 (2009): 1-25; and Hazel Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara: Difference/Homosexuality/Topography* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

feature O’Hara as they treat aspects of sociality closely related to gossip, including community, coterie, and friendship.<sup>8</sup> Yet the “playful malice” of gossip’s talk *about* others cannot be subsumed neatly into broader considerations of O’Hara’s conversation (in dialogue *with* others) or the communities these conversational practices are often seen as sustaining. At the same time, the term gossip—in suggesting an identity that gathers, interprets, invents, and circulates private and typically unverified information about others; in designating this unconfirmed material itself; and in indicating (as a verb) the performance by which this information is disclosed—provides the conceptual ability to move fluidly among the actors, content, and style that continually work in concert to form, deform, and reform communities and the selves of which they are comprised. An explicit focus on O’Hara’s queer art of gossip thus both usefully condenses varied critical emphases on talk, sexuality, the social, and the poetic and offers a rhetoric whose formal specificity holds out the promise of more nuanced examination of how dish actually shapes and takes shape within individual poems.

As soon as one begins to sound the largely unexplored depths of O’Hara’s “deep gossip,” one discovers that although O’Hara is widely viewed as American poetry’s paradigmatic instance of the poet as gossip, his poems’ dish confounds many of the most basic paradigms of idle talk. This breaking of the rules of gossip might be

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<sup>8</sup> See in particular Lytle Shaw’s *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006) and Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Terrence Diggory, “Community ‘Intimate’ or ‘Inoperative’ : New York School Poets and Politics from Paul Goodman to Jean-Luc Nancy,” in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2001); Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007); Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and Reva Wolf, *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

seen as—and no doubt in part is—the result of its adaptation to literature, in which form it becomes, Patricia Meyer Spacks claims, “no longer true gossip, only a simulacrum.”<sup>9</sup> Setting aside that Spacks’ description of literature’s gossip as untrue representation oddly makes it sound even juicier and more truly gossipy than the so-called “true gossip” it imitates, to understand gossip in literature in this way would be to make of it what Barbara Herrnstein Smith influentially calls a fictive representation of natural discourse, one that “invite[s] and enable[s] the reader to create a plausible context for it.”<sup>10</sup> But O’Hara’s lyric gossip, I argue, does not so much gesture toward “a plausible context” one must “create” for it as constitute its own often rather *implausible* context—neither lyric nor gossip, yet deeply engaged with both as it attempts to glimpse what is possible beyond the apparent horizons of each genre.

In attending to this implausible context and the possibilities of its bad form, the discussion that follows revolves around the foremost ways O’Hara’s lyric gossip, already a transgression of what he calls the “awful lot of dicta laid down by everybody about what was good and what was bad” in modernist poetry, also and more unexpectedly deviates from established notions of good dish.<sup>11</sup> Although unmistakably gossipy, O’Hara’s poetry often complicates gossip’s staging by talking about the scenario’s typically absent others not behind their backs but in front of their faces; and at times it upsets even the most fundamental definition of gossip as talk to and about other people by dishing to and about O’Hara himself. This self-gossip, like the “self-talk” Erving Goffman describes as “a kind of perversion, a form of linguistic self-abuse,” becomes for O’Hara a queer means of poetic self-fashioning whose gossip presents an alternative to the idea of confession that has dominated understandings of

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<sup>9</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relations of Literature to Language* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 33.

<sup>11</sup> O’Hara, “Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O’Hara,” 12.

disclosure in mid-century lyric poetry, especially in relation to changing conceptions of privacy, subjectivity, sexuality, and style.<sup>12</sup> Beginning with his first poetic experiments with gossip in the early 1950s, O’Hara builds a rhetoric that holds in tension lyric abstraction and gossipy particularity, self-effacement and self-assertion, strangeness and intimacy, and absence and presence, continually shuffling the terms of these seeming binaries in order to baffle and reconceive the gendered and sexualized as much as generic assumptions that structure them. His lyric gossip seeks not an ideal of disclosure by which one uncovers and inhabits the authorized truth of one’s subjectivity, but rather, in a Cold War climate notoriously hostile to queerness, pursues within the intimately cultivated failures of lyric poetry and gossip an imagined space for the real emergence of improper names, unauthorized selves.

## II. IMPROPER NAMES

“We’ll open with a question. Is style hearsay?”<sup>13</sup> With this query the painter Joan Mitchell commenced an April 1958 panel on “Hearsay” at the Club, a New York artists’ gathering for discussion, debate, and a fair amount of gossip about avant-garde art and poetry. Let’s open with this question, too, since it is one O’Hara poses and inspires throughout a body of work whose reception has been indelibly marked by “our inveterate love of gossip,” and since the dialogue’s collaborative script— assembled by Elaine de Kooning “after three evenings of private discussion” among herself and panel members Norman Bluhm, Mike Goldberg, Mitchell, and O’Hara; subsequently “tampered with by Frank O’Hara”; and eventually published as “5 Participants in a Hearsay Panel”—provides one instance of O’Hara’s and his cohort’s

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<sup>12</sup> Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 80. Further references will appear within the text.

<sup>13</sup> From the script for an April 25, 1958 Club panel, published as “5 Participants in a Hearsay Panel” in *It Is 3* (1959), rptd. in Frank O’Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), 149. Further references will appear in the text.

unorthodox thinking about gossip. Is style hearsay? The panel posits a number of possible answers, the following among them:

NORMAN: Frank says: Style at its lowest ebb is method. Style at its highest ebb is personality. (149)

FRANK: Elaine says Pavia says Dogs don't mind being dogs. The panel has heard—hasn't it, Joan—that certain galleries have dropped all their artists and are looking for promising new talent. (150)

FRANK: Someone in the know says more women artists keep journals than men do. (151)

MIKE: Frank says Elaine says Norman is being stuffy again. (151)

Thus satirically assuming and celebrating gossip's rhetoric, the dialogue proceeds as if purposefully inverting the initial inquiry so that the question at hand ("Is style hearsay?") becomes as well "Is hearsay a style?" (149).

If to ask the former question is to broach an interpretive problem having to do with the seemingly distracting role played by gossip in aesthetic judgment, especially amid the noise of the marketplace and its often disavowed influence, to respond to the latter question, a more immediately formal one, is to suggest, just the opposite, that art, criticism, and gossip are impossibly and productively intertwined. Nearly all of the panel's prepared remarks *on* hearsay, parsed out "with careful attention to misattribution and misquotation," are tagged *as* hearsay, from the relatively straightforward dish of "Norman says," "Harold Rosenberg says," "Fairfield says," or "Someone in the know says" (150, 151), to more elaborate chains of talk whose genealogies rival the actual dish they spread in gossipy significance, such as "Philip Guston told Andrew Wyeth that Louis B. Mayer told John Huston," or "Ernestine Lassaw told Franz Kline and Tom Young that Bob Rauschenberg told her that Joseph Cornell saw a beautiful girl in a box, a cashier's box, outside a movie house . . ." (149, 151). In this way, the dialogue's dense thicket of speech tags and proper names

presents the aesthetic as inevitably mediated by the social, but also troubles any easy distinction between the two by tacitly asserting that hearsay is an available style—one that itself often circulates as a form of hearsay.

As the first of Mitchell's fellow panelists to respond to her question, O'Hara sets the discussion's tone of inversion and paradox with a reply that helps to illuminate more specifically his own poetics of gossip: "Well Pavia says," O'Hara says, referring to Philip Pavia, sculptor and founding member of the Club, "nowadays everyone talks about you behind your back in front of your face" (149). In this opening gambit's bit of meta-gossip, O'Hara theatrically exemplifies the self-contradictory quip he voices by talking about Pavia and indeed, at one remove, "everyone" in New York's vanguard circle of artists, many of whom were in the audience during the panel, in front of their faces but as if behind their backs. Strictly speaking this is not gossip, which "[a]lways," as Spacks writes, "involves talk about one or more *absent* figures"; in this case the others taken as the subject of talk are present (and, in the rambunctious atmosphere of the Club, might well be expected to intervene).<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, this witticism and its mischievous enactment provocatively propose that gossip depends not on a necessary framework for communication but instead a manner one might deploy in various frameworks, an attitude one might strike toward others and the social norms that govern our relationships with others. Studies of gossip have emphasized how the *just between us* intimacy of its shared exclusions facilitates group cohesion and defines community membership by establishing who is out of the loop and therefore who is in it. But the impossible spatial metaphor of talking "behind your back in front of your face" positions both those being talked about and those doing the talking—both gossipees and gossips—in a liminal space, simultaneously inside and outside the social circle and its norms. Gossip, in this formulation, might be

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<sup>14</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, 4, emphasis mine.

understood as a style of talk (*as if* “behind your back”) whose breach of decorum (*in fact* “in front of your face”) wants to reimagine and transform more than consolidate the given arrangements of inhabited spaces ranging from a panel to a party to a poem.

The idea of gossip as a transformative style is suggestive of what I take to be the queer poetics of O’Hara’s lyric gossip, which in adopting the rhetoric of idle talk makes strange the familiar surroundings of the lyric poem. Indeed, being talked about “behind your back in front of your face” aptly describes the experience of O’Hara’s poetry and the compendium of proper names and personal references that, at once inviting and opaque, can make even O’Hara’s most immediate readers feel both addressed by and absented from the poems, talked to and talked about, approached as an intimate and a stranger. One of O’Hara’s lovers, the dancer Vincent Warren, captures this effect when he writes, “The poems are full of personal references that mean so much to me—and maybe nothing to strangers—but there are *many* references in the earlier poems that I don’t get, except the intimacy of Frank’s feelings about whatever he’s referring to—so I guess the ‘strangers’ who read the love poems too, get what Frank’s talking about.”<sup>15</sup> This uncertain relational dynamic of intimacy and strangeness, getting it and not getting it, mirrors the way O’Hara himself, though everywhere designated, is seldom properly in or out of his poems or the world they describe—a strategy of aesthetic self-making that recalls the gossip’s self-assertion by self-effacement (*but you didn’t hear it from me*).

These issues—style and hearsay, poetry and dish, intimacy and strangeness, self-assertion and self-effacement—converge in a formative instance of O’Hara’s lyric gossip, the 1951 poem “A Party Full of Friends.” Among the first of O’Hara’s verses to feature prominently the names of friends, the poem commemorates in gossip “a party,” as Mark Ford writes, “that [John] Ashbery hosted in his furnished room on

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<sup>15</sup> Vincent Warren, “Frank . . .” (1973), rptd. in *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, 74.

West Twelfth Street while O'Hara was staying with him during a Christmas break from Ann Arbor in 1950."<sup>16</sup> O'Hara begins by plunging into the revelry:

Violet leaped to the piano  
stool and knees drawn up  
under her chin commenced to  
spin faster and faster sing-  
ing "I'm a little Dutch boy  
Dutch boy Dutch boy" until  
the rain very nearly fell  
through the roof!<sup>17</sup>

Each of the poem's six subsequent stanzas similarly accumulates partygoers, breathlessly relating, for example, how "Jane . . . advanced slowly" from across the room while "Hal" and "Jack" discussed Violet's and Jane's antics; how "Larry paced the floor" as "Arnie . . . muttered"; how "John yawked / onto the ottoman" and "George thought / Freddy was old enough / to drink"; and how "Gloria had not been / invited, although she had / brought a guest" (*PR* 24-25).

As this précis suggests, "A Party Full of Friends" is most immediately a poem full of names. How are we to understand them? For Charles Altieri, such more or less unknown proper names have the effect of alienation: O'Hara's "texture of proper names gives each person and detail an identity, but in no way do the names help the reader understand anything about what has been named. To know . . . a person O'Hara expects to meet is named Norman is rather a reminder for the reader that the specific details of another's life can appear only as momentary fragments, insisting through their particularity on his alienation from any inner reality they might possess."<sup>18</sup> Citing Altieri, Perloff similarly asserts that "persons and places, books and

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Ford, introduction, Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Frank O'Hara, "A Party Full of Friends," *Poems Retrieved*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1996), 24. Further references to poems included in this volume will appear in the text as *PR*.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 111.

films are named because they are central to O'Hara's particular consciousness"; these names gesture toward an inaccessible world of experience, not the lyric transcendence of "mythologizing portraits" (130-31). Yet Ford sees the proper names of "A Party Full of Friends" as just such transcendent efforts, "initiating what one might call O'Hara's mythopoeic gossip mode."<sup>19</sup> And Geoff Ward claims that, rather than "insisting" on "alienation," O'Hara's references to friends' proper names tend to serve as points of identification: discussing "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," he contends, "Any of us middle-class speaking subjects has a friend like Kenneth and a lunch appointment next week with our own Joan or Jean-Paul."<sup>20</sup>

Do O'Hara's unknown proper names signal our exclusion from the world the poems represent, or do they transcend their particularity to become a point of abstract identification? And how could these names' particularity either designate a reality from which we are barred, or, quite the opposite, form an invitation to a party full of mythologized friends we recognize as surrogates for our own? Rather than simply choosing one reading or the other, Lytle Shaw has recently argued that O'Hara's use of proper names is best understood as part of a fluid rhetoric that productively negotiates between the poems' vital, empirical contexts and their anticipated textual afterlives. Shaw's focus on how these contexts "come into awkward and revealing contact" better accounts for the coincident intimacy and strangeness I find central to O'Hara's lyric gossip, and in keeping with this emphasis, I read "A Party Full of Friends" as a significant experiment in what happens when gossip's naming names coincides with lyric naming, and a circle of friends becomes a poem of names.<sup>21</sup>

This question is brought to the fore when, following Larry's boastful lament that "when I'm not paint / ing I'm writing and when I'm / not writing I'm suffering /

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<sup>19</sup> Ford, introduction, O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw, *Frank O'Hara*, 79.

for my kids I'm good at all three" (PR 24-25), O'Hara responds:

indeed you are, I  
added hastily with real ad-  
miration before anyone else  
could get into the poem, but  
Arnie, damn him! had already  
muttered "yes you are" not  
understanding the fun of  
idle protest. (PR 25)

This stanza's narrative of earnest Arnie stepping on O'Hara's ironic retort both introduces and strikingly blurs the boundary between the poem and the experience it represents. O'Hara's attempt to prevent "anyone else" from entering "into the poem" enacts a form of the narrative figure metalepsis, defined by Gérard Genette as "any intrusion" of the "narrator or narratee" into the narrative's world, "or the inverse," thus producing "an effect of strangeness."<sup>22</sup> Specifically, these lines present an instance of author's metalepsis, "which consists of pretending that the poet 'himself brings about the effects he celebrates'"—although here, O'Hara seemingly *fails* to bring about his intended effect of guarding entry "into the poem" ("Arnie, damn him!"), such that his metalepsis comically connotes not the poet's autonomy but the threat posed to it by the subjects of his gossip, whose stories are and are not his own.<sup>23</sup> This moment thus presses what Genette calls metalepsis' "unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narrates—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative."<sup>24</sup>

Once the poem's narrative levels have been brought intrusively together, the textual relationship between O'Hara, the friends who are the subjects of his poem's gossip, and the reader becomes increasingly destabilized. In this sense, metalepsis'

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<sup>22</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 234-35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 234. Genette here is quoting Pierre Fontanier's *Commentaire raisonné sur "Les Tropes" de Dumarsais*, vol. 2 of Dumarsais' *Les Tropes* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 236.

transgression of the border between those doing the talking and those being talked about suggests another way in which O'Hara's lyric gossip chats "behind your back in front of your face," using style to transform the relations of a given space. O'Hara seems to have enjoyed flirting with metaleptic effects: numerous anecdotes recall his habit of composing poems in the midst of, and about, everyday social occasions, as if bringing backstage talk front stage to dish on an ongoing experience. Kenneth Koch recollects, "One of the most startling things about Frank in the period when I first knew him was his ability to write a poem when other people were talking, or even to get up in the middle of a conversation, get his typewriter, and write a poem, sometimes participating in the conversation while doing so."<sup>25</sup> James Schuyler similarly remembers "having coffee with Frank and Joe LeSueur . . . and Joe and I began to twit him about his ability to write a poem any time, any place. Frank gave us a look—both hot and cold—got up, went into his bedroom and wrote 'Sleeping on the Wing,' a beauty, in a matter of minutes."<sup>26</sup> And Joe Brainard writes, "I remember seeing Frank O'Hara write a poem once. We were watching a western on T.V. and he got up as tho to answer the telephone or to get a drink but instead he went over to the typewriter, leaned over it a bit, and typed for four or five minutes standing up. Then he pulled the piece of paper out of the typewriter and handed it to me to read. Then he lay back down to watch more T.V."<sup>27</sup>

Such accounts, while no doubt part of the O'Hara myth, usefully dramatize the way his lyric gossip improbably occupies everyday social spaces, making their familiar experiences strange—as if any moment could be revealed to perhaps belong to some poem. Even when O'Hara's poems have not literally been written

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Koch, "A Note on Frank O'Hara in the Early Fifties" (1964), rptd. in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> James Schuyler, "Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters" (1974), rptd. in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Brainard, "Frank O'Hara" (1968), rptd. in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, 168.

simultaneous with their occasions and the doings of those involved, their ambiguous shaping of temporality often frames them as if this were the case. A well-known paratextual instance of such framing occurs in the humorous, self-authored jacket copy for O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, a blurb which begins: "Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations . . . ." <sup>28</sup> At first blush, the effort to effect the sense that occasion and poem correspond exactly might seem a continuance of a particularly American poetic desire to close the gap between experience and verse, a desire given voice, for instance, in Walt Whitman's 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, where he claims of the American people's "manners speech dress friendships" that "these too are unrhymed poetry." <sup>29</sup> Yet if O'Hara wants to merge everyday experience and poetry, or to perpetuate the illusion of such a merging, he certainly does not succeed, since what often proves notable in the poems, as in the above anecdotes of O'Hara's composition of them, is not the seamless fusing of the everyday and the poetic but rather their conspicuous and "startling" encounter.

The metalepsis of "A Party Full of Friends" stages this odd encounter. Figuring "the poem," like the "party," as a space one might "get into" or be kept out of, O'Hara imagines too that friends, poet, and reader might variously move between these spaces, their characteristic styles (gossip and lyric), and their different ontological statuses. Does Arnie's muttering occur in the poem or the party? Which space does O'Hara's hasty interjection occupy? Can Arnie cross as a name "into the poem" through his presence at the party? Has Gloria "not been invited" to the party or the poem? Can the reader—a bit like the "guest" of an uninvited guest—gain entrance to the party by means of the poem's surrogate names? Very little seems certain, as

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<sup>28</sup> Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1964), back cover.

<sup>29</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 617.

O'Hara's metalepsis both draws attention to and fantastically erases the border between these two worlds—as Genette writes, “the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells”—in spatial but also temporal terms.<sup>30</sup> The poem's gossipy, past tense account initially sets the party, expectedly, in a temporality prior to the poem's narration of it, but this straightforward temporal relation is hopelessly muddled once O'Hara presents Arnie, in the party's temporality, as beating him into the poem (“Arnie, damn him! had already / muttered ‘yes you are’”), even as in the poem he beats Arnie to the punch (“indeed you are, I / added hastily . . . before anyone else / could get into the poem”). This contradictory distinction between the time of the poem and (as it were) party time suggests these lines depict O'Hara anticipating during the party the future writing of the poem, or, more exactly, recalling while writing the poem his past anticipation of this future moment. Thus during the party O'Hara is already in the poem, but during the writing of the poem he is back at the party, ensuring that he—like the reader—is never fully within nor without either world.

Given O'Hara's lightness of tone in “A Party Full of Friends,” we might chalk up these strange and dizzying effects as simply so many spatial and temporal pranks on the reader. Yet something more seems at stake when the poem concludes by laying claim to the resulting disorder as a means of poetic self-fashioning, exclaiming in the first lines of the final stanza, in another marked instance of author's metalepsis:

What  
confusion! and to think  
I sat down and caused it  
all! (*PR* 25)

The sense that these lines' ambiguous “it” could refer to either the “confusion” of the represented party or that of the poem that represents it is only heightened by their echo

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<sup>30</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 236.

of O'Hara's slightly earlier poem "Autobiographia Literaria," a more obvious if no less ironic example of ars poetica, which concludes:

And here I am, the  
center of all beauty!  
writing these poems!  
Imagine! (*CP* 11)

Taken together, these passages suggest the affinity in O'Hara's work between the "center of all beauty" and the center of "confusion," a stance similarly expressed in his 1955 poem "My Heart," which invokes the reader as an "aficionado of my mess" (*CP* 231). "A Party Full of Friends" locates poetic identity within a "mess" and "confusion" that is not only that of the exuberant party or giddy poem, but also and even primarily that *between* party and poem, experience and representation—the boundary O'Hara's metalepses have both performed and distorted. Thus the final stanza's metalepsis, in "pretending that the poet 'himself brings about the effects he celebrates'" ("I sat down and caused it"), peculiarly pretends to bring about the confusing effect of metalepsis itself, celebrating *it* as constitutive of his poetic self.

As O'Hara transgresses the line between the world of the party and the world of the poem, and so fails to inhabit properly either one, he imagines out of this failure a threshold space between the two, one whose "confusion" culminates, in the poem's final lines, in the emergence of the poet's proper name. Consider the complete closing stanza:

What  
confusion! and to think  
I sat down and caused it  
all! No! Lyon wanted some  
one to give a birthday  
party and Bussy was born  
within the fortnight the  
only one everybody loves. I  
don't care. Someone's going  
to stay until the cows

come home. Or my name isn't

Frank O'Hara (*PR* 25)

In one sense, the poem's gossipy network of names—Violet, Jane, Hal, Jack, Larry, Arnie, John, George, Freddy, Gloria, Lyon, and Bubsy—here finds closure in the one full name which has “caused it / all,” and whose authority unifies the poem's represented experience: “Frank O'Hara.” Yet as soon as O'Hara asserts that he has “caused it / all,” he negates this claim (“No!”), allowing that the party (and hence the poem) might have been “caused” in part by Lyon, who “wanted some / one to give a birthday / party,” and Bubsy, whose birth date provided a convenient excuse for it. This gesture recalls O'Hara's previous claim to have kept others out of the poem and the subsequent admission that they have already made their way in, forming a pattern of self-assertion and self-effacement that makes the final lines' *my name is my word* guarantee—“Or my name isn't / Frank O'Hara”—anything but certain, and perhaps recommends the opposing interpretation. Rather than a poem progressing toward the constitution of the poet's authoritative name and its implied subjectivity, we might also grasp the poem's organizing subjectivity as gradually deconstituted, moving toward the anonymity of free-floating gossip as the lyric voice is unveiled as a textual figure in a poem functioning independent of any subjectivity an authorial proper name might imply.

O'Hara accentuates this double movement between gossip and lyric—toward a voice somehow particular *and* anonymous—by placing the status of the proper name in necessary relation to the indefinite pronoun *someone*: “Someone's going / to stay until the cows / come home. Or my name isn't / Frank O'Hara.” Most considerations of O'Hara's use of proper names have treated these names in isolation, or only in relation to other types of proper names (exploring, for instance, the canonizing effect of setting unknown names of friends next to the celebrated names of literary forebears

or Hollywood stars, or examining the way O'Hara's gatherings of names imagine alternative kinship structures). But O'Hara's names are often mirrored by indefinite pronouns, and the recognition of this mutually constitutive relationship between the particular and the anonymous provides, in a number of poems, a form of poetic closure. In O'Hara's 1955 poem "At the Old Place," for example, the presence of a nameless "Someone" facilitates the closing scene of camp, queer acknowledgment among the poem's proper names:

Jack, Earl and Someone drift  
guiltily in. "I knew they were gay  
the minute I laid eyes on them!" screams John.  
How ashamed they are of us! we hope. (CP 224)

This camp mix of the intimate and the strange becomes uncanny in O'Hara's well-known 1959 elegy for Billie Holiday, "The Day Lady Died," as the poet's idiosyncratic maneuvering among the proper names "Miss Stillwagon," "Verlaine," "Patsy," "Bonnard," "Hesiod," "Richard Lattimore," "Brendan Behan," "Genet," and "Mike" gives way to a memory, both personal and impersonal, O'Hara's own and everyone's, in which the self is formed and lost:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of  
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT  
while she whispered a song along the keyboard  
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (CP 325)

Finally, another poem from 1959, "Personal Poem," concludes by focusing on an unnamed "one person" who mediates O'Hara and LeRoi's, and the poem's, valedictory moment:

I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is  
thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi  
and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go  
back to work at the thought possibly so (CP 336)

Here, the ambiguous "one person out of the 8,000,000" is itself both as particular as can be (one *specific* person among the multitudes?) and wildly general (*any* "one

person” in New York?), just as in “At the Old Place” the anonymous moniker “Someone” functions as a kind of proper name. Such slippage between the anonymous and particular is inherent in the very definition of the term *someone*, which can refer to an indefinite, unknown or unspecified person (and thus a no one), or a person of importance or authority (a real someone). At risk of flattening their distinctive uses of the indefinite pronouns “Someone,” “everyone,” and “one,” we might understand each of these poems to close, like “A Party Full of Friends,” with a self on the verge of becoming a particular someone or—or rather *and*—an anonymous no one.

In an obituary for O’Hara, Peter Schjeldahl writes that “[t]he painter Helen Frankenthaler says personal invitations to parties in the ’50s often carried the information ‘Frank will be there’—the ultimate inducement to attend.”<sup>31</sup> The closing lines of “A Party Full of Friends”—“Someone’s going / to stay until the cows / come home. Or my name isn’t / Frank O’Hara”—suggest a similar inducement, yet also retroactively reflect the uncertain presence and agency of the poet, who has been the indefinite “anyone” attempting to get a word into the poem before “anyone else” and the “some / one” who gives the party “Lyon wanted,” and whose “name” now, as before, depends on someone’s continued presence. Employing the present tense, these lines recall the poem’s previous instances of reported speech from the party. Yet free of quotation marks—like the indirect discourse of O’Hara’s earlier statement, “indeed you are,” ambiguously situated between the world of the party and the world of the poem—their tense implies a lyric present. Read as the former, O’Hara insists “Someone’s going / to stay” at the party; as the latter, he declares that someone—some reader—will stay within the poem. Since we can neither conclusively choose between

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Frank O’Hara: ‘He Made Things & People Sacred,’” *The Village Voice* 11 August 1966, rptd. in *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, 141.

nor reconcile these alternatives, where are we to locate “Frank O’Hara,” whose proper “name” (or its loss) thus depends on its relation to both an intimate and a stranger?

O’Hara’s 1950 poem “A Letter to Bunny” (addressed to V. R. Lang, the Violet of “A Party Full of Friends”) worries about the uncertain effect on poetic selfhood of straddling two formal spaces—here epistolary and poetic: “When anyone reads this but you it begins / to be lost,” O’Hara writes, not without excitement. “My voice is sucked into a thousand / ears and I don’t know whether I’m weakened” (*CP* 23).

Encouraging O’Hara to try to publish “A Party Full of Friends,” Ashbery frames the loss of intimacy in moving between these spaces as more certainly productive, affirmatively suggesting the queer intimacy of a party full of strangers: “the fact that no one would know who the people are would add rather than decrease charm.”<sup>32</sup> Designating a voice at once lost and found as it pursues intimacy *and* publicity, one ear and “a thousand,” the “name” that invites us to and excludes us from “A Party Full of Friends” can only be an improper one. Its formal transgressions ensure it is fully present within neither the party nor poem, gossip nor lyric, but instead an intervening space, one the poet’s lyric gossip can imagine and foster if never authorize or confirm—a space in which, as long as someone else remains, *Frank will be there*.

### III. DISHING DIRT

What motivates O’Hara to imagine this space, somewhere between the everyday and poetic? When John Ashbery writes that O’Hara’s poetry makes room for “the reader who turns to poetry as a last resort in trying to juggle the contradictory components of modern life into something like a livable space,” he could be describing the O’Hara we have glimpsed so far, always the vitalizing life of the

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<sup>32</sup> John Ashbery to Frank O’Hara, 26 April 1951, qtd. in Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 187.

party—or poem.<sup>33</sup> But what contradictions of “modern life” provide the basis for O’Hara’s poetic attempt to live with and within them? One year after the composition of “A Party Full of Friends,” in a poem entitled “Prose for the Times,” O’Hara presents a darkly comic allegory that again uses the terms “party” and “poem” to explore the limitations and possibilities of his work’s burgeoning investment in the friction between social experience and the poetic. Less an instance of lyric gossip than a poem *about* lyric gossip, it begins:

Yesterday I accepted an invitation to a party. But I had no sooner arrived and let my coat tumble, exhausted, onto a bed, when a perfect stranger whom I immediately and unwittingly admired asked me if I were a poet.

Many guests crowded around the two of us, as at a wedding. “I suppose I am,” I said, “for I do write poems.”

“Well write one now, will you?” he said, smiling fiercely . . . (PR 70)

Although we are used to hearing about, as one friend remembers it, “Frank’s legendary capacity for friendship,” this poem’s “perfect stranger” and his fierce smile, as much a threat as a kindness, might serve as an emblem for the deep *ambivalence* toward friendship that, as Andrew Epstein has argued, informs O’Hara’s poetry.<sup>34</sup> O’Hara’s reputation for dashing off on-the-spot occasional poems, so central to the legend of his generous sociability, here entails a potentially dangerous (as we will see) imposition: “Well write one now, will you?” And whereas in “A Party Full of Friends” the identity of the “poet” seems to depend upon his getting the ear of a figure of intimacy and strangeness (“Or my name isn’t / Frank O’Hara”), in this case an encounter with an “immediately . . . admired” albeit “perfect stranger” inspires only a reluctant assertion of poetic identity (“I suppose I am . . . for I do write poems”), one which is quickly undercut by the refusal of the stranger’s appeal for a poem: “‘I’m sorry, but I don’t feel like one just now, if you don’t mind,’ I said, thinking of many

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<sup>33</sup> John Ashbery, introduction, Frank O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, x.

<sup>34</sup> J. J. Mitchell, “The Death of Frank O’Hara,” *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, 144. See Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 86-126.

things, chiefly, perhaps, of childhood, when I would make myself vomit so I wouldn't have to go to parties" (*PR* 70).

The most arresting aspect of the allegory presented by "Prose for the Times," however, is its emphasis on the erotics bound up with and partly accounting for this ambivalent negotiation of the social and the poetic—an erotics that suggests just how much O'Hara's stylistic negotiation of these imbricated worlds is a queer one. Certainly there is something queer about the meeting between the intimate stranger and possible poet in "Prose for the Times," which anticipates O'Hara's oft-cited, semi-satirical statement of poetics, "Personism: A Manifesto," in situating "the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style."<sup>35</sup> Here the "poet," "immediately and unwittingly" drawn to the "stranger," focuses his cruising eye specifically on how "[a] few tendrils of hair escaped the opening of his shirt" while their chance encounter, charged with the frisson of the pas de deux between knowing and unknowing, promise and risk, plays out with all the choreography of a "wedding" ritual (*PR* 70). *Are you? Do you? Will you?* After the poet coyly brushes off the stranger's request—part come-on, part taunt—for a poem, the scene's erotic tension becomes unavoidably explicit:

"Well, what makes you feel like writing one?" he said, and kicked me in the balls.

Ugh!

As I hobbled to a chair, however, I managed to somewhat regain my composure. "You needn't be afraid of me," I said, turning. "I don't love you." (*PR* 70)

Slipping uneasily into slapstick violence rather than sexual or indeed poetic consummation, the poem's conclusion frames the constitutive meeting of poet and would-be reader as an erotic encounter gone awry, its final declaration asserting that the poet's particular form of "love"—or is it poetry?—might be something both

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<sup>35</sup> Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto" (1959), *Yugen* 7 (1961), rptd. in *Collected Poems*, 499.

desired and feared, and its pursuit thus fraught with danger.

It is in this sense that “Prose for the Times” takes the temperature of its times, particularly within O’Hara’s social circle, where the era’s phobic suspicions and the violence hounding queerness engendered, among other anxieties, poetic uncertainty. John Ashbery claims not to have been able to “write anything from about the summer of 1950 to the end of 1951”: “The Korean War was on,” he recalls, and “[t]here were anti-homosexual campaigns. I was called up for the draft and I pleaded that as a reason not to be drafted. Of course this was recorded and I was afraid that we’d all be sent to concentration camps if McCarthy had his own way. It was a very dangerous and scary period.”<sup>36</sup> Numerous histories of Cold War sexuality have shown how during this period, as Gavin Butt writes, “in the absence of reliable signifiers of homosexual difference, and given the widespread rumors about the large number of gays in the arts . . . artistic identity *itself* becomes phobically charged with queerness,” such that the male artist, especially, “is constantly shadowed by queer meaning.”<sup>37</sup> O’Hara literalizes such shadowing when, in “A Young Poet,” he depicts the poet of the title as “taken for a junky or a pervert / by police / who follow him, / as he should be followed, but not by them” (*CP* 279).

Following the poet “as he should be followed,” O’Hara’s work enters into and valorizes a queer network of desire paradoxically limned by homophobic gossip. Rather than disavowing the gossip that keeps queer meanings in circulation around the poet and poetic production, he embraces and redeploys it, proclaiming “To the Poem”: “Let us do something grand,” something “small and important and / unAmerican” (*CP* 175). In *Kenneth Koch, A Tragedy*, his self-proclaimed “great collaborative play” with Larry Rivers “which cannot be printed because it is so filled with 50s art gossip

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<sup>36</sup> Brad Gooch, Interview with John Ashbery, 4 February 1988, qtd. in Gooch, *City Poet*, 190.

<sup>37</sup> Butt, *Between You and Me*, 44, 45.

that everyone would sue us,” O’Hara has Koch’s character recall with mock-anxiousness: “They called me ‘queer’ and I thought they meant I was a poet, so I became a poet. What if I’d understood them?”<sup>38</sup> Recognizing how “poet” can signify “queer,” O’Hara humorously intimates that “queer” can in turn signify “poet,” as if one identity might insinuate the other. And as “Prose for the Times” suggests, in the culture of suspicion surrounding postwar American sexuality, a culture fueled by the Kinsey report and McCarthyism, they often did. As sexuality and poetry blur in “Prose for the Times,” O’Hara diagnoses and plays on the fears of his era, considering that to make poetry out of one’s queer social world during a “dangerous and scary period” involves accepting an invitation to an uncertain encounter, and perhaps creating something out of even this encounter’s violent failures. If “[y]esterday” the poet was “exhausted” and could only “suppose” he was “a poet,” these failures are, nonetheless, presumably what make him “feel like writing” the poem that we read today.

As an instrument of Cold War political power, gossip seeks out, produces, and disciplines the non-normative; it harries queerness. Yet the negative affect that motors such gossip, implicit in the scene of malicious knowingness about poetic identity in “Prose for the Times,” is not simply opposed to but at the ambivalent heart of O’Hara’s *lyric* gossip and its queer erotics. Or perhaps gossip’s bad feeling is rather, as the title of a 1954 poem announces, seated in this poetry’s “Spleen.” Spleen, an affective state of spite, moroseness, and melancholy conceived of as rooted in the body, linked to artistic genius, and manifesting a nervous response to modernity, was familiar to O’Hara foremost from his enthusiastic reading of Charles Baudelaire, who describes it in *Paris Spleen* as “some malicious Demon” that “gets into us, forcing us,

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<sup>38</sup> O’Hara, “Larry Rivers: A Memoir,” *Collected Poems*, 514; Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers, *Kenneth Koch, a Tragedy*, in *Amorous Nightmares of Delay: Selected Plays* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 129.

in spite of ourselves, to carry out his most absurd whims.”<sup>39</sup> Baudelaire’s figure calls to mind O’Hara’s image of the muse as “my demon my dish,” and in “Spleen” O’Hara reflects on how this “demon” indeed “gets into” and possesses him, seemingly in spite of himself:

I know so much  
about things, I accept  
so much, it’s like  
vomiting. And I am  
nourished by the  
shabbiness of my  
knowing so much  
about others and what  
they do, and accepting  
so much that I hate  
as if I didn’t know  
what it is, to me.  
And what it is to  
them I know, and hate. (CP 187)

Even as O’Hara claims to “accept / so much,” “Spleen” seems formally to have accepted as little as possible, working within a purposefully restricted lexicon whose every word it worries, teasing out of each as much meaning as it can. Thus chewing for fourteen terse lines on his taste for distasteful dish—what he calls the “shabbiness of my / knowing so much / about others and what / they do”—O’Hara here examines how the relationship between disgust and desire, often remarked, plays a central role in gossip and its commitment to the sordid details of dishing the dirt. When William Ian Miller writes of disgust that it “might bring in its train affects that work to move one closer again to what one just backed away from,” affects ranging “from curiosity, to fascination, to a desire to mingle,” he could just as easily be describing gossip, which can in one breath recoil, *How horrible!* and in the next insist, *Tell me everything*.<sup>40</sup> In the terms of “Spleen,” gossip’s way of “knowing” can make

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Bad Glazier,” *Paris Spleen* (1869), trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), 13.

<sup>40</sup> William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 111.

“accepting” feel like “vomiting” and “vomiting” seem “nourish[ment],” such that it is difficult to decide whether O’Hara’s repeated claim to “know so much” is a disgusted confession or a fascinated boast.

Of course, it is both. O’Hara imagines his poetry more generally if no less ambivalently in terms of “spleen” when, in a letter to Fairfield Porter, he ostensibly criticizes his own work as “full of objects for their own sake, spleen and ironically intimate observation which may be truthfulness (in the lyrical sense) but is more likely to be egotistical cynicism masquerading as honesty.”<sup>41</sup> Porter’s reply, perhaps sensing the self-valorizing undercurrent of this assessment, shrewdly assures O’Hara that “[a]nother name” for the quality of “spleen” in his poetry “is generosity,” drawing out the suggestion that aversion can also be a form attraction.<sup>42</sup> O’Hara later says as much in “Joe’s Jacket,” where we find “the incessant talk of affection / expressed as excitability and spleen” (*CP* 329). In collapsing the opposition between attraction and repulsion, between taking “things” in (“accepting”) and forcing “things” out (“vomiting”), “Spleen” further suggests how the performance of gossip troubles distinctions between self and “others,” “I” and “they,” what “I am” and “what they do”; between “knowing” and unknowing; between subjective (“what it is, to me”) and objective (“what it is to / them I know”) perspectives more generally—and between, most of all, feeling disgusted and feeling disgusting.

This promiscuous “desire to mingle” subjectivities, inspiring and arising out of disgust, resonates with the progression in “Prose for the Times” from the child who “would make myself vomit so I wouldn’t have to go to parties” to the poet who nevertheless “accept[s] an invitation to a party” (if only to wind up exclaiming, “Ugh!”). In “Spleen,” too, a marked ambivalence toward negotiating the intimacy and

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<sup>41</sup> Frank O’Hara to Fairfield Porter, 7 July 1955, qtd. in Gooch, *City Poet*, 268.

<sup>42</sup> Fairfield Porter to Frank O’Hara, 8 July 1955, *Material Witness: The Selected Letters of Fairfield Porter*, ed. Ted Leigh (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 131.

strangeness of “others” carries with it an erotic allure. Within the poem’s thematic and formal dialectic between attraction and repulsion, reception and release, its seemingly dominant affect, “hate,” becomes as well a form of desire that, to recall Miller, “work[s] to move one closer again to what one just backed away from.” As O’Hara asks in a later poem concerned with the productive role played by “hate” and “shabbiness” in relationships with others, “why be afraid of hate, it is only there / think of filth, is it really awesome / neither is hate” (*CP* 333-34).

“Spleen” takes up the “hate,” “spleen,” and disgust that often motivate gossip’s “ironically intimate observation” not as a moral stance but as a shameful undoing of gossip’s tedious moral stance. “[N]ourished” by his eroticized relation to gossip and the “shabbiness” of “knowing” and “accepting / so much” that his culture deems filthy or disgusting, including the practice of gossip itself, O’Hara imagines gossip’s performance of repulsion and attraction as a means of queer self-making in which one flirts with and is seduced by the disgusting (we might label its four acts “I know,” “I hate,” “I accept,” and “I am”). “The complex of judgments that are embodied in disgust, the way disgust in fact works,” Miller writes, “means that it has to get its hands dirty. How could it be otherwise?” In fact, he adds, disgust “may even have to be curious about [the disgusting] or fascinated by it to do its job really well, carouse with it after a fashion.”<sup>43</sup> Put to queer use, this dynamic recalls what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as gossip’s “rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations” of one’s “social landscape.”<sup>44</sup> We might even envision gossip’s fascination with the illicit, the erotic, and the disgusting as asking the multivalent question that announces one of O’Hara’s six poems entitled “Song” (this one from 1959): “Is it dirty”?

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<sup>43</sup> Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 111.

<sup>44</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

Is it dirty  
does it look dirty  
that's what you think of in the city

does it just seem dirty  
that's what you think of in the city  
you don't refuse to breathe do you

someone comes along with a very bad character  
he seems attractive. is he really. yes. very  
he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes

that's what you think of in the city  
run your finger along your no-moss mind  
that's not a thought that's soot

and you take a lot of dirt off someone  
is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly  
you don't refuse to breathe do you (*CP* 327)

This lyric “Song” about feeling “dirty”—unclean, disgusted, sexual—loosely references villanelle form, using its refrains (“that’s what you think of in the city,” “you don’t refuse to breathe do you,” and variations on the question “Is it dirty”) to edit together dirt, gossip, and sex. As the poem dissolves between the filth everywhere present in “the city,” gossip about “someone” as “attractive as his character is bad” (“is he really. yes. very”), and a scene of cruising for “someone” to “take a lot of dirt off” of, dishing the dirt becomes an eroticized way of “mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations” of a queer “social landscape” within the squeaky-clean conformity of the 1950s mainstream cultural terrain. In many ways, “Song” presents—as its title suggests—a more obviously celebratory and less spiteful rewrite of “Spleen,” and as in that poem, O’Hara here viscerally figures *himself*, as gossip, as the permeable border between the space of the poem and this “social landscape,” making bodily his lyric gossip’s transformative play with invitation and exclusion, who is in and who is out. The poet’s dish, as Miller might say, carouses with dirt, and inevitably “get[s] its hands dirty. How could it be otherwise?” *You*

*don't refuse to breathe do you?*

Accordingly, the obsessively mulled-over meanings of “dirty” (“that’s what you think of in the city”) shift over the course of the poem as “dirt” moves from something external to the poet to something internal. If in the first stanza’s repulsed pose the “dirty” is to be avoided and observed only from a safe distance (“Is it dirty / does it look dirty”), by the second stanza it appears less conclusively filthy (“does it just seem dirty”) and at any rate unavoidable (“you don’t refuse to breathe do you”), and by the final stanza it is actively sought out (“you take a lot of dirt off someone”) and reimagined as something that “improves” one’s “character.” This rapid progression from disgust to desire accompanies an emergence of a lyric self, as the “dirty” surfaces of “the city” become the “dirty” surfaces of “attractive” bodies, of others’ interiorities (“his character”), and finally of one’s own interiority: “run your finger along your no-moss mind,” the poet declares; “that’s not a thought that’s soot.” The poem’s “you,” at first indicating a second-person address to a general, anonymous “you,” thus increasingly (though never completely or finally) points toward the lyric self-address of a particular subjectivity, so that once again gossip about a strangely intimate “someone” enables a provisional lyric self-performance—as if “Song” declares that someone’s going to come along with a very bad character, or my name isn’t Frank O’Hara.

At the same time, the fleeting lyric self that appears in “Song” internalizes the “dirty” exterior space of “the city” to the extent that it can seem, as much as any particular subjectivity or body, a resonant *space* of gossip, echoing with all of the dirty thoughts one might “think of in the city.” The figure of the self as a queer urban space is a recurring one in O’Hara’s work. In the 1953 poem “Grand Central,” for instance, O’Hara speaks *as* the station, presenting his voice as the gossipy heart of New York’s infrastructure: “The wheels inside me are thundering,” he begins; and he is, in an

image that suggests Ovid's vision of the House of Fame, "an expanse of marble floor / covered with commuters and information" (*CP* 168). This "information" is chiefly sexual gossip, and in the final stanza the voice of the terminal comes alive as it relates in detail one particularly juicy bit: "During the noon-hour rush a friend / of mine took a letter carrier across / the catwalk underneath the dome," "knelt inside my cathedral," and "unzipped the messenger's trousers / and relieved him of his missile, hands / on the messenger's dirty buttocks, / the smoking muzzle in his soft blue mouth" (*CP* 169). In "Homosexuality," from 1954, O'Hara similarly slips into the voice of a queer urban space of gossip. "It's wonderful to admire oneself / with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each // of the latrines," he writes, fluidly moving from the "merits" of "oneself" to the "merits" of restrooms known for public sex, such that one stands in for the other: "14<sup>th</sup> Street is drunken and credulous," he dishes, while "53<sup>rd</sup> tries to tremble but is too at rest" (*CP* 182).

These lyric voices are both intimate and inanimate, bodily and disembodied, intensely personal yet ultimately anonymous, much like the spaces of gossip and public sex from which they emanate, spaces menaced but also queerly charged by the "shabbiness" of "knowing so much / about others and what / they do." They are voices that suggest how O'Hara's lyric gossip more generally claims a space for the circulation of queerness, using dish as a source for an erotics of style that makes dirt desirable. Turning inside out disgust and desire, these poems do something "small and important and / unAmerican" by providing "something like a livable space" for the shabby, filthy, dirty, gossipy—a space unwittingly nourished by the very culture that would find it disgusting. "I don't have an American / body, I have an anonymous body," O'Hara writes in "Grand Central," adding, "though / you can get to love it" (*CP* 168).

#### IV. SELF-GOSSIP

Thus far we have seen how O’Hara’s stylized performance of gossip seeks to reimagine varied social spaces—ranging from the intimate party to the anonymous city to the textual space of the poem—as livable worlds for a queer network that ripples out from an empirical inner circle to more affectively and temporally distant readers. Figuratively talking behind his objects’ backs but in front of their faces, O’Hara’s lyric gossip brings to mind Roland Barthes’ remarks on friendship: “friends form a network among themselves,” Barthes writes, “and each must be apprehended there as *external/internal*, subjected by each conversation to the question . . . where am I among my desires? Where am I in relation to desire? The question is put to me by the development of a thousand vicissitudes of friendship.”<sup>45</sup> Is one internal or external to an exchange of gossip, a social circle, a community, a culture, a poem? Is one an intimate or a stranger? Is one within or without oneself and one’s desires, disgusted or disgusting? O’Hara’s lyric gossip amplifies the “vicissitudes of friendship” and their pressing questions in order to map (to recall Sedgwick) “the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations” of his “social landscape.”

In line with such queer world-making efforts, O’Hara’s use of gossip has been understood primarily as a function of community or friendship. Bruce Boone’s important early analysis of O’Hara’s “gay language” briefly identifies O’Hara’s gossip as an example of a “language practice [that] calls up and relates, or narrates, a community,” and numerous subsequent readers have noted his gossip in passing as, as Srikanth Reddy writes, a “social form [that] consolidates a larger group identity.”<sup>46</sup> In his study of friendship and postwar poetry, Epstein demonstrates how O’Hara often seeks to manage his relationships “in the realm of the text rather than ‘real’ life,” an

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<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 64.

<sup>46</sup> Boone, “Gay Language as Political Praxis,” 83; Reddy, “Digression Personified,” 18.

observation that accords with the consensus among those few critics who attend more specifically to O'Hara's gossip.<sup>47</sup> Hazel Smith, for instance, views the gossip in O'Hara's poetry as part of "a strategy for regulating relationships: a way of bringing out into the open, and at the same time containing, tensions," and David Trotter, too, suggests that O'Hara's gossip works to "ensur[e] a certain fluidity in his relationships with other people" by alternating gossipers and gossipees, those he gossips with and about, so that "the group is sustained without ever separating into permanent alignments."<sup>48</sup> Focusing on this dynamic's objectified gossipees, Trotter—in a view loosely shared by Smith and Epstein—sees O'Hara's gossip as a productive *denial* of intimacy, insofar as it temporarily distances O'Hara from his "feeling" for whichever friends he takes "as the objects of an impersonal curiosity," thus ensuring "a continuous redistribution of roles," and no set "hierarchy" of friendships.<sup>49</sup>

Without refuting these useful takes on gossip's relationship to the fluid social logics of O'Hara's poetry, I do want, by way of retracing where my discussion has been and where it has been headed, to pause over two of their tacit assumptions about O'Hara's gossip—the first being that, although O'Hara's poetry engages in a relatively benign form of gossip's othering, it is better in this scenario to be the subject than the object of gossip; and the second that O'Hara's poetic gossip is fundamentally about other people. These basic ideas are not specific to O'Hara criticism; indeed, they are widely understood as definitional aspects of gossip in general. To complicate their basis in O'Hara's poetry, then, is to ask how that poetry itself seeks to reimagine gossip. More specifically, to question the first assumption is to suggest the queer agency O'Hara's poetry locates in the unauthorized selves that are objectified and

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<sup>47</sup> Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 105.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara*, 150; David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 157.

<sup>49</sup> Trotter, *The Making of the Reader*, 157, 158.

circulated by gossip, while to question the second is to contend that O'Hara's lyric gossip pursues a version of such agency through the self-othering strategy of gossiping about himself. In so doing he seeks to transform, as much as the social spaces of friendship and community which have been the focus of his readers, the solitary space of lyric subjectivity.

Conventional wisdom tells us that to be gossiped about is to be absented and objectified, and it accords relatively greater agency and power to gossipers; yet one of the most curious aspects of O'Hara's lyric gossip is the immediacy and intimacy of its relationship to its gossipees, whose objectification is often paradoxically imagined as a form of agency—indeed, an agency that infringes on the gossip's own. O'Hara, recall, understood the “spleen” of good dish as expressing as well a form of “generosity” toward its objects, or what he terms in “Joe's Jacket” “the incessant talk of affection.” “If we were some sort of friends I might have to bitch you,” he writes in “Day and Night in 1952” (*CP* 93). Bill Berkson similarly recollects of O'Hara's “terrible” gossip, “He gleaned a whole repertoire of anecdotes out of every day. He dramatized your words to others. If you heard them, or if they came back to you, they weren't exactly *your* words, his voice was too much his own—but he showed what they meant in his terms. Nobody ever seemed to mind.”<sup>50</sup> Berkson's anecdote suggests how O'Hara's lyric gossip, not exactly someone else's words but not exactly his own, either, talks gossip's other into a liminal space of unauthorized agency. Gossip in this sense becomes a way—both ironic and intimate, bitchy and friendly, shabby and generous, objectifying *and* animating—for O'Hara to temporarily give himself over, as in “Spleen,” to the incomplete agency of “others and what / they do.”

When we turn to instances of gossip in the poems themselves, we can see how a frequent strategy of O'Hara's talk about absent others is to make them present,

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<sup>50</sup> Berkson, “Frank O'Hara and His Poems,” 161.

bringing them imaginatively into rather than excluding them from the experience of the poem. The gossipy “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul” is representative in its use of dish to gather together a series of names:

and Allen is back talking about god a lot  
and Peter is back not talking very much  
and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth’s  
although he is coming to lunch with Norman  
I suspect he is making a distinction  
well, who isn’t (CP 328)

Each member of this network of friends is “apprehended there as *external/internal*”—to the city (Allen and Peter are “back,” while Norman is saying “Adieu”), to the conversation (“talking” or “not talking”), to a “weekend coming up / at excitement-prone Kenneth Koch’s” (“Joe . . . is not coming”), and to a “lunch with Norman” (CP 328). The one space they all inhabit together, of course, is the space of the poem, suggesting how the poet and gossip who has elaborated this dishy list of distinctions is yet the only one not “making a distinction,” as his lyric gossip simultaneously excludes *and* includes the various objects of its talk.

In similar fashion, in “To Richard Miller”—a 1958 sonnet addressed to the publisher of the Tiber Press, which would soon bring out O’Hara’s *Odes*, a volume including prints by Mike Goldberg—O’Hara gossips with Miller about the apparently missing in action Goldberg, yet it is Goldberg, being gossiped about, who seems more intimately connected to O’Hara, who begins by conjecturing:

Where is Mike Goldberg? I don’t know,  
he may be in the Village far below  
or lounging on Tenth street with the gang (CP 301)

Goldberg “may be in the Village,” or “on Tenth street,” but he is certainly in the poem, and gradually the poem’s loose speculations about his possible activities accumulate an agency of their own and even a kind of poetic authority, standing in, in

a manner both jokey and erotic, for poems O'Hara does "not intend to write":

Maybe he is living sketches of an ODE  
ON SEX which I do not intend to write  
in his abode or drinking bourbon in the light (CP 301)

The increasingly clunky rhymes which commandeer the sonnet's logic mirror and accentuate how O'Hara's gossip begins to speak for itself—a development especially appropriate since the poem and its dish have been inspired by O'Hara's inability to account for or control Goldberg's actions in the first place: "I will goad / him into Tibering and hope all's for the best," O'Hara weakly concludes (CP 301).

The agency O'Hara posits for those objectified by his gossip becomes even more explicit in a garrulous passage from "The 'Unfinished,'" in which, "back in New York," he finds that

Gregory is back in New York and we are still missing  
each other in the Cedar and in hotel lobbies where Salvador Dali is  
supposed to sleep and at Anne Truxell's famous giggling parties  
until one fine day (*vedremo*) we meet over a duck dinner, good god  
I just remembered what he stuffed it with, you guessed it: oranges!  
and perhaps, too, he is the true narrator of this story, Gregory  
no, I must be, because he's in Chicago (CP 318-19)

*Where is Gregory? I don't know . . . .* This catalogue of missed connections puts forward a number of possible meeting places for O'Hara and Gregory Corso, all spaces of gossip—the buzzing city, "the Cedar" bar, "hotel lobbies" where Dali is rumored "to sleep," the painter "Anne Truxell's famous giggling parties." Even when the two do finally "meet over a duck dinner," the odd temporality of this meal frames it as another missed connection: "one fine day (*vedremo*)," an allusion to Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* and its aria "Un bel di, vedremo" or "One fine day, we'll see," superimposes the future tense of "*vedremo*" onto the lyric present tense of "we meet"; for good measure, O'Hara then refers to the meeting in the past tense ("I just remembered what he stuffed it with, you guessed it: oranges!"). Thus just when O'Hara and Gregory at last converge in one place it is at seemingly different times,

such that they “are still missing / each other” everywhere but within the space of the poem’s fantastic “one fine day.” In *this* space of gossip Gregory, the object of O’Hara’s gossipy monologue, is given authority as “perhaps” its “true narrator.” These lines evoke a tricky authorial moment in “5 Participants in a Hearsay Panel,” also from 1959, when Elaine de Kooning adds, after reading a poem by “Frank,” “Frank has asked me to announce that none of the sentiments expressed in this poem are his. They’re mine” (151). They also recall O’Hara’s use of metalepsis in “A Party Full of Friends,” and how his comic failure to keep Arnie from entering the poem connotes a loss of autonomy to the objects of his gossip. Here, O’Hara generates an almost metaleptic effect as he gabs about Gregory so much that he not only appears in the poem as a present absence but “perhaps” becomes its “true narrator.”

Recognizing the strange, unauthorized agency that O’Hara locates in being gossiped about helps to clarify the strategies of poetic self-fashioning in poems such as “Song [Is it dirty],” where he transforms himself into a “dirty” mind and hence the object of his own gossip, or “Homosexuality,” where “with complete candor” he discusses himself as a city space, occupying both the subject and object positions of the poem’s dish. This collapsing of subject and object positions and their first and third person speech—at issue in “Spleen”—points toward the second and most significant way in which O’Hara contravenes not only standard critical assumptions about his gossip but also the conventions of gossip itself, which is by definition about other people. In fact, O’Hara’s gossip is at times not about *people* at all, calling into question much more fundamental distinctions between the subjects and objects of gossip. In “Homosexuality” he gossips about “the latrines,” while in “Song [Is it dirty]” he dishes the city’s overdetermined “dirt”; in “The Lover,” he baffles the common-sense claim that, as one theorist of gossip quips, “we can’t gossip about

carburetors or the weather,<sup>51</sup> by gossiping, in a rhetorical move akin both to the pathetic fallacy and apostrophe, about nature: “The mean moon is like a nasty / little lemon above the ubiquitous / sniveling fir trees,” he writes (*CP* 46). These instances of gossip about inanimate objects have the effect of animating them, underlining the similar but less expected vivifying effects of O’Hara’s objectifying talk about people.

These quickening effects provide one explanation for why, when O’Hara’s poetry does (as is much more common) gossip about another person, it tends to disclose as much about O’Hara as anyone else. Ashbery asserts that O’Hara’s work “is almost exclusively autobiographical. Even at its most abstract, or even when it seems to be telling someone else’s story . . . it is emerging out of his life.”<sup>52</sup> Even a poem that announces itself as “A Party Full of Friends,” we might add, is ultimately most full of O’Hara himself. However knowingly, gossipers perform and reveal themselves to an audience; to gossip is always to risk to some degree one’s own reputation alongside that of the gossipee. Andy Warhol remarks in *POPism* that “One thing I’ve always liked to do is hear what people think of each other—you learn just as much about the person who’s talking as about the person who’s getting dished,”<sup>53</sup> a claim neatly illustrated by a stream of gossip in O’Hara’s poem “Day and Night in 1952”:

John, for instance, thinks I am the child of my own old age; Jimmy is cagey with snide remarks while he washes dishes and I pose in the bathroom; Jane is rescuing herself at the mercy of her ill temper towards me which is expressed only in the riddles of her motival phantasies; what am I to say of Larry? who really resents the fact that I may be conning him instead of Vice and Art; Grace may secretly distrust me but we are both so close to the abyss that we must see a lot of each other . . . but the other John catches every one of my innuendi

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<sup>51</sup> John Morreall, “Gossip and Humor,” *Good Gossip*, eds. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 58.

<sup>52</sup> Ashbery, introduction, O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, x.

<sup>53</sup> “It’s called gossip, of course, and it’s an obsession of mine,” he continues. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: the Warhol ’60s* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 92.

the wrong way or at the very least obliquely and is never mistaken or ill-tempered, which is what I worry about the most. What can I do?  
(CP 93-94)

Smith cites this passage as an example of O'Hara's gossip about others, but it is more accurate to say that in this instance he takes great pleasure in dishing himself.<sup>54</sup> What can he do? Throughout his work, O'Hara self-reflexively deploys the insight expressed in Warhol's remark, using dish to construct and convey (and indeed caress) self. He and Larry Rivers comically adapt this technique in the relentlessly gossipy *Kenneth Koch, a Tragedy*, reserving the drama's most devastating gossip for its own authors:

KENNETH:  
You wouldn't talk this way if Larry or Frank were here.

LEWITIN:  
Those phonies.

JACKSON POLLOCK:  
Those fags.

FRANZ KLINE:  
Those dope addicts.

GEORGE:  
Those cheapskates.<sup>55</sup>

"What've they got to do with all of this?" a character shortly asks, and the answer, clearly, is everything: gossip, here, becomes a form of playful, circuitous self-disclosure.<sup>56</sup> *Have you heard what they're saying about me?*

Thus, although even Warhol admits, "you can't gossip *about* yourself," O'Hara often does just this, talking about himself behind his back in front of his face, one might say, as an eroticized mode of aesthetic self-making.<sup>57</sup> In "Dialogues," he

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<sup>54</sup> See Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara*, 149.

<sup>55</sup> Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara, *Kenneth Koch, a Tragedy*, in *Amorous Nightmares of Delay: Selected Plays* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 130.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>57</sup> Warhol and Hackett, *Popism*, 93. Emphasis mine.

recirculates dish about himself (“You call me Mr. de Winter / behind my back, smiling, not without gentleness”) and takes pride that others are “dining on my image” (*CP* 240, 241), while in one of his many poems entitled “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” he similarly reports:

I am so glad that Larry Rivers made a  
statue of me

and now I hear that my penis is on all  
the statues of all the young sculptors who’ve  
seen it (*CP* 190)

Later, referring to this gossip’s exposure as much as the nude “statue”<sup>58</sup> it buzzes about, O’Hara happily admits, “I am what people make of me—if they / can and when they will”—seemingly claiming to have given the fashioning of his self up to others’ authority and “what people make” of him, whether dish or art (*CP* 190). But O’Hara, not simply resigned to being made by others, proves complicit in this making, eagerly taking up the unauthorized agency of being gossiped about in order to make something of himself. More than anyone else, O’Hara here is dining on his image.

On occasion O’Hara pushes the limits of gossip even further, gossiping not only about himself but also disregarding the convention that, since gossip is an essentially social activity, “we do not,” as Aaron Ben-Ze’ev reminds us, “gossip to ourselves.”<sup>59</sup> In the poem “Olive Garden,” for instance, the solitary poet is “too tired for companionship,” but not too tired for the dish about himself that he divulges to himself: “Some disinfatuated fisherman will say of me ‘He just wanted to go somewhere,’ and indeed it will make for the tears of intimacy to hear. I am truly filthy, and not the most bitchy could guess the whimsicality of my retreats, the arabesque of my faltering. Ah! what do I mean of myself?” (*CP* 92). As O’Hara writes in “Essay on Style,” “I was reflecting the other night meaning / I was being

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<sup>58</sup> The “statue” to which O’Hara refers is in fact Larry Rivers’ 1954 painting *O’Hara Nude with Boots*.

<sup>59</sup> Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, “The Vindication of Gossip,” *Good Gossip*, 14. Emphasis mine.

reflected upon” (CP 393). Such a mode of self-disclosure evokes John Stuart Mill’s description of lyric poetry as “feeling, confessing itself to itself,” and more immediately invites comparison with mid-century confessional poetics.<sup>60</sup> Yet where O’Hara’s confessional contemporaries provocatively pursue self-authorized identities, his lyric gossip reveals, as we have seen, in the possibilities of unauthorized selves (at times as if *feeling, gossiping about itself to itself*). In practice, of course, the difference between confession and gossip can be difficult to discern: confession might be merely the high cultural version of gossip’s low discourse, substituting the model of the psychoanalytic session and its talking cure for that of the telephone chat and its daily dose of dish. In theory, however, the ideal of confession seeks to uncover and inhabit the putative truth of the self, while gossip thrives on the mutability of truths and identities. As Breslin writes, “Rather than struggling to recover a lost core of identity, O’Hara creates a theatricalized self that is never completely disclosed in any of its ‘scenes.’”<sup>61</sup>

We might better understand these extreme instances of O’Hara’s lyric gossip, then, as *self-gossip*, in the dual sense that O’Hara is talking about himself but also dramatically indulging the “truly filthy” social taboo of talking to oneself, or what Erving Goffman calls “self-talk”: when, speaking aloud, “we address an absent other or address ourselves in the name of some standard-bearing voice” (79). Goffman asserts that to be caught in the “peculiar” performance of self-talk, which involves “more roles than persons,” is humiliating: “self-talk might appear to be a kind of perversion,” he writes, “a form of linguistic self-abuse” akin to “masturbation” (80). What appears perverse, in other words, is not so much to talk to oneself—surely a common enough occurrence when one presumes to be alone—but to be found talking

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<sup>60</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1833), in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), 348.

<sup>61</sup> Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary*, 231.

to oneself and, even worse, to *continue* doing so. More than an embarrassment, such persistent self-talk presents “a threat to intersubjectivity; it warns others that they might be wrong in assuming a jointly maintained base of ready mutual intelligibility among all persons present” (85).

If self-talk, as Goffman writes, “involves lifting a form of interaction from its natural place and its employment in a special way,” then O’Hara’s poetic self-gossip, in lifting his poetry’s dish from its usual scenario and restaging it as a solitary drama, represents a further inseting of the performance of his lyric gossip more generally, which already redeploys the social interaction of gossip within the space of lyric poetry (83). Thinking specifically about O’Hara’s self-gossip therefore brings into relief the broader investment of his lyric gossip in reimagining, rather than simply rejecting, the solitary space of lyric subjectivity. Goffman’s account of self-talk can make it sound oddly like lyric poetry. In self-talk “we address an absent other or address ourselves”; in the lyric, writes Northrop Frye, the “poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else” other than the reader.<sup>62</sup> “All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy,” claims Mill,<sup>63</sup> and although Goffman’s focus is not on literary language, he does consider “the soliloquy” in terms of self-talk, claiming it “is not really an exception to the application of the rule against public self-talk. Your soliloquizer is really talking to self when no one is around; we members of the audience are supernatural, out-of-frame eavesdroppers. Were a character from the dramatized world to approach, our speaker . . . would stop soliloquizing” (83). Goffman suggests that the dramatic soliloquy is not “public self-talk” as long as it maintains the illusion of its privacy—a formulation that recalls understandings of lyric as “preeminently the utterance that is overheard,” or more precisely the utterance that

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<sup>62</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 249.

<sup>63</sup> Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” 349.

we “out-of-frame eavesdroppers” must be able *to read as if* overheard in order to maintain lyric decorum.<sup>64</sup> In self-talk, that is, it is “the witnessing of the deed which transforms it into an improper one,” just as proper lyric, as Mill writes, requires that “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself” (81).<sup>65</sup>

Is lyric a form of inviolate self-talk, awaiting only its being caught out to seem perverse? When Goffman differentiates self-talk from “inner speech” on the basis that the former is out loud and often wildly animated, the latter silent and meditative, he suggests one way that the solitary lyric’s exalted use of language keeps from appearing “a form of linguistic self-abuse”: lyric discreetly *speaks*; self-talk volubly *talks* (80). Discussing talk, Steven Connor notes how “English maintains a subtle but sustained set of distinctions between talking and speaking,” such that to *talk* implies a lack of agency or conscious thought, whereas to *speak* connotes authority and purpose.<sup>66</sup> Talking designates the casual, the gratuitous; it is more about the act itself than any particular information or aim (as in idle talk, small talk, or girl talk). Talk can drift into the mindless or automatic (think: talking heads, talking through your hat, or talking in your sleep) and more generally hints that one is not in control of one’s language (as in loose talk, or *he’s all talk*). Speaking, on the other hand, suggests formality and design, and a desire to convey a particular meaning. Certainly there are exceptions to these differences in usage. But the nuanced distinction in English between talking and speaking points toward one of the reasons forms of talk like gossip can seem so far apart from the lyric: gossip is a feminized way of talking; the modern lyric ideal imagines a masculine form of speaking (lyrical practice, to be sure,

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<sup>64</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 249.

<sup>65</sup> Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” 349.

<sup>66</sup> Steven Connor, “Satan and Sybil: Talk, Possession, and Dissociation,” *Talk Talk Talk: The Cultural Life of Everyday Conversation*, ed. S. I. Salamensky (New York: Routledge, 2001), 163.

being another matter). Even William Wordsworth, influentially in pursuit of a poetry of ordinary language, maintained that the poet is “a man *speaking* to men,” and tellingly positioned the speech of poets against the feminized gossip he called “personal *talk*.”<sup>67</sup> The critical concept of the poetic speaker that quietly emerges out of the New Criticism, becoming standard in the 1950s, underlines this distinction.<sup>68</sup> The idea of the speaker provided principally a term for distinguishing the biographical person who writes a text from the person who speaks within it, but also, implicitly, a term that could be called on to sort neatly the gossipy talk of biography from the voice that speaks poetry—at precisely the historical moment when the seeming distance high modernism had imposed between these entities was being newly challenged by postwar poetic practices ranging from Beat poetry to confessional verse to the talky lyrics of O’Hara.

O’Hara’s poems perform a torrent of “incessant talk”: within them “I talk, you talk, / he talks, she talks, it talks,” “we talk about things” as “we talk all afternoon” and then “quietly talk all night,” and when finally “we are alone” we talk about how “no one is talking” (*CP* 329, 192, 308, 421, 345, 441). Such non-stop talk has earned O’Hara a reputation as the quintessential poet of sociality. Yet so much of this performed talk, even when anchored by a particular addressee, feels like self-talk. Goffman describes how an invitation to talk “that is openly snubbed or apparently undetected . . . can leave us feeling that we have been caught engaging in something like talking to ourselves” (87), a scenario O’Hara calls attention to in “Day and Night

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<sup>67</sup> See the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), and “Personal Talk,” which begins, “I am not One who much or oft delight / To season my fireside with personal talk, / About Friends, who live within an easy walk, / Or Neighbours, daily, weekly, in my sight.” Each in William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 603, 269. Emphases mine.

<sup>68</sup> For a brief history of the literary critical term “speaker” see Clara Claiborne Park, “Talking Back to the Speaker,” *The Hudson Review* 42.1 (1989): 21-44. Park demonstrates how the term “speaker,” while tacitly present in many of the foundational texts of the New Criticism, does not unseat the term “poet” until the 1950s, most explicitly in Reuben Brower’s influential study *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951).

in 1952” when he interrupts the poem to ask of an ambiguous second-person addressee: “I’m talking to you over there, isn’t this damn thing working?” (*CP* 93). Finding ways to get the “damn thing” that is lyric poetry “working” would become the basis for O’Hara’s celebrated “I do this I do that” poems (*CP* 341), whose poetics of “Personism” emerged when O’Hara, while writing a poem, “was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.”<sup>69</sup> Substituting the poetic approximation of a telephone conversation for the actual conversation, or self-talk for talk, O’Hara “lift[s] a form of interaction from its natural place,” as Goffman might say, and redeploys it in an unnatural way, posing a purposeful “threat” to social and aesthetic norms of “mutual intelligibility.”

In casting the solitary lyric speaker as a self-talker, and this self-talker as engaged in self-gossip, O’Hara reimagines the space of lyric subjectivity in two significant ways. First, he draws out the perversity inherent in the performance of the lyric self, which is always talking to itself in public as if in private, at risk of illicit exposure. Like talking behind someone’s back in front of his or her face, perverse self-talk carries on in the presence of others it treats as absent, effecting a queer mix of intimacy and strangeness that derives its charge from the talker’s exposure. Second, by reframing lyric speech as talk O’Hara undermines the stability of the poet’s claim to an autonomous self that authorizes and unifies the poem. I have suggested how O’Hara’s poetic gossip about others valorizes effects of exposure and unstable agency as oddly animating; his self-gossip, in casting himself as both subject and object of dish, at once amplifies the illicitness of self-talk’s and gossip’s forms of exposure by indecorously revealing himself through his own talk and entails a ceding of poetic agency that allows for the emergence of unauthorized selves.

We can see these strategies crystallize in “Dido,” which presents the extended

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<sup>69</sup> Frank O’Hara, “Personism,” *Collected Poems*, 499.

self-gossip of a “queen,” “gloriously ruined,” who is also a faded “starlet” and—as this heady mix of classical and Hollywood mythology might suggest—also a feminized camp persona for the poet (*CP* 74, 75). “Dido” initiates its self-talk with a question posed and answered by the Queen of Carthage herself: “Suppose you really do, toward the end, fall away into a sunset which is your own self-ignited pyre? is it any the less a sunset just because you stopped carrying the torch? I must pull myself together . . .” (*CP* 74). The middle voice implicit in this opening Q & A between a “you” that is also “I” (*I ask myself*), in the “self-ignited pyre” (*I ignite myself*), and in the insistence that “I must pull myself together” announces a self both subject and object of her actions, not least of which is the gossip—to and about the self—by which she attempts to “pull [her]self together.” Lamenting her “dear heart, gloriously ruined,” she proclaims:

But this is the most heartbreaking of all, for the truly grave is the most objective like a joke: you advance unawares while misery surrounds you on the lips in the bars, and it accepts you as the characteristic sibilance of its voice, hitherto somewhat less divine.

I could find some rallying ground like pornography or religious exercise, but really, I say to myself, you are too serious a girl for that. . . . If, when my cerise muslin sweeps across the agora, I hear no whispers even if they’re really echoes, I know they think I’m on my last legs, “She’s just bought a new racing car” they say, or “She’s using mercurochrome on her nipples.” They’d like to think so. I have a stevedore friend who tells everything that goes on in the harbor. (*CP* 74-75)

“[T]oo serious a girl” for “pornography or religious exercise,” Dido turns instead to the divine perversities of self-talk, and particularly self-gossip. Goffman notes how even truly solitary self-talkers “may occasionally find themselves terminating a spate of self-talk with a self-directed reproach,” thus “catching *themselves* out—sometimes employing self-talk to do so” (81), and something of this doubly perverse, recursive logic inflects the statement “really, I say to myself,” which interpolates its self-talk within self-talk. Rather than “terminating a spate of self-talk,” however, this speech

tag—redundant unless directed toward others—accentuates how the poem’s self-talk perversely continues within the presence of others it not only excludes but whose roles it takes on. It is in taking on these roles that the poem becomes most explicitly an instance of self-gossip. Dido transforms the humiliation of being gossip “on the lips in the bars” by voicing that gossip herself: she becomes the sibilant hiss of gossip, providing the “characteristic” tone of “its voice” that now makes its “misery” feel “divine.” She is, to recall “Spleen,” a self “nourished by the / shabbiness” of the dish that objectifies her, and just as her self-talk voices the imagined gossip about her on “the lips in the bars,” it will provide the missing “whispers” that she feels *should* trail the sweep of her “cerise muslin” as she moves through the marketplace.

It is through the queer performance of dish that “Dido” shuttles between multiple roles, each suggesting an unauthorized self, “gloriously ruined” by gossip. Selling her damaged wares in the “market,” “the bars,” and “the harbor,” and “advertising in the Post Office” (or “the office of letters,” as Andrea Brady notes<sup>70</sup>), Dido seems a mythological figure, a fallen starlet, a camp queen, and a poet—and each of these figures is and is not O’Hara himself, who, as in “Song [Is it dirty],” moves fluidly between and intermingles their spaces of gossip, cruising, and poetry as he fantasizes a subjectivity at once objectified and animated by its becoming gossip (*CP* 75). The poem’s conclusion appropriately places the authority of its “queen” in the hands of an anonymous somebody—future lover or reader?—whose uncertain arrival promises both her ruin and her triumph: “if this doesn’t cost me the supreme purse, my very talent, I’m not the starlet I thought I was. . . . Somebody’s got to ruin the queen, my ship’s just got to come in” (*CP* 75). “Or my name isn’t / Frank O’Hara,” one can almost imagine this final line continuing. The extremes of a poem

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<sup>70</sup> Andrea Brady, “The Other Poet: Wieners, O’Hara, Olson,” in *Don’t Ever Get Famous: Essays on New York Writing after the New York School*, ed. Daniel Kane (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006), 336.

like “Dido” dramatize the strategies at work in lyric gossip less obviously or excessively but no less indelibly marked by the desire to engage and transform the solitary space of lyric subjectivity. O’Hara’s “deep gossip” is surely about friendship and community, but it is also deeply about the self that inhabits these social formations. Exploring the “ruin” of this self, O’Hara seeks to reconstitute it differently—to rethink ruin as possibility, disgust as desire, poetry as perversion, lyric as gossip.

## CHAPTER THREE

### JAMES MERRILL'S "CELESTIAL SALON":

#### *THE CHANGING LIGHT AT SANDOVER* AND THE AFTERLIFE OF GOSSIP

##### I. "BURIED IN OSTENSIBLE CHITCHAT"

[G]ossip, though it can be exceedingly interesting when the parties are alive, is not at all interesting when they're dead.

—W. H. Auden

[W]ho could ever think—in particular, at this date, what gay man—that someone's death ever stopped the elaboration of someone else's fantasy about him?

—D. A. Miller

Does gossip have an afterlife? The fresh news promised by hot gossip might seem to carry a short expiration date: gossip's critics and proponents alike often remark its occasional, ephemeral, and even disposable qualities—those aspects of everyday talk that, depending on one's perspective, either compare unfavorably to or enable a subversion of the literary, understood, in Ezra Pound's famous formulation, as "news that STAYS news."<sup>1</sup> Yet at a time when "Google's unforgiving memory," Daniel J. Solove argues, "transform[s] forgettable whispers within small local groups to a widespread and permanent chronicle of people's lives," gossip's news—if "once scattered, forgettable, and localized"—increasingly appears the enduring stuff of history.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it always has been. Ovid's influential account of gossip imagines the house of Fame, classical goddess of gossip and rumor, as an impossibly totalizing, eternal archive of "every voice and word" ever uttered, while Fame herself, as

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Solove, *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 8, 11. Solove presents a fascinating discussion of Internet gossip and its implications for free speech and privacy law, though his insistence that digital era gossip "is being reshaped in ways that heighten its negative effects" ("The Internet," he writes, is "a cruel historian") and his valorization of privacy run counter to the modern proliferation of gossip's pleasures and the aesthetic possibilities of publicity pursued by the poets I consider (12, 11).

thoroughly as any search engine's web crawler, "scours the whole wide world" of discourse for "all that goes on in heaven or sea or land."<sup>3</sup> Ovid intimates, *pace* Auden, that although the subjects and occasions of gossip inevitably pass, talk about them remains indelibly on record, waiting only for its performance to become "exceedingly interesting" again.<sup>4</sup> As no less a theorist of modern dish than Oscar Wilde puts it: "Gossip is charming! History is merely gossip."<sup>5</sup> In this view, our gossip outlives us, becoming history, or, rather, we become historical by living on as gossip. Indeed, insofar as gossip's keen, revivifying attention ensures that no one ever really gossips about the dead, Auden may be right to claim that good gossip dishes only on the living. More than a shift from the literal to the figurative, reinflecting Auden's claim in this way entails a change of emphasis from gossip's transience to our own; it suggests that, instead of asking if there can be gossip after life, we might better inquire: *is there life after gossip?*

The sharpest—and strangest—meditation on these questions that I know is James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a sprawling, 560-page poem that takes what can only be called an exceeding interest in (as one reader sees it) "much gossip, often licentious, about the famous dead," to the extent that, for some, the poem seems a veritable "all-night talk show of the dead."<sup>6</sup> *Sandover*—now narrative, now dramatic, now lyric in temper—chronicles nearly 30 years of Ouija board conversations between Merrill (JM, in the board's uppercase shorthand), his lover and partner David Jackson (DJ), and an eclectic ensemble of voices from the beyond,

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<sup>3</sup> See Book XII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 275-276.

<sup>4</sup> W. H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in the *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 451.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Moffett, *James Merrill: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 155; and Robert Mazzocco, "The Right Stuff," *New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1983, rptd. in Robert Polito, ed., *A Reader's Guide to James Merrill's The Changing Light at Sandover* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 215.

including dead friends, literary forebears, familiar spirits, bat-like angels, and a pantheon presided over by God Biology and his sister Mother Nature. Announcing his poem, in its opening pages, as “The Book of a Thousand and One Evenings Spent / With David Jackson at the Ouija Board,” Merrill mines the occult qualities of the relationship between literary tradition and individual talent as he channels a queer fantasia on themes as seemingly disparate as nuclear apocalypse, Cold War politics, homosexuality, friendship, reproduction, and poetic self-making.<sup>7</sup> These far-flung threads are woven together by the gossip that both establishes and sustains Merrill’s “celestial salon” and proves vital to his poem’s attempt to create “some kind of workable relation / Between the two worlds” (100, 20). Thriving on gossip with and about deceased parties, *Sandover* at times appears to be crafting a self-affirming literary genealogy of the gossip, from Plato to Proust and on; and its pedigree of gossip as poetic practice features, somewhat ironically, W. H. Auden (or WHA), who plays this divine comedy’s Virgil as a dotty queer uncle guiding his charges in their earnest hounding after juicy bits of revelation.

Though these revelations begin modestly—heavenly anecdotes, the (often comic) workings of reincarnation—they soon broach an extravagantly detailed cosmology. But for all the poem’s trappings of cosmic quest, JM and DJ delight most in the everyday pleasures of turning to their first and wittiest familiar, Ephraim, along with various dearly departed, “for an off-the-record gossip,” vowing early on “never to forego, in favor of / Plain dull proof, the marvelous nightly pudding” (124, 32). Even as *Sandover*’s later volumes seem to move away from Ephraim’s “marvelous,” supernatural dish, in favor of the absurdly divine and divinely absurd pedagogy of atomic bats and archangels, JM and DJ cling to Ephraim’s camp “tone,” at first

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<sup>7</sup> James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 4. Further references will appear in the text.

“trusted not one bit” (17). The two quickly recognize “How much we’d come to trust him, take as law / His table talk, his backstage gossip,” and they consistently revel in its “no-proof rhetoric” (55). No surprise, then, that Merrill’s readers have remarked, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, the “gaily inflected gossip” of his poem’s central figures and the chatty tone and subject matter of verse steeped in “gossip from the beyond” and “social chitchat,” largely agreeing that “gossip and ritualized information form much of the poem’s surface.”<sup>8</sup> Yet responses to this gossipy “surface” have tended to dismiss it as *mere* surface, or “more gossip than gospel.”<sup>9</sup> Noting gossip’s unavoidable presence in Merrill’s project, but only in passing, most critics have proceeded as if in tacit agreement not to indulge the poem’s idle talk: as if, in this case, what happens in *Sandover* stays in *Sandover*.<sup>10</sup>

Merrill, too, seemed to sense his poem might become more gossip than gospel.

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<sup>8</sup> From John Shoptaw, “James Merrill and John Ashbery,” in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, eds. Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 767; Phoebe Pettingell, “Voices from the Atom,” *New Leader*, December 4, 1978, rptd. in *A Reader’s Guide*, 159; Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 213; and Charles Molesworth, “Scripts for the Pageant,” *The New Republic*, July 26, 1980, rptd. in *A Reader’s Guide*, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin Bedient, “Books Considered,” *The New Republic*, June 5, 1976, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Those few readers who find Merrill’s dish palatable and substantive enough to address follow Helen Vendler in first conceiving the poem’s talk not as *gossip* but the broader, and ostensibly more benign, *conversation* (see *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, 217). For these readers conversation—celebrated, however rightly, as a democratic exchange between affectionate equals—lends itself better to ethical claims for the poem’s talk as a means of establishing non-violative relationships between self and other (see Lee Zimmerman, “Against Apocalypse: Politics and James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*,” *Contemporary Literature* 30.3 [1989]: 383-385; and Nick Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich* [Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003], 165-166, 183).

Such claims in fact resonate with the work of theorists who have attempted to recharacterize gossip’s primary function as expressing intimacy and affection, rather than conveying trivial matters or maliciously spreading misinformation. But these claims for conversation in Merrill’s trilogy, even if adapted to gossip, represent only part of the story: all gossip is a kind of conversation, but not all conversation is gossip. On the one hand, it would be difficult to argue that gossip establishes a non-violative relationship to the other, since it is objectifying talk about others that partly fuels gossip’s intimacy; similarly, an emphasis on conversation’s mutuality obscures gossip’s potential for enforcing normativity: the way in which gossip is always potentially about shaming, about establishing hierarchies (however fluid or temporary), about who’s in the know and who is not. On the other hand gossip, unlike conversation, also connotes a potential queerness, and a pleasurable, world-making investment in the non-normative. I seek to show how *Sandover*’s poetic representations and enactments of gossip significantly engage the tension between its potential normativity and its potential queerness.

In a draft typescript of *Sandover*'s third volume, in a passage cut before publication, he playfully describes efforts to resist the temptations of "an hour of devilish / Tortes of language, sparkling flutes of chat"—a culinary figure for the excess of gossip with eager, gabby ghosts that he feared would increase his poem's girth "each time we surrender / (Between meals as it were) to a rich dish. / The work's already anything but slender."<sup>11</sup> Despite these worries, Merrill and Jackson's Ouija sessions invariably succumb to "rich dish," much of it served up in the first omnibus publication of *Sandover* (1982), which gathers the poem's three installments, each less "slender" than the next—*The Book of Ephraim* (1976), *Mirabell's Books of Number* (1978), and *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980)—and adds a "Coda: The Higher Keys."<sup>12</sup> And *Sandover* was hardly the last word from the other side: Merrill's archive shows that he continued to consult the Ouija for the latest news from this world and the next until as late as just months before his death in early 1995. In addition to these talks, transcribed and preserved for posterity, Merrill publicly revisited the Ouija's world in poems appearing in *Late Settings* (1985) and *A Scattering of Salts* (1995), and in a dramatic adaptation (and eventual film) entitled *Voices from Sandover*.<sup>13</sup> But it is in a 1992 *Paris Review* interview entitled "The Plato Club" and conducted, via the Ouija board, with a gathering of deceased queer writers, that he presents his most outré elaboration of fantasies about the dead. Referenced briefly in *Sandover* as an "Athenian / Club where you can get a drink and read / The underground newspapers"

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<sup>11</sup> James Merrill Papers, Special Collections, Washington University Libraries.

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Ephraim* first appeared in Merrill's Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *Divine Comedies*. *Mirabell's Books of Number* was presented the National Book Award; the complete *Sandover* won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

<sup>13</sup> See "Clearing the Title" and "From the Cutting-Room Floor" in *Late Settings*, and "Nine Lives" in *A Scattering of Salts*, in James Merrill, *Collected Poems*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 406-410, 463-467, 591-601. *Voices from Sandover*, featuring Merrill as JM, was performed three times in the years 1988 and 1989, and filmed in 1990. For the script see *The Changing Light at Sandover*, 563-625. For the film see *Voices from Sandover*, videocassette, Films for the Humanities, Inc., 1990.

(305), the Plato Club, Jean Genet confirms, “is the gayest in the universe.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly there is something perversely buoyant about the ribald gossip that drives the interview’s proceedings, even as the spirits, as Gertrude Stein says, “watch & listen with amazement at current political efforts to ‘clean up’ sex” and worry, as Henry James does, that “Stigmata long gone have been re-released in fear of disease” (19, 79). In the course of what are meant to be *Paris Review*-style Q & As about, Merrill explains, “your life as a writer. Shoptalk,” Colette insists the emphasis be on “Gossip!” (30, 31). Merrill concludes of her bawdy dish and its emphasis on sex and language, “You’re inventing delicious fictions—I hope!—to dramatize their interaction” (33).

This nexus of gossip, sex, and poetic self-making is perhaps most clearly at work when Wallace Stevens attempts to allay Merrill’s concerns over the raunchy turn the interview has taken by comparing it with a recalled, or reimagined, *Life* magazine photo shoot. “Think of this assignment as I did when *Life* magazine insisted on photographing me in my living room,” he suggests. “I cunningly wore a robe over shirt & tie, coat & vest, & when the cameras were set up I was asked to stand near a wall of books. I did, but as the shutter clicked I opened my robe to reveal a considerable erection” (59). When this anecdote meets with considerable disbelief, Stevens explains that “for all of us here the joining of two hands on a cup leaves us quite aroused,” intimating the mechanics of the Ouija board and its chorus of dead voices, including his own, “aroused” into chatter by the shared grasp of the living (59). But his comment also, and more immediately, gestures toward the sexual excitement with which these voices respond to Merrill and Jackson’s touch, and—more to the point—implies the palpable erotics of being in touch with, and giving voice to,

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<sup>14</sup> James Merrill and David Jackson, “The Plato Club,” *Paris Review* 34.122 (1992): 51. Note that the interview eschews Merrill’s standard all-caps presentation of the Ouija’s voices. Further references will appear in the text.

gossipy presences from the other world. Stevens' unlikely anecdote reworks a moment of self-presentation as a poet for the pages of *Life* into bawdy sexual gossip for the pages of his living mediums, slyly engaged in their own games of concealment and self-exposure for the *Paris Review*.

Nearly all of Merrill and Jackson's interlocutors in "The Plato Club"—a veritable who's who of queer literature—concoct such "delicious fictions" of sex and style, or, as one spirit declares in an unpublished Ouija transcript, "WHAT I'D CALL A RICH LOAD OF GOSSIPY MANURE + ALL TRUE. WE PREDICT A SENSATION (POSSIBLY TINY LEGAL ACTION BUT NOT FOR YOU!)."<sup>15</sup> This characterization of the interview, like Merrill's favored adjective for the Ouija's dish—*rich*—accentuates gossip's ambivalent literary and cultural (not to mention legal) status: both "MATERIAL" and "MANURE," it is at once a source of nourishing abundance and of self-indulgent waste, both an object of fascinating complexity and one that inspires bemusement or indignation (*it's all a bit rich!*). Staking his own ambivalent relation to gossip, Merrill admits that "[a] lot of the talk" in *Sandover* "sounds like badinage, casual if not frivolous," but emphasizes, "something serious is usually going on under the surface."<sup>16</sup> "How many years," he asks in a draft passage from *Sandover*, "Before we learn to dig out meanings that / Lay buried in ostensible chitchat?"<sup>17</sup> Such remarks draw attention to the uncertain threshold between gossip and poetry, that tricky space, neither fully interior nor exterior to poet or poem, in which we find what Merrill calls in *Sandover* "this net of loose talk tightening to verse" (85).

This chapter charts the significance in *Sandover* of the dialectical tension

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<sup>15</sup> Ephraim's take on "The Plato Club" appears in a Ouija transcript dated September 22, 1991, James Merrill Papers.

<sup>16</sup> James Merrill, "An Interview with Fred Bornhauser" (1983), in James Merrill, *Collected Prose*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 136.

<sup>17</sup> These lines occur in a draft of the conclusion of the third part of the first lesson in *Scripts for the Pageant* (see *Sandover*, 332, for the final version, which omits these lines). From a typescript dated October 29, 1977, and taped into Merrill's notebook of Ouija transcripts, James Merrill Papers.

between “gossip” and “gospel,” “loose talk” and “verse.” In the private Ouija transcripts and unofficial codas, like “The Plato Club,” which follow *Sandover*’s completion in 1982 and together make up the poem’s rich afterlife as gossip, Merrill reenvisions the fictive world of *Sandover* and his poetic reputation in the context of anxious AIDS era discourses about sexuality and the arts, placing renewed insistence on—and faith in—the dense intertwining of gossip, poetry, and sex in the otherworldly voices he and Jackson have aroused. These fantasies about the dead both dig in and dish the dirt, finding buried meanings and new life in *Sandover*’s chitchat. Taking my cue from these postmortems of *Sandover* and the stakes of their sensational performance of gossip, in what follows I offer an account of the formative interplay between the queer art of gossip and Merrill’s poetic practice. Doing so entails first a discussion of how mid-century attitudes about sexuality inflect the relationship of lyric privacy to gossipy publicity in *Sandover*. Developing this line of thought, I examine the ways the Ouija-poem’s “backstage gossip” and the pleasures of such contingent, “no-proof rhetoric” challenge the pervasive menace of the gossip-laden, Cold War discourse of the Lavender Scare, which haunts the 1950s origins of Merrill’s poem and which would position queerness as a figure for the non-reproductive and anti-social, in part by blurring nuclear and sexual threat. In *Sandover*, I argue, the reproduction of lyric gossip establishes affiliations that recast a post-nuclear fear of annihilation in terms of the domestic sphere and a queer, post-nuclear family, building a utopian vision of the future out of the unstable economy of queer reproduction central to America’s Cold War unease. *Sandover*’s “celestial salon” and its complicated ties, sustained by gossip and poetry, thus invite us to consider both gossip’s role in and the relation between queer and poetic self-formation, and to encounter the world-making strategies of poetic tradition as a gossip network.

Merrill’s gossipy retelling of the pervasive cultural narrative which equates

homosexuality with the dissolution of the social, I will further suggest, opens onto and in part arises from the aesthetic issue of poetic tone. As Langdon Hammer explains, the contemporary question of tone—“a key problem in American poetry since the 1970s, with both technical and philosophical aspects”—involves not only a formal shift from predominantly metrical to predominantly free verse, but also a “historical difference in the confidence with which we understand other people’s interiority and communicate our own.”<sup>18</sup> This crisis in confidence is a motivating dilemma for Merrill and Jackson’s tonally ambiguous Ouija dictations and the poem they engender, and I explore how the question of tone, both for Merrill and American poetry more broadly, is bound up in important ways with the question of gossip, which bears its own stylistic and theoretical concerns with both “other people’s interiority” and “our own.” As we will see, gossip and what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as its tools “for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one’s world” provide *Sandover*’s verse with an opportunity and a method for its provocative sounding of the problem of tone and the queer possibilities, as much as limits, of lyric interiority.<sup>19</sup>

## II. “NOT THE MOMENT QUITE TO GOSSIP”: POETRY AND PUBLICITY

In thinking about the relationship between lyric poetry and gossip in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, one could do worse than to begin with a formidable occasion for both: the poetry reading. Merrill’s poem ends with a poetry reading; in the coda’s final scene, we find JM about to deliver *his* poem, the making of which has been documented by *Sandover*, to “SOME / FANS OF YOURS IN HEAVEN, A SMALL

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<sup>18</sup> Langdon Hammer, “Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry,” in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 7, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

CROWD” who, Ephraim shares, “HAD HOPED TO HEAR THE POEM READ ALOUD” (540).<sup>20</sup> The invitation-only reading takes place at the eponymous Sandover—the “*noble rosebrick manor*” in which most of the poem’s virtual action occurs—in the ornate ballroom where “26 CHAIRS” arranged for the event accommodate almost an alphabet (“SOME DOUBLINGS MAKE FOR GAPS”) of deceased luminaries ranging from Jane Austen to W. B. Yeats (319, 547). In the moments before the reading, as Dante switches seats with Proust and Colette swaps looks with Maya Deren, JM stands apart, only to have his thoughts interrupted by a young T. S. Eliot. “I feel,” JM says,

. . . forgotten. Friends are letting me  
 Compose myself in tactful privacy  
 When what I need—ha! a young man in gray  
 Three-piece pinstripe suit has veered my way,  
 Smiling pleasantly: NOT THE MOMENT QUITE  
 TO GOSSIP BUT THERE’S ONE THING YOU SHOULD KNOW.  
 THESE WORKS, YOU UNDERSTAND? THAT OTHERS ‘WRITE’  
 (It’s Eliot, he’s thinking of Rimbaud)  
 ARE YET ONE’S OWN (557-558)

*Sandover*’s concluding scene positions Merrill’s alter ego, JM, as celestial poet laureate, literally “compos[ing]” himself in an act of poetic self-making that is certainly brash and seemingly lyric: here this self-composition specifically occupies, at least initially, what we might think of as the “tactful privacy” of lyric solitude. Yet the privacy and decorum of such lyric self-creation is interrupted soon enough by gossip’s invasion of privacy and delicious breach of tact. If “Poetry,” as John Stuart Mill writes, “is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world,” in these lines Merrill imagines a liminal encounter between poetry and

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<sup>20</sup> I maintain the distinction between Merrill and his poem’s speaker since, as Stephen Yenser notes, *Sandover* “interlaces the realms of reality and fiction”: the autobiography and voice of what Merrill calls the poem’s “semi-fictional ‘JM’” overlaps extensively with, yet also significantly departs from, Merrill’s own. See Stephen Yenser, *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 222; and James Merrill, *A Different Person* (1993), in *Collected Prose*, 521. Where clear, further references to *A Different Person* will appear within the text.

eloquence, solitude and the world—lyric and “GOSSIP.”<sup>21</sup> Using the scene of the poetry reading, where lyric solitude theatrically enters public circulation, he dramatizes—and revalues—tensions Mill finds implicit in poetry itself, which, though often “a soliloquy in full dress, and on the stage,” must still perform its privacy for an assumed, but unacknowledged, audience’s consumption.<sup>22</sup>

This moment indeed almost literalizes Northrop Frye’s version of Mill’s figure for the lyric poet, who, “so to speak, turns his back on his listeners.”<sup>23</sup> Eliot’s interruption of JM’s “tactful privacy” hence may seem, as if tapping on the studiously turned shoulder of the poet, tactlessly to disrupt lyric performance. Eliot commences his dish, after all, by announcing that it should not now commence: “NOT THE MOMENT QUITE / TO GOSSIP BUT . . . .” But of course, in depicting Eliot saying what he should really not now be saying, Merrill portrays him prefacing his comments with gossip’s rhetorical trope par excellence, paralipsis, and seizing quite the right moment for gossip, which depends in no small part on the seeming inappropriateness of its occasion for effect. And rather than frustrating the authorial resources of lyric privacy, this bit of gossip is, JM seems to be on the verge of asserting, what he in fact “need[s]” to compose himself. Just as its paralipsis manages very well to emphasize what it ostensibly passes over, gossip’s talk about others, often too the passing on of others’ talk, self-contradictorily serves to perform the authority that it also seems to shrug off or efface. Gossip in this sense becomes a way of telling one’s own story by telling someone else’s, and Eliot’s coy gossip—and, even more, JM’s retelling of it—presents an exemplary instance of how *Sandover* approaches gossip as such a mode of aesthetic self-fashioning.

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<sup>21</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1833), in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), 349.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 249.

Throughout the poem, however, Eliot has exemplified rather the opposite of self-creation: *The Waste Land*, we have previously learned, was largely ghostwritten by the spirit of Arthur Rimbaud, using an unaware Eliot as a medium. “WE HAD TO APPOINT RIMBAUD HE WROTE / THE WASTE LAND WE FED IT INTO THE LIKE-CLONED ELIOT,” explains Mirabell, the fallen bat-angel who, as namesake of William Congreve’s comic hero, orchestrates with appropriate élan the lessons which fill the poem’s second volume (219). JM’s incredulous response—“Rimbaud ghostwrote ‘The Waste Land’? You are *something*”—betrays recurring doubts about the authorship of his own “WORK GUIDED BY HIGHER COLLABORATION,” for which Eliot’s multivocal monument has been evoked by the spirits as a reassuring precursor (217, 162). In addition to its unhistorical claims about Eliot, *Sandover* cites as precedent an occult tradition including Victor Hugo’s transcribed conversations with the spirit world and the experiments in automatic writing conducted by W. B. Yeats and his wife George, as well as the visionary poetry of Dante, John Milton, and William Blake. But despite the illustrious company Merrill’s divine dictations keep, JM deems the poetry in which they result “maddening—it’s all by someone else!” (261).<sup>24</sup> And whatever reassurance Eliot’s specific example offers falters when even his minor contributions to *The Waste Land* are pitched as a gag about the uncertain parts of self and other, personal and impersonal in poetic production: “TSE / RESISTING THE FOSTER CHILD, ADDED TOUCHES OF HIS OWN: / THE SUBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE,” Mirabell jokes (219).

Even worse, the embarrassing spiritual and physical mechanics of Merrill and

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<sup>24</sup> JM often equivocates about his part in what he calls, in *Ephraim*—referencing the famous nineteenth-century Russian spiritualist Helena Blavatsky and the early twentieth-century Greek-American mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff—“This great tradition that has come to grief / In volumes by Blavatsky and Gurdjieff” (136). For discussions of *Sandover* within an occult literary tradition, see Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 157-178; Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 132-158; and Devin Johnston, *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 99-127.

Jackson's homemade Ouija board and the upside-down teacup which serves as planchette make unavoidable both the seeming passivity of its mediums and the challenge posed by other voices to the agency of the poet: at least, as JM observes, "Eliot thought he thought his poem up; / It wasn't spelt out for him by a cup" (219). As the Ouija's compositional method foregrounds the collaborative, perhaps even determinative forces—ranging from literary tradition to the unconscious to language itself—at play in *all* poetic production, JM finds it difficult to disavow these forces or entertain in any simple way the "thought he thought his poem up." Having been informed, as he recalls in *Mirabell*, that "THE WEORK FINISHT IS BUT A PROLOGUE," and "3 OF YOUR YEARES MORE WE WANT" (113), he eventually confesses,

I'd set my whole heart, after *Ephraim*, on returning  
 To private life, to my own words. Instead,  
 Here I go again, a vehicle  
 In this cosmic carpool. *Mirabell* once said  
 He taps my word banks. I'd be happier  
 If *I* were tapping them. Or thought I were. (261-262)

Depicting his poem as a collaborative trip in an unhappy "carpool" rather than a felicitous, solitary trek into one's own "private life," and as a reduction of the autonomous poet to a mere lexical "vehicle" for table tapping spirits both literal and figurative, JM here both shatters and indulges the ideal of lyric subjectivity implicit in a phrase like "my own words." It is *Sandover*'s charged relation to this ideal that is at issue when Eliot at last appears, several hundred pages later and "[s]miling pleasantly," to provide the punch line for the poem's significant running joke about the difference between solitary and collaborative authorship, the seeming agency of the poet and the seeming passivity of the medium, and the headings of lyric and gossip which have quietly organized these concerns, among others, throughout the poem.

In keeping with a work that takes the Ouija board's "YES & NO" as motto, and adopts as a formal and philosophical principle the notion "[t]hat anything worth

having's had both ways," Merrill's final scene represents Eliot's gossip, interpolated into a moment of lyric self-composition, as neither neatly reconciling poetry and idle talk nor acceding to the binary thinking which would make of them an either/or proposition (174). Insinuating that Rimbaud's authorship of *The Waste Land* is less certain than Mirabell's dish would have it, Eliot declares his lyric authority, but does so via gossip. The rhetoric of gossip allows him paradoxically to assert his own voice almost entirely in a voice not his own, disclosing his authorship through unattributed talk of "THESE WORKS . . . THAT OTHERS 'WRITE.'" By repeating and fleshing out Eliot's counter-gossip about Rimbaud, JM in turn (and, at still another remove, Merrill) tacitly affirms that the poem we might variously understand to have been written by "OTHERS" is "YET"—nevertheless? still? or at some future point may be—his "OWN." The audience for JM's poetry reading has also been promised gossip, "SALON / AFTER SALON LEFT BREATHLESS BY . . . SLY / HINTING AT 'REVELATIONS,'" and in this anticipatory moment—not quite yet the moment for the poetry or gossip with which it is imbued—JM's lyric self-composition "need[s]" Eliot's intruding voice and its gossip about "THESE WORKS," just as Eliot's particular bid for poetic authority depends on the recirculation of gossip and its strategies of innuendo ("YOU UNDERSTAND?") (540). As Merrill presents them, these are less poetic claims against gossip than *through* gossip.

Such claims carry a particularly queer resonance, both within the world of Merrill's poem and in the 1950s cultural context in which it originates. Inhabiting the unsettled space between lyric discretion and gossipy disclosure in the exchange between JM and Eliot, and in *Sandover's* final scene more generally, Merrill emphasizes a set of productive tensions that strikingly meet throughout his queer *Künstlerroman* and its quasi-autobiographical account of JM's self-composition. The poetry reading with which the poem closes pointedly mingles poetic and sexual self-

fashioning when, in the buildup to it, we learn that Ephraim will “BRING IN . . . OUR POET”—appropriately so, JM notes in a flourish of self-gossip, “[h]aving long since brought him out” (547). Sexual and poetic identities are seen here as complementary: the poetic achievement of *Sandover* and the poem’s frank celebration of homosexuality and a queer literary tradition, both “brought . . . out” by Ephraim over the course of the poem and the postwar decades it chronicles, together enable him now to “BRING IN . . . OUR POET.” Merrill also posits a link between the poetic and the sexual through the reading’s setting, as JM recognizes the ballroom at Sandover as a version of “the old ballroom of the Broken Home” (557), a reference to Merrill’s well-known poem about his childhood—and adult—navigation of his famous parents’ scandalous “marriage on the rocks.”<sup>25</sup> “The Broken Home” ends with lines that suggest how its queer and poetic negotiation of the family romance provides one set of blueprints for *Sandover*. Its final stanza explains that, like the yet-to-be-imagined Sandover, the “house became a boarding school,” inspiring Merrill’s hope that “Under the ballroom ceiling’s allegory / Someone at last may actually be allowed / To learn something”—a wish represented as fulfilled in the fantasy of *Sandover*, where the ballroom poetry reading’s “allegory” of literary tradition revamps a troubled familial model of lineage as a sustaining form of queer tutelage, with a very certain “Someone” as prize pupil.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> James Merrill, “The Broken Home,” *Collected Poems*, 198. Merrill’s father, Charles, was a founding partner of Merrill Lynch, making his parents’ separation one of “certain climactic moments” in his childhood and—or, as the following suggests, perhaps even *because*—fodder for the gossip columns: at eleven Merrill “tracked down a story in the kind of New York newspaper ‘we’ never saw; the caption beneath my photograph read ‘Pawn in Parents’ Fight.’ I knew my custody was in dispute, but—only a pawn?” See Merrill, *A Different Person*, 555.

<sup>26</sup> Merrill, “The Broken Home,” 200. Willard Spiegelman also suggests that “The Broken Home” “prepares us for the nursery at Sandover, which becomes the schoolroom in *Scripts*” (see “Breaking the Mirror: Interruption in Merrill’s Trilogy,” in *James Merrill: Essays in Criticism*, eds. David Lehman and Charles Berger [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983], 188), and Materer further points out that the name of the pet dog who leads the young Merrill into his mother’s bedroom in the poem—Michael—anticipates “the name of the compassionate archangel in *The Changing Light*” (see *James Merrill’s Apocalypse* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000], 3). Merrill himself explains that Sandover “took on aspects of the house I describe in ‘The Broken Home’ . . . [b]ut actually it is an

In connecting sexual and poetic identities, *Sandover* evinces the Cold War influence of the early 1950s, when—as narrated in *Ephraim*—Merrill and Jackson began both their relationship with each other and the Ouija sessions out of which the poem would eventually develop. These were years marked by suspicions that the arts were being taken over by a far-reaching homosexual network, an alleged *Homintern* paralleling the *Comintern*, or Communist International, supposedly running rampant in the State Department. John D’Emilio delineates how in the cultural imagination of the era “homosexuality became an epidemic infesting the nation, actively spread by Communists to sap the strength of the next generation,” a logic that carried over into the arts, where—as Michael S. Sherry writes—“anxious observers depicted gay artists as psychologically and creatively inauthentic,” effeminate figures who “undermined the nation’s cultural prowess.”<sup>27</sup> According to Gavin Butt, “given the widespread rumors about the large numbers of gays in the arts,” in the postwar period “artistic identity *itself* becomes phobically charged with queerness.”<sup>28</sup> The male artist, especially, “though no self-evident figure of homosexuality, as a result of phobic suspicions, paranoias, and rumors, becomes a kind of sexually *liminal* figure.”<sup>29</sup> Merrill similarly indicates this perceived queerness of the artist, and specifically the poet, in his 1993 memoir *A Different Person*, writing that “thirty years ago a gay idiom . . . served as a deshabelle to be slipped into behind closed doors. In this it resembled shoptalk” (649). From this perspective queer sexuality, poetry, and the gossip which blurs them occasion, as much as the Ouija board, what sometimes seems

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imagined place” (“An Interview with Jack Stewart” [1982], *Collected Prose*, 129).

<sup>27</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 44; Michael S. Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

in *Sandover* a crisis of agency—each inviting, in its own way, an alien element into the domestic circle, and each courting cultural connotations of passivity, feminized weakness, and inauthenticity that ensure JM risks becoming, whether in fact or in a prejudicial mid-century point of view, what he calls in *Ephraim* a “medium / Blankly uttering someone else’s threat” (65).

These risks, however, also engender possibilities in *Sandover*, perhaps chief among them—for a poem in which the lost agency of “[b]lankly uttering” also playfully suggests the virtuosity of a normative blank verse and dazzling variations from it—the pleasures of a sheer formalism into which selfhood often dissolves (and out of which it often emerges). The poem’s Ouija-board gossip, too, holds out a queer promise equal to the threat of taking on “someone else’s” voice, encouraging JM’s self-described efforts to become “sufficiently / Imbued with otherness” (89). Like the gossip about “THESE WORKS . . . THAT OTHERS ‘WRITE,’” which facilitates their becoming “YET ONE’S OWN,” and like the sexual speculation of being “brought . . . out,” which allows the “POET” to be brought in, becoming a “medium” for free-floating talk provides access to what Merrill calls, in an oft-quoted statement, a “self . . . much stranger and freer and more farseeing than the one you thought you knew.”<sup>30</sup> If to be an artist in mid-century America “was to occupy a subject position criss-crossed with sexual ambiguity” and “constantly shadowed by queer meaning,” the reparative recirculation of the gossip, innuendo, and sexual suspicion attached to the arts and the figure of the artist thus offers a potential form of queer self-fashioning in a hostile climate, drawing on the strategies of gossip to intimate, enact, and enjoy queerness without ever undeniably disclosing it.<sup>31</sup> As Butt explains, “the artistic life, so to speak, could be experienced as a specifically queer form of existence and the figure of the

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<sup>30</sup> James Merrill, “An Interview with J. D. McClatchy” (1982), *Collected Prose*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Butt, *Between You and Me*, 45.

artist him/herself a specifically queer form of embodiment.”<sup>32</sup>

Whether embodied or disavowed, such forms of queerness are only accentuated for the postwar male poet, at work in a lyric genre still marked by the high male modernist revolt against the supposed effeminacy of Victorian verse and a feminized literary culture, and in a genre especially valued at the time for its stylized performance of privacy, ambiguity, and paradox—or for its transgressive refusal of these New Critical imperatives. “From the age of nineteen,” Merrill writes in *A Different Person*, “I’ve been made to feel . . . my difference from the rest of the world, a difference laudable and literary at noon, shocking and sexual at midnight—though surely from the beginning my nights were part of the same vital process as my days” (650). Merrill’s notebooks from the 1950s bear traces of this “vital process” and the historical backdrop against which *Sandover* turns to gossip to reimagine a “laudable” lyric privacy as a “shocking” mode of queer publicity. An obscure poem entitled “Publicity,” neatly copied out by Merrill “From Daniel George’s Notebooks” and into his own, comically flirts with the fraught association between poetic identity and queerness:

A friend of mine (well, not a friend:  
I’ve only met him once or twice  
But he amuses me no end)  
Has taken up unnatural vice.

Of course, it doesn’t worry me  
(I’ve never been with him alone),  
But since his line is poetry  
I rather think he wants it known.<sup>33</sup>

It is not difficult to see why Merrill, specifically, would be attracted to this poem’s

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>33</sup> Merrill copied this poem into a notebook from the early 1950s, in the James Merrill Papers. Though no year is recorded for this entry (only “7 Jan.”), it appears to date from 1953. Daniel George is the pseudonym of the English writer Daniel George Bunting; “Publicity” first appears in his *Alphabetical Order: A Gallimaufry* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), 337, where it is dated 1933.

manner and subject—its witty formal elegance, light conversational tone, punning, and correcting and qualifying registers of voice take glee in smudging the “line” distinguishing privacy and publicity, poetry and perversion. As the “unnatural vice” assumed to be homosexuality is revealed (or is it?) as “poetry” and a presumed wish for discretion is revealed as a desire for disclosure, what seems gossip about “a friend” advances as well (especially in its parenthetical admissions and denials) as a queer performance of the self. The poem’s “I” speaks about, on behalf of, and *as* a poet, and in each case this figure is indeed “criss-crossed with sexual ambiguity,” his verse a vice “constantly shadowed by queer meaning,” and vice versa. Is the speaker’s “friend” queer, or a poet? The final line’s ambiguous “it” allows for, even invites, both interpretations. Ultimately, however, the poem’s joke—much like that of Eliot’s cameo appearance in *Sandover*—suggests the perversity of publicizing poetry, a perversity inherent, and disavowed, in Mill’s ideal of the lyric as a public performance of privacy, one which “know[s] that other eyes are upon us,” but must somehow admit “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us.”<sup>34</sup> Whereas Mill insists that “there is nothing absurd in the idea of such a mode of soliloquizing,” “Publicity” revels in the queerness of this definitional absurdity, turning to gossip to playfully tease out its erotics. When Merrill carefully transcribed the poem in 1953, its location of something delightfully illicit in the paradox of lyric practice must have seemed to him both appealing and apt.

Dated November 14 of that same year—significantly the year Merrill received his first Ouija board as a gift, and the year he met Jackson—Merrill and Jackson’s earliest surviving and possibly first Ouija transcript also takes up the relationship between poetry and publicity. This brief, initial session in fact introduces many of what will become *Sandover*’s central preoccupations. Already Merrill and Jackson

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<sup>34</sup> Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” 349.

begin to construct a queer poetic genealogy, contacting Walt Whitman, “YOUR GREAT POET SINGING SONGS,” who urges, “DO NOT O DO NOT O CHILDREN BELIEVE IN SHAME,” and Sappho, who declares “WE THAT SING ARE ONE.” Addressing the uncertain authorial agency of the poet and the medium, they ask Sappho, “You *are* people living and writing?” She confirms, “THERE IS A CHANNEL TO EACH.” And as if foreseeing their taste, in *Sandover*, for Ephraim’s “marvelous nightly pudding,” Merrill and Jackson seek dish, though the spirits admonish them: “THAT IS VERY ODD. YOU COULD BE AS POETS AND YOU WANT SCANDAL.”<sup>35</sup> Yet poetry and scandal, as “Publicity” posits and as the culture surrounding Merrill would have affirmed, are scarcely distinct modes; and when Whitman’s ghost ambiguously refers to a poem “ONCE WRITTEN AND THEN BURNED,” this first transcript also introduces one of the motifs—that of the incriminating manuscript and the potential gossip it scandalously signifies—around which Merrill organizes *Sandover*’s queer meditation on poetry and publicity.

One source for this motif, from Merrill’s own life, appears in *A Different Person*, where he writes of the anxiety his sexuality caused his mother, spurring her “efforts to make me into a different person.” These efforts “had led her to open letters not addressed to her, to consult lawyers and doctors—behavior that appalled her even as she confessed it. Her latest move, however”—preemptively destroying, under the flimsy guise of a misunderstanding, Merrill’s lovers’ letters while he was living in Europe in 1950—“I found hard to forgive” (537). Merrill understood her action as motivated by

a single mean-spirited fear. Publicity would render you unemployable, a “security risk.” Your former partners would come forward, with letters and so forth as evidence, to blackmail you. With so many “mysterious young men” in the picture—my mother’s case went—those “awful” letters could vanish overnight, and I would live under the “threat of exposure” for the rest of my

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<sup>35</sup> Ouija transcript dated November 14, 1953, James Merrill Papers. In *Mirabell*, JM stumbles upon a fictional version of this transcript, dated “x.1953” and tucked in a copy of Alexander Gilchrist’s *The Life of William Blake* (178).

days. (537)

This passage presents the Cold War institutional language surrounding a perceived homosexual menace—“Publicity,” “security risk,” “blackmail,” “threat of exposure”—drifting in and out of direct and free-indirect discourse and confusing the private, personal talk of the family sphere and the impersonal public statements of those government agencies which would vehemently claim to protect it. Merrill’s “mother’s case” echoes, for example, the argument advanced most notably by Joseph McCarthy, who declared in a 1950 article in the *New York Times* that “perverts were officially considered to be security risks because they were ‘subject to blackmail.’”<sup>36</sup> A 1950 Senate report on the *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* likewise contends, as D’Emilio summarizes it,

“The social stigma attached to sex perversion” was so great that detection could ruin an individual for life. “Gangs of blackmailers,” the report continued, took advantage of this vulnerability by making “a regular practice of preying upon the homosexual.” Espionage agents “can use the same type of pressure to extort confidential information.” . . . [Homosexuals] would betray their country, the committee asserted, rather than live with the consequences of exposure.<sup>37</sup>

This national “hunt for homosexuals and lesbians extended far beyond a search for those in the military and the federal bureaucracy,” as the “obsessive concern with national security spurred the growth of an immense system of tests and standards to determine the suitability of employees.”<sup>38</sup> Thus parroting what Merrill calls postwar “arguments . . . against sexual or political irregularity” (537), his mother becomes in the memoir a kind of “medium / Blankly uttering someone else’s threat.” Yet her fear

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<sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, March 15, 1950, 3, quoted in *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, ed. Jonathan Katz (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), 91. For a representative sample of news stories documenting the anti-homosexual and anti-Communist investigations during the years 1950-1955, see *Gay American History*, 91-105.

<sup>37</sup> D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 43. For the full report, see U.S. Senate, 81<sup>st</sup> congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, Committee on Expenditures in Executive Departments, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* (Washington D.C., 1950).

<sup>38</sup> D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 46.

of this threat was not wholly blank. Though he does not mention it in his memoir, Merrill's correspondence from the time more fully elaborates the circumstances which led to his letters' destruction, explaining that his New York "apartment was broken into and curiously enough, left untouched as far as objects and jewelry are concerned. My mother thought up another interpretation, which might well be accurate, and after various misunderstandings presumed to go there herself . . . for the purpose of burning all the loose papers she could find."<sup>39</sup>

This account of the ominous break-in and subsequently burnt letters prefigures—and helps illuminate—the passage in which JM, in the final section of *Ephraim* (Z, in the volume's abecedarian arrangement), contemplates burning the transcripts of his and DJ's séances, figured as "old love-letters from the other world" (87). In the previous section, the pair has made contact with W. H. Auden's ghost ("Wystan had just died") for the first time, and though "pleased with his NEW PROLE BODY" and comparing "Heaven to A NEW MACHINE," Auden's most immediate concern could be described as the "threat of exposure," a threat that, in the memoir's belated light, seems even more clearly bound up with sexuality:

. . . a gust of mortal anxiety  
 Blew, his speech guttered, there were papers YES  
 A BOX in Oxford that must QUICKLY BE  
 QUICKLY BURNED— (87)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> From an undated typescript (c. 1951) in the James Merrill Papers. In "a postscript about the letters" Merrill again references the break-in, writing to his mother, "I will take whatever blame you like, for not having, as you recommend, a steel file or something (though if one can break into an apartment, one can break into a file); and while I understand too well to feel any resentment towards *you*, I must say that I'm very distressed by your action." Undated typescript of a letter to Hellen Ingram Plummer (c. 1951), James Merrill Papers.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Edgerly Firchow wonders if "Merrill was aware that Auden had left behind in Oxford the journal he kept during the latter part of his stay in Berlin in 1929. According to Auden's friend, David Luke, who found the journal in the former's Oxford apartment a few days after his death, much of it is 'intimately autobiographical.'" See Firchow, *W. H. Auden: Contexts for Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 248 n. 17.

The fictional Auden's anxious impulse toward destruction is repeatedly contrasted with Merrill's inclination to preserve. In *Mirabell*, when JM remarks of Auden's afterlife output, "These posthumous ephemera, Lord knows, / Will keep your fans and critics on their toes," Auden characteristically insists: "BURN THESE!" (246). And with the whole of *Sandover* nearing publication, Auden, in a 1982 Ouija

Auden's stubborn "mortal anxiety"—in addition to assuming a keen public interest in gossip about the dead—provokes JM to recollect his first contact with Ephraim, last incarnate as a first-century Greek Jew in the debauched court of Tiberius and "throttled / by the imperial guard for having LOVED / THE MONSTERS NEPHEW (sic) CALIGULA" (8). For Ephraim, too, has insisted that

A long incriminating manuscript  
Boxed in bronze lay UNDER PORPHYRY  
Beneath the deepest excavations. He  
Would help us find it, but we must please make haste  
Because Tiberius wanted it destroyed. (8)

To this pattern of "incriminating manuscript[s]" that must be "destroyed" ("Wystan had merged / Briefly with Tiberius, that first night, / Urging destruction of a manuscript"), JM adds his and DJ's Ouija notebooks:

in the final  
Analysis, who didn't have at heart  
Both a buried book and a voice that said  
Destroy it? How sensible had *we* been  
To dig up this material of ours? (87)

JM and DJ's "buried book," however embarrassing, might appear less obviously sexually "incriminating" than Auden's or Tiberius' manuscripts.<sup>41</sup> Soon

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transcript, implores: "NOTHING OF A POET'S BUT HIS OWN CONSIDERED BEST EFFORTS SHD SURVIVE HIM. SO WE COME TO THE POINT: THE TRANSCRIPTS. BURN." When Merrill demurs, "We'd felt we were meant to preserve them to 'verify our experience,'" Auden persists: "THEN LEAVE STRICT INSTRUCTIONS: NOT A LINE REPRINTED. WHY? BECAUSE MISTAKES ENTERED IN + YR EXCELLENT JUDGMENT SIFTED THEM OUT. YET THE AVID GROUPIE WILL TAKE IT ON HIMSELF TO IN EFFECT SOW CONFUSION SIMPLY TO BE IN THE RAY OF LIGHT." "I see," says Merrill. "I quite agree!" (Ouija transcript dated July 4, 1982, James Merrill Papers). Yet, as we will see, this is not the first time Auden's ghost has compelled JM and DJ to consider burning the Ouija transcripts, nor the first time they will refuse: despite Auden's warnings against "THE AVID GROUPIE" in search of fifteen minutes of critical fame, Merrill arranged for his and Jackson's Ouija sessions to be preserved in his archives at Washington University (and, just as Merrill himself "REPRINTED" excerpts from these transcripts in post-*Sandover* poems, scholars have drawn on them in print).

<sup>41</sup> The Ouija transcripts are figured as a source of corruption in these lines' allusion to Prospero's renunciation of his magic in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (5.1.33-57), an allusion that stresses the occult dangers of the Ouija and reiterates JM's contention, in section Y, "Better to stop / While we still can" (89). But whereas Prospero voluntarily "drown[s]" his "book," choosing life over art, JM and DJ, twenty years on, "dig up" theirs, making art out of life.

Though again not in overtly sexual terms, JM also positions the transcripts as incriminating "private" documents destined to circulate publicly, and scandalously, if not destroyed when he compares them to

though, in a passage that seems both to draw on the incident detailed in Merrill’s memoir and to anticipate that account’s language, JM finds the Stonington home he shares with DJ broken into and—just like Merrill’s New York apartment in 1950—“curiously enough left untouched as far as objects and jewelry are concerned” (“We had no television, he no taste / For Siamese bronze or Greek embroidery,” quips JM) (90). The mysterious “thief” inexplicably takes nothing, but amplifies JM’s doubts about the “threat” posed by “this material of ours”:

The threat remains, though, of there still being  
 A presence in our midst, unknown, unseen,  
 Unscrupulous to take what he can get.  
 Next morning in my study—stranger yet—  
 I found a dusty carton out of place.  
 Had it been rummaged through? What could he fancy  
 Lay buried here among these—oh my dear,  
 Letters scrawled by my own hand unable  
 To keep pace with the tempest in the cup—  
 These old love-letters from the other world.  
 We’ve set them down at last beside the fire.  
 Are they for burning, now that the affair  
 Has ended? (Has it ended?) (91)

At a mythic level, “this particular thief in the night” is, as Stephen Yenser observes, “reminiscent of both the Troubler in the Garden and Hermes, patron of thieves.”<sup>42</sup> But Merrill’s “burglar here in the Enchanted Village” also manifests historical fears of “sexual or political irregularity” that clarify the nature of his overdetermined “threat” (90). Imagining the Ouija transcripts as “old love-letters” that provide evidence of JM and DJ’s “affair” with an “other world” that is as much queer *demi-monde* as *au-delà*, suggesting that the house has been broken into by an “[u]nscrupulous” figure whose “threat remains” as long as these letters do—Merrill, here, recasts his mother’s burning of his friends’ and lovers’ correspondence as part of *Sandover*’s occult drama,

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the Nixon tapes: “Impeachment ripens round the furrowed stone / Face of story-teller who has given / Fiction a bad name (I at least thank heaven / For my executive privilege vis-à-vis / Transcripts of certain private hours with E)” (41).

<sup>42</sup> Yenser, *The Consuming Myth*, 236.

the resulting palimpsest charged, “at heart,” by the burnt material beneath its surface and the “voice that said / Destroy it.”

In *Sandover*, JM does not burn the transcripts: “Let that carton be,” he concludes. “Too much / Already, here below, has met its match” (92). And neither has “the affair . . . ended”: by the time these lines appeared in print, Merrill and Jackson were well into the intense Ouija sessions documented in *Mirabell* and the spiritual lessons which, as we will see, make *Sandover*’s most insistent case for a privileged relationship between homosexuality and poetry. Merrill instead rewrites personal history, letting the “threat” remain, and allowing the raw “material” of the Lavender Scare’s malicious gossip and its “exposure” to become a source for the overtly queer poetic gossip of *Sandover*’s “celestial salon.” In preserving his “love-letters from the other world”—and, implicitly, the poem based on them—JM does not valorize their privacy, or privatize their erotics, but instead perversely fans the flames of their ardent desire in verse. “To my surprise, all burn / To read more of this poem,” JM writes (72). In heaven’s hierarchy, he has learned, all publicity is good publicity, as “Power . . . kicks upstairs those who possess it, / The good and bad alike”: “CALL IT THE HELIUM OF PUBLICITY,” Ephraim says (54). One might “rather think,” recalling “Publicity,” that faced with the “threat of exposure” JM “wants it known,” giving the spirits’ inaugural words to Jackson and Merrill—“YOU COULD BE AS POETS AND YOU WANT SCANDAL”—more ambiguous intonation, and a quality as prophetic as admonitory.

Whatever pleasures *Sandover* takes in the “Publicity” of gossip’s “no-proof rhetoric” rest uneasily next to the lingering menace of the McCarthy era’s version of such rhetoric, and the kind of “Publicity” that “would render you . . . a ‘security risk.’” As I have been arguing, the naming names of that malevolent use of gossip contributes to the poem a disquiet—sometimes campy, often not—still palpable after, as JM says,

“those twenty / Years in a cool dark place that *Ephraim* took / In order to be palatable wine” (261). I would not want to suggest that this disquiet tidily explains “those twenty / Years” between Merrill and Jackson’s first contacts with the other world and the successful transformation of their experience into poetry.<sup>43</sup> But the question of this gap—temporal, historical, biographical, affective, political, aesthetic?—and the poem that seeks to bridge it remains an important one. Certainly it is a question posed by *Sandover* itself, and the voices that demand “WHAT HAS IN FACT BEEN / 25 YEARS IN PREPARATION WE FIRST CALLD U THEN NOW / U ARE READY” (127). Throughout *Sandover*, and especially in *Ephraim*, Merrill calls attention to “THEN” and “NOW,” the period of the poem’s origins—the 1950s, with its postwar fears of Communists, perverts, and what, for the public, often amounted to the same thing, artists—as well as that of its composition during the post-Stonewall, liberationist 1970s. Emerging from and intermingling these contexts, Merrill’s poem stages the tension between gossip as an exercise of power, fueled by paranoia and normativity, and gossip as a more intimately pleasure-driven, queer world-making resource.

It thus may be tempting to conclude that in *Sandover* Merrill uses gossip to enact a shift from the phobic figuration of homosexuality associated with the poem’s originary context, and toward a burgeoning, alternate figuration of homosexuality, which we might locate more readily in the context of the poem’s composition in the mid- to late-1970s. Such a story would make of *Sandover* a personal, poetic, and historical coming-out narrative, hinging on a celebrated, if somewhat specious,

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<sup>43</sup> Merrill’s pre-*Sandover* oeuvre contains a handful of disparate attempts to work with the Ouija material. He first wrote about the Ouija in “Voices from the Other World,” which appeared in 1957 and again in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959); “Words for the Familiar Spirit,” from 1959, was later included in the privately-printed *The Yellow Pages* (1974); and in Merrill’s 1957 family roman à clef, *The Seraglio*, Francis Tanning’s occult experiences with the Ouija resemble Merrill’s own. Both *Ephraim* and “The Will,” also included in *Divine Comedies*, painstakingly narrate the Ouija material’s more substantive false start, in the late 1960s, as an eventually lost novel. See *Collected Poems*, 112-113, 719-720, 392-398; and *The Seraglio*, in *Collected Novels and Plays*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

dividing line between pre- and post-Stonewall queer life. And there is undoubtedly something to this story, especially insofar as it resonates with persuasive critical accounts of the gradual—and imbricated—stylistic and thematic uncloseting of Merrill’s verse. As Helen Vendler argues, “Secrecy and obliquity were Merrill’s worst obstacles in his early verses; though his tone was usually clear, the occasion of the tone was impossibly veiled”; more recently, Piotr K. Gwiazda writes that Merrill “always made his homosexuality an open secret in his poetry—with the emphasis shifting from *secret* to *open* in the course of his fifty-year career.”<sup>44</sup> Merrill himself observes, in concluding the incident of the burnt letters in *A Different Person*, “It never occurred to the alarmists that a person who made no secret of his life was a sorry target for blackmail. The discretion my mother urged was the *sine qua non* for the scandal she dreaded. But so fine a point eluded me at the time . . . ” (537).

Twenty-five years on, *Sandover* grasps this point not by doing away with an outmoded “discretion,” or by acceding to a defused “scandal,” but by taking up and even exploiting the necessary relation between, in this case, lyric privacy and gossipy publicity as a means of recognition and pleasure, rather than disavowal and dread. This dynamic suggests that instead of understanding the gap between the Ouija’s first revelations and *Sandover*’s composition as signifying only or even primarily a lack or need in Merrill’s past, we should consider also what role the transcripts and the experience to which they testify fulfill for him and his poem in the moment of its making. What would it mean to “conceive of the work of historical affirmation not, as it is often presented, as a lifeline thrown to those figures drowning in the bad gay past,

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<sup>44</sup> Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, 206; Piotr K. Gwiazda, *James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 55. Vernon Shetley usefully complicates this take on Merrill’s work, arguing that “Rather than a progression from closed to open, private to public, Merrill’s development is informed by a tension between public and private modes of expression.” Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 66.

but rather,” as Heather Love observes, “as a means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present”<sup>45</sup> What possibilities—aesthetic, philosophical, political—does Merrill seek in the pre-Stonewall origins of his poem? What meanings lay buried in the Ouija’s ostensible chitchat? Such questions recommend a closer look at how, within the mid-century gossip buffeting, often disastrously, about the figure of the homosexual, Merrill finds viable queer self- and world-making strategies—strategies that enable him to perform the many and varied texts that others write, while making them yet his own.

### III. “MEANINGS YOU CANNOT CONCEIVE”: GOSSIP’S QUEER REPRODUCTION

Of the texts JM and DJ are tasked to perform, none imposes itself more thoroughly than the spirits’ extended discourse against the Cold War’s nuclear threat. Indeed, in a study of this threat’s treatment in contemporary American poetry, John Gery contends that “No better evidence of the extent to which a nuclear awareness has permeated American letters exists than *The Changing Light at Sandover*.”<sup>46</sup> Gery’s assessment reflects the critical consensus regarding *Sandover*’s impetus; the poem’s installments, as Judith Moffett writes, “all were originally undertaken as a warning against nuclear disaster.”<sup>47</sup> Ephraim sounds this warning early on: when JM and DJ

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<sup>45</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 34.

<sup>46</sup> John Gery, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 133.

<sup>47</sup> Moffett, *James Merrill*, 154. The importance of nuclear anxiety to Merrill’s poem has become increasingly axiomatic: among many others, Harold Bloom describes *Sandover* as “an apocalyptic epic whose true starting point is Hiroshima” (“Introduction,” *Modern Critical Views: James Merrill* [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985], 7); Yenser asserts that the final volume’s “central question is whether humanity can save itself from destruction” (*The Consuming Myth*, 288); Shoptaw includes *Sandover* as “part of a growing antinuclear poetry in the seventies” (“James Merrill and John Ashbery,” 762); and Brian McHale calls the poem “a jeremiad against the threats of nuclear war and destruction of the environment” (“Angels in America: James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, in *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* [Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004], 52). For useful discussions focused specifically on the nuclear theme in *Sandover*, see Charles Berger, “Merrill and Pynchon: Our Apocalyptic Scribes,” in *James Merrill: Essays in Criticism*, 282-297; Zimmerman, “Against Apocalypse”; and, especially, Materer’s *James Merrill’s Apocalypse*, which shows in detail how the poem’s handling of its nuclear subject matter

visit New Mexico, he denounces “the nearby nuclear research,” claiming “THE AIR / ABOVE LOS ALAMOS IS LIKE A BREATH / SUCKED IN HORROR TOD MORT MUERTE DEATH” (33), and even before the global “HORROR” of his couplet’s suffocating rhyme insinuates itself in *Sandover*, we learn in Merrill’s poem “The Will”—included, like *Ephraim*, in *Divine Comedies*—that Ephraim impatiently insists JM “SET MY TEACHING DOWN” or “YOUR WORLD WILL BE UNDONE / & HEAVEN ITSELF TURN TO ONE GRINNING SKULL.”<sup>48</sup> Nuclear dread reappears in *Ephraim*’s section P (on “Power”), which pictures “the doomsday clock” of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* edging, in 1970, “Minutes nearer midnight. On which stroke / Powers at the heart of matter,” JM imagines, “Will open baleful, sweeping eyes, draw breath / And speak new formulae of megadeath” (54, 55). Confirming these atomic “Powers” and the unprecedented finality of their threat, Ephraim informs JM and DJ that

NO SOULS CAME FROM HIROSHIMA YOU KNOW  
 EARTH WORE A STRANGE NEW ZONE OF ENERGY  
 Caused by? SMASHED ATOMS OF THE DEAD MY DEARS  
 News that brought into play our deepest fears. (55)

When Mirabell revisits this “frightful hour” of revelation in the poem’s next volume (“YR EPHRAIM 6 YEARS AGO CAME / WEEPING TO US ‘THEY ARE IN ANGUISH’”), he poses a question that looms over *Sandover*: “FACED WITH NUCLEAR DISASTER, HOW / IS MAN NOT TO DESPAIR?” (183).

Merrill’s readers have demonstrated the centrality of the question of nuclear despair to his poem, their criticism attesting to the productive array of answers it provokes. Scholarship on *Sandover* has yet to fully consider, however, how this question might be distinctly freighted for a gay man who had come of age during the McCarthy era, a time when the nebulous threat of “NUCLEAR DISASTER” often took shape in the national imagination in two linked figures: the Communist and the queer.

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<sup>48</sup> “reflects the central period of the Cold War” (103).

<sup>48</sup> Merrill, “The Will,” 396.

Only Peter Coviello addresses sexuality's part in *Sandover*'s nuclear anxieties, adducing the poem, in an essay on AIDS and the rhetorics of nuclear and sexual apocalypse, as a striking example of just "how intimately bonded the nuclear and the sexual actually were, *before* the advent of AIDS gave to such bonding a ghastly quality of inevitability."<sup>49</sup> In line with this observation, I want to suggest that it is "NO ACCIDENT"—to borrow one of the bat-angels' basic principles—that in *Mirabell*, the volume most fully articulating atomic threat, we also find *Sandover*'s most explicit theorization (and celebration) of homosexuality.<sup>50</sup>

Numerous histories of sexuality in postwar America examine what Elaine Tyler May calls "the powerful symbolic force of gender and sexuality in the cold war ideology and culture," showing how "It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself."<sup>51</sup> According to Lee Edelman, during "a time of unprecedented concern about the possibility of national—and global—destruction," the "historical pressure upon the postwar American national self-image found displaced articulation in the phobic positioning of homosexual activity as the proximate cause of perceived danger to the nation."<sup>52</sup> Homosexual relationships, characterized as sterile and non-reproductive, left the queer with seemingly no investment in a national future. The "death and anomie associated . . . with the modern homosexual resonated with national concerns in the wake of a world war and the unleashing of the atomic bomb," writes Miriam G. Reumann. "In a culture focused on rebuilding a normative society and celebrating fecundity, what

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<sup>49</sup> See Peter Coviello, "Apocalypse from Now On," in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, ed. Joseph Boone et al. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>50</sup> In a poem rife with contingency, JM and DJ continually stumble over "A BASIC PRECEPT U WILL NEED TO TAKE ON FAITH: THERE IS / NO ACCIDENT" (179).

<sup>51</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 91.

<sup>52</sup> Lee Edelman, "Tearrooms and Sympathy; or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet," in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.

would be more threatening than sterility?”<sup>53</sup> When the concept of queer reproduction was entertained, it was in terms of dangerously weak, effeminate artistic output that would damage the nation, or, worse, in terms of the queer spy’s gossip, in a kind of updating of the World War II slogan equating idle talk, perverse sexuality, and national threat: *loose lips sink ships*. Thus as “the idealization of domestic security, for both the nuclear family and the nuclear state, became an overriding national concern,” the homosexual—scapegoated at once as a figure of moribund non-generativity *and* deathly fecundity—emerged as a *nuclear* threat, representing a menace both to the nation and normative domesticity.<sup>54</sup>

More than simply connecting historical dots—though that too gives us a sharper picture of Merrill’s poem—recognizing the line yoking *Sandover*’s engagement with Cold War fears of nuclear destruction to its homosexual thematics brings into relief the postwar rhetorics of gossip whose afterlife helps to construct, circulate, and mediate among the poem’s competing figurations of queerness. The work of the poem itself is described, as Devin Johnston points out, in “rhetoric reminiscent of the Cold War.”<sup>55</sup> Within the complicated system of *Sandover* the term “V Work”—used by the spirits “WHEN NAMING WORK GUIDED,” like JM’s poem, “BY HIGHER COLLABORATION”—immediately refers to the “THE 5” souls of Akhnaton, Homer, Montezuma, Nefertiti, and Plato, reborn throughout history to combat apocalypse (162, 143). It might seem fitting, then, that “V Work” also connotes the Second World War’s Victory and its aftermath, and “‘LIFE’ IN OUR SALON TONGUE” (the French *vie*), especially when such work’s goal, as Johnston notes, is continually framed as “‘containment’ and ‘resistance’ against encroaching entropy” (340).<sup>56</sup> But

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<sup>53</sup> Miriam G. Reumann, *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 189.

<sup>54</sup> Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy,” 158.

<sup>55</sup> Johnston, *Precipitations*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* Stephen Yenser also feels that the term used throughout the poem to describe the necessary

of course, JM and DJ's V work irredeemably complicates any parallel with the Cold War containment doctrine, for which "encroaching entropy" was often code for a queerness ambiguously positioned within the nation, yet understood as mirroring and vulnerable to the foreign threat without. The V work of *Sandover* turns inside out the premises of the Cold War containment it recalls, first by conceiving of itself as queer collaboration, and then by further imagining its queerness not as a non-generative, anti-social, or deathly force but instead as a life-affirming social network built through poetry and gossip.

From the beginning—and often with disarming earnestness—Merrill considered his queer encounters with the Ouija an ineradicable stay against the perils of Cold War destruction. Writing to his mother in 1955 about his first evenings "at the Ouija board with David," he details "a series of very strange experiences which have . . . made a profound change in my life," concluding, "I cannot calculate how much I must have suffered in my mind from the fear of absolute annihilation. Now it seems all kinds of exalted utterance, whether scripture or poetry, point to truth."<sup>57</sup> One way *Sandover* positions the figure of the homosexual as confronting rather than contributing to "the fear of absolute annihilation" is by transforming the loosened tongue of the queer "security risk" from a liability to an asset. True, JM, DJ, and their grapevine of intimates face recurrent censorship (and surveillance) from unseen presences shielding sensitive material: "*Censorship*. / (It happens now and then. The cup is swept / Clean off the Board. Someone has overstepped . . .)" (107). Such suppression occurs repeatedly, and as "the cup sweeps—is swept?—clear off the Board / Into the wings, a single violent swerve," inevitably "THE VERY AIR BECOMES A NERVOUSNESS" (231, 186). Ultimately, though, the poem's V work does not protect

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response to the universe's destructive forces—"contained"—is "reminiscent of the cold war" doctrine of containment (*The Consuming Myth*, 295).

<sup>57</sup> James Merrill to Hellen Ingram Plummer, 2 September 1955, James Merrill Papers.

against but depends on the relaxed discretion of spirits like Ephraim, described as “spilling these top secrets” (543). Rather than safeguarding confidential information, *Sandover*’s heightened rhetoric of secrecy tends playfully to elevate banal disclosure, as when Robert Morse, accidentally revealing he has been allowed to join the lessons, is melodramatically cut off by Auden: “ROBERT, A SECRET! TOP SECURITY!” (413). At other moments, such rhetoric stimulates—by threatening to degrade—the value of and desire for revelation, as when, in the coda, JM debates disclosing in his poem that Ephraim, the first and lowest familiar, has all along been an avatar for the angel Michael, the last and highest guide: “Not tell this secret? God, how to resist— / And for what other reason were we born?” (555). “SECRETS TOO GOOD TO BE KEPT RISK A GOSSIPY CHEAPNESS,” Ephraim counsels in the source transcript for this passage, immediately adding: “THEY ALSO OF COURSE TICKLE THE HUMAN FANCY.”<sup>58</sup> Divulging this secret, JM exemplifies the poem’s willingness to “RISK A GOSSIPY CHEAPNESS” in order to “TICKLE THE HUMAN FANCY,” and in a key speech addressed to Nature, JM and DJ’s friend, muse, and divine mother-figure Maria Mitsotáki (or MM) argues that such gossipy disclosure does not contradict but is in keeping with the spirits’ wishes:

WE COME, WE MORTALS, FROM AN AVID WEED  
 CALLED CURIOSITY. IN YOUR GARDEN, MAJESTY,  
 I HAVE SEEN & HEARD THE BUSY SECRETS BUZZING  
 LEAF TO LEAF: ‘AHA, THAT’S HOW SHE DID IT!’  
 THESE FEED US, YOU FEED THEM. I THEREFORE CLAIM  
 THAT YOU WANT THESE SECRETS OUT. (455)

As Maria more simply avows in a transcript, “US WEEDS” relish “THE WINDS OF A GOOD GOSSIP.”<sup>59</sup> The poem’s Ouija sessions accordingly find motivation in pleasurable play with the politically charged power dynamic of protecting, coaxing out, and “spilling . . . secrets,” as if, in *Sandover*, loose lips *launch* ships.

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<sup>58</sup> Ouija transcript dated August 30, 1978, James Merrill Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Ouija transcript, James Merrill Papers. See *Sandover*, 419 for the final version of this scene.

We can see such play at work in a notebook entry from 1957 that records a particularly camp, cloak-and-dagger Ouija conversation between Ephraim and Merrill and Jackson (whose contributions appear in parentheses):

It wd be possible 4 me 2 be completely discredited by a agent. (Agent? How Kafka! what men?)

All I can say—there r agents. [ . . . ] (Well now don't tell us anything you shouldn't after this.)

Oh I am hopeless abt state secrets. T Telling is absolutely free, it is telling that starts counter-manifestations that turn on us and cd 4 the living as well. I can tell u anything but I must be sure u will not do anything abt it + U can tell me anything but we must not set up our own little system.<sup>60</sup>

This exchange's ominous, Kafka-esque "agents" foreshadow the capital-T "They" of *Mirabell*, whose "surliness," threatening presence, and seemingly malicious, disembodied gossip (*They say . . .*) will contribute to the board a suddenly darker tone and an uncertainty as to whether the other world is ruled by "A BENIGN POLICE FORCE KEEPING WATCH ON US" or something more (overtly) sinister (124, 187). The exchange also recalls "those unfortunates who are"—as the *New York Times* would report—"most readily subject to the blackmail by which security secrets are often obtained by enemy agents."<sup>61</sup> As Ephraim presents himself as susceptible to mysterious "agents" by whom he might be "completely discredited," and thus liable to spill "state secrets," the rhetoric of "security secrets" contributes to his gossipy "[t]elling" an alluring frisson. Despite its risks, Ephraim valorizes the pleasures of idle chatter between himself and his living mediums, who can "tell" each other "anything" so long as the end of such talk remains the act of gossip itself; and despite his caveat that their "[t]elling" tales out of school "must not set up our own little system," in *Sandover* gossip manages precisely this. "U ARE SO QUICK MES CHERS,"

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<sup>60</sup> All errors in the original. This early transcript, on loose paper, foregoes the typical uppercase presentation of the spirits' voices. From a journal entry dated "Jan 8, 57. Jaipur," James Merrill Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Arthur Krock, "The Jenkins Case," *New York Times*, October 18, 1964, Section E., 10, qtd. in Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy," 149.

Ephraim boasts near the end of the first volume: “I FEEL WE HAVE / SKIPPING THE DULL CLASSROOM DONE IT ALL / AT THE SALON LEVEL” (72). Even when, in *Mirabell* and *Scripts*, “THE DULL CLASSROOM” appears to take precedence over “THE SALON,” the gab sessions that bracket these lessons establish their own system of being in and apprehending the Ouija’s world, ensuring that the insights of everyday gossip continually reshape gospel. As Auden says in an unpublished transcript, “I HAVE LONG THOUGHT WE MUST HAVE SMALL CHATS BEHIND BIG BACKS DO U NOT AGREE? NOT NOT NOT SECRETS BUT OF WEE HUMAN WONDERS.”<sup>62</sup>

Rearticulating a postwar homosexuality often seen, as Edelman writes, “in terms of indolence, luxury, and the lack—or worse, the repudiation—of generative productivity,” *Sandover* (unsurprisingly attacked shortly after its publication for presenting “the universe as a playground” for just such “an elite, indolent clique of white, gay, male poets, dead and alive”) represents “SMALL CHATS BEHIND BIG BACKS” as a form of figurative and literal procreation, gossip that both dishes on and itself actually produces “WEE HUMAN WONDERS.”<sup>63</sup> The episode based on the transcript warning of “agents,” for example, relates a madcap sequence of events in which JM, DJ and Ephraim conspire to provide Ephraim’s recently deceased earthly charge “a running start on life” by having his soul, for which Ephraim is responsible, reborn to JM’s pregnant “niece Betsy” (19).<sup>64</sup> At the same time they haphazardly arrange for another soul (this one under the watch of JM’s dead friend, the poet Hans Lodeizen) to be reborn to “Gin—that will be Virginia—West,” the pregnant wife of DJ’s “ex-roommate” (20). Blurring loose talk and reproduction, JM and DJ play midwife, a figure for which gossip—if we summon its etymology—provides another term. And

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<sup>62</sup> Ouija transcript, James Merrill Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy,” 163; Bruce Bawer, “A Summoning of Spirits: James Merrill and *Sandover*,” *The New Criterion* 2 (June 1984): 39.

<sup>64</sup> As Yenser points out, Merrill had no such niece, providing the poem’s most explicit evidence of how poet and persona are not to be neatly conflated. See *The Consuming Myth*, 222.

as with gossip, which accumulates unforeseeable meanings as it circulates, the second soul JM and DJ midwife is accidentally “born to a VIRGINIA WEST IN STATE / ASYLUM,” since DJ “too late / Recalls ‘Gin’s’ real name: Jennifer Marie” (29). Though Betsy, as intended, gives birth to a child, Wendell, who “OUTDOES THE WILDEST DREAMS / OF PATRONS,” the queer reproduction of JM and DJ’s gossip—like that of the homosexual “security risk”—is met with fearful reprisal (29). “We have MEDDLED,” Ephraim confesses, “And the POWERS // ARE FURIOUS,” threatening to intercept and cut off JM and DJ’s otherworldly contact: “AGENTS CAN BREAK OUR CODE / TO SMITHEREENS” (29).

When JM sheepishly visits his “ex-shrink,” Tom, “[w]ith the whole story,” Merrill situates this affair in the psychohistorical context of the 1950s, framing its strangely generative idle talk as a response to cultural conceptions of homosexual morbidity (29). “[W]hat you and David do / We call folie à deux,” Tom declares, continuing:

“ . . . Now suppose you spell

It out. What underlies these odd  
Inseminations by psycho-roulette?  
I stared, then saw the light:  
“Somewhere a Father Figure shakes his rod

At sons who have not sired a child?  
Through our own spirit we can both proclaim  
And shuffle off the blame  
For how we live—that good enough?” (30)

As in his sessions consulting the Ouija, this session on the analyst’s couch provides revelation but demands JM himself “spell / It out.” Acting again as a medium, even midwife—now for the high gossip of psychoanalysis—JM speculates that Wendell, along with Ephraim himself and the Ouija’s “odd / Inseminations by psycho-roulette” more generally, form a shared fantasy through which he and DJ attempt to mitigate the

perceived oblivion of their childlessness and its threat to the nuclear family. Yet while this somewhat pat explanation is “good enough” for Tom, JM tacitly rejects its normative emphases on childlessness as a problem and on the sexuality that is to “blame.” That very night—in what we might think of as a small chat behind the big back of a mid-century psychoanalysis hostile to homosexuality—he and DJ happily resume their “folie à deux” and celebrate the co-creativity of their queer reproduction, reconnecting with Ephraim (“Our beloved friend / Was back with us!”), who dishes that “FREUD . . . DESPAIRS / OF HIS DISCIPLES & SAYS BITTE NIE / ZU AUFGEBEN THE KEY / TO YR OWN NATURES”—*never surrender the key to your own natures* (31, 30). Reworking Tom’s revelation, they decide of Ephraim: “*He* was the revelation / (Or if we had created him, then we were)” (32).

In considering how the idle talk out of which Ephraim emerges potentially discloses both other and self, “*He*” and “we,” JM here posits that the self (or selves) parenthetical to the Ouija’s revelations might in fact be the revelation. Is the medium the message? Is JM simply a midwife or gossip for texts “THAT OTHERS ‘WRITE’”? Or do the voices channeled in his poem provide a means for his own composition? As *Sandover* takes up such questions, its queer reproduction becomes a trope for JM’s (and implicitly Merrill’s) authorship, and vice versa—substitutions at work when, later in *Ephraim*, Wallace Stevens’ ghost responds to the poem in progress by cautioning JM:

A SCRIBE SITS BY YOU CONSTANTLY THESE DAYS  
 DOING WHAT HE MUST TO INTERWEAVE  
 YOUR LINES WITH MEANINGS YOU CANNOT CONCEIVE  
 Parts of this, in other words—a rotten  
 Thing to insinuate—have been ghostwritten? (72)

Stevens’ immediate implication—as we have seen, a recurring one—is that JM’s largely channeled poem forms part of a select body of literally “ghostwritten” work, as with Eliot and Rimbaud. In this sense, the challenge to JM’s poetic autonomy in the

idea that he takes divine dictation explains much of what makes this intimation feel “rotten.” “What most scandalizes us about a ‘dictated’ poem,” argues Brian McHale, “is the way it undermines common-sense notions of authority.”<sup>65</sup> Yet even an apparatus as weirdly clunky as the “Ouija’s ventriloquy” can be, as McHale shows, abstracted, naturalized and made to conform to such “common-sense notions of authority” as the figures of the inspiring muse, of literary tradition, or of language itself, suggesting that authorial anxieties alone do not account for the scandal of Merrill’s dictated poem.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps more intractably scandalous, then, is another possible source for JM’s dictations, one closer to hand: DJ. Stevens’ charge of ghostwriting also implicates DJ, deemed by the spirits “HAND” but indeed another “SCRIBE” (Jackson was a frustrated novelist) who more obviously “SITS BY” JM “CONSTANTLY,” his right hand atop the inverted teacup that skates across the Ouija, spelling out, letter by letter, the raw material of *Sandover*. Alison Lurie’s notoriously gossipy memoir of Merrill and Jackson’s relationship makes the case that although critics “have usually written and spoken as if *Sandover* were the work of James Merrill alone,” Jackson “was in an essential sense the co-author of *Sandover*, so much of which flowed through his hand, and none of which could have been written without him.”<sup>67</sup> Merrill himself muses about his “ghostwritten” poem, “I wonder if the trilogy shouldn’t have been signed with both our names—or simply ‘by DJ, as told to JM’?”<sup>68</sup>

Though often diminished, or taken for granted, DJ’s ambiguous authorial role reminds us that—again like *The Waste Land*, a shared undertaking (as JM points out) between Eliot and “Uncle Ezra” even without Rimbaud’s alleged ghostly intervention (219)—*Sandover* is also the product of human collaboration. In thinking about this

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<sup>65</sup> McHale, “Angels in America,” 40.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. For a useful overview of such naturalizing critical moves, see McHale, 42-44.

<sup>67</sup> Alison Lurie, *Familiar Spirits: A Memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson* (New York: Viking, 2001), 136, 106-107.

<sup>68</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with J. D. McClatchy,” 109.

earthly partnership, especially, it is useful to consider Wayne Koestenbaum’s insight, in his study of male literary collaboration, “that double authorship attacks not primarily our dogmas of literary property, but of sexual propriety.”<sup>69</sup> If, as Koestenbaum theorizes, “men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse,” often figuring “the text they balance between them” as “the child of their sexual union,” perhaps what strikes JM as particularly “rotten” in the above passage is how Stevens’ pun on “CONCEIVE” links phobic perceptions of homosexuality as sterile (“YOU CANNOT CONCEIVE”) with epistemological and imaginative lack (an inability to comprehend or envisage the “MEANINGS” of even one’s own “LINES”), and thus a loss of poetic authority.<sup>70</sup> We can interpret, that is, Stevens as negatively insinuating—like JM’s “ex-shrink,” Tom, but “in other words”—that a queer authorial failure to “CONCEIVE” is *the cause* as much as the effect of the poem’s “hav[ing] been ghostwritten.” *Sandover*’s insistence otherwise—its faith in queer relationality as the invention of a way of being whose “MEANINGS YOU CANNOT CONCEIVE,” but whose revelatory contours are limned in part by gossip and poetry—scandalously reworks the Cold War figure of the threateningly non-generative, anti-social queer.

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<sup>69</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Of course, unlike the often repressed erotics of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century collaborations Koestenbaum considers, *Sandover* forefronts the *literal* and figurative sexual relationship between Merrill and Jackson and the spirits they contact. Merrill and Jackson’s Ouija transcripts emphasize even more explicitly how figures of reproduction and authorship, sexual and literary politics, are bound up in *Sandover*. When Eliot’s shade claims, in a passage that (as we have seen) reappears in the poem’s coda in adapted form, “THE DICTATED WORK IS NONETHELESS ONE’S OWN OTHERWISE IF THE MOTHERS OF THE WORLD REALIZED THEY’D ONLY PROVIDED THE EGG WD THEY CONSENT TO CONCEIVE?” he has in mind both JM’s and his own “DICTATED WORK,” but also, it seems, the birth of Wendell and the Ouija’s “Inseminations by psycho-roulette” (Ouija transcript dated September 18, 1977, James Merrill Papers). Eliot’s words further echo—and suggest as one model for *Sandover*’s reproduction trope—Pound’s real-life understanding of *The Waste Land* as the progeny of his and Eliot’s queer collaboration. In a poem about their work on *The Waste Land*, entitled “Sage Homme” and sent to Eliot, Pound casts Eliot as male “Mother” and (playing on *sage-femme*, the French term for midwife) himself as the eponymous midwife presiding over the difficult birth of Eliot’s “printed Infancies,” which have been “Sire[d]” by a “Uranian,” or male homosexual, “Muse”—also, as it turns out, Pound. “Sage Homme” can be found (in edited form) in a 24 December 1921 letter to Eliot, in *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), 170. For an excellent reading of the unexpurgated “Sage Homme” and of Pound and Eliot’s queer collaboration more generally, see Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, 112-140.

Merrill portrays childlessness, same-sex erotics, and the indiscrete reproductions of gossip as crucial to—rather than disastrous for—*Sandover*'s anti-apocalyptic verse. As the lessons of *Mirabell* proceed, DJ wonders specifically if his and JM's homosexuality has something to do with their being chosen as poetic mediums for the spirits' instruction:

What part, I'd like to ask Them, does sex play  
In this whole set-up? Why did They choose *us*?  
Are we more usable than Yeats or Hugo,  
Doters on women, who then went ahead  
To doctor everything their voices said?  
We haven't done that. JM: No indeed.  
Erection of theories, dissemination  
Of thought—the intellectual's machismo.  
We're more the docile takers-in of seed.  
No matter what tall tale our friends emit,  
Lately—you've noticed?—we just swallow it. (154)

The Ouija's divine gossip—what “They” say—here becomes a form of oral (and aural) sex for its “usable” mediums, whose one shared line in this “docile” duet appropriately notes and insists upon what has *not* been done, as if comically to underline the daffy passivity of their feminized collaboration and its ostensible failure to generate substantive “theories” or “thought.” In passages like this one, as Gwiazda writes, Merrill performs a “queer critique of the masculinist and heterosexist tropes that surround the existing notions of authority,” one that “uses the same rhetoric that categorizes homosexual men as passive rather than active, immature rather than mature, superficial rather than profound.”<sup>71</sup> The force of this critique derives largely from Merrill's redeployment of the reproductive rhetorics of both authorship and queerness. JM and DJ's ironic willingness to “swallow” the Ouija's “marvelous nightly pudding” thus might seem an anti-reproductive mode—a camp travesty of both procreation and literary production that refuses to “disseminat[e]” the “machismo” of

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<sup>71</sup> Gwiazda, *James Merrill and W. H. Auden*, 67, 68.

heteronormativity—and in part, it is. The same biological non-reproduction that arouses Cold War suspicions raises homosexuality to a position of privilege in *Sandover*'s celestial hierarchy, where its “CHILDLESSNESS” helps avert the ecologically ruinous overpopulation of “FUSED MAN IN HIS CLOSELY / PACKD CITY,” which, like “THE FUSED ATOM,” alarms God Biology (216, 194). In the Ouija's mirror world it is the outsized figure of heterosexual fecundity, not homosexual sterility that signifies annihilation.

Yet JM and DJ's homoerotic receptiveness to the board's “odd / Inseminations by psycho-roulette” constitutes, as we have seen, less their inability or refusal to reproduce than the capacity to reproduce queerly. In addition to the rebirths for which JM and DJ notably play midwives, in *Mirabell* JM also appears as godparent—another role for which *gossip* once provided a name—to Urania, his Greek-American godchild “in the first pride of speech” (111). Urania's name suggests the heavenly muse but also, as Reena Sastri notes, “uranium, fuel for nuclear weapons, and uranism, a term designating homosexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.”<sup>72</sup> Gossip, nuclear threat, homosexuality, and futurity—as “Noné (godfather)” to Urania, JM becomes symbolically responsible for a set of concerns which serve as inspiration for his poem—a project over which, as Auden later explains, this child “MUSE . . . PRESIDES,” “BABBLING” like JM himself “ON THE THRESHOLD OF / OUR NEW ATOMIC AGE THE LITTLE LOVE / AT PLAY WITH WORDS WHOSE SENSE SHE CANNOT YET / FACE LEARNING” (111, 261). JM's various parental guises—midwife, queer uncle, godparent: gossips all—also serve as authorial representations that reflect Merrill's understanding of his collaborative poem as an alternative form of reproduction. Years after *Sandover*'s completion, Merrill's memoir describes how “distress” over his “childlessness” passed once the home he shared with Jackson “had filled up . . . with

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<sup>72</sup> Reena Sastri, *James Merrill: Knowing Innocence* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 87.

Ephraim and Company, who were prepared, like children, to take up as much of our time as we cared to give, but whose conversation outsparkled Ravenna, and who never had to be washed or fed or driven to their school basketball games.”<sup>73</sup> “I wonder, by the way, where they get the idea that homosexuals aren’t breeders,” he wryly comments in a 1991 interview. “I know quite a few who are.”<sup>74</sup>

Merrill joins a long and venerable tradition of homosexual “breeders” in *Sandover*. When Mirabell, picking up DJ’s lingering question about homosexuality’s role “[i]n this whole set up,” exalts the homosexual over “ALL SO-CALLD NORMAL LOVERS” who “MUST PRODUCE AT LAST / BODIES” and “DO NOT EXIST FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSE” (156), his account of same-sex attachments that spawn, in poetic form, wisdom and virtue recalls Plato’s *Symposium* and its metaphorical distinction between “Men who are pregnant in body” (“drawn more towards women,” such men “express their love in trying to obtain for themselves immortality and remembrance . . . by producing children”) and “Men who are pregnant in mind” (whose “relationship with beauty” in the form of male bodies gives birth to beautiful ideas, ideal forms).<sup>75</sup> Of these types, men who are pregnant in mind “have a much closer partnership with each other and a stronger bond of friendship than parents have, because the children of their partnership are more beautiful and more immortal.”<sup>76</sup> Mirabell similarly contends that same-sex desire gives birth to art: “LOVE OF ONE MAN FOR ANOTHER OR LOVE BETWEEN WOMEN / IS A NEW DEVELOPMENT OF THE PAST 4000 YEARS / ENCOURAGING SUCH MIND VALUES AS PRODUCE THE BLOSSOMS / OF POETRY & MUSIC” (156). Though JM lightly

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<sup>73</sup> Merrill, *A Different Person*, 626.

<sup>74</sup> James Merrill, “An Interview with Thomas Bolt” (1991), *Collected Prose*, 159.

<sup>75</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (New York: Penguin, 1999), 46, 47. *Sandover* is enamored of symposiums: JM describes the lessons as a “symposium” (377); in the coda we learn from MM that JM’s poetry reading will be followed by a “CRITICAL SYMPOSIUM” (540); and JM describes himself and DJ at the Ouija as Ephraim’s “symposiasts” (553). For another discussion and useful overview of *Sandover*’s engagement with Plato, see Gwiazda, *James Merrill and W. H. Auden*, 70-74.

<sup>76</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 47.

challenges the elitism of this claim—“Come now, admit that certain very great / Poets and musicians have been straight”—his words themselves reclaim the Homintern discourse linking queerness to the arts. And Auden, too, ventures that it is precisely because of their biological “CHILDLESSNESS” that he, JM, DJ, and the “insouciantly childless” Maria have been chosen for the spirits’ V work (156, 216, 102):

3 OF US IN MM’S EUPHEMISM  
COMME CA & SHE (THOUGH FEMALE) NOT IN LIFE  
MUCH DRAWN TO ROLES OF MOTHER MISTRESS WIFE,  
WHY ARE WE 4 TOGETHER LISTENING?  
A) 3 WRITERS & MM RATHER A MUSE  
B) EXCEPT AS MESSENGERS WE HAVE NO  
COMMITMENT TO A YOUNGER GENERATION (205)

When JM again poses “Wystan’s question: Why the four of us?” Mirabell maintains, in language that directly references the *Symposium*, “KEEP IN MIND THE CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE THIS TURNS US / OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES,” suggesting that the board’s “4 TOGETHER” are pregnant not in body but in mind (216).<sup>77</sup> That this in-group’s lone heterosexual, “FEMALE,” and non-writer, MM, is ultimately revealed to be an incarnation of the immortal Plato, and thus very much “COMME CA,” retroactively lends further credence to Auden’s Platonic surmise about the nature of their collaboration and its attendant bond of friendship.<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, Maria’s unveiling as Plato helps to cast *Sandover*’s treatment of his philosophy of desire in a more ambiguous light. However rightly, interpretations of the *Symposium* often emphasize how Socrates, using Diotima as a medium, advocates the sublimation of sexual desire into an attachment to beautiful forms themselves, transcending relations with individuals in favor of the contemplation of abstract principles—sentiments Mirabell appears to endorse when he

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<sup>77</sup> Diotima declares of the “rites of love” that their “purpose . . . if they are performed correctly, is to reach the final vision of the mysteries.” Plato, *The Symposium*, 47.

<sup>78</sup> In *Scripts*, Maria appears “as Plato” and gives “A LIVELY SYMPOSIUM” (496).

explains that “MIND IN ITS PURE FORM IS A NONSEXUAL PASSION / OR A UNISEXUAL ONE PRODUCING ONLY LIGHT” (156). But although *Sandover*’s queer reproduction is predicated on the absence of biological reproduction, it is not therefore “NONSEXUAL” or “UNISEXUAL,” and not anti-relational. Mirabell’s Platonic declamations, in fact, are occasioned by his transformation from the bat-like creature hitherto known as 741 into a “SOMEWHAT ATHENIAN,” or homosexual, peacock who has “COME TO LOVE” his earthly interlocutors (157, 155). Hardly “NONSEXUAL” or anti-relational, Mirabell’s metamorphosis from mathematical abstraction into embodied, feeling initiate in “THIS WORLD OF COURTESY” is imagined as a coming out (JM asks, “was there from the first a Peacock that / Struggled within you to unseat the Bat?”), and it is produced, Auden believes, by the imaginative and affective connections of “WE 4 TOGETHER”: “MM & I / IMAGINE U, YOU US, & WHERE THE POWERS / CRISSCROSS WE ALL IMAGINE 741 / & THEN TRANSFORM HIM!” (155, 158, 159). Or, as JM later affirms, Mirabell concretizes “an impulse only / Here at the crossroads of our four affections” (173).

After 741’s coming out as Mirabell, the poem’s seductive gossip again revises its gospel. Having advanced his philosophy, Mirabell more ambivalently dishes that Plato “CLUNG TO AN IDEAL BOTH LOFTY & STERILE,” at which point Maria—or, as we later learn, Plato himself in MM “DRAG”—immediately appears, paralleling her own “LAST BLOOMING” with Mirabell’s queer metamorphosis, and implicitly contrasting both with the potential sterility of the Platonic ideal (158, 468, 158): “NOW DO U UNDERSTAND MY LOVE / OF YOU,” MM asks JM and DJ—“U HAVE THE TOUCH THAT TURNS / BATS INTO PEACOCKS & DECREPIT OLD / BAGS FROM THE OTHER HALF OF ATHENS INTO / ROSE TREES” (158). The source transcript for these lines more bluntly posits the generative queer affiliations that Plato as MM celebrates—“U HAVE A POWER TO TURN WEARY HETEROSEXUAL OLD BAGS INTO ROSES AND THEN GO THAT

BLISSFUL STEP FURTHER AND LOVE US,” Maria says<sup>79</sup>—a point Auden’s later gossip about Plato will make again even more bluntly:

IDEAL FORMS ALSO LEAVE HIM COLD HE KEEPS  
SQUINTING THROUGH KEYHOLES AT SOME LITHE YOUNG BOD  
POOR OLD GAFFER  
SAY IT: POOR OLD SOD (147)

*Sandover*’s queer imaginings, impulses, and affections most often take shape through its gossip, and we would do well to remember that the *Symposium*’s seemingly austere philosophy is also, as Roland Barthes proposes in *A Lover’s Discourse*, “a gossip,” since its dialogue consists of “speaking together about others.”<sup>80</sup> Gossip structures the text’s nested series of accounts, in which Athenian intellectuals gather to celebrate Agathon’s victory, drink, and gossip about *eros* and each other’s relationships; and in which we see that years later, their enticing dish circulates unabated—on the road from Phalerum, both Glaucon and an unnamed interlocutor breathlessly seek out the dialogue’s frame narrator, Apollodorus, who has himself consulted Aristodemus, in order “to get the full story of the party at Agathon’s,” a party that took place when they “were still children.”<sup>81</sup> “Such is the genesis of the theory of love,” Barthes writes: “an accident, boredom, a desire to talk, or, if you will, a gossip lasting little over a mile.”<sup>82</sup> If *Sandover* can be said to advance a “theory of love,” it too emerges more as the effect of the poem’s seemingly frivolous gossip than the distillation of its didactic lessons. Consider, for example, the following characteristic little scene of gossip, sparked by Mirabell’s question, “IS THE PEACOCK NOT ALSO SOMEWHAT ATHENIAN?”

JM: Platonic? Oh, you mean the peacock

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<sup>79</sup> Ouija transcript dated July 27, 1975, James Merrill Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 183.

<sup>81</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 3, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 183.

I once put in a poem set in Athens?  
 Yes, of course. DJ: Would he be using  
 “Athenian” in the sense that Marius—  
 3 CHEERS FOR DAVID HE STANDS UP FOR US!  
 Is that you, Marius? COME & GONE MY DEAR  
 PLATO SAYS ATHENS WAS AT BEST HALF QUEER  
 What’s Plato *like*? O YOU KNOW TATTLETALE GRAY  
 NIGHTGOWN OFF ONE SHOULDER DECLASSEE,  
 TO QUOTE MM A GAS, TO QUOTE CK (158)

Quite a lot, and yet very little of consequence, might seem to take place in this dizzying bit of talk, which culminates in Auden’s gossip about Plato. Yet such ripples of gossip eddy in and out of the poem’s lyrics, lessons, and more general dialogue so consistently as to warrant closer attention. Though eschewing “machismo,” over the course of the poem the form of gossip itself constitutes an “Erection of theories, dissemination / Of thought” about loose talk, verse, and queer relationality. In this regard, this passage’s most salient formal features include the intricate mix of voices in its eleven lines, shared by five different speakers—Mirabell, JM, DJ, the critic Marius Bewley, and Auden, whose gossip adds three additional voices when he quotes Plato, MM and CK (Auden’s lover, Chester Kallman)—and the fact that these voices are not simply in conversation but, in speaking primarily about absent others (Marius, Plato, MM, CK), engaged in gossip.

Mirabell’s allusion to Merrill’s early poems “The Peacock” and “Transfigured Bird”; DJ’s talk of Marius’ favored term for homosexuality, “Athenian”; Marius’ inclusive, queer “US”; Auden’s familiar “O YOU KNOW”; the camp posture and sexual subject matter of the gossip more generally—these cozy aspects of the poem’s talk both reflect and create the board’s often odd affinities between selves and others including the living and dead, male and female, queer and straight, young and old, real and fictional, human and non-human.<sup>83</sup> In so doing, they might seem to align with the

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<sup>83</sup> “Transfigured Bird” and “The Peacock” each appear in Merrill’s *First Poems* (1951), in *Collected Poems*, 33-36, 39.

arguments of those critics who have categorized the poem's chatter as "conversation" whose interplay between "self and other" speaks to an ethic of dignified "equality" or respectful "mutuality."<sup>84</sup> But while these discussions usefully attend to *Sandover's* poetics of the everyday and its effects of intimacy, their framing of the poem's talk as conversation rather than gossip tames its often unruly affect and grants a stabilizing parity to exchanges equally marked by rapid shifts and disparities in agency. An insistence on conversational mutuality, respect, and manners effaces both the difficulties and the pleasures of gossip's reappropriations, exclusions, use of others, and interruptions. In this passage, as elsewhere in the poem, authority obtains in speaking *of* as much as *to* others: even those present find themselves absented by gossip, as when, though JM addresses Mirabell directly, DJ speaks of him in the third person; or when Marius, summoned to the board by DJ's gossip, reciprocates by speaking about rather than to DJ. Conversely, gossip's objectifying talk also animates its objects' agency, as if to be in *Sandover* is first to be gossiped about: Mirabell's nod to Merrill's poetry gives way to JM's voice, DJ's talk of Marius enables his brief appearance, and the entrance of Maria/Plato in the ensuing passage follows this scene's gossip about Plato. Throughout the poem, the agency and intimacies of being in the know are counterbalanced by and depend on the sense that one is also, inevitably, out of the loop. Thus Auden, part of *Sandover's* inmost group, repeatedly appears after "overhearing / Some gossip," surfacing to interject: "CHATTING ABOUT ME MY DEARS?" or "DID I HEAR MY NAME?" (175, 181, 419). Similarly, as soon as he complains that it is "TOO UNFAIR" that Maria "NEVER GETS DISCUSSED BEHIND HER

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<sup>84</sup> Vendler argues that the poem's "espousal of the conversational as the ultimate in linguistic achievement is a moral choice, one which locates value in the human and the everyday rather than in the transcendent" (217); and Zimmerman emphasizes the "mutuality" of how "in conversation, one voice depends upon its counterpart; the interplay requires both self and other—and *Sandover* locates authority or truth precisely *in* this interplay" (383-384). Halpern stresses a conversational "equality" in the poem and, echoing both Vendler and Zimmerman, asserts the poem's "moral . . . emphasis on conversation and the values of the everyday" (183).

BACK,” the inequity of this inequity is remedied by JM and DJ, who invite him to seize the first “opportunity / To talk behind Maria’s back” (419, 422). Maria, who instigates much of the poem’s dish (“TIME FOR TALK, CHAPS?”) (309), aptly expresses gossip’s irresistible vicissitudes in a transcript exchange with JM: “I MUST SAY AN OLD REMNANT OF MANNERS MAKES ME CRINGE TO HAVE THIS SERIES OF IN-GROUPS OF COURSE ANOTHER OLD REMNANT WELL —is delighted. ARE WE NOT A W F U L ? LETS TALK ABOUT WHA.”<sup>85</sup> In *Sandover*, conversational manners have nothing on gossip’s awful pleasures.

Of course, *Sandover*’s gossip is *poetic* gossip, appearing in verse form, and the poetic features of the work’s talk are far from incidental to its network of voices. In the passage above, for instance, Marius does not so much complete DJ’s interrupted thought (“Marius—”) as assert affinity by commandeering his rhyme (“STANDS UP FOR US”); likewise, it is rhyme more than reason that ensures Auden’s gossipy take on Plato (“TATTLETALE GRAY”) accords with MM’s (“DECLASSE”) and that of “CK.” Merrill’s pentameter also engenders connections and breaks among the passage’s alternating voices, most apparently in those instances when questioning and answering speakers share a single line, but also in accommodating interruptions that, by filling out the meter, additionally serve as complements. Further, by introducing dramatic side-text indicating speakers (as in “JM:” or “DJ:”) into lines whose pentameter requires its pronunciation, the poet himself—and in turn his reader—form a necessary part of the network of voices. This side-text does not belong to any of the passage’s voices, yet formally must be voiced, suggesting that the poet orchestrating the poem’s gossip network emerges as part of it: the poet is also a gossip.

A brief moment in *Scripts* dramatizes the coordinate circulation of poetry and gossip in *Sandover*. When the angel Michael concludes the eighth of the volume’s

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<sup>85</sup> Ouija transcript, James Merrill Papers.

first lessons with a questionable poetic flourish—“SO NEXT WE DON THE GLAD ARRAY / OF ALL OUR SENSES TO MEET THE DAY”—his exit prompts Auden immediately to dish on his lackluster verse (“ENTRE NOUS MY DEAR HE’S NOT IMPROVING”) and to offer his own improvement on it: “NEXT WE DON OUR SENSES IN GLAD ARRAY / & MEET HERE AGAIN ON ANOTHER DAY” (352). JM decides “That too could stand some work, if I may say so,” but before he can propose a revision Michael, who has overheard this small chat behind his big back, unexpectedly returns: “MY VERSE NOT METERED? NOT IN RHYME? THEN PRAY / MAKE SENSE OF IT YOURSELVES ANOTHER DAY!” (352). Here three couplets, each a version of that which precedes it, attempt through gossipy and poetic revisions to “MAKE SENSE” of another’s voice. Throughout *Sandover*, no single voice ever seems to originate or complete its own thought; each utterance, no matter how authoritative, is subject to—even subjects itself to—the revisions of “ANOTHER DAY.” In *Scripts*, especially, JM and DJ’s experience of the lessons, as well as the angels’ lessons themselves, must be fleshed out after the fact by WHA and MM’s behind-the-scenes gossip: “We yearn for tomorrow’s inside story / From Maria and Wystan—what they won’t have seen!” JM writes (285). The poem’s pattern of gossipy supplements to its scenes of instruction illustrates just how much its disembodied gospel depends on sensual gossip—“Don’t tease us, tell!” JM at one point begs of Maria—and how *Sandover* approaches gossip’s collaborative reproductions as a model for poetic making (302).

The “ENTRE NOUS” transformations of Michael’s couplet capture, in miniature, poetic gossip’s role in the generative, “self-revising” structure that led Merrill to claim of *Sandover*, “It’s not so much a visionary poem as a revisionary one, I often fear.”<sup>86</sup> David Kalstone feels that “What is most honest and most troubling about Merrill’s trilogy is that there is no final truth revealed: individual revelations keep changing

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<sup>86</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with Fred Bornhauser,” 136, 138.

their shapes, and symbols . . . demand constant reinterpretation”; and McHale could be describing gossip when he similarly writes of the poem, “no ultimately reliable version of things is ever achieved, and who knows how far the process could go?”<sup>87</sup> These epistemological problems of truth, interpretation, and reliability are no doubt effects, in large part, of Merrill’s use of the Ouija board as a compositional tool, yet I do not mean to suggest that gossip’s “no-proof rhetoric” is simply an analogy for Merrill’s Ouija board poetics. (Analogies, at any rate, are never simple in *Sandover*’s double vision.) In a poem concerned with the historical whispers of sexual and political suspicion surrounding the pervert and the poet, it is just as likely the other way around: Merrill’s Ouija board is commonly read as, in Vendler’s words, a figure “for language itself” or, as David Lehman puts it, “a clear though audacious metaphor for language as the source of death-defying poetry,” but insofar as the obstinately literal contrivance of the Ouija can be understood as figurative, surely this overdetermined figure also represents gossip, another social exchange in which a medium takes in and performs a chorus of disembodied voices for a select group of friends, often gathered around a table.<sup>88</sup>

In E. F. Benson’s series of Lucia novels, from which *Sandover* borrows much of its camp style, the Ouija board represents just such a figure for gossip. The cover of one of Merrill’s Ouija notebooks takes its label—“weedj”—from the term for consulting the Ouija coined by characters in *Lucia in London*, one of the Benson novels that, Merrill notes in *Sandover*, he and friends from Stonington, including Robert Morse, “reread— / And reenact—each summer” (257). *Lucia in London* features a plotline in which Lucia’s neighbors in the village of Riseholme acquire a

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<sup>87</sup> David Kalstone, “Persisting Figures: The Poet’s Story and How We Read It,” in *James Merrill: Essays in Criticism*, 144; McHale, “Angels in America,” 25.

<sup>88</sup> Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, 220-221; David Lehman, “Elemental Bravery: The Unity of James Merrill’s Poetry,” in *James Merrill: Essays in Criticism*, 50.

Ouija board and make contact with a familiar spirit named Abfou, who does little more than dish on the absent Lucia's snobbishness; and the opening of *Mirabell* echoes Benson's use of the Ouija as a figure for village gossip by comically imagining the "small town" as a seemingly occult "state of mind, a medium / Wherein suspended, microscopic figments / —Boredom, malice, curiosity— / Catch a steadily more revealing light" (97).<sup>89</sup> *Mirabell* thus presciently begins by conceiving of the "medium" not as an individual person but, like the shared alphabet of the Ouija, or the shared tradition of poetry, a communal space occupied by varied affects, perspectives, and voices—an atmosphere of potentially world-making gossip.

Within this space of relationality—"WE 4 TOGETHER"—the social and aesthetic reproductions of gossip and poetic making construct a queer, post-nuclear family that brings JM and DJ together with literary father-figure Auden and surrogate mother-figure Maria. These familial ties are most immediately evident in the group's endearments: JM and DJ call Maria "Maman," while to her they are "MES ENFANTS" (to Auden, "MY BOYS"). "ENFANTS MES VRAIS ENFANTS," Maria intones, "I AM FREE / OF ALL OLD BLOOD TIES & CONNECT MY LIFE / WITH YOURS" (246). In keeping with the family dynamic, Auden coyly refers to himself and Maria (or rather Plato) as "A FAIRY PAIR," and in hindsight we can see how this family romance of queer parentage plays

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<sup>89</sup> See E. F. Benson, *Lucia in London* (1927), in *Make Way for Lucia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 179-358. The intertextual relation between *Sandover* and the Lucia novels awaits investigation. In the poem's later volumes, Robert Morse (or RM) charms heaven with his "E F BENSON BABYTALK," and *Sandover's* chats are frequently punctuated by the mangled French of the Bensonian valediction "AU RESERVOIR" (257). Merrill himself emphasized—with appropriate camp frivolity—the importance of the Lucia novels for his work; when asked how much familiarity with his source material he expected of his readers, he replied, "Ideally a reader might happen to know, let's say, about a third of these things, might have read Proust but not Dante or E. F. Benson" ("An Interview with Fred Bornhauser," 138). As this unlikely lineup (has the phrase "Dante or E. F. Benson" ever again been uttered?) suggests, Benson's camp gossip lurks at the fringe of *Sandover's* poetic tradition: describing, in an unpublished Ouija transcript, the "THRONG" of "AMERICAN 'GREATS'" gathered "BEYOND THE HEDGE" at *Sandover*—including Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot—RM notes "OFF AT THE EDGE RATHER SHYLY . . . WAS E. F. B." Later, Byron's "GREAT GOSSIP" causes RM to remark of *Sandover*, "IT MIGHT OFTEN BE THE GREEN AT RISEHOLME." Transcript dated September 18, 1977, James Merrill Papers.

out in Auden's constant dashing off to "JAW WITH PLATO," intercourse ("LUCKY BOYISH ME OH WELL COUGH COUGH") that makes their relationship the stuff of gossip (303, 159, 141). Modulating the Cold War figure of the homosexual as an embodiment of perversion, loose talk, and nuclear threat, JM conceives the core group of himself, DJ, Auden, and Maria (Mirabell will soon be added, and Ephraim is never far from hand) as a little nucleus, or—linking his post-nuclear family to the gossipy Verdurin salon in Proust—"What might be seen as her 'petit noyau' / By Mme Verdurin" (147). Rather than an anti-social vision of queerness, in Merrill's poem, affective queer kinship instead moves, through the reproduction of its poetic gossip, toward unexpected relations. As JM tells DJ, "Wystan, Maria, you and I, we four / Nucleate a kind of psychic atom": "At the core / *We* are kept from shattering to bits / By the electron hearts, voices and wits / Of our dead friends [ . . . ] In orbit round us" (191). "FACED WITH NUCLEAR DISASTER," the poem suggests one might find not "DESPAIR" but relief in the "celestial salon" of queer "hearts, voices, and wits" protectively gathered, as Ephraim affirms, "ROUND U IN A WIDE CHARMED CIRCLE" (128).

Out of the Cold War's anxious discourse of queer reproduction, Merrill thus produces a guardedly utopian vision of poetic gossip as a relational mode. The term gossip originally meant "being a friend of," and *Sandover* finds in gossip's "no-proof rhetoric" a form of queer friendship. In his essay "In Defence of Gossip," the real-world Auden asserts that "As a game played under the right rules," gossip is "an act of friendliness . . . and a creative work of art."<sup>90</sup> For Merrill too, art, gossip, and friendship are conflated: Edmund White writes that in *Sandover*, "The sort of love expressed all around—decorous, teasing, edifying, at turns witty and grave—this love

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<sup>90</sup> W. H. Auden, "In Defence of Gossip" (1937), in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Volume 1, 1926-1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 427.

seems to me a utopian vision of love, a vision most often glimpsed these days by homosexuals, one that draws on the energies of both family love and romantic love but transforms that vitality into something new, a sublime sort of friendship.”<sup>91</sup> Materer concurs that “the value of ideal friendships within the poem . . . points the way to a renewed humanity,” but thinks it “doubtful that this is a specifically sexual ideal.”<sup>92</sup> Yet although Merrill does not suggest anything inherently homosexual in this ideal, it seems to me doubtful that *Sandover*’s pursuit of it can be distinguished from the poem’s efforts to reshape the historical contours of non-reproductive erotic relationships. *Sandover*’s friendship ethic in many ways anticipates Michel Foucault’s late work and the idea, as expressed in a 1981 interview, that “The development towards which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship”: “not to discover in oneself the truth of sex but rather to use sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships.”<sup>93</sup> White’s description, in 1983, of “a sublime sort of friendship” that is “most often glimpsed these days by homosexuals” resonates with Foucault’s claim that “Homosexuality is an historic occasion to re-open affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual, but due to the biases against the position he occupies” and thus those “diagonal lines that he can trace in the social fabric,” which “permit him to make these virtualities visible.”<sup>94</sup> The “diagonal lines” traced by the poetic gossip of the defiantly childless JM and DJ at the Ouija certainly “make . . . virtualities visible”: “Between the lines,” Merrill notes in one Ouija transcript, “a hint that none of these souls see each other except thru us—that we are a kind of communications satellite for them.”<sup>95</sup> In the

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<sup>91</sup> Edmund White, “The Inverted Type: Homosexuality as a Theme in James Merrill’s Prophetic Books,” *Essays on Gay Literature*, ed. Stuart Kellogg (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1983), 48.

<sup>92</sup> Materer, *James Merrill’s Apocalypse*, 115.

<sup>93</sup> Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” trans. John Johnston, in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 308.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>95</sup> Ouija transcript dated July 27, 1975, James Merrill Papers.

same transcript Ephraim declares that “Us homosexuals,” in DJ’s words, “ARE THE ONES WHO HOLD THE WORLD TOGETHER.”<sup>96</sup>

Foucault contends that “what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’” is not “the sexual act itself” but rather “the homosexual mode of life”: “everything that can be uncomfortable in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship, things which our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force.”<sup>97</sup> Merrill seems to have a similar, if more demotic, sense of what normative culture might find “disturbing” about homosexuality when, in a published notebook fragment recording an anecdote about John Cage, he writes:

Crowded lecture hall, one of his last appearances.

Member of audience: Mr. Cage, do you and Merce Cunningham have a homosexual relationship?

Long pause. JC (amiably): Well . . . I cook and he eats.<sup>98</sup>

The subversive humor of Cage’s answer—perhaps euphemistic, perhaps not—“amiably” challenges his audience to acknowledge an intimacy between men (who are also, notably, artistic collaborators) that is perhaps as unsettling to convention as any sexual act. At the same time, the sexually infused details of this domestic arrangement flirtatiously confuse straightforward attempts to distinguish between ways of life and sexual acts, or to reinforce categories such as active and passive, masculine and feminine, normal and perverse—even literal and figurative, or cohabitation and collaboration.

In *Sandover*, the seemingly benign recurring image of JM and DJ seated together before the Ouija board similarly emblemizes the sly provocation such queer

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 309.

<sup>98</sup> Merrill, “The Poet’s Notebook,” *Collected Prose*, 33.

intimacy can represent, as if announcing, “Well . . . I’m the SCRIBE and he’s the HAND.” Over the course of the twentieth century even the Ouija board has been conscripted as a figure for the intimate parlor game of heterosexual courtship, with its passive, feminine medium instructively taking dictation from a penetrating, masculine higher power. The perhaps surprising legibility of the board’s gendered erotics is presumed, for example, in two mainstream depictions of the Ouija, each of which portrays what Merrill and Jackson might call “Doters on women, who then went ahead / To doctor everything their voices said.” The first depiction, Norman Rockwell’s 1920 painting “The Ouija Board,” created for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, illustrates the charged pause following a question posed by the romantic couple at the board (see figure 6). Her bearing suggests a frivolous credulity and passivity, his action and rationality: casting her expectant gaze heavenward, her fingers resting lightly on the pointer, she awaits the spirits’ reply, seemingly unaware that it (and she) is being manipulated by her partner, whose straightforward stare, erotically intruding posture, and firm hold on the planchette insistently pointed toward “YES” imply he won’t take no for an answer. Her head is in the stars, his feet are on the ground; and the Ouija perched suggestively upon their laps mediates and stands in for the displaced erotics of this encounter—a dynamic still evident in the second depiction, a 1960 advertisement for a commercially produced Ouija (see figure 7). “Funny how a boy seems to make the best partner!” this ad exclaims. “Especially,” its copy clarifies, “if he’s open-minded and willing to give the OUIJA Talking Board a fair try.” The board’s placement—its alphabet rightside up for the man in Rockwell’s image, for the girl in the advertisement—suggests a shift in this partnership’s agency; yet in assuming that the girl to whom its pitch is addressed would have no skepticism to overcome, and in positioning her as an ideally passive consumer, the ad also echoes the conventional gender roles of the first depiction. Here, the girl’s flurry of questions



Figures. 6-7. Norman Rockwell, “The Ouija Board,” *Saturday Evening Post* cover, May 1, 1920; and Parker Brothers’ Ouija Talking Board, advertisement, December 1960.

connotes feminine frivolity (“Oh, OUIJA, can we take the car?”), fantasy (“Shall I become a model, or a fashion designer?”), gossip (“Who’s Debbie’s date for the prom?”), and naiveté (“Are flying saucers for real?”); while the boy’s fewer and more restrained inquiries (“What college will accept me?” and “Should we go steady?”) imply the desired corrective of a practical, masculine rationality.

The lack of such stereotypically masculinist comportment at the board—not to mention a female presence—distinguishes JM and DJ’s sessions from both the Ouija’s popular iconography and, as DJ jokes, from those literary models of (occult) collaboration found in “Yeats or Hugo,” models which doctor, erect, disseminate, and emit rather than docilely take in or just swallow. The poem’s conceptions of poetic and queer production often rely on and rework the popular, sexual rhetoric surrounding the Ouija itself: as Shoptaw puts it, “Merrill’s receptive cup and erogenous-zones board make a refreshing break from the too often dully phallic



Figure 8. Harris Pemberton, “James Merrill and David Jackson in Stonington, c. 1980s.” Reproduced in *The Changing Light at Sandover* (xi)

pen.”<sup>99</sup> In a review of *Sandover*, Thom Gunn invokes “above all” the image of Merrill and Jackson “sitting at the Ouija board” as part of his pointed celebration of the poem’s depiction of what he calls “a gay marriage” and the “triumph” of this relationship’s invention of an improbable world:

The men’s life together is presented to us in detail which is almost casual: we see them choosing wallpaper, keeping house, traveling, entertaining, and above all sitting at the Ouija board. It is not a minor triumph and it is not an incidental one because, after all, it is the two of them in their closeness who have evoked the whole spirit world of [*Sandover*], or perhaps even created it.<sup>100</sup>

*Sandover*’s presentation of this marriage is less acquiescence to desexualized norms of domesticity than a strategic deployment, “almost casual,” of the discomfiting effects of homosexual “affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship.” Photographs of Merrill and Jackson intimately seated at the Ouija in their Stonington home frequently appear in the paratextual materials surrounding

<sup>99</sup> Shoptaw, “James Merrill and John Ashbery,” 759.

<sup>100</sup> Thom Gunn, “A Heroic Enterprise,” *San Francisco Review of Books*, August 1979, rptd. in *A Reader’s Guide*, 157.

*Sandover*, as if the couple delighted in staging the queer disjunction between their impossibly ambitious poem and the unlikely authorial image of two grown men holding hands atop a teacup, absorbed by what Merrill calls “this absurd, flimsy contraption, creaking along,” the air about them pregnant with “affective and relational virtualities,” the gossip of unheard voices, unseen worlds, meanings we cannot conceive (see figure 8).<sup>101</sup> In *Sandover* it is funny, indeed, how a boy seems to make the best partner.

#### IV. “ACOUSTICAL CHAMBERS”: GOSSIP AND POETIC TONE

So far I have treated gossip primarily as something Merrill represents and thinks about in *Sandover*, while suggesting, too, that it is something he thinks *with*, as he finds in loose talk one model for his collaborative, “revisionary” poem. Implicit in my account of how *Sandover*’s lyric gossip productively takes up and rearticulates the terms of a rather anxious mid-century relationship between privacy and publicity, and of how it reparatively reinflects the postwar suspicions surrounding homosexuality, reproduction, and nuclear threat, has been the problem of poetic tone—a dilemma to which I now explicitly turn. For it is the aesthetic and literary-historical problem of tone inherent in *Sandover*’s method of composition, I propose, that both shapes and takes specific shape within the poem’s queer concerns with postwar questions of selfhood and agency. By tone, I mean the common critical metaphor by which we refer to a poem’s tone of voice, the emotional stance it appears to adopt in relation to its material and auditor. A key term for the New Criticism, and one of the cornerstone pedagogical concepts of Brooks and Warren’s influential textbook *Understanding Poetry*, a poem’s tone, we learn there, “indicates the speaker’s attitude toward his subject and toward his audience, and sometimes toward himself”; though poetry lacks

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<sup>101</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with J. D. McClatchy,” 110.

the vocal intonation or gestural signals of conversation, nonetheless in a poem, as “[i]n ordinary life, a great part of our meaning—our basic attitude toward the *what* and the *who* of any transaction—is indicated by the tone.”<sup>102</sup> As any good gossip knows, *how* a thing is said is as important, if not more, than the statement itself; the same set of words with different tones might easily express opposed meanings. Thus, as any good gossip also knows, tonal reproduction is liable to go awry. It is this liability that *Sandover* exploits in performing its culture’s texts but with different emphasis and feeling, a different “basic attitude toward the *what* and the *who*” involved, and therefore, as we have seen, meaning very different from that originally intended.

The instability of tone in *Sandover* begins in the Ouija board’s mute voices, manifest only as alphabetical characters, and is duplicated in the hastily scrawled source transcripts of these sessions, which give little sense of who is speaking, what is being said, and how. As Merrill describes it, the board’s voices proceed “at a smart clip, perhaps six hundred words an hour,” leaving a whirl of unbroken text, for the most part devoid of even the most rudimentary tonal cues that spacing, shifts in case, and punctuation might provide, and lacking clear side-text or formatting that would indicate a change in speakers.<sup>103</sup> Confronted with these “[d]runken lines of capitals lurching across the page, gibberish until they’re divided up into words and sentences,” the immediate task facing the Ouija’s mediums, then, is discerning—after the fact, and already at second hand—the spirits’ message and its tone.<sup>104</sup> In an interview Jackson recalls that “practically every time, sure, we talked it over, the whole thing, how it had come through. Sometimes we talked over what we thought the tone was. Very often

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<sup>102</sup> Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 112. This final edition of the textbook (following previous editions in 1938, 1950, and 1960) includes slight (though significant) revisions of its description of tone; nonetheless I quote from it because it gives the best sense of the current status of New Critical ideas of tone during the composition of *Sandover*.

<sup>103</sup> James Merrill, “An Interview with Helen Vendler” (1979), *Collected Prose*, 88.

<sup>104</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with J. D. McClatchy,” 107.

Jimmy would get things wrong.” To the question, “You found that the hardest thing to ‘get,’ then, was not the message itself, but its tone?” Jackson answers in the affirmative, explaining, “Because the tone’s a voice. . . . the thing that was always one of the problems to talk over afterwards was, Did you feel that was said in this voice? Or, didn’t Wystan seem surprised?”<sup>105</sup>

This compositional problem permeates the poem itself. Each volume’s presiding spirit, for example, is grasped first, if tentatively, in terms of tone. JM and DJ puzzle over, and delight in, the contrast between Ephraim’s “tone / We trusted most, a smiling Hellenistic / Lightness from beyond the grave,” and “the tone we trusted not one bit. / Must *everything* be witty?” (15, 17). Mirabell “Distinguishes himself” from among the bat-angels by his use of punctuation, “tinkering symbols known / Not in themselves, but through effects on tone” by which he “strikes a note we’ve missed, / Clerkly but eager, glad to be with *us*” (129). (Auden later admits to being “BAFFLED BY THIS CHANGE IN TONE” [175].) And in *Scripts*, the litterateurs assembled for the angels’ demanding lessons take comfort in the sense that “THE TONE” of their instructors’ often “OBSCURE . . . TEXTS” is, Auden finds, “FAR MORE SHAKESPEARIAN THAN BIBLICAL” (420). Merrill and Jackson’s efforts to “get” the Ouija’s tone are most closely mirrored in the poem when, following God Biology’s song—an eerily looping text rendered by JM in ten lines of ten-syllable syllabics—an entire section is devoted to reading the transcript and “talk[ing] over what we thought the tone was.” “PLAINTIVE? AFFIRMATIVE?” asks Auden (362). “He’s singing to the Pantheon,” JM offers. “OR ALONE / KEEPING UP HIS NERVE ON A LIFERAFT,” Auden proposes (362). This guessing at tone continues at length, focusing, Auden insists,

UPON THE SOUND ITSELF THOSE TONES WERE EITHER  
THOSE OF AN ETERNAL V WORK OR A MACHINE

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<sup>105</sup> David Jackson, “DJ: A Conversation with David Jackson,” interview by J. D. McClatchy, *Shenandoah* 30.4 (1979): 44.

SET TO LAST UNTIL THE BATTERIES  
RUN DOWN OR . . . ? Did the tones heard correspond  
To what you read just now? EXACT SYLLABICS:  
THERE IS A LANGUAGE ARE WE ON TO SOMETHING?  
CAN WE MAKE SENSE OF IT? (363)

These questions—is the proper tone poetic, mechanical, or something else entirely?—suggest a radical and absorbing uncertainty (“ARE WE ON TO SOMETHING? / CAN WE MAKE SENSE OF IT?”). For Merrill, given the “unprecedented way in which the material came,” such that “DJ and I never knew until it had been spelled out letter by letter,” tonal uncertainty *itself* became a tone as “What I felt about the material became a natural part of the poem.”<sup>106</sup> In this sense we might say that *Sandover* is—among other things, to be sure—a poem *about* tone, written at a time when the concept, its underlying assumption of a subjective interiority, and the lyric genre as commonly defined in terms of this interiority’s expression had in many quarters fallen out of favor.

If by 1988 Merrill could refer in a lecture to “what we used to call tone—the shades of mood and manner implied by this or that way of speaking,” when he began to consult the Ouija in the early 1950s, tone presented a dominant lens for reading lyric poetry.<sup>107</sup> I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* identifies tone as one of “four kinds of meaning” at work in literary—indeed *all*—language, asserting that “many of the secrets of ‘style’ could, I believe, be shown to be matters of tone, of the perfect recognition of the writer’s relation to the reader in view of what is being said and their joint feelings about it.”<sup>108</sup> Such claims anticipate the prevailing mode of interpreting poems during the postwar period, when the tenets of the New Criticism were widely implemented in the university classroom. In *The Fields of Light*, for example, a 1951 study that models the methods of reading practiced in his classes at Amherst (and later

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<sup>106</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with Helen Vendler,” 85.

<sup>107</sup> James Merrill, “The Education of the Poet” (1988), *Collected Prose*, 13.

<sup>108</sup> I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), 175, 198.

Harvard), Reuben Brower foregrounds the analysis of tone, drawing on Richards but also on Robert Frost's related poetics of what he sometimes called "sentence sounds," or "the sound of sense." Taking as an epigraph for his chapter on "The Speaking Voice" Frost's statement that "Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. . . . All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination," Brower avers: "Every poem is 'dramatic' in Frost's sense: someone is speaking to someone else."<sup>109</sup> The "analysis of tone," for Brower, accordingly demands that the reader "delineate the exact speaking voice in every poem we read."<sup>110</sup> And the poet's job is to shape the poem so as to fasten this voice definitively to the page. As Frost explains in his correspondence, "A sentence *must* convey a meaning by tone of voice and it must be the particular meaning the writer intended. The reader must have no choice in the matter. The tone of voice and its meaning must be in black and white on the page."<sup>111</sup>

Merrill was on intimate terms with these ideas of poetic tone, having studied at Amherst with Brower (who in fact cites Merrill's "honors thesis on Proust" twice in *The Fields of Light*).<sup>112</sup> In an interview years later, Merrill fondly recalls "a course at Amherst that Reuben Brower gave. I now see it was chiefly a course in tone, in putting meaning and the sound of meaning back into words," and he concurs when asked if "Frost's idea of 'sentence sounds'" is "more or less relevant to what you're saying."<sup>113</sup> In *A Different Person* he further evokes "all I had learned about 'tone'

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<sup>109</sup> Reuben Brower, *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 19.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, 30 May 1916, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1964), 204.

<sup>112</sup> See Brower, *The Fields of Light*, 43, 116.

<sup>113</sup> James Merrill, "An Interview with Donald Sheehan" (1968), *Collected Prose*, 55. Merrill frequently refers to Brower's teaching; in a 1982 essay he evokes his time "at Amherst, reading . . . Jane Austen and Pope with Reuben Brower" ("Acoustical Chambers," *Collected Prose*, 7), while in his 1988 lecture

from my teachers” at Amherst, as well as from “the presence on campus, twice yearly, of Mr. Frost and *his* campaign for the sound of sense” (461). Frost’s “campaign” emphasizes that although poetic tone, or “the sound of sense,” “is only there for those who have heard it previously in conversation,” it is not simply a transcription of conversational tones of voice, but instead takes shape as these tones come into tension with meter.<sup>114</sup> “[S]entence sounds” are captured “fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously,” but these tones “are only lovely when thrown and drawn and displayed across spaces of the footed line”: indeed, “if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre.”<sup>115</sup> JM’s reference to *Sandover* as “this net of loose talk tightening to verse” accurately describes Frost’s “sound of sense,” and like Frost’s, Merrill’s formalist verse deploys meter as a grid against which to display *Sandover*’s different voices—humans and ghosts speak in iambic pentameter, for example, while the bat-angels use fourteeners (85). Discussing “voice”—“the democratic word for ‘tone’”—in an interview, Merrill contends, “I notice voice a good deal more in metrical poetry. . . . If Frost had written free verse, I don’t think we’d have heard as much of the voice in it.”<sup>116</sup>

“‘Tone,’” Merrill maintains, “always sounds snobbish, but without a sense of it how one flounders!”<sup>117</sup> Yet by the early 1970s, when Merrill began the project that would become *Sandover*, he was also well aware of how a sense of tone might just as

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on “The Education of the Poet,” he describes “an hour during my senior year at Amherst,” during which “Reuben Brower and I were looking at . . . lines by Pope” (13).

<sup>114</sup> Robert Frost to Sidney Cox, 19 January, 1914, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 107.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, 22 February 1914; Robert Frost to Walter Prichard Eaton, 18 September 1915; and Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, 4 July 1913; in *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 111, 192, 80.

<sup>116</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with Donald Sheehan,” 51.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

easily invoke uncertain floundering.<sup>118</sup> During these years, an increasing distrust of lyric's fictive "speaking voice" and the subjective interiority this voice was taken to presume (misgivings often ascribed by critics to historical and aesthetic shifts of the 1970s including, but by no means limited to, the wake of Watergate, Vietnam, poststructuralist theories of language, and the emergence of Language poetry) reflected what Langdon Hammer calls a "historical difference in the confidence with which we understand other people's interiority and communicate our own." Hammer argues that this "reduction in poetry's perceived potential to represent complexity of feeling, mood, stance—all that Brower and Richards once spoke of under the rubric of tone" presents "a key problem in American poetry since the 1970s," one "which comes down to a general uncertainty about how to represent inner, mental and emotional experience."<sup>119</sup> Such uncertainty jars against the certain claims that tone "must convey . . . the particular meaning the writer intended," leaving the reader "no choice in the matter," or that one must (emphasis mine) "delineate the *exact* speaking voice in *every* poem we read." It accords however with Merrill's experience of tone, as both a reader and writer, in the composition of *Sandover*, which brings the problem of conveying and apprehending "inner, mental and emotional experience" to the fore, but also raises the more fundamental problem—especially for a "ghostwritten" poem—of distinguishing interior from exterior emotion. In a poem in which, as Jackson attests, Ephraim's "tone" was "immediately suspected as our own tone," how does one begin to determine whose voice, meaning, and emotion are being conveyed?<sup>120</sup> In a discussion of tone as a more general aesthetic concept—"a cultural object's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' the world"—Sianne Ngai argues

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<sup>118</sup> In letter to David Kalstone dated 28 November 1972 he writes, "I'm making the oddest stabs—into blank verse, or prose memoir, I can't decide—at some alternative to the Ouija board novel; which serve to leave me very bad-tempered in the evening." James Merrill Papers.

<sup>119</sup> Hammer, "Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry," 13, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, "DJ: A Conversation with David Jackson," 25.

that the problem of such uncertainty is not an obstacle for but *a constitutive part of* tone, “such that to resolve or eliminate the problem would be to nullify the concept or render it useless for theoretical work.”<sup>121</sup> Ngai notes that “because tone is never entirely reducible to a reader’s emotional response to a text or reducible to the text’s internal representations of feeling (though it can amplify and be amplified by both), the problem it poses for analysis is strikingly similar to the problem posed by uncertainties concerning a feeling’s subjective or objective status” (29-30). “Tone,” she observes, “*is* the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce” (30).

Ngai’s assertion that the concept of tone draws on and is “even constructed around” the difficulty of distinguishing exterior from interior formulations, objective from subjective feeling—what Eliot in *Sandover* might call texts that others write and those that are one’s own—helps clarify Merrill’s formal and philosophical engagement with the extreme tonal ambiguities of the Ouija’s voices (30). These voices accentuate what Ngai suggests “we might think of as tone’s greatest adversary in the domain of philosophical aesthetics”: the idea, often referred to as “projection,” that “what a critic calls ‘tone’ is simply a subject’s emotion-based appraisal of an artwork, treated *as if* it were an intrinsic property of the work itself” (82). Ngai writes, “There is a sense in which tone resembles the concept of collective mood frequently invoked by historians (‘Cold War paranoia’ and so forth),” and as she repeatedly turns to “certain kinds of ugly feeling,” like paranoia, to illustrate the concept of tone, its uncertainties take on the negative contours of this affect (43, 28). Paranoia, like tone and the projection that shadows it, “forefronts the question of how to adequately distinguish our own constructions from those which construct us”; and like tone’s

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<sup>121</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 29, 30. Further references will appear within the text.

definitive confusions, “[c]onfusion about feeling’s objective or subjective status becomes *inherent* to the feeling” of paranoia, here compelling us to ask, “Is the enemy *out there* or *in me*? (317, 19).

We have seen how this question asserts itself in *Sandover*, a Cold War poem that embodies the figure of the nuclear annihilation it sets out to prevent, and in which Merrill is, as David Kalstone writes, “bombarded by voices of extinction using *his* words and *his* pages.”<sup>122</sup> These same voices might make of the poet a mere “medium / Blankly uttering someone else’s threat” in a “ghostwritten” poem (is the poetry *out there* or *in me*?). But for Merrill such multivalent uncertainty, if at first disconcerting, quickly becomes a form of pleasure spun out of the threads of postwar paranoia and authorial anxiety. *Mirabell* in fact includes a sonnet whose subject is projection, or “the sentimental fallacy,” in which JM declares, “It’s hopeless, the way people try / To avoid the sentimental fallacy— / How can person not personify?” (172). “Putting it into words,” he accepts, “Means also that it puts words into me” (172). Jackson states, “Whether all that dictation came out of our collective subconscious or not finally became less and less of real interest,” and when asked, “Could not the ‘they’ who move the teacup around the board be considered the authors of the poems?” Merrill blithely equivocates, using the idiom of the Ouija: “Well, yes and no.”<sup>123</sup> *Sandover* does not seek to resolve so much as fully inhabit the problem of tone.

This is a stance for which gossip—seemingly autonomous talk that floats in and out of the bodies that perform and invariably alter it, thriving on and producing ambiguities of agency and interiority—proves instructive. *Sandover*’s tone is steeped in gossip: the inverted teacup from which the poem’s mediums, as Merrill writes, “sip

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<sup>122</sup> David Kalstone, “Persisting Figures: The Poet’s Story and How We Read It,” in *James Merrill: Essays in Criticism*, 143.

<sup>123</sup> Jackson, “DJ: A Conversation with David Jackson,” 38; Merrill, “An Interview with J. D. McClatchy,” 109.

. . . this warm, unsweetened tone” is *spilling the tea*, after all (101). What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the “nonce-taxonomic work represented by gossip” pursues, like the analysis of poetic tone, nuanced accounts of others, providing, she writes, “the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one’s world.”<sup>124</sup> And, like the tonal uncertainty Ngai argues is produced by “our aesthetic encounters,” gossip’s sharp pursuit of particularity is also often imagined as producing an indistinct, atonal hum: chatter, buzz, clucking, cackling, murmurs. From the salon (packed “CHOCKFULL OF STARRY GOSSIP & WE ROAR”) to the schoolroom (where we “HAVE SEEN & HEARD THE BUSY SECRETS BUZZING”), the ambient, atonal tone of gossip’s “provisional hypotheses” characterizes much of *Sandover*’s soundscape (386, 455). More, this tonal uncertainty serves as a positive figure for the poem’s queer reproduction: explaining “THE CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE,” Mirabell proclaims,

THE LOVE  
 U EXPERIENCE IS NOT THE STRAIGHTFORWARD FRONTAL LOVE  
 MANY READERS INFER & YET OUR V WORK MUST SING OUT  
 PAEANS TO THE GREENHOUSE THO WE OURSELVES ARE (M) TONE DEAF

(216)

Announcing his metaphor with his characteristic “(M),” Mirabell here explains homosexuality as a propensity toward tonal instability that paradoxically provides the basis for *Sandover*’s queer, life-affirming song.

Merrill’s turn to gossip as an occasion and method for thinking about the formal, historical, and philosophical aspects of the problem of tone thus might seem to indicate a break from the more narrowly focused poetics he had learned from teachers like Brower or Frost, for whom tone of voice “must be positive, strong, and definitely and unmistakably indicated.”<sup>125</sup> But it is more an exuberant reimagining of this

<sup>124</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, 4 July 1913, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 80.

poetics, in line with Merrill’s mischievously placing Frost in queer contexts, as when *Sandover* stages an erotic encounter between a hypnotized DJ, possessed by Ephraim, and JM, “In a white farmhouse up a gravel road / Where Frost had visited” (26), or when the Ouija transcripts elaborate a ludicrously bawdy fantasy out of the anecdote of Frost’s calling on Ezra Pound in his Kensington flat, only to discover him exotically perched in a tiny portable bathtub.<sup>126</sup> For Frost, too, draws on gossip in formulating his poetics of tone. In the series of letters articulating his efforts to get into his poems “the sound of sense,” Frost links these efforts to a love of gossip. He hints at this link in his suggestion that “The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words,” a scene of overhearing that recalls Mill’s influential definition of lyric poetry as, in Frye’s phrasing, “preeminently the utterance that is overheard.”<sup>127</sup> But whereas for Mill the poet is overheard, as if lyric is the stuff of gossip, for Frost the poet overhears, making verse out of gossip. The ear for gossip implied in such poetic overhearing becomes overt in a later letter in which, after first claiming that his “conscious interest in people was at first no more than an almost technical interest in their speech—in what I used to call their sentence sounds—the sound of sense,” Frost admits,

I was interested in neighbors for more than merely their tones of speech—and always had been. I remember about when I began to suspect myself of liking their gossip for its own sake. I justified myself by the example of Napoleon as recently I have had to justify myself in seasickness by the example of Nelson.

I like the actuality of gossip, the intimacy of it. Say what you will effects of

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<sup>126</sup> Recalling this incident over the board, Frost complains: “PEOPLE WON’T TALK ABOUT MY PHYSICAL LOVE OF EZRA. MOST GOODLOOKING + PHYSICAL MAN. I WAS W/OUT MY WIFE (AS FREQUENTLY) + EP + I EXPERIMENTED SO I DO KNOW AS I TOLD WS, SOMETHING ABOUT IT. GAVE IT UP AS I COULD SEE EP’S VANITY WD DO US BOTH IN, BUT NEVER EXPERIENCED LOVE AGAIN. WROTE MANY A TRASHY POEM + WAS CRUELLY HURT WHEN EP TOLD ME SO.” At this, Pound suddenly appears to declare, “RF WRONG I QUITE LOVE HIM + WAS NO INITIATE IN THAT FRAT.” When Merrill invokes the gossip of the bath, interjecting, “The glimpse of you he gives on first meeting, rising from the bathtub . . .” Pound insists: “+ WENT STRAIGHT AT IT TOO! POOR FROST NOT HAVING RELEASED HIMSELF FOR A MONTH, QUITE A TERROR, HAH! YES YOU WERE BOB!” See Ouija transcript dated July 20, 1978, James Merrill Papers.

<sup>127</sup> Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, 4 July 1913, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 80; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 249.

actuality and intimacy are the greatest aim an artist can have.<sup>128</sup>

Frost's discovery of a latent, "suspect" interest in a culturally feminized gossip must be "justified," even in the relatively private space of a personal letter: and so the somewhat joking invocation of masculine, military strength that becomes the dead serious summoning of the poetic "artist" and his assertive "aim." Despite such anxious justification, though, the surprising sense remains that for Frost the vernacular of gossip—both in its abstract "tones of speech" *and* its "actuality and intimacy"—presents a viable paradigm for modern poetic production. And more than simply viable: in a 1956 lecture, Frost not only celebrates "Gossip," which "may be defined as our guessing at each other," but avows that "Gossip exalts in poetry. Poetry is the top of our guessing at each other. . . . The beauty of gossip is that it is the whole of our daily life. It has flashes of insight. The height of imagination is there."<sup>129</sup>

The "height of imagination," the "top of our guessing at each other"—Frost's claim for poetry as exalted gossip returns us to his "sound of sense." In this context, the "hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world" that Sedgwick ascribes to gossip reverberate with Frost's impossible taxonomic efforts to capture, "fresh from talk," "boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones . . . and forty eleven other tones" that perhaps "could be collected in a book though I don't at present see on what system they would be catalogued."<sup>130</sup> Like his admission of his tangled interest in "tones of speech" and "gossip for its own sake," Frost's "sound of sense" gleaned "from voices behind a door that cuts off the words" suggests tone as a kind of gossip: what we make out of

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<sup>128</sup> Robert Frost to William Stanley Braithwaite, 22 March 1915, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 159.

<sup>129</sup> See Stanley Burnshaw, *Robert Frost Himself* (New York: G. Braziller, 1986), 253. For similar remarks by Frost on the topic of gossip, see *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, ed. Reginald Cook (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 108; and *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 176.

<sup>130</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23; Robert Frost to Walter Pritchard Eaton, 18 September 1915, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 191.

the little bit we can catch of others' interior experience behind the closed door of private subjectivity. Cut off from the subjectivities presumed to be behind that door, the poet's gossipy speculation perhaps fastens to the page his or her own tone and the interiority it implies as much as that of any supposed other in the adjacent room, and this uncertainty of objective and subjective feeling, third- and first- person experience, anticipates the reader's relation to the poem, another interiority accessible only as a disembodied voice we can guess at. Where just a resonant space can be confirmed, we imagine the depth of subjectivity; and in concentrating on this slippage between spaces and subjectivities, Frost's figure for the "sound of sense" presents tone as a form of gossip that imagines and circulates the unverifiable ideal of lyric interiority.

Like Frost's poet making sense—and song—out of voices from which he or she is cut off, *Sandover*'s principal medium absorbs, as Auden sees, "A PLAY OF VOICES FOR / U MY BOY IN SOLITUDE TO SCORE" (137). In its opening lines—"Admittedly I err by undertaking / This in its present form"—Merrill's poem begins with JM's confessional, lyric "I," speaking, after a failed attempt to craft a novel out of the Ouija's "PLAY OF VOICES," from a conventionally lyrical position of "SOLITUDE" ("I alone was left / To tell my story") (3, 4). *Sandover* ends by repeating the same lyric note, as JM commences his reading of the completed poem: "I begin: 'Admittedly . . .'" (560). Nonetheless, although critics have emphasized the poem's many embedded lyrics, and argued for *Ephraim* as a lyric sequence, no one could claim that the 557 pages of *Sandover* that intervene between these two lyrical admissions constitute a lyric poem. Rather, the poem's framing lyric subjectivity takes a stance that not only sets out in error, but knowingly errs, or wanders, through the multivoiced, multigeneric trilogy and its coda. At times in this discussion I all the same refer, even when describing passages quite far from lyric, to *Sandover*'s lyric gossip. In doing so, my contention is not that the poem's gossip always or even

mostly takes lyric form—though it often does—but that as lyric goes astray in *Sandover*, its loose talk consistently gossips *about* the normative limits and queer possibilities of the genre, and especially of its putative interiority.

Merrill's gossip about lyric interiority, like Frost's, recurs to architectural metaphors to portray the uncertain effects of tone, calling poetry, for example, a "vast chamber full of voices."<sup>131</sup> In an essay entitled "Acoustical Chambers," published the same year *Sandover* was completed, Merrill writes that "Interior spaces, the shape and correlation of rooms in a house, have always appealed to me," and speculates that "[t]his fondness for given arrangements might explain how instinctively I took to quatrains, to octaves and sestets, when I began to write poems. 'Stanza' is after all the Italian word for 'room.'"<sup>132</sup> Blurring interior spaces and the interiorities with which they echo, Merrill describes his endeavors to fasten to the page his world's complex "inflections" and speaking "tones" as requiring "magical places real or invented, like . . . Sandover, acoustical chambers so designed as to endow the weariest platitude with resonance and depth."<sup>133</sup> *Sandover*'s inventive design includes the "given arrangements" of inset verseforms (couplets, terza rima, sonnets, a villanelle, a canzone, and an array of nonce-forms), meters indicating voices of diverse ontologies, page layout (the indented left margin of *Mirabell*'s human and ghostly voices, or the dramatic side-text that appears in *Scripts*), and typography (the shifts between small caps and lower-case text, or regular and italicized font, which distinguish voices *and* the particular recesses from which these voices emanate, whether on earth or in the board's virtual world)—an elaborate poetic architecture of interior spaces whose "resonance and depth" animate, yet without ever verifying, the presence of its various species of disembodied voices. These "acoustical chambers," both formally carved

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<sup>131</sup> Merrill, *A Different Person*, 469.

<sup>132</sup> Merrill, "Acoustical Chambers," 3.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

out in the poem *Sandover* and self-reflexively represented as part of the manor house Sandover, comprise spaces of poetry in which gossip exalts and spaces of everyday gossip about exalted poetry.

Consider the poem's well-known "ROSEBRICK MANOR" speech, in which Auden rebukes JM's idyllic wish to return to lyric's "private life, to my own words": "CAN U STILL BE BENT," asks an incredulous WHA, "ON DOING YR OWN THING: EACH TEENY BIT / MADE PERSONAL (PARDON MME) AS SHIT?" (261, 262). He continues,

THINK WHAT A MINOR  
PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART  
COMPARED TO THOSE GREAT GIVENS THE ROSEBRICK MANOR  
ALL TOPIARY FORMS & METRICAL MOAT  
RIPPLING UNSOUNDED! FROM ANTHOLOGIZED  
PERENNIALS TO HERB GARDEN OF CLICHES  
FROM LATIN-LABELED HYBRIDS TO THE FAWN  
4 LETTER FUNGI THAT ENRICH THE LAWN,  
IS NOT ARCADIA TO DWELL AMONG  
GREENWOOD PERSPECTIVES OF THE MOTHER TONGUE  
ROOTSYSTEMS UNDERFOOT WHILE OVERHEAD  
THE SUN GOD SANG & SHADES OF MEANING SPREAD  
& FAR SNOWCAPPED ABSTRACTIONS GLITTERED NEAR  
OR FAIRLY MELTED INTO ATMOSPHERE?  
AS FOR THE FAMILY ITSELF MY DEAR  
JUST GAPE UP AT THAT CORONETED FRIEZE:  
SWEET WILLIAMS & FATE-FLAVORED EMILIES  
THE DOUBTING THOMAS & THE DULCET ONE  
(HARDY MY BOY WHO ELSE? & CHAMPION)  
MILTON & DRYDEN OUR LONG JOHNS IN SHORT  
IN BED AT PRAYERS AT MUSIC FLUSHED WITH PORT  
THE DULL THE PRODIGAL THE MEAN THE MAD  
IT WAS THE GREATEST PRIVILEGE TO HAVE HAD  
A BARE LOWCEILINGED MAID'S ROOM AT THE TOP (262)

Imagining English poetic tradition as a manor house—"Sandover, that noble rosebrick manor" (319)—Auden's conceit downplays the "SELF" by emphasizing the House of Poetry it contingently inhabits, and the "GREAT GIVENS" of form, meter, and varieties of diction that together make up the estate's grounds. His speech presents a series of opposed perspectives and inversions—"OVERHEAD" and "UNDERFOOT," "FAR" and

“NEAR,” “LONG” and “SHORT”—and a voice that similarly contrasts the heightened diction and syntax of lyric (“RIPPLING UNSOUNDED,” “IS NOT ARCADIA TO DWELL AMONG?”) with the everyday phrasing of idle talk (“MY DEAR,” “JUST GAPE UP,” “MY BOY,” “IN SHORT”). What starts in the elevated, distant tone of a guided tour through this allegorical landscape—though Auden is addressing JM, the rhetorical question posed in this voice takes into account no particular auditor—gradually shifts into a more personal, conversational register (“AS FOR THE FAMILY ITSELF MY DEAR”) which we recognize as that of gossip about the goings on (“IN BED AT PRAYERS AT MUSIC FLUSHED WITH PORT”) of the estate’s occupants (“THE DULL THE PRODIGAL THE MEAN THE MAD”). This tonal contrast sustains the inversion of the figure at the bottom of the manor’s social hierarchy ascending to its very “TOP,” a shift in importance that, recalling Ephraim’s unveiling as Michael, or Maria’s as Plato, we might view as the figure of the gossip supplanting the lyric “SELF,” now demoted to “A MINOR / PART.” Given gossip’s long (and often literary) association with women and servants, Auden’s revealing that this passage’s voice and its increasingly relaxed discretion figuratively belongs to the inhabitant of the manor’s “MAID’S ROOM” positions his speech specifically as servant’s gossip about the House of Poetry.

This seems to have been a voice and a conceit Merrill was drawn to: we find another gossipy tour of poetic tradition in an earlier, occasional poem that serves as precursor for Auden’s “ROSEBRICK MANOR” speech. Appearing in the September 26, 1963 *New York Review of Books* under the pseudonym “Raoul Marx,” “Poets at Home” ostensibly presents a review in verse of the recent anthology *The Modern Poets*. Its speaker, host for the at-home suggested by the title, immediately welcomes us:

Yoo-hoo! This way, dear reader, I so hoped  
 You’d find us. We have neither *Sward* nor *Bowers*  
 Nor imaginary *Gardons*, yet a peasant *Plath*

*Wilburing* you through *Ciardi* perennials of many  
*Hughes* to our—hardly a *Villa*, more a *Warren*.  
For fine old *Holmes* you'll have to look elsewhere.<sup>134</sup>

Through puns and spoonerisms that anticipate the multiple meanings and inversions of the rosebrick manor's allegorical landscape and its use of proper names, the speaker's tour of this particular House of Poetry doubles as lively gossip about who's in and who's out of the anthology's literary circle. Here, for example, are "neither [Robert] *Sward* nor [Edgar] *Bowers*," and no "imaginary *Gardons*"—a reference to S. S. *Gardons*, a pen name used by W. D. Snodgrass, who (a real toad?) *is* included in *The Modern Poets*. When it comes time for the salon's "tête-à-Tate" this gossip becomes plain, the house's symbolism giving way to sheer dish about the minor parts played by assorted selves in the world of art:

Yes, we're all here.  
Tomlinson? Ginsberg? Meredith? Great *Scott*,  
How names like that *Kinsella* line beats me.  
Why, any *Lehmann* will tell you—Beg your pardon?  
*Miles* is as good as *Amis*? Ha, that's *Rich*! (812)

Here, poetry and poetic reputation circulate via a network of proper "names" that recall highlighted items in a gossip column as much as an anthology's table of contents. And although this poem is signed with a self-effacing pseudonym, our host's relentless literary dish can be traced, as in WHA's embodiment of the feminized figure of the gossip, to one name and source in particular, "That shallow, *Merrilly* chattering stream" (812).

Reading Auden's "ROSEBRICK MANOR" speech with "Poets at Home" in mind does more than just bolster the overlooked, gossipy aspect of its tone. Critics have generally understood Auden's manor house of tradition to be, as Gwiazda writes,

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<sup>134</sup> James Merrill, "Poets at Home," rptd. in *Collected Poems*, 812. Further references will appear parenthetically within the text. See also *The Modern Poets: An American-British Anthology*, eds. John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963).

“cohabited by the writers of the past.”<sup>135</sup> But the presence of these writers is ambiguous, and they often seem less inhabitants than *parts of the House of Poetry*, just as the salon of “Poets at Home” more accurately figures its poets *as home*, components of a resounding architecture of gossip and poetry, from the “peasant *Plath*” and “*Ciardi* perennials” of the landscape to “the simple *Hall*” in whose mirror we see reflected “a door marked / *T. ELIOT*—that’s where we got our training” (812). When Auden compares “THE SELF” to the “GREAT GIVENS” of “THE ROSEBRICK MANOR,” the individual’s “MINOR” part morphs, through rhyme, into the autonomous features of the “MANOR” itself. And though “THE FAMILY” seems, at first blush, to include “writers of the past”—Shakespeare and Dickinson, Hardy and Campion, Milton and Dryden—who live within the manor, these figures appear not as individuals but as architectural detail, their names doubling as flowers in the design of the space’s “CORONATED FRIEZE.” Rather than a family tree, this frieze’s notably plural “WILLIAMS,” “EMILIES,” Thomases, and “JOHNS” indicate a taxonomy of *types* of poets, much like the taxonomy of rhetorical flowers we find in the estate’s garden. Even Auden’s reputed presence in the manor emerges, like his voice, as an effect of the “MAID’S ROOM,” that particular “acoustical chamber” he claims to have inhabited.

The gossip of the “ROSEBRICK MANOR” speech tells JM—and us—that what we hear “IN A WORK OF ART” is not a lyric “SELF” but a resonant formal space, a tone. Part of an allegorical landscape in which “TOPIARY” equals verseforms, “MOAT” equals meter, “PERENNIALS” equal poetic touchstones, the “HERB GARDEN” equals clichés, and so on, the “MANOR” itself, I suggest, equals manner, or tone. Beginning with I. A. Richards’ linking of “manners” and “tone,” the analysis of poetic tone has involved reference to manners as social behavior, one’s attitude toward others.<sup>136</sup> For

<sup>135</sup> Gwiazda, *James Merrill and W. H. Auden*, 126.

<sup>136</sup> See, for instance, Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 198. In this regard it is worth noting, too, that Brower’s *The Fields of Light* features an analysis of tone and its role in the design of Pope’s *Epistle to*

Merrill, a student of this tradition, “It’s hard to imagine a work of literature that doesn’t depend on manners, at least negatively,” and such “manners—whether good or bad—are entirely allied with tone or voice in poetry.”<sup>137</sup> The manor house of poetry, in Auden’s punning speech, is accordingly a House of Tones: “SWEET” tones and “FATE-FLAVORED” and “DOUBTING” and “DULCET” and what Frost might call “forty eleven other tones.” The term *tone* also has visual meaning, as in the general effect of color or of light, and *The Changing Light at Sandover* thus announces itself as a series of represented and formal spaces in whose constantly changing light “SHADES”—ghosts, tones—“OF MEANING SPREAD,” producing “ghostwritten” texts, pregnant with gradations of meaning their “TONE DEAF” mediums cannot conceive, and promising unforeseeable transformations of tone, of the depth and hue of the poem’s protean voices. Such tones enable “provisional hypotheses” about lyric selves whose interiorities are never certain, but no less powerful for that. As Merrill remarks of manners, “One could paraphrase Marianne Moore: using them with a perfect contempt for them, one discovers in them after all a place for the genuine.”<sup>138</sup>

In *Sandover*, Merrill uses tone with a perfect contempt for it. The poem’s lyric gossip lays bare the problems of poetic tone, interrogating the uncertain “PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART,” the difficulties of distinguishing between subjective and objective feeling, the perhaps illusory nature of lyric interiority. Yet the “ROSEBRICK MANOR” speech, supposedly a rebuke of JM’s wish to return to “my own words,” is in fact, Merrill admits, one of “only a few places where I presume to pass ‘my own words’ off as a message from the other world. The showiest is Wystan’s evocation of the manor house (*Mirabell*, 9.1). It came welling up from me one

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*Burlington*, a poem which conducts, like *Sandover* and “Poets at Home,” a satirical tour of an estate, during which we hear, Brower writes, “the cultivated voice of a guide speaking.” Merrill certainly would have been familiar with Brower’s analysis and Pope’s poem. Brower, *The Fields of Light*, 146.

<sup>137</sup> Merrill, “An Interview with Donald Sheehan,” 58.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

afternoon, instead of from the Board. I never again felt so ‘possessed.’”<sup>139</sup> For all the uncertainties of tone and the seemingly irresolvable questions of agency, interiority, authorship, and tradition such uncertainty implies, Merrill is “STILL . . . BENT” on the “private life” of “my own words”—but as they emerge as gossip from within lyric’s “acoustical chambers.” Here, he seems to echo Eliot in *Sandover*, whose gossip, in asserting that the “WORKS” that “OTHERS ‘WRITE’ . . . ARE YET ONE’S OWN,” evinces a desire for a lyric subjectivity that he knows is an impossible desire, and yet pursues all the more because of it. “Freedom to be oneself,” Merrill writes in *A Different Person*, “is all very well; the greater freedom is not to be oneself” (565). Putting pressure on the problem of poetic tone, Merrill’s Ouija poem demystifies lyric’s subjective interiority even as its gossip discovers in this interiority a queer space for a “self,” to recall Merrill’s words, “much stranger and freer and more farseeing than the one you thought you knew.”

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<sup>139</sup> James Merrill, “*The Changing Light at Sandover: A Conversation with James Merrill*,” interview by Robert Polito, *Pequod* 31 (1990): 11.

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