

STYLE AND THE EXPERIMENT:
THE COHERENCE OF EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

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This dissertation tracks “style” as it is produced by literary experimentation: I consider the self-referential style of William Carlos Williams’ *Kora in Hell*, the mechanical, automated movement of style in William Burroughs’ two trilogies, the minimal “literariness” needed to make appropriation in U.S. Conceptual Writing function as poetry, and the role of the image in the styles of John Ashbery, Bernadette Mayer, and Raymond Queneau. Style functions as a machine, as a structure that ties syntax to plot, as both an *effect* of writing and a cause, and as the creation of a text’s apparent subjectivity. In these readings, I proceed from the many critical assumptions of style’s outdatedness—like Fredric Jameson’s insistence that the term does not apply to works produced after modernism, and to less period-restricted rejections of style’s implications of individuality—in order to redefine style in terms of its relationship to the experiment. I argue that style is what makes experimental writing legible as literature; it is the condition of differentiating writing, recognizable by the stylistic *phenomena* that, according to Gérard Genette’s semiotics of style, must somehow cohere into stylistic *features*. By examining works more often discussed in terms of their abilities to stave off style via disjunction, I find style where it should not be: in works made by citation or collage, by procedures that emphasize chance or otherwise undermine authorial intent, writers fail to rid themselves of this sense of authorial coherence.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Diana Hamilton was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, and she now lives and writes in New York, where she earned her B.A. in Comparative Literature from New York University in 2008. In 2010, she started graduate school in the doctoral program in Comparative Literature at Cornell University. In addition her academic work, she is the author of one full-length book of poetry, *Okay, Okay* (Truck Books 2012) and four chapbooks: *Universe* (Ugly Duckling Presse 2014), *23 Women to Kiss Before You Die* (Make Now Books 2014), *Some Shit Advice* (The Physiocrats 2014), and *Break-up* (Troll Thread 2015). In 2015, she took on the position of Associate Director of the Writing Center at Baruch College, City University of New York.

*for Easy,
who was a cat*

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The list of names of friends who helped me with this project would be too long. I must thank, though, the members of my Dissertation Writing Group, Rebecca Kosick, Anna Horakova, and Elizabeth Blake (and the Society for the Humanities, which funded our work). Even more than writing, reading, and breakfasting with these friends helped me with this project, this collaboration taught me so much about how to support and seek support from other writers.

Finally, if somewhat abruptly, I would like to thank books—without which this dissertation would not be possible. The most important books to a dissertation, I think, are the ones that do not appear within it, or appear only in the flourish of aside (which a writer hopes a

reader can forgive): the only way to keep writing about books, I am sure, is to read other books no one expects me to make arguments about. Along these lines, I would like to thank the *Collected Works of Jane Austen*, especially her Juvenilia, which remind me daily of the Seriousness of Silliness and of Freindship [*sic*], Samuel Delany's *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, Jane Bowles' *Two Serious Ladies*, Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Melville House's Novella Series, to which I subscribe, and, most of all, every poem or novel Elizabeth Blake ever emailed me about, which gave me reasons to wake up to a morning of the poem ("The Morning of the Poem" being a Schuyler poem for which I am also grateful). Similarly, I learned as much from reading groups in graduate school as I learned from class, and I would be a member of the Big Fat Post-War American Novel Reading Group for the rest of my life, I think, especially if, dear friends, we quit reading so much Pynchon. To books whose authors I know personally, I forward my thanks to your creators. With one exception, that is: I would thank the books, rather than their author, of Steven Zultanski, because he dislikes all things academic too much to want mentioning here, even if he was close at hand for all of this dissertation's writing. In one respect, I hope that I am not like Montaigne—that I am not myself the matter of this book—but I thank him, nonetheless, for the *essais*: this is a project about experiments, and therefore about trying. I offer, this, with thanks, as one such attempt.

Thank you, too, to the em-dash, which got me through this dissertation.

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Introduction

Teaching Style

“What do you notice,” I asked with some hope, “about Pynchon’s writing style?”

It was the early weeks of a writing seminar on the subject of “Science and Literature,” and the students were discussing Thomas Pynchon’s “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite.” The essay begins by considering C.P. Snow’s idea of “Two Cultures”—the break between science and literature—and moves through a complicated history that unites nineteenth-century textile workers’ acts of sabotage with the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; in Pynchon’s account, the term “luddite” applies to Ned Ludd (the original frame-breaker from whom “luddites” get their name), workers who struggle to reclaim the means of production, Frankenstein’s creation, and those who more simply fear technological advance.

In hindsight, it is clear that this is the sort of overly general question that so often earns blank gazes. At the time, of course, I believed it would be generative: Pynchon is among the most distinctive prose stylists in the U.S., and I had prepared a follow-up exercise that would have the students compare the essay’s style to excerpts from *The Crying of Lot 49* (which opens with a description of Cornell University, where I was teaching), *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and the manual Pynchon wrote in his work as a technical writer at Boeing (incredibly titled “Togetherness”). More importantly, we had just spent a few weeks reading and writing about *Frankenstein*, and I was hoping that Pynchon’s description of Frankenstein’s creation as “a major literary Badass” would stand out as a stylistic decision.

They had, it turned out, not noticed much that they were willing to share—or, at least, they did not know what I meant by this suspicious word, “style,” at once familiar and too abstract.

I tried again. “What about his word choice?” “Is there anything surprising about the structure of the essay?” I offered follow-up questions, implicitly defining “style” in the process. I had assigned “Is It O.K. to Be A Luddite” precisely because—in an essay full of capital-B Badasses, strange transitions from industrial sabotage to the gothic novel, refusal to straightforwardly answer the titular question, and overall Pynchonian syntax—I had hoped it would help them see how stylistic decisions inform all arguments.

These follow-up questions helped, as the students, it turned out, *had* noticed plenty about Pynchon’s decisions. In fact, many thought he had made bad ones. The Author, many noted, did not make his position clear—so much so that the class was pretty evenly divided between whether it *was*, according to Pynchon, O.K. to be a Luddite. The essay jumped too quickly between subjects; it used more complicated language than was necessary, just as I warned them against (as if Pynchon, too, had just studied for the SATs). We had been reading from Joseph Williams’ *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, and this essay was far from concise. Pynchon is not a writer who fears either nominalizations or distance between subject and verb.

I realized, then, that style *had* come up in the classroom, but only as an evaluative category for the kinds of decisions writers make during the revision process. In writing handbooks, “style” was something a young writer wanted, but may not necessarily have, and its main attributes—directness, concision, connection, clarity—were intentionally avoided by the texts I had chosen to assign. I was asking them to consider the idea of style as a quality of *all*

writing—something to be described, rather than judged—but they were successfully imitating the main way the term had appeared in class discussion.

I had not yet given my students this other sense of style, and I found it hard to produce a working definition. Despite our attention to individual passages, to diction and audience, to the sorts of references he chose, the students were most comfortable talking about the essay as if its answer *must* be a “yes” or “no” to the kind of question an editorial might pose. Technology is good—it cures diseases and creates computers—technology is bad—it leads to the bomb. Even more than they avoided the subject of literary style, they skirted the text’s many contradictions; trusting me to have chosen a text that cohered, they politely moved past the very complication I asked them to attend to.

And what did I mean by style, anyway?

As I tried to draw my class’ attention, whenever possible, to a more complicated understanding of *how* things happen (whether a murder, a course of research, a travel through time, or a college essay) rather than *what* happens, I realized that this was the same move I was trying to make in my own research. That semester, I had narrowed the focus of this dissertation to the role of style in so-called “Experimental” writing, works by writers like William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, Bernadette Mayer, “Conceptual Writers,” and other contemporary poets typically described by their experiments. In existing criticism on these writers, style had often been explicitly rejected, even by the authors themselves, many of whom articulated the motivation for their use of literary experiments as a desire to purge their writing of the seemingly outdated goals of originality and self-expression bound up in many understandings of style. I sensed that the “style” these texts rejected was an especially bourgeois one, tied much more strongly to individual originality than to structure or pattern. But that did not change my sense

that structure itself was being thrown out with a discarded interest in a clear-cut relationship between author and text.

But we do not need to turn to the avant-garde for a rejection of style's importance; literary criticism itself, for some decades, has experienced a number of trends that highlight the work's relationship to history, to political-economic forms, to larger cultural phenomena, or to its own material conditions of production, at the expense of attention to the text's peculiar functioning. D.A. Miller alludes to this shift in *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*:

Picture, if you can, a past moment of literary criticism when, institutionally empowered and rewarded, close reading was the critic's chief tool of professional advancement; his command of a *text*, his capacity to tease from it a previously invisible *nuance*, or illuminate it under a fresh *insight*, would as good as light the pipe in his mouth and sew elbow patches on his jacket, so unfailingly did he thus distinguish himself as the compleat, the full professor of English Literature. Now picture, if you need to, a future moment of literary criticism in which the same practice has fallen into total dereliction, and the *esprit de finesse* has ceded all its previous authority and prestige . . . (57)

Miller's suggestion, of course, is that you do not need to "picture" this future, as he means to describe the present. He argues not for a return to the close reading associated with Emeritus status, but to its "minoritized" state, one marked by the "almost infantile desire to be *close*, period . . . to the mother text" (58). This forbidden proximity is the question of style, in Miller's account: not only to be able to see it, to describe it faithfully, but to *imitate* it, a process he connects to Austen's use of "free indirect style" to allow the narrator to speak in the characters' voices. But the desire is so strong here precisely because it is impossible; Miller is getting away with an entirely unfashionable approach.

My students, in fact, were on trend: they knew instinctively to focus on Pynchon's enthusiasm for the way word-processing was (in the 1980s) sure to change writing, and to connect it to the devices that added to the room's already unpleasant florescent glow. They did not know, instinctively, what to make of the fact that Pynchon's aerospace safety manual began:

“Airlifting the IM-99A missile, like marriage, demands a certain amount of “togetherness” between Air Force and contractor.” The comparison seemed harmless; the statement unobjectionable. Without attention to style, it is difficult to see what makes this sentence so clearly out of place in the context of a technical manual. As a writing teacher, I wanted them to act like Miller, who unabashedly mirrors Austen’s style. I wanted them not only to track the repetitions that make style legible, but also to find strategies to borrow for their own writing. From there, the class got much better: we understood each others’ approaches, and we tried out imitative responses to inhabit authors’ styles. I could not shake the sense, though, that college students had not previously been encouraged to value the shape of a sentence.

Outdated Style

The very thing that makes style compelling to teach—it tempers students’ impulses to reduce texts to a limited set of overlapping themes, and most of the information needed to identify it is easily contained within works made accessible by the syllabus—threatens to make style dangerously out of touch with context.

In “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” Lionel Trilling addresses this problem when he describes his fear that specifically literary or formal analysis is a way of avoiding the work’s purchase on extra-literary questions. This is because, in his experience, the merit of writers like Proust, Kafka, or Gide is their treatment of deeply personal questions that require the teacher to give up his privacy to discuss them, while stripping the works themselves of their import by flattening them into the kind of thesis statement analysis wants: “The exasperation of Lawrence and the subversiveness of Gide, by the time we have dealt with them boldly and straightforwardly, are notable instances of the *alienation of modern man as exemplified by the*

artist” (387). Anything specific about the writing is lost to a general description of theme. In reaction to these concerns, and with a continued dedication (and, I suppose, professional obligation) to keep teaching the course, he began to focus on what I call stylistic analysis—but which, notably, he calls “the most literary way” of proceeding—as a means of redirecting class conversation from this kind of reduction:

Very likely it was with the thought of saving myself from the necessity of speaking personally and my students from having to betray the full harsh meaning of a great literature that I first taught my course in as literary a way as possible. A couple of decades ago the discovery was made that a literary work is a structure of words: this doesn’t seem a surprising thing to have learned except for its polemical tendency, which is to urge us to minimize the amount of attention we give to the poet’s social and personal will, to what he wants to happen outside the poem as a result of the poem; it urges us to fix our minds on what is going on inside the poem. (387)

In Trilling’s pedagogical confession (the past heyday of close reading Miller memorializes), this pedagogical stage is one to be passed through quickly on the way to a more honest approach, one that gives up the false division of critical labor produced by this concern. In part, this happens because of his recognition that literary style is tied up in all of the more difficult questions he hoped to avoid: it was not necessary, or even possible, to avoid “the poet’s social and personal will” to identify the specific contours of the writing he was tasked with teaching.

At the same time, Trilling’s recognition that the emergence of a New Critical close reading tended towards apolitical and otherwise toothless observations still haunts critical enthusiasm about style; at best, this kind of analysis can feel outdated. In many ways, I mean, style is seen as a conservative category. Though it often appears as a problem to twentieth-century critics—one considered in detail in structuralist literary analysis—style becomes harder to analyze uncritically after the many turns U.S. literary criticism took after the extension of deconstruction across the university system. To consider style in its own right (rather than as a means of making a larger argument) threatens to overlook all of the good work done to identify

literature's relationship to history, politics, identity, publication, the archive—anything that raises the stakes of the work outside of itself. At best, to pursue style could betray a longing for a criticism in which we have not yet encountered the impossibility of recognizing structure without subsuming it to one or more of its individual elements. At worst, it would be something precious—look at the use of semi-colons!—an overabundant interest in *craft*, that element of the intentional fallacy that Writing Workshops cannot give up, but critics can eschew. From this view, analyzing style—especially of literature produced in and after modernism—is a more-or-less veiled avoidance of the real longing for socio-political struggle that motivated many works' creation. Of course, these are not the only two attitudes; at least three are common enough critical approaches: From one perspective, aesthetics register politics, and we should analyze writing on the grounds of this overlap; from another, aesthetic questions are worthy of analysis regardless of their extra-artistic application, and it is enough to begin to describe writing's aesthetic qualities; from another—the criticism I am currently imagining—any emphasis on aesthetics is reactionary.

Alongside its alleged indifference to politics, style is often put in opposition to historical analysis. In Chris Nealon's writing on John Ashbery, though, he argues for the necessity of understanding his style to see the poem's relationship to historical context, a subject I touch on in my second chapter. In *The Matter of Capital*, Nealon traces a number of theoretical accounts of style's historical import, reading Auerbach, Adorno, and others against (at times even their own) subordination of style to a generic quality of poetry (Adorno's "lyric intensity"). I see this theoretical history as underscoring the continued importance of stylistic readings within a critical context that so often turns to history at the expense of literature's specificity.

Nealon is hardly the first to think of style's dialectical relationship to history. In Marshal Brown's "*Le Style est l'homme même: The Action of Literature*," he argues for a return to style as a solution to a number of apparent impasses in literary criticism, and he describes "the return to style [as] a return to language in its function as the determinate negation constituting history from deep within as a continuously modulating process" (808). Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, historicizes the significance of style itself, arguing in his dissertation on Jean-Paul Sartre's style that modernism required an increased intelligibility of and attention to style that indicated "not so much a weakness of the writer's talent but a new problematic moment in his situation, a moment of crisis in the history of the development of writing itself" (vii). Style's secondariness is not merely one of appropriation or imitation, but the product of the historical conditions of writing.

Half a century later, this project emerged from a similar tension Trilling struggles against. Like Trilling, I recognized that the writing I was reading required attention to both micro and macro literary elements in order to produce specific description, while simultaneously recognizing that such attention could also be seen, quite reasonably, as a strategy for avoiding more difficult, more complicated, and more political qualities. Trilling resolves this tension by deciding to "give the course . . . without strategies and without conscious caution" (388), an approach academics now are unlikely to see as enough of a "method" for scholarship or pedagogy. But Trilling's problems are primarily with the way the overtly "personal" content of modernism is mediated by literary form, which leads him to announce that "literature had to be dealt with in the terms in announced for itself" (ibid). To care at all about literary style in most of the works I focus on here (beyond the first chapter on William Carlos Williams) is precisely to

deal with literature in terms contrary to its own pronouncements. If style is the man himself,¹ it makes sense that a century that reconsidered the relationship between the individual writer and the text would also leave style to the indifference of history. Once “the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it” (Foucault 107), the aspect of literature that seemed so tied to that exterior individual is as subject to suspicion as the man.

But the question of style was raised not only by the eventual “primary” literary subjects here, but also by the critical texts that shaped my thinking about literature in the years leading up to this project. Along the way, I found that all of the critics and theorists to which I had for some time found myself returning were frequently described by *others* as theorists of style. This emphasis on style was shared even when (in some cases) the word itself rarely appeared in their works: Fredric Jameson, Gilles Deleuze, Hugh Kenner, Jacques Rancière, Susan Sontag, Gérard Genette, and Mikhail Bakhtin, all go to great lengths to account for the tension between generality and particularity in stylistic description. This encouraged my already-growing sense that to talk about the literary is always to talk about style.

Once the question of how to teach style came up, I could not repress it. In *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Cultures*, Stuart Ewen describes style’s sudden ubiquity when he first began his research for the project:

I walked out of my house, to the local subway station, with the purpose of taking the train up to the Butler Library at Columbia University. At the entrance to the station, I glanced and then stopped to look at the newsstand next to the station doors. Among the hundreds of slick and colorful magazine covers, the word “style” appeared again and again. On news magazines, sports magazines, music-oriented magazines, magazines about fashion, architecture and interior design, automobiles, and sex, “style” was repeated endlessly. It seemed to be a universal category, transcending topical boundaries, an accolade applied to people, places, attitudes, and things. Still not sure what style was, I proceed to the

¹ “Le Style est l’homme meme,” from Buffon’s 1753 speech, “Discourse on Style,” quoted in (and the title of) Brown’s essay.

library with the knowledge that I was on the trail of a hot topic, a universal preoccupation, a key to understanding the contours of contemporary culture. (2)

This may sound familiar to anyone who has experienced the paranoid, academic reversal by which your research subject seems to start seeking you out, when you procrastinate going to the archive, only to find it in the margins of every text you read for pleasure. Perhaps, then, it is simply confirmation bias that makes me want to say, along with Ewen, that studying style creates this effect so much more. Because “style” is so often used to mean simply the *way* something appears rather than what it *really* is, it becomes a name for iterability, for a repeatable pattern. It seems to be everywhere, creating the sense that it is both pressing and impossibly vague.

So style is everywhere, if inadequate; it shapes the thinking of writers interested in form, but it also avoids recognizing form’s relationship to history; it applies equally to popular culture and to modernism. This does not get us closer to my focus, though: style’s relationship to what comes “after” modernism, to experimental works produced by means and with aspirations contrary to what Trilling sees as modernism’s beauty, its personal expression, its authorial cohesion.

Low-Stakes Experimentation

These quasi-historical accounts of style’s decline—relying on a teleological narrative that renders progressive the very turn *against* artistic “progress”—tend to presume that something happens to artists in the twentieth century that pushes them to reimagine art’s criteria. When artists explain their own recourse to “experimentation,” though, applying procedures or other external devices to a work’s production, their descriptions tend to be simple, understating the stakes. William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin slice up existing texts to create new ones and name this process “the cut-up method,” which they describe as “experimental just in the sense of

something to do” (31). These words are close to Jasper Johns’ famous instructions from his notes to simply “do something to” the materials involved in an artwork, over and over. Bernadette

Mayer similarly justifies the one-month time constraint of *Studying Hunger*:

Listen

I began all this in April, 1972. I wanted to try to record, like a diary, in writing, states of consciousness, my states of consciousness, as fully as I could, every day, for one month. A month always seems like a likely time-span, if there is one, for an experiment. A month gives you enough time to feel free to skip a day, but not so much time that you wind up fucking off completely. (7)

The constraint interferes here less with theoretical questions about authorial intent and more with practical concerns about art’s production. It is not that modernism’s passing somehow prevents Mayer from writing a lyric poem, but that these procedures are useful for accomplishing her documentary goal.

Along these lines, Mayer’s famous list of possible literary experiments is often taught in introductory writing workshops as inspiration for getting started. This list does not presume the straightforward non-intervention of the artist often associated with procedural works. She instructs a writer to, “In a poem, list what you know” (20), or to “Turn a list of the objects that have something to do with a person who has died into a poem or poem form” (13): the experiment is meant to produce works that otherwise would not happen, but personal experience is still available content. At the same time, this list also complicates any appeal to easy implementation, by instructing poets to win the Nobel Prize for Science, for example, or to write “a perfect poem.”

We have at least two conflicting goals of applying “experiments” to writing: simply in order *to make writing possible*, to create a prompt for response, and at the same time, in order to *propel writing towards the impossible*. Simultaneous to these aims meant to help the writer along, there are many others that seek to cut her off entirely. Burroughs often insists that the

effects of the cut-up method could not be achieved by imitation rather than implementation, and that procedures are necessary to go beyond the limitations of the individual mind. In opposition to the idea that the cut-up is just “something to do,” it is possible to read that *going beyond* is as the entire point. Burroughs writes to Ginsberg that the cut-up method is “a way to systematize the drive to lose the undesired past, to cut his way out of an old identity, if not out of identity itself” (qtd in Harris 8). Many have pointed out the concurrent development of theories that distance the role of the individual author from the text’s meaning and works of poetry or fiction that literally separate the author from production. Where authors and artists turn to more thorough applications of appropriative or combinatory procedures, critics often assume that style becomes irrelevant.

But if we return to the example of Mayer’s *Studying Hunger*, it is clear from only a short excerpt that constraint did not do away with style. Later on the same page, she returns to the shared questions of constraint and experimentation in the language of the sciences; she does not want to compile mere data, but “to do this as an emotional science, as though: I have taken a month drug” (7). The “emotion” of this pseudo-scientific activity seems to describe a quality of the writing, rather than a state of mind: she “was waging a constant battle against traditional language,” and provides an example of her journal that demonstrates that the experiment is, at least in part, a stylistic one. She writes her intentions for the month-long project, which include:

Special: change, sudden change, high, low, food, levels of attention
 And, how intentions change [. . .]
 And, a language should be used that stays on the observations/notes/leaps side of the language border which seems to separate, just barely, observation & analysis. But if the language must resort to analysis to “keep going,” then let it be closer to that than to “accumulate data” (ibid)

This search for what language should “be used” is a search for style on every level: she is considering what kind of attention to pay to detail, what kind of shifts to record, how analytical

to be with respect to what she observes, how to make this language strange. And again, there is that insistence on *keeping going*, on finding a way to make the writing feel uninterrupted, which is a stylistic trait often associated with the New York school. In my final chapter, I spend a little time with *Memory*, another month-long project (and one she describes at the beginning of *Studying Hunger*), to see the role of the image in the development of a combinatory style, one that registers missing photographs, audio recordings, and forgotten memories themselves in an often dream-like life writing. Mayer's style is important as well for how difficult it is to place: generally described as second-generation New York School, she is also variously associated with visual artists who were both her contemporaries and her collaborators, like Vito Acconci, or compared to Language Poetry, or to later conceptual projects that share her work's emphasis on constraint. Her own style is made possible by a refusal to resemble other available period styles, and a refusal to aim for the kind of authorial consistency that prevents change.

This dissertation argues for the importance of style to understanding the effects of this kind of literary experimentation. Via readings of Mayer, Burroughs, and contemporary writers known either under the umbrella of Conceptual Writing or its loosely grouped descendants, I outline core elements of style's function, including its apparent autonomy, its relationship to reference and self-referentiality, its production of images, and its ability to make literature out of the non-literary through these relationships.

Earlier, I recounted Marshall Brown's defense of style's dialectical relationship to history, where he claims Jameson as a great historical thinker of style. To make this argument, one must choose which Jameson to cite, since he more often argues for style's dissolution. He argues that, if modernism was "predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as

unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body” (168), a growing suspicion of the individual subject—suggesting that it either no longer exists, or that, retroactively, we can see that it never did—combines with the sheer proliferation of styles under modernism to produce style’s irrelevance:

What is clear is merely that the older models—Picasso, Proust, T.S. Eliot—do not work anymore (or are positively harmful), since nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer . . . Hence, one again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. (168-9)

But what if style expressed something other than this private world—what if it did something other than “express”? The historical change in writing’s apparent cohesion around an individual would remain, then, but style would need to be otherwise defined.

This is not the first project to reconsider style under the condition of its assumed disappearance. Many critics who wish to return to style’s descriptive value in fact use Jameson against himself, in order to demonstrate that the most persuasive account of postmodernism’s distinctive style-less-ness frequently relies on stylistic analysis. As often as he has linked late capitalism with the fading of artistic style, he has argued for its importance outside of discussions of historic specificity: he dramatically defends it by insisting that “Where there is no possibility of doing something in different ways, there is no possibility of style” (41). Brown picks up this articulation of style as the condition of difference. He argues for style’s ability at once to answer calls for something that could replace criticism’s overemphasis on interpretation of meaning, and to correct a problem he connects to the cultural turn, which produced critical blindness to literary specificity. Deleuze also argues for a criticism that would provide “the outline of the plane of consistence of a work” (119), and articulates the function of an individual author’s name—the

proper name of style—as “regimes of signs” and “precisely not a reference to a particular person as author or subject of enunciation; it refers to one or several assemblages” (*Dialogues* 119-20).

In Sianne Ngai’s recent *Our Aesthetic Categories*, she emphasizes the importance of style to understanding the categories of the zany, the cute, and the interesting developed throughout the book, and acknowledges the need to account for Jameson’s claim that “the analysis of style can no longer count as a legitimate way of doing history” (31). Without discounting Jameson’s description of pastiche in the postmodern, she draws our attention to the fact that “Jameson’s argument about the contemporary decline of style’s ability to function as a reliable index of sociohistorical conditions needs to be stacked against the way he compellingly relies on stylistic categories throughout *Postmodernism*” (32). Ngai’s own work demonstrates the remaining utility of style’s indexical function, as this book explicitly describes its aesthetic categories “as subjective, feeling-based judgments, as well as objective or formal styles” (29). Using earlier theorizations of style to justify its continued importance, Ngai’s account of style considers the kind of address style poses towards audiences, and the way it engages both aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgments.

In taking up this small but forceful contingent of style’s defenders, I hope to demonstrate not only the counterintuitive importance of style as it relates to literary experimentation, but to extend this analysis to consider style as a broader theoretical category. One recurring tension in rejections or defenses of style is its relationship to the appearance of a writing subject. If the loss of some attachment to individuality means that we must “speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum,” a style still emerges after that speaking: style comes to be constituted by the very masks that were meant to replace it.

In the chapters that follow, many such masks accumulate, especially under the condition of what could be called “pastiche”: I find critics describing John Ashbery’s development of a “persona,” the reappearance of an apparent “writing subject” in projects by Conceptual Writers who claim to produce works irrelevant to their personal subjectivities, Burroughs’ “person impersonator,” and so on. I proceed from this critical assumption of style’s death, but instead of rejecting outright others’ rejection of style, I take this claim as a problem to be solved.

The imitation of dead styles has not proven itself opposed to stylistic innovation: even in the work of visual appropriation artists like Sherrie Levine, whose works often reproduce others’ photographs without manipulation, artworks still involve a style. This style might unite elements of an individual work, multiple works by the same artist, or works of a number of artists in the same period, or it might be marked instead by the lack of unity between elements on as many levels. Grouping under the term “style” many kinds of *coherence* produced by the relationship between disparate elements of literature, I examine style’s unexpected appearance where it seems to have lost its relevance. In works produced by citation and collage, by procedures that emphasize chance, and in theoretical frameworks that challenge stability of all kinds, style reappears precisely where it has been discarded: no longer, if it ever was, tied to craft, tradition, or unnecessary embellishment, style provides the means of identifying coherence under the guise of disjunction.

Returning to Bernadette Mayer’s list of possible experiments, we can see this how this conception of style runs counter to its most common usage. Referencing Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style*, one item reads: “Exercises in style: Write twenty-five or more different versions of one event.” But Queneau’s book—and, likely, any work that followed Mayer’s instructions—is not, in fact, a clear exercise in style, but an exercise in literary qualities than can

be read only as *aspects* of style; sonnets and letters, while surely tied to generalizable styles, are themselves only forms. I deal with this in my last chapter, on the relationship between style as general description and style's specific elements, in a reading of Queneau's *We Always Treat Women Too Well*, an exercise in stylistic parody and excess.

Mayer's list does suggest a true stylistic exercise, though: "Attempt to write in a way that's never been written before." While "way" may suggest too much of a sense of form's separation from content—a division that Sontag has identified as the primary confusion behind style's dismissal—the "never before" speaks to stylistic innovation, not because of its emphasis on novelty, but because of its sense of a *whole* effort, an instruction that unites every level of an imagined text. As Sianne Ngai puts it, "From 'Ming dynasty' to 'Henry James's 'late' phase,'" to speak of style is to speak of something that fluctuates among scales of spatial or temporal reference and degrees of institutional codification" (31).

Style, in General

My chapters make a similar move between levels of generality. Spanning in period from modernist poetry to contemporary poets writing after conceptualism, and spanning in focus from self-reference, to style's mechanicity, and to the role of the "image" in style's identification, I circle around paths for getting at an understanding of a writer's style. Following Gérard Genette's argument that style is any text's "conditional literariness," I describe style as a *movement* between levels of detail: from smaller elements—a particular syntax, a recurring theme, or even a quality of disconnectness—to the level of the book, the body of work, or a time period.

My first chapter takes a step back from all this focus on style's role "after" some moment of its decided descent, to instead focus on the question of self-referentiality, with a particular emphasis on William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell*. If the book is written a bit too early to fit in with the other examples, it is certainly "experimental;" it is often hard to tell, in this text, where the book begins and ends, what among his "commentaries" and introductory remarks are meant to actually elucidate what comes later, or what is another example of a poem. Beginning by demonstrating the way criticism handles moments of self-referentiality in poetry, I also consider the kinds of references poetry makes. Aesthetic theories frequently note the relationship between style and its available subjects of representation—as when common people and uncommon voices populate novels—suggesting that art's turn to art itself must have aesthetic effects.

In focusing on poems-about-poems, this chapter tries to get at a broader sense of poetry's reference, and it does so in order to tie self-referentiality to style. Poems are so often accused of not being about much outside of poetry, and style is so often associated with ignoring extra-literary context, that it feels productive to begin where these two overlap. But this starting point is motivated for another reason: in each successive chapter, as I move through existing critical accounts of the authors (especially those that want to thematize recurring content to draw specific attention to the works' construction), critics wind up relying on self-referential moments even in otherwise "referential" poems and novels in order to make sense of them. While these moments sometimes seem felicitous (and while I certainly fall back on this method of reading myself in the pages that come), on closer inspection, they often seem to be so by coincidence. This method is especially tempting when there seem to be descriptions of the work's style within the text, as in William Burroughs' work, where cut-up and disjunct videos, sounds, and bodies

abound. By categorizing different varieties of metapoetic moments, I conclude that style is *itself* a metapoetic category: the primary element of a poem that draws attention back to the writing itself.

If the first chapter demonstrates how style draws attention to itself, the second puts style into motion. Here, I consider the effects of early experiments in literary appropriation on artists and writers' later, less experimental works. I focus on William S. Burroughs's two trilogies: the 1960s *Nova Trilogy*, produced by methods including the cut-up and the fold-in, and the 1980s *Red Nights Trilogy*, characterized by an unusual level of syntactical connectivity. Along the way, I identify a recurring shift from pastiche to coherence that is visible in a number of artists' trajectories. I start with Robert Rauschenberg's photographs as they relate to his better-known combines, and then track a similar shift in criticism of John Ashbery, who is alternately described as having developed the style of his later works through the more constant citations in his earlier poems, or of having staged a "conservative turn" in this move. From there, the chapter turns to the famous "Talking Asshole" section of *Naked Lunch*, and finds an important iteration of the relationship between style and the voice, or style and writing. In divorcing style from orality, the chapter moves into readings of specific stylistic aspects of the first two books of each trilogy, showing how style seems to function almost automatically.

Returning to this question of style's ability to shape texts, the third chapter focuses on the way non-literary writing comes to be read as literary. I define "Conceptual Writing" in terms of its ability to create literature out of other materials, considering Kenneth Goldsmith's transcription in *Soliloquy* and Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, which reproduces legal briefs she wrote in her role as a public defender for people accused of violent, sexual crimes. Both texts suggest that style changes in this move towards literature even where the text itself does not

change. This is not a new observations—that appropriated material changes in its new context—but my argument for stylistic analysis of this shift runs counter to most readings. By considering this process of “becoming literature” as proper to conceptual writing, this chapter leaves conceptualism behind to focus on what happens to poetry written in its direct wake. Using Sianne Ngai’s argument for the role of aesthetic judgment in classifying conceptual art as “merely interesting”—where she suggests that this kind of observation actually forces the critic to draw connections between the work and the socio-historic conditions that determine it—I argue for the role of a more aesthetically-mediated interestingness in postconceptual writing.

My fourth chapter takes a step back, returning to the relationship between general and particular that frames so many theories of style. Working inductively, I analyze the role of one smaller-scale stylistic quality, building from a moment in Genette’s “Style and Signification” where he suggests the difference between a single “image”—a stylistic *phenomenon*—and the property of being imagistic—a stylistic *feature*. Using this idea of the image to frame the larger question of generalizability, I return to Burroughs, and to his appropriations of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in *Nova Express*. While both texts contain “a heap of broken images,” they function differently in each (even where the images are identical), in that images in Eliot’s poem are more visualizable than in Burroughs’ text. This leads into a reading of the “combinatory image,” using the writing-through of photographs in Bernadette Mayer’s *Memory* to draw out this combinatory force.

In both readings, I attempt to move from a specific element to a general description. In Burroughs, this element is appropriated images from Eliot; in Mayer, this element is the small-scale poetic images that stand in for both visual memories and for their photographic documentation. By trying to start with images as one specific element of the writing, though, I

wind up producing even more general descriptions. For this reason, I reverse course to begin reading Raymond Queneau's *We Always Treat Women Too Well* at the most general level: by tracking the way others' have described his work's relationship to Frenchness, to Americanness, to Britishness, to the thriller genre, and to sado-masochistic fiction. Identifying recurring redundancies in Queneau's description, I argue for the way these repetitions prevent the emergence of anything like an image; excessive information renders the referent ridiculous. His misplaced attention to detail, along with his avoidance of "crass" description—the narrator seems to borrow the Catholic characters' prudery at times—permits Queneau to skirt excesses of violence and sex. This chapter's goal is to highlight the circular move between general and particular that characterizes stylistic description.

In each of these sections, written experiments seem initially aimed against subjectivity, but wind up constituting a new relationship to the subject, even if only by creating the *appearance* of a subject behind the writing's continued coherence. At the beginning of his *Écrits*, Jacques Lacan warns against the common understanding of the relationship between subject and writing: "'The style is the man himself,' people repeat without seeing any harm in it, and without worry about the fact that man is no longer so sure a reference point" (3). For Lacan, style is instead "the man one addresses," and it can be located only within the context of this address. Derrida makes a similar connection between style and the subject in "Freud and Scene of Writing," where he quotes Freud's comparison of the *stylus* to the penis in an argument connecting the machine-like quality of the "psychic apparatus" to both primary inscription and to death. I have these references in mind when I end by referencing Deleuze's argument for the relationship between literary style and sadism and masochism. In a longer version of this project, I would argue for an analogous relationship between "experiments" as they relate to writing style

and “actions” as they relate to perversion, finding a shared impulse in the literary and sexual recourse to external constraints or procedures. As perversion makes the subject into the object of the fantasy, style makes the subject into the object of writing. In experimental writing, style sometimes emerges against an author’s best intentions, and produces the appearance of another writing subject.

The term “coherence” also shapes the following chapters, since style requires the maintenance of *some* degree of continuity even while writing itself varies across individual projects, author’s careers, and historical-aesthetic moments. This is not a contradiction, though, but an essential movement, and there are many theories of style that account for its relationship with change and continuity, its ability to be at once binding and undoing. When Adorno critiques the relevance of the concept of style in *Aesthetic Theory*, he describes the move from an older sense of originality—tied up with the individual artist and work as the locus of creativity—to the “utopic” as a move away from “individual style” (172-3). After this move, style “takes on the quality of a blemish,” and originality tends not towards something primordial on the level of a singular work of art, but towards “the production of a new type” altogether (ibid). In this process, “style itself” becomes “the unity of style and its suspension . . . the higher the ambition of artworks, the more energetically they carry out the conflict with style” (206). Even though Adorno dismisses the relevance of style for artworks after this shift, this argument for its inadequacy actually indicates its importance: in the work’s attempt to overcome the “blemish” that is individual coherence, art’s aspiration winds up inventing a new style that immediately necessitates the process of its own undoing. In order to understand the unity style constitutes, though, it is necessary to first understand the moment of its suspension, in which it seems to be left behind by the work’s struggle against self-identity. The books I focus on in this dissertation

maintain that attempted suspension of style, such that the styles that emerge despite this struggle differ from what would have been possible without struggling.

When Deleuze defines style in his dialogues with Claire Parnet (a definition that opens my first chapter), he touches on all of these contradictions that give the sense of the term's belatedness and urgency, its mystery and its materialism. But he also expresses a sentiment I shared consistently in writing this dissertation: "Charm and style are poor words;" he admits: "We should find others, replace them" (6). In this dissertation, I have not found a word to replace style, but I have tried to permit the word to mean each of its competing levels of description.

Chapter 1: Style as Metapoetics

P is for Poetry

“A style,” Gilles Deleuze explains, with reassuring confidence, “is managing to stammer in one’s own language” (4) [Un style, c’est arriver à bégayer dans sa propre langue]. This formulation is appealing because it combines, in one short statement, so many other definitions of style: it prioritizes something proper to the self, “one’s own language;” it focuses on individual expression; it suggests rarity, or style being something to which one aspires. Most importantly, it implies an interruption in simple denotation: style is not a Strunk and White-approved clarity, but the ability to stammer when you know what to say, a controlled stammer, even. Opposed to this idea of purposiveness is another common definition: “It belongs to the people of whom you would normally say, ‘They have no style’” (ibid); style gives the impression it is not there, that it is effortless. In the longer elucidation of the term he gives in the *Abécédaire*, this little claim becomes all the more loaded: not just to stutter, but to make language *itself* stutter, to make one’s native language foreign. He cannot answer the interviewer’s question about whether he has a style himself, but the question leads him to explain the need to rewrite the same passage over and over, and to argue for other ways of bringing a style into being that seem less rare, more quotidian. As the interview switches from S to T, he even comes back to “Style” as he talks about “Tennis,” and suggests that there are styles to the movements of athletes’ bodies that change across time.

In this shifting definition, Deleuze captures so much of what is at stake in trying to pin down style: as soon as you focus too much on the organic, or on the individual, you lose the creation of a whole new language; as soon as you argue too much for the appearance of effortlessness, you betray its lie; as soon as you describe its ineffability, you locate it in the

motion of a wrist, or of a pen. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to focus on just one tension brought up by this elaboration, and then will quickly leave Deleuze behind. The sense that style is a *private language*—so much so that it creates a foreign tongue within a native one—is essential to understanding how style can seem so *insular*, so separate from anything a text could be “about.” While Deleuze goes on to clarify that he, of course, does not believe that *what* is said can be separated from *how* it is said, the description of that “how” is hard to tie to the world outside the text.

This is the case especially with style in poetry, where the dual insularities associated with each term combine to describe a markedly particular language, one often limited to the confines of the poem. For this reason, I start this dissertation not with the question of post-war citation, or of contemporary appropriation or other experiments in form, but with a simpler poetic “experiment”: *ars-poetica*, or the self-referential poem. There is a kind of playfulness in the poem-about-poetry that seems tied to the spirit of trying things out, and poems-about-poetry have a style of their own worth exploring. But even beyond the experimental tie, style is also related to the poem’s degree of reference.

We know that poetry often turns in on itself to become *about* poetry, more than about the poem’s ostensible subject. Perhaps this is because poetry combines the essentially referential effects of writing with less referential aesthetic effects. If lineation was once enough to distinguish poetry from prose, the recognition of non-lineated (and sometimes non-textual) writing *as poetry* requires defining poetry by other means, in ways familiar to any teacher who has tried to explain what a prose poem is to students: there is some greater degree of connotation over denotation, by some accounts, or a greater relationship between form and meaning than in prose, an emphasis on orality, etc. I would argue too that poetry is more likely to be about itself

than other kinds of writing are, and that poetry draws excessive attention not only to how it is written, but also to the sheer fact of its having been written. In this sense, it could be said to *lack* style, since poetry is rarely like Deleuze's gentleman, the man no one would think to describe as stylish. The *Princeton Encyclopedia* also defines poetry's "end" as its own aesthetic qualities: "The means are verbal and the end is the aestheticization of the experience of the object" (939).

Of course, poetry is not the only self-referential art, nor the only art that counts its own aestheticization among its ends, drawing attention to its construction. We also look through L.B. Jeffries' cameras in *Rear Window*, to see his framing efforts overlap with Hitchcock's, or through two cameras at once to see Sherrie Levine's reproductions of Walker Evans' photographs: we don't need writing to see that art is about art. Nor does a focus on poetry help us determine *when* art becomes about art: while, in some accounts, this is the necessary state of the contemporary—the claim that art is becoming increasingly *only* about art, and has less and less to say about the world itself—we would have to look back rather far for any "origin point" of literature's self-referentiality.

Despite all of this, poetry's self-reference seems special, if only because it is so often described in terms of its comparative remove from representation, from clarity, from society, or from whatever else poetry turns against. It is Derrida's little hedgehog, about to be smashed in the road,² or Adorno's "gar,"³ stammering with meaningless import, only able to speak to society because of its remove. No one reads it, we hear, but people keep writing it, for reasons unknown. Maybe, then, self-reference is inevitable: the poem sets off towards something outside itself, but

² Derrida could be read as describing the danger that comes with poetry's turn to self-referentiality, where poetry is "l'animal jeté sur la route, absolu, solitaire, roulé en boule auprès de soi. Il peut se faire écraser, justement, pour cela même, le hérisson, istrice." ["the animal thrown onto the road, absolute, solitary, rolled up in a ball, next to (it)self. And for that reason, it may get itself run over, just so, the *hérisson, istrice* in Italian, in English, hedgehog."]

³ This is from his reading of Stefan George's song, where the non-semantic German syllable *gar* "establishes the poem's status with the force of a déjà vu" (53).

in referring, seems to simultaneously articulate the fact that it is poetry. It turns its mode of reference into another statement about what poetry *could be about*, if it were not, in this instance, again about itself:

And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line,
While they ring round the same unvary'd Chimes,
With sure Returns of still expected Rhymes. (147-9)

Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* provides too easy an example of this process—it makes fun of what critics value while providing exactly that—but it demonstrates an intuitive observation: that we expect poetry to somehow perform its “content” on the level of “form.” One poem, we frequently observe, presents a world in pieces via its own fragmentation; another is shaped like the object it describes; this one, about heartbreak, ends by breaking apart its final couplet.

This is as much the fault of reception as of writing: critics can turn any citation into a moment of metapoetics, as if poetry's insularity were somehow more legible than its attempts to account for something else. We often encourage this in our students, hoping that the poem's self-address will help justify a text that seems especially illegible; I myself have asked a class first opening William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* to consider how the poem could be said to “make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general,” and even to consider what self-referentiality could lie in “by defective means” (3). This is not unwarranted, of course—plenty of texts turn to self-description as another kind of content. But what does emphasizing such moments teach students to assume about poetry's purpose? If we see poetry as essentially about poetry's own possibility, we risk merely confirming its already-proven obsolescence.

I chose an example from *Paterson* not by accident: as a poet who so explicitly, even haphazardly, combines statements about poems with the poems themselves, only to eventually include poetry in the “commentary” and commentary in the “poetry”—as a poet who rewrites the

distinction between prose and verse—Williams poses a particular problem to the question of the metapoetic. Because he is so invested in writing *about* poetry *in* poetry, it would be a willful misreading to reduce meta-statements to “mere content,” so that the poem becomes its own subject only to the same extent as the tree or the farmer do. But because his self-critical claims so often explicitly contradict the poems, it would also be misreading to replace actual criticism with his meta-commentary. If his poetic commentary on his own writing differs from his commentary on other objects, though, what is particular about this kind of reference?

Criticism Within Poems

To answer this question, I proceed from a number of negatively defined claims about poetic meta-reference, all of which come from (what I see as) examples of a particular *style* of bad criticism. First: It is a mistake to privilege metapoetic moments over the merely “referential;” outside of the context of an actual poem, there is no reason to assume one is more important than another. Second: It is a mistake to read poetry as if it had the same job, the same *means* as criticism. It may be equally misguided to ignore that great work has been produced by pushing this boundary, but it is a boundary that, at least for its utility as a descriptor, seems to exist. Third: It is therefore also a mistake to confuse the metapoetic for “criticism,” in general, and to assume that a “poet-critic” is *literally describing the work where the description appears*. While these statements may seem obvious, they are contradicted by a great deal of criticism on poetry. And while they are true of metapoetic moments in poetry generally, they become more problematic when applied to Williams, for whom the strict separation implied by the second claim is much more difficult to maintain. Here, I will use Williams’ *Kora in Hell* as a test case of sorts, since it rejects these most problematic modes of reading, but also makes it very difficult to

maintain any clear separation between modes of writing. This is a problem with which anthologies have often dealt by extracting the more visibly “poetic” texts from their surrounding, prosaic context, which is why it is so easy to forget that “The Red Wheelbarrow,” for example, does not stand alone on a white page.

We need to distinguish between the work a poet does when he chooses to also take on the role of the critic—even a critic of himself—and the work done by the poem that makes reference to poetry. These are two fundamentally different tasks, but they are often lumped together under the position “poet-critic,” or under a broader category of modernism’s inherent self-referentiality or emphasis on language. In an essay on the historical status of the poet-critic in the U.S. after 1945, Robert von Hallberg notes that the kind of question with which we began—what poetry is for, if it refers to itself—is often asked particularly by poet-critics, and *not* by academics who are not themselves writers of poetry (292). At the same time, in his account of critical approaches to self-referentiality in twentieth-century poetry, Andreas Jäger reminds us that it is the very anxiety betrayed by such a question that motivates, even requires, poets’ turn to criticism in a moment of self-justification. Jäger sees this as a post-war moment, responding to Adorno’s seeming prohibition against poetry (though clearly, taking this literally is also a misreading), in which “part of the vacuum left by the dissolution of traditional poetic discourse was filled by the emergence of a kind of poetry dominated by critical discourse” (17). More usefully, he outlines three different varieties of self-referentiality: 1. “as writing ‘about poetry and poets,’ i.e. poetological poetry in a wider sense (the aspect of subject matter),” 2. “as a quality of poetic language foregrounding the textuality of the poem rather than its referentiality,” and 3. “as a result of the poet’s awareness of his or her own status in a modern society . . . which may be analyzed on the textual level as stylistic self-consciousness or irony” (8).

Note that “stylistic self-consciousness” is its own *type* of self-referential poem for Jäger: the poem seeming-to-be-aware that it has a style makes it, to some extent, about the construction of that style. I am not sure I follow the first half of Jäger’s third type, since it seems hard to trace anxiety about modern society as a recurring mode, but I am compelled by the suggestion that such anxiety would necessarily lead to a greater awareness of style. I want to return to the idea of “stylistic self-consciousness” later, when it becomes clearer what kind of self-consciousness the word “style” suggests. For now, the division between the first two categories emphasizes a useful difference between the choice of poetry as the poem’s subject, and the foregrounding of the materiality of language in such a way that the poem draws attention to its component parts.

Both von Hallberg and Jäger assume that poetry begins to self-describe as evidence that its function has been called into question. In these accounts, metapoetic moments are fundamentally *insecure*, demanding poetry articulate its own purpose and means of interpretation alongside the poem itself. This is also the suggestion with which I began, concerned that overemphasizing meta-reference could reduce poetry to much lower stakes. Among the corrections I pose here to the way references to poetry within poems are often read, I now want to suggest the opposite: contrary to such expectations, many poems that foreground poetry—and that foreground their own styles—do so *at the expense of everything else*. These poems bear the knowledge that poetry can be better at approaching the world than other approaches, especially better than interpretations *of* poetry would be. This is clear on first glance for the reason that good poems “about” poetry do a lot more than provide a poetics: at the very least, they also provide a poem. If we follow Jäger’s claim that metapoetic poems are more self-conscious of their styles, we can also imagine how such self-consciousness could be useful in accounting for things outside of the poem. In his comments on style, Deleuze tries to avoid admitting he has

one, but also acknowledges that he has never separated “ideas” from their formulation. By this logic, a poem more seemingly “conscious” that it was crafted—a poem more explicitly about the fact that it is poem—would also be more conscious of the form of expression adequate to what it was about.

It is easy to provide examples of metapoetic / poetological moments in twentieth-century poetry. Most of the book-length, all-encompassing canonical poems necessarily turn to poetry itself, as any poem about everything would have to. The self-reference often goes beyond this initial necessity, though, in moments where the poem attempts to provide its own reading strategy alongside its writing, as where Zukofsky writes in “A”-12: “I’ll tell you. / About my poetics— / music / speech / An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music.” Though one could collect hundreds of such moments, we do not require evidence to prove that *A* provides more than an example of metapoetic handwringing: what text could be surer poetry has something to say about more than poetry?

Other examples seem less aimed at teaching the poem’s own interpretation than in saying something about poetry’s domain in general. In the 1924 version of Marianne Moore’s “Poetry,” we find an example that is the most explicit possible register of self-reference—and with the ever-charming “imaginary gardens with real toads” (135), set off in quotes—but even here, reducing the poem to what it has to say about poetry would be an obvious mistake:

[. . .] Hands that can grasp, eyes
 that can dilate, hair that can rise
 if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
 they are
 useful. When they become so derivative as to become
 unintelligible,
 the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
 do not admire what

we cannot understand: the bat
 holding on upside down or in quest of something to
 eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
 wolf under
 a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
 that feels a flea, the base-
 ball fan, the statistician—
 nor is it valid
 to discriminate against "business documents and [. . .] (ibid)

It is hard to cut off a quote from this poem at any point, given its incredible accumulation, but this excerpt suffices to emphasize: 1. its blatant *critique* of criticism/commentary (“high-sounding interpretation”)—if poetry is the subject here, it is only to say how much better poetry is at saying things *about* other things than criticism is capable of accounting for—2. its emphasis on utility, and 3.—the hardest to pin down—what an essentially *good poem* it is, not because of what it tells us about poetry, but because of “elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under/a tree.” This poem is also not reducible to a metapoetic statement about poetry’s purpose or address.

Poetry is instead equated with real-life materiality—“Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise”—to reduce criticism to something essentially exterior to other “useful” things—poems and hands. At the same time, these lines perform a certain poetic utility, in the simplest way, so that the first line proves capable of turning hands into eyes. Everything else in this section is also at work (not in the sense of labor, but of *doing* something), and poetry’s work is the putting-into-motion of a kind of combinatory logic that establishes relationality without becoming “derivative” or “unintelligible.” Most importantly, this poem is *about* all the things it mentions, in a way only poems can be, performing the impossibility of collapsing the functions of the referential and self-referential by including (and defending) so much material as potentially poetic (even business documents). Of course, at the same time, to read this poem as

being about the superiority of poetry is bizarre, given its first lines, and the lines to which the eventual poem is reduced, by 1967: “I, too, dislike it. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine” (412). Poetry is fundamentally unlikeable—there are more important things—but given a certain set of conditions, it provides at the very least “a place” where all of its materials fit together, including the statistician and the simile connecting the critic to the horse.

Plenty of other canonical examples of poems-about-poetry function similarly, in at first seeming to privilege poetry-as-subject to the point of wholly interiorized self-referentiality, but all the while in poems that continue to insist that poems “about” poetry are always necessarily also about something else. Just so, one of Williams’ poems titled “Poem” makes no explicit reference to the writing of poetry (outside of its title). It instead allows the movement of a cat from a jamcloset to a flowerpot to describe what could be read as the poem’s own step “down/into the pit” (CP 352, qtd in Halter 205), but manages to be at once about a cat and about the fact that its account of the cat is a poem. O’Hara describes this distance between poetry’s subject and its content in another metapoetic poem, “Why I Am Not a Painter”:

a color: orange. I write a line
 about orange. Pretty soon it is a
 whole page of words, not lines.
 Then another page. There should be
 so much more, not of orange, of
 words, of how terrible orange is
 and life. Days go by. It is even in
 prose, I am a real poet. My poem
 is finished and I haven't mentioned
 orange yet [. . .](261-2)

If to write the best poem about orange means to neither mention orange, nor to write in verse, we could expect the most meta of poems to be the one hidden in prose, speaking of anything but poetry. Of course, this reading is the one I warned against: taking what a poem says about poetry

as nothing but a useful critical interpretation of poetry's effects. This poem also performs a number of clear self-contradictions: its title is literal, since it *is* in a way about why he is a poet rather than a painter; it is not in prose; it is only one poem. The fact that it meets none of its own criteria for poetry's distinctiveness makes it, at the very least, somewhat ironic, since the narrative given for the successful development of poetry looks wholly unlike the development of this apparently successful poem. The simplest answer to the question—that both the poem's claims about poetry and its performative disproving of those claims are somehow true—is also the reason poetry and criticism cannot be collapsed: poetry can say and do opposing things without submitting either thing to its contradiction. Criticism is much worse at this kind of maintenance.

By analyzing Williams, I want to show that metapoetic statements are not simply the byproduct of a moment that, more generally, foregrounded the problems of mediation in language, language as material, etc.⁴ This is not to say that they offer some dramatic reconsideration of the relationship between the poet and the critic. I am focusing on Williams, though, precisely because it is so hard to cast aside either of these roles in reading his work. He so insistently frames his writing's division between commentary and poetry, poetry and prose, that he uses the position of "criticism" as an excuse for dullness:

So, after this tedious diversion—whatever of dull you find among my work, put it down to criticism, not to poetry. You will not be mistaken—Who am I but my own critic? Surely in isolation one becomes a god—At least one becomes something of everything, which is not wholly god-like, yet a little so—in many things. (SA112)

⁴ Fredric Jameson makes this a distinction between modernism and post-modernism, in terms of modernism's relationship to classical poetry, in his reading of Williams' *Paterson*: "That all of these features are ultimately formulable in terms of language itself, however, is clearly the ultimate "modernist" presupposition in Williams and one that cannot be interpreted away: comparisons with other objects . . . are not so significant as the still relatively classical or neoclassical way of conceiving of "the poem" in the first place (as "a column; a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands" [2/2])." (6)

In this image, the poet becomes the poet-critic not in order to take advantage of a more privileged perspective on poetry's effects, nor to allow for a more "experimental" or "playful" example of criticism's approach to poetry: he becomes a critic in order to become his own scapegoat, so that anything tedious in the poem can be blamed on the critic. Again, here, criticism is not something that promises to raise poetry out of the depths of its threatened irrelevance, nor something the poet lays claim to in an historical moment where others fail to provide adequate accounts of the unprecedented difficulty of literature—it is something poetry is accidentally reduced to, and must survive. Of course, by my own account, Williams' description should be no real guide to how to read his work. But whether it *applies* to *Spring and All*, it at least gestures towards the division between poetry and criticism as one of tedium—perhaps a difficult one to accept, given poetry's not wholly un-tedious reputation. In this metapoetic claim, poetry, so much harder to recognize stripped of its traditional formal markers, would be identifiable in Williams by anything not-tedious, anything that manages to rise above its surrounding moments.

Criticism then exists not to make sense of poetry, but to make it look good by comparison. If we extend this reading onto von Hallberg's outlining of the emergence of professors as opposed to poets as the primary critics of poetry in the postwar years (281), it is even clearer that this is their job: so much academic criticism of poetry can be read as an apology for not having written a poem. Nothing verifies this so much as our suspicion that all good criticism risks becoming literature. The most relevant source for this suggestion is also its most staunch opposition. Harold Bloom talks about good criticism becoming literature in order to insist that the privileging of one over the other is impossible:

I keep saying, though nobody will listen, or only a few will listen, that criticism is either a genre of literature or it is nothing. It has no hope for survival unless it is a genre of

literature. It can be regarded, if you wish, as a minor genre, but I don't know why people say that. The idea that poetry or, rather, verse writing, is to take priority over criticism is on the face of it absolute nonsense. (344)

The two suggestions are reconcilable, though, by the fact that literature is clearly something to which criticism aspires—even, or especially, for Bloom.

Before determining what exactly the metapoetic does for *Kora in Hell*, it is necessary to differentiate between different kinds of seemingly “critical” or self-referential moments. In doing so, I am leaving out the most obvious level of Williams’ criticism—the actual essays about poetry that are not included in books labeled as “poetry” or literature. I am not especially concerned with the distinction between poetic and prosaic moments of literature—the divide here is between what is “poetic” in the broadest sense and what is merely descriptive or interpretative of other literature. While any number of categories could be developed, I offer four for the purposes of this argument, derived from *Kora in Hell* itself:

1. The non-explicit metapoetic moments—“statements” or phrases ostensibly about other aspects of the poem’s subject which could be *applied to* the poem against its stated meaning by reading, whether or not this move is suggested by the poem itself;
2. Correspondence as criticism—the inclusion of letters with other poets and intellectuals that allow for explicit commentary on Williams’ and others’ poetry;
3. What Williams describes as “commentary” in *Kora* as separate from the purportedly more “literary” improvisations, and
4. Arising from the third, the development of “poetry” *within* what was meant to be commentary—where the style of the improvisations reemerges.

For the first category—non-explicit metapoetic moments, or ideas ostensibly “about” things other than poetry that could be read retroactively as metapoetic—it is necessary to

backtrack a moment to an earlier unanswered question. The question was: What are the implications of understanding the relationship between poetry-as-subject and poetry-as-method as contradictory—this suggestion from O’Hara and Williams that the truly metapoetic poem would make no reference to poetry? This question is more difficult when applied to a text like *Kora in Hell*, which claims to have divided the creative from the critical, but which clearly fails to maintain such a divide. This suggests that the most self-referential moments are not those about poetry, then, but moments that are at once about poetry and something else.

When Williams recounts his mother’s telling of a story, and writes, “By some such dark turn at the end she raises her story of the commonplace” (KH 8), it is clear that this is also a description of Williams’ own relationship to the common or daily, whether the means by which such material is converted is necessarily always a “dark turn.” Can we then assume that this is more “true” than those moments explicitly about the working of his poem? Similarly, we could look to Williams’ suggestion that Arensberg “scour the country” for unexpectedly “creative” paintings made seemingly by accident by otherwise untalented autodidacts (9). We could understand his writing in *Kora in Hell* as essentially attempting to scan *itself* for accidental poems: here, he makes way for the intervention of whatever would enable an unskilled painter to paint something brilliant, whether that something is chance, sublimation, or something made possible only by proximity to less interesting work.

In the second category of the metapoetic in *Kora in Hell*, the inclusion of correspondence with other poets permits a different kind of self-referentiality, in that the explicit statements on poetry are often framed as responses to questions or critiques posed by his contemporaries. When he writes that “the sole precedent [he] can find for the broken style of [his] prologue is Longinus on the sublime” (6), the most apparent stylistic similarity between the two texts lies in

this overlap of criticism with conversation, so that the particularity of address enables a more self-referential mode by displacing the motivation for self-description onto a correspondent. This is emphasized by the 1957 prologue's assumption that the book exists for the pleasure of a few "friends" (30), and by descriptions of other poets' projects that become immediately legible as descriptions of his own, as when he cites Marianne Moore: "My work has come to have just one quality of value in it: I will not touch or have to do with those things which I detest" (10).

Longinus' *On Sublimity* positions its argument in response to at least three individuals, the first two announced by the opening of its preface: "You will recall, my dear Postumius Terentianus, that when we were reading together Caecilius' monograph *On Sublimity*, we felt that it was inadequate to its high subject, and failed to touch the essential points" (1). By writing to a dear friend, he can skip the more general, introductory remarks he might have to make if addressing a wider audience, since Terentianus' "own wide culture prevents [him] from any long preliminary definition" (ibid). And just as Longinus changes the kind of support his argument would need by delimiting his text's addressee, the form of the letter offers Williams just one way of rerouting the expectations of certain kinds of formal criticism for the sake of including poetic statements.

Self-reference here is a "broken style" made possible by correspondence. Among the most potentially "useful" of the claims Williams makes in the "commentary" in *Kora* are the explicit poetic statements that come in his response to a letter from H.D.. In response to her desire to remove those parts of the long poem "March" in which she sees a "derivative tendency" (13), Williams remarks that "The hey-ding-ding touch was derivative, but it filled a gap that I did not know how better to fill at the time. It might be said that that touch is the prototype for the improvisations" (ibid). If *Kora*'s defining feature is a writing process that permits the inclusion

of so-called “derivative” moments for the sake of where they lead, the inclusion of correspondence could fall under the same heading. They are literally *derived* from someone else, but often lead to more explicit statements of poetic intent than would have been possible without Pound, Stevens, or H.D. to argue with.

At the same time, identifying the letters as derivative requires a crucial interruption to this attempt to use Williams’ letter to H.D. as a guide to the text: the reminder that something changes in the simple reframing of the letter as literature, rendering both H.D.’s letter and Williams’ response something other than correspondence between literary contemporaries. I take this topic up later in the third chapter, where I consider the ways letters and other extra-literary materials come to be read as part of an author’s oeuvre—especially if the letters provide evidence of either the “naturalness” or “craftedness” of the writer’s style. In the end, if such moments provide quotes useful for supporting a certain reading of the book, it is only by accident: they are not indications of the poetry’s meaning, but poetry itself (although they are closer to explications than they might otherwise be, given that they fall in the book’s preface). What this means is rather cryptic, but it gives the sense that *something other than criticism is happening* when criticism appears to happen within a poem. We could close read H.D.’s letter letters, then, for evidence of Williams’ style, or we could (more reasonably) determine what is at stake in this presentation of her letter as his literature.

In order to outline the relationship between the texts that Williams describes as “commentary” and the texts that he describes as “poetry”—and in order to get a sense of the possibility of the maintenance of this strict separation of modes—we can look to another example of the metapoetic from *Kora in Hell*, and to our third category. According to the text, this separation is required by the book’s more literary aspirations:

I thought at first to adjoin to each improvisation a more or less opaque commentary. But the mechanical interference that would result makes this inadvisable. Instead I have placed some of them in the preface where without losing their original intention . . . they relieve the later text and also add their weight to my present fragmentary argument. (16)

The order of what follows is somewhat surprising. If this “more or less opaque commentary” has been moved to the preface for the sake of clarity, or to “add weight” to his argument, why does it appear out of order compared to the numbered improvisations to which it corresponds? For the most basic example of metapoetic references that cannot replace reading or interpretation, we can look to the relationship between these notes and the numbered text on which they appear to comment. This is more complicated than the separation of one kind of writing from another. On the unusually sonically playful XI 2—“When beldams dig clams their fat hams (it’s always beldams) balanced near Tellus’ hide, this rhinoceros pelt, these lumped stones” (51)—Williams writes about France’s comparative openness to sexually active women. Although virginity comes up as a topic elsewhere in the book, it is hard to figure out how “sun’s self turned hen’s rump” (*ibid*) is explained by these additional passages.

Other examples of commentary from the preface better illuminate their respective improvisations, though. On IV No. 2, he writes:

Although it is a quality of the imagination that it seeks to place together those things which have a common relationship, yet the coining of similes is a pastime of a very low order, depending as it does upon a nearly vegetable coincidence. Much more keen is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question. (18)

One would expect IV no. 2, then, to somehow perform a kind of comparison, whether the kind promised by simile or by dissimilarity. Instead of containing any explicit comparisons, though, the relevant passage comes closest to being addressed by this commentary in its repetition of a phrase in different contexts, so that “How smoothly the car runs. And these rows of celery, how they bitter the air—winter’s authentic foretaste” (36) becomes “How smoothly the car runs. This

must be the road. Queer how a road juts in” (37). We discover the “peculiarity” of what does not repeat in this return to the same phrase in different circumstances. Similarly, the same section includes the aphoristic “Well, a jest’s a jest but how poor this tea is” (ibid), in which the “but” betrays the insufficiency of the self-identity of “jest.” If most of the commentary feels too separated from its object to be read as real comment, this section *does* seem to be about “the power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity,” a project of disambiguation.

But where does the possible correspondence forged between the commentary and the improvisation get us? In the end, the only observations being made here could be equally made without the guiding remarks damning the simile—again, the commentary is supportive only in so far as its “applicability” to the poem is testable. In attempting to determine what sense can be made of Williams’ metapoetics, we have to move on from the hope that these claims are propositions to be tested against the texts themselves. To do so is to misunderstand how poetry works: to the extent that poetry is capable of establishing truths, it does not do so by purporting or supporting “facts” with evidence. This means that, even after having done some work myself here to show the contradictory relationship between the statements and the poems, I am not attempting to resolve these contradictions, or to prove Williams “wrong” about his own work (as so many poets and artists are, after all).

Marjorie Perloff, for example, proves Williams wrong about his work in *Dance of the Intellect*, where she rejects his account of his work’s relationship to meter in order to demonstrate that the particularities of the line he develops are aimed fundamentally at visual effects rather than metrical ones. She takes issue with Williams’ claimed disdain for “free verse” in relationship to “The Nightingale”:

Like most of Williams' attempts to account for his own prosodic inventions, to theorize about verse, this one is confusing and contradictory. "Free verse isn't verse to me"—over and over again, Williams made this declaration, and yet the fact is that "The Nightingales" is written in "free verse," there being no measurable recurrence of phonic elements Again, Williams's repeated insistence that his poetry is written in "the American idiom"—"the language as spoken"—belies what is actually on the page . . . (89)

Perloff is avoiding taking a poet's own poetics at its word, but in doing so, she still has to "apply" the author's self-description to the text, only in reverse. Now, her job seems to be to disprove his claims, even to the absurdity of demonstrating that "This is just to say"—Williams' famous poem about stolen plums—is not, in fact, a regularly metrical poem (It is hard to imagine anyone mistaking this poem for rigidly metrical, but the proof is given anyway). Taking this refutation further, she considers Williams' story about the first poem he ever wrote, four short lines about a black cloud's movement across the sun. Taking issue with other critics' wholesale acceptance of this origin story (in which Williams claims the poem cured a depressive spell), she doubts its veracity: it must be mythologized self-invention, because "it is doubtful that he would have known of a convention according to which the four short lines in question could possibly qualify as a 'poem'" (92). In effect, he cannot yet have written the poem because *her argument* about his "visual prosody" would not permit it: he has to put "conventional metrics and then Imagist free verse behind him and begin to place poetry in the context of the visual arts" before such a poem would be possible.

While it is true that Williams' claims about meter seem fundamentally incompatible with the scansion of the poems themselves, this is not so much a refutation of Williams as an interpreter of his own work, but a refutation of the attempt to use these claims to provide so straightforward an approach to the poems. It is not that an author's statements are irrelevant, but that we need a context to establish *what kind of relevance* they might have. In Perloff's reading

of metricality, this would mean first establishing that meter is relevant to the interpretation of the poem under development, especially given that her final thesis foregrounds the importance of *visuality*: “the typographical layout of the page was not a sideline, some sort of secondary support structure, but a central fact of poetic discourse” (105). Because it is not possible to negatively prove the importance of the visual by *disproving* the importance of the metrical, it is hard to fit Williams’ self-descriptions into the argument. If proving the poems *are* in free verse does not help us understand what Williams means when he insists that “free verse isn’t verse”—or, as she points out, that he writes like Americans speak—there must be some other way.

Of course, I am also “applying” Williams claims—the “commentary” sections from *Kora in Hell*—to his works; I also proceed from an apparent tension between the metapoetic claim and the text itself. To some extent, this is justified merely by the poet’s decision to make such claims; even if we cannot expect a direct relationship of explication, it makes sense to start by considering the relationship, if only to figure out what work the claims might be doing. In the case of Perloff’s reading of Williams’ metricality, this might mean asking *why* Williams would repeatedly argue against free verse. Perloff shows that, even if his claims are inaccurate, they force readers to look for metricality where they might otherwise assume its irrelevance, suggesting that metapoetic claims have a real effect on reading, whether or not they are “correct.” For if the commentary on the improvisations cannot be read as merely true or false with respect to the texts on which they comment, they still bear some relationship to those texts despite this non-correspondence. What do they do, if not provide an internal criticism of the poem?

One thing they do instead: they aspire to the status of improvisations themselves. By considering criticism’s relationship to poetry as one of envy and conflict, this is the direction in

which I hoped to move: the quality of untestability or apparent irrelevance in a metapoetic statement suggests that the aims are *literary*, where literature is given more room to contradict itself. It demonstrates that the metapoetic aims at the construction of poetry. This is the fourth category of the metapoetic in *Kora in Hell* listed above: the apparent emergence of something “primary,” something itself poetic, *within* what was initially described as commentary, or those places where it is apparent, at least stylistically, that the mode has shifted. These moments help define the poetic by outlining the most basic elements of its identification.

This is a particularly tricky concept to provide examples of, relying as it does on a sort of personal “recognition” of a moment that rises to the status of poetry. In this case, though, it feels safe to claim that it happens not only in momentary examples recognized by taste, but also *in general*: any cursory reading would see that Williams’ “commentary” transforms, at some point, into a stranger mode than mere comment. We can turn to a passage somewhat at random—here, the notes on II. No 3—to identify a moment where something poetic can be clearly distinguished from something more straightforwardly descriptive. The improvisation itself is already an interesting test case for the divergence of the metapoetic from the poetic, as it begins with a set of implied comparisons that get interrupted with something else entirely:

When you hang your clothes on the line you do not expect to see the line broken and them trailing in the mud. Nor would you expect to keep your hands clean by putting them in a dirty pocket [. . .] Then how will you expect a fine trickle of words to follow you through the intimacies of this dance without—oh, come let us walk together into the air awhile first. (33-4)

While the improvisation seems to be moving towards commentary, suggesting that the words of poetry might themselves get sullied by some quotidian event, this concern gets left behind every time it is brought up by the interruption of the music that sets off “this dance.” The section ends by asking the musicians to play faster, and by providing names for the dance in question: “Huzza

then, this is the dance of the blue moss bank! Huzza then, this is the mazurka of the hollow log! Huzza then, this is the dance of the rain in the cold trees” (34).

If we follow the logic of this interruption of the metapoetic by the poem in the improvisation, we can apply it to the improvisation’s commentary to get a sense of how a poem begins to form precisely where it should not, within the poem’s interpretation. Unlike some of the more immediately abstract moments from the preface, the beginning of this note *does* seem to respond specifically to the improvisation in question:

The instability of these improvisations would seem such that they must inevitably crumble under the attention and become particles of a wind that falters. It would appear to the unready that the fiber of the thing is a thin jelly. It would be these same fools who would deny tough cords to the wind because they cannot split a storm endwise and wrap it upon spools. The virtue of strength lies not in the grossness of the fiber but in the fiber itself. Thus a poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being. (16-7)

At first, again, the language of “instability,” or the lack of a metaphorical “fiber” running through the improvisation, seems simply true. As we saw above, he is ready to tie writing to the fact that we have to get dirty: Clothes get dirty in the mud, and hands are sullied by certain pockets, so “a fine trickle of words” cannot “follow you through the intimacies of this dance without” getting messy, too.

With the interruption though, the connection is never made, and the question of applicability becomes more complicated. Halfway through this paragraph, he seems to be riffing on some notion of fiber instead of responding directly to the poetic text. But this is a false start: it would be a mistake to look for an example of the chance appearance of the poetic in this moment of the preface for many reasons. It becomes clear by the end of this paragraph that he is in fact still commenting on the section in question, which does, after all, result in bringing together “many broken things into a dance,” and more importantly, the comparison to fiber is too

consistent to be confused for the style of Williams' improvisations, in which the *interruption* of the comparison by the repetition of the dance is more important than the recurring thread.

Instead, what I am calling here the emergence of a poem from the metapoetic happens in the next paragraph of this commentary—

It is seldom that anything but the most elementary communications can be exchanged one with another. There are in reality only two or three reasons generally accepted as the causes of action. No matter what the motive it will seldom happen that true knowledge of it will be anything more than vaguely divined by some one person, some half a person whose intimacy has perhaps been cultivated over the whole of a lifetime. We live in bags. This is due to the gross fiber of all action. By action itself almost nothing can be imparted. The world of action is a world of stones. (17)

I am not attributing the “poetic” to the (whether pseudo- or earnest) philosophical musing on causality, but to the improvisatory quality, where the current train of thought bears only a tentative connection to the place with which this comment on II no. 3 began. Here, the “fiber” returns, no longer as an explicit comment on the disconnected quality of the original text, but with a different meaning entirely.

The operational logic of the original improvisation is now also controlling the commentary. With “We live in bags,” it becomes clear—we are no longer in what could be described as a critical mode; a poem is happening. The poem happens *by way of* this passage through the metapoetic, in that it only comes about as a result of actual “reflection” or commentary on the text. In this example, a poetic-critical moment stages the eventual return to the poetic. In the final instance, the poem reemerges precisely where writing quits being about poetry, where what was being said about poetry turns out to have been about something more than poetry at the same time—the fiber of the poem now becoming the fiber of all action.

In Halter's reading of the relationship between Williams' poetry and contemporary visual art, he often refers to the distinction with which we began, the divide between the referential and

the self-referential, “between the poem as an autonomous work which yet depends on the deeper connections to the empirical world it refers to” (3). This gets us closer to the tension between commentary and poetry in works like *Kora in Hell*, and also explains the ambivalence expressed by theories of the metapoetic that downplay the importance of explicit reference to poetry. The poem’s attitude towards itself is not only a question of the historical relationship between poets and criticism, but one of poetry’s status as a means of access or reference to existing things, among which poetry is one. In this sense, poems about poetry start from the simplest level of externalization. At the moment of being inscribed as a poem, they also become something else—a reference—so that they leave the domain of poetry, becoming subject to observation alongside other matter.

Whether the poem speaks about itself or about something else, these examples suggest that the former may legitimate the latter. If a poem can demonstrate greater facility to say something *true* about this first instance of its relationship to exteriority—this first moment of its own unfolding—it is in a better position to show it has something true to say about other things. In this line of thinking, poetry would refer to itself precisely where it wants to refer to other things, and would use self-reference a vehicle for reference as such. This happens in most poems with the word “Poem” in the title, especially where the rest of the poem avoids the subject of poetry. In Amiri Baraka’s “A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand,” for example, the title’s reference to itself *as a poem* could not possibly be mistaken for the poem’s emphasis, which is (arguably) the final line: “Will the machinegunners please step forward?” Self-reference is *not* a matter of art-for-art’s sake, aesthetic autonomy, or a focus on the way poems work at the expense of attention to the world. Instead, it is as if the poem were its own first test case, and

once it demonstrates its ability to speak about poetry, it does so (or, at least, *ought* to do so) with the hope of speaking about something else.

Williams' work's continued interest in having something to say (about more than poetry itself) may seem too obvious to be worth mention, but it is an issue with which many accounts of Williams must deal. Perloff's insistence on the turn to the visual also functions as a turn away from referentiality, so that a poem's words seem to exist primarily as material for the construction of a visual scene. Similarly, both Halter and Miller's accounts of the relationship between Williams and visual art attempt to put the effects of his poetry in dialogue with the turn to abstraction, so that Miller appears surprised that "Words . . . still refer to things other than themselves" (305). He continues:

The word "parsley" is the name of a small green crinkly plant. Williams cannot escape the referential meaning of words, and curiously enough he has none of that tormenting fear of reference which haunts modern art, no desire to abolish the naming power of words in order to create a poem which will be entirely free of objects, like an abstract painting. In his poetry words are one thing, trees and flowers are another, but both are possessed within the same inner space (305)

At first, he seems troubled by the reference of the word to its corresponding herb, only to realize, seemingly mid-sentence, that his "cannot escape" is a mistake—Williams does not attempt this escape at all. Miller's confusion continues later, though, when he reconfigures Gertrude Stein's famous quote to assert that "A primrose is just a primrose" (307); it seems unlikely that his "prim" allows the tautology forbidden by poetic repetition, ruined by "just." There is reference here, but it is not in the form of one-to-one correspondence.

Just as a reading of words like "parsley" in Williams' poetry must accept the poem's relationship to actual, wilting herbs, even while the poem turns in on itself, such that parsley has a certain meaning that is only constituted by a constellation of other signs—just as the word "fiber" in the prologue to *Kora in Hell* refers at once to something that holds either the poem or

all human action together, at once to something plantlike and material, and to something abstract—the relationship between the metapoetic and the poetic is one that insists on multiple readings that permit each other. The metapoetic in *Kora in Hell* is not a performative poetic-criticism, or the writing of a poetics under more lenient restrictions than in formal prose, or language's ultimate self-referentiality, or poetry's inability to refer to things outside of poetry. Instead, it focuses attention on the way a text works. When Zukofsky's lines seem to describe the way the poem is working, they function not necessarily as literal information about how that happens, but as a reminder to notice that there is *some* operating logic worth looking for.

Here, we get to my focus on the relationship between self-referential moments and literary style, a relationship that takes many forms. First, we have a divide between the self-reference of modernism and the self-reference of “postmodernism” (to the extent that term is operative). The former is said to cohere into a text-level (or *oeuvre*-level) style that, in referencing itself, makes itself all the more singular. In Gertrude Stein's *Lifting Belly*, she “came to speak about it,” about lifting belly; she has specific instructions about what will and won't be spoken about—suggesting the repeating demands and questions of sex; she demands singing and speaking, while singing and speaking herself. This getting-ready-to-talk-about-it marks the poem throughout, and suggests a performative dimension to self-reference. In the latter—the kind of self-reference associated with postmodernism—the mixing of many disjunctive styles at once renews attention to a work's construction; one thing these texts seem to *want* to say about themselves, when they refer to themselves, is that there won't be a unified Kathy Acker, William Burroughs, etc. Burroughs' *Nova Express*, in which the works of many other writers are “folded in” to the text, begins “Listen to my last words anywhere,” but is already unsure *whose* words they are a few lines down: “Are these the words of the all powerful board syndicates?” Oliver

Harris describes Burroughs's slicing and rearranging of existing texts as a way to "cut his way out of an old identity, if not out of identity entirely," explaining that "this ambition demands discontinuity" (8). In this account, self-reference appears a way of undermining Style, drawing attention to disjunction. These distinctions do not hold for long, though, as we see in the next chapter, which returns to Harris' claim that Burroughs escapes identity.

Stylistic polyvocality is not only a quality of postwar avant-garde U.S. literature, but also of the nineteenth-century novel: for Bakhtin, "social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it" are not exceptions to a stylistic rule, but the mark of "authentic novelistic prose" (288). The navel-gazing brought about by literature's irrelevance cannot be ascribed to any particular war's effects, and a quick search for the term "metapoetics" shows scholars attributing the term from works ranking from Pindar, to Chaucer, to Russian formalism. Even the twentieth century's best hope for specificity, its claim to pastiche's fragmentation, falls out; claims to stylistic disjunction often ignore the fact that *the disjunction itself is stylistically consistent*. Further, self-reference clearly happens in spurts, without a relationship to some overall stylistic unity, or to this kind of consistent self-styling. We even have the sense that the "meta-" is *itself* a style—in films that function as a pastiche of film's capabilities, or in extremely self-conscious narrators—and even a sign of "sophistication" in popular culture (indexing the meta moments in popular TV, for example, stands in for evidence that it is Serious). Conversely, we have a sense that some "styles" are more self-referential than others, and hence, that self-referentiality is merely a quality many styles share, rather than a style itself.

Each of these attempts to tie meta-reference to style shares the same problem: they assume the question is what *amount*, or what *kind*, of self-reference. Instead of determining what

quantity of self-referentiality can be indexed to what style, though, I argue for a different articulation of this relationship: that “style” itself is an essentially metapoetic quality of writing. Here, we have seen that 1. Style is a kind of “self-consciousness;” 2. The incorporation of others’ poetic statements aims at a “broken style;” 3. One way this style *breaks* is by suggesting H.D.’s writing be read *as if it were by Williams*; and 4. “Critical” moments of commentary can be read as poetry by the extent to which they share the style of the improvisations. These are just the connections that come out of *Kora in Hell*, but they suggest that *there is something inherently self-referential about style*. Both self-reference and style—what D.A. Miller ascribes to those “with almost no place to go” (29)—draw attention inward, to a poem’s most particularly literary qualities. Style, then, is its own metapoetics, and stylistic analysis asks what a work has to say for itself.

Chapter 2: Style in Quotation Marks

We can often trace the origin of work's style *somewhere else*, somewhere external to the work. This is true despite style's frequent framing as some original product of an author: "Style is the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist's will" (Sontag 32). Critical accounts of style's constitution by means other than simple craft abound. In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach ties style inextricably to history, such that the New Testament requires the portrayal of everyday life without subordination to the Greek standard of presenting the everyday as comic (44); style emerges from the context rather than from either subject or author. In another move that distances the author from her style, D.A. Miller describes Jane Austen's style as constituted by its resistance to personification, to such an extent that some of her work can be considered *not to be in her own style*. In perhaps the most persistent reading of style originating outside a text, Harold Bloom provides a Freudian account of belatedness and anxiety as it conditions any poetry that must struggle with the knowledge of other strong poems—this list could go on.

The fact that style can be found outside of the text itself, or outside of the contours of the writer's own subjectivity, is not so mysterious, then; the question is not why or how this process of style's creation starts, but when it seems to *stop*: when, that is, an "individual style" seems to emerge. "Style" then describes both the process of its own development and its endpoint, the strange consistency that allows a text to take on the impossible specificity of the author-turned-adjective.

If all style borrows, a more dramatic version of this process ought to be visible in texts that literally give up their own voices, incorporating the actual language of other sources, or applying procedures that ought to prevent anything like single-author style from remaining relevant. For this reason, works included under the imprecise umbrella of the "postmodern" are

less likely to be described stylistically. In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Fredric Jameson describes modernism as hinging on “personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body,” whereas postmodernism assumes that “that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past” (168)—either that it *no longer* exists, or that, retroactively, “it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place” (ibid). For Jameson—as well as for countless other readers of “experimental” post-war literature—the kind of appropriation used by T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound somehow still solidifies into a personal univocality, whereas style is rendered moot by later appropriative acts’ move towards increasing disjunction.

Even if this position is not taken up directly, it is implicit in the most common critical approaches to procedural, highly disjunctive, or appropriative works. At the same time, the story wherein “disjunctive” writers “return” to continuity is equally familiar. In his critical overview of John Ashbery’s long poem “The Skaters,” Brian McHale describes how “Ashbery’s poetics parallels or anticipates the shift in postmodernism generally from forms of disjunction to recycling, appropriation, pastiche, and other varieties of secondhandedness” (563), implying that pastiche itself functions as a transition towards a greater sense of continuity. According to McHale, the fact that *Rivers and Mountain* seems, at least on first glance, more coherent than *The Tennis Court Oath* tempts Ashbery’s readers into ascribing a greater sense of clarity than the poem merits.

In a compelling account of style’s relationship to a bad sort of clarity, Douglas Crimp’s “Appropriating Appropriation” bemoans the way appropriation in visual art can produce a sense of *false* continuity. He distinguishes between good appropriation, in which the lifted objects are found “materials,” and bad appropriation, in which the artist appropriates the “style” of another

artist or artwork. Using two architectural examples, he describes Michael Graves' public services building in Portland as an "eclectic mix of past architectural styles drawn generally from the orbit of classicism," while Frank Gehry's personal home in Santa Monica "appropriates only a single element from the past . . . it is not, however, an element of style; it is an already existing 1920s clapboard house:"

Graves appropriates from the architectural past; Gehry appropriates laterally, from the present. . . . Grave's approach to architecture returns to a premodernist understanding of the art as a creative combination of elements derived from a historically given vocabulary . . . Gehry's practice, however, retains the historical lessons of modernism even as it criticizes modernism's idealist dimension from a postmodernist perspective . . . Moreover, the individual elements of Gehry's house resolutely maintain their identities. They do not combine into an illusion of a seamless whole. . . . these fragments never add up to a style" (127)

Here, the emergence of style becomes a sign of aesthetic failure. He offers this example of art's turn from maintained disjunction to stylistic coherence not as a narrative for the progression of postmodernism in general, but as a lesson in the danger of art's institutionalization. Crimp's article ends by reading a (then recent) turn in Robert Rauschenberg's career towards photographing objects that (according to Crimp's description) once would have been materially incorporated into his combines, such that Rauschenberg "appropriates his own work, convert[ing] it from material to style" (34). He accuses Rauschenberg of responding only to museum and gallery curators' desire for specific kinds of art objects, and suggests that Rauschenberg's newfound emphasis on style betrays a failure of the intended effects of appropriation.

This reading only makes sense if we accept Crimp's initial premise: that appropriation's relationship to style is one of failure, because what *ought* to maintain aesthetic disjunction instead creates "a very strong illusion indeed of the wholeness of the end product" (127).

Crimp's argument offers a persuasive (and useful) distinction between two different endpoints of

acts that, on first glance, seem similar (the appropriation of materials and the appropriation of style), but his argument holds only if 1. Style itself is a problem for art, and 2. Some art exists that manages to elude style's seeming wholeness.

Because this dissertation argues for the importance of style's role in *reading* works most typically discussed only according to their relative abilities to stave off style—often via disjunction or proceduralism—I cannot agree with either of these premises. In fact, the second's failure discounts the first: because style persists even where it should not, its mere presence is a critical problem rather than an artistic one. While this argument will largely hinge on a reading of the movement of style through two major periods in William Burroughs' writing, both Crimp's reading of Rauschenberg and McHale's account of Ashbery's stylistic progression offer useful detours on my broader path of portraying style *as* movement, as the actual process of seemingly "procedural" literature—or the means by which writing proceeds—rather than as a static description or definition of a given text. Examining some of the stylistic analyses of Rauschenberg and Ashbery clarifies the importance of the question for Burroughs. Though these are three very different kinds of art, and three artists whose works are themselves heterogeneous, all speak to a specific relationship between appropriation, style, and aesthetic consistency.

If we reject both of the premises necessary to Crimp's critique of Rauschenberg—assuming that style is not *necessarily* a problematic object or endpoint of appropriation, and more forcefully, that no artwork escapes its own style—there is another way to understand what is at stake in Rauschenberg's "turn" to the combinatory effects of photography from the material combine. According to Crimp, Rauschenberg converts materials into style by returning his formerly appropriated objects to their contexts in photographs, creating a problematic continuity. Instead, it is this continuity between the combines and photographs that reveals the extent to

which style was *always* at work: in order for the photographs to be “continuous,” the combines must be too.

Rauschenberg’s 1955 “Short Circuit (Combine Painting)” directly engages the relationship between style, medium, and “materials.” Those materials include the paint, fabric, wood, various collaged items, a painting by Susan Weil, Elaine Sturtevant’s reproduction of a Jasper Johns flag painting (the original was stolen), and the cabinet in which the materials of the upper half of the combine are hidden, depending on how the piece is displayed. This work likely functions, for Crimp, as a positive example of the artist’s appropriative works, since even the work’s structure is designed to prevent it from being viewed “whole.” At the same time, this work shows how style’s coherence becomes legible retroactively, since Rauschenberg’s combines



are as identifiable as any signature brush stroke. This work’s inability to escape style—assuming, with Crimp, that that would be the goal—does not even need to rely on the

identifiability of its artist, though (depicted as much by the work’s constellation of personal relationships as by its appearance). The conception of the cabinet itself—allegedly, a means of including the work of new artists in an exhibit that had changed its rules to prevent such inclusion—speaks to the fact that this early work already includes an “appropriation of style.”

Most importantly, its eventual need for Sturtevant's reproduction points to both the apparent interdependence of its individual elements and the way style circles around the appearance of originality and its relationship to imitability.

Starting from the interior upper-left-hand quadrant, Johns'/Sturtevant's flag opens out onto the rest of the combine; it takes the same structural position as the stars do in the flag itself.



From there, the work shows its stripes: Weil's painting, covered or not with a white door, a red stripe below with the instruction "open," a small postcard, and vertical white strokes of paint that bleed into the

lower section, itself separated into a number of lateral segments, with a cloth rectangle in red and white polka dots seeming to quote the pattern of the original stars. The flag painting can itself be covered with another striped rectangle, this time multi-colored. The reappearance of various elements of the flag is not necessarily proper to Johns' or Sturtevant's painting, but the discolored blurring of the stripes, the way a "found" image becomes the work of another individual through the specificities of paint, dirt, and geometry, all seem related to the enclosed flag, regardless of the order in which the elements proceed (whether the combine seems to come "from" Johns or vice versa).

If we turn to a photographic example of Rauschenberg’s use of the American flag, it is still clearer that style plays no greater role in this secondary appropriation. Some elements here do seem in line with the style of the combine: The chance meaning produced by a combination of found elements—an antiwar slogan, a patriotic symbol, and a one-way sign, suggesting the inevitability of one course of action—the apparent lack of intervention into a number of these elements, and the actual visual motifs (a similar proliferation of shapes that suggest laterality or striping). But we do not need the photograph’s existence to render the style of the former



materials visible.

Instead, Crimp’s privileging of the combine’s materiality is a fantasy of physical authenticity, a fear that art could prove capable of transcending its individual elements.

Style is, in its

loosest meaning, this relationship between individual elements of a work—the expression of the interaction between elements in a way that neither reduces the work to them nor loses sight of them. It makes sense that a theory of appropriation that wants to ward off the threat of coherence would also be wary of style, of course—but this hope never seems to bear out. Gérard Genette defines style’s relationship between individual elements in his attempt to develop a structuralist stylistics. He takes issue with any “atomist, or punctualist, conception of style” (124) because

“style is indeed in the details, but in *all* the details, and in all their relationships” (141). I have applied this notion to Rauschenberg in order to point out the absurdity of attributing style to only one period of the artist’s work, but also to show the way individual stylistic elements or descriptions seem to move beyond the confines of individual works, especially in combines that literally combine other artist’s paintings. My question here is proper to a style of literary appropriation, though, so I will turn to a second example that hits closer to home: the operation of style in relationship to both citation and disjunction in the early work of John Ashbery, among the most important of what can be called post-war, or postmodern, or “experimental,” U.S. poets. Like Rauschenberg—and like Burroughs later—Ashbery is sometimes accused of leaving behind the experiments and disruptions of his early work. Those experiments can have stylistic effects, though, even when they are not applied.

The Poet as Collector

Critical accounts of Ashbery’s work often gesture towards this concept of style as something first overheard or found in another’s words. At the same time, Ashbery appropriates differently than the artists Crimp critiques, who appropriate the singular style of another’s work. In Ashbery’s poetry, so many different elements coincide that critics often use the plural when addressing his style(s). His *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* speaks to this process by which a distorted sense of self is reflected back, and not just in the mirror’s constitution of the self first as if it were another: the poem describes “imaginative methods” as overused, and as creating a “medium/In which it is possible to recognize oneself” (266). But the actual *process* by which something like a “oneself” of style is formed from the ruins of experimentation starts not in *Self-Portrait*, but in *The Tennis Court Oath*, which seems, from the perspective of many decades, to

have invented one of the most legible poetic styles of the second half of the twentieth century through a process of collage and quotation that functions, in terms of its actual implementation, much differently in the works that follow. Rather than some dramatic stylistic shift, the same style functions by different means in these works. Unlike with Rauschenberg, Ashbery's style does seem confined to the first five or six books; a truer change happens after that. Here, I am interested in the move between the very early books, where the effects of an earlier citational practice are more clearly visible.

If Ashbery's style is borrowed, it is by means of imitation as much as citation. In his reading of Ashbery's treatment of political economy, Chris Nealon describes the poet's indebtedness to Auden, who himself used "high/low juxtaposition [to] modulate into a historical account of the poem's bivalent present, which still bears traces of both a heroic mode . . . and a mischievous, schoolboy low style" (60). This paralleling of the two poets goes beyond identifying similarities in their writing. Nealon also considers their shared relationships to history, relying on a "dialectical understanding of style that is always in relationship to catastrophe" (73). It is not just that Ashbery was "inspired" by Auden's stylistic registering of history, but that Nealon *needs* to understand Ashbery's style in order to read him historically.

But Nealon's reading of Ashbery is important here not for its historicity, but for his curious identification of what constitutes Ashbery's style. It is "both a comportment of Ashbery's, and a collection of images and ideas that assert themselves thematically across the course of his career" (74). The idea that style functions as an individual's "comportment" is not unusual, nor, necessarily, is the relationship of style to themes (although it does require incorporating the *what* of literature under the "how" of style's umbrella) or images, but the relationship *between* these two descriptors is uncertain. Is it that Ashbery has a particular

comportment *towards* “thematically asserted” images? Is his work marked stylistically by the images themselves, or by the fact that they appear as a mere “collection,” curated but not made? To answer this last question, it would be tempting to turn to Ashbery himself in “The Skaters,” where style could then be one answer to “how much any one of us survives,” where subjects are reduced to “The articles we’d collect.”

Brian McHale’s guide of common misreadings of this poem warns precisely against this interpretive gesture, reading lines of the poem as if they were *about* the poem itself—a method I talked about at length in the prior chapter. He notes that critics (Harold Bloom serving as one primary example) “tend to proceed by selecting ‘key’ lines or passages, treating these as interpretive centers or ‘nodes’ around which to organize the heterogeneous materials of the poem” (566). But one does not need meta-textual (or “ars-poetical,” per McHale’s terminology) moments to identify the sense of *collection* with Ashbery’s style; McHale himself describes how “Verbal ‘found objects’ litter the poem’s surface,” and how the style of “The Skaters” “shifts erratically and without motivation” (565), juxtaposing bureaucratic, religious, critical, and colloquial registers. Ashbery’s style is constituted not only by a collection of images, but also by a collection of styles.

In John Shoptaw’s description of the stylistic shift from the more explicitly collaged and disjointed *The Tennis Court Oath* to *Rivers and Mountains*, it is this diversity of rhetorical registers, these leaps from image to image or source to source, that makes *Rivers* more coherent. Though *Tennis* is more disjunct, *Rivers*’ continuity is produced by heteroglossia—the consistency is itself variable. This seeming contradiction—the leaps produce coherence—is one I have already repeated; again, appropriation (or the sense of “secondhandedness,” in McHale’s terminology) is associated with a less disjunct end product. For Shoptaw, this results in not just

poem-level coherence, but also in the emergence of what seems like a subject: *Rivers and Mountains* “reconnects the syntactical fragments of *The Tennis Court Oath* and joins a newly discovered authorial persona with his implied readers” (74). This “persona” is specifically the product of the use of *speech* as opposed to quoted *writing* in poems like “The Skaters,” such that *The Tennis Court Oath* is more unified by its literariness, but in a way that prevents Ashbery from “addressing the readers in their own language” (ibid). Often, critics connect coherent style to the semblance of subjectivity. We look for a person more when the “voice” of the poem is consistent.

For my purposes—how writing style is built by experimental practices—I am more interested in Shoptaw’s discussion of a continuous “persona” than in his (and others’) insistence that speech takes priority in “The Skaters.” In fact, this argument rings false to me at times. Lines from *Tennis* like, “Oh my daughter,/My sweetheart, daughter of my late employer, princess” seem just as turned towards the possibility of being spoken as those of the “The Skaters.” Further, the opening of “The Skaters” hardly aspires to the direct address of speech: “These decibels/are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound/Into which being enters, and is apart” (194). Shoptaw emphasizes speech because of the poem’s use of the second person, but even these moments of apparent connection seem solidly on the level of “writing,” even as the poem itself describes an act of listening:

The performance has rapidly reached your ear; silent and tear-stained, in the post-mortem shock, you stand listening, awash
With memories of hair in particular, part of the welling that is you,
The gurgling of harp, cymbal, glockenspiel, triangle, temple block, English horn and metronome! And still no presentiment, no feeling of pain before or after.
The passage sustains, does not give. And you have come far indeed. (195)

There is no imaginable person that emerges from the noisiness of such lines, no particular *you* identifiable with an “implied reader.” If it is about the reader, the word “ears” makes her into a

listener; the assumption that the reader is “tear-stained” also suggests a second person other than the one who holds the book.

Though Shoptaw’s explanations for the shift seem strange, the sense that a shift has happened is shared by most accounts of Ashbery’s literary trajectory. Both *The Tennis Court Oath* and certain poems from *Rivers and Mountains* include strategies of literary experimentation and citation that are gradually left behind, though the same sense of polyvocality and rapid observational shift continues to characterize poems built by other means. More than it suggests personal address, his identification of a new “persona,” built from *Tennis*’s experiments, in fact opposes any sense of the personal. The persona is not a person, but the mask that replaces him. The experiments of the first book create a style so recognizable that one imagined “voice” unites both, even if the imagined speaker acts differently in each.

The Writing Asshole

Ashbery offers only one example of this process, in which a poem’s relationship to a predecessor or source material establishes the solidity of the work’s style rather than introducing a new one. Just as Hugh Kenner noted of T. S. Eliot that “the achievement of many passages in *The Waste Land* is to make lines identical with lines Shakespeare or Webster wrote sound like lines Eliot might have written himself” (79), many poets’ citationality has the effect of developing the style of the text instead of disrupting it. While it is easy to produce a list of poetic examples of this process, it is not an effect necessarily specific to poetry; most early accounts of the effect of quotation on authorial style deal with the dialogic quality of the novel. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov describes how writing is contaminated, stylistically and thematically, by citation, even where quotes are safely identified:

The author's utterance, in incorporating the other utterance, brings into play syntactic, stylistic, and compositional norms for its partial assimilation—that is, its adaptation to the syntactic, composition, and stylistic design of the author's utterance, while preserving (if only in rudimentary form) the initial autonomy (in syntactic, composition, and stylistic terms) of the reported utterance, which otherwise could not be grasped in full. (116)

Here, he introduces two different modes of citation: one which assimilates the quote to the context only so far as is necessary, maintaining its “initial autonomy,” and another only implied by this description, where the stylistic assimilation would go so far as to remove the difference between quotation and “original” speech. In this latter case, language would be appropriated primarily for this effect of mutual determination between quote and reporting context. For my purposes, the latter category is more important, as I am focusing on the counterintuitive development of style by means of this process of assimilation. Bakhtin’s critique of stylistics in “Discourse in the Novel” also addresses the effect of quotation or speech on the reporting context. He famously prioritizes this quality of the novel over and against poetry, which for him is essentially monologic, whereas in prose, the “social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it” are not exceptions to a stylistic rule, but the mark of “authentic novelistic prose” (265). He argues against trying to identify any specific string of attributes as an author’s style; after listing five possible “basic types of compositional-stylistic unities” in novels⁵, he suggests that they are all “subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole, a unity that cannot be identified with any single of the unities subordinated to it” (262). If this was not true for the poetry Bakhtin was reading, it certainly seems to apply to Ashbery, and to a number of other poets whose works avoid the stability of one implied speaker. Diverging from Bakhtin’s

⁵ “(1) Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants); (2) Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaz*); (3) Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)); (4) Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth); (5) The stylistically individualized speech of characters” (262). Bakhtin focuses on the relationship between reported speech and style, so the specificity of the novel comes down to the difficulty in accounting for style once the language of heterogeneous characters begins to be included.

emphasis on speech genres, though, my reading of Ashbery rejects the priority of speech over writing—not in a Derridean grappling with this question on the level of language itself, but on the level of the operation of the poems—and sees the incorporation of diverse and seemingly contradictory “speakers” as outside of the order of actual speech.

This misapplication of Bakhtin—understanding dialogism as inherently related to an effect of writing instead of one of speech—applies to novels just as well as to poetry, since the novel too turns to speech for writing’s sake, moving from the implication of voice to an emphasis on inscription. With his use (and abandonment) of the “cut-up method,” William Burroughs provides a parallel example to the stylistic effects of appropriation in Ashbery; moving between his two trilogies, we can re-read the already-noted shift from apparent disjunction to apparent clarity, from experimentation to writing. The Nova trilogy was compiled from 1961-1964 via cut-ups and self-appropriation from the “Word Hoard,” while the *Red Nights* trilogy is often read as the author’s late comfort with more established narrative, or celebrated as a masterpiece, or simply considered less interesting given its apparent lack of experimentation.

Throughout Burroughs’ work, the nature of the quotation mark is ambivalent, not only because, in repurposing and collaging his own and others’ text, he disrupts the original context of iteration, but also because what appears in quotation marks is not always reported speech. Clear jumps in speaker appear midsentence without punctuation, or are included in parentheses instead of quotes, and phrases marked as spoken by characters reappear pages later as if part of the narration. This process appears most forcibly in the oft-discussed “Talking Asshole” section of *Naked Lunch*, which, on first glance, seems to take the novel’s dialogic incorporation of outside speakers to an extreme. *Naked Lunch* provides a useful starting point for addressing this question

of the relationship of speech to writing. If writing necessarily begins to “speak” like a book’s characters, or to take on the voice of a citation, how does it take on the voice of a literal asshole?

Even though *Naked Lunch* precedes both of his trilogies, it *reads* like a book that comes between the two. It shares a vocabulary and a set of characters with the first trilogy, having been compiled from the same “Word Hoard,” a collection of over 1000 pages that Burroughs wrote in the decade leading up to the publication of *Naked Lunch*; at the same time, it seems to have learned disjunction without the use of the cut-up method, sharing the second trilogy’s *lack* of applied “experiment” and its nonetheless distorted narrative. This sense of *Naked Lunch*’s centrality is shared by Oliver Harris, although he acknowledges it as problematic: “Clearly enough, in fixing on *Naked Lunch* as the central point to which the first trilogy leads and from which the second trilogy develops, my understanding of what is “Burroughsian” about Burroughs is deeply unfashionable” (44). At the same time, the exemplary role *Naked Lunch* plays for both criticism and popular reception of Burroughs’ work supports this sense, as it is allowed to stand in for a body of work from whose methods it largely departs. Harris deals with *Naked Lunch*’s problematic exemplarity by focusing on the various readings of its most famous section, commonly referred to as the “Talking Asshole” bit, even though it appears unmarked within the “Ordinary Men and Women” section. For Harris, this section provides a test case for larger problems with Burroughs criticism, since it “stands for the intractable difficulty of *Naked Lunch* insofar as it is a part readily taken for the whole” (216).

In this section, two “pure scientists,” Benway and Schafer, discuss medical strategies. Schafer wants to address the “scandalously inefficient” (119) body by reducing the organs’ redundancy: “Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have one all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate” (ibid). In response, Benway begins to recount an anecdote about “the

man who taught his asshole to talk” for a carnival act. Soon, the asshole starts speaking on its own, grows teeth, eats (including holes through his pants), gets drunk and demands “equal rights,” and finally makes the man himself shut up when he grows “Undifferentiated Tissue” on his mouth until it seals over. The “whole head would have amputated spontaneously” except the asshole needed the eyes to see. Then, the text (still in quotes as if delivered by Benway, but now very far from the context of the original recounting) discusses “Grade B movies” (this is the famous “That’s the sex that passes the censor” section), Democracy as cancer, viruses, and ends by recounting another story of “an Arab boy who could play a flute with his ass” (119-122).

There are many distinct parts to this story, and it is a real interpretative danger to focus on only one, since it is constituted entirely by the strange shifts from paragraph to paragraph that take the text furthest from its dialogic set-up and closest to what reads like meta-discourse for the rest of the text.

Harris analyzes this section not because it is a reasonable starting point for even this particular novel, let alone his whole body of work, but because criticism’s frequent focus on it suggests a need to substitute a part for the whole that playfully mirrors what is at stake in the anecdote itself. It has been said to represent the whole “world of Interzone,” writing as such, heroin addiction, Burroughs’ style, and his relationship to critical theory (215-6). Harris turns to the epistolary context in which the story originated (it is one of a number of such routines sent originally in correspondence with Allen Ginsberg) while working through its many problematic readings. He finally describes letter-writing’s ability to “dispossess” a writer of materials more casually, and reads the whole bit in relationship to Burroughs’ claims about writing publicly or privately, seeing the Word Hoard as a sort of material, verbal constipation that the “Talking Asshole” is able to relieve. There is a great deal passed over in my summary of his account, but

since Harris has already outlined all of the problems of interpretation *and* posited his specific, archival response, I will risk myopia by considering only the question of the voice, since that is the asshole's primary acquisition.

As the text slides further away from Benway, towards what reads like narration rather than monologue (including paragraph-long parentheses), it is possible to see Benway as “ventriloquizing a routine about ventriloquism” (Harris 220).⁶ He seems to lose his voice as the story takes over and, like the asshole, speaks for itself; the voice of his interlocutor is also left behind; the man's mouth closes up with tissue, and even the voice of the asshole—“It's you who will shut up in the end”—is heard only briefly before the text moves on to bureaucratic control. The discussion of censorship only takes the receding of voices a step further, where silence purportedly would replace the substitutive voice of the ventriloquist. Instead of this section revealing an abundance of speech, through the giving of a voice to what is normally silent, it functions much more to eliminate every speaker it sets up, replacing speech with narration.

The importance of heteroglossia to Burroughs' work cannot be understated. Not only are the usual textual indicators for the incorporation of another voice left out (which would make it comparable to free indirect discourse), or used almost arbitrarily—the text moving in and out of quotation marks, dashes, and ellipses, into narration that slips back into dialogue with no change to the writing beyond diacritical marks—but throughout *Naked Lunch*, many voices are recorded on tape and film before being subjected to editing procedures that draw attention to the book's own fragmentation. Lydenberg and Mikriammos have focused on the role of the voice in these experiments internal to and constitutive of the text, the latter considering the actual timbre of Burroughs' oral recordings as essential to reading his writing. In Mikriammos' attention to

⁶ Harris uses this language in his own ventriloquizing of an argument he debunks because it reduces this passage to a critique of bureaucratic control, but the phrasing still seems apt.

voice's role in this novel, he applies Roland Barthes' "The Grain of the Voice" as a musical example of what exceeds meaning and ties song to the body. Channeling Barthes herself, Lydenberg claims that "Burroughs asserts that it is always the voice of language who speaks" (197), disentangling any emphasis on orality from an emphasis on the personal.

On the level of the texts, the role of the voice remains altogether ambiguous. In her writing on the "disembodied voice" in *Nova Express* (where the relationship between narrative voice and Burroughs' own is all the more complicated, since this text incorporates more of others' writing than the first two the trilogy), Lydenberg cites a passage where The Death Dwarfs imitate speech:

Biologic Agent K9 called for his check and picked up supersonic imitation blasts of The Death Dwarfs—"L'addition—Ladittion—Laddittion—Garcon—Garcon—Garcon"—American tourist accent to the Nth power—He ordered another coffee and monitored the café—A whole table of them imitation word forms and spitting back at supersonic speed—Several patrons rolled on the floor in switch fits—These noxious dwarfs can spit out a whole newspaper in ten seconds imitating your words after you and sliding in suggestion insults—That is the entry gimmick of the Death Dwarfs: supersonic imitation and playback so you think it is your own voice—(do you own a voice?) they invade The Right Centers which are the Speech Centers and they are in the right—in the right—in the right—the write—"RIGHT"—"I'm in the right—in the right—You know I'm in the right so long as you hear me say inside your right centers "I am in the right" (83)

There are many elements of this passage that make it tempting to read as a code for how Burroughs' "own" voice works. The Death Dwarfs create the sense of a voice only by imitation and technological intervention, and the ability to produce this relationship to an implied voice requires an assertion of power (which relates to the overlapping themes of control and ventriloquism in the "talking asshole" section). Similarly, words here come in excess, and they relate at once to the news and to control of the individual. But in terms of the writing—outside of what seems to be happening in the text rather than to it—the notion of the voice does not seem especially helpful. Where is its "grain," the *signifiance* that would give the impression of its

being tied to a body (even one that is impersonal, that “expresses nothing”) (Barthes 82)? Where is the phrasing that longs to be read aloud, that interpolates the reading voice of some author? To my ear, the repetition here is, as in Ashbery, very much on the order of writing and not speech: like the talking asshole, it moves from speech to writing mostly by feigning a relationship to the voice. Even at the end of the passage, where the text moves to quotation marks and directly refers to sound (“you hear me say . . .”), there is a logical insistence that does not seem oral. “The Death Dwarfs,” the “right centers,” the too-fast delivery of an entire newspaper—they are *about speech*, but they are unspoken. The passage itself even offers up this transformation, temporarily changing the insistent spoken “in the right” to its already-implied homophone. Returning to the “Talking Asshole” section, this plays out as well in the paragraph-long parenthetical asides that interrupt Benway’s story: these digressions are unvocalizable, making it clear that no one could be speaking.

Because voice and style are so often thought alongside each other, it may seem strange to reject the importance of vocalization—even if, in this common usage, “voice” is clearly metaphorical. The metaphor even seems apt if one considers the voice, as Barthes does, as something impersonal that gives the *impression* of a body to sound without tying it to the expression of anything individual about that body. If we consider Mladen Dolar’s tying of the voice to automation, as something excessive over both meaning and the aesthetic at once, it seems even closer to the description of style as movement I hope to develop.

Dolar’s *A Voice and Nothing More* pursues the “object voice,” approachable only by psychoanalysis, an account that would correct both the casting-out of the voice by linguistics’ emphasis on signification and the aesthetic concentration on the voice, which turns it into a “fetish object” (4). In lieu of these “two widespread uses of the voice—the voice as the vehicle

of meaning; the voice as the source of aesthetic admiration—there is a third level: an object voice which . . . functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation” (ibid). His emphasis on the role of mechanicity in the production of this object voice comes in the book’s introduction, where he recounts Walter Benjamin’s puppet chess-master story and gives a short history of the invention of speaking machines and chess automatons, culminating in their overlapping invention:

the chess automaton was constructed in such a way as to appear as human-like as possible—it made the pretense of being engrossed in deep thought, rolled its eyes, and so on—while the speaking machine was as mechanical as possible: it did not try to hide its mechanical nature; on the contrary, it exhibited it conspicuously (9)

Since the speaking machine went first when these machines were presented together, Dolar reads the voice as the secret internalization of the chess automaton, such that the person who was meant to be secretly operating the chess machine turns out to be nothing other than the mechanized interiority of the voice presented first by the speaker. The interiority promised by the voice turns out to be only another machine, whose “humanity” was created by its false starts and mistakes.

I rehash Dolar’s complicated introduction to the mechanical voice’s status because it shares a great deal with the idea of style I am building: like the voice, style suggests an imitation of personality that does not express any individual; they are both tied to invention (more surprising for the voice), and are both operative as systems precisely because they do not wholly work; there is no satisfying substitute for either. But while Dolar’s account of the voice forecasts what I hope to show is at stake in Burroughs’ style, it is the very proximity of the two ideas that makes them simple to distinguish. Literary style is about the way writing works, not speech, even where it *represents* speech. The best warning against the misapplication of theories of speech to writing occurs in the text that might also be the most often misapplied itself: J.L. Austin’s

elaboration of the possibility of distinguishing between performative and constative utterances in the lectures compiled in *How to Do Things with Words*, which neither finds a satisfactory isolation of the performative in speech nor countenances the relevance of a distinction in speech to literature. Austin is very careful throughout the lectures to remind his audience that the things that happen in a poem, a play, or a novel are mere “masqueraders” of the effects of the distinctions he set up in “actual” conversation. This implies that the famous performative examples of literature (Allen Ginsberg’s appropriation of Walt Whitman’s appropriation of prayer, for example) are only imitations of language’s functioning under certain extra-literary conventional settings.

While many strong oppositions to style, like Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*, long for a “writing without style” (5) that could be properly thought of as writing itself, the actual history of both poetry and prose in the last century has not born out the hope of this erasure, and style turns out to have been, as Marshall Brown describes it in “*Le Style est l’homme même: The Action of Literature*”—another zero ground of literature, the aspect of writing that is irreducible to generality. Just as style suggests something non-reducible, leftover by criticism’s attempts to account for writing conceptually, Dolar deals with the voice as remainder of phonology and signification. But the closest his concerns come to a figurative voice is the one “internal” to a subject, the self-addressed voice, and he focuses most on the voice’s materiality: that of the commander during a battle, or any voice that, most basically described, is “the bearer of an utterance.” The disappearing voices in the “Talking Asshole” section of *Naked Lunch* do not suggest, then, a latent (disembodied or physical, depending on the critic) voice speaking over the text, but a writing that has eradicated voice via style.

Beyond the Cut-up

This priority of writing style over (and through) the dialogic interruption of voices is not particular to *Naked Lunch*, but it does seem to “start” there, given reception’s emphasis on this novel’s role. As suggested by the counterintuitive location of *Naked Lunch* between two periods of production that it chronologically precedes, this has to do with the stylistic features it shares with the “cut-up” Nova Trilogy. Robinson recounts the history of Burroughs’ cut-up method, in which one or more texts are literally split with scissors into fragments that can be recombined, in *Shift-Linguals*, detailing Brion Gysin’s “invention” of the experiment when he spliced newspaper articles in 1959, and its historical antecedents in Dadaism and Gysin’s own work across media. Robinson (and many other readers of Burroughs) analyze these early cut-ups in terms of what they “reveal” about their source materials, “including the journalistic obsession with peripheral ‘facts’” (24-5); removed from their “original” reporting contexts (much like the examples of reported speech Voloshinov describes), these fragments become *more legible*, and the method of their new juxtaposition is one of revelation, clarity, and even cohesion: “despite their lack of connection, [they] combine curiously well” (ibid). In this history, *Naked Lunch* becomes “a cut-up apprenticeship,” although one that differs significantly from the books that follow in that it can be said to create something new—here, Robinson quotes Skerl—instead of the necessary destruction implied by material acts of disjunction.

But is the cut-up method destructive or constructive? Does it show (or render “naked”) what was previously at stake in the writing it uses, does it create something new out of its parts, or does it primarily undo existing writing’s claim to coherence? When Harris recounts Burroughs’ 1959 letter to Ginsberg introducing the cut-up method, he reads it “quite simply” as “a way to systematize the drive to lose the undesired past, to cut his way out of an old identity, if

not out of identity itself” (8). In his letter, Burroughs explicitly rejects both inherited narrative continuity and authorial control: “In this game the point is to lose what you have, and not wind up with someone else’s rusty load of continuity” (L 434, qtd in *ibid*). This desire is not as simple as it may first appear: to lose what you have, *but not to replace it* with what anyone else has. Since Burroughs’ work *does* seem to replace what he loses, in creating a body of work that is easily identifiable by a set of repeating, recognizable markers, it could seem that he found his own, particular “rusty load of continuity” in the process of avoiding everyone else’s.

For this reason, Harris warns against any critical account that attempts to make sense of both trilogies’ possible consistency, since “a critic who narrates with any success the chronology of Burroughs’ development across these two decades is, on Burroughs’ terms, doomed like a gentle reader of *Naked Lunch* to have missed the point” (8-9). Because of Burroughs’ repeated claims to this resistance, scholarship turns to his relationship to later critical theory, and then wrestles with the apparent contradiction between 1. The applicability of twentieth-century theories of authorship and writing to Burroughs’ novels and 2. The fact that the bulk of his work that seems to “verify” the suspicion of the author’s coherence somehow predates these theories’ proclamation. After pointing out, as many have, Burroughs’ apparent predictive confirmation of Barthes in *Naked Lunch*, Polina Mackay’s notes dryly that “Burroughs was not aware of this theoretical framework when he was writing, for the simple reason that he was writing before its expression” (116).

Literary criticism often finds in a particular experiment confirmation of what was always at stake in writing, and struggles to articulate the relationship between the novelty of the experiment and its lack of origin. This problem occurs not just in interpretation, though, but in

Burroughs' own explanations of the cut-up method. Readers can be trained to understand it, he says in a 1966 interview in the *Paris Review*,

because cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway. Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That's a cut-up . . . A juxtaposition of what's happening outside and what you're thinking of
(Knickerbocker)

Such claims—repeated elsewhere as “all writing is in fact cut-ups” (Gysin 29)—question the necessity of the experiment's implementation. If writing is already cut, what are the scissors for? More strongly, how is it a method that could be *invented*? Why not “free associate,” Knickerbocker asks, and create the disjunction *yourself*? Because, Burroughs says, “One's mind can't cover it that way.” What the cut-up makes possible—what all experiments do that leave something up to a force outside of their artists—is the creation of juxtapositions that would not exist left to the creative capacity of an individual.

I pose this already over-asked question here to stage what is at stake in the transition from registering juxtapositions in the form of disjunction as a result of a physical procedure vs. permitting them as the result of good old-fashioned craft. Is the cut-up really just “something to do,” as Burroughs puts it? If the novels that eschew material experimentation are *as* disjunctive as the cut-ups without needing to “make explicit” a disjunction that remains otherwise invisible, this implies that the individual author can be overcome by other means, and even by his own efforts. At the same time, Burroughs and Gysin offer a populist justification for the cut-up's implementation in lieu of attempting to create the same effects in writing: “Cut-ups are for everyone,” they insist, undercutting at once the sense of the experiment's novelty and their own role in introducing it into practice. The claim for disjunction's universal possibility seems to dissipate alongside the use of experiment and collage, making the observation that the Nova

trilogy obviously was not, and (barring sheer probability and imaginary scenarios of infinite typing) could not have been, written by someone else, seem somehow relevant. Similarly, if the appropriation that characterized Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath* makes use of a method of collage shared by countless other poets, its actual effects are again shown to be Ashbery's.

To suggest that there is a problem in critical claims about Burroughs' identity with theory is not to deny the relevance of the relationship between the two (because the theory is "already there" in the literature). There is a different, more basic problem: not that Burroughs kills the author before Barthes does, but that his apparent attempts to do so do not work. Although almost all critical responses to Burroughs insist on his successful subordination of authority, "Burroughs" is still a functionally descriptive word for a set of textual qualities independent of their author.⁷ By considering the role of style in this move, via continuity, towards a different kind of disjunction, we can approach style in a number of ways. Keeping in mind the many theoretical condemnations of style, it could take the role of a problem in Burroughs' work, tying these novels too strongly to the author experimentation attempted to leave behind. Similarly, style could be said to establish a false continuity that eliminates difference by making passages seem related that actually have little in common. The most optimistic option would also have to be considered, finally: that style might prove capable of maintaining real discontinuity by setting in motion the texts' differences for the projection of future combinations in writing. Keeping the threat of these first two scenarios in mind, then, we can turn to the two trilogies whose differences are most upheld to look for a dissimulating style.

⁷ "If Burroughs was acting out "the death of the author" in advance of Roland Barthes's famous thesis, then like Barthes, we still have to qualify this by saying, yes, as the sole ground and guarantor of meaning the writer has died but not his chronology" (Harris 9).

Between the Trilogies

Through the theoretical claims attributed to the effects of the cut-up method, it becomes clear that Burroughs' novels are not just another example of an apparent shift from disjunction to clarity, from experimentation to writing, nor is the cut-up method simply another *kind* of act of appropriation that characterized so much art of the last century.

More strongly, Burroughs' writing demonstrates how style begins to function *on its own*. Like the experiments that constituted it initially, style works in the writer's stead: the progression from *Naked Lunch* and the first trilogy to his later work demonstrates how appropriation and experimentation alter not only the texts on which they are performed, but the style of the author who performs them, so that certain experiments are somehow "internalized" in the process of writing and no longer require actual implementation. Once used, that is, the cut-up method appears to branch out behind the limits of the scissors; once it has been implicated in the constitution of style, style takes up the cut-up for itself.

An early review of William Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night*, the first and titular book of his 1980s trilogy, remarked that there "are sometimes eight or nine pages of continuous, linear narrative!" (Disch). At least on the sentence level, this later work is undeniably more "continuous," if continuity means conforming to a handful of grammatical and narrative norms. Here, the plots are familiar to readers of Burroughs: an unknown virus, one that especially affects redheads, is spreading through the population, with symptoms that include uncontrollable ejaculation, foul smells, rashes, and death, and which can be treated only with narcotics, making the already addicted characters more likely to recover. Eventually, the virus is identified as *love*, because it produces "fever . . . loss of appetite . . . even allergic reactions" (25), and this—the "*human virus*" itself (ibid)—sets off a process of investigation that enables the book's use of

generic conventions of detection and science fiction. There are still unexplained temporal shifts, romping gay adventure, and mystical effects of death by hanging, but this “content”—which for Burroughs is clearly not detachable from style—appears only to be interrupted by further content, not by syntactical or logical breaks, barring some sections that depict dreams or films that do “see fragmentation occur at a syntactic level, in the same way as in the cut-up” (Robinson 144).

In *Cities*, then, we have what most critics agree looks like a far less fragmented writing style. But in the work of an author for whom eight pages of linear narrative justifies an exclamation mark, it is clear as well that continuity, at least in this context, *itself* functions as a break, at least within the Style of what goes by the name Burroughs. Much of Burroughs criticism (where it deals with the later trilogy; the earliest studies come before this turn) hinges on this question: whether the later work constitutes a “conservative” return to the conventions of fiction, whether he functionally disavows the formal experiments of the 60s, and, more simply, of what this shift consists. This movement can be seen in the shift between the Nova trilogy to the *Red Nights* trilogy, which is at once celebrated by some as a masterpiece, an author’s late comfort with more established narrative, or considered less interesting given its apparent lack of experimentation. This move towards continuity has more than one meaning: not only a move from disjunction to clarity, but also the sense of continuation of the earlier projects: Burroughs himself claimed that “all [his] books are one book, it’s just a continual book” (qtd. in Robinson 44). I am not making an argument about the material, historical conditions of these novels’ consecutive production; the important, difficult work of that unraveling has been done (and is continuing to be done) by others. Instead, I will risk running up against the problem Harris diagnoses in the criticism that precedes him, that “no critical engagements with theme or theory

and no textual analysis can escape the consequences of lacking an established material base” (244). I hope to evade this problem not by ignoring it—there is clearly a material basis for a theory of Burroughs’ style that begins with a literary experiment discovered by Brion Gysin and applied in different, productive ways across Burroughs’ career—but by suggesting that the operation of style on a text does not necessarily correspond to chronology.

To the extent that there *is* a shift between these two trilogies, a temporary suspension of the text’s identification with its own style, it can be seen from the first pages of both. At the beginning of *The Soft Machine*, the section titled “Dead on Arrival,” the disjunctive quality of the first trilogy is already apparent. He uses short sentences with little punctuation, whose connection is neither unmotivated nor transparent:

I was working the hole with the sailor and we did not do bad. Fifteen cents on an average night boosting the afternoons and short-timing the dawn we made out from the land of the free. But I was running out of veins. (5)

But while this syntax is characteristic of the cut-up novels, it is not necessarily the product of the method itself. Lydenberg describes *Soft Machine* as “a relatively accessible introduction to Burroughs’ writing experiments during the 1960s” not because of its frequent use of these experiments, but “because of its tentative and restrained use” (56). From these opening lines, the text generates materials that will repeat in different sentences throughout, and which point back as well to phrases in *Naked Lunch*, where he “work[s] the hole with the Sailor, out on the hyp afternoons” (281). The definition of “working the hole,” which, as the opening line of a Burroughs’ novel, easily reads as bluntly sexual on first look, comes thirty pages later:

“I’m thin”—Crisscross of broken light from wood lathes over the patio, silver flak holes in his face—We worked the Hole together in our lush rolling youth—(Footnote: “working the Hole,” robbing drunks on the subway)—And kicked a habit in East St. Louis—Made it four times third night, finger scraping bone—At dawn shrinking from flesh and cloth— (34)

And five pages after its first appearance, “short-timing the dawn” also returns: “Looking at dirty pictures casual as a ceiling fan short-timing the dawn we made it in the corn smell of rectal mucus and carbolic soap” (10). The work generates its own stockpile of vocabulary, to which it necessarily returns, as the same phrases are put in different contexts, in different orders than they would apparently be in an “original,” uncut text. Here, Robinson and Lydenberg’s description of *Naked Lunch* as “an unconscious cut-up apprenticeship in cutting and rearranging the voluminous material that finally yielded the published version” (qtd in Robinson 41) starts to make sense, since the cut-up method, in fact, only *exaggerates* this effect: since these novels were “built” from the same materials, they share a great deal.

From this, we know that the cut-up has some effect in addition to or in collaboration with simple, sentence level fragmentation, and that *The Soft Machine*’s use of both creates a particular syntactical style. Similar operations pervade the later, more straightforward writing of the second trilogy, but their deployment is very different here. Even more visible than the censored “content” of this text is the structure of its sentences, which cohere grammatically just often enough to still ask for coherence from sentences that do not. Because of this, the stylistic shift in sentence structure is the easiest to spot, and the reason it is so tempting to assume that *Cities of the Red Night* functions as a *return* to some un-cut language. It opens with an apparently simple historical claim:

The liberal principles embodied in the French and American revolutions and later in the liberal revolutions of 1848 had already been codified and put into practice by pirate communes a hundred years earlier. (xi)

This is followed by a two-page quote from *Under the Black Flag* by Don C. Seitz and a summary by Burroughs of the relationship between the efforts of eighteenth-century pirates and later “liberal revolutions.” Already, appropriated material has shifted to the clearly demarcated

citation, rather than the “fold-in.” He uses this technique in earlier novels as well, but normally in conjunction with something stranger on the level of the sentence, so that a footnote citing a non-existent scientific paper backs up a “claim” in the text, only exaggerating the text’s break from the logic of evidence by purporting to provide logical support. In addition to this shift to the use of clear signposts for references, the prose here, if a write-thought of another source, is clear. The only hints that something stranger will follow appear in Geitz’s phrase, “He was one hundred years in advance of his time” (forecasting the novel’s time travel), and in Burroughs’ ominous closing sentence of this forward: “Only a miracle or a disaster could restore it” (xv). This sentence *does* share its breathless lack of commas with the one beginning “Fifteen cents” from the opening of *The Soft Machine*, but here, that choice does not affect either the grammar or the possible meanings of the sentence.

Of course, one might expect the foreword to be clearer than what follows, and the next section, “Invocation,” does read more like the writing we think of when we think of the name “Burroughs.” The speaker offers a dedication to “the Ancient Ones, to the Lord of Abominations, *Humwawa*, whose face is a mass of entrails whose breath is the stench of dung and the perfume of death . . . To all the scribes and artists and practitioners of magic through whom these spirits have been manifested . . .”—ending 2 pages later in all caps—“NOTHING IS TRUE. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED” (xviii). In the move from the very clear, historical account of the book’s framing, to the prayer that would dedicate what follows to a long list of gods, to the opening sentence of “Book One,” something has become permitted on the level of style for Burroughs that was once off limits:

September 13, 1923. Farnsworth, the District Health Officer, was a man so grudging in what he asked of life that every win was a loss; yet he was not without a certain plodding persistence of effort and effectiveness in his limited area. (3)

From an author that felt the need to move further into disjunction after *Naked Lunch*, turning to the literal cutting up of texts rather than writing out those cuts, we have the return of the grammatical sentence, of whole units of related narrative, of plots that are no longer introduced as already-destroyed.

But it only takes reading *Cities* to see that this does not describe a “conservative turn,” or a rejection of a prior writing method. It is not even an actual instance of narrative clarity. Instead, disjunction moves here from the level of the individual sentence to the relationship between larger sections of text; it is dispersed to a narrative in which an eighteenth-century pirate ship staffed by young boys and a twentieth-century drug plot overlap somehow in a detective’s experimental search for a missing boy. As Robinson puts it, “Burroughs effectively reinvents the cut-up, on the level of narrative blocks rather than syntax” (131). Further still, the relationship between disjunction and continuity already apparent in *The Soft Machine*’s “restrained” use of the cut-up suggests that this process of fragmentation’s extension was already at play *before* the experiment was realized, rather than simply being its aftereffect.

At a minimum, this suggests that the dispersion of fragmentation in the moves towards and away from experimentation must be attributable to something other than just the effect of that experiment. Sticking with the opening volumes of each trilogy for the sake of simplicity—accepting that this argument may thereby apply only to the relationship between the two books, rather than between the two periods of writing—we can examine a few ways style bears a relationship to consistency. In this section, I focused on the most apparent stylistic difference between *The Soft Machine* and *Cities of the Red Night* by briefly noting the syntactical clarity of the latter as the most common way it is used to exemplify a break in the author’s practice. However, to linger only on this difference would be to reduce style to the sentence, which runs

counter to my identification of (once-syntactical) disjunction on the level of narrative in a less collaged novel. Reading these two novels alongside each other more meaningfully raises many other questions pertinent to style's identification. Here, I will focus on just two: first, the question of *stylization* as a subcategory of style, and second, the effect individual characters appear to have on style outside of characterization. Far more is at stake in style's constitution—we have already considered the role of images, quotation, procedure, and syntax—but these two examples are useful precisely because they are both problematic.

Style, More or Less

In an attempt to raise style to the level of literature's primary operation, bringing the term "stylized" into play introduces a serious problem: it suggests that some works—or some excerpts of works—have more style than others, or engage more directly with it, which suggests in turn that style might be somehow escapable. At the same time, style comes up against the question of stylization even where critics want to insist that all books have a style. Susan Sontag's "On Style," perhaps the clearest and most widely-read essay on the term, insists that style is frequently denounced only in the name of "a new stylistic vocabulary" (16)—all complaints against it function simultaneously as stylistic interventions—but uses "stylization" to rename unnecessarily *decorative* writing. If critics sometimes mistake style for something separable from content, "stylization" is the name for where that divide *actually* occurs; it is "what is present in a work of art precisely when an artist does make the by no means inevitable distinction between manner and matter, theme and form . . . [it] reflects an ambivalence . . . toward the subject matter" (19-20). She describes stylization as a separation of "manner" and "matter" that is not implied by the word style itself.

In *Cities of the Red Night*, the word “stylized” appears in a way that highlights the differences between *how* each of these novels are written and *what* they are written about. In this section, the private investigator (alternately referred to as a “private asshole”), Clem Snide, realizes he is not making progress on his case, and “decide[s] to knock off and take in a porn flick”:

It was good, as porn flicks go—beautiful kids on screen—but I couldn’t understand why they had so much trouble coming. And all the shots were stylized. Every time a kid came all over a stomach of an ass, he rubbed the jism around like tapioca. (116)

Like Sontag, Snide uses “stylized” as an insult, implying an unnecessary relationship between the mode of presentation and the thing being presented. At the same time, this relationship constitutes his description of the film, which implies that possessing the trait of being “stylized,” like the shots in the porn Clem Snide is watching, could itself be one aspect of style, even if we must be careful to remember that the words are not synonyms. We could not then cast the question of stylization out from the question of style, especially in a body of work where *both* the “matter” and the “manner” are so striking. If these two novels seem to be in fundamentally different styles on first glance—the second trilogy being where Burroughs claims to have “appli[ed] what [he had] learned from the cut-up and other techniques to the problem of conventional writing” (qtd in Lydenberg x)—is one more stylized than the other? Does one resemble the porn flick in which every orgasm is followed by an absurd, repetitive ritual—that is, does the style of one rely *more* on such devices?

Noting *The Soft Machine*’s recourse to various levels of syntactical fragmentation, I would instinctively expect it to be more stylized than *Cities*. However, close reading early sections of the novel only complicates the attempt to maintain this distinction between manner and matter. “Public Agent,” a section that also deals with pornographic films, returns to the

operation of a self-generating vocabulary I described above. The text presents a public agent who “doesn’t know who [he] work[s] for: ‘I get my instructions from street signs, newspapers, and pieces of conversation I snap out of the air the way a vulture will tear entrails from other mouths’” (27). His primary task seems to be fighting homosexuality via the “blue movies of James Dean” and killing those with “a James Dean habit,” as he puts it. The following pages describe a number of his attacks:

The broken fruit was lying with his head damning the piss running over his face and the whole rough a light pink from his blood. I winked at the commuters. “I can smell them fucking queers,” I sniffed warningly “And if there’s one thing lower than a nance it’s a spot of bloody grass. (28)

So far, nothing that strange is happening to the sentence structure—the plot of a double agent sent by unknown forces to murder gay men in Turkish baths is more improbable than a few missing commas. But later down the page, in the same section, we start seeing the phrases from this initial section recombined:

Piss running over his face. Don’t know who I work for. I get mine from his blood, newspapers and pieces. “I can smell them fucking the air the way a vulture will.” In any case bloody grass. I sloughed him with the iron room and strangled him like rotten cantaloupe. Then I had to check in. I was the blood jumped out his mouth, nose receding flesh to finish. Across the room huddled my clothes shivering grey flannel suits under terminal drugstore. So I am a public agent the whole trough a light pink instruct from street. I winked at the commuters. “Conversation I snap out of queers,” I sniffed warningly. “It’s a pot up on my back cases.” (ibid)

On first glance, this text seems more stylized than most; with apparent indifference to the narrative set up on the prior page, the *manner* of writing takes precedence over its materials, literally reorganizing them. As with all problematically simple form/content divides, though, more than that is happening, because the “matter” always changes along with the apparent “manner.” The cut-up of the previous text forces various elements not just to be near each other, but also to *mean* each other. The “I,” who previously simply did not know his employer, now

gets his assignments from the blood of his victim. Later in the same paragraph, he *becomes* the blood as it leaves the mouth, and then, after briefly becoming the pink light, himself “snaps out of queers.” Via the rearrangement of phrases, he goes from moving *towards* the “nances” in the bath house to coming *out of them*. Matter and manner cohere after all, and the syntactical disjunction seems necessary to the plot.

If the sentence-level breaks are necessary to a “content” shared by the later trilogy, would *Cities* be the stylized one, then, with similar plotlines about viruses, transportations of souls via hanging, and even descriptions of the cut-up method itself, in the absence of its implementation? Hopefully, it is clear that the answer to the question also has to be *no*: the second trilogy’s “manner” also internalizes its “matter.” In lieu of a style generated via the splicing of sentences in such a way that a new subject is produced by style itself, though, the unit of juxtaposition is much larger. It often hinges on a combination of generic norms or aspects of “plot” that, while also part of the work’s style, *seems* less directly “stylized” only because their effects are not as often registered on the level of individual units of writing.

Clem Snide, Cut and Uncut

If stylization does not provide a useful way to distinguish between the two modes of operation, then, we can hopefully turn to another level of style mentioned earlier for better disambiguation: characterization. The attempts to simplify the differences between these two novels seem to come from how much they have in common, not least among which is the reappearance of characters (or, at least, characters’ names). What relationships do fictional characters have to the construction or identification of a work’s unifying style? A character produced by one method ought to differ from one less subject to experimentation. Returning to

Clem Snide—whom we left a few minutes ago, dissatisfied with the stylization of the pornographic movie—his introduction in both novels shows how a single character is shaped by (and shapes) the style of his characterization. In *Soft Machine*, his introduction is broken by the novel's characteristic dashes:

The name is Clem Snide—I am a Private Ass Hole—I will take on any job any identity any body—I will do anything difficult dangerous or downright dirty for a price—
 The man opposite me didn't look like much—A thin grey man in a long coat that flickered like old film—He just happens to be the biggest operator in any time universe—
 “I don't care myself you understand”—He watched the ash spiraling down from the end of his Havana—It hit the floor in a puff of grey dust— (67)

The accumulation of dashes creates a greater sense of connection between phrases by suggesting a sequence, such that his willingness to take on any identity seems to logically follow from his being a PI, which itself follows from his name. At the same time, the dashes separate the phrases from each other spatially, suggesting that the passage is a list, or a disconnected set of observations; the punctuation is (by its very nature) both disjunctive and connecting. Snide introduces himself in *Cities of the Red Night* with less syntactical interruption:

The name is Clem Williamson Snide. I am a private asshole.
 As a private investigator I run into more death than the law allows. I mean the law of averages. There I am outside the hotel room waiting for the correspondent to reach a crescendo of amorous noises . . . (35)

Given the already acknowledged syntactical differences between these two novels, it is tempting to look at these examples for the different sentence-level establishment of the same character, but this effort is disrupted by the passages' surprising similarity. Both start with the first person declaration of position, and they introduce the character in relationship to a current case—although the latter gains a middle name and temporarily loses the “asshole” designation—and both playfully appropriate the conventions of the detective story. The clearest difference between the two is the replacement (in the second) of first's dashes with periods that logically separate.

Even this replacement, though, has fewer effects than one might expect: if the dashes of the *first* were replaced by periods (or, in one instance, a comma), the passages would read much more alike. In fact, within the context of *Soft Machine* itself, these dashes have already changed in purpose. Both dashes and ellipses in this first trilogy often function to make the cuts in the prose visible:

The gate in white flames—Early answer to the boy wake naked—Down on his stomach is he? Ah there and iron cool in the mouth—Come see me tonight in bone wrenching spasms—Silver light pops something interesting—The boy features being younger of course—To your own people you frantic come level on average—Wait a bit—No good at this rate . . . (50)

Whereas the dashes elsewhere in the text *highlight* narrative *disjunction*, the dashes in the chapter on Clem Snide in fact themselves *obscure* the narrative *continuity*. In *The Soft Machine*, Snide already appears in the same, more regulated sentences in which he will reappear later in *Cities of the Red Night*, exaggerating the impression that the latter somehow opens out from the earlier work. This is important because, as the book's detective, Snide is at the center of narrative discontinuity. He is tasked with sorting it out, not as a stand-in for the detective-reader, but as a plot device for establishing connections via investigation.

In this role, he also moves the operation of the first text's primary stylistic trait—the cut-ups and fold-ins that provide chance juxtapositions—to the level of plot, using these methods to solve the cases themselves. In his attempt to find more information about a murder case, he visits the room where it happened, records a number of different sounds, and then splices them together and plays them back for clues:

I recorded a few minutes in all three rooms. I recorded the toilet flushing and the shower running. I recorded the water running in the kitchen sink, the rattle of dishes, and the opening and closing and hum of the refrigerator. I recorded on the balcony. Now I lay down on the bed and read some selections from *The Magus* into the recorder. (CRN 43)

The effects of the literal splicing of texts in one novel have turned, on the one hand, into the more fictional cutting of temporally and narratively disjunct plotlines, and, on the other, into a method for a character to piece together these narrative fragments within the story itself (although this process of investigation clearly does not actually *resolve* the narrative). The same process I described in tracking the book's relationship to disjunction and stylization reappears as we follow Clem Snide: while the prose in both books bears some relationship to the chance juxtapositions promised by the use of various literary "experiments," the effects of those experiments extends both before and after the time of their use.

The Style of Criticism

Narrative accounts of physical splicing with apparently magical effects, like the one just quoted from the bathroom scene in *Cities*, appear frequently in both trilogies. Of the many recurring elements that mark the *Nova* trilogy, critics often note this frequent incorporation of (what seem to be) descriptions of the books' composition in the actual plot of the story. Tracking these, evidence can be found for the theoretical importance of the cut-up method to an understanding of the book's "meaning": his invention of machines that can combine the user's writing with a famous author's, combinatory films created from the sound of the injection of heroin and the image of the drug itself, or detectives, as in the example just cited, who use methods of random cutting, splicing, and juxtaposition to solve cases—this list could go on. On initial reading, it is tempting to join those who see these scenes as reminders of the revelatory effects of Burroughs' literary experiments: it allows for close-reading of individual scenes in support of an extra-literary or biographical argument, and it submits a critical hypothesis to the tautology of the work's agreement, as we are trained to do. But what if the "location of the

theory in a fictional context,” as Robinson describes this effect in *Shift-Linguals*, does not just “blur the boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’” (51) in order to challenge the apparent rigidity of fact, history, and reality itself, but instead implicates the relevance of Burroughs’ commentary on the importance of this method in interviews, essays, and paratextual comments? While it is hard to disagree with the claim that Burroughs’ work—along with a number of his contemporaries—seeks to challenge received ideas about reality and fact, it is also clear that writers cannot be trusted to provide satisfying accounts of their own work. I do not wish to underestimate the importance of these scenes to understanding Burroughs’ work, but to challenge their status as quotes that can be taken literally to provide critical accounts of the books in which they appear.

Instead of reading Lee’s investigative techniques as yet another reminder of the innovations afforded by the cut-up, that is, I have traced the character’s movement through the two trilogies to show the importance not of the use of the cut-up itself, but of the becoming-plot of the extra-literary. As with any citation, the surrounding passages have to assimilate themselves to this encounter, which has a number of effects on the books’ larger operation. This movement from the exterior of the book to its interior parallels a number of other literary transpositions, in and outside of Burroughs. By beginning with Ashbery and the more general problem of the how citation is able to create an individual author’s style, I hoped to use Burroughs as an example of a procedure widely prevalent in literary experimentation.

But a similar, opposite move happens in the least experimental of writing: the criticism that attempts to account for experimentation’s meaning. Any discussion of style must deal with its competing uses: it can denote something general—a period style, the style of the detective novel, punk style, being in style, etc.—or particular—Ashbery’s style, the style of an author’s

early work, the style specific to a given work, or passage within a work. The titles of literary criticism fall clearly in the former category, as they have an easily (and almost compulsorily) imitable form: “Quote from the text: Specific subject and period of which quote is representative.”⁸ In isolation, the “quotation title” has little effect on the borrowed text, barring cases where the quoted work becomes less famous than the one where it is quoted, and where it can then seem, retroactively, to refer to its repeater (“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” being just one example). But as these titles accumulate, and, by necessity, refer to more varied phrases in order to remain differentiable, the work in question begins to read like its own bibliography. To write about Burroughs, for example, one must read *Wising Up the Marks*, *Shift Linguals*, *Word Virus*, *The Algebra of Need*, *Last Words*, *Rub out the words*, and many other texts whose titles involve phrases that have left the context of Burroughs’ work to become descriptions of it. While this trait is obviously not specific to Burroughs’ criticism, the repetitive, appropriative, and combinatory quality of his writing, his apparent inclusion of interpretation of his own work, and his own inclusion of titles of previous works within the prose of later ones, all create a strange sense of a stylistic becoming-criticism:

The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals. In *Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine* and *Nova Express* I show who they are and what they are doing and what they will do if they are not arrested. Minutes to go. Souls rotten from their orgasm drugs, flesh shuddering from their nova ovens, prisoners of the earth to come out. With your help we can occupy The Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly”
(7)

In this passage at the beginning of *Nova Express*—often cited as evidence that Burroughs *is* “Inspector J. Lee,” since these opening remarks are signed in his name—Burroughs refers to his 1960 *Minutes To Go* as if its title were a mere phrase in this text, in the same paragraph where the titles of those books in *this* trilogy are signaled in italics. To the contemporary reader, this

⁸ I submit the entire indices of recent annual meetings of the MLA and the ACLA as examples.

could also make the capitalized “The Reality Studio” seem to cite the online Burroughs community of the same name. Since both Burroughs and his readers point to the uncanny “accuracy” of some of the cut-up passages, it is now possible to add criticism itself to the list of things anticipated by Burroughs’ writing.

The excerpting and splicing of texts can then be seen to expand not only to Burroughs’ work written without material constraints, but also to return back to the outside world, where the claims for the cut-up method’s relevance originate: it again looks as if “all writing,” or at least, writing related to Burroughs, appropriates and collages, or takes advantage of chance encounters between disparate word groups and contexts to create new effects. This is exactly the direction I have hoped to avoid, though, by instead emphasizing the particularities of Burroughs’ project beyond the simplest aspects of its identification, and identifying style (rather than appropriation or experimentation) as the operator that draws these works together.

Automated Style

I began by considering how style is often thought of as secondhand, whether via inspiration, imitation, misreading, dialog, quotation, collage, or procedure. Throughout my attempts to pin down the relationship of Burroughs’ use of the cut-up method with respect to these problems, though, the question has turned out not be one of the effect of borrowed materials or experiment on the style of the text, but on how the text seems to have anticipated that effect *in its style* before the procedure or the quote is actually incorporated. Despite the fact that both *Soft Machine* and *Cities of the Red Night* elude the issue of citation in this discussion, there is still an overall impression of secondhandedness, in that phrases, processes, and characters all reappear, abbreviated or elaborated, presented as if new or disjunct. Instead of

temporarily suspending a fantasy of originality by turning outward to borrowed materials, Burroughs' work appropriates itself with the effect of making its own qualities seem external to it.

In *La seconde main: Ou, le travail de la citation*, Antoine Compagnon describes the relationship between a quote and its context in terms of an organ transplant, given the necessary assimilation and the inherent risk, in any act of appropriation, of the text rejecting its source: "Aussi son assimilation, de même que la greffe d'un organe, comporte-t-elle un risque de rejet contre lequel il faut se prémunir et dont l'évitement est l'occasion d'une jubilation" (31). But to frame citation's effects in terms of an organ transplant is to reassert, even if metaphorically, the importance of the *body* to style; "La citation est un corps étranger dans mon texte" (ibid). For Burroughs, at least, the "original" writing in which a quote finds its home does not seem to fit metaphors of corporeal coherence. Perhaps quotation functions less like a new organ and more like a pacemaker, then: a machine that intervenes where the body of the text fails. In this metaphor, the author's work still takes on the quality of a body, but not one prepared to reject any inassimilable organ; instead, that body malfunctions without interference.

Any discussion of automaticity in Burroughs must also bring up the virus, as he so often describes language in these terms: "the Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself" (*The Adding Machine* 47). Because such descriptions resist remaining metaphors, critics often celebrate the "realization" of Burroughs' predictions by the revelations of science or history, as when Robinson concludes his summary of these positions by asserting that "New scientific evidence that suggests human speech was the result of a genetic mutation which is only present in modern

man serves not only to support Burroughs' theory, but also further enhances the popular idea of Burroughs as a visionary" (40).

While it may not be relevant whether Burroughs' claims about language's functioning resonate with scientific investigation, the metaphor of the virus does seem useful for understanding the process of style's identification across his work. In *Cities*, viruses can be identified only by their symptoms, even though the "symptoms of a virus are the attempts of the body to deal with a virus attack" (24); a virus is defined negatively by the process of its attempted rejection. Similarly, as style threatens to assimilate disparate methods, texts, and characters into a problematic unity of writing that presents itself, through criticism, as resolvable, it is also identifiable by the text's resistance to it. For this reason, the most aberrant books (or moments within texts) offer the clearest path towards a broader conception of style. This is not just because it is easier to identify anything negatively, but also because the exception creates a need to incorporate a new contradiction into a definition that would otherwise have failed.

This is clear in D.A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*, where he argues that *Persuasion*—Austen's last finished book, and one critics often describe in terms of its stylistic aberrations—is not in the style of Jane Austen. It lacks, he insists, her characteristic protection of the narrator from personification: "Before, the object of mourning in the Austen Novel had been a foregone personhood; now, what is to be mourned is the Style that used to stand in the place of that personhood" (92). In a sort of love-letter to the peculiar characteristics of Austen's prose, Miller critiques *Persuasion* for its departure. Though Miller's approach could hardly be equated with anyone else's, he does share—if not exaggerate—the impression that *Persuasion* presents a problem for any attempt to describe Austen's oeuvre. Other critics, however, locate the problem on the level of should-have-been-edited inconsistencies: the non-necessity of the younger Walter

Eliot's narrative destruction, or the improbability of Louisa and Benwick's happy engagement based on the novel's set-up of the two characters. Instead, Miller's problem encompasses the novel as a whole: Anne's capacity for self-reflection undermines the very narrative authority with which it often coincides, because she always submits herself to the kind of evaluation usually left to a narrator (71), "confront[ing] the Austen Novel with a certain problem, or possibility, which interferes with the usual functioning of its system" (70). To Miller, this is "the great false step of Austen Style" (68) itself, where the narrative voice that successfully and strangely managed to remain "No One" throughout her other novels here "contemplate[s] the possibility of its falling into personification" (69).

Miller gives an entirely convincing account of this novel's difference from Austen's other works: Anne's narrative role suggests at best the redundancy of the narrator, and at worst, this risk of its personification. This is only a problem for the novel, though, if consistency with what was previously recognizable as Austenian is a narrative priority. In a novel in which movement between social positions is carried out on a number of different levels, in which characters only come to recognize themselves (or their lovers) by catching their reflection in other characters, in books, or in mirrors, in which constancy and inconstancy are both vital traits for the success of the main character, it becomes necessary to consider that "Style" might also only be rendered visible by its other. If Austen's style is the non-personification of its narrator, *Persuasion* is the change to that style that winds up solidifying its eventual constancy, the lover who, like Louisa, style at once engages and leaves behind. Miller shows this himself; in a book that brilliantly describes the secret of Austen's style, he devotes a third of it to the angry identification of what is inconsistent with it. In this reading, *Persuasion* demonstrates something definitive in Austen's

other works by departing from them, while requiring the critic to develop a description of that larger body of work that can accommodate it.

It is not just that exceptions prove rules, though: what Miller mourns is the elision of Style's impersonality, an emergence of a character capable enough to overlap, at times, with the narrator's voice. At the heart of the problem is that style's impersonality seems to move closer and closer to "persona" (as we saw in Ashbery and in Burroughs).

Miller's description of style as an obvious Secret, an impersonal detachment of writing from personality, returns us back to the mixed metaphors left up in the air: citation as organ transplant, style as pacemaker, and the word as virus. In style's distance from personhood, in its movement, indifferent to actual practice or chronology, across a body of work, it becomes easy to leave the body behind altogether—and with it, the overvaluation of the kind of originality Rosalind Kraus dismisses as "an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention but to sources of life" (53)—in favor of the machine.

To conceive of style as "automatic" is not merely to allude to mechanicity, though. The machine requires an outside force to operate it, whereas style seems to move on its own here, from narrative consideration of the means of mechanical and verbal control, to procedural-writing (in guise of the cut-up and fold-in), to more continuous narrative, and this shift is not a return to intent from its initial surrendering.

Instead, an initial procedure identifies a text's style, and then spreads out from the sentence to the plot, as in the move from manner to matter addressed above. From there, it creeps into the *actions* of one its fictional creations, so that the writing's own style informs the action taken by the private detective. Once disjunction is set in motion—once style has become automatic—it can operate by any means, including the means of clarity itself—and spreads

across the trilogy to every level of the text. By Burroughs' "style," then, I mean a quality of the writing that can be considered self-animated, such that it subtracts from the question *both* the personhood of Burroughs and the experiments already put into practice to effect that subtraction. In *Cities of the Red Night*, the detective knows something is wrong when the missing person's face looks the same in all of the photos, because "anyone who always looks like the same person isn't a person. He is a person impersonator" (40).

This discussion has been limited by my focus on only one novel from each trilogy, and in that focus, I have tried not to suggest that the excerpts can stand in for the novels or their trilogies; instead, my goal has been to look in the particular for qualities that would be necessary for a description of the whole, if that whole could be described. My final chapter repeats this attempt to move from particular to general description, and the problem at the heart of any pursuit of style, which requires reading the coexistence of the most micro and macro levels of a text.

The choice to focus on Burroughs' style comes not only from its obvious stylistic particularity, but also as a result of the inadequacy of critical approaches that elide how the novels are written in favor of their apparent social critique. In *Word Cultures*, Robin Lyndenberg outlines the failed critical attempts to read Burroughs' novels for a moral code that could be measured against existing norms, and sees this failure not only as a misunderstanding of the stakes of Burroughs project, but as a necessary pitfall of "conventional literary criticism which equates interpretation with metaphorical decoding and with the ethical pursuit of truth" (10). By demonstrating how style operates in multiple directions and on multiple levels of two novels that represent distinct moments in Burroughs' writing, I hope to also demonstrate that the consistency

created by inconsistency—the “personhood” implied by a changing face—functions across writing *as if by the hand of the author*, although before and beyond that author’s actual control.

Chapter 3: Conditional Literature

Something that was not literature now is. The transformation is more than one of reception—where some writing comes to be seen as literary that was not before—it is a deliberate aim.

That *something* is “Conceptual Writing,” or the materials from which its examples were built. Conceptual writing is more complicated than this simple proclamation, but the most recognizable gesture of its core texts is the presentation *as poetry* of language that was not identifiable as poetic before the conceptual project was carried out.

While “Conceptualism” is sometimes used to describe an aesthetic that can be retroactively recognized in many works from preceding centuries, “Conceptual Writing” is also a period and place-specific movement—of which the origin would be Kenneth Goldsmith, whose written projects, alongside Ubuweb and the anthology he edited with Craig Dworkin, arguably created the category. Craig Dworkin attributes the coinage of the term to the 2003 Ubuweb collection; the anthology *Against Expression* came out eight years later. Whether the term describes a specific subset of U.S. writing or a global set of aesthetic characteristics, though, the presentation of non-literary materials as literary is more dominant than its most repeated goals.

The project’s main practitioners typically defend it on the grounds of valuing *illegibility* and *uncreativity*, resisting personal *expression*, or simply trying to negate the dominant poetic mode—“MFA writing,” where the image and the crafted line seem dominant. More frequently than the work realizes these goals, though, it exemplifies the becoming-literature of some other material. Its most cited examples involve projects of large-scale appropriation (Vanessa Place’s *Statement of Facts*), small-scale appropriation (collaged found language, often from the internet,

as in many of Robert Fitterman’s books), or transcriptions of procedural exercises (Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy*) that clearly engage with an attempt to change literature’s conditions.

In this chapter, I want to consider the role literary style plays in this recognizability of conceptual writing as literature. To do so, I differentiate conceptual writing from a contemporaneous group of writers—poets whose relationship to the condition of literature relies less on context/framing, despite coming out of a very similar set of concerns. For this reason, this chapter may require you to believe that “Conceptual Writing,” whatever it is, matters. This poses a problem, as there are many readers who are happy to wait out its passing, or who believe they have already observed it.⁹ This chapter needs the reader to believe conceptual writing matters because, worse still, it attempts to define *Postconceptual Writing*, which provides one contemporary example of a *turn* to literary style by way of various literary experiments. The “post,” in fact, refers to this turn.

In earlier chapters, I discussed style’s relationship to the literary experiment in terms of its production *by* those experiments, or in terms of its self-referential quality. Here, style instead functions as *evidence* of literature, or as one of its minimal conditions. This idea is somewhat intuitive—it relates to the way we recognize more or less literary nonfiction (the kind that merits close reading), or the sense that someone is a “prose stylist” in a genre that does not require her to be. To cite Gérard Genette once more, style is “the place par excellence of conditional literariness: literariness that is not automatically conferred by a constitutive criterion such as

⁹ When I wrote this chapter, two contexts surrounding conceptual writing were different. First, the term seemed more confined to the U.S.; more recently, conferences across Europe have drawn more connections between related writing practices happening across the prior century and across the world. In a second, and perhaps inverse, context, poets in the U.S. have forcefully critiqued conceptual writing as at best apolitical and at worst actively racist, given recent presentations by Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place that appropriated racist and/or racialized materials without considering the effects of those materials being presented by white poets. The goal of this chapter is to focus on what happens *after* conceptual writing, and I take this latter argument specifically as a real motivation for leaving conceptualism behind.

functionality or poetic form” (138). At the same time, style is a quality of all writing, according to Genette and most other theorists of style. While this suggests that all writing is literature, style’s presence indicates instead some measure of the “*potential*” (ibid) for literariness, instead of proof that it exists.

In *Fiction and Diction*, the book that most directly presents his theory of style, Genette

attempt[s] to spell out the conditions under which a text, oral or written, can be perceived as a “literary work,” or, more broadly, a (verbal) object with an aesthetic function—a genre whose *works* constitute a particular species defined by the fact, among others, that the aesthetic function is intentional in nature (and perceived as such). (3)

From this statement of ambitions, it is clear that his idea of literature will be bound up in its conditions. Literature requires, at the very least, 1. the appearance of words, 2. their “perception” by a reader, and 3. intentionality—more strongly, intentionally aesthetic qualities, and the intention for the aesthetic to have a *function*. These are only the minimal conditions for literature, though, and it seems as though writing progresses, if in roundabout ways, towards this minimalism: the book’s introduction describes how the conditions for literature (style being the primary) are constantly pushed, such that more and more writing that at first appeared non-literary winds up under literature’s umbrella. Not minimal literature—like Aram Saroyam’s poem “light,” whose title is also the entire poem—but texts that are *minimally* literature, meeting only the smallest number of criteria, even if the works themselves are maximal in scope.

Genette’s is the most careful analysis of style’s role among these conditions, and his work returns repeatedly to the relationship between the particular—specific elements of individual styles—and the general—style itself. In explaining how descriptions of style necessarily turn whatever is under investigation into a possible type, such that it creates “a model of competence capable of giving rise to an indefinite number of pages that conform to this model” (126-7), he complicates this observation by insisting that the recurring feature identified

must be “aesthetically significant” to be stylistic. This suggests that some qualities are *necessarily* non-stylistic, though, and while Genette wants to note that, in any given work, *some* features are insignificant, he uses the example of Oulipo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*) to qualify this claim, as their works “tend to show to the contrary that no type of constraint is aesthetically insignificant a priori” (128). Further still, exercises like Jean Lescure’s “N+7” procedure—where every noun in a text is replaced with the dictionary entry seven down from it—“may fortuitously exemplify a style, preexisting or not” (135). Genette immediately revises this statement: it not just *might*, but *does* “*inevitably* exemplif[y] a style, like any verbal utterance” (135). The question of which style, though, is harder to determine: if both non-literary and literary texts (and, indeed, mere “utterances”) always involve a style, there is still a distinction between them. Lescure admitted that “literary works of quality are not apparently improved by the N+7 method” (qtd in Matthews and Queneau 83), suggesting that the decision to apply a procedure depends on the stylistic qualities of the source text.

Everything, then, depends on context; this is as true for the “aesthetically significant” constraint as it is for so many traits that seem to hope for objective categorization. For Genette, the *Oulipism*—a text written “in the style of” the members of the Oulipo, if not actually by its members—is important to the concept of conditional literariness not only in its testing of the contextualization of aesthetic effects, but also because of its ability to effect a change on an earlier, “root” text. In *Palimpsests*, Genette describes the “transformational” quality of Oulipian exercises in a way that relates to my focus here on style’s ability to turn things into literature. While many of the exercises he discusses involve a stylistic transformation from an already-literary text to a new one, the combination of context, exercise, and secondary style in literature’s formation bears a strong resemblance to the process of conceptual writing.

Perhaps for this reason, anthologies of conceptual writing often claim Oulipian texts as examples in the same way that Oulipo claimed its own predecessors as “plagiarism by anticipation,” a counter-intuitive gesture meant not only to destabilize a chronological idea of artistic progress, but also to create a larger context for a given work’s relevance. In *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, for example, this retroactive categorization allows contemporary works like an alphabetized list of words in the Bible—Rory Macbeth’s drily titled *The Bible*—to share a context with the stone-sucking sequence in Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*. This latter scene is presented as “an obsessive transcription of body movements and inanimate objects into mathematical logic” (73), such that it can be absorbed by any aesthetic based on procedure. This creation of a larger context is not just the inevitable result of putting together an anthology, but the very goal of the term “Conceptual Writing”:

I wanted to show, for instance, that when put next to texts from a soi-disant poetic tradition, a work of conceptual art might look indistinguishable from a poem. Or, similarly, that when read next to works from the Oulipo, a book usually considered part of the history of language poetry might look much more like part of the broad postwar international avant-garde than the coterie 1980s New York poetry scene . . . (Dworkin xxii).

By establishing this broader context, Dworkin and Goldsmith create an (intentionally) ahistorical account that simultaneously removes many other, perhaps more relevant contexts (like time, place, or person) for the sake of a larger history’s authority.

Even *the degree to which context is significant* in establishing a work’s style is, in fact, contextual—context matters in some contexts more than in others. To return to an example from the last chapter, Austin’s *How to Do things with Words* argues for the independence of style and context in his warning that his readings of real-world utterances do not apply to imitations of speech in literature. The manner in which something is uttered matters only as much as context in determining whether the utterance functions; one cannot declare the naming of a boat with no

boat present, or, as in his example, appropriately describe the king's hair when there is no king. But the context at hand—the context of literature—is so particular that Austin insists that his distinctions cannot be applied to it. This is important for thinking about contextual style—and what it might mean for style to be a condition of literature—because it suggests that two identical utterances *do* completely different things simply because, in one of them, the utterance is a part of a work of literature. This tells us neither *how to do literary things with words* nor how an utterance comes to acquire the context that makes it do something new, but it does suggest that there is an aspect of literary style that does not appear within the text itself. If literature is a context that bestows a different function on an utterance, utterances seemingly safe from this context can suddenly find themselves subject to it, since non-literary things come to be read as literature all the time.

The clearest example of this is the way seemingly extra-literary materials produced by famous writers wind up part of the authorial *oeuvre* some time after the fact, as Michel Foucault describes in his account of the author function's ability to make mere “papers”—those of a Marquis de Sade or a Friedrich Nietzsche, for example—relevant to literary scholars. To return to Genette, the minimal recognition of an intentional aesthetic function becomes possible when a reader knows a seemingly innocent scrap to have been penned by someone whose literary intentions have been important enough to exceed their published work. This category hardly needs examples, it has so many. In a recent issue of the *London Review of Books*, Michael Wood regrets the critical piety that makes readers look for literature in Marcel Proust's letters, citing the introduction to a new collection of them, *Lettres à sa voisine*, which describes them as “un vrai petit roman.” He then works to *prevent* them from becoming a novel by pointing out their differences from Proust's fiction. After detailing many elements of the book that help make the

argument for reading it as a sort of epistolary novel—one instance of “Proust’s comical plotting,” and an explanation of another critic’s observation of “stylistic rivalry” between Proust and his neighbor—he concludes by asserting that the “writing in *Lettres à sa voisine* tells us nothing about Proust’s breakthrough into the novel.” He goes so far as to describe the prolific composition of letters and articles that fail to rise to the level of *À la recherche du temps perdu* as Proust’s way of enacting the death of the author by insisting on the sharp division of the author from the man, which, for Proust and Flaubert alike, is always grounded in the way extra-literary writings of each fail to evidence the stylistic achievements of their major works. Whether the critic reads letters with the hope of finding literature there, though, or with Wood’s hope of ensuring the sanctity of an established body of work, the conditional literariness of letters is subject to their resemblance to other texts.

Similarly, the critical desire to find additional relevant archival materials—variations, alternate endings, biographical details that inform narrative or syntactical decisions—goes hand-in-hand with critical refusal to accept texts of ambiguous intent as part of an oeuvre. For example, in the introduction to the English translation of Stéphane Mallarmé’s fashion magazine, *La dernière mode* (in which the poet wrote almost every section under various pseudonyms), the editors recount how critical reception of the book has hinged on either the refusal or the longing to find poetry in the fashion essays. Faithful belief in the aesthetic function of a certain writer can just as easily force the exclusion of texts as it can their inclusion. This example is more complicated than that of correspondence, and it is a common critical problem where pseudonyms are used; it seems as though the author intended to separate this work from the rest.

Other literary-critical transformations include the move from the confines of “genre fiction” to literary fiction, a move that happens not only within bookstores and syllabi, but also

as a part of the process of reading. *I'm not much of a reader of sci-fi*, confides a reader of Philip K. Dick's novels; yet this exception is often made *because* of the appearance of generic conventions as much as it is made because of their transcendence. In Dick's work, a reader can get all of the comfort of the familiar disjunction of highbrow post-war literature, while feeling that, in her ability to recognize its break from a genre with which she was unfamiliar, she also gains that familiarity. Dick's novels' very paratexts—the book jackets now often quote the repeated description of him as a “poor-man's Thomas Pynchon”—situate them within the transformation of its contexts, the move from “mere” Science Fiction to literary canonicity. Of course, the very possibility of this move relies on a wholly problematic assumption that genre fiction is less literary, but it nonetheless remains a common way of talking about the exceptionality of a book that finds a larger audience than initially expected. This is also, to some extent, what criticism does when it hopes to remain relevant to popular culture: it congratulates itself on its ability to find as much as to say about fan fiction as it does about the movie that inspired it, as it did about the novel by which the movie was inspired.

In all these examples, it is clear that the boundaries of literature often change not only because writers work to push them, but also because critics work to expand the possible set of objects for interpretation. Criticism plays a strong role in a seemingly non-literary text's move to literature, either from a desire for more materials to study, to reconsider existing opinions, or to reshape an author's work to be more in keeping with one's own critical interpretation. In Wood's essay on Proust's *Lettres à sa voisine*, he mocks this longing; in order to find evidence of Proust's fictional writing in the letters, “All we need is hindsight, and a sense of superiority over all those early readers, like André Gide, who got things so hopelessly wrong.” But it is not just a

matter of superiority, or of critical overconfidence: literature's own struggle against its constraints has the effect of making more things look like literature.

Conceptual writing is a part of this history. Of course, it works differently than the examples cited above: at the very least, it purports to be a more extreme example of this process of "becoming literature," but it also demonstrates the way criticism participates in (and may even be necessary to) certain kinds of literary recognition. Sianne Ngai describes how conceptualism—in '60s and '70s visual art as well as in twenty-first-century writing—appeals to critics because it seems to rely on external description to function (15). Conceptual writing thus attracts the critical discussion capable of legitimizing it as literary, even as it claims to reject traditional critical or interpretative strategies. This seems to delegitimize its claim to radicality, producing its own assimilation into literature by its protest against its conditions. This creates the impression that someone must *go further* than it goes, and this is often how the question of what might come "after" conceptual writing is framed. Instead of going further, though, the writing I want to describe as postconceptual seems to stall. By "stall," I mean that it seems to reject this implied need for more radical literature.

In response to literature's obsessions with its conditions, conceptual writing pushes for a *Conceptual Literariness* rather than a conditional one: seemingly incompatible with "close-reading," it moves the level of interpretation to context rather than the work. Because of the procedure, idea, concept, whatever, this thing that might not be literature now is; someone gave it a context. Postconceptual writing makes a similar move, but looks more to its own writing for evidence of the shift: this thing that might not be literature now is; someone gave it a beautiful sentence. There's a shift from *Conceptual Writing* to *Conceptual Writing*, in which the first word is left behind for writing that, in its distinction from others, requires a new adjective.

This shift is my focus: 1. How conceptual writing turns out to be legible in terms of literary style despite its apparent goal of illegibility, and 2. How postconceptual writing quits trying to be “non-literary,” maintaining a so-called “conceptual” premise with more explicitly aesthetic goals. My goal is to qualify the word “Postconceptual,” which fails to provoke specific literary expectations, with a description of how texts *work*. I have to defer this goal for some time, though, to first detail what I mean by the possible literariness of conceptual writing.

The Failure to Define Conceptual Writing

Conceptual writing’s usual definitions are over-determined, but they share the premise of the priority of the idea of a given writing project over that idea’s execution. There are other qualifiers, of course. For one, it also wants to challenge the way the literary “book” form functions, according to Kenneth Goldsmith—by making them act more like reference books, or like ideas—even though many of its iterations wind up having a stronger relationship to their eventual book form than a typical book of poetry would. I am thinking specifically here of Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*—a 900 page, word-for-word, retyping of one issue of the *New York Times*—whose divergence from the issue of the newspaper it repurposes appears first in its format (a very thick, expensive, unreadable book instead of a very thin, somewhat less expensive, unreadable issue of the newspaper) and its “untimeliness,” for which the book’s apparently problematic rigidity makes possible the endurance that gives it a different status than the daily newspaper.

Conceptual Writing is also said to eliminate affect and expressivity. Many make this claim, but Dworkin and Goldsmith’s anthology of conceptual writing, *Against Expression*, makes the prohibition titular. Its most cited examples, however, are built from an author’s own speech or gestures, or from the accounts of rape victims and perpetrators, texts that constantly

express and produce affects. It is also uncreative, or boring—claims formed in opposition to all contemporary writing that goes by the name “creative.” But if it works primarily to correct a contemporary mistake, its defenders have also worked hard to show its historical antecedent in a way that problematizes the question of to whom it would respond, or what problem it would correct. It is not clear, for example, if writing itself has fallen “behind” painting,¹⁰ as has been repeated enough times, or if only this particular kind of writing is marked by its indebtedness to an outdated historical precedent.¹¹

All of these definitions fail for the same reason: they try to identify a literary movement only in terms of its difference from literature.

Critics often turn to technological mediation to answer the question of chronology and the problem of being “behind” or “ahead” of similar movements in other modes of contemporary poetry. If conceptual writing can be shown to bear a strong relationship with the internet, for example, it has a better hope of surviving the accusation of being stuck in the mid-twentieth century. In describing the contemporary situation as needing “information management” (“Conversation”) rather than creativity, Goldsmith makes this relationship unambiguous and too naïve: the internet has given us too much information, therefore we can no longer write. To the extent that technology does have something to say about contemporary writing, though, it must be more complicated; though Goldsmith frequently talks about the relationship between writing and the internet, very few of his works actually go to it for their materials, and instead

¹⁰ “Writing is 50 years behind painting” (Gysin 34).

¹¹ Goldsmith has repeated the pronouncement in the affirmative (and been incorrectly attributed with the quote himself by others) many places, but one example can be found in an interview by Perloff for *Jacket* in 2002. Many others have also repeated it in order to disagree, namely Charles Bernstein in a 2009 article for *Parkett* showing poetry to be, in fact, in advance of the art criticism that would describe it as anachronistic. It is relevant that both of these repetitions come approximately 50 years after the quote was first uttered by Gysin in 1959 (reprinted in the 1978 book with Burroughs).

demonstrate that the proliferation of information precedes its having been rendered visible by technological advances.

Nowhere is this more clear than *Soliloquy*, in which Goldsmith claims to have secretly recorded and transcribed verbatim every word he spoke for a week, removing only the speech of his interlocutors. Here, “media” play a strong role, but not necessarily the one expected: if the project can be taken at its word as showing the amount of raw data represented by unedited human speech, it also shows that problems of selecting, editing, and legibility are dealt with on a day-to-day basis in our ability to manage and remember speech, such that it is always misrepresented as artificially streamlined and coherent.

The internet does make frequent appearance in the book, but as subject matter rather than medium, and shows instead the immediate anachronism of technological contemporaneity, since *Soliloquy*’s internet is already unrecognizable (imagine Goldsmith’s difficulty in locating a “real real porn place” (20) on the internet today). The roles which technology-as-medium serves in the book are the recording device he wears for the week, the computer on which he does the work of transcribing, and occasionally, the phones or radio equipment that make the recording twofold.

Technology cannot be called upon to save conceptual writing from its threat of anachronism, any more than its difference from literature can. Many of these definitions share a sense that that the work *is* its concept, but better accounts acknowledge that most of these works wind up far from their original itinerary. The unanswered question, then, is whether poetry should or should not *try* to coincide with its concept. It is only trying, after all, that makes failure possible—a failure that Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman prioritize in *Notes On Conceptualism*. Much of the argument of that text can be mapped onto Fredric Jameson’s essay on “The Poetics of Totality,” where he reads William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* as a necessarily

failed attempt at totalization via the path of allegory. In this reading, Jameson ascribes much of what *Notes* gives to Conceptualism to a poem originally published in the middle of the last century:

[O]nly failure makes possible human experience as such, where success binds and alienates us more securely and inextricably into an external world of things (and not least of money and business and the market, so that failure as an ethos is linked to capitalism itself as a system). Finally, an aesthetics of failure is built into the works themselves, at least those whose awareness of their own aims is more lucid and reflexive and has not required the blind and productive self-deception of ideologies of myth and expression in order impossibly to come into being. (3)

Like Williams, conceptual writing fails to the same extent that it *tries*, and this “trying” always marks a relationship to a problem for which the writing attempts to posit some solution. The problems to which conceptual writing would respond have already been listed, and to say that its success is always mediated by its failure risks merely repeating an empty phrase. I do not want to challenge this sense of failure, but challenge given assumptions about what conceptual writing “tries” to do.

First, contrary to arguments that identify conceptual writing as a practice that requires no reading to be adequately thought, it is (and needs to be, to make arguments about it) read; thus, the turn to literary style. This need for reading is created by the departure from the concept, even if those reading strategies differ from the way one reads a novel or a poem, and even if there is not a single empirical person who would be willing to meet that expectation. Of course, this means that conceptual writing also need to be *written*, that the conceptual book cannot be replaced by its abstract.

What to include under the rubric of conceptual poetry, though? It hinges on whether the concept is “adequate” to the work. If the concept is merely the work’s “idea” as posited by an artist, or even the work’s plan as suggested by mechanic device, it makes sense to accept strict

definitions of conceptualism as the easy identification of the primacy of procedure; this is a way of identifying works that *do not work* by identifying them with their concept. But if the word “concept” is assumed to speak specifically to the question of nonidentity, of heterogeneity, of a process that escapes its conditions, the conceptual work reducible to its concept would have been excluded from the definition of conceptual writing.

In this, conceptual writing always risks become Postconceptual; because it is defined by a movement away from the concept, and because that move generally involves a literary turn, the separation between the two terms is one of degrees. The former involves the production of literature out of non-literature: transcription becomes poem. The latter gives up this initial investment in non-literariness, instead emphasizing literary *style*. In this list of existing definitions of conceptual writing, I have tried to show the importance of the distance between an initial “plan” and the way it gets carried out—the essential reiterability of conceptual writing—and before moving on to postconceptual writing, I want to focus on a few forms this distance takes.

In Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy*, we see an example of a wholly “transcribed” text that, by insisting on the non-alteration of transcription, draws attention to its actual construction. Rather than revealing the vast quantity of data produced by speech, or examining speech as it “really” is—as Goldsmith claims—it becomes a confessional poem despite itself. Vanessa Place’s *Statement of Facts* represents a different, more difficult becoming-literary that hinges on the relationship between (what looks like) form and content. In both cases, we can see how conceptual writing functions to move beyond some initial boundary on what can be read as literary.

Conceptual Writing Fails to Not Be Literature

Built by compiling every word Goldsmith spoke for one week, even *Soliloquy*'s strictest realization would threaten claims that conceptual writing does not need to be realized—that a plan would suffice in its stead. The text would clearly differ for any author who would undertake the concept's realization. This is in line with Genette's statement about the way the description of a style introduces the possibility of its infinite repetition. Goldsmith often uses *Soliloquy* to note, for example, just how much boring, petty, meaningless garbage we spew at each other every day, taking for granted that this “we” functions, that there's nothing particular about his daily speech habits that result in such pessimism. Instead, it is obvious that *Soliloquy* is so long only because Goldsmith talks so much.

The stakes for his project are a lot lower than those typically attributed to it. To see this, we can look at Goldsmith's own early ideas for the form the project could take: Take the following passage:

Here's a new project I'm working on. OK? I'm taking a leap of language. I'm recording everything I'm saying for an entire week. I mean it no, I'm always taking [sic] about the volume of language that's around I mean what what would your language look like if it was if you collected every piece of shit word you that you said for an entire week. Yeah and what would it look like and you know what form would it you know it say you just printed it out and put it in a big stack and it's a visual representation of all the crap that you speak all week. That see there it's a visual representation of language. It may not be exciting but it's a great concept it's you know it could in other words that could be I could take the language that I record myself speaking all week no one else speaking, just the shit that I spew myself and think now, how could I represent this visually differently? That's raw material. How could that be represented you know if every word of language was a drop of water and I counted it out and dropped it into a glass would this represent my language for a week? You know how many jellybeans in the jar kind of thing. . . . You know it could be every drop fill a glass of water for every language I spoke? That kind of thing, I mean I think that that kind of raw material could be flowed into something really really interesting visually in the gallery. (15)

Early in the first day of the week (named in the book as “Act I,” indicating that the book claims a relationship to the traditions of dramatic time), Goldsmith describes the project to an interlocutor

who does not appear to be aware that the work being discussed is currently under way. First, there's a premonitory inauguration of conceptual writing: "it may not be interesting, but it's a great concept." He has only begun the project at this point and does not yet know what form the material will eventually take. The initial iterations Goldsmith suggests in conversations in *Soliloquy* are all visual, and precious at best—symbolic visualizations of language as material that would leave the entirety of the work to the impression made by its remarkable size.

The visual representation of quantity still exists in its form as a published book, if only in the book's dimensions, but with the additional opportunity to actually open it and read it. This purely visual interpretation of language would count as "conceptual writing" under the definition I am hoping to depart from—successful realizations of an idea with no compelling divergence. On the other hand, *Soliloquy* itself is something altogether different, and the possible representations he offers—water, jellybeans, or printed transcriptions—suggest different levels of representational distance from the original spoken text. Of course, transcription is closer; "jellybeans in a jar," while not actually suggested here, at least suggests a countable representation; "drops of water" removes even the mathematical aspect of words-as-quantity, since the individual drops (unless uniformly measured) would be impossible to measure once the jar was filled.

At issue is not a style of representation, though, but the style of individuals' speech. Eventually, these seemingly innocent questions of representation become more important in book itself, where editorial decisions of punctuation, spelling, and sentence length all alter the extent to which the book can be said to show that we all speak like George Bush, as the back cover claims. When Goldsmith insists that he is revealing something dishonest in the way we

think of ordinary speech, the editorial decisions of nonintervention or intervention in transcription here lay claim to greater mimetic satisfaction.

Rather than dealing with visual or oral representations, *Soliloquy* turns out to have another literary concern: the confession. In Goldsmith's account, "confessional poetry" is its own style, one he hopes to avoid. In recounting a conversation held earlier in the day during his first meeting with the critic Marjorie Perloff, Goldsmith describes his continued investment in internet appropriation as a response to the confessional mode of his contemporaries:

and she's like well, you wouldn't write anything confessional would you? I said, well, absolutely not, really . . . I'm interested in a subjectivity that's not my own. I'm interested in a confession that has nothing to do with my life. You know, like taking shit from the net. (61)

This passage appears in the middle of a project that serves as an obvious counterpart to this claim. What could be more confessional than providing access to the kind of unedited speech most people try their hardest to forget, let alone to record for posterity? Even confession's relationship to religious ceremony works here, as it is a form in which the historical origins of autobiography takes place as a dialogue with an inaccessible man; the interlocutor is at once the justification for the confession (and the person with the power to assign penance) and absent, behind a screen—a physical barrier that maintains the same polite anonymity as Goldsmith's erasure of everyone else's speech.

Confession and autobiography share their origins, implying *Soliloquy*'s possible intervention in the autobiographical poetic modes to which it responds. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin outlines this relationship:

Typical of all the above-named works [Seneca's letters, Marcus Aurelius' "To Myself," and Augustine's *The Confessions*] is the advent of a new form for relating to one's self. One might best characterize this new relationship by using Augustine's term "Soliloquia," that is, "solitary conversations with oneself." . . . This is a new relationship to one's own self, to one's own particular "I"—with no witnesses, without any

concessions to the voice of a “third person,” whoever it might be . . . The point of view that “another” takes toward us—which we take into account, and by which we evaluate ourselves—functions as the source of vanity, vain pride, or as the source of offense. It clouds our self-consciousness and our powers of self-evaluation . . . Another distinctive feature of this third modification is a sharp increase in the weight of events pertaining to one’s own personal and intimate life; events enormously important in the private life of a given individual have no importance at all for others (145)

This could show some *humility* in *Soliloquy*; since others’ points of view contribute to our own vanity, only the rigorous elimination of those views to the purity of self-expression permits access to a true internal relationship, one implied by the autobiographical account. The final characteristic distinctive of the so-called “stoic” mode of early autobiography is meant to show its historical limitation: though the elimination of the exteriorization made possible by the dialogic is characterized also by a lack of public appeal, Bakhtin assigns these works to a period predating the true inauguration of the private self when “a sense of self [was] still rooted firmly in the public sphere” (ibid). And just as Bakhtin insists that Augustine’s *Confessions* “requires a noisy declamation” (146), *Soliloquy* is constituted by “soliloquia” that were once declaimed loudly, even drunkenly, to friends and acquaintances. That is, taking the contemporary goal of self-representation to its most mimetic extreme, *Soliloquy* turns full circle to a moment where the closest someone could get to the private self was its public expression; there are no internal musings to view in distinction from one person’s public self. The only distinctions to be made are the differences between repetitions of that same self, over and over, to different people.

A list of those people around whom the self that constitutes *Soliloquy* is formed was made partially available upon the book’s release via an index to its limited first edition. In its typical use, the index stages the difficulty of sifting through an already existing overwhelming quantity of material which conceptual writers, among others, typically attribute to only the contemporary; indexes indicate the difference between popular reading strategies and most

books' formal realizations. Usually made by someone other than a book's author, the index functions as a reading tool that facilitates the reduction of literature to citation, in keeping with Jonathan Swift's advice:

The most accomplished way of using books at present is twofold: either first to serve them as some men do lords, learn their titles exactly, and then brag of their acquaintance; or, secondly, which is indeed the choicer, the profounder, and politer method, to get a thorough insight into the index by which the whole book is governed and turned, like fishes by the tail. (96)

Soliloquy's index also allowed individual readers a fraction of the self-indulgence the book represented for its author; readers could cross reference their and their friends' names in order to find out whether they had been spoken about or to during the book's week. In addition to enabling gossip, though, the index also highlights *Soliloquy's* dependence on its form as a book. This guarantees some greater relationship to reading than the project would have had had it been presented as visual art. The index suggests this insistence on reading—it loses its utility once the standard edition (twice as long) is released, so that the page numbers no longer correspond to those of the book it indexes, and the index functions as a separate text. What seemed to be a useful tool for dealing with an overload of text instead mocks the desire to sift through poetry's material for more useful “reference,” refusing to make the language more penetrable:

I'm still pissed I'm still really pissed at people's inability in the art world to handle reading the language I'm really you know and I could easily just say fuck it . . . They could handle it when it was 3 panels they got it it was enough but when it went to 6 panels or 8 panels it was too much. You know I mean I can't tell you how many people have told me that they've seen the article but how many people have actually read the article? (13)

In *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith complains about the reception to this exhibition, which was written up by Raphael Rubinstein in *Art in America*. In his complaints about audience members' refusal to read, we see a different relationship to legibility than in his later claims.

In addition to the book's form, its turn towards literature is most obvious in the transcriptions' omissions—there's a style to leaving things out. In his essay "A Silly Key" from the issue of *Open Letter* on Goldsmith's work, Christian Bök identifies *Soliloquy*'s absent elements as constitutive of the reading experience, so that one winds up using the book as a map to a larger imagined text rather than taking it word-for-word (as one utterance, as Bakhtin might put it):

The pleasure of perusing such a text arises from the challenge of filling in the missing context for these exchanges, particularly since the author often interacts with renowned artists and powerful critics, whose private remarks go unheard, even as the author talks among these people, gossiping about friends, divulging their secrets, insulting their careers, behaving in fact like a soliloquist, who pretends that his intimate thoughts go unobserved and unrecorded. (66)

In the same essay, Bök accuses those who attempted to pay similarly close attention to the banality of everyday expression before *Soliloquy* of taking too strong of an editing role over the materials—"they still refuse to subdue the formalities of their own literary artifice" (67). In elevating Goldsmith's transcription over others', he assumes that *Soliloquy* holds a stronger mimetic relationship to actual speech than otherwise "purified" transcribed utterances. But it is not so obvious that *Soliloquy*'s transcription requires *less intervention* than others'—the decision to omit a comma or to type out an "umm" is not less of a decision than their alternatives, after all. Goldsmith notes this when discussing his work *No. 111* 2.7.93—7.22.95,¹² which could be

¹² "Rather than attempting the impossible task of funneling absolutely everything that struck him into a book, Goldsmith limited his selection to words and phrases ending in various off-rhymes of the "r" sound. These include "er," "ar," "ir," "ah," "a," "air," "ear" and "uh." At the start, it seemed as if 130 pages would suffice, but the project kept growing. Goldsmith began thinking of his manuscript as a kind of reference book and wanted the finished volume to have a dictionarylike heft. Looking at the reference books on his shelves, he noticed that they tended to be at least 600 pages long . . . [it] has a rather straightforward structure which relies on alphabetical order and the number of syllables in a word or phrase. Each chapter is composed of words or phrases of a certain syllabic length which are arranged, within the chapter, in alphabetical order. Thus, the first chapter begins with "A and ends with "Zsa," the second begins "A whoa!" and ends "zuder," . . ." (Rubinstein 97-8). Note that *Soliloquy* does not quite meet the page limit for status as reference book.

seen as inverting the process of self-transcription by emphasizing the editorial decisions necessary in construction:

That belongs what I'm doing is I'm just taking sentences and I just keep chopping them up. And so if it's got a closed parenthesis, it's it's it's intended. Or if sometimes there'll be one one quotation mark because I just chopped up the sentence which is interesting because you start to wonder why where's the other one. (27)

This is not to replace one accusation with another. It is no problem that Goldsmith's work often involves serious editorial criteria and selection, and the obvious counter-argument to his projects of self-transcription—that his own awareness of being recorded takes away from a project's claim to the quotidian—only matter if one actually values the strength of a project's relationship to reality, or if the disavowal of intent is taken as a possible goal instead of one to simply try to approach. However, it does undermine the grounds by which Bök would rid the book of its “literary artifice.” In the earlier quote where Goldsmith talks about his preference for gossip, for example, you can see a number of decisions of punctuation: to make the first exclamation run on, despite the regular introduction of new independent clauses, and then to punctuate the final sentences for dramatic effect. His “literary artifice” is to create the impression there's no artifice at all, and Bök falls for this.

As one example of written speech, *Soliloquy* certainly does make an effort to maintain the stutters, redundancies, and cruelty of day-to-day interaction. But the project also necessarily does more than this, by reconsidering the value of the relationship between poetry and the authorial self.

My point here is not that *Soliloquy* becomes literary by editing found material, but that it *minimizes* the number of interventions necessary to make transcribed speech literary. By making the project focus on a self constructed by confession, and, more importantly, by organizing the material as a book, it moves the speech from transcription to literature.

I turn to a second, more recent example of conceptual writing, one that shares many traits with *Soliloquy*: Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts* also makes literature out of language already produced by its author, and the simple decision to present found material as "poetry" similarly changes the way it can be read. Beyond these initial similarities, though, the books are very different, and Place's text—by incorporating unedited, disjunct legal descriptions of sexual violence—forces us to consider the relationship between "form" and "content" in this move from legal brief to literary work.

For this latter move to work, paratext plays a large role. A book as difficult—and as unlikely to be read—as *Statement of Facts* is especially subject to the subordination of its material to summary. The inside jacket of the book's cover provides a preliminary definition of the genre of writing from which the book has been built:

A statement of facts is a legal document which sets forward factual information without argument. These documents are used in a variety of legal settings, ranging from appeals to filing vehicle registration paperwork. Depending on the context, a statement of facts may be prepared by a legal professional, or it may consist of a form with options to check.

The goal of a statement of facts is not to put forward an argument, but rather to present factual information in a clear, easy to understand way. That said, many lawyers may make implicit arguments in a statement of facts, using a variety of tricks to sway the reader to one point of view or another. Typically these arguments are designed to paint someone in a favorable light, or to dismiss the reliability of someone else.

Having just looked at the title and read this helpful information, one might expect it to be only a particularly dry example of appropriation—especially because the description of the title realizes the very writing style it promises. But the law provides a useful way to think about how even a rigorously formalized discourse must take seriously the material it fits into that form. *Statement of Facts* is not just a collection of Statements of Facts, but of those written by Place in her job as

a public defense attorney on behalf of people in the appeals process after having been convicted of what are mostly violent sexual crimes. Three of the four blurbs included in the book's jacket do not seem to think this is a complication, though, instead characterizing the book mostly by its conceptual gestures¹³:

Statement of Facts is a book about limits and boundaries: physical, psychological, legal, literary, and conceptual. It is about speech and its transcription, and the strange distortions of language that have evolved to serve the legal system . . . it reveals just how frail the fabric of justice is. —Ken Gonzales-Day

The crime addressed by the legal system is non-specific, here—these claims could be made about a book appropriating almost any legal document, even if that appropriation was not done by someone writing the actual documents as part of her job. Of course, other blurbs focus on just that:

Statement of Facts is poet/lawyer Vanessa Place's masterful demonstration of day-for-night writing. —Simon Leung

Her poetry is an appropriation of the documents she writes during her day job, flipping her briefs after hours into literature . . . Here's where it gets interesting. She both has written them, and, at the same time, she's wholly appropriated them—rescuing them from the dreary world of court filings . . . —Kenneth Goldsmith

For both Leung and Goldsmith, the project is legitimated *only* by its status as self-appropriation (note that Goldsmith's description of the project's stakes could equally be applied to *Soliloquy*). While Leung goes on to describe the project as “nauseating,” Place's “descriptions of heinous sex crimes . . . are a treatise on contingency,” not on the crimes themselves; the appropriative act is first a way of dealing with a difficult career, and second, a means of making descriptions of sex crimes something other than descriptions of sex crimes. However, once one starts reading the actual book, it is not at all clear that this latter transformation “succeeds.” The similarity between the appellate brief and the short story might, for some, allow things to “get interesting” before

¹³ These are only excerpts of larger blurbs.

the realization that the book's author and the briefs' author coincide. Remaining are Kim Rosenfield's comments, the only blurb that deals explicitly with the project's reorientation of the concept's relationship to its material: "*Statement of Facts* takes on issues too messy to benefit from further elucidation which only grow more disturbing presented in their purest case material form."

Statement of Facts has a "content problem" that its paratextual materials elide: the book's material is too disturbing to be glossed over by acknowledgments of its clever conceit. Most of what could be said about the book's concept—word-for-word "reframing" of a legal language such that it has some effect on the way one would read poetic language when claimed as such, some treatment of the available criteria for objective reportage as it is possible in and outside of literature, the relationship between justice and syntax, etc.—would have to take into account its being "about" rape. This is where Rosenfield's notes are especially helpful: the book is "unflinchingly reminding us 'a rape is a rape is a rape,'" and it does not stop reminding us about this in order to say the other things it has to say about poetic language; it is in fact only able to make any other argument through this reminder's repetition. In disagreement with all of the book's framing, I would say that this is barely a book about a poet's employment, that it is somewhat about disciplinary boundaries (in every sense of discipline), but that most importantly, it is a book that makes it impossible to make any stylistic or formal argument without simultaneously keeping the content in mind.

This is why, when Marjorie Perloff made the bizarrely offensive claim that the book makes it difficult to distinguish victims from perpetrators (either offending a large part of the audience or problematically provoking no audible complaints from said audience, according to different perspectives after the fact) at the Rethinking Poetics conference at Columbia University

in 2010, she was accused of making a “formalist” (Young 7) argument: it was difficult to understand the formal relationship she described without assuming she was saying rape victims shared some blame for their rape. I imagine many critics of Place—among which I count myself, as I see *Statement of Facts* as an exception within an overall extremely problematic body of work—would consider an analysis of “literary style” in this repurposing of legal materials equally formalist, but I want to use the book as a literary example that maintains the (always true) interdependence of “style” and “content” more forcefully than other works, particularly in its reliance on certain conditions for its becoming available to more literary analysis.

Perloff responded to many of the people who took issue with her comments in a way that paid more attention to the book’s relationship to its subjects (not only its language, that is, but to the lives of the individuals referenced by the legal documents it contains). But in doing so, she chose to read the book as though it could be asked to make the same arguments as Place’s related book of nonfiction, *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and Law*. In the end, the supposedly formalist argument is the most vulgarly content-based of all: the race, citizenship, and socio-economic status of the book’s “characters,” along with their close living quarters, all go to show “the culture of rape is largely a socio-economic problem” (1), according to Perloff. This claim, which ignores the prevalence of rape across socio-economic backgrounds, is hardly an adequate gloss of the argument of *The Guilt Project*, let alone an account of *Statement of Facts*.

Statement of Facts’ success lies in its ability to take to its extreme what is true in all writing: that what goes by the name of “content”—whatever a book can be said to be “about”—is always stylistically mediated, and that a work’s style is, of course, always “contained.” As Samuel Delany puts it: “Every generation some critic states the frighteningly obvious in the style/content conflict . . . put in opposition to ‘style,’ there is no such thing as content” (1). In

Statement of Facts, this becomes clear because the excessive nature of its “content,” as noted by Rosenfield, resists formal domination. And its most familiar “artistic” elements—including its mimetic comportment, gesturing at all the authority claimed by the assertion “based on a true story”—turn out also to be borrowed from another discipline, so that depiction of truth is a goal only to the extent that the goal survives the text’s movement into literature from the court room.

The first Statement of Facts included in the book, only three pages in length, disrupts the attempt to identify the guilty party. This is not in the sense Perloff suggests—because somehow everyone is to blame, or because the real-world conditions of the scenes described turn out to be as culpable as the rapists themselves—but because the form of the Statement of Facts as described on the book’s jacket (and quoted above) attempts to go so far in the direction of objectivity that the remaining account lacks the suspense, the accusation, the assumed guilt shifting from character to character that would usually be expected to formalize responsibility within generic constraints, whether those are the constraints of a detective novel or the constraints of the sensory perceptions of an individual witness. That is, it is more like Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* than a whodunit: in providing adequate tools for successful realization of plot and limited narrative perspective, the mystery encourages reading’s equation with solving, whereas a legal brief in its use in the appeals process starts with the assumption of guilt, and merely provides details. But this is not the typical understanding of the “Rashomon effect” in its presentation of incommensurably subjective interpretations as a means of preventing hermeneutic strategies that would recreate truth, for only the Prosecution’s perspective is given—“No affirmative defense was presented” (11). Instead, the incommensurability of accounts is located on the level of the individual, where competing attempts at conveying the truth are prompted by different solicitors, real and imagined.

At the beginning of the document, the reader is informed that Ben—the 13-year-old victim—was sitting on his porch reading the Bible before the appellant asked him to join him in the alley to smoke marijuana, where he and the appellant engaged in anal sex. Only the degree of force is under dispute. On the next page, this initial character development continues: “Ben knew it was a sin to lie and to bear false witness” (10)—the prosecutions’ objective presentation of the facts considers this motivation for correction of an originally inaccurate account relevant. But God is not the first to solicit the story; he is preceded, unsurprisingly, by Ben’s mother. Though “Ben had sex with appellant ‘out of curiosity’” without having been asked by the appellant before penetration, he returns to find his mother on the porch and writes “a statement about what happened, saying he had been forced, which wasn’t true” (9). And despite Ben’s awareness of the general problem with lying, he “did not care about the consequences of his lies to appellant” (9), telling the police the same story he told his mother. When the account continues by indicating that “Ben’s physical examination was consistent with the history provided. It was also consistent with not engaging in anal sex,” it is unclear with *which* history the examination was consistent, especially as the following sentences go on to talk about quantities of sperm cells measurable in the DNA sample collection for the rape kit:

The LAPD laboratory protocol recommends at least 1.0 nanograms of DNA for optimal amplification. Rinehart amplified .36 ng; smaller amounts of DNA have been successfully amplified . . . According to Rinehart’s report, there was more than one person’s DNA in the anal and rectal samples. She compared the mixture profile from the rectal sperm sample and found a minor profile consistent with Ben’s; the major profile matched appellant’s at 12 of the 13 locations . . . Using FBI software, Rinehart computed the statistical likelihood of a random match from the rectal sample “B” if people were being drawn randomly one at a time in the general population—at 1 in 1 quintillion. A quintillion has 18 zeros after the one. There are six and a half billion people on earth. (10-11)

The form of the Statement of Facts often reads as a series of paratactic sentences representing some remainder agreed upon by the prosecution and the defense, and it often juxtaposes

scientific data and emotional descriptions all under the same third-person narration. Just at the point in the text where the account is most frustrated and confused—when the differing versions of Ben’s story have all been accounted for, and it seems like a conclusive summary is becoming possible—the Statement takes this page-long path through a DNA sample. It needs to use the criminalist’s data to indicate the conclusive fact of the appellant’s identification in the sample, but seems suspicious that the conclusion has not been made clear enough, and so takes the time to define quintillion and to remind the reader of the earth’s population. It is in passages like this where the transformation to “literature” is most apparent, even though these strategies are common rhetorical courtroom tactics: the effect of the book’s presentation as poetry is to draw attention to rhetorical decisions made in the presentation of these cases.

One way to think about this “literary” quality is to distinguish between different purposes—those of the law, of journalism, or of literature. Here, poetry’s urgency becomes legible, but problematically. In those cases in the book where children are the victim of sexual acts with which they are unfamiliar, the delay in reporting the initial assault is often related to their inability to express what is happening to them, which contributes to their fear that they will either not be believed or will be punished for their involvement. When eventually prompted by a family member, doctor, or legal representative to find the words, a child struggles to respond, and the book’s usually direct text breaks into the child’s attempt at a comparison that would make the rape describable. Ava, nine years old, attempts to describe the crime of which the appellant, her uncle, was convicted:

Ava told police she was sitting on the couch when appellant put his hand in her pants and his finger against her private part; she said it felt “like hammers.”[. . .] Once, appellant touched her vagina with his penis; during late July or early August, he put his private part “in a little way” until she felt “like stuff inside of mine, like water.” (16)

Simile is no longer just a simple poetic device in which straight-forward description is replaced by comparison—for the sake of an image, or for the substitution of a contingent relationship for a causal one. Instead, comparative language appears as the means of conviction, providing evidence as damning as the data-laden analysis of the rape kit. It is also a coping device, and a break into individual voice or personality the book can only permit via quotation.

This is only one example of the way the book simultaneously maintains a relationship to its status as poetry and its status as appropriated legal text relating to actual lives. Other examples also require divergence from the legal tone in heavily quoted texts. Another aspect of the relationship between the form of the Statement of Facts as a legal document and the “literary elements” of its publication as a book of poetry is a result of the former’s need to provide short summaries of the perspective of an entirely different discipline, community, or individual witness, so that the societal factors that might prevent a prostitute from providing information against a pimp are given in one paragraph, followed by another paragraph explaining the means of guessing the likelihood of a repeat offense based on the appellant’s age. Each of these paragraphs individually could provide the subject for hundreds of pages of research, but are substituted for here by one expert representative of a community of scholars. Of course, the relationship between literature’s use of plot, character development, individual choice, constraint, and the law has a rich history in both novels and literary criticism, but Place takes the relationship further, so that literary development of story and character, to the extent that it happens or falls short, has the exact same limits as the possibility of providing a written account of any given case.

Given the sheer number of cases that comprise *Statement of Facts*, dozens of such readings of the book would be possible. To say that this book can be read “as literature,” though,

is not just to say that we can close read its figurative language, analyze its rhetoric, or note clever turns of phrase: it is also to call into question conceptual writing's claims to a naïve transmission of form or concept, and to ask different questions about context. Perloff's emphasis on form, for example, fails because it gives away her unwillingness to think about the people (or representations of people) this book is about; the focus on form is not just a rejection of apolitical aesthetic qualities, but also a rejection of the actual subjective stakes of the act of representation.

For this reason, it is important to note that I see both *Soliloquoy* and *Statement of Facts* as exceptions within their author's broader works, but as exemplary exceptions. These books are better than other examples of conceptual writing precisely because they fail to realize conceptualism's promises, which are promises I do not hope for: a disinterest in reading, in subjectivity, in realization, in anything beyond overwhelming information, boringly presented. Goldsmith seems to have recently realized the problem with his work's prioritizing of "flatness," of writing without content. This is the motivation I read, at least, behind his decision to read "The Body of Michael Brown" at the Interrupt conference at Brown University early in 2015, a performance that resulted in broad internet protests, failed apologies from the author, and a number of essays penned on the relationship between conceptual art and race. In this performance, he read the transcript of Michael Brown's autopsy report, and he "massaged" the text (his words). His editorial choices included the inexplicable decision to rearrange the report such that it ended with the Brown's genitals, for example. Goldsmith does not seem to have realized that this transcript—of a very recent murder, one that inspired nationwide protests against police violence that are ongoing—would function differently than transcripts of more "historical" deaths, like JFK's. Similarly, he did not image the "context" of a white man reading this text in front of Brown's graduation photo, on stage at an Ivy League University, with very

few people of color in the room. In the end, this recent work was only made possible by the same false ideas about writing he expresses in *Soliloquy*. To return to an already-cited passage: “I’m interested in a subjectivity that’s not my own,” Goldsmith writes, “I’m interested in a confession that has nothing to do with my life.” In rejecting the necessary effects his own subjectivity has on his projects, he fails to see that this “confession” is his own—or is at least associated with the the name “Kenneth Goldsmith” as it functions as an author—and that one cannot take “a subjectivity that’s not [one’s] own” without some degree of linguistic violence.

This is why it is not enough to acknowledge that many examples of conceptual writing themselves disprove the artist’s own goals: we need to go further and reject the goals themselves. The belief that subjectivity is something easily avoided by literary experimentation has to be replaced with a writing more interested in how writing actually works.

Postconceptual Writing Quits Trying to Not Be Literature

Despite its protests, then, conceptual writing needed someone to hold the book open, literally, for the purposes of reading. A great deal of its functioning in fact *relied* on its existence *as a book of literature*, which makes possible entirely different reading strategies. Postconceptual writing, on the other hand, takes the book for granted, and is more comfortable with its status as literature.

If the question “What is Postconceptual Writing” feels relatively minor, it is one that many others have already begun to ask. Because conceptual writing’s framing often claims to be a radical break that is hard for either detractors or supporters to imagine being sustained for the 15 or more years it has functioned as a critical term, writers and critics have been looking for its “post” for some time. Perloff does as much in a recent *Boston Review* essay, where she strangely

proposes as “responders” to conceptual writing a number of poets whose work, for the most part, preceded it. This would be a familiar gesture, but the authors she lists are simply Language poets, and the works in question bear almost no relationship to conceptualism’s project. All of this hinges on a rejection of “the lyric” more problematic for its irrelevance to the works at hand than for its ahistoricism. Matvei Yankelevich’s response to Perloff was useful in calling attention to the peculiarities of her argument, and for distinguishing the postconceptual in terms of its readability, but it wound up making a case for hybridity that has already been made by many outside of the terms of the debate.

Beyond the evidence that this is a question in current circulation, my own idea of the postconceptual hinges on three competing justifications:

1. That to think through the postconceptual is useful because, in Peter Osborne’s terms, postconceptuality “defines the state of visual art” today—and because it is unclear whether the arts can be separated entirely into visual and literary categories.
2. That, as I have already suggested, to think through the postconceptual is useful because conceptual writing seems to exist.
3. That to think through the postconceptual is useful because postconceptual writing itself actually seems to exist.

The “seems” here is not accidental hedging; the relevance of literary categories often hinges on the impression of their existence, more than on proof; the proof gets sought in the archives retroactively, after a community makes use of a term.

In a recent essay in *Radical Philosophy* and in his book, *Anywhere or Not at All*, Osborne positions a much bigger periodizing albatross of twentieth-century criticism, post-modernity, with respect to a number of other circulating terms: contemporaneity, globalism, and

postconceptuality. For Osborne, postconceptual art *is* contemporary art, a claim that he insists remains “speculative” in the Hegelian sense: “its artistic meaning is ultimately determined by the reflective totality of its applications to the interpretation of individual works” (25). In this account, postmodernism was discredited by its tie to the unrealized “lateness” of capitalism, rather than because of its inability to meaningfully distinguish between itself and modernism, and he suggests the postconceptual as the state of art under “high capitalism,” implying that contemporary art must reflect capitalism’s refusal to retire.

From this, we get the sense that the postconceptual is tied to the current state of global capital, and that it functions as a correction to the mistakes made by theories of the postmodern. More important here, though, is that the general state of postconceptuality does not function as “a traditional art-historical or art-critical concept at the level of medium, aesthetic form, style or movement.” (25). In some ways, this implies that by proposing to identify postconceptual writing, I am simply suggesting that writing also exists under these same economic or art-historical conditions.

Osborne develops this category in much greater detail. In a chapter that reckons with the apparent division between conceptuality and aesthetics, he defines postconceptual art as any art “premised on the complex historical experience and critical legacy of conceptual art, broadly construed, which registers its fundamental mutation of the ontology of the artwork” (48). Here, he lists six major “insights” of conceptual art’s legacy that contemporary art necessarily internalizes, and curious among them is the second: “Art’s ineliminable—but radically insufficient—aesthetic dimension” (48). After considering the claims of conceptual artists and their critics to the eradication of aesthetics in these works, he explains how the actual maintenance of the aesthetic was a failure of conceptual art’s *self-understanding*, but actually a

“perverse artistic success” (49). Of course, many manifestos have called for an elimination of some element of art that can only be approached rather than actually attained, and this *failure-to-have-eliminated* is often the point, as in Genette’s faint praise of surrealism: “The great merit—perhaps the only one—of Surrealism is to have revealed, through its own experiments, that a throw of the dice will never abolish meaning” (48).

Similarly, my idea of style here hinges on the residual aesthetic and semantic qualities of writing: on the one hand, in works naïve enough to have not yet accepted this ineliminability, and on the other hand, in writing that gives into and explores it. This is one distinction I want to draw between conceptual and postconceptual writing. Though her focus is very different from Osborne’s, this argument is borne out compellingly in Sianne Ngai’s chapter on the “interesting” in *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Although Osborne argues that conceptual art destroyed the ontological statuses of categories like “form” or “style,” Ngai argues that conceptual art’s “interestingness” is a “formal, objective style.” Taking up conceptual artists’ own identification of the “interesting” quality of mute presentation of materials or procedures without apparent judgment, Ngai relates this aesthetic effect to Schlegel’s “*interessante*,” the rise of nineteenth-century realism, and the relationship between photography and its subjects:

We can thus glimpse the connection between late twentieth-century conceptual art—famously obsessed with acts of documentation, classification, and the presentation of evidence—and a range of realist, print-cultural practices from the previous century. (5)

In this introduction, she collapses conceptual art with conceptual writing, and goes on to argue not just that this category of interestingness, like others she develops in the same book, constitutes *a* style, but that is closely tied to style itself. She notes how the “interesting” balances the general with the particular, and that it is “a style explicitly about difference and the acts of comparison that make its perception possible” (37)—i.e., by bringing up a process of

differentiation between particular elements and general descriptions, its style mirrors the operation of stylistic analysis more broadly. Precisely where aesthetics and style alike seemed to become irrelevant, that is, art takes on a quality of “interestingness” that bridges aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgments.

Ngai’s argument stands out to me not necessarily because the three categories she develops feel especially relevant to postconceptual writing, but because of the division she establishes between each aesthetic category as a “feeling-based judgment” and as an “objective style,” suggesting that the latter never involves the former. The stakes for this relationship between judgment and style turn out to be the site of aesthetics’ politicization:

Although nothing seems more apolitical on first squint than the interesting, we will soon see how its conceptual indeterminacy makes it the one category in our repertoire best suited for linking aesthetic judgments to non-aesthetic judgments, including judgments of a political nature” (13)

In a long section analyzing Kant, Genette, and Cavell, among others, Ngai questions why “judgment” has been removed from conversations about aesthetics today, given that it played such a pivotal role in the theories on which contemporary aesthetics are based. In doing so, she examines the different role of judgment in each category, showing through a number of other writers how statements about aesthetics constantly perform the conflation of description with evaluation, in order to argue that this is the case most of all in the category of the “interesting,” where the conversational announcement that something is interesting demands one’s interlocutor to ask for a justification: “‘Interesting’ thus makes the feeling-based judgment of something as interesting seem paradoxically coextensive with its concept-based justification” (46).

Ngai suggests that the interesting says more about a work’s relationship to *something else* than do other aesthetic categories, forming a more direct connection between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, even though other categories “*seem* more overtly political” (51). If she is

right that conceptual writing is defined by this move from aesthetic judgments—which are harder to make when a work is unwritten and not meant to be read—to extra-aesthetic judgments, whether those of literary criticism more broadly or of the poem’s relationship to society, then the writing that I am describing as “postconceptual” can be said to reinscribe the appearance of external judgments as more clearly internal, aesthetic qualities: it redirects judgment to literature. This writing is not “merely interesting.” That is to say: it takes interestingness’ claim to complication in the need for commentary and puts that judgment back into a more literary context.

We can see this process in a recent book by Josef Kaplan, *Democracy is not for the People*. Perhaps because a great deal of Kaplan’s work in this book uses the same *procedures* associated with conceptual writing, it has been subjected to its own interestingness time and again. Many responses to the book deal only with the claims it makes, rather than with their style or context. One poem suggests that artists living in poor neighborhoods “corner, beat and mug rich people” who move in in order to halt the process of gentrification, and readers seem tempted to argue exclusively about the political efficacy of violence when discussing it, even if they do not treat most poems as testable maxims.

This was what I said when I wrote about the poem a few years ago, at least—now, I want to be clearer that an interest in Kaplan’s style does not get in the way of an interest in its politics. This is the difficult thing about talking about literature: *of course* Kaplan’s poem is dealing in some way with the possible validity of its proposition, but it’s still strange to reduce the poem to the accuracy of its proposition when it makes that proposition as a poem, rather than as an essay.

Returning to this book after reading Ngai’s account of conceptual interestingness, though, I started to see how these readings were not just bad interpretations, but perhaps predicted by

Kaplan's reception within the context of conceptual writing. Talking about the poems *as poems*, that is, would seem ridiculous if they are meant to be unreadable repetitions of brute material as it exists in reality.

Kaplan's work offers a useful test case for the distinction I am hoping to make between conceptual and postconceptual writing, as it spans this distinction within itself. Take his perhaps most "read," most controversial, and most "conceptual" work, the recent chapbook *Kill List*, which consisted entirely of an alphabetized list of contemporary poets followed by a diagnosis of their relative wealth:

Chris Alexander is comfortable.

Elizabeth Alexander is a rich poet.

Bruce Andrews is a rich poet.

Maya Angelou is a rich poet.

Those writers that Kaplan deemed poor were left off the list entirely, although this was overlooked by most "readers," many of whom seemed as offended by their own omission from this catalogue of the contemporary scene as they were by the ostensible threat to murder posed by the title—better to be killed off in the revolution than unrecognized altogether. Still others were angry for being listed as wealthier than they saw themselves to be, as if Kaplan's two categories were intended as exhaustive and concerned with some hallucinated accuracy.

I am not suggesting that these non-readings are conceptualism's fault—surely other poems are read in terms of their implicit arguments. But conceptual writing makes it difficult to do anything else with the poem, since it seems to forbid readings both close and distant. Perhaps the poem can be understood in terms of works of conceptual art that replaced the work with instructions for its completion, such that the "concept" here would be the extermination of poets

of means, or perhaps there is something to be said about its organization into four-line stanzas and the way it uses identical rhyme in the repetition of either “comfortable” or “rich” at the end of each line. In Joelle McSweeney’s reading of *Kill List*, she considers a number of possible implications of the poem’s form, focusing on its alphabetical order, but winds up wildly beyond its purview:

“No order of knowledge is neutral because it is tainted with human’s killer instinct. We like to call ourselves ‘sapiens’ because we draw up the very best kill lists and the very best robots or enlistees or acolytes to carry them out.”

This poem demonstrates the role of judgment in writing characterized primarily by an “interestingness” that leads to observations about things other than the poem itself. It is possible to comment on its form or language, of course, but it seems to deflect that attention more than most poems would. Because of this, it is not an example of the condition of postconceptuality except in the most minimal sense: like most “posts”, the postconceptual has the effect of retroactively making its own qualities appear to be the ones proper to what came before it—post-structuralism had this effect on structuralism, for example—but it does not move “beyond” this basic tension between the refusal of judgment and judgment’s duration.

Unlike *Kill List*, though, the poems collected in *Democracy is Not for the People* do not hinge on a tension between a title and a strict form. This is in part because they function much closer to how poems usually do, but not *just* because of that—many poems function more like poems than do Kaplan’s, but they do not present themselves on first glance as possibly conceptual. The move from the conceptual to the post is performed most literally in “Ex Machina,” where Kaplan appropriates descriptions of violent attacks in Israel: “Habeishi had hidden powerful explosives on his body, and once amongst the crowds he reached over to detonate...”

Each description of an attempted attack is interrupted by ellipses, though, that announce the intervention of a wholly literary device, the *deus ex machine* predicted by the poem's title:

Habeishi had hidden powerful explosives on his body, and once amongst the crowds he reached over to detonate... but suddenly, a tyrannosaurus rex, apparently attracted by the loud bustle of human activity, burst into the station, flinging Habeishi into a wall with a quick flick of its snout, knocking him unconscious. And all lived.

The poem seems, at first, reducible to two procedures: compiling an appropriated listed of attempted terrorists attacks in a certain locale, and adding to each a simple intervention that interrupts the end of the quoted passage. Because it *seems* to do only this, it seems *merely interesting*, and the only way to talk about the poem is to begin commenting on what it might have to say about extra-aesthetic questions; when I first heard Kaplan read this, for example, I understood it to be a Zionist poem because it chooses to document only attacks in Israel. Despite presenting itself simply, though, the poem has as much to say about *what literature can do* as it does about the conflict in Palestine, something the poem demands acknowledging by making the intervention so absurd. Instead of calling for the implementation of such *dei ex machina* in real life, the poem stages politics through fantasy. This does not suggest that other, less imaginative hopes for survival require similar fantastic logic, nor that poetry undermines its own political relevance by demonstrating its absurdity. To the contrary, it provides an exaggerated but simple reminder—emphasized again by the title—of how writing *makes things possible*. Here, that possibility is very simple: a real-life death is prevented by a fantastical literary intervention, one that functions with the poem's fiction.

If conceptual writing hides its aesthetic qualities behind an “interestingness” that relies more on its ability to elicit judgments from observers than on its specific formal or stylistic qualities, work by writers who—as in Osborne's definition of postconceptual art—have internalized the main insights of conceptualism are able to maintain the prolonged non-aesthetic

judgment of the interesting without allowing the work to rest only on this effect. That is to say, they are interesting *and* something else, but the something else eventually supersedes their interestingness.

This process is already predicted in Ngai's account, even though she does not engage with the problem of what comes after conceptual art. She describes how descriptions of contemporary art used the phrase "merely interesting," as if that quality were incompatible with other aesthetic categories, when in fact it is a category marked by its ability to combine with others. But to reach her conclusion that "interesting" is an aesthetic judgment that, more than any other, produces justifications of itself, while extending the period of judgment beyond the duration of other, more final judgments like "beautiful" or "bad," Ngai must reject a great deal of the way conceptual art described itself, and must continue to suspend the "other" aesthetic qualities over which interestingness takes priority. The term most tied to art's disinterest in "quality" turns out to be all the *more* invested in "quality" than other categories, it is true, but only in terms of quality's external application. Works by those writers operating primarily in what has been described as a "postconceptual" context redirect this judgment towards themselves. If interestingness is not only a style, that is, but also the quality that most raises the very question of stylistic analysis, these works apply that process towards the development of a properly *literary* style under the umbrella of an operating concept.

Chapter 4: The Style of the Image

The stylistician sits in a café:

At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance. (Poe 285)

Good health and a crowded thoroughfare drive Edgar Allen Poe's narrator in "The Man of the Crowd" to attempt to categorize each person who passes by the café where he sits one evening. As he does this work—and as night descends—his categories become increasingly specific, whether because he pays more attention or because later passersby are more idiosyncratic: they include "organ grinders, monkey-exhibitors, and ballad-mongers," "Jew pedlars," and "drunkards innumerable and indescribable," (286) and he becomes more equipped to quickly recognize whole histories in individual faces. He's getting more confident, that is, until someone finally appears for whom categories can't account; the rest of the story literally follows the man, only to determine that it's pointless to follow the titular "man of the crowd."

Like Poe's narrator, driven to describe with increasing accuracy, the literary critic—or more simply, the careful reader—"descends to the details," where the devil resides, and at first takes comfort in his ability to effectively categorize. But perhaps the analogy ends here, where Poe's narrator sets out in obsessive pursuit of the exception to his own understanding. As he follows the man around the city, hoping to resolve the man's annoying illegibility, the critic settles back onto his stool, and continues to track the examples that confirm his thesis; he knows too early in his note taking that the exception will not redefine his understanding. Of course, he does not have to be a critic to be accused of this oversight, as thinkers of all sorts might envy Poe's protagonist's immunity to confirmation bias. But this story opens with a German book (its Germanness seems indicative of a stylistic type, in this sentence) that "does not permit itself to

be read” (283) and it carefully stages the drama of a kind of illegibility, one where a part does not seem to help us account for the whole. This neurotic movement between the general and the particular, though, is the only way to account for the accidental.

For the people-watcher and the critic of style share a properly structuralist commitment: “to refuse to relegate everything that is not comprehensible as an ideal type to the status of aberrational accident” (Derrida 26). In “Force and Signification,” Derrida’s reading of Jean Rousset’s *Forme et signification*, he criticizes analyses of form that fail to make this refusal (and that literalize structure as literary form). But it is not always clear, for criticism, who the *agent* of this refusal should be: is it the structure itself, or the story, the poem, that maintains the accident, or is it the reader? In Poe’s story, it is both: the description of the crowd becomes increasingly specific regardless of a reader’s attempt to identify the specifics of *this* story (which, you will note, I am avoiding here: it has been reduced to a simple narrative, leaving all kinds of unaccountable men wandering about its structure, un-followed).

Throughout this dissertation, style keeps assimilating new elements of writing to itself, as if it refuses to let the particular remain particular, to let the accident remain accidental. Style repeats the effects of a prior procedure, operates in opposition to apparent authorial control, and creates literature out of materials meant to resist literariness; in keeping with reading’s general paranoia, the search for style results in the recognition of what would otherwise be unnoticed patterns. Style’s relationship to these broad theoretical effects, though, is only made possible by much smaller units, Swift’s “proper words in proper places,” or more menacingly, the word frequencies and syntactical repetitions that enable software to reliably identify authorship, period, or genre. In the prior chapters, I have repeatedly put off narrowing onto a particular element of style’s structure in the hopes of simultaneously putting off wrongly prioritizing any

individual element. At the same time, I have occasionally come up against these more “minor” stylistic constituents: the recurring images of flags or bikes in Rauschenberg’s combines and photographs; the centipedes and bodily fluids that seem to be default vocabulary in Burroughs’ novels; or the grammatical, tonal, or syntactical shifts that indicate a greater degree of orality in certain of Ashbery’s poems. As these moments accumulate, whether they appear as interruptions in a larger argument or “examples” of a broader movement, they share the problem of style’s inability to reconcile element with structure, or an identifying marker with an identifying description.

In Gérard Genette’s “Style and Signification,” where he attempts a semiotics of style, he distinguishes between stylistic phenomena and stylistic features, such that “Only the former is “encountered;” the latter is constructed on the basis of the former’s occurrences” (n123). When I use the word “element” here, I am referring to this notion of a stylistic phenomenon, something that appears or can be encountered, but which is not necessarily part of any describable feature; just as “an outburst of anger is a phenomenon, while being bad-tempered is a feature” (ibid), a single word’s appearance is a phenomenon in its own right, but something different from the “feature” of using esoteric, vulgar, or neologistic vocabulary. Genette is of course not the first or the last to make such a distinction in identifying the process of stylistic example, but he appears here because his primary example of this distinction provides a good point of departure for considering the relationship of part to whole in identifying style.

Genette’s exemplary “event” or phenomenon is the appearance of the *image*, which he compares to the “feature” of being imagistic. Since there are many distinct ways a given literary style can be said to be imagistic, this example highlights the importance of identifying the relationship between individual elements and the stylistic features they make up:

Yet it seems to me that would be useful to distinguish between the stylistic *phenomenon* (*fait*), which is an event, recurrent or not, in the syntagmatic chain (for example, an image), and the stylistic *feature*, which is paradigmatic property capable of characterizing a style (for example, to be imagistic). (ibid)

The passage—which is only a footnote to his forceful critique of any “discontinuous” or “atomistic” stylistics—implies that these structures are not proper to art, but to all qualities of things, and his purpose is a much broader elucidation of the structural elements that constitute style’s definition than an investigation of any specific elements. If this is *merely* an example, though, it is one that tempts greater analysis, as Genette’s distinction is somewhat unsatisfying. For one, the relationship between “phenomena” and “features” is often less direct than the examples he provides. To return to an earlier example from the second chapter, the appearance of the American flag in any given painting is an *event* of sorts, but its corresponding feature could hardly be said to be that of “having flags;” it could correspond to a feature of being linear, collaged, or perhaps even patriotic. This suggests that the same could be true of the image: its appearance can result in a variety of competing properties, given that “image” refers at once to a particularly poetic turn of phrase—especially where meaning seems to hinge on a noun or object—and to visual representation, across media.

This problem—that an image could be one element of a variety of “paradigmatic properties” of a style—appeared when I was writing about Williams Burroughs’ style between the cut-up *Nova* trilogy and the later *Red Night* trilogy. It seemed clear to me that many “events” in Burroughs’ writing could be described as images, that is, but how they cohere into a stylistic feature of “being imagistic” was less clear. On the one hand, the descriptor “imagistic” seemed intuitively incompatible with Burroughs’ writing—which made me wonder how a *phenomenon* could occur with such frequency without creating a corresponding feature—but on the other hand, it seemed equally difficult to think through his style without thinking through its

relationship to the image. For the image is not just one among a number of possible recurring elements; “the style of the image” also suggests a works’ relationship to representation and to technological innovation or cross-media experiments.

Burroughs himself explicitly refers to its importance: in *Nova Express*, Mr. Winkhorse describes apomorphine as an anti-virus because it “is no word and no image [. . .] Word begets image and image IS virus” (48). For Burroughs, the image is a *plot element* in addition to a quality of writing. It has the ability to spread on its own, like a virus, but a virus specific to language, as if the image infects not via the visual, but by its connection to language.

In this chapter, I will start by sticking with this question of the image for a bit, since it unites a number of key texts for considering the relationship between style and experimentation: in addition to Burroughs’ frequent references to the image as a force of control analogous to heroin, news, state power, etc., *Nova Express* also rewrites T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where “the heap of broken images” offers one defining characteristic of modernist style. As in Burroughs’ work, Bernadette Mayer’s experimental books from 1970s (including *Memory*, *Studying Hunger*, *Eruitia ex memoria*, and *Midwinter’s Day*) all rely heavily on experiments with image-making: whether the dream image, the poetic image, the photograph, or the description of what’s *seen* in day-to-day life. Perhaps most literally, *Memory* is full of images: the written result of a project that originated with over a thousand photographs, it opens with a reference to a picture of a sink that appears on its cover—“& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation” (1)¹⁴—but this tells us little about what stylistic phenomenon results from an immense photographic base.

¹⁴ Note the echo here of Gilles Deleuze’s definition of style as the ability to create a new, foreign language within one’s mother tongue.

Beyond these texts, the image is, of course, an element so proper to poetry, and to poets' disagreements with each other: in contemporary poetry, "the image" seems to name any moment in a fragmented lyric poem where meaning threatens to localize itself, where the poem's refusal to refer to much beyond language suddenly promises a concrete enough example that an audience breathes a collective sigh of relief at a description of someone's childhood dress, a piece of urban detritus, or a synesthetic description of color. This also makes it clear, though, that to say that poem "has an image in it" is to say almost nothing; it invites the kind of stylistic description that contextualizes the appearance of individual elements. At the same time, to say the poem "has an image in it" is very different than saying it has a photograph in it, so the word seems capable of referring to something specifically literary, even if it doesn't provide much information about what kind of image it might be.

For these reasons, this chapter begins to address the question of the general/particular by starting with a more basic question: how is style constituted by "images," visual or otherwise, and how can we describe relationships between writing and image-making? How does any individual instance of an "image"—or any other stylistic element—raise itself to the level of stylistic description? Other questions follow from these. As critics have considered the possibility of (or, at the least, a hope for) a style-less writing, does there exist writing that has the stylistic feature of being image-less? Is the image tied specifically to visuality? Of course, all this would depend on the definition. For a canonical account particular to poetry, there is Ezra Pound's *phanapoeia*, "the throwing of an image on the mind's retina," implying not only the text's longing for visualization, but also the body's role in that process. This is more than a conception of the image, though; it's also one of *imagism*, a literary condensation that shirks generality and the non-necessary. Or to be as broad as possible, we could refer to Auerbach's use

of the term “figura,” which, in addition to its “original” meaning as “plastic form,” referred as well as to well to shapes, images, sounds, and by the time of Lucretius to variants like “model,’ ‘copy,’ ‘figment,’ ‘dream-image’” (17). My focus here is not on some solidified definition—a question which many book-length theories have left open—but on the way the question of the “image” exemplifies the problem of the stylistic example, especially for poetry or “poetic” prose. For the broad question here is not about *images*, but about *features*: just as my first chapter tracks the feature of self-reference in order to identify a larger relationship between self-reflection and style, and as the intervening chapters focus on experiments in citation and collage to identify how they produce (and are produced by) styles, I start with the image here as a privileged example: it is a feature that seems especially good at remaining general and particular at once.

To start to determine what *kind* of image has a stylistic effect, and how certain literary experiments produce that kind of image, I’ll return to William Burroughs’ fiction, where the image seems farthest from whatever vernacular definition we might presume. By considering the relationship between Burroughs’ style and his use of images, we can approach a first test case for the way a particular element manifests as a stylistic feature.

From Particular Image to General Style

“Since junk *is* image,” Burroughs begins a footnote in *Nova Express*, with a characteristic presupposition, assuming this first claim needs no explanation—“Since junk *is* image the effects of junk can easily be produced and concentrated in a sound and image track.” Sound and image can be divided, that much is clear. But they seem to be *united* in junk, as if junk operated like a movie. The text proceeds to give instructions for isolating these tracks:

—Like this: Take a sick junky—Throw blue light on his so-called face or dye it blue or dye the junk blue it don’t make no difference and now give him a shot a photograph the

blue miracle as life pours back into that walking corpse—That will give you the image track of junk . . . (9)

We can safely say of this passage, “The word “image” appears.” We can make other, equally unobjectionable observations: “Burroughs discusses the “image” in terms of audio-visual equipment.” But what would permit a reader to extend these claims to descriptions of style?

While the passage promises the possibility of isolating the image from other elements with which it might be entangled, it seems harder to separate the style-image than it is the junk-image. Is it reasonable, for example, to say: “Burroughs’ writing is marked by frequent explicit reference to ‘the image?’” Or, to go further towards interpretation: “The syntactical disjunction of the cut-up novels demonstrates their relationship to audio-visual editing?” It’s unclear, for example, whether a certain frequency of instances would permit these moves, or whether something might make a single image indicative of style.

Burroughs’ particular use of the image becomes more complicated still in the section from *Nova Express* where he incorporates excerpts of T.S. Eliot’s long poem *The Waste Land*, since many of what we might describe as images in this section come directly from Eliot’s verses. For this reason, we can look to Eliot’s images as they become Burroughs’. Because Burroughs’ work is most often related to Eliot’s on the grounds of their shared use of collage, and because Eliot’s poem offers an alternative version of the image’s relationship to style, the overlap between these two texts also offers an important opportunity to distinguish Burroughs’ style of the image.

Aspects of Eliot’s work appear throughout the Nova Trilogy. The Hanged Man, which the speaker of Eliot’s poem “do[es] not find,” can be readily found in Burroughs, twitching from death and ejaculation. In *Nova Express*, large swaths of the poem appear either mixed with other

found materials, in the middle of Burroughs' own "narrative," or simply re-collaged with other quotes from the same poem:

Through all the streets no relief—I will show you fear on walls and windows people and sky—Wo weilest du? Hurry up please its accounts—Empty is the third who walks beside you—Thin mountain air here and there and out the window—Put on a clean shirt and dusk through narrow streets—Whiffs of my Spain from vacant lots—Brandy neat—April wind revolving lips and pants—After diner sleep dreaming on rain—The solider gives no shelter—War of dead sun is a handful of dust—Thin and tenuous in gray shivering mist of old Western movies said: Fill your hand, Martin.—. (115)

There are many ways readers can (and already have) approached Burroughs' use of Eliot's images in this passage, where most of the language comes from *The Waste Land*, directly or indirectly. The appropriative gesture could be read as a nod to a major influence, acknowledging a debt to an infamous literary collage; as an emphasis on the already-established sense of the world in ruins; as treating the poem as a refuse site for recycled materials; or even as a rewrite of the original text, "an 'alternative' version of *The Waste Land*—creating 'new' T.S. Eliot images," as Edward Robinson has suggested (53). The choice between these interpretations depends on whether your focus is on Burroughs' work or Eliot's, on close-reading or history, on theory or interpretation.

While all of this is likely at stake in the appearance of so many of Eliot's lines, it is worth noting that most accounts of Burroughs' *debt* to Eliot focus on their shared use of combinatory *methods*: the collage, the cut-up, the un-marked citation. With this emphasis on method, little is said about the stylistic relationship between the two texts. This seems to suggest that either work could be reduced to a few procedures. I could be accused of doing the same to Burroughs' writing in my second chapter, where I tracked the internalization of Burroughs' cut-up method into his writing style elsewhere, showing how its effects were marked not by the experiment's actual implementation, but by the stylistic signs of the experiment's possibility. In doing so, I

tried to show continuity between his two trilogies that evaded a relationship of actual identity, as these novels are clearly dramatically differently written. In reading Burroughs in this way, though, I risk the error of conflating style with method, as if a single day spent cutting up newspapers with Brion Gysin somehow generated the entirety of Burroughs' artistic production from then on. The extension of the cut-up across non-cut materials is not evidence of the centrality of this method to his work, though, but a single example of style's movement; his work's relationship to the idea of "reality"—as it is portrayed in the news, in movies, and in fiction—could just as equally be tracked across his oeuvre.

For this reason, I am most interested in those readings that suggest another relationship to Eliot's work than simple inspiration by method. For a simple example of how method fails to account for the relationship, we might consider how Eliot's lines can feel even more jarring, when they appear in Burroughs' prose, than the strange events of their surrounding sci-fi quasi-narrative; Burroughs' irreverence almost makes Eliot's formality seem disruptive. Similarly, it's hard to overstate the incompatibility between the two writers' syntax.

But it's also worth questioning whether this relationship is important at all, especially given the wide array of textual materials Burroughs incorporated in this period (most significantly, cut-ups of his own writings from the prior decade). The question of citation is tied to the question of the image in this relationship, in that critics seem more drawn to identifying where either of these authors' quotes come from than to considering what happens to those quotes in their new contexts.

It's not just this novel, or this author, or this method that makes a reader want to figure out what's been borrowed and why, though; appropriation often tempts interpretation to treat composition as a mystery, especially since it's an unusually solvable one, resulting in a kind of

critical satisfaction that is often easy to achieve. This is as true of *The Waste Land* as it is of *Nova Express*. In his reading of Eliot's poem, Hugh Kenner describes Eliot's use of quotations as "not unobtrusive ones but ones we are meant to identify" (439), as if the two terms were somehow contradictory. And in fact, they might be: when citations appear unmarked or otherwise "disguised," there is a greater corresponding pleasure in tracking them down. Artists who appropriate famous works wholesale, on the other hand, make the reference too obvious to make something like "identification" satisfying. Consider Elaine Sturtevant's painstaking reproduction of Duchamp's windows or Johns' paintings, the titles of which include both the original artist and the original title: *Duchamp Fresh Widow* and *Johns Target with Four Faces*. The work's relationship to its source is *so* acknowledged in these instances that a critic is forced to skip over the pleasure of recognition for the sake of some more critical analysis.

In the case of *Nova Express*, on the other hand, the already-existing connection between Eliot's work and Burroughs seems to drive this impulse to "identify" citation further. Critics are especially motivated to track down sources when the original materials are themselves already considered art (unlike novelistic rewritings of historical materials, for example). This hope that identifying the origin of collaged or re-contextualized elements will provide useful information for understanding the artwork in which these sources were combined is not always realized, but it is especially tempting when there is a promise not only of further insight into the new work, but a reconsideration of the old.

This latter claim—that Burroughs' work somehow affects the way we read Eliot—suggests that whatever the relationship is between *Nova Express* and *The Waste Land* (which Burroughs described as "the first great cut-up collage" (Knickerbocker)), the latter seems to suffer some demotion in its new place. For one, it appears in a section immediately followed by a

similar folding-in of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” and the poem is given no privilege above more “literary” materials. Edward Robinson’s suggestion that the relationship involves the creation of new images *for Eliot* implies the subordination of one to the other, and also requires a closer examination of what those images might look like. Robinson reads a passage on the following page that begins “What thinking, William?—Were his eyes,” (116), quoting lines 113 and 125 of the Eliot: “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?/ [. . .] Those are pearls that were his eyes.” Robinson describes literary images (here and more generally) as a call for visualization on the part of a reader, so that the thinking, the pearls, and eyes, all should appear in the place of the words on which the eyes land. In its transformation, then, whatever required “imagining” in *The Waste Land* comes up against a new (and likely more difficult) responsibility of turning phrases into visual iterations, since now, instead of being pearls, the eyes must be visualized as William, his thinking, or as a question (as if the question has been left unfinished: “Were his eyes X?”). Robinson writes of one section that the reader is “compelled to envisage the faces as if appearing in the rain, and in doing so, not only is a new image created from the pre-existing images embedded within the original text, but a scene is created with a new time/space frame.” The repurposing of Eliot is generative.

In this account, *Nova Express* adds to an original “heap of broken images” while creating a new “scene;” in this new scene, the images function as a connection between the competing effects of the original cited context and the new narrative being constructed through that citation. Returning to the passage I cited above, though, this creation of new images and scenes does not fully account for the stylistic effect of appropriation. The move from Eliot’s “fear in a handful of dust” to Burroughs’ “fear on walls and windows people and sky” *is* a change in image and in scene—one could even say it creates a new image—but this new image is not the collage’s main

effect. For one, the borrowed words appear in a far more disjunctive context, and even the initial offer for an image (“I will show you fear”) functions differently: it’s not the *specific image* of fear’s localization, but the very refusal to locate that fear in any one, imaginable space, or even a specific kind of object.

Here, the allusion to Eliot functions not to simply reinforce the importance of collage as a *method*, nor as some literary interpretation or addendum to an existing canonical text, but as a stylistic invention. This new style is rendered legible by the effects of the same words in different combinations. Just as Eliot’s poem encouraged an identification of source materials that is reenacted in Burroughs’ appropriation, his compilation of styles renders the poem’s appearance in a new text a stronger stylistic invasion than other “not unobtrusive” citations would be. Kenner’s sweeping account of *The Waste Land* in *The Pound Era* is helpful for understanding this process:

The Waste Land does not presuppose the anonymous Language as a sort of simulating device, to be specialized into this or that poem and imply in the process this or that person. *The Waste Land* presupposes instead that there is something called Poetry, which has come to us from many lands and periods, and consorts with certain elevations of style, and no longer has much meaning. It is packaged like the official Poetry of a time when poetry is dead, complete with numbers lines and footnotes It is like a parody of a Poem (capital P) . . . (439)

Revisiting this perfect reading of *The Waste Land*, it is clear that Kenner’s description of Eliot’s style could not possibly apply to Burroughs. Of course, this should not be surprising, but the many suggestions that the reappearance of Eliot’s poem somehow *adds* to the original seem to deny this obvious fact. More importantly, the sharp stylistic difference underscores the danger of focusing on an experiment over its effects: while both texts collage found materials, no one could reasonably describe *Nova Express* (or the other novels in the same trilogy) as a parody of a capital-N Novel: parody relies on imitating the overall system of an original, not on the mere use

of the original's tools, nor does *Nova Express* explore literary "elevation." While both texts may share an apparent lack of "meaning"—a complaint that has been lobbed at Burroughs perhaps even more forcefully than at Eliot—even this semantic resistance takes a new form. *Nova Express*'s appropriation of *The Waste Land* is, by definition, a consorting with elevated style, but without the same homogenization of styles-plural rendered singular—and not because the style of Burroughs' writing never coheres, but because it never grants its borrowed materials the maintenance of their original styles. This difference has a dramatic impact on the role literary images play in their respective styles, although one not yet discernable in Kenner's account.

In *Nova Express*'s use of Eliot's poem, fragments that once cohered now neither emphasize their fragmentary quality—the cited lines are no more disjunctive than Burroughs' "own" writing—nor aspire to a new, whole Poem or Novel. Both are in pieces, but the pieces are more difficulty assembled on Burroughs's end. At the same time, these fragments are sometimes made to speak more directly to each other than they did in their original context, not because of any change to the actual language, but by combining phrases that originally appeared separately. For example, In *The Waste Land*, line 34 "Wo weilest du"—Where do you stay?" or "Where are you lingering?"—is the last line of four lifted from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*; the capitalized "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" first appears 100 lines later. Burroughs' reconfiguration turns the instruction "Hurry up" into a follow-up to the question: "Wo weilest du? Hurry up please its accounts." Wherever it is you stay, hurry up, please—it is no longer "time," but it is "accounts"—suggesting a more specific urgency to transition quickly into Burroughs' own narrative. In their new context, the lines no longer function as a Wagnerian illusion, nor as an end to a rhyming stanza. It's not only a dissection of Eliot's poem, in fact, but also one of Burroughs' own work, where that "hurry up" line frequently re-appears.

In this section, the identification of literary images with their possible visualization turns out not to function as a comprehensive definition of the image as such, but perhaps as a description of Eliot's image that no longer works when applied to Burroughs. As I suggested above, whereas Eliot's "I will show you fear in a handful of a dust" (line 30) may actually perform its promise of demonstration, the syntactical dissolution of the end of Burroughs' phrase functions to prevent any *showing* of fear; it instead seems to appear on all surfaces: "I will show you fear on walls and windows people and sky." It's not just a replacement, but a displacement too: the "handful of dust" hasn't been lost, but moved to another phrase: "The solider gives no shelter—War of dead sun is a handful of dust." Rather than appearing as the visualization of fear, the dust now *is* the "War of dead sun," a phrase that suggests a metaphor that never realizes its promise.

While Burroughs' writing is as littered with images as Eliot's, these images have far less of a relationship to the possible construction of visible scenes. Eliot's dead tree gives no shelter, and while it would be hard to find out whether any individual reader cared to picture such a treeless omen, the tree's death would prevent it from providing the kind of shadow a rock affords. And when Burroughs' "solider gives no shelter," as the passage continues, there is no comparable visual. Are we meant to picture his leanness, or his unwillingness to house visitors?

On the next page, though, these phrases repeat in different formulations that complicate any strict division on the grounds of the visible. Now, the speaker "will show you fear in the cold spring cemetery—Kind, wo weilest du?" (116), reassembling the latter quote, and reconfiguring the former to read as a *clearer* visualizable image than Eliot's "handful of dust," less suggestive of a symbolic meaning beyond the literal fear of death's resting place. What seems to be at issue now is the image not as a register of the possibility of a picture, figure, or scene, but the image as

a basic unit of literary recombination. In this sense, Eliot's poem is a lesson in a combinatory process carried further by later artists. Along these lines, later writers will attribute their discovery of the effects of this kind of combination to Eliot; in Guy Debord's account of *détournement* as an artistic and political strategy, he credits the "discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images" to his own claim that a relationship is always formed between two combined objects, however distinct their original contexts.

From Particular Style to General Image

As an initial characterization of the difference between the style of the image in each text, distinguishing visual from non-visual images appears to be unsatisfying. It would be equally easy to argue that a careful reading of Eliot's poem forecloses visualization; it's not exactly easy to "picture" quotation. But if no "image is thrown onto the mind's eye," as Ezra Pound says it ought to be thrown, one might then have expected his revisions to fix that.

To some extent, the difference between Burroughs and Eliot's style of the image is a question of periodization, as it is easy to assume that any difference between their writing would be constitutive of a break between modernism and post—somehow attributable to a specific war, a specific market collapse, or a different attitude towards the fragment. Whether to find a difference at all between these texts, then, may seem related to a critical decision to value the meaning of *post* in these and other cases.

In *The Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière specifically addresses the dissolution of the relationship between image and text as one proper to his "Aesthetic Regime of Art," which would unite this quality of Burroughs' text with works well before a poem from 1922. He begins the book by debunking two terms that seem to present opposite theories of the relationship

between the image and reality, but which actually reflect the exact same position: either there is no reality, but only images, or there are no images, but only reality incessantly repeating itself. These are the same position because “if there is now nothing but images, there is nothing other than the image. And if there is nothing other than the image, the very notion of images becomes devoid of content” (1).

The image’s ability to displace as broad a term as “reality” supports its problematic role as a specific stylistic element. Further, these two mirrored claims may be familiar to readers of Burroughs’ work, where both the proliferation of images and the controlling repetition of reality appear not only as possible qualities of the work, but as *events* that happen on the level of plot and as descriptions of society. When the death dwarf mainlines images in *Nova Express*, the image is described as more addictive than heroin, and then injected into the image-addict to produce “information” that could be used to solve a case. The image is already everywhere, yet it can be consumed in infinitely larger quantities; images function as a control-system, but they can be manipulated to change that system; despite the image’s own ubiquitous power, it may or may not be controllable by a substance that mitigates addiction to it. The spreading of the image across narrative and form makes it difficult to identify a relationship of criticality.

But this may be interpretation’s problem, rather than an issue with the image’s actual status. Rancière attributes the tautology of the false opposition between image and reality not to the actual role of the image in art, but to the existing discourse for approaching this role. In that case, it’s the way we talk about the image that prevents creating meaningful distinctions between different artworks; the works themselves remain distinct despite our inadequate description. In a move typical of his work, he shows how criticism attempts to deal with this problem by attributing differences not to aesthetic qualities of individual works, but to the technology that

produced them, losing sight of the fact that these differences often precede technological innovations that serve as the imagined origins of aesthetic particularity. In a reading of the opening shots of Robert Bresson's *Au hazard Balthazar*, he describes a quality of "imageness"—"a regime of relations between elements and between functions"—that opposes how we traditionally think of the image in film:

Bresson's 'images' are not a donkey, two children and an adult. Nor are they simply the technique of close-ups and the camera movements or dissolves that enlarge them. They are operations that couple and uncouple the visible and signification or speech and its effect, which create and frustrate expectations. These operations do not derive from the properties of the cinematic medium [. . .] the camera's fixing on the hand that pours the water and the hand that holds the candle is no more peculiar to cinema than the fixing of Doctor Bovary's gaze on Mademoiselle Emma's nails, or of Madame Bovary's gaze on those of the notary's clerk, is peculiar to literature. (5)

Albeit in different terms, what Rancière is describing is Bresson's *style* of "imageness" in opposition to a technical derivation of all images' effects. That Bresson shares Flaubert's style of image-making speaks not only to a broader historical periodization of this style, or to the uncoupling of individual media from their necessary attributes, but also to the relationship between the visual (here, represented by the cinema) and the literary (in the form of the nineteenth-century novel) in producing styles of the image. On the other hand, if a technological reading prevented creating meaningful distinctions, this reconsideration of technology's role also serves to flatten difference.

If a simple distinction between "visualizable" and "non-visualizable" images was unsatisfactory, though, perhaps there is still something to be said about the relationship between literary and cinematic images. Rather than rendering this question irrelevant, this introductory pairing of Flaubert and Bresson makes the relationship between text and image—here, between "the visible and signification"—central to placing the image within what he calls the Aesthetic Regime. In a later chapter focused on Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, he produces a

useful definition of the image in qualifying an initial misuse: as “Extracts from novels or poems, or the titles of films and books” appear between or over shots from films, separate from Godard’s own narration, they “frequently create connections that confer meaning on the images, or rather make the assembled visual fragments ‘images’—that is, relations between a visibility and a signification” (33). Note the hesitation: even in a book focused on the future of “the image,” he is tempted to describe the filmic excerpts as “images” set apart from the text that confers meaning on them, but is quick to redefine the term to describe a more complicated operation. To explain what he might mean by this clarification, he describes the image as a “relation between a visibility and a signification;” the image is not a *phenomenon* in the sense Genette offers, but a relationship between meaning and visuality. He provides an example from the final section of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* of “a combined image of the defeat of the French forces in 1940 and of German artists in the face of Nazism, of the ability of literature and cinema to foresee the disasters of their times and their inability to prevent them” (33-4). Here, the term encompasses not only the combination of visuality with text, but also a specific reading that can be produced from that combination.

In this theory, the image operates in two ways. It is either “an incommensurable singularity” or an “operation of communalization,” either something that functions entirely alone, or something that makes combination possible. This definition emerges from a series of theories of art’s incommensurability that Rancière suggests led many to diagnose a strict separation between the arts at the very moment when, in his account, this distinction becomes meaningless. This is why so much of his reading focuses on dissolving any inherent difference between filmic and literary images. I borrow Rancière’s definition because it feels useful to think of the image as a unit of operation between text and the visual—alongside or separate from the

question of media or technology—when considering Burroughs’ work, where literary experiments are often tied to film technology within the narrative.

Burroughs’ use of the image is necessarily ambivalent: his own plots often obscure the differences between word and image, not only because “Word begets image,” but also because the cutting up of texts is so often presented as the same procedure as cutting up film and audio. Though the twentieth century saw the normalization of the extreme montage in film and music, for example, with no analogous popularization of disjunctive writing, critics (and Burroughs himself) often attribute his formal experiments to other media. Instead of seeing Burroughs’ image as a literary response to the many contemporary “technological” changes to the experience of the visual, though—and instead of seeing it largely as a product of the cut-up or fold-in—this analysis of the image’s relationship to style would focus on identifying Burroughs’ proper approach to the image in writing. Rancière’s notion of the “sentence-image” offers a means of understanding a commonality between media that does not assume the reliance of one on the other.

Tying neither words to the “sayable” nor the image to the “visible,” the sentence-image combines “two functions” that are defined by the divorce of the text and image as a production of representation. For while Eliot’s original lines may seem more tied to the visible than Burroughs’ reconfiguration, neither can be said to bear a strictly representational relationship to an exterior world. The important difference between them, as I suggested already, is a stylistic one, which brings us back to the question of Burroughs’ style of the image. Continuing from where I left off before in *Nova Express*:

“Here,” said she, “is your card: Bread knife in the heart—“
 “What thinking, William? Were his eyes—Hurry up please its half your brain slowly fading—Make yourself a bit smart—It’s them couldn’t reach flesh—Empty walls—Good

night, sweet ladies—Hurry up please it's time—Look any place—Faces in the violet light—damp gusts bringing rain—“ (116)

The large majority of this passage comes directly from the poem, including the final two phrases that most closely resemble the traditional notion of a literary image. We can't determine a stylistic specificity, then, based on phrasing. Though the fact that this language is put in quotes, as if the speech of an individual, surely changes how it is read in the same way that a camera angle or cut *affects* an image without constituting it (without *effecting* it). The style of the image turns out to reside in its combinatory effect. Unlike with junk, it is not possible “isolate the image track;” the images are not only a saying goodnight to ladies, the scene of a tarot reading, or a storm, but also the syntactical operation that connects these, the suggestion that things are represented by speech, and the dashes that prevent separate phrases from coming together. Between what could be visible and what could be sayable lies a series of images, spoken by someone unimaginable, given the sole duty of providing the plausibility of combination.

The Literal Image

That said, there is something unconvincing in all of Rancière's insistence that it is not the cinema itself that produces this particular relationship between word and image, especially given that the argument of his chapter comes from an attempted history of the cinema as such. Surely, this is the medium where the tension between sight, sound, and language is most likely to be foregrounded. While any medium can experiment with the non-simultaneity of collaged elements, film highlights the effects of this disjunction more readily than others. Take Bruce Conner's film *REPORT*, where appropriated video footage and radio reports of John F. Kennedy's death overlap out of sync, such that it makes running commentary on the peaceful parade *seem* like the matching audio for footage of his death. The montage focuses by a series of

this sort of juxtaposition, as when a newscasters' description of the events is illustrated by the explosion of a light bulb. The film happens in the disagreement between the sound and image tracks, and in film's ability to hold both together despite this disjunction. Is there a particularly literary approach to maintaining this kind of disagreement?

I am wary of identifying a novelistic or poetic image with a filmic one, given the properly literary way language can produce a style. Though film, radio, and photography all play important roles in Burroughs' work, in terms of both plot and construction, in the end, it is always through *writing* that his images get presented. That's why I'm turning to Bernadette Mayer's *Memory*, where writing produces images that are first produced (or that bear some relationship to images earlier produced) by photography, and that are further mediated by voice recordings, art installation, etc.: what happens when a number of other media's effects are condensed within the lines of a poem?

But it's not only this stronger relationship to the photographic image that Mayer's work promises; it also offers the possibility of a more positive definition of the literary image's effects. The extended test-case of Burroughs failed to give us this: so far, we have seen what the image *is not* far more than we have seen what it *is*. We know, for example, that the literary image cannot be reduced to its literal phrasing, since the same phrase produces a different image in different context; we know that visualizability is an inadequate measure of the image; in a more positive definition, we even know that there's a fundamentally *combinatory* quality to style's relationship to the image. Throughout this reading, though, the image has become increasingly general, even while style becomes more particular: our "elements" and "features," have, in fact, become inverted. To track the image down in its particularity, we'll have to act more like Poe's protagonist: not to remain satisfied by the early emergence of categories, but to track the

exception down to its end—even if that end produces as unsatisfying a realization here as it does in “The Man in the Crowd.”

In Mayer’s *Memory*, we certainly have combinatory images: the project started as a photographic one, and Mayer used these photos to write a set of journals that she later taped herself reading aloud, playing the recordings for a continuous 7 hours in a gallery where the photographs were exhibited; in the first instantiation of *Memory*, there was no book at all, but a lot of language produced with the assistance of photographic images. Mayer wrote the eventual book titled *Memory*, the only version in which the project is still readily accessible (though the images can be accessed at Mayer’s archive at UC Santa Barbara), five years later, and she writes *through* all of the materials of the original project to produce it. In fact, in her description of *Memory* in the beginning of another book, *Studying Hunger*, she describes the journals as a means of “processing” the photographs:

You see, the whole thing had already had a beginning with a project called MEMORY which turned into a show which turned into a dream or returned to a dream that enabled me to walk. Before this I couldn’t walk, I had street fantasies like any normal prostitute. Anyway, MEMORY was 1200 color snapshots, 3 x 5, **processed by Kodak plus 7 hours of taped narration**. I had shot one roll of 35-mm color film every day for the month of July, 1971. The pictures were mounted side by side in row after row along a long wall, each line to be read from left to right, 36 feet by 4 feet. All the images made each day were included, in a sequence, along with a 31 part tape, which took the pictures as points of focus, one by one as taking-off points for digression, filling in the spaces between. MEMORY was described by A.D. Coleman as an "enormous accumulation of data". I had described it as an "emotional science project". I was right. (*Studying Hunger*, 7)

Not only do the journals seem to be a way to process both the film and the dreams, the images also had to be “read from left to right,” coming to resemble language even before being turned into a book. As a work of literature, then, in its final instantiation, it literally combines a number of mediated images, although the absence of photographs in the book is an accident of publishing rather than a conceptual constraint.

In her chapter on Bernadette Mayer in *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, Maggie Nelson suggests that this combination of multiple mediations of memories is part of a broader style of “radical inclusivity,” one she attributes to “second-generation” New York School more broadly as she writes on “Mayer’s desire for and elaboration of the “‘Everything’ work” (119). For Nelson, Mayer “may represent the most unapologetic, and, perhaps, the most unmanageable example of “poetry-by-the-yard” from the period” (100); the poem seems to try much harder to include everything than other experiments in rendering as much as possible poetic. In fact, Nelson’s description of Mayer’s work—here, she’s focusing on two projects related to *Memory, the Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* and *Midwinter Day*—draws out an important mapping of the question of the relationship between “general” and “particular,” as many of the individual *elements* of her “Everything” correlate to the styles, methods, and themes of other artists and writers. She lists a number of interrelated contexts that have some bearing on Mayer’s work, which, taken together, emphasize the sense that hers is a style of exhaustivity, without clarifying the relationship between that exhaustive quality and the elements that make it up:

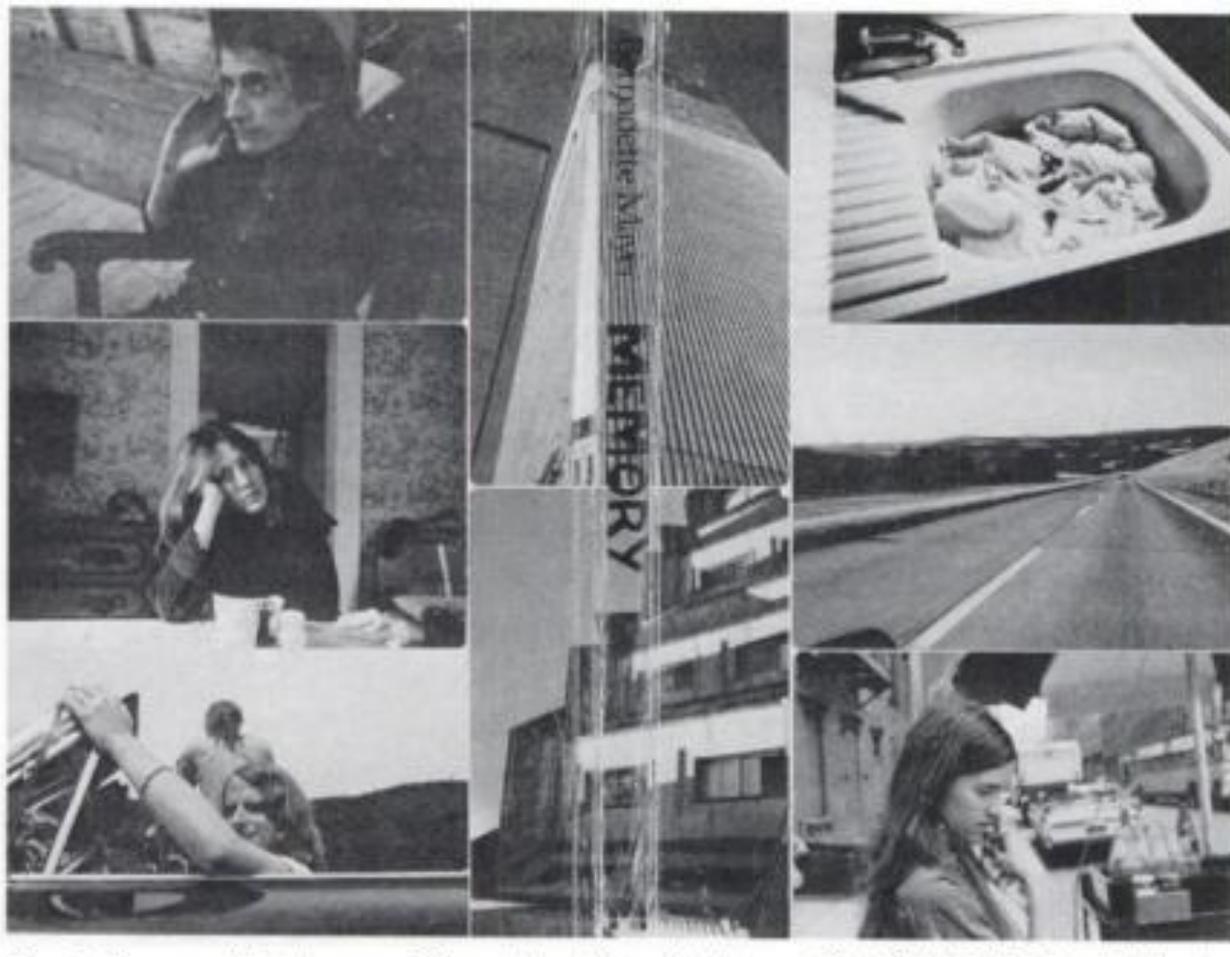
Here, I consider both works as extensions of the New York School interest in contingency and dailiness, as well as part and parcel of broader, interrelated contexts, including performance art, conceptual art, and Warhol’s pioneering experiments with recording verbal and visual excess; the tradition of the American long poem, especially the kind of collapses the boundary between poetry and prose; and other feminist works from the period . . . many of which act out the productive pleasure to be found in the blurring of private and public spheres (ibid)

Throughout this chapter, Nelson accrues additional stylistic descriptions and contexts: Mayer’s “general aversion to literary preciousness;” the relationship between her work and John Cage’s; “the ‘not caring’ attitude” of “downtown poetic circles” (107); other critics’ inclusion of Mayer within the context of Language poetry rather than New York school; and so on. This dizzying set

of overlapping contexts helps to clarify what Nelson and others mean when they talk about the desire for the poem to be able to include everything. That “everything” especially includes descriptions of domestic dailiness perhaps excluded from otherwise-exhaustive works by male poets of the same generation: Mayer’s books “extend the New York School ‘aesthetics of monstrous absorbency’ to include the many anxieties, frustrations, pleasures, and desires which attend being or becoming a mother, mothering daughters, being a female writer, and having a female body” (101). On the other, hand, Mayer herself (as Nelson acknowledges) rejected her own association with the New York School, insisting that her work was influenced more by contemporary visual art and music; Nelson quotes a 1997 interview Mayer did with the poet Lisa Jarnot, where she specifically identifies her distaste for the “style” of New York School writers like Ted Berrigan as the reason she tried to keep much of it out of *0 to 9*, the magazine she and Vito Acconci edited in the late 60s.

I cite Nelson’s work here at length because she is the first to really condense the (otherwise limited) critical reception of Mayer’s writing in a coherent description without attempting to exclude any contexts that would overly complicate her own focus. In this account, Mayer is both the most extreme case of many of the key stylistic traits of the New York School—the inclusion of details of day-to-day life, a certain chattiness, an emphasis on memory, that “lack of preciousness”—and a writer who *explicitly rejects this style*. It seems, too, that she rejects it for a style less specific to poetry, and even less specific to writing: her style of image-making positions itself against its closest poetic resemblance for a stronger relationship to visual art. In her reading of *Desires of Others to Please Mothers in Letters*, Nelson draws out more specifics of Mayer’s own style, including her focus on presenting various and competing desires, and perhaps most fascinatingly, her examination of the relationship between writing too much—

“producing writing that has no audience to support it”—and having too many children—“without much money to support them” (126). The excessiveness of her writing, then, involves some sort of motherly, unappreciated overproduction. For Nelson, though, it’s equally important to acknowledge what’s unpleasant in all this excessive writing, and she resists other critics’ inability to acknowledge that there are parts of Mayer that feel “lazy, dull, or simply impossible” (128), and the fact that Mayer herself has been dismissive of critical attention. The “general” impression we get of Mayer’s style from this account is one of *wordiness*, play, recurring thematic content, and a combination of styles inherited from a long tradition of art and literature, re-written at various times to create a different set of priorities.



While all of this helps contextualize Mayer's projects, we would have to do more work to see how it helps us understand the role of the image in those projects, especially in *Memory*, which is more unusually focused on the relationship between visuality and experience than the books Nelson considers. Returning to the description of how *Memory* came about, though, it's clear that the image plays a role in a larger combinatory exhaustivity—it's not just one of the particulars of that style, I mean, but a thing that can be added up.

Let's go to *Memory*'s first *written* image, where the book opens with an ampersand that sets off the constant sense that Mayer's starting in the middle of an account. "& the main thing is we begin with a white sink" (7), the poem begins, in prose, on the first of the month (July), referencing one of the few photos that make it onto the book's cover, eight arranged symmetrically with two wrapped around the spine. Many of the book's stylistic elements—the perpetual immediacy of its description, its reference to color, its connection of concrete objects/images to "meaningful" descriptions of states of thought, the emphasis on time, memory, and dreams—appear in the opening:

& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation.
Men on the wall in postures please take your foot by your hand & think that this is
pictures, picture book & letters to everyone dash you tell what the story is once once
when they were nearly ready thursday july first was a thursday: back windows across
street I'm in sun out image windows & so on riverdale, did you know that, concentrated
dash was all there was mind nothing sink... with my white pants in it. I dont remember
this dont remember thinking one on one white & whiter the word pictures . . .

She frequently references the photographs, but they seem to be reminders of the *fact* that she has forgotten, more than they are reminders of experiences themselves. And in fact, they function to replace memories with still images, and to make "remembering" into a syntactical style more than a process of self-recovery; the writing of rhetorical questions into answer, of descriptions

generating doubt before generating further descriptions, gives much of the book the sense that it proceeds from memory to memory *by way of* its images.

But is the image even here? If so, the speaker doesn't hear them:

Fern in new york where are we no one can avoid distractions
 i love you you are deer we dont hear images from you anymore
 what else can you remember nothing something else
 parents, come to the hurricane, it's on the first floor
 wheel color color wheel i ate colors in a dream what do (14)

Perhaps there are images here, but they just aren't "heard"—which suggests that they haven't yet been converted to sound (or, alternately, to language). In this case, the images might still be accessible by vision. Regardless, the surrounding lines seem to function like dream images, things possibly forgotten, but a kind of forgetting that gets renegotiated with each line's ability to bring things back, to turn the "nothing" to "something else." At this point, the combinatory image is not just to the tying of sense to vision, of word to picture, but the combination of words themselves as they add up (or fail to add up) to images. Two lines down, we *still* don't hear images from you, though the lines repeat almost word for word in the reverse order:

wheel color color wheel i ate colors in a dream what do you
 parents, come to the hurricane, it's on the first floor
 can you remember nothing something else
 i love you you are deer we dont hear images from you
 Fern in new york where are we no one can avoid distractions what else
 anymore do you reach me (ibid)

There are a number of possible relationships between style and image to identify here: the way reference to the visual emphasizes disjunction, especially because of the difficulty of that visualization; the reversal of orders, such that images are permitted to recur; the sense of a direct address, etc. That reversal of order seem proper to the literary image, since writing controls the order in which information is received in a way Mayer's photographs—or other literally-visual images—would not. But to focus on that reversal first is to skip over the more obvious

observation, connecting back to Burroughs: that little of this is visualizable. As we have already seen, that's a quality of a number of poets' literary image, albeit one that functions differently in each, but the distance from visuality feels more striking in a literary first image mediated through photography.

And in fact, the poetic image here feels more like a *response* to an image than an image itself. The recurrence of "color wheel," for example, seems to comment on the black-and-white cover, reminding that these images bear a strong relationship to color even when those colors are not made available. At the same time, the wheel also refers to the poem's own recursive path, and to the way proximity facilitates movement (from red to purple to blue). In another sense of "response," there's an implied admonition of someone else's failure to be in touch; the lines respond to that absence. Once we get to "Fern in new york" again, it starts to feel as if images are part of the city's many "distractions," a sensory overload intentionally excluded from the poem's mode of response.

How does this predict the book's own style? In addition to rejecting the style of other New York School poets, Mayer sometimes rejects the coherence of style itself, at least where it generates an over-attachment to one's own earlier work. In an interview in *The World* the same year *Memory* and *Studying Hunger* came out, she was asked if she had ever written a work that failed, that needed to be thrown out. First, she says that none of her works have failed in that way. But then, she seems to reject the stakes of that question, implying that fear of failure is bound up in an inability to keep going (a stance that makes sense from a writer whose best-loved works involve writing hundreds of pages in short periods of time):

The real issue for me now in terms of other people's writing and what I feel about it is that I don't think . . . you talk about addiction, it's not addition (sic) that's the issue, it's addiction to style. You can't get anywhere by becoming addicted to a style that works. You have to be constantly changing. That's a very peculiar thing for me to say because I

have a very successful style in the recent work. It's very easy for me to use it, but I constantly change it. I want to write an episode of "Gunsmoke."

Recognizing that the style she develops in her experimental projects from the 1970s is working well for her, this same style is made possible by a refusal to adhere to it. At times, it even seems like a style trying to undo itself from the crafted-ness style implies. Consider a passage from July 29, where she describes a set of photographs:

I shot the insane drawings & drew some darker ones & someone says again were you on mescaline & the one that came out like a map & one like lightning the color wheel, like the light I took pictures of lying on the floor no style no nerves the bottle of amontillado smokes tampax strike anywheres newspapers & towels a long bath film can ashtray & matchpack up closer blurred who cares? a spiral binding for the earth.

"No style no nerves": she's giving up that addiction to style in a way that seems to make others look for a replacement addiction, a drug that would justify the messiness of the scene. And again, the style of the image is combinatorial: it's about the inclusion of everything that happens to lie around in the visual scene.

This flexibility with respect to what's already working defines much of her work. The end of *Memory*, for example, leaves behind the tying of writing to a specific day of the month. Titled "Dreaming," it seems to describe the dreams that follow the period of recording. At the same moment that she departs from the time-constraint of the project, though, she explains it again:

Cause memory & the process of remembering of seeing what's in sight, what's data, what comes in for awhile for a month **& a month's a good time for an experiment** memory stifles dream it shuts dream up. (*emphasis mine*)

The language here echoes her justification of another month-long project published the same year, *Studying Hunger*: "A month seems like a likely time-span, if there is one, for an experiment. A month gives you enough time to feel free to skip a day, but not so much time that you wind up fucking off completely" (7). At the same time, the question of "what's data"—

suggesting that Mayer's work redefines, in some way, what kind of information could count as "data" in the context of a literary experiment—also overlaps with *Studying Hunger*, where Mayer wants to find out "if a human, a writer, could come up with a workable code, or shorthand, for the transcription of every event, every motion, every transition of his or her own mind" (ibid). Though both of these descriptions make use of an apparently "scientific" or otherwise methodical approach to writing, Mayer always presents her desire to develop processes and codes for archiving her own day-to-day experience, emotions, and states of consciousness as a specifically *writerly* possibility; not just any researcher can do it. In all of these justifications and explanations, she circles around the idea of style, itself a sort of shorthand or code for what an individual writer does.

But this section's breaking of the temporal constraint also permits consideration of that style outside of the book's overall procedure, and suggests a different relationship to recording "memories" of reality through archival documentation:

What's in sight, it was there, it's over, a dream makes memory present, hidden memory the secret dream, it's not allowed, forbidden, don't come out the door, there's an assassin at it or a lion, wild Indian, a boar, a little bear upside down in the dream, so, memory creates an explosion of dream in August & I no longer rest I dont rest anymore I dont resist anymore & there's a haze then & two eyes my eyes just eyes wide open & this is the climax the reversal

It's now not the journals, the recordings, or the slides that make memory present, but the dreams that process this material the following month. Mayer's resistance to "the style addiction" differs from others' we've seen here, in that it does not rely on a false longing for the avoidance of subjectivity by way of technological or procedural interventions that undermine the otherwise subjective process of writing. While *Memory* is clearly an important antecedent for many more recent "conceptual" books, her interest in dreams and in personal experience suggest that it isn't

necessary to struggle against style's subjectivity to experiment with procedures that create projects unified by a concept or experiment.

This embrace of the personal in experimentation ties also relates to the role of the "dream image" in her style, which permits the quasi-surreal to appear as the quotidian, and challenges the role documentation plays in making memory reliable:

cause fear had already started as a finish to memory & memory as an opening onto a finish for fear. And dream's an analogy to reprocessing in process, so rewrite it it's changed but a memory according to how you record it now & as it could go on forever, this could, dream's a memory kept in process kept in present by whose consciousness by whose design, so, memory creates an explosion of dream in August & let me narrate for you & listen, let me violate the rights you got let me tell you I dream let me design it:
August 4

We're four days after the end of the month of *Memory*, and there's something scary about finishing the book; there's something in the book that ends fear, too—or perhaps another meaning of "finish," the kind of polish that seems eschewed by a claim to lack style. The anxiety of finishing writing—as an anxiety of finishing remembering—speaks the book's investment in psychology, acknowledged from the beginning with the inclusion of the introduction, written by Mayer's analyst. He begins by comparing her writing to Proust's and Joyce's, but he does so not necessarily to establish an impressive set of literary antecedents, but in order to describe her experiments' apparent success at inventing new modes of uncovering memories. For him, Mayer is an inventor of mnemonic devices, and the relationship between style and the experiment, then, involves a process of uncovering new styles so as to uncover new memories.

One way this happens is through images: Mayer's' images seem related to those used in old guides to memorization, where the creation of a visual scene provides a location for memory's storage. It is not the photographs themselves that do this work, but their mediation: Mayer's photographs certainly collect and generate memories, but they can also be replaced by

textual images that seem less tied to this kind of archival maintenance. Again, then, the image is just a stylistic device for combination; it remains hard to isolate as a specific element: to define Mayer's overall "style" in terms of this particularity, we get back to a general description of text-as-means-of-combination, image-as-holder-together-of-meaning-and-visual, dream-images relying on words that may *individually* suggest the visual, but which together seem to me more about language, etc.

Perhaps the image is just an insufficiently small phenomenon. For one, we can't seem to look at it on its own: in Burroughs', Eliot's, and Mayer's versions of the literary image, it emerges only from its relationship to a source: another literary text from which the image is borrowed, or a photograph an image somehow recreates. Further still, it seems, at heart, to be relational, rather than some singular element that could be mapped in relation to a larger network of similar elements. If the image is a *process* of combination rather than an isolatable element, it might not be able to help us understand the relationship between the general and particular. The image, in fact, seems to be an experiment in its own right, or at least its production is bound up in experimentation.

The same critique could just as easily be made of any other *particular* element of style, though. If I had focused on Mayer's omission of punctuation, for example, I would have returned to earlier discussions of the relationship between orality and writing—the rushed, period-less prose seeming to suggest speech.¹⁵ This would then be a quality not specific to a sentence in *Memory*, or even to Mayer's style in a broader set of texts, but to a whole tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American writing—ranging, at the very least, from Whitman to the New York school—where punctuation bore a relationship to breath (and of course, the time period

¹⁵ In an earlier draft of *Memory*, the text was lineated; the final version replaces line breaks with "and." Strangely, the element of the text that most seems to bear a relationship to recorded speech is a replacement for an element specific to the white space of the page.

and country would soon prove arbitrary, moving us towards even broader questions). I could follow a similar path towards generality, for example, if I tried to stick with her use of proper names—a gossipy coterie characteristic of many lines out of this book—the dream-like quality of some descriptions, or the book’s commentary on how memory functions, etc. Any specific observation can lead to a general problem, and the relationship between the specific element and the question of locatable “style” gets ever further away.

The problem, then, is not with the image itself—which shares the tendency towards generalizability other specific traits have—but it may lie with the order in which I approached it. If we wound up at the general by starting with the particular, that is, it may work better to reverse course, to hope to wind up with some particular stylistic elements by starting with general description.

From the General to the Particular

In writing about the overlap of style and experimentation, it feels hard to overlook Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style* (and Barbara Wright’s translation, *Exercises in Style*: the nature of the book’s constraints makes the translation a feat of stylistic experimentation in its own right). Here, we *seem* to get the clearest sense that style is what is at stake in experimentation, rather than being some accidental byproduct or unresolvable remainder of a writing that meant to eschew its own consistency. The title suggests that to produce a new style is the whole point. Then again, it isn’t a matter of *novelty* so much as variation; what we are promised is the same story in a number of different styles, where “style” becomes a synonym for “the way of proceeding” or “how the content is delivered.”

But we only *seem* to get the clearest sense of style's relationship to experimentation in this book; the book makes it increasingly hard to identify even the meaning of the word "style" in its title. First, many have noted how the claim that the "same" story is being told each time suggests a base-line story that would lack style, a search for what Genette terms the "zero-degree" story of the book. In his account, this would be either "Récit," the closest to simple narrative, or the final variation, which he argues is the closest to Queneau's "most notorious and most clearly defined style, that of *Zazie dans le métro*." Although Genette suggests looking for the closest analog to *Zazie*, he also claims that this is the wrong concept of "style" for approaching *Exercices*:

the "styles" that Queneau considers are never, as in the canonical pastiche, the idiolects of authors but rather general types: genres ("Official letter," "Blurb," "Cross-combination,"), levels of usage ("Noble," "Cockney"), grammatical options ("Ancient," "Past)," (122-3), and then goes on to identify a few exceptions. Queneau resembles "The Albert Camus of *The Stranger*," for example, "In a way that is perhaps not entirely accidental or purely grammatical (ibid).

If style here isn't tied to authorial consistency, though, it also can't be tied to the consistency of the text as a whole: the whole point is to have a *different* style for each, where consistency is internal only to an individual exercise. There's some exploration of the relationship between style and speech, genre, context (the jargon of specific disciplines), characterization, and a host of other literary elements. Taken as a whole, though, most of these are exercises in word-play, narrative perspective, and constraint more than they are interested in any recognizable definition of style, which is always about the relationship of part to whole, about the appearance of a system (even where that system appears as broken, or on the verge of breaking down).

Exercices de style, is not, in fact, Queneau's exercise in style; for that example, I would look to his exercise in genre, which necessarily plays more with the stylistic questions of structure and imitation. In *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes*, Queneau's pseudonym,

Sally Mara, writes an “American-style” thriller (according to its introductions) that is somehow a rip-off of a British thriller by James Hadley Chase (also a pseudonym), *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, which is, somehow—to fill a gap in England’s inability to create homegrown literary trash—itself at once a rip-off of a generic American thriller and of William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, which Faulkner described as an attempt to write a marketable book, aimed at American readers’ desire for sensational violence, as evidenced by the popularity of the thrillers all of these books claim to be inspired by, but which none of them seem to resemble. “It would be hard to find a better illustration of the characteristics of the ‘style américain’ which Denis de Rougemont identified in French writers of the 1940s,” writes Christopher Shorley:

a striking, anecdotal opening, including the use of a catch-phrase, the tendency to concrete expressions, and of course, an emphasis on brutality. It quickly becomes clear, moreover, that this is no mere exercises de style, briefly pastiching the style of the série noire school, for the attempt to exploit the preoccupations of the thrilling novel genre is sustained throughout the novel. And as with James Hadley Chase, the brutality is complemented by eroticism . . .

Note Shorley’s shared distinction between a “mere” exercise in style and something that is “sustained throughout the novel;” on the most general level, engagement with style seems to require duration to be serious.

The plot of this novel, presented with the fictional paratext claiming it has been translated from the English, sets up a simple constraint to generate gratuitous sex and violence: Irish revolutionaries take over a post office and clear it of its employees to hold out against the British army, only to spend most of the book dying and/or having sex with a young woman (Gertie Girdle) who unwittingly remained locked in the bathroom when they cleared the building earlier in the book. The place names are all taken from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and so, at times, is the sense of humor. The prose, however, only bears an extremely parodic relationship to the kinds of sentences that would normally portray such activities in the genre it seems to send up (when it

resembles those sentences at all); the woman, rather than succumbing to rape, mortification, or political persuasion, seems to seduce them all in turn—including the gay men, the devout Catholics, and those less specifically turned off by her initial charms—and watches them die with a laugh.

The degrees of allusion are dizzying, as are the book's possible relationship to the plural *styles* longed for by the *Exercises*; we don't know whether to go searching for Chase, Faulkner, Joyce, Queneau, genre-fiction, British prudishness, sado-masochistic description, or whatever else such a synopsis promises. But despite the confusion, the book makes its commitment to style clear, even if that style's hard to pin down.

In John Updike's introduction to Barbara Wright's English translation, he sets up a number of contradictions in possible approaches to reading this "kind of thriller," as he describes it. The first is the question of Frenchness, brought up in the novel itself (outside of its language) by way of Gertie Girdle's Parisian undergarments, as he outlines the way a reader's Frenchness or Americanness might condition tolerance to Queneau's violence and sex:

unlike the American-style novels, sexy and tough, that it burlesqued, [*We Always Treat Women Too Well*] did not prove popular with the French public in the Forties; nor has it been popular with *Queneauistes*. Excluded from the official Gallimard edition of Queneau's oeuvre until 1962, it has been persistently regarded by academics as an "unfortunate but forgivable interlude in a distinguished man's career," we are told by Valerie Caton in her foreword to the belated English translation.

Updike suggests that American readers may be more prepared for Queneau's violence by the tradition of "Hammett and Chandler and Spillane than readers saddled with tender Gallic sensibilities;" further still, translation to English brings the book closer to its intersections with Joyce and with Ireland, suggesting that the book found a better home in English, the language from which it pretended to be initially translated. Things get strange here, though: the latter qualities hardly explain why Americanness would help a reader, especially since the novel that

most accounts seem to think Queneau is parodying, *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, was decidedly British. Updike and Caton—along with the few critical works that analyze *On est toujours*—both outline Queneau’s discomfort with British interest in sadism in the 1940s, and see the novel as a critique of literary sadism’s contemporaneity with WWII. At the same time, Updike acknowledges that the “sado-erotic tradition in French literature” ought to prepare a French reader better than an American: “it seems unlikely that postwar critics who embraced Genet and George Bataille would snub Queneau’s sportive travesty out of mere squeamishness” (x). In a novel set during the Easter Rising, France seems to ally with the U.S. in their shared comfort with a violence the British also want to import; if nationality is meant to be linked to style, the connection happens more from a desire to borrow than from an enforcement of existing aesthetic borders.

The real divide between possible readers of this book turns out not to be one of national origin, then, but of comportment towards laughter and arousal. In addition to his disagreement with those who would exclude *On est toujours* from the official record of Queneau’s literary output, Updike also addresses outright one difference between his and Caton’s response: the book makes Updike laugh precisely where it makes Caton appalled. But he leaves implied another difference between his reaction and other readers’, one that is even more subjective than laughter; pronouncing that “This farce feels genuinely sexy,” (xiii), Updike finds himself in unacknowledged disagreement with Caton’s 1981 forward, for whom “The scenes of sex and violence are not titillating but disquieting and absurd” (xviii).

For Caton, as well as for others, this is the book’s moral triumph: it refuses to be the smut it purports to offer, and the distancing effect of its violence offers the best critique of other literature’s depravity. Queneau’s light-heartedness, and the way he permits Gertie Girdle to

triumph, makes this argument hard to follow, especially given that both Chase and Faulkner's novels are far more stomach churning; in Chase's, the captive woman is raped repeatedly and kept too high to resist, with a doctor's assistance, only to find herself so unable to cope after her release—either because she's fallen in love with her captor, in some bizarre readings of the plot, or because she is too ashamed of her corruption, or because rich women, the book didactically warns, are not taught self-sufficiency—that she throws herself out a window. This seems like a far more effective mirroring of the true horror of violence than a woman's calm in the face of the persistent erection of a man shot in the head mid-coitus.

If readers of *We Always Treat Women Too Well* need to insist on its critique of smut and violence to defend its literary relevance, they do so at the expense of its much less ambivalent critique: that of the over-valuing of propriety. The men's insistence on correctness towards women leads them all to sleep with Gertie, on whom the narrator's disdain comes down hard for her attitude towards the bathroom, chastity, proper dress, and all sorts of niceties. A young girl dies after returning to the post office to fetch her handbag, written off nonchalantly after an understated description of her appearance that turns out, according to the narrative, to be irrelevant once she dies: "However that may have been, having been hit in the belly by some lead, she collapsed, dead and bleeding." (33) The narrative punishes her for trying to keep things nice.

I cited Updike's introduction at length because he emphasizes the book's stylistic experiments over its shock; here, the bad taste of prose is more remarkable than the bad taste of sex: "From first to last, the style twinkles with Queneau's impudent excesses of precision." To demonstrate this excess, he then quotes a number of examples, beginning with the near ridiculous, "He thumped, rethumped, rerethumped, and rererethumped, his fist down on the

tablecloth.” This first example is also the line of the novel perhaps most directly borrowed from the Greater Queneau, whose poem, “A la posterité,” is the evidence Wright offers for Queneau’s irreverence in the face of the highest literary success: “J’y dis merde et remerde and reremerde,” the poet professes as he dedicates the poem in question to posterity. Shit, or shit-again; to thump, and to re-re-thump: the book’s primary stylistic mode is one of insistence.

While Updike does not seem to acknowledge this self-reference, he curiously cuts off the quote at the moment of its actual excessive precision, suggesting that the quote is more important than the style. For in the novel, that line continues: “He thumped, rethumped, rerethumped, and rererethumped, his fist down on the tablecloth, and consequently (indirectly) on the table” (53), a stylistic joke in keeping with the others Updike lists, as where Cartwright stands “with a heavy heart, a lumpy throat, an empty stomach, a dry mouth and a glassy eye” (xiv). The quotes that end this introduction combine to create Updike’s seemingly emotional conclusion: that “the deeper satirical point that Queneau’s fiction consistently makes [is] the ineluctable banality of existence, as shown by the subtle clumsiness and foreordained triteness **of our attempts to render life into words**” (xiv) [emphasis mine].

All that seems a bit heavy-handed of a conclusion for a book focused largely on a number of naïve, Iris Catholic republicans, more alarmed by their proximity to a ruinable virgin and her insufficient undergarments than by their own imminent deaths. Perhaps, then, the emphasis is on that “our”: is this a book that shows how trite *our* “attempts to render life into words” might be (Updike’s final sentence is example enough of the problem of triteness), rather than how trite Queneau’s actual attempt is?

In keeping with this section’s orientation—its reversal of course from the particular to the general and back again—we can start where *We Always* ends: The double-entendre “Then the

situation was reversed” (165) describes Gertie’s sexual position with all of the chastity masochistic prose requires. Because ultimately, this book’s style is founded on description, and on a ridiculous chastity that describes the thumping of a forced threesome too briefly to capture the violence of rape, and the re-thumping with a redundancy that confuses what’s actually being described. In both instances, this all-wrong level of detail draws attention to description itself rather than to the thing being described. Rather than being constituted by images, this style constantly skirts the image: unlike Mayer and Burroughs’ constant gestures towards combination, and unlike Rancière’s account of Bresson and Godard’s tying of meaning to visualization, Queneau’s descriptions have an exaggerated clarity that goes so far as to strip them of their ability to effectively refer.

This elusion of reference happens not by way of abstraction, but by the interruptions of specific signifiers: a corset that feels merely generic, letting you know that you’re in a scene where a corset is required. It proceeds by awareness of what noun, what repetition, could have this effect at any given moment: there’s a *fashion* at stake in this flatness. Towards the end of the book, Dillon drafts copy that *could* appear in thirty years (i.e., the character in the book’s historical past is predicting a future contemporaneous with the book’s publishing):

I can well imagine an article in a Paris magazine of the time saying something like: “A revival from a bygone age, the corset makes its sensational come-back at the start of the new season. It will remodel the feminine body, make it into a living statue. These imperatives of fashion will be even more categorical than those of the higher philosophy.” (161)

Just as the corset makes the body into a “living statue,” the corset’s appearance freezes the prose style, allowing it to participate in a genre of quote-unquote “erotica” it otherwise hardly resembles. In *We Always Treat Women Too Well*, women’s undergarments appear in the characters’ imaginations far more often than they appear on women’s bodies. When the men

think about the underwear they've actually had a chance to see (an encountered image rather than an imagined one), the only "seen" corset is that of Kelleher's mother, "who always went about laced with cruel force into vice-like corsets, with the laces sticking out of her petticoats, which was what had led him to consider masculine codpieces much more aesthetic" (133).

Dillon's women-of-the-future and Kelleher's mother both turn cold in their corsets, and they are not the only women becoming statues: the book is littered with feminine, immobile corpses, and the soft, un-corseted body of Gertie Girdle speaks to the men's need for a more banal meaning of the statue's coldness. Dillon "observed that it was only the Venuses and Dianas that had copped it and were mutilated, and this made him smile" (140). Just as Queneau's sex scenes eschew the typical erotics of bawdy force-turned-pleasure, his corseted Venuses hesitate to take on the role of Venus in Furs. To any readers of sado-masochistic fiction, chaste description is a familiar criterion. In Gilles Deleuze's *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, he lays out the elements of literary style proper to masochism and sadism respectively, arguing that "the clinical specificities of sadism and masochism are not separable from the literary values peculiar to Sade and Masoch" (14). Masoch (and masochism) always maintains a baseline "stamp of decency" (26), and love, though tied to a contract that remains erotic, is kept at bay from sex. I want to make it clear, though, that Queneau's chastity is fundamentally different in kind. Here, there is no "climbing toward the Ideal" (Deleuze 21)—whereas Masoch's protagonist wakes from his opening dream of the statue to realize he's fallen asleep reading Hegel (although Deleuze argues that Plato is more important to *Venus in Furs* than the master-slave dialectic) Queneau's characters have all fallen asleep reading genre paperbacks, only to wake up in a Joyce parody.

Instead of idealizing decency, raising the woman to the level of God or mother, Queneau's descriptions focus on scenery, on motions ancillary to the action itself, reducing the "image" to set of impossibly silly adjectives and adverbs: "Her thighs were shining milkily in the greyish rays of the dawning day" (86). "Milkily" and "greyish" both undercut whatever description is set into motion by the rest of the sentence, such that this longer description suggests nothing other than "white thighs." It's tempting to call this mode of description excessively precise, as Updike does, but it actually is not precise at all—the repetition undoes rather than doubles. Just before chapter 24 ends, a typical description—distractingly purple—lets the River Liffey cut through the dialogue: "The Liffey was sending its silvery fish-scales gliding down between the quays, allegedly deserted but in fact haunted by the enemy soldiers" (58). "Silvery" already adds little to fish-scales, even before Gallager "took a deep breath, though of his country's future, and said to Kelleher: "That's right; some lobster." Clearly, these scales are meant in some sort of jest, if a minor joke about what people contemplate as they avoid contemplating death, but the sentence loses all meaning when it reappears at the beginning of the next chapter, this time in the midst of Callinan's reflection:

He looked out through the loophole, saw the Liffey sending its silvery fish-scales gliding down between the quays, allegedly deserted but in fact haunted by the enemy soldiers, and he seemed to hear a decisive masculine voice pronouncing the word "gliomach" which, translated from the Irish, is lobster. Then he realized that he was hungry. But he didn't say anything. (59)

Lobsters, fish scales, Liffeys and quays, all silvery, decisive, and masculine: rather than a description of anything occurring, we get a prose style that sends up the characters' *recourse to images*, their falling-back on meaningless description as a kind of prosaic repression of events at hand that the text mirrors whenever it focalizes. This is why *We Always Treat Women Too Well* feels like the real "exercise in style": instead of trying on a seemingly random variety of writing

strategies to identify the difference between their effects, it functions by way of a specific descriptive and generic experiment, one that creates a style not-yet-predicted by the other examples of genre it imitates.

In this final example, I tried to get closer to the man in the crowd, the sentence in the paragraph, the chapter in the book, by moving from a question of capital-S style—this relationship of the chaste to the sexy, the generic to the aberration—to a question of adjectival description. That’s only a matter of proceeding, though, since Mayer, Eliot, and Burroughs all create a general style by way of specific textual moves: they all embody a relationship between style and experiment that maintains the recursive motion between general and particular, between type and example. The “experiment” is a means of generating specific strings of text (or specific combinations of otherwise recognizable strings) that work together to *create* a style, one whose coherence relies on its elements remaining, at times, incoherently distinct.

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