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Story Lines: Disruptive Erotics in the Prose Poem

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, which is a mixture of creative and critical pieces, proposes that the prose poem is both a poetic strategy embedded within the structure of prose, and a feminist strategy embedded within patriarchal language and forms. By embracing both prose rhythm and poetic disruption, prose poetry defies conventional grammar and refuses to satisfy a reader's desire for either prose or poetry.

Prose poetry is a hybrid writing form; it crosses two genres at the same time as it absorbs and interrogates both. Prose poetry expropriates two distinct genres while presenting a form of writing that is seen to consist of both. It offers itself as a "new" genre that questions generic coding and categorization by transgressing established genre constraints. My pieces begin at the level of the sentence, then explore a content that challenges conventional narratives. In my critical pieces, I examine conventions of literary construction and reader expectation by looking at such critics as Linda Alcoff, Jacques Derrida, Stephen Fredman, Wlad Godzich, Nancy Hartsock, and Jonathan Monroe. In addition, through such poets as Kathleen Fraser, Carla Harryman, Diana Hartog, Erin Mouré, Gertrude Stein, and Rosmarie Waldrop, I explore my own and these poets' struggles to create new ideas and forms from inside the conventions that constitute the either/or structure of the prose poem.

By writing prose poems, I wish to embrace the problematic of poetry that "looks" like ordinary prose, yet invites disjunctive readings which may extend beyond traditional poetic forms and conceptions of narrative. By definition, "prose poetry" must fail as a "new form." Yet my poems – and the critical work I write around the poems – investigate the success of such failure.

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1. Prose Poetry as Visually-Impaired Cyclops

Gertrude Stein did not invent the 20th Century. She merely recognized it (and embraced its ugliness) long before such practice became fashionable.

Within each prose poem on the page can emerge a plasticity resistant to notions of purity in either prose or poetry, a disjunction of poetry housed inside prose and of poetic devices living inside narrative. Stein's book of prose poetry, *Tender Buttons*, is composed of poems housed in three separate corners of the book. Stein has chosen the sentence as her basic unit of composition. These sentences release the reader from the semantic baggage traditionally loaded into narrative prose because her prose poetry can distort, conflate, skew, and otherwise render the sentence pliable. The ancient Greeks hid inside the belly of a horse in order to successfully invade and conquer Troy. I would like to suggest that prose sits inside the belly of poetry, or poetry shifts awkwardly within the abdomen of prose, not to conquer a reader, but to trespass and transgress predictable genre categories. The reader, seduced by expected narratives, awaits the deciding signal from Odysseus, the hero who appears just in time to destroy the enemy's home, just in time to supply the needed climax.

This climactic scene against the Trojans, however, is merely introduction to Odysseus's own long and detailed travels. As hero, he wishes to return home and claim the spoils of war. His narrative is continually interrupted. Just as Odysseus wishes to revert to the traditions of his story, I wish to reread that narrative yet again: in my context, Odysseus as noticeable

hero fades and melts into the much more present company of a visually-impaired cyclops or the insatiable desire of the sirens.

According to Aristotle,

The *Odyssey's* story is not long: a man is away from home many years; he is watched by Poseidon, and isolated; affairs at home are such that his property is consumed by suitors, and his son is conspired against; but he returns after being tempest-tossed, allows some people to recognize him, and launches an attack which results in his own survival and his enemies' destruction. This is the essential core; the rest is episodes. (91)

As in any narrative, of course, the episodes are *all* that are interesting, the rest (the "core") is mere plot. In their first two "episodes," Odysseus and his men sail to Ismarus and sack the entire city, sparing only Maron, priest of Apollo, who gives them twelve jars of fragrant red wine in gratitude. They are then driven by a storm to the land of the lotus eaters where they are welcomed, but must flee because anyone who eats the lotus fruit will be so happy he will forget his other life and wish to remain where he is. Odysseus, a great hero, does not want a single man to forget a single battle, no matter how comfortable he has become, no matter how contented.

In the third episode, they sail to the land of the Cyclopes, herdsmen, one-eyed giants who live in caves.

In *The Poverty of Objects*, Monroe argues that the term "prose poem," although it "suggests a synthetic utopian third term, also implies the continued irresolution of the two opposing terms that constitute it" (Monroe 20). The existence of this "third term" form, then, depends on the inability of its constitutive terms to fulfill the projected promise of cross-generic utopia.

But it is this *possibility* that appeals to writers who wish to explore and transgress the boundaries that divide, for example, “verse” and “novel.”¹ As much as the utopian promise such a form offers may ultimately remain unfulfilled, transgressive poetry refuses comfortable and known forms, and infringes instead on the difficult freedom of the unfamiliar.

The prose poem form investigates poetic strategies within the structure of prose. Prose poets write in a prose rhythm and syntactical disruption that deny conventional grammar and refuse to satisfy the reader’s desire for either prose or poetry. In his essay, “New Prose, New Prose Poem,” Ron Silliman talks about how the context of the way a piece is defined constructs its easy labelling within a prose/poetry binary opposition. That the word “prose” always modifies the word “poem,” for example, assumes a poetry-reading audience. Writers who deliberately blur the distinction between (or within) these binaries subvert reader expectation by dismissing the rules of genre with which we conventionally approach texts.

In Molière’s 1670 play, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, the main character, M. Jourdain, hires a Philosophy Professor to help him write a love letter. “Sont-ce des vers que vous lui voulez écrire?” (*You would like to write to her in verse?*) asks the Philosopher. “Non, non, point de vers” (*No, no, not verse*) replies M. Jourdain. “Vous ne voulez que de la prose?” (*You do not want anything but prose?*) demands the Philosopher. When M. Jourdain answers: “Non, je ne veux ni prose ni vers” (*No, I want neither prose nor*

¹ As well, boundaries that exist between artistic media have also been crossed by artists who refuse the limitations of a single genre. One example would be the transgressions that may occur from “canvas” to “poem,” as in the truisms Jenny Holzer has installed around New York City.

verse), the Philosopher, exasperated, insists: "Il faut bien que ce soit l'un, ou l'autre" (*It must be one or the other*) (Molière 54), dividing all writing into "prose" or "poetry." Molière's surprised M. Jourdain, who has just discovered that even without the best of educations he has spoken "prose" for more than forty years, reveals this knowledge triumphantly to his wife when he asks fiercely, "savez-vous, vous, ce que c'est que vous dites à cette heure?" (*do you know, you, what it is you are speaking right now?*). When his wife wittily retorts that she is talking sense, M. Jourdain shouts: "C'est de la prose, ignorante" (*It is prose, you idiot*). He then attempts to lecture: "Tout ce qui est prose n'est point vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers n'est point prose. Heu!" (*All that is prose cannot be verse; and all that is not verse cannot be prose. Ha!*) (Molière 66). That he has confused the Philosopher's original words does not affect M. Jourdain's claim that ordinary speaking language is "prose."

This naturalization has occurred as a historical consequence of prose. Elsewhere, Silliman, anticipates this concern when he suggests: "To know, then, what the prose poem is or might be, we must first ask: what is prose?" (Silliman *New Sentence* 97). Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, in their comprehensive and historically specific critical work, *The Emergence of Prose*, point out how little prose itself has been theorized, especially in a world "dominated by its taxonomic approaches of poetics" (Godzich x). From Aristotle through mediaeval times, theorists have taken prose for granted, "treating it as if it were natural, artless," turning instead their critical attention to verse which, as artifice, needs to be analyzed (Godzich xi). Prose is often assumed to represent a "common" or "natural" transcription of speech. But Godzich and Kittay, while tracing its development in fourteenth-

century France, demonstrate that any writing "is never merely transcription: it is a system that involves codes, rules of inclusion and exclusion, as well as all sorts of markers" (Godzich 15).

All my thinking life I have resisted notions of the one and the other – either/or binary oppositions claiming that as soon as I label a thing, I must also earmark its opposite. My method for resisting the either/or binary is to locate / seek / create the third eye. For the cyclops in the Odysseus myth, observing with this other eye articulates a way of seeing that is neither left nor right. Only through the signifier of his colossal organ of sight does the cyclops claim his identity within this narrative; only after he has been blinded does the cyclops recognize Odysseus, the "hero" of the epic. And when that primarily focused gaze is interrupted, when Odysseus forces a blazing spear through his alternative eye, the cyclops' perception transforms to include a vision that is neither left nor right, but perhaps both.

Whenever I am obliged to choose between two opposites, I position myself within that choice in a way that does not allow me to see (with either eye) the differences and gradations between the one, the two, and the many. To focus on one object or idea or word, is to exclude the possibilities of all but its opposite. Recognizing a thing allows for its opposite, but not, peripherally speaking, for its sideways connections and network of associations. At the same time as I perceive a binary division, I also recognize that the one necessarily includes the other. The configuration and/but, then, is not absorption and not erasure, but dialogue and openings for poetic disagreement.

Odysseus and his men enter the cave belonging to Polyphemus, son of Poseidon. The Greeks help themselves to the cyclops' sheep, cheese, and

other provisions. And when he returns he immediately eats two of the sailors and blocks the mouth of his cave with a large boulder. But every day Polyphemus eats two men for breakfast and two for supper, until Odysseus becomes worried that not enough men will survive to make the trip home. And so Odysseus offers Polyphemus the wine from Maron. But he tells the cyclops his name is Nobody. And your reward, Nobody, says Polyphemus, is to be eaten last of all. But after the cyclops drinks this unusual nectar he soon passes out. And Odysseus and his men sharpen the wooden stake used to roast sheep, heat it over the fire, and wait.

Robert Kroetsch, in his poem "The Sad Phoenician," pursues an elusive and/but dialogue and in doing so generates a bifurcated, albeit *unhappy*, narrative:

and the Phoenicians gave us the whole works
 but what does that matter to a world that ignores
 them, the Greeks got all the credit of
 course, because they stole the alphabet
 and the girl from Swift Current, she more or less
 took everything
 but the kitchen sink, claiming all my books, my
 records, my prints; she moved in with that
 photographer from Saskatoon, the one who
 takes those sterling pictures of the wind
 and I should sue
 but she follows large flocks of birds, I hear,
 calling my name
 and pleading
 but why she developed a thing for adverbs, that's
 too rich for my blood, I want to tell you
 and

(*Sad Phoenician* 14-15)

Kroetsch's narrative includes a closure of sorts, in that it stops after a paragraph-long stanza and does not suggest (as I indicated above) another conjunction. The piece remains continuous, offering a Cyclopean glance at an alternative possibility of reading, of yet another narrative. Throughout his poem, Kroetsch uses every conceivable punctuation mark *except* the period, and ends with no punctuation at all. Unlike either/or, and/but – in its perpetual alternation of these two conjunctions trading off on the left side of the page – pushes the narrative forward, tantalizing the reader in its avoidance of closure. This continuum perpetuates the text, extending the narrative away from what at first appears to be a prosy monologue and towards an engaging *dialogue* established within the prose poetry form.

Gertrude Stein begins her essay, "Poetry and Grammar," with the question: "What is poetry and if you know what poetry is what is prose" (Stein "Poetry" 125). Through this question she asks not only for a definition of two supposedly separate modes of writing, but she also questions how the separation between them is decided. Her question suggests doubt that a respondent can always successfully discriminate between the two. Stein disagrees with the assumption that all writing is automatically divided into either "prose" or "poetry." She refuses to recognize this absolute division in her own writing. She is one of many poets who reject decisive boundaries. The prose poem form can generate strategies of genre inclusiveness for such writers as Stein to incorporate strategies from other genres or categories of writing.² Prose poetry – by exploiting two generically distinct forms – either

² Most genre theorists discuss, among other things, the most suitable terminology for genre theory. Alastair Fowler, in *Kinds of Literature*, argues the distinctions between the available

presents a writing that is seen to combine prose and poetry, or offers itself as a “new” genre that transgresses the constraints of both and so calls into question generic coding and categorization.

One strategy for rereading genre is for the reader to let go of textual expectations, to read paratactically, which allows for elliptical procession, a reading strategy that suggests a word or sentence from seemingly disjointed ones. This strategy may be combined with a method of reading hypotactically, which insists on the subordination of one sentence to its precedential partner. Letting go of the meaning of each sentence leads a reader into a subsequent (and more “developed”) meaning. Stein’s *Tender Buttons* encourages readings on both these levels, becomes hypodermic, then emerges inside a hypersensitive ordering of excessive taxis. The title itself – with an unexpected noun following the adjective – directs readers backwards at the same time as it propels us forwards into the text. Neither “tender” nor “buttons” are particularly unique words, but together they intensify the way we read both. Read together, they insist they are signifieds as well as signifiers.

In most of her longer pieces, Stein offers not just disrupted sentences, but also what appear to be paragraphs. Here is an example from “A Little Called Pauline”:

repertoire of terms. Despite his distinctions, other critics such as those collected in Joseph Strelka's book, *Theories of Literary Genre*, for instance, use a collection of labels (including “genre,” “mode,” “category”) in sometimes opposing ways. In short, there is no consensus. In this essay, I do not argue the dimensions and limitations these terms offer, but instead consider them to be part of the lexicon now available for such discourse.

A little called anything shows shudders.
 Come and say what prints all day. A whole
 few watermelon. there is no pope.
 No cut in pennies and little dressing and
 choose wide soles and little spats really little spices.
 A little lace makes boils. This is not true. (25)

There is no *grammatical* logic that forces a paragraph break after the first sentence. The *structural* logic of this break forces the reader to pause on "shudders" before continuing to "Come." The paragraph breaks signal a prose structure of complete sentences and conventionally indented paragraphs that is undercut by the sentence fragments and partial descriptions imbedded in this prose structure. They also cause the reader to pause on a single word before reading the subsequent words, much in the same way line breaks operate in more traditional poetry. In the first line, Stein's act of shuddering the woman's name out of existence gives the reader pause for breath. "There is no pope," besides being untrue (at least in the factual sense), is a segue into "No cut in pennies..." that re-emphasizes the "no," so that "pope" becomes an adjective to the second "no," and a noun to the first. *How* the words connect, or *why*, is never as much fun for the reader as that they *do* connect. Stein's "paragraphs" make the seams even more obvious: reverse the stitching on the outside of the garment, and reveal a meticulous and interconnected pattern on the inside. Stein's threads reveal a language that is no longer safely hidden from the reader's improved sight.

Gertrude Stein writes a defamiliarization of common "objects" in an uncommon world (or vicegrip versa). She writes desire into a text: Stein's, the reader's, each prose poem's desire to break out of a preconceived mould to create new and impossible worlds. The most logical response to writing is

more writing. For this reason, I often refer to or quote writers such as Stein who have influenced and directed my own poetry, my own desire to explore the page.

Tender Buttons is in my breakfast, it is an eruption of the text into the everyday. Not because Stein is writing *about* domestic matters, but because her poems *live* the domestic. "Narrative thus becomes what is in *Tender Buttons*, the telling of what happens in each successive moment of its happening" (Schmitz 1217). *Tender Buttons* balances at the fulcrum where word meets the tip of my tongue, the tip of my pen. I want (this is my reader's desire), more than a causal, linear, rational, suasive critical discourse from Stein's prose poetry. I want to carry her words to wherever they're already going, acknowledge and enter that "arrangement in a system to pointing" Stein writes of in "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass":

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and
nothing strange a single hurt color and an
arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and
not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling.
The difference is spreading. (9)

"The text exists in the same sense that the carafe exists, not as a hidden entity embedded in tropes, a core of facts, but only in her emergent discourse. One must read as she writes" (Schmitz 1209). And write the way she writes: one of the best approaches a reader can take to *Tender Buttons* is a co-authoring; the text may be autotelic, but the reading is never merely arbitrary (each subsequent reading may be a process of arbitration).

In Stein's writing, and in much of the prose poetry I will look at, the signifier pushes to the surface of the page, where the reader cannot ignore or

read through the words in order to perceive only the story. The words *are* the story. But Stein does not offer these words merely as substitutes for the objects the words describe; the objects Stein presents are not the original and individual referents: not the exact penny on her dresser, or the lace around Alice Toklas's neck. The objects Stein writes are always the signifieds: the *idea* of an object called. In this way, the referent drops out of sight by becoming the signified, the signified moves into the position of the signifier, and the signifier loses all power of depth, retaining only its surface value. Stein's signifiers do not signify *towards* meaning, but instead point *away* from a consuming semantics; the reader's perception, instead, is focused on the page and its surface.

This language-oriented writing, rather than attempting a "mythical clarity" (Perelman "Sense" 63), encourages the reader to co-produce meanings on the page. The assumption of "mythical" clarity is what Steve McCaffery calls "the referential fallacy" (McCaffery *North* 61). McCaffery likens the medium of language when it is organized to maximally enhance a referential reading as reduced "to the status of perfect fenestration" (McCaffery 152). The relationship between signifier and signified in highly referential texts, McCaffery says, erases a perception of the former for the sake of the latter. Language-centred writing moves away from "the classic notion of the word as a container" (McCaffery 145), and proposes instead a shift "to the ground of semantic production," that organized surface where signifiers interact (McCaffery *North* 152).

Stein does not disrupt grammar simply to force misreadings or even rereadings of what the sentence is or could be. If so, she would have arranged those sentences to make much less "sense" than they do. Stein puts pressure

on every noun, verb, preposition in a sentence, disrupting whatever narratives her sentences and paragraphs also encourage. These disruptive narratives in Stein's *Tender Buttons* are an organizing feature that construct a text that is continuing and not continuing. Stein's evident fragmentation is not that of sentences, but of a reader's expectations of sentences and what they propound.

Russell Edson, a writer who labels himself a prose poet, writes magic-realistic parables that are concerned with plot twists and character sketches more than with rhythm or images:

A BOX OF WOMAN

A man buys a box of woman and blurs into several men, vibrating as they tear to open their box of woman.

Out comes the heart, an alligator pear. The womb's an enema bag. And the cunt's an old wash rag. This leg's a hoe, the other a rake... One tit's a cup of custard, the other a breast of roasted chicken...

When taking a woman one should check the ingredients printed on the box. Look for more flesh than bone, more happiness than not. ... More desire than aspirin. (Edson, *Clam* 19)

The words in Edson's piece do not question their role as transparent signifiers, but accept the burden of meaning within each word. The and/but configuration cannot be read into this piece as the narrative insists on a reading where desire is one-directional, from subject *against* object. The syntax of these particular words, unlike Stein's disruptive eruptions, tells a

story that the reader is expected to follow and may retell, often in other words, since the signifiers are less important here than their signifieds³. One version of the above tale could read: the poet as misogynist who, terrified of the body of the other, transforms it into a series of derogatory and recognizable objects, although I doubt this is the interpretation Edson favours, as the poem presents its narrative humorously.

In another prose poem, Edson uses the metaphor of fat to describe a form he considers oversatiated: "This is silly, I am simply a fat man whose eyes are of average size, from where I look out from my flesh like anyone else" ("Portrait" 95). Sadly, the poet's eyes are *not* Cyclopean. Like everyone else, his gaze is directed only away from himself. The sadness resides in the fact that poetry, for me, is not meant to be a representation of the world the way anyone might see it, nor is it about looking out from two ordinary eyes. The sadness resides in the fact that this poem is missing its third eye. "To live in the refuse of others is to live in the negative of their desire" (96), Edson declares, ignoring the possibilities of excess, invoking the photographic binary of an equal number of negatives to match every positive. But what if a plate (as Steve McCaffery suggests in his essay on general and restrictive economies⁴) can be broken into more pieces than make up its whole? What

³ I make a distinction between Stein's dialogue with signifiers and referents and Edson's push towards the signified, because of the different "value" these terms bring to the page. Edson is working with an "idea" of a woman and using words to conjure this image, whereas Stein wants her words to be opaque referents, rather than transparent conveyors to be used for representational purposes.

⁴ This is McCaffery's version of Bataille's version of the potlatch (McCaffery *North* 219, n23).

if “negative desires” far exceed “positive” ones? The “refuse” of others may not be the “negative” Edson assumes it to be. The refuse might represent an antediluvian eye, or its redundant blinking.

Edson’s desire for the prose poem, is for “... [a] poetry freed from the definition of poetry, and a prose free of the necessities of fiction” (100). Yet, insisting on a division between form and content, he declares that the subject matter is “not simply a hook on which to hang form” (101). Subject matter, according to Edson, will constantly remain crucial to the *real* writer (101). Given his belief in salvation through the imagination (98), I find it contradictory that Edson invests so heavily in notions of the “real.” “Being a fat man one must depend on external structures for support, walls, doorways, furniture; but this does not necessarily mean that one needs external support for one’s vision” (100). Could this awkward image be what he means by “the humor of the deep, uncomfortable metaphor” (102)? The true poet’s vision, according to Edson’s fat man, is internally separated from the social world and its specific contextual space. This poetic vision is uninterrupted and pure. Too bad for the anorexic, then, whose hysterical body cannot chubbily enter Edson’s jolly and secure edifices.

In my own work, I strive to enact an and/but poetics through the use of form itself. By writing neither prose nor poetry, but somehow both, I wish to embrace the problematic of poetry that “looks” like blocks of fiction, yet invites readings both within and beyond story, a seeing beyond. Marguerite Murphy, examining the problematics of terminology, argues that “the prose poem, by its very nature as a hybrid, indeterminate genre” (3) embraces contradiction. Because I focus on the prose poem’s indeterminacy, the *form* I

assume for prose poetry is part of the problematic, inviting a reflexive engagement with contradictory form.

In this manuscript, I problematize the narrative strategies of notation (periods and capitals, right justified line endings, etc.) and fictionalizations (characters, plot, seriality, etc.) as a way of examining notions of sequence, linking, intertextuality, and other tactics of prose that can be absorbed into the poetic context. I also address the third eye, seeking out the problem of how to write female agency and desire into male discourse. This necessitates locating and investigating the social contexts which define identity and subjectivity. The content of my prose poems will challenge the argument that women's subjectivity has only recently been recognized. Many feminists in current debate have discarded subjectivity as mere imitation of patriarchal structures already in existence. My text, therefore, comments on its own historical context within the contemporary social and literary world by embracing the politics of identity. The identification of signs (such as gender, race, class) can be reread against histories and traditions that construct them. I introduce and examine my prose poems as formal responses to previous forms and fashions. Prose poetry, articulated as a category of writing, has a relatively short history. Although poets have arguably used "prose" strategies since epic Greek poetry, the idea of a prose poem as form has only been expressed since Aloysius Bertrand (via Charles Baudelaire). Since 1869, critics have critiqued the "form" of the prose poem, the potential "genre" of prose poetry. Prose or poetry? Poet's prose or prosy poetics? An either/or binary opposition. Choose.

INTRO

the [we] an entrance into adulthood. by the time
I'm singular again, there isn't time to remember
an [I]. and [he] promised me daemons (lesser
gods posed as lucky charm). so discard my
childish bracelets. inside each cheap locket, your
name(s) shivers. counterclockwise

the glass in my window reflects a man
crosscountry-skiing on a February river. parallel
arrows puddle into tracks pointing

a womanfriend plants trees in the arctic. grows
eagles in her chest

your telephone voice stumbling on my bed
becomes the polar bear's retreat from Churchill,
Manitoba. becomes the accident of ice crystals
and orgasm. the unwinding of a single spool of
thread. the *what's left* of an interrupted morning.
delayed thaw from the ground up

my dark hair traps between your armpits, below
your nostrils, underneath your fine transparent
chest. traps the fold that is us both. the sweat of
our polar skin melts your laugh. fresh cherries
appear on the bathroom vanity in December.
eager for that existing

in love with the future tense of we

connect the dots . . .

he kept the daemon. I will no longer love you
more than my eyes :

2. Anatomized Voice and Embodied Memory

The lance Odysseus uses against Polyphemus must seem to Odysseus enormous and clumsy. Had he attempted to use one of his own thin spears, it would have been a mere toothpick, an irritant in the creature's face. Instead, Odysseus grabs the cyclops' own spit used to roast sheep and plunges this new weapon, still red from the latest meal, into the cyclops' lone eye. Blinding him.

Roaring in pain, Polyphemus calls to the other cyclopes, who rush to the cave entrance of their friend. When they ask what is wrong, he yells to them that Nobody is hurting him, Nobody has blinded him. Confused, but satisfied that their friend is in no danger, they return to their own caves, settle in for the night.

"Prose," besides its other equally useful functions, establishes a contrast to "poetry." In the same way one can focus on the morpheme⁵ only as a recognizable unit of difference, what matters in the prose poem is that each part of the whole also *remains* its individual part. What separates, joins, and what joins, separates. This place of conjunction suggests to me the *disjunction* in the contemporary prose poetry I find so seductive. Peter Quartermain, in his critical book, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*, uses this term to indicate an avant-garde

⁵ Though it is the difference of a morpheme that underscores the similarities between two words, I also find interesting the role the middle term plays in contrasting words: the step from "bat" to "cab" requires the presence of "cat."

poetics that includes contemporary formally innovative poetry with a specific historical background. Poetry is disjunctive when it recognizes a specific historical poetics and at the same time pushes past the limits or restrictions demarcated by that poetics. According to Louis Cabri: “[t]o say a text is disjunctive then, is to say it is not as the reader commonly knows and reads a text to be ... In other words, “disjunctive” refers to that which the text is not, not to how or what it is. If the disjunctive text were specifiable (or, better yet, generalizable) in some way, on the basis of what the reader knows, then the text would not be disjunctive” (37). The problem, for many readers, is identifying and relating to an absent subject position in the poem. Many of the poets I look at here, in their own work avoid or critique assumptions concerning subjectivity. For this reason, their poetry can be read as “disjuncting” normative literary conventions.

This notion of disjunction always includes, for me, the junction itself, the juncture where prose and poetry meet, where one sentence introduces or contradicts the next, the space between title and text, which informs the body of the entire piece. In my poems entitled “in turn” (38), the juncture lives in the space between the quoted words and my own. In what way, I ask myself, do my poems follow (or not follow) from the quotations I hang above them? All but one are by women, all but one come with someone else’s words as introduction. In Greek mythology, women are positioned as either Athena or Medusa, either pure and helping or evil and hindering. Either position can be detrimental to men’s desires or needs. Seen as binary oppositions of either all good or all bad, the representation of women is often a representation of a man’s negotiation between Scylla and Charybdis. In these poems, I try to

address the limits and restrictions imposed on female desire, as a way of both containing and blaming that desire.

The American Marine term “Suzie Rottencrotch” (51) perpetuates an image of women’s sexuality as impure and excessively demanding. The impetus for this series comes from a desire on my part not only to deconstruct this term, but to compare representations (in this case, film) of women’s sexuality to representations of women’s pain. The prose sentence, here, gives me the opportunity not only to quote other writers who inform and influence my poetry, but to expose the poetic gap between that which is said and that which is left unsaid. I use these writers as an entrance into an on-going dialogue, one which includes disagreement and dissent. The idea is not to come to terms with the disparity between a predominantly male military society and female poets, but to reveal the many layers of articulation possible in one conversation. Communicating my words beneath the words of others sets up comparison and dialogue, in which I can engage without forcing resolution.

Stein’s focus on the sentence and its possibilities for disruptive grammar make tangible her notion of “continuous present” that is more an instruction for perpetual resistance to an inherited poetics than a frozen focus on a particular moment in time. Anticipation appropriates the reader’s desire for the unexpected, the unrehearsed, the improvisation, and denies the reader real engagement with the process of language taking place on the page.

Likewise, in *Daydream Mechanics*, by Nicole Brossard, the format of the book extends an intimacy often promised by the traditional lyric. Then, the pages begin with a short justified text that refuses the downward pull of the “bottom” of the page. The reader hangs along the top edge of the book,

never reaching farther "down" than half way. This concrete evidence of what gets left unsaid becomes the blank surface we realize constructs the structure and form of the prose blocks:

, in the comma sense scar line drawn backwards to its centre (lower belly) and licit mobile link and justification for what follows, in the case in which the visible the slope of the calligraphy produces quick impatience unanimous thus I provoke riot I in the plural person cause insist riot, opening up of meaning if multiple travesty threat subversible false eyelashes face new incidence and checkmate (90)

Brossard writes her desire to free grammar onto the skin of the page, makes visible her punctuation (and lack of punctuation) through a circular, spiraling writing that pushes the words forward while at the same time pulling them back towards that first significant comma. The reader produces meaning for these disparate phrases, collecting them into one paragraphed sentence which allows for multiple readings and subversive games.

A spiralling text does not demand the condition of completion that a circular ending proposes. The spiral is the doubled movement both away, and towards, the centre. Ever-widening, the spiral forms a cone that becomes the entire text, with the "middle" a small pin-point that takes up very little space. At the same time, the spiral turns inwards, the text writes itself closer and closer, yet never reaches or reveals that inner core. This technique of writing in a "spiral" is a process of narrative construction employed by many contemporary feminist poets.

Harryette Mullen, in *Trimnings*, attempts a similar device with her prose poetry stanzas:

Thinking thought to be a body wearing language as
 clothing or language a body of thought which is a
 soul or body the clothing of a soul, she is veiled in
 silence. (66)

The words in this sentence slip from noun to noun, commenting critically on the gaps and absences each word admits. Mullen not only pays tribute to Stein's *Tender Buttons* by invoking that text's method and structure, but she also writes into an inherited language, reshaped by her own insistent grammar.

Mullen's poetry examines social constructions of gender and race, as well as formal constructions. These "topics," however, are more represented in her second book of prose poetry, *S*PeRM**K*T*, through media language, advertising, slang usage, and the context of the assumed narratee:

Eat junk, don't shoot. Fast food leaves hunger off
 the hook. Employees must wash hands. Bleach
 your needles, cook the works. Stick it to the frying
 pan, hyped again. Another teflon prez. Caught in
 the fire 'round midnight, quick and dirty biz.
 Smoked in the self-cleaning oven. (Mullen
 unpaginated)

Mullen's disconnected sentences can be read to produce meanings which address the subjects of drugs and poverty in the United States. Mullen's narratee is one who does not need the "issues" explained, rather, this narratee participates in the word-association and colloquial speech-pattern the narrator

reinvents. The closure of the poem is not the "end" of the "issues" but the chance to reenter the same text from another opening. Read especially in the context of the other pieces in her book, this poem becomes a comment on the connection of the two issues of race and politics. "Eat junk food, don't shoot up with junk," the first sentence might be instructing the reader; or, alternatively, this sentence may be read as a "message" that is being broadcast through the media. This connects to the image of the frying pan a few sentences later, which repeats the image of fast food, as well as underlining the anti-drug message (which for some time was promoted through advertisements comparing using drugs to frying eggs).

But Mullen's poetry – although rich with puns that promote and encourage such multiple readings – is not delivered as "code" in order for the reader to arrive at the "true" meaning. This prose poem does not assign an individual voice to speak as the poem's authority, nor does it expect the reader to discern the author's actual experience. Mullen's "narratee" is not expected to receive and interpret every nuance of every colloquial phrase; her narratee is rather a socially coded concept of subjectivity, wherein reading becomes the reciprocal activity of writing. The relationship between narrator and narratee in this series of prose poems does not develop through chronology or identification, but becomes one of a dialogue – how to keep the conversation going. What Mullen performs through these words is a context of address for the reader to engage in issues of race, gender, and class built on the readers' own context of meanings.

Daphne Marlatt, in a similar project of retrieving past words in order to reshape present biases of language, attempts "to salvage the wreckage of language" (*Salvage* 10) which she states is "so freighted with phallogentric

values it must be subverted and re-shaped, as Virginia Woolf said of the sentence, for a woman's use" (10). Frequently, this "woman's use" is merely a way of repeating the traditional story from another angle, seeing it from a third eye.

Often, though, the writing "against" phallogocentric language is subsumed by the dominant patriarchal limitations of language as a referential tool. The prose poem, constructed as it is from prose and poetry, can resist conventions of referentiality by intermingling, into the convention of prose grammar, poetic narratives, essayistic reporting, formal and informal speech patterns, and further disruptive devices which invite the reader to play along. Such an invitation is one Brossard writes into her text which attempts, through formal restructure, to rewrite representations of female desire. She writes this desire by constructing a space within which her text can safely desire, in order to get out of that confining space and to desire in the open. Her poetry spills into the established space of prose, invading a dominant structure with transgressive ardor. Such a feminine aesthetic demands the sensual and the erotic to metamorphose "woman" as signifier into "woman" as signified. For Brossard, sexual identification, except as scripted within the traditional male-oriented heterosexual couple, has not yet been written enough for her to step outside the role casually. In *French Kiss, Or: A Pang's Progress* she tells the story of this absence, begins to fill it with her sentences:

Ride astride grammar. I spread myself, eager
inconsequential and desire.

Destination the point of furthest (though
reversible) displacement of my conscious state.
Slow progressive irrigations in the city and in my
breast. (11)

Brossard, here, straddles phallogocentric language and writes her female "I" into pre-existing narrative structures, while resisting the conventions of narrative development. In this way, she proposes an alternative destination.

This process does not dismiss the traditional role of woman-as-object-of-desire, but rather establishes the stronger role of object-desiring, so that the narrator can invent herself as subject-in-process. This is an invention that subverts the notion that female desire is located only at the telescopic end of male conscription. The notion of the male gaze is encoded into our language which privileges the visual. Peggy Phelan says, discussing the politics of performance, that "[v]isibility is a trap; it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession" (6). An example of a text which addresses this problem is Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*. In this narrative, the narrator is the camera's eye. His words offer an objective description of the main character's actions, of the room she moves in; the narrator's eye can extend only so far and sometimes the action takes place out of vision. But this is only one possible reading of such a narrative. The male gaze is constructed as both objective and obsessively attentive. The narrator of the novel may also be the main character's jealous husband, spying on and recording her every movement. *Jealousy* is not about figuring out which reading comes closest to the truth, it's about how the narrator can be *either* objective camera lens *or* obsessive male viewer. For women, this positioning of the female body at the end of either of these lens has amounted to similar limitations of their own subjectivity. In the introduction to his recent dissertation, Rob Budde says, "seeing has nothing to do with looking" (Budde 1). He discusses the imperial gaze of those who stare at circus freaks. Those stared at incorporate their

objectification into their bodies in a display of deformed excess. This allows for a rereading and repositioning of the situated self. In *The Pirate's Fiancée*, Meaghan Morris rereads narrative structures through a feminist perspective that opens up subject positions for women. Through a technique of "tactical reversal and resistance, women are turning their sex-saturation back on the sexuality apparatus (sex you have said we are, sex we will be...) and in doing so, women begin to outflank it" (67-8). One of the strategies for "outflanking" a definition is to situate oneself so firmly within its boundaries as to make those boundaries opaque and seeable.

Just as "'woman' as signifier seems to show a remarkable stability: as site of change and changeability, innovation, rebirth, renewal, experiment and experimentation, the place for the planting of otherwise discredited questions" (Morris 66), so too does "woman" as *signified* express remarkable depth and texture, power and contradiction, subversion and reclamation. As the image of woman moves between signifier and signified, her subjectivity comes under examination. Some poets wish to discard any notion of subjectivity, others to claim what has until recently been denied them even as a possibility. Many female poets desire to perform Cixous's miracle of a woman writer who, in "The Laugh of the Medusa," learns how to "write her self" (Cixous 875) as active subject into her own text.

This attempt by many women to represent, in their poetry, a feminine subjectivity, necessitates a re-evaluation of current ideas on the subject and subjectivity, on the centre and the whole. Let me begin with a line from Ed Dorn's book-length poem, *Gunslinger*: "All that I will hold / we will put into him" (Dorn unpaginated, emphasis mine). Dorn's long narrative poem questions the notion of an implicit rational subjectivity in a way useful for

my argument. The narrative centres around a group of traditionally “western” characters (storyteller, Gunslinger, Madame, etc.). These characters seldom use the pronoun “I” to refer to themselves but use it to refer to a what has become a dead body because, early in the book, the character “I” dies. Since he (of course “I” is male) is now an empty signifier, the other characters pour everything they possibly can into him. And “[t]hat observed the Slinger / is where your race / put its money” (Dorn unpaginated)⁶.

This poetic construction of an “I” character addresses, in a suggestive way, the issue of subjectivity. Fredric Jameson contextualizes the notion of subject within his totalizing master-narrative, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. My discussion around female subjectivity emerges from the discussion of the subject. Jameson’s reading criticizes the humanist emphasis upon the individual self. He argues that the norm of cultural and literary criticism is to use a humanist method of ethical analysis. This criticism, he insists, relies upon an outdated tradition of universal reason.

Jameson demands that the ethical act move beyond the category of the single individual and into the realm of the social and political (194). From my point of view, Jameson’s argument is a useful tool for engaging in the debate against the unified subject. Jameson presents his totalizing theoretical position in *The Political Unconscious* as a way to transcend ethical binary oppositions, a process that is “outside the subject” but “in History” (235). The notion of woman as subject is recent, and inhabiting this historically male-defined space of subjectivity is a feminist project many women strongly

⁶ Race here refers to the “human” race, as the Gunslinger (or Slinger) is an extraterrestrial.

support. But aiming to appropriate the very subjectivity that has excluded and discriminated against women can be interpreted as a dangerous move towards perpetuating or reinventing the patriarchal power structures many feminists wish to oppose. Spivak, using the example of (traditionally female) housework, argues that, rather than simply support women who wish financial compensation for housework, Marxist feminists should question the system of capitalism, "universally accepted by men," which insists that "wages are the only mark of value-producing work" (Spivak 79). She points out that while "denying women entry into the capitalist economy" may marginalize women even more in their struggle for pay equity (Spivak 79), feminists may not wish to buy into the patriarchal capitalist system of payment for "work" in the home, an endorsement of exchange-value which perpetuates the existing economic system.

Donna Haraway talks about "the plot of original unity out of which difference must be produced" (Haraway 151), and Chantal Mouffe notes that "in every assertion of universality there lies a disavowal of the particular and a refusal of specificity" (Mouffe 13). The idea of a central unified subject is based on traditional patriarchal views of the (white) Western male as centre and "subject" of history (implicitly excluding everyone else). Postmodernist theorists (such as Derrida and Kristeva), and poststructuralists (such as Lacan and Foucault) have focussed on the decentred subject as a way to attack the Enlightenment construct of a unified subjective whole. Jameson attacks the same concepts in his desire to transcend a unified subjectivity that has been constructed and legitimized by the power structures of domination (Jameson 114). It seems to me that there is a link between his desire and the importance for contemporary feminist theorists to question this myth of a unitary subject.

Haraway argues that a woman "does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject" (Haraway 159) because consciousness of a unified identity is grounded in a notion of historical man to which women have no access. Luce Irigaray articulates a similar conviction, that man "has always represented the only possible subject of discourse, the only possible subject" (Irigaray 191).

In an article on postmodernism, Nancy Hartsock argues that the "connections between knowledge and power or between the construction of subjectivity and power" are institutionalized in the name of universality (Hartsock *Postmodernism* 18). Hartsock is quick to point out that exactly at the moment when women demand "to act as subjects rather than objects of history," the concept of "subjecthood becomes 'problematic'" (Hartsock *Rethinking* 196). The same issue in poetry revolves around the notion of the speaking "I." At the exact moment when women have gained the authority to tell their own stories, the idea of an authoritative persona becomes suspicious, and first-person narratives based on "experience" no longer viable. So, a male poet such as Ed Dorn can write witty and postmodern jabs at the reader's belief in an autonomous self, at a time when female poets are only just discovering they might actually have a self. As Johanna Drucker contends: "Women need to speak from the position they wish to occupy" (Drucker 18). The accusation directed at women that "speaking with authority" replicates the forms of patriarchal repression is actually "the means used to keep women from powerful positions" (Drucker 19). It is much easier to give up one's self to the collective when one has been historically privileged with a presupposition of such a self.

For many feminist critics, though, striving for a subjectivity that has traditionally been designated as male perpetuates the entire structure of the centre/margin binary opposition that, historically, has discriminated against women⁷. Western tradition has equated female identity specifically with biology and sexuality. A deconstruction of that object position is one which I can only welcome. "How can we ground a feminist politics," asks Linda Alcoff, "that deconstructs the female subject?" ("Cultural Feminism" Alcoff 419). This is a problem for women who wish to support feminism while at the same time argue against any collective notions of the construct of woman. Alcoff outlines a debate between "cultural" feminists who reinvest in an essentialized feminine centre and poststructuralist feminists who support the notion of the subject as construct. Alcoff outlines the problems with both these positions: "A subjectivity that is fundamentally shaped by gender appears to lead irrevocably to ... the posing of a male/female opposition as universal and ahistorical" (424), she says, whereas "[a] subjectivity that is not shaped by gender appears to lead to the conception of a generic human subject" (424). The former reasserts women's essential nature, and the latter ignores any understanding of women's specific lived experiences.

⁷ This debate, obviously, involves and affects women of colour, gay wo/men, and other "minority groups." I am arguing here within and against the Jamesonian position that "only the emergence of a post-individualistic social world, only the reinvention of the collective and the associative, can concretely achieve the 'decentering' of the individual subject" (Jameson 125). But I do not wish, as Irigaray would say, to reduce the many to the multiple of one (Irigaray 197). To conflate through easy comparison these disparate alliances re-asserts the ethical notion that issues of race, gender, class, can be unified into one homogenous issue.

This, precisely, is where I wish to return to Jameson's master narrative which he claims includes all social classes: "*all* class consciousness ... is in its very nature Utopian" (289). Jameson's insistence that his total system of Marxian criticism can encompass *all* stories, recuperate *all* forms of the ideologeme: "... the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian" (286) appears somewhat unself-reflexive about the traps of such supreme incorporation. Alcoff argues that:

[f]or the liberal, race, class, and gender are ultimately irrelevant to questions of justice and truth because "underneath we are all the same." For the poststructuralist, race, class, and gender are constructs and, therefore, incapable of decisively validating conceptions of justice and truth because underneath there lies no natural core to build on or liberate or maximize. Hence, once again, we are all the same. (Alcoff "Cultural Feminism" 420-421)

The problem, in my view, is Jameson's opposition to a "me"-centred ideology, while at the same time proposing a "total" Marxian system that partially perpetuates categories of the "Other" as "whatever is radically different from me"⁸ (115). Jameson's desire for "transcending the 'ethical' in the direction of the political and the collective" (60), assumes a cohesive and coherent possibility for such a collective.

The appeal of Jameson, for me, is his all-ongoing strategy of recuperation that attempts to reread all narratives back into the collective

⁸ I found it difficult to accept how Jameson, in an attempt to speak about how "we" characterize Otherness, declares that "women's biological difference stimulates fantasies of castration" (Jameson 115). Even though he is arguing here that the concept of good and evil is positional, his language reinscribes women as responsible for the othering.

whole; Jameson's Utopia includes *everyone*. His recuperative totalization is not homogeneous in that it offers more than one centre. Jameson does theorize a totalizing whole, but his argument for "decentering" (60) the subject suggests a whole which contains many centres. The problem, for me, is that in light of current literary writings away from the idea of a centred humanist speaking whole, proposing the existence of a female subjectivity tends to universalize the concept of "female" and that, once again, locks women into an identity based on biology. Personally, although I am suspicious of any inherited patriarchal structures⁹ (literary or otherwise), I am also excited when women (be we constructs or biological beings) demand space. This may not entirely dismiss, but at least expands the notion of what (and where) the centre is. My inclination to decentre the subject, comes from a desire to introduce a "whole" which may contain many and divergent centres. As well, my decentring of the subject comes from a position of writing wherein it is far too easy to grasp the notion of a split or fragmented subjectivity. Not living as the centre of a myth means, perhaps, it is easier to read the story as someone else's. The cyclops discovered the consequences of being only one episodic adventure in another's story. Discussing my own work here in the context of prose poetry I find engaging makes me feel like a cyclops trying to look back at my own eye, discombobulated and disjoined, yet not unhappy. For me, discomfort with language also convinces me to attempt to occupy language. For women interested in rewriting the givens,

⁹ I believe there is also a connection between the desire for a female subjectivity and the continuing contention that critical/theoretical writing is (at least perceived as) somehow inherently masculinist (Clark 16).

placing narratives into and against entrenched forms transgresses those forms.

Brooke Horvath says that “the prose poem is a form that comes relatively unencumbered by expectations and conventions” and that “the absence of norms or expectations” gives it a sense of “freedom” (Horvath 108). And Donald Wesling claims that the prose poem depends on the confusion generated by the fact that it is “easier to overlook the form of the prose poem than to revise [genre] definitions” (Wesling 174). “No other form, mode, or genre before the prose poem,” Wesling claims, “has so called into question the literariness of the poetic device, thereby risking while enhancing and extending our notion of poetry” (Wesling 188). And Rae Armantrout asks, “How readable is the world?” (10), and whether or not “readability [is] equivalent to clarity?” (Armantrout 16). This speaks to an issue important to many writers: the need to “clearly” describe the conditions of their lives. Armantrout addresses the issue of whether or not clarity is capable of representing “the nature of women’s oppression” (Armantrout 7). Her essay suggests that innovative and radical poetry articulates such oppression better than the “easily readable” (Armantrout 7) texts which merely perpetuate dominant modes of writing and reading.

bp Nichol, in *Selected Organs*, sets up a series of autobiographical anecdotes which he organizes by body parts. His text declares boldly (bodily) from its onset the “I” to be the centre and the story to be what swirls around (but never quite settles on) that I, which tells the story of him telling his story. Nichol’s “you” becomes the informal version of the more removed “one” which formally includes both addresser and addressee and, thus, implies universal experience and perceptions. A consciousness of a universal self

separated from language is what changes this speaker's relationship to his own body, and his awareness of how his body can be spoken about. This piece responds to the insistence that the body can be separated socially by metaphorical language. Nichol's sentences are organized into prose stanzas – one "paragraph" per numbered section – which tell the "life" of the persona in memories gained through a colloquial spoken prose.

Among other things, bpNichol's book, *Selected Organs*, reveals the binary nature of the inherited structures of our world: inside versus outside, the body drawn and the body written, prose and poetry, parts included and those not yet clued; the book operates under a condition of binary opposition. The "Selected" of the title implies what has been left out, what, in the structure of binaries, gets labelled as "existent" and what as "lack."

In a text proposed as one which processes the self, it is interesting to note that Nichol begins where the typically unified subject is not:

The Vagina

1.

I never had one. (9)

The "I" is the first word, and the voice claiming this "I" immediately problematizes our reading of a confidant (male) subject by beginning with what the poet's body is not and cannot be: the negation or lack that has traditionally con¹⁰finned the female subject/object; the "gap" that writes the

¹⁰ The French *con* refers to female genitals and is used as an insult to denote idiot. (Godard 107)

vagina as sheath for the penis. The "I" goes on to declare that he lived inside a woman for nine months and now lives inside a male "shell" (9). The subject, although immediately identified by sex, repudiates gender by labelling it a mantle; not one that can be casually thrown on and off at will but one that is inscribed through the social construction of the body¹¹.

By recognizing binary structures, the text recognizes the urge to break out of binaries, to change the rules. "I always wanted one. I grew up wanting one" (10). This isn't about desire as translated from body to body, but about textual expectations and how "wanting one" can be a means of writing the self onto the page: "The trick is to get from there to here" (11). Wherever here is, is not only on the other side of there, but is "thru her" (11); the binary nature of the world perpetuated by the connection that turns exits into entrances and back again, female lack into male desire, and the dual nature of opposition into an always present "third possibility" that is *between*. When the persona declares, having waited two years for male menstruation, "I never had one" (10) the first sentence echoes, ricocheting around the entrance of the vagina until the text pushes meaning through to another entrance, to another body part.

¹¹ Scott Taylor writes: "To gain identity one must risk losing it altogether? Or to gain identity one must lose identity? This is strange and I am not at all sure that it is right. There is such a thing as context and surely everyone that has this thing, context, has identity" (35). The context, here, is Nichol writing the female "lack" onto the male body. Although I personally find vagina a useless term for women's genitals (vulva being so much more accurate, sensual, and all-encompassing), Nichol has chosen the exact word to begin his narrative of self that throughout history has labelled woman as mere passageway for an external body part (or internal-becoming-external body).

Nichol, in *Selected Organs*, questions the textual assumption that the body is a totality. "This was the first time I ever really looked at my toes & boy were they something else" (47). The speaking subject recalls an awareness of body that divided a supposedly unified self into a self composed of "my" and "something else." Nichol's pieces confront the idea of the fragmented body. For as we read about the toes (and how unbearably ugly they are), we don't think of the body as one entity, we think of its parts. We think of the fragments that even collected do not make a cohesive whole, we read the toes as bifurcations growing out of bifurcations, postmodern reminders that the body is also parody and pastiche.

In contrast to Nichol's wish for a disruptive, cross-generic writing that also extends and identifies autobiographical memory through the body, the following section of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* offers a disruptive and hybrid poetry that transgresses the autobiographical by offering personal experience as topic and harmony for formal experimentation:

*The obvious
analogy is with
music*

It was a mountain creek, running over little pebbles of white quartz and mica. Let's say that every possibility waits. In raga time is added to measure, which expands. A deep thirst, faintly smelling of artichoke hearts, and resembling the sleepiness of childhood. (Hejinian 19)

The unusual format – which places a textual inset, or title of sorts, against the beginning of each section or "chapter" – forces the reader to acknowledge the form, and not simply read through the structure to the narrative of reminiscence. The autobiography gestures towards the problem of memory,

but Hejinian refuses a conventional treatment of this problem. Rather than exploring the persona's "memory" of childhood on, her book's format proposes the repeated pattern of thirty-seven as numerical and symbolic representation of a "life." Hejinian rewrites her "autobiography," which consists of thirty-seven sections, made up of thirty-seven sentences each, eight years later to include eight additional sections and eight additional sentences in each section. So the writing of a life becomes as much stylistic as it is personal profile. *My Life* challenges an established autobiographical genre which insists that a life is formed from chronologically sequenced events culminating in epiphanous moments prepared for by the narration of this, now textually ordered, life. The narrative link between the sentence fragment "hanging" beside the body of the text is one of association and resemblance. Her words insist that music is an "obvious" analogy and, indeed, there is reference to "raga" in the body of her text. Yet, as this comment on musical time is inserted into an all-encompassing narrative of childhood, the musical allusion fades against a more pressing temporal one: "But nothing could interrupt those given days ... I was an object of time." These sentences, together, form a continuous narrative of recollection, while at the same time consciously resisting the very genre within which they engage.

Hejinian uses the strategy of repetition – imitating a phrase or sentence found earlier in her text – changing the wording so that context effects words and her words effect her context. This encourages the reader to question whether Hejinian's narrative can ever progress in linear fashion. Her writing that is not organized into a conventional storytelling model of beginning, middle, and end suggests a stylistic transgression against "closure" as formal

literary completion. Though her reader expects a personal history from this "life-writing," Hejinian presents a fragmented subject composed through the prose poem of childhood memories and adult preoccupations. There are narrative bits with which one can make a story, but as the writing shifts from prose-poem to autobiography to novel the reader becomes more conscious of the *process* of writing than of what the writing is *about*. Narrative, as a construct, is reflected in a language of process which repeats known poetic phrases, but within a changing prose context.

IN TURN

The difference between a sentence and a paragraph. There is none.
– Gertrude Stein *How to Write*

there is no such thing as a prose poem. this has been proven

the problem with myths is not believing them.
syntax. women grow beauty overnight and men develop heroes. something to do with the diet.
horses grow wings. caterpillars are most vulnerable at the moment of metamorphosis

who knows the correct grammar for a point of transition? punctuation longs to be invisible

there used to be seeds in the alley, but now they've become medusa's hair. before that's even possible

**Invention does not consist in creating out
of void, but out of chaos.**

– Mary Shelley “Introduction” *Frankenstein*

**it isn't every day you get to visit the day that
didn't happen. slip across a fold and there you
are. what goes around, comes around. until it
stops**

or changes direction

**they promise we'll recognize the horns but that
might mean keeping the daemons. add eggnog to
coffee and then it's December. this has been
proven**

holidays and hitting

**Lovers desire and seduce only to murder
and create.**

– Aritha van Herk *Places Far From Ellesmere*

**mythic hands transform from birds to fish and
back to hands again. just in time to pull up the
reins. just in time to be cut off by the evil twin
brother who has trained snakes to swallow birds
whole to slit fish with their tongues. the cross on
your eyelids etched with tapwater**

**trauma begins at the level of the sentence. he is a
hero gone mad**

**the hero is a brother gone too too sane. a
perfectly good alphabet, trembling at the level of
sound. his fingertips drip blood as he strokes her
frozen skin. his newly adopted snakes slither
comfortably into his iron sable hair**

**Pain always hurts, and the only time it
doesn't is when you are dead.**

– Rachel de Queiroz *Dora, Doralina*

migraines. ai in the word. no pain there, just
sound and light. no sense either. sign posts. no
escape from the migrainous except into. further
the body inside farther. my left side purple
sludge leaks out of my left temple. slow. the
right side evaporates. no reverse, except into
French

each sexual act slices off the end of your life. a
blood attraction. in the event of a snowstorm,
uncross all the Ts first. then remove the commas

if I do it backwards, condensed sludge evaporates
up my entire head. spoilt nerve endings. all I
know from pain

bread

**You tell me you believe in magic and at
first I'm with you.**

**– Bronwen Wallace *The Stubborn Particulars of
Grace***

**the hurting its own artistic value. a migraine
explodes your pupils when the lights are out.
craves reverse vision. but not so fast**

**How do you enter the labyrinth? Turn left
turn left turn left.**

– Méira Cook *A Fine Grammar of Bones*

**Sanskrit folds inside her mouth and she blows
bubbles to where he used to stand. nothing left
behind compensates for that single conjunction:
ampersand**

**everyone knows he loved her slightly less than his
20/20 vision. years after the fact, telepathy
redeems itself. “seeing is believing” I’ve been
told, but the light bursts my disintegrated survey**

**Never trust an animal that has tasted
blood.**

- Lorna Crozier *Penis Poems*

jesus had migraines he wore thorns on his
temples, the blood inside his lifeline leaked down
through his fingernails. completes the feminine.
red on his palms a decoration

(repeat) try to breathe through my eyelash

just as many men get migraines. except not. it's
because of the bleeding. the cyclic trigger
identifies women at 70 percent. cerebral
menstruation

**Image of the whole physical body must
always be there.**

- Erin Mouré *Furious*

**if you have sex it helps. blood defects from the
brain to vulva. gorgeous there**

**except, of course, the push of rhythm too much
too much too**

**I've tried stroking, encouraging, seducing,
but the head pounds back. awake on my back, no
motive**

Using the future as an angle.

– Gail Scott *Heroine*

nobody talks about the pulse of inbetweens. all
during the day.

I'm not talking the act, I'm talking the act
compressed. gulps. not rhythm, a single or
double nibble. no more than

what your hand doesn't remember my vulva does.
slowed down and singular. gulp, not part of a
pattern, but there inside. rhythm of the daily

a pleasure swallow

down
here

madness is on the loose here, scarcely noticed.

– Nicole Brossard *Lovers*

**five minutes between two films goes on and on. a
witch healer, switch quickly to a soldier defending
his country. defending any country, from
mothers and lesbians. my head pulses. rinse it
away. the unbearable urge to push. again push.
like that doctor priest scientist manly**

Is there no way out of the mind?

- Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar*

**no survivors, but you can replace handwriting
with computer-generated script. don't try to
justify poetry, punctuation needs to be clean and
obedient**

**minimize the quotation marks and do anything to
contract the blood cells**

**fragments and phrases, when impregnated with
Latin, impersonate the sentence**

don't overdue

**blood is the body out of control. we no longer
survive memory's sequel. female blood has
nothing to do with glory**

**shaved heads all look the same. witches or
soldiers – who recaptures that space?**

I gulp some more, some more

stop. again

.stop

The gates are closed. There is no way out of here.

– General Schwartzkopf, US Army Press Conference, 1990

rinsing the *Our Lords* straight into barracks and boot camp. how we believe mothers love their daughters best except for sons. *Suzie* is Marine-slang for women, full name *Suzie Rottencrotch*. beware evil leaks from within, contaminates the pure

in one film the soldier brags he tried to strangle his mother. automatic. not waking, he slept through the reinvention of additional killing

then, they were burning witches. five minutes later and 300 years ago. translating doctors by exterminating midwives

outline the enemy. trace the same [he]r

. out of sync

3. Crossing the Border: The Prose Poem as Feminist Oppositional Genre

Having successfully blinded his captor, Odysseus is perplexed at how now to achieve freedom. The advantage of sight is not enough to put him ahead of the game against such a capable foe. In the morning, Polyphemus, his retina still burning, shifts the boulder slightly so only a few sheep can pass through the entrance at a time. He feels each animal to ensure it is not Nobody or one of Nobody's sailors. Polyphemus follows his herd out and, once on the other side of the exit, he again secures the boulder. In the evening he returns, consumes two more men, and promptly drops asleep to avoid the increased pain in his forehead, the unsundering itch. The impending loss of his crew makes Odysseus desperate. He plans an elaborate ruse to pass undetected through the cave's mouth when the cyclops lets his sheep out one by one, caressing their backs to make sure they are not men in sheep's clothing. During the night while the cyclops snores, Odysseus ties his men to three sheep each, and grabs hold of the largest ram himself. In this way, he deceives the blind giant, who has only recently learned to keep watch with his fingers, and does not think to check the underbelly of animals.

"Prose frees people from established relationships while constructing a new world of power and authority within its self-supporting discourses" (Fredman155). In an attempt to locate more accurately the poetics possible within the prose line, Stephen Fredman changes prose poetry into "poet's prose" (1), so that the noun/adjective relationship is reversed: this is prose used by poets, rather than poetry infected by prose. This grammatical reversal, however, invites the possessive into the prose poetry equation, so

that the argument becomes who “owns” such prose. This power, insists Fredman, grants agency to the employers of prose (one wonders if he assumes a minimum wage) because “poetry has lost its authority” (156).

Just in time.

Although I agree with Fredman that the attention to language by certain poets (his examples are William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, and David Antin) has defamiliarized prose grammar, referentiality, and narrative, I find that the perpetuation of the binary opposition of prose and poetry weakens Fredman’s argument. The poets who interest me have no desire to reclaim any notions of authority traditionally conferred upon the poetic voice. In fact, Fredman’s desire for poetry to be an investigation of the domain of “truth” (157) harkens back to humanist perceptions of an ultimate and external good, determined for all by the superiority of the poet’s vision. A vision that, so obviously belonging to the realm of the masculine, can only produce the male gaze.

How, then, is it possible for female poets to subvert this concept of an objectified object at the farsighted end of such a coded male gaze? Poets such as Kathleen Fraser, Carla Harryman, Erica Hunt, and Erin Mouré have turned back towards their bodies as sites of discourse, as visible metaphors for the excessiveness of female desire, as tangible locations from which language can emerge.

In the section of my manuscript subtitled “more excess” (71), I attempt to address the end of narrative, the end of the poem, the *end* of an end. In these poems I use line breaks and fragmented phrases within the overall structure of prose. This break from prose rhythm makes more visible that rhythm, but also takes advantage of the page as an artificial site of closure, as

an exit from one poem and an entrance to another, in much the same way Polyphemus makes the entrance of his cave into an exit for Odysseus and the sheep. In these poems, beginning with "the hymen in Greek antiquity" (72), I write about theoretical closures, such as the hymen, a place where the body *theoretically* closes. The hymen is a theoretical membrane which operates, in discourse, as a blockage from one part of the body to another, much as the tympanic membrane exists in the eardrum or the scopic membrane in the *glance* of the cyclops. The hymen is an unseen hidden part of a woman's body whose manifest absence demonstrates her purity. The hymen's existence depends on its ability to disappear.

The notion of memory that invades these poems is generated from the same idea of a concretized membrane. How and why does memory operate? I do not mean to examine this in a scientific way, but to use the science available to question my own assumptions and presumptions about the body and how my existence in the world is constructed as "body" and "notbody." The details that leak into and out of these poems come from my investigation into the membrane of language that forms thinking. Each piece becomes an interruption of the beginning that the previous piece established. Each poem opens up desire so that desire becomes excessive and convoluted, exceeding the proper limits, multiplying the number of nipples considered standard, transcending traffic headed in the right direction. These poems wander into the badlands then do not want to return again, but desire farther wanderings, multiple eyelids, crazy reversed fairytales. The genre that has been designated the vagina includes a breakable hymen. But the cunt and the vulva do not recognize this construction. In the final poems in this series, the hymen as signifier transforms into the clitoris as signified, an excessive feminine rhyme

that obliterates a generic closure promised by conventional climax. Instead, ravaged hags and deformed cyclopes breed hybrid forms, deformed genres.

The prose poem form can generate strategies of genre inclusiveness which both question and reinvent literary boundaries. According to Jonathan Monroe, in *The Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*, "the prose poem has functioned throughout its history as a ... hybrid form for the mingling and confrontation of various literary and extraliterary types" (11). Such hybridity often enables women writers to abandon patriarchal structures of discourse which represent, in a literal way, established genres that have traditionally excluded alternative modes and methods of discourse. As such, contemporary Canadian and American feminist poets have invested in the prose poem form because of its ongoing struggle with genre, a struggle which attempts to deconstruct notions of genre as well as to re-establish them. The "genre" of the prose poem has the potential to transform social as well as textual borders, and so appeals to various "border" writers who strive for such transformation in their own writing. Unlike writers who wish to claim a particular genre as essentially belonging to a particular gender, the poets I will examine claim the prose poem not only as an inviting space for women (or other genre-excluded poets), but also as a potential site for social change through radical formal innovation. These poets transform presumably familiar forms and transfigure literal borders in order to explore and redefine a poetry generated through textually-structured opposition.

Monroe argues that the prose poem is a site for the "ongoing struggles of genre" (Monroe 11), by claiming that the "prose poem today is a genre that does not want to be itself" (Monroe 15). In *Poverty of Objects*, he constantly refers to the prose poem as containing inherent agency, suggesting that it is

capable *in itself* of changing prevailing social situations. It is sometimes difficult to avoid the kind of discourse that places responsibility on the poem, but such language makes it possible to ignore the writers behind the poems, and does not take into account their choice or intention in choosing a hybrid form. Diane Freedman argues in *An Alchemy of Genres* that poetic prose – “often an amalgam of genres, a crossing of various borders – may enable women to abandon patriarchal discourse for a discourse of unbounded fecundity” (Freedman 46). In rejecting pre-given generic forms, such writing also rejects the ideas inhabiting those traditional forms, for: “Language can liberate but it can also reinscribe, reiterate oppression” (Freedman 3).

Freedman makes a serious plea for “border-crossing poet-critics” who “may write alternately or simultaneously in multiple genres, crossing discursive boundaries even as they blur the distinctions between writer and reader, author and subject” (Freedman 38). Paradoxically – for Freedman – the literary innovations which most appeal to her are those texts which, at the same time as they cross generic borders, also offer stable, familiar forms. Interestingly, Monroe points out a similar discord within the prose poem itself, that, for prose poetry to be able to maintain the privilege of existing as a transgeneric form, the two separate genres of “prose” and “poetry” *must* endure as separate and separated. In other words, recognized borders must first exist in order for a form to be able to trespass them. Conversely for Freedman, to misrecognize pre-given forms of writing is to achieve a new familiarity, a stability of identity. Monroe’s emphasis is on how a mixed form which “depends for its very existence not only on the continued difference of its two defining terms but even on their continued oppositional status” (Monroe 20), continues to transform and transfigure presumably “familiar”

forms. The relationship of those separate forms (however changed) remains an oppositional one.

Besides being a hybrid itself, and offering the stylistics of hybridity for use in literary border crossings, the prose poem is also a contradiction, a form that attempts to resist its own form. Gertrude Stein makes the most of this contradiction, using the prose poem as a vehicle for non-lineated verse:

CUSTARD.

Custard is this. It has aches, aches when.
Not to be. Not to be narrowly. This makes a whole
little hill.

It is better than a little thing that has mellow
read mellow. It is better than lakes whole lakes, it is
better than seedling. (Stein *Tender Buttons* 51).

The custard is not the bowl possibly imagined by the reader, but "this" on the page. Stein draws attention to her words through a disjunctive syntax that still "means," that forces readers to recognize particular emphases in particular places. The title, for instance, has a period, implying it is also a sentence. Each "stanza" has a conventional paragraph indent, so our visual expectation is for a more conventional structure than Stein's sentences ever fit into. "It" is better than a little thing, but is the "It" of the second stanza a reference to the "Custard" of the first? Can the reader even rely on the "It" of the second sentence as referential? Stein's signifiers *become* the referent, reflexively turning the poem's direction inside out.

Stein's *Tender Buttons* is an attempt both to cross forms and to establish itself as form. In this poem, just as the title is a sentence, the

paragraphs are also stanzas. Monroe claims that prose poetry expresses this contrariness by, on the one hand, rejecting the privilege and exclusiveness from which other genres derive their identity. On the other hand, "it asks to be recognized as legitimate and distinctive in its own right" (Monroe 42). This contradiction becomes a generative site for writing.

It is the prose poem as this active place of generation that appeals to Freedman's project. As a poet, Freedman says she is "adverse to formal verse" (Freedman 36), and instead argues for a "borderland" writing that "overlap[s] the conventional realms of fiction, poetry, criticism, confession, autobiography, reportage, cultural anthropology, and history" (Freedman 56). But even though Freedman quotes Audre Lorde's famous observation that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (in Freedman 10), Freedman, in choosing poets whose writing rarely crosses generic borders, seems not to recognize the "master's tools" in poetry, either her own, or that of other women writers whose work she admires.¹²

Gloria Anzaldúa is a poet and theorist who celebrates "kicking a hole out of the old boundaries ... and slipping under or over" (Anzaldúa 49). Her book, *Borderlands*, is a critical analysis of how border writing opposes the tyranny of forms. *Borderlands* approaches the autobiographical content of this problem, exploring a cross-genre writing that is informed and performed by people whose subjectivities are constantly shifting, or whose identities can

¹² Prose poetry does not automatically imply innovative writing. I must stress that I do not wish to criticize Freedman for writing about and celebrating the poets she does. Rather, the poets I here focus on oppose patriarchal language through a particularly cross-generic writing which Freedman claims to stress.

be defined as hybrid: "*la mestiza*¹³ undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa 78). This writing snatches at poetic prose and crosses as many generic boundaries as there are chapters. Yet, when it comes to her own poetry, separated from her critical essays by being placed in the second half of the book, Anzaldúa, in much the same way as Freedman, assumes many of the patriarchal and Western forms she discards in her "critical" writing. Her poems contain overwhelming information "about" what life at the borderlands is/can be like. I do not mean to criticize Anzaldúa for employing the conventions of poetic address, but simply to point out that, as much as her poetry takes on and critiques the white male hegemonic discourse that has been imposed upon her and other *mestiza* writers, it does not do this through challenging the traditional lyric form. Anzaldúa's "critical" writing can, in fact, be read as "creative borderline." Rather than continue to set up a binary opposition between what a theorist may say about cross-generic writing, and what the writing actually does, I will look now at some American and Canadian poets whose critical writing encompasses and encourages formal transgressions, and the way in which such formal transgressions are played out in their poetry.

Charles Bernstein, in his essay "What's Art Got to Do with It?" questions why contemporary art and the discussions around it must be separated from each other by readers and critics. "Professional anti-intellectualism plays itself out in a particularly uninhibited form in the

¹³. Gloria Anzaldúa has coined this term from the Spanish *mestizo* to include not only the people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood, but also Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, and women of other mixed heritage. See her book, *Borderlands*, cited below.

promoting of works of poetry that espouse a distaste for the intellectual and rhetorical nature of writing" (Bernstein "Art" 603). Bernstein's argument suggests to me a possible reading of Erin Mouré's *Furious* as both art and theory, criticism and poetry. "Writing is *always* about writing..." says Erin Mouré in her "Statement on Poetics" in *Quarry* magazine (1993). In traversing the edge between poetry and criticism, she writes *about* writing *by* writing. By exceeding the limits of the genre which claims poetry cannot also be criticism, Mouré's *Furious* insists on a reading of language as socially constructed and socially constructing. Mouré's poetry strays from the path that leads the reader to a notion of the poem as unified and knowable. Instead, she invites her reader to meander, to explore alternate paths which suggest the poem, as poem, is under construction.

By including the prose section, "The Acts," after the four sections of poetry in *Furious*, Mouré invites a reading of this section as criticism, as commentary, or as lyric prose. And her refusal to respect the existence of the boundary which separates poetry from criticism, creates an anxiety for her reader which centres around notions of genre purity.

Mouré's poetics considers writing, *all* writing, to be figurative and thus a form of poetics. Her poems ask what this thing is that we call poetry. And how do we, as academics and poets alike, perpetuate ideals about genre at the same time that we question them? For me to suggest that certain genre boundaries have been exceeded is a critical statement that, in itself, does not exceed its own genre boundaries. For me to exceed criticism, I write poetry which enters the realm of the theoretical. For this reason I am interested in the prose poetry in *Furious*. In "The Acts," Erin Mouré offers examples of poetic excess at the same time as she critiques repression, which leads to an

instability of the preconceived form. Anxiety and the frenetic movement it generates, for Mouré, becomes a safer place to situate subjectivity than the stasis of the known.

It is important to recognize that the borders certain writers oppose are invisible to other writers who may not be limited in their writing by the same social restrictions. Erica Hunt, for example, focusses on non-canonical genres, such as diaries and letters, in order to convey a subjectivity split and fragmented between genres, whose agency is yet to be realized. Her book of poems, *Local History*, allows Hunt to pursue what she calls an "oppositional poetics," one which crosses cultures as well as borders of "class, race, and gender" (Hunt "Notes" 198), through narrative prose. For Hunt, the diary and letter forms (traditionally considered to be "female" genres,¹⁴ these genres offer non-conventional historically-inscribed writing possibilities) do not necessarily move sequentially from incident to cohesively-related incident. Instead, her poems consist of ordinary domestic details, made extraordinary through Hunt's attention to the transformation of language in the play between poetry and prose. "What some call security," she posits in one of these diary entries, "from another angle resembles only the knack of imprisoning oneself with as many objects as can be dreamt of" (Hunt *Local History* 47). The borderline between imprisonment and freedom is often one of understanding the subject's position vis à vis the barriers surrounding that position.

¹⁴ See, for example, Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, where she discusses how educated Renaissance women maintained an expected public silence. They wrote "amateur" letters, diaries, and journals, in which they conformed to more "appropriate" writing styles for women "by confining their word to a domestic setting" (41-42).

Throughout his book Monroe argues that the prose poem is a “paradoxical, utopian site” wherein the “manifestly political struggles of gender and class” (Monroe 11) must take place for it not to become an “empty form” (Monroe 42). I would add the contemporary concerns of race writing to that list, insofar as the prose poem – by pushing against the formal boundaries of literary genres – may also encompass the growing and varied claims by writers of colour that what they recognize as restrictive boundaries, other writers may only consider transparent. Hunt’s poems transgress a social commentary concerned with how people interact with one another. “One of the definitions of being a person is that another person is talking to you. The person is particular, unlike that diffuse group of people you don’t spend time with who are all pronouns” (Hunt *Local History* 12). In this way, Hunt connects the social to the linguistic.

Some writers transgress genres of writing that are not always recognized as distinct genres. Carla Harryman often mixes various modes of prose into her poetry, especially the language and forms of detective fiction, journalism, and published plays. In *Animal Instinct*, a book subtitled with three generic designations, none of them poetry, she opens the piece, “La Quotidienne: An Atmospheric Play,” with these stage instructions:

– Neither the Spanish costume, which is designed for a flamenco dancer, nor the elaborate headgear of the Dutch peasant is inconspicuous. He turns his back and leaves the officer’s black hand floating in midair like a catfish in an aquarium. (Harryman 81)

Such stage directions are meant to be read as more than serviceable instructions for a director. To use a description of Monroe's about prose poetry, such self-reflexivity is "a mode of discourse that speaks against itself in the very act of defining itself" (Monroe 17). Without stepping so far away from the genre "drama" as to actually dismiss characters or dialogue,¹⁵ her crossing from this genre into the prose poem makes the reader conscious of the fact that s/he is *reading* a play. Stating that "neither" a Spanish flamenco costume "nor" elaborate Dutch headgear are "inconspicuous" is an effective way to make those images more than conspicuous in the reader's mind. Harryman's writing, which crosses genres as soon as she has established them, operates also within the genre of criticism. "Now that we are locked in this embrace I can tell you" (Harryman 82), she confides to the reader, whom she has "locked" into the embrace of stage directions and spoken dialogue, but on the page.

Rae Armantrout argues, in "Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity," that "the core of woman's condition [is] that she is internally divided, divided against herself" (Armantrout 8) and suggests that feminist writing offers "a moment of potential" to exclude the possibility of reader identification with the (usually male) subject. Unlike Freedman, Armantrout does not celebrate poets who conform to modes of writing which perpetuate a unified and stable identity. Instead of denying or ignoring the internal division women feel, says Armantrout, why not challenge the "supposedly natural ... formation of subjectivity"? (Armantrout 8). The "conventional"

¹⁵ A fact which does not deny that the pieces are, actually, plays. The copyright page of Harryman's book duly lists where each one has been first performed.

poem, which Armantrout says reflects a “univocal” narrator, conveys “an impression of closure and wholeness, *no matter what it says*” (Armantrout 8, my emphasis). In other words, conventions of form construct a seemingly natural “unified Voice” (Armantrout 9) that can be identified as a construction. “How readable is the world?” asks Rae Armantrout (10), and “Is readability equivalent to clarity?” (16). This speaks to an issue that is important to many writers: the need to “clearly” describe the conditions of their lives. Armantrout also addresses the issue of whether or not clarity is capable of representing “the nature of women’s oppression” (Armantrout 7). Her essay suggests that innovative and radical poetry articulates such oppression better than the “easily readable” (Armantrout 7) texts which merely perpetuate dominant modes of writing and reading.

Rosmarie Waldrop, concerned with the specifics of her own writing and with the social relevance of poetry in general, prefers a poetic structure that “can make the culture aware of itself, unveil hidden structures. It questions, resists” (Waldrop “Alarms” 47). Waldrop also celebrates transgressive and subversive writing that goes “against expectation by breaking some convention” (Waldrop “Alarms” 58). When questioned on her position concerning feminist writing, Waldrop insists, “I don’t want to write ‘about’ any issues, not even feminist ones ... [b]ut I think my feminist consciousness inevitably gets in (like my other assumptions)” (Waldrop “Alarms” 65). Waldrop makes clear that she does not wish to directly address any particular subject matter, yet at the same time is confident that whatever her focus, her interests will permeate the poetry.

Waldrop presents the argument that one must consciously produce form (or unconsciously reproduce form), whereas the content – one’s

“concerns and obsessions” (Waldrop “Alarms” 66) – will “get into the poem no matter what” (Waldrop “Alarms” 55). Feminist issues, for Waldrop, can be incorporated into the form without overtly writing “about” these issues. Her book of prose poetry, divided by numbered sections, with one prose section on each page, gives an example of such concerns:

11

Whenever you're surprised that I should speak
 your language I am suddenly wearing too many
 necklaces and breasts, even though feeling does not
 produce what is felt, and the object of observation is
 something else again. Not modulating keys, not
 the splash that makes us take to another element,
 just my body alarmingly tangible, like furniture
 that exceeds its function, a shape I cannot get
 around. (Waldrop *Lawns* 21)

In this poem the speaker, a woman, is addressing a man who is incapable of seeing her beyond her construction in the patriarchy as “object.” The female poet, inserting herself into patriarchal language, makes the reader aware of the female body as signifier of ornament and adornment. His glance reinscribes the patriarchal view that women constitute decorative bodies, rather than participating active subjects. The speaker threatens to disrupt the patriarchal objectification of her “alarmingly tangible” body by resisting and disrupting this inscription. She discovers, however, the difficulty this entails, as her body has been historically inscribed so that she cannot move without first exceeding its shape or function within traditionally male-defined discourse. Rather than simply attempting to escape this cramped space, Waldrop acknowledges the female body’s tangible object-ness, while at the

same time insisting it is also something else; something the observer has yet to comprehend because [he is] too occupied in the pursuit of the evasive image of desire. Waldrop also writes against the classical figure of Daphne fleeing her determined pursuer; the body in this piece is leadenly immovable, an unnoticed boulder suddenly in "your" eye, blocking the exit from which light, noticed or not, is escaping.

Waldrop relies on her words to convey this "message," and so focuses the reader's attention on the subversive shape of the words as they appear on the page. I use the word "subversive" not because Waldrop writes in prose rather than more traditional versed poetry, but because the connections and assumptions of each sentence suggest a feminist resistance as much or more than would an explicit or overt explanation. Were these words contextualized differently, they would not *mean* the same; the "sense" of each sentence is entirely dependent on its formal context.

Unlike Waldrop, Kathleen Fraser does not disrupt the contextual flow from sentence to sentence as a method of constructing meaning. Her prose poetry, *Each Next*, contains normative sentences, each one continuing within the proffered narrative.

I thought, at first, it was the presence of another woman between us ... I heard your exhaustion and imagined the crowded space inside your head, the women I keep company with there, each making her claim upon you ... I wondered how long we would remain fragments of a wholeness only guessed at. (Fraser *Each* 28).

The “joke” Fraser uses to propel the narrative forward is that of a woman who can only admit to herself that her fear of the “other woman” is actually the fear of her own demanding many selves, all struggling for attention. Writing within and against the journal form, Fraser explores the formal devices of such writing – the inclusion of daily and domestic details, the lack of definite conclusion, short fragmentary entries – in order to focus on the process of writing, rather than on writing as product. Fraser begins and ends this book with the word “notes.”¹⁶ Such bookending immediately foregrounds certain literary conventions and their generic crossings. The “poem” is represented by its title, “notes,” which introduces or echoes the “real” poems sandwiched between these two pieces. In the Introduction to a book of essays on the construction of feminine language, Fraser writes that women “can push against or extend the formal directives of a literature shaped by a poetics largely developed out of the experiences and pleasure principles of men writing” (Fraser “Taking” 7). Fraser understands this “pushing against” to occur both on the level of form as well as within the content of the poetry.

The first line of the first poem, “Dear other” (Fraser *Each* 11), also acknowledges the strategy of conflating genres in this writing; rather than mere notes, the poem is also to be read as letter or diary. In “Talking to myself talking to you,” Fraser takes on the conversational mode of addressing the poem’s listener and uses this form to foreground the question of who actually owns or controls the language with which one speaks. The subject, a “fragmented, less than perfect whole” (Fraser *Each* 30), becomes

¹⁶ The former she titles: “his. notes. new year,” and the latter: “Notes re: Echo.”

overwhelmed by her inability to deal with the predicament of her car breaking down and turns to her male lover for help. But language, although she employs it, shatters her confidence as she attempts to explain to him why she feels such fragmentation. The subject gives the details of both the breakdown – when, alone on the highway, she remembers an incident in the newspapers of a rape victim, smiling for the cameras from her hospital room – and the resultant argument that ensues between her lover and the car mechanic – which both relieves her and makes her feel even more inadequate.

Rather than explain these connections to the reader, Fraser merely inserts the words: “I smile for the camera” (Fraser *Each* 33) within a section where the narrator is talking solely to her lover, no camera in sight. The repeated sentence conflates the memory of the rape victim and the predicament of the woman whose lover uses his masculinity to intimidate both women and other men. By comparing only the one action of the two women, Fraser allows the reader to make comparisons between their lives and situations, and the men who overwhelm and dominate them. “I want to begin to talk to you,” she says at the end of the poem, having not yet successfully created a dialogue, “It is my politics. My love” (Fraser *Each* 34). There is no separation, then, for Fraser’s narrator, between love and politics, between a prose sentence and a line of poetry.

Fraser enacts this feminist assertion through the final sentence of the poem which turns on the possibility that this, too, is an address to her lover. “My love,” can be read as an extension of her attempt to write a more feminist, more assertive self, or as the salutation at the end of a letter she has not yet been able to begin. That inability to begin, to actually say what she

feels, is the contradiction that makes Fraser's contrary prose poem form so appropriate to her writing. That this form offers writers a mixed collection of "philosophy, myth, philanthropy, social theory, and political confrontation," according to Monroe, is "one of its greatest strengths" (Monroe 124).

Often, narratives that transparently express women's lives and personal experiences reinscribe the notion of emotional mimesis as transformative. The question of what kinds of discourse yield (or reject) what kinds of power is one Stein has pursued throughout much of her writing. Stein makes each word opaque in order to question the very transparency and universal availability of patriarchal language. "For Stein," says Monroe, "there is nothing in grammar which does not also imply *genre*" (Monroe 182). She states in her prose poem / essay, "Patriarchal Poetry":

Patriarchal Poetry their origin and their
 history their history patriarchal poetry their origin
 patriarchal poetry their history their origin
 patriarchal poetry their history patriarchal poetry
 their origin patriarchal poetry their history their
 origin.

That is one case. (Stein "Patriarchal" 115)

Stein makes, through the repetition of very few words, a forceful comment on the historical connection between patriarchy and traditional forms of poetry. Stein's repetitions also encourage the reader to acknowledge how the changing context of single words shifts how s/he reads those words. Stein, in fact, did not advocate the crossing and blurring of all generic boundaries as a simple means of generating new writing. Her collection of prose poems, *Tender Buttons*, is an attempt at rediscovering the unfamiliar in descriptions

of objects that have become too familiar. As Monroe has noted, the impact of the prose poem "has been reduced largely to that of a corrective. The verse lyric itself has by now absorbed virtually all of the prose poem's most prosaic motifs" (Monroe 28). This conjecture of the prose poem as a "corrective" is suggestive. The implication is that the lyric, and other traditional genres, may have already absorbed the prose-poem tactic of transgressing generic borders. If true, this, in effect, could render neutral its effectiveness as genre critique.

The gesture towards cross-generic writing has not disappeared so much as it has shifted. The prose poem's transgressions are both imitated by and absorbed into other genres. This indicates that its enduring advantage for writers is its innovative hybridity, a hybridity which – by recognizing and redefining literary limits – challenges and trespasses the very idea of limitation.

MORE EXCESS

the hymen in Greek antiquity

there is no hymen in Greek antiquity

**interpretation balances on the horizontal bruise. the
reversible sin. the concubinage inscription of lover**

zealous infatuation

scriptured obsession

mucous longing.

how to lick

**religion onto the tongue of the other. how to passion
an arousal out of closure. out of the original barrier
of first refusal**

**my spread fingers invite the conspiracy of your own.
the anxious history of anatomy. my lips collaborate
your confidence. my throat opens backwards to
expose**

**the legitimate pursuit of devotion remains the
pilgrimage equation of salvation. a contraption
invented to contain sacrifice**

no opening in the gap :

no confession

hymeneally-sealed commitment

days slip under my eyelids. under the skin beneath
my skin. my fingernails grow. my hair lengthens.
my lips repeat themselves. I acquire a taste for
already

card-stacked and wandering. a tunnelling into. half
then half again

by increments
by erotic suspense
by remote control

telephone lines strung across back alleys and grimy
stucco garages. the palm of your hand can be a
direction your whole body follows. technology
accompanies the word

an implication

my ambitious delight: lizard cravings

the cupped tip of your tongue licks my ankle. your
eyelash one moment from a bent regret. and bone

gossips the barest shelter of flesh

the wood remembers**i**

because certain musical habits get adopted by your
instrument of choice (Hermes's lyre, tortoise shell
and laurel branch). because wood glides into the
shelter of rehearsal. a lyric line that tempts
each
separate
note

a drop of saliva on my upper lip invites confusion.
you steal into my jeans pocket bruise my hip-bones
crack my ribs so suddenly. I hardly notice.

because the cruelty of desire

uncombs my hair, the ache inside my knee speaks out
loud. my back reacts to the *on hold* impression of
forearms. the body in hesitation

ii

**because the baggage of love coupled withdraws along
its own scripted lines. apathy of the foregone
conclusion. because melodies promise perfume in
another language**

the hallucination of sound

the sensual mirage

the repeat

blood currency romances the day into tomorrow

iii

inside the ear articulate molecules hurtle outwards.
obviously we replace muse-questions with gentler
tasks. how hunger can mean its opposite

I've witnessed ultrasound used for cleaning jewels,
for levitating solid objects of wood. I've believed in
technology

because *because* is a construct of music and
linguistics, a grammatical twist voicing its own
choral agenda. and hidden superlatives. words so
valuable we risk the asphyxiation of science, a habit
of neglect

a lip, tucked under

**a lower lip means so much more than obsession.
more than protruding invitations. a liP that curls
back into a bubble pronounces its own ending**

**I've witnessed the back of his hand
pause
at the touch of air. I've witnessed his skin
glide the edge between body
and notbody**

his erased scalp confused me

**only friends get close enough to baggage love with
the scar that interrupts your left eyebrow. a gap
between follicles that announces a transcription of
injury**

**your body replaces the surface of his palimpsest skin
I balance more than 2 faces at a time**

your erased scalp confused me

another red spade

and every goosebump lips its own orgasm. skin we
define as organ we define as music or part of the
body

in heaven we don't recognize the *heave*, the *even*.
the *he* that opens meaning

names don't fit the trebleclef tattoo on your lungs.
gone is the autographed membrane severing inner
from outer

 how to breathe without changing directions
 how to swallow

the risk of repression is to risk again

and your name that used to be his. exhales

stranglehold

Suzette plants tulips in my back, decorates my
shoulders with a pulse of daffodils, the footsteps of
lady's slippers

her dad builds volcanoes that erupt in his back alley.
boils larva on the kitchen stove

through my car windshield, a triangulation of cute
bald women and stoned young men on stilts

as alienated woman trudges through snow, carts a
huge flower box – triangular and unfilled – in front
of her chest, the time-&-motion man puts on his
watch, preparing to calculate a minor expedition

notice the thick snake – a grey scarf – wrapped
around an otherwise exposed throat. we encourage
that leaked detail. butterflies anachronistic in winter

sanguine interruption

a painting on the decayed wall displays a celebration
of skeletons. one, a clown, wears a priest's collar,
overly fleshed and rouged next to the grey bone of
the others

his lips brush crimson against the canvas

he looks like death with his
white painted face his
round arched eyebrows his
crosses for eyes and his
lips, his
lips
aim out for a kiss

the light through my windshield changes; I shift
gears

strangely-held

her first gift was a set of Chinese *rin no tan* balls. a
marbled couple I warm inside my hands then fit
exquisitely into my vagina

the ripe pleasure of fingers pulsing vulva

her second gift was her body. this took more time.
she lowered herself onto my mouth limb by limb. a
murmur of rock dropped into

a companion of mate. a trick
of neglect

the reed like paper
for Fred & Susan

i

with Radical Sunday never more than a day away,
how to repeat *I want* without the words. I need *ohne*
here, the deep O in my chest rivals the nipple behind
my rib-cage. hidden there

mine is invisible but the sign of the witch continues.
a 3rd nipple

I am waiting for a lover, too clever for his own
words, to suck on my insides. to search and to
search with his rare tongue for that delicate pathway
of nerve endings, of blood intelligence

ii

she told me she won't wait for anyone, the woman
with the purple eyebrows. her own rib-cage
promises multiple clitorises I can only imagine

and today is Monday. and today is Saturday

I lost my watch on the tracks of the LRT but it
perpetuates *-tick-tick-tick-* inside metal strips of
avenue

she stretches one thin and purple line above the other
and disappears. invisibles my choice, my expectation

I want her desire and
the C-train directs me: look both ways
the day breaks sound

iii

**a caught bird refuses the ritual of rehearsal notes,
then bursts apart when offered an orthodox melody**

precision damages the body

**and you are that lover predicted by your textured
self, while I inherit an appetite for impatience**

hoodoo wanderings

i

yesterday on the bus an old woman punched at the window. her fist *thump-thump*-ed until the teenage boy sitting next to her yanked it open. no, she said

she wanted the music

and then my two nephews in East Coulee scattered themselves all over the Badlands. Granddaddy Hoodoo squatted on the edge of borrowed land, observed their toes, and the laundry

my sister bakes bread and serves it with peanut butter and drums. I rode the prairies from 10:00 am till the sun squished below the car's visor and streaked my eyes cardinal and orange. the whole day the prairies. and dancing in the car with Paul Simon's saints

12 hours later the prairies in Calgary, my chest against highway hit the city an hour too soon. my eyes stone open, still I missed the Badlands

ii

that woman wasn't punching. I missed the rhythm
along with the other passengers. we all *tut-tutted*,
eager to help. not even the teenage boy recognized
her knuckles against window pane. I watched myself
kiss her wrinkled fingers, then got off next stop and
entered a coin wash. with a borrowed jacket but no
jeans I waited for the bus to circle the city, the driver
stopping at each *-ping-* and me not ever able to see
where the bus woman

disembarked. debussed. got off

promising adventure, my fingers ache where my eyes
can't see them, where I haven't drummed on a
window, where isn't the Badlands

please, I want Winnipeg to be busy and remember
me

payback i

whispered pennies, I said, laughing at your copper
voice. your voice in copper

we delivered the night talking investments and bank
securities. your fingers drip into my belly and my
tongue glances your earlobe, tastes the 2-dollar bill
traded for 200 pennies. you counted. one. one.
one. each coin wrapping its name around your
fingers

you weren't there, licking my belly, I was alone on
the balcony remembering purple popsicle sticks and
moaning. my cravings melted into the sidewalk;
chalk hopscotch and a dusty arrow of pebbles

there's always more space inside a number than a
prayer, inside a page, or a sentence

I long for Freud's homesickness of love. whereas
you sit sideways during passion, just for a trace of
her lip whistle

payback ii

that memory was nipped with desire. one penny per
eyelid. you didn't suggest it, but I began counting
from 198

no articulation, so how to represent sorrow with the
end-rhymes mate/fate/wait. the masculine of the full-
stop, the delivery

last favours are always closer than the eardrum. and
no rate of exchange will ever be high enough to buy
back 2 pennies of ambition

the last of August**i**

remnants. of sun. of that insidious optimism. of
you. yesterday I began reading fairy tales. they are
only possible when I begin, again, to believe in
winter. Hansel & Gretel and Snow White and Red
Riding Cap

ii

I discover that in the original version (or at least the earliest recorded), the wolf gets away with swallowing little Red Cap whole. no woodcutters stand by, no stones in that belly, no revenge. I have cold chicken for supper and, after, I walk and I walk until I no longer think about not thinking about you. and it's ridiculous, I know, but I never have claimed not to be ridiculous, so I turn around and walk back home and recite ridiculous rhymes to myself

sentimental	:	everpental
resolution	:	caroplusion
group dynamics	:	scoop-eye-lamics

and am
pleased that every single one is a feminine rhyme and
thus makes perfect sense

iii

**but really what I'd like is to go backwards I decide
during the night. reverse my whole life so it's one
endless stream of yesterdays. a fairy tale gone crazy.
August. July. I'm in Red Deer again. I'm in L.A.
I'm in your arms again. we haven't met**

**good evening, I pronounce to the building manager
as I leave the next morning. well, it's a start**

Yvonne & Debbie at Value Village

i

Yvonne wears bracelets in her hair. the metal clink-clinks from

a mile away. my sister, walking

at Value Village she shops garbage bags full of 50s neckties. long-johns she dyes purple then wears them under grey dresses. before the silver I braided Yvonne's hair, 108 times, then she cycled the continent

Debbie works at Value Village and wears her hair in corn-rolls. copper and black. I'm Debbie, she says to me and I hold out my hand

Yvonne holds out maternity pants, fat elastics in front. Debbie shakes her head. stick with dresses, she says, flaps her own dress in and out. in summer a person needs all the air she can get

silver spins my sister's face

Debbie has two kids. asthma so bad she hauls them to hospital every weekend. from their dad, she nods copper. though he won't claim it. he doesn't have asthma but all his brothers' kids do. Yvonne shakes her head and silver clinks silver

Debbie's father disowns her when she's born with 12 fingers

ii

she shows off the burnt black spots at the joint of both baby fingers. no bone, she says, just limp flesh and transparent nails. she rubs one scar

one of her dad's uncles and both his sisters were born with 12 fingers; her mom punched her dad in the mouth

Debbie spreads her remaining fingers wide. right after, Debbie's mom cut those other two off fast, but, she still feels them cold in winter

the country that used to be Ceylon

because it is fall we don't sleep beneath nets. still,
you get a rash all over. mom can't decide if the bites
are from ants or lizards. I know better. one of the
waiters, a young man, secretly leaves chocolate and
coconut by your bed. and you sleep through your
own eating

two things in the world my brother is allergic to:
chocolate and coconut. bites. and the waiter, I
believe, goes empty-handed home to his three
children, having stolen nothing

less than three weeks later I am travelling airports,
disappearing Sri Lanka. into Taiwan, Hong Kong,
Tokyo, Hawaii. you sleep there and there and there.
you mouth succulent words into the unsettled night

in the country that used to be Ceylon, boys sleep with
guns next to their temples. in Canada, my brother
[no. you, asleep] dreams tonight of coconut

to travel inside schoolyards

the hardest is you in grade two. two times faster
 than grade one. or *langsam*. teachers always grade
 on a curve. and forget about who falls into the
 middle. curvature. curvilinear. the curious thing is
 I never have trouble getting the accent to recede

plain lucky, I guess

guess again, you say, take my hands and swing them
 high over your head. when the bell rings everyone
 crowds the doors, pack ourselves in. the boys' line
 up, and the girls'. curtains, you say

you say curtailed, and I mispronounce you. our
 teacher wears purple, a different shade monday-
 tuesday-wednesday-thursday-friday. figures, you
 say. figures add up. and curses

WE'VE HAD ENOUGH

the we catches my voice surprised against your neck,
 your hands cured

cursed again you say. your words want what they
 get

that old joke

**white fire in your belly fingers toenails. I clutch at
old letters, read them, read them. out loud**

on this the day of our daily

**when you call I caress the cradle of the telephone, the
plastic receiver. my fingers tap-stroke the letters on
my push-button apparatus. I am reversing it into one
of numbers**

fire

**across the street from your house, a new church.
half catholic, half protestant. you say it represents
progress. I think of my father's old joke. a nun
faints when one of her novice's claims she wants to
grow up to be a prostitute. turns out the nun thought
the girl said *protestant***

fainted at the word

**there's something I have to tell you. surely, there's
something I should tell**

**the church is faded brick and a roof that slopes down
to the grass. I am always surprised to see it still
intact**

**tomorrow I will call you. my breath hot on the
mouthpiece. the telephone against your parched
ears. my fire, my faith**

cunt magic

but not just words. the cunning of my vulva. the
threat of my protruding belly. your finger glances
past my nipple. my clitoris spell-binds. magics you
away

ugly, old

after the movie we walk back to your place. hags of
hollywood, you say. the women so ancient, made to
look young again. pubescent. why don't they just
retire, you say. dry up

slip don't slide, honey honey
my rat
's nest with bee
's-wax, honey honey
slice me apart

wedge-shaped

**your cum leaks, honey. over the blankets, honey.
the movie still happening in my**

I am ugly

I am old

I play spillikin with your sperm

*so why not a sizzle?
why not a jazz here – broken in the centre
of this sentence
's curved breath?
where's the punch-line line?
where's the day-old day?*

wicce's wand

**this morning a magic square appears in the
newspaper. numbered letters. my black hair startles
your blond legs. the cumulative risk of vulva &
clitoris & vaginal lips. I throw out the paper before
you wake**

here:

**taste this ugly, taste
this old**

ovarian

I want to write *her breasts were like... breasts.*
yeah. good opening to a country be-bop

you weren't there when that poet walked into the
microphone, his mouth on the words *i'm feeling*
clitoral, today, he said in lowercase, *i'm feeling very*
clitoral

clinical – clitical? – analysis of poetic diatribe: how
to metaphor away anatomy. how to invisible muscles
and blood vessels and veins and capillaries

shut down the body

4. The Vice in Voice: Genre, Genericity, Degenerescence

Odysseus flees the cyclops. Once he and his men have stolen out of the cave, they run towards the relative safety of the ship, and cast off. Intoxicated with hubris, Odysseus cannot resist calling out his real name to his captor. This angers Polyphemus more; he has been previously warned about Odysseus. Infuriated, the giant hurls the top of a mountain into the sea and nearly capsizes the ship. Polyphemus is no mere giant, he is the son of a god. Cheated and damaged, he prays to his father that Odysseus's trip will take many years and, when Odysseus finally returns to his home, he will return to terrible troubles. Poseidon grants his son's wishes, although it is, again, Odysseus who perpetuates his own delay. By untying a sack of fierce winds within sight of his homeland, Odysseus releases not only the gales and gusts he needs in order to return home swiftly, but also demonstrates that he must be ill-favoured by the gods.

I am using the classical narrative of Odysseus and the Cyclops as a way of positioning my own narrative intentions. I use this famous story as a device to enter an established discourse, and then change and redirect that discourse. Context is everything. I return, in this section of poetry, to a much more narrational syntax and grammar. Perhaps, given my fascination with disjunctive poetry, this section is my translation of disrupted syntax into story. More likely, it is a chance to explore the impact dysjunctive¹⁷ poetry has on narrative glimpses, and the importance of story to longer poems.

¹⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Wiseman for the coining of this term, just in time for the writing of my dissertation.

What makes a sentence a line of poetry rather than an excerpt from an essay or novel? The answer, partly, is the surrounding words and sentences, the pages, even the book jacket. The cyclops, with his third eye, has conflated the binary of dual focus into one single beam of blocked perception. By destroying that orifice, Odysseus also destroys the connection between sight and perception, the doorway separating inside and outside. The cyclops, day-dreaming of revenge, creates instead an episodic narrative of exits and returns, of arrival and continuing deferral.

Rather than presenting another either/or binary, I wish to invent an isosceles triangle. Many of the poems in the section "out of context" (125) have appeared, in changed form, in other texts. I began this section as a reappraisal of poems earlier abandoned. Then I began to experiment with pieces that appeared, successfully, elsewhere, and to attempt a new reading / writing by inserting them into this much altered prose poetry structure. "platypus love" (141), for example, began as sections from a novel, an equation of fiction that left no room for poetry format or peculiar punctuation. Once I had repositioned those sections inside this poetry format, their own internal logic shifted and metamorphosed. "caramel in the dark" (152) began as a page from a short story with characters and names (not just pronouns) and setting and even plot. The shift, here, onto the language rather than the events forced a rereading on my part of a dynamics that I had not *seen* before: jazz and cadence and alliteration and other ear games. The shift, in these poems, is not so much from one text to another as from the eye to the ear. The third eye is not only a way of seeing, but a way of hearing.

Writers often inadvertently perpetuate the very ideological assumptions they wish to challenge. By upholding particular forms and

structures, writers invariably reinforce ideologies these structures bring with them. However, writers who challenge traditional forms can, and do, also appropriate the forms for their own use, often changing not only the content historically associated with the form, but also changing and determining the form itself. By designating a piece of writing prose poetry, the critic (or writer or reader) is commenting on how an individual text fits into a wider context of reading. A specific text, originally considered to be a poem, may be influenced and changed by prose and narrative strategies. Prose poetry may be read as a "new" genre which breaks the laws of two established "legal" categories but upholds the "law" of genre that insists on categorization as a method for reading text. Prose poetry may also be read as a "cross" genre, a unique and perfect mix of two already established categories that offers new readings of each while still leaving the original categories intact for further definitions. For example, in my poem, "-ily ever after" (132), I shift the responsibility for narrative from fiction onto a disrupted syntax of continuance.

Individual members of a particular genre always signal the limits and excesses that these boundaries are capable of containing. Accordingly, a critic's (or writer's, or even reader's) decision that a particular text will or will not fit into a particular genre is a legislation of inclusion and exclusion; that which also identifies a text within a genre, identifies the cultivation of that same genre. Members of a genre reinvent the very categories within which they have been located.

As texts exceed what Todorov calls "anachronistic" limits of genre hierarchies, they redefine and recreate generic structures. He notes that "it is not 'genres' that have disappeared, but the genres of the past, and they have

been replaced by others" (Todorov 160). Carla Harryman, in her book-length series of prose poems, *Vice*, inserts, early in the book, the following exhortations:

Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres.

I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them. (4)¹⁸

This quotation is from Jacques Derrida's essay, "The Law of Genre," in which he posits that genre, by default, forces a legal or institutionalized definition of classification; definitions, like laws, are an arbitrary poetics. Harryman repeats Derrida's words without citing their author as part of her project to "mix" genres in *Vice*. By making the reader believe she has written those words herself (as most readers will assume¹⁹), she is challenging the notion of genre as a legal apparatus which encourages copyright. Harryman invokes this law, then immediately calls it into question. Her initial declarative statement that she "not mix genres" can be read as *following* the order of genres, but also as breaking of the law the very moment she restates it.

¹⁸ I realize that font choices are often a signal more of economics than of politics. However, I suspect Harryman's (and her publisher's) use of a courier typeface – in this computer age where virtually every publishing package comes with several font selections – means to suggest to readers the prose of journalism (as well as a nostalgic association with typewriters) within the mixed-genre texts of this book. And so I present quotations from her text in that jarring font to represent the original courier typeface.

¹⁹ Although there is no textual marking to delineate this section as words written by anyone other than herself, Harryman, taking on the "problem" of genre in this book, is also aware of how widely and often this article of Derrida's is quoted from or referred to in discussions about genre.

Harryman's *Vice* invokes problems of genre because it refuses a fixed label and instead intermixes and integrates normally rigid writing categories into one text. She offers her readers a text that both upsets the "natural" order of genre and also upsets the "framing" of disorder, in order to reinforce already existing laws: "This framing," says Harryman, "creates an illusion of social cohesion while the images themselves directly contradict the hallucination" (55). It is this contradiction which concerns Harryman; she is concerned by its continued influence on what Derrida would call the "genericity" of deviation (231).

For Harryman, in her restructuring of genre identifications, recognizing a genre's known borders is only one step towards overstepping the line. For Derrida, recognizing the lines one should or should not overstep, becomes a question of how literary critics institutionalize and engage with various writing styles through genre, and how notions of genre both resist and reinforce such institutionalization.²⁰

In Harryman's *Vice*, her intertextuality, from one literary discourse to another (from Derrida's essay to Harryman's poetry), upsets the lawfulness of genre. Harryman wants to complicate the textual commotion she herself is implicated in creating. "I get worried about the material I'm generating" (54), she declares, emphasizing her own anxiety about perpetuating a textual machinery that will continue to produce "category,"

²⁰ "Institution" in the sense of institutionalized literary criticism; Derrida's philosophical and textual musings also form a critique of academic discussions in which the analysis of literature is consumed by a tradition of scholars erecting and enforcing genre laws.

even from texts which struggle to articulate an antonymous relationship to genre categorization.

Harryman does not simply “mix” one genre with another, but calls into question the notion of genre itself. What Harryman’s *Vice* does to the theory of genre is not extraneous textual play – displaced politics that Theresa Ebert calls “postmodern ludic”²¹ – but an interrogation of reading and writing strategies and how those strategies encourage textual stability. What is the usefulness, questions Harryman’s book, for a poet to adhere to recognized rules which divorce one kind of writing from another?

“Vice,” a metonymic transgeneric gesture, engages the intentional articulation and the “voicing” of self and subjectivity. The confusion of pronouns in these pieces reverses the authority of the first person, becomes one of poetic response to and responsibility for the social situation of genre selection. In anticipating the conventions of reception which inform the context of lyric address, Harryman rereads and recontextualizes these pieces rather than fulfilling their expected poetic outlines. She is attempting to formulate (for herself as well as for her reader) a language that will allow her not only to break the law, not only to create new laws, but to question the authority and infallibility of generic legislation.

²¹ Referring to “dominant postmodern theories,” Theresa Ebert criticizes them for “ludic” language exploits that “have problematized the notion of politics and rearticulated it as solely a cultural politics: that is, as a language-effect” (Ebert 6). Ebert, in her argument, does not recognize as legitimate an ideological feminist poetry – such as Harryman’s – which responds with a politics of play to and against the socio-political history underpinning predominantly male-centred forms.

The lyric moment in Harryman's *Vice* is disturbed *as* it is presented, not *after* it has already been fixed as belonging to a generic code or pattern. Disrupting the notion of the page and the space lyrics usually occupy, Harryman offers, early in the book (7-9), a lyric poem that conforms to formal rules. Harryman addresses the formal presentation of a lyric on the page: instead of aligning her left-justified margin close to the spine of the book and surrounding it with white space, she pushes her stanzas to the centre of the page and interrupts a usually blank space with a series of single dots corresponding to each written line. Harryman also, within the words themselves, responds to the "limitations" she regards in the lyric as genre:

- But they make
- a mistake in a fictional
- maneuvering of limits
- Suddenly scared as killers
- who enshrine them in the
- motif, they find themselves
- the blank dummies of a
- genre (7)

Unwilling to accept the lyric speaking voice as a singular unified and non-narrative being, Harryman disobeys the generic rules of lyric which insist there be a focus on a speaking voice and he/r individual thoughts or feelings rather than on a disjunctive evasive prose which risks unfocussed narrative.

In a short intertextual fragment, Harryman presents this Olson line: "All my life I've heard / one makes many" (22, oblique and

quotation marks hers)²². At the same moment that she invokes the tradition of a speaking voice, she exceeds its membership in a poetic genre by marking (and so *remarking*) the voice with prose punctuation. Likewise, by including the "slash," she effects a prose representation of poetic expression. This exhibition of the technical contradictions of a poetical notation within a prose genre displays for the reader the context surrounding the text.

The designation which separates two categories from each other by its very existence also connects them. "The trait common to these classes is precisely the identifiable recurrence of a common trait by which one recognizes, or should recognize, a membership in a class" (Derrida 228). That the distinction between known and recognized genres can be marked, indicates interconnections between and within these very genre distinctions. These demarcations, categories labelled as separate and precise, may well perpetuate notions of genre blending and boundary blur, whereas texts that have some claim on bending and confusing the notion of strict genre adherence may well reinscribe genre laws and distinctions.

As soon as genre announces itself, says Derrida, "one must respect a norm," (Derrida 224). To disrespect this ideal norm, to cross over the line of demarcation into the generic badlands, accommodates the notion of an ideal genre containing all genres. Derrida recognizes the paradox that genre-mixes reconstruct genre, yet he does not elaborate on a self-generating formal innovation. Mixing and erasing genre markers involves recognizing and breaking the history that has established those markers as genre laws. Carla

²² This is the epigraph to Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. New York: Jargon/Corinth Books, 1960.

Harryman, writing against the notion of homogeneous or absolute inclusion, attempts to negotiate genre law as an ideology that traps form into conformity: her "text," a virtual catalogue of – and so, also, a subversion of – transgeneric writing, "internalizes" the contradictions of sorting through what poetry is and what it is not. The argument against generic "laws" (by either Harryman or Derrida) is *not* that all boundaries should be blurred or abolished altogether, but that even texts which attempt to exceed these boundaries paradoxically fulfill the laws of their (often multiple) generic classifications. Making visible the demarcation of a genre does not do away with borderlines, but it does recognize literary genre as construct.

"Genre," instead of welcoming new writing forms which elaborate the category to which they belong, insists on anachronistic specialization. Instead of anticipating the future, genre categories reflect on prior distinctions. That contemporary texts need adjectival monikers such as: "biographical" novel, "creative" essay, "nonfiction"²³ or "prose" poetry, indicates the present difficulty of quintessential genre. Yet the unstable boundaries of genre often encourage readers to cling to given or known limits even more stubbornly.

The implication of writing "prose" poetry (or any other cross-boundaried genre) is one of an exhaustion of terminal definition. The law of genre is the law of the general which absorbs specific members into the whole, legislates similarity and commonality, and convicts individual texts which manage to surpass these absorptions as being somehow deviant. The law is also destination: arrival, rather than departure, suggesting closure,

²³ "Much in the way we have nonfiction," says poet Xi Chuan, "there are now what can be considered nonpoetry poems" (talk delivered).

ending, destiny, and recognition. Future and unrecognizable developments or adaptations remain illegal, unscripted, unmentionable, and so belong to the artistic “vice” of textual outlaws.

The prose poem, for me, does not fixate on one way of writing over the other, but invents a third possibility. I write poetry. I write fiction (translation: prose). Prose poetry is so obviously poetry, the statement *seems* to need no explanation and no critical defense: poets write prose poems, novelists don’t. Not to say that novelists (or short storyists, or essayists) *can’t*²⁴, but only that the writing of a novel extends itself into other arenas besides the short page-oriented poetics of a prose poem. On the other hand (in the other eye), the conventional tactics of poetry, such as line breaks, disappear in the prose poem and are replaced by fictional tactics, such as narrative. The appeal of the prose poem, to me, is that I can focus (visually speaking) on language play and the materiality of the word, while drifting into “story.” Or, I can begin a poem with a fictionlike first sentence, then break off into puns and rhyme and fragmented and disjunctive language.

Last year, I received a writing contest announcement in the mail. The contest had two categories, one for a “postcard story,” and the other for a “prose poem.” The first was designated: “A work of narrative fiction in 500 words or less” (*Grain*), and the second: “A lyric poem written as prose paragraph in 500 words or less.” I find these confusing, yet revealing, designations. I have no quarrel with the first category (though I might if I

²⁴ Margaret Atwood, for example, has written a perfectly fine collection of prose poetry, *Murder in the Dark*. She chooses this form as a strategy for exploring certain poetic ploys, tricks, tactics, rather than as a rewriting of the novel genre.

were ever to write a story onto an actual postcard), but the second intrigues me. Intrigues because of its blatant refusal to recognize the history of poets who have written prose poems *not* in the lyric tradition. And the contest description also insists the poem be “written as a prose paragraph(s)” [sic]. It must at least *look* like a paragraph, looks being all important to poetry, and poets in general²⁵.

By reexamining form, the writer not only acknowledges the “social space” – a term Fredric Jameson uses to historicize “heterogeneous narrative overtones” (Jameson 179) – surrounding that particular form, but s/he self-reflexively reexamines the context of form, thus creating an inherent instability in the notion of genre itself. “The critical reader,” Mary Gerhart says of how one relegates a text into one category or another, “comes to a text with some generic and gender expectations already in hand” (Gerhart 194). She argues for an “understanding [of] genre not merely as a means of classification but as a principle of knowing,” (Gerhart 7-8). Gerhart is dissatisfied with genre theory which merely identifies or perpetuates already oppositional inclusion/exclusion either/or binaries.

Early in *gIFTS*, an extension of the eight-book-length poem *The Martyrology* by bpNichol, the prose poem “Some Nets,” proposes a three-part narrative consisting of alternating italics, small caps, and regular fonts. The punctuation marks, more than invisible markers, participate in the narrative unfolding on the page. The oblique marks separate and join the phrases, as do

²⁵ This emphasis on the visual is also Russell Edson’s argument, when he states that “[s]uperficially, a prose poem should look somewhat like a page from a child’s primer, indented paragraph beginnings, justified margins” (101).

the parenthetical asterisks. Nichol makes obvious to the reader that punctuation can interrupt at the same time as it perpetuates a text. This first section makes it impossible not to see the punctuation: the sentences become stutters made up of fragmented language, and the fragments become the sentences that push the narrative on “& on” (Nichol unpaginated). The excessive commotion of language and change in *gIFTS* breaks down the idea of separate genres. “Some Nets” makes visible the invisible: one can “read” the punctuation, the syntactic directions urging the reader onwards into language. The problem, with such prose, is to know when to stop:

three days after (*) *the lightning hit it / or the beat,*
 (*) *check this, i can play around it, with it, there /*
what's left of () the barn (*) still smoulders in the*
sun / unresolved () notes or chords, should've*
been of wood, () paper, burning / sending clouds of*
smoke across () the highway / dislocating /*
darkness / son / i awoke into () / nets / hearing*
the voices from the Fire Hall across the lake () / i*
 remember this, angry, i thot it was a party, felt
 foolish / (gIFTS unpaginated)

How to read such prose that insists on its own unreadability? If one reads the asterisks out loud, why not the parentheses which contain them? Then why not the oblique marks? The italics? The commas? The lowercase “i”? Nichol makes the reader aware of he/r own responsibility in the poem, shows the transparency of prose. And if one were to “read through” the punctuation marks, ignoring the disruptions of the syntactical markings, the reader would then be actively and consciously editing the piece as s/he goes,

participating in what Denise Levertov describes as the writing process, in which “[e]ar and eye, intellect and passion, interrelate” (Levertov 315).

Eluding or erasing generic boundaries is hardly the point; as soon as one crosses a line, one re-marks the solidity of that line, revealing exactly that which one has just betrayed. But to shift the focus of genre theory away from the line dividing two extremes to the event of crossing or erasing or underlining that line, refocuses and reinvests this theory with the opportunity of contradiction: “The re-mark of belonging does not belong” (Derrida 230). In other words, marking a genre makes that genre opaque, whereas *re*marking upon the genre belongs to a separate category or action than the one remarked upon. For example, designating a text as prose poetry implies that it has certain markings, grammar, sentence, punctuation, etc., which are recognized as general principles of prose classification. But the designation itself does not “take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts” (Derrida 230).

In this case, the text is being considered as a poem influenced and changed by prose and narrative strategies, or as a “new” genre (breaking the laws of two established “legal” categories, but upholding the “law” of genre that insists on categorization as a method for reading any text), or as a “cross” genre, a unique and perfect mix of two already established categories that offers new readings of each while still leaving the original categories intact for further definitions.

The position of sentences is what matters in prose: hidden in a lyric line, the sentence no longer operates as prose, but as breath articulation. Nichol’s prose pieces – and their interruptive capacity in *gIFTS: The Martyrology Books 7&* – engage with the book as a whole and, with the other

pieces, posit a fragmentary disjunctive poetics. Each sentence replicates the generative push of a disjunctive poetic series that anticipates the next line/sentence/stanza while at the same moment denying closure. Sentences in prose generate more sentences. In the context of poetry, as these sentences have little recourse in climax or dénouement, they do not know where to end.

The act of separating is itself an act of joining. What is important to remember about sequences of sentences (or poem series, or even television shows) is that whatever connects the sequence also divides it. In a poem, this means the numbers or dots at the top of each stanza not only signal union but also division: the whole of the poem equals its disparate parts yet its parts remain disparate. Reading (or writing), one cannot achieve the whole picture, because the view is fragmented. In a poem, the syntax which surrounds and contextualizes a sentence separates it from other poetic devices as well as joining them together, in form as well as disposition.

This suggests a reevaluation of how one reads, of the strategies one brings to a text in order to make sense of the signifiers, their signifieds, and of the social space that surrounds isolated texts. Derrida specifies this artificial isolation as “consisting of the framing edge, without content, without modal or generic boundaries” (Derrida 242). For Jameson, the framing edge (for example, a peasant dance transforming into a minuet) “continues to emit its ideological signals long after its original content has become historically obsolete” (Jameson 186). The paradox Jameson reveals is that generic categories themselves dissolve into “historical contradictions” or “sedimented ideologemes” (Jameson 145). Form, then, continues to construct

content, without necessary acknowledgement of the specific historical space within which a particular form developed.

Stories speak to other stories, because narrative constructs a dialogue of continuance. George Bowering, in his collection of prose poems that are also critical essays, *Errata*, maintains: "Of course any text is an intertext" (Bowering 3). Derrida suggests intertextual citation as an "appropriate" response to the enforcement of genre law; for example, those laws surrounding re-citation imply "all sorts of contextual conventions, precautions and protocols in the mode of reiteration, of coded signs such as quotation marks or other typographical devices" (Derrida 226). This suggestion operates on the level of "contamination" (Derrida 226) in that genres, constantly and unendingly, contaminate and infect each other's barriers and extremes.

Maria Damon, in her essay, "Tell Them about Us," begins with a framing of her own unease in discussing young, underprivileged women: "what does it mean, my telling the story of the dark end of the street of poetic exile – *in order to* move into the power bloc of academia?" (4). Damon has decided, in this essay and in her recent book, that it is necessary for her (and others) to tell "a" truth, as this is how to "generate discourse about the nondiscursive, about the un-discourse-able" (5). By replicating these young poets' words, and presenting academically-generated discourse around the writing, Damon is refusing to dismiss the poetry as "raw material" considered authentically and socially "less than" (253) the more lyrically conventional or avant-garde poetry usually discussed in critical journals.

"For the girls," writes Damon in the introductory section of this essay within her book, "any sense of subjectivity must be inextricably bound up

with economic and sexual subjection" (78). Most of the poems she has copied here express a hopelessness about their proscribed situations. This is a hopelessness based on lack of economic autonomy and a sense of sexuality based not on sensual expression but on the social consequences (pregnancy, abortions, etc.) of sexual action. Teenyboppers, and other subcultural "groups" of girls, are trained early on to look for love and, consequently, idealized versions of marriage. "The small, structured and highly manufactured space that is available for ten to fifteen year old girls to create a personal and autonomous area," writes Angela McRobbie, "seems to be offered only on the understanding that these strategies also symbolize a future general subordination" (221). Girls are allowed fantasies of romance and adventure in that these narratives actually reinforce the ideal of family life that we need and expect women to desire in order to perpetuate society's paradigms. Unlike the conventional representation of white middle-class teenage girls, the poetry of these three women seems to construct a much more bleak self-awareness of their particular situation. Maria Damon's inclusion of such poetry in her book on American vanguard writing ("*The Child Who Writes / The Child Who Died*" in *the dark end of the street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*), contextualizes these poets' desires and allows them literal space on the periodical page for the expression of their desires.

Damon's insistence on designating these poems within a modernist and postmodernist discourse, her insistence that these poems are *not* "crude and naive artifacts of a more 'natural' Other" (Damon 252) forces a defensiveness of otherness that, in its attempt to argue the poems out of this construct, she herself perpetuates within the structure of the argument.

Linda Alcoff argues in her essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," that "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" (Alcoff "Problem" 7). An example, perhaps, would be Damon's inclusion of the girls' handwriting "in order" she says "to recreate as closely as possible, for the benefit of the academic reader ... the transcultural experience" (Damon 232n) of handwriting that is "startling, scrawled in ballpoint pen" (232). Unlike Damon, I react no more and no less viscerally to Charlotte's poetry than to Susan's. Perhaps Damon is speaking *about*, rather than speaking *for*.

What I admire most about Damon's article is that her essay seriously attempts to write critically about a poetic language generated by young working class women. In my reading around this subject, although I could find little that has been written about urban poverty and the female teen experience, there is *no* discursive writing at all that takes up and addresses poetry not considered to be somehow engaged in high culture (either academic, traditional lyric, or avant-garde) standards. By contextualizing an argument about these poems within her discursive book on avant-garde poetics, Damon is speaking out for a critical language that may address specific overlooked contexts and *à côté*-avant-garde poetics.

Given the struggle these girls have to write what they *know* is "poetry," what would it mean to turn a poem inside-out? What does the reverse of poem mean? How can one write its opposite? Changing a poem's context critically shapes its reception by a particular audience. Writers who challenge genre categorization are interested in the project of affecting a text's literary reception.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Pink Guitar* is subtitled, "Writing as Feminist Practice," and makes the overt effort to be both writing and writing about. Her "essays" range from feminist criticism of such male poets as William Carlos Williams (and how feminist reader-critics are in turn "read by" the modernist agenda) to criticism which celebrates poets such as Susan Howe's poetic/prose/critical project which uses a notion of the "feminine" position from which to "launch an anti-authoritarian struggle" (DuPlessis *The Pink Guitar* 135). As well, DuPlessis offers creative/critical analysis of her own feminist agenda for contemporary female poets. Her essays range from poetic to fictional to something undefined, genres still promised, Nobodies as yet unnamed.

That these essays can exist and remain, within their cross-genre status, *essays*, speaks loudly to my project. Not only do I wish my poems to be critical analyses of literary binaries and conditions, but I want for them – loud and clear – to make visible the formative capacity of imposed structure. Let me offer, for example, this "prose poem" by bpNichol:

It is an old man's story. He stores these memories up as words, excused by phrases. Different phases linked by such coherences as give them meaning. Never clear. How many years of mornings, asked this evening, under the street lamp on Admiral Road? No one to hear as I did, not voice it loudly, except to you: in your deafness, in your proud listening. (*Martyrology* 3, paragraph formation mine).²⁶

²⁶ The version in Nichol appears in this form:

This is not, of course, Nichol's poem. His comes lineated and without the capitals. But my proud listening hears prose in the most dedicated of line breaks, just as I seem to be able to read lineated verse into obvious rectangular-prose poems.

Here, in an opposite way, is a similar example from Karen Mac Cormack:

To make sensual what is public
 freed from socks
 the creaking of the floor
 every sort of
 punctual
 on the morning those
 looking both ways
 for Sunday observe our own mark of rehearsal
 four apart
 well known
 the running is not a place of post
 to which replies. (20, line breaks mine)²⁷

it is an old man's story
 he stores these memories up as words excused by phrases
 different phases linked by such coherences as give them meaning
 never clear
 how many years of mornings
 asked this evening
 under the street lamp on admiral road
 no one to hear as i did not voice it loudly
 except to you in your deafness
 in your proud listening

²⁷ Here is Mac Cormack's version:

This sentence operates as a full paragraph on the page, yet holds inside its structure a rebuttal of how spoken grammar behaves: the trying does not halt, but continues on. These poems, like the genres they write around and within, refuse to accept captivity within the permanent structure of either sentence or line, but break out into breaths and words and images captured between interim climaxes. Obviously, changing the look of a poem changes the way eyes read them. But I offer these "translations" not simply as exercises to demonstrate how a poem can be rewritten through form alone, but to present my own process of reading disparate writing.

Enclosing all these diverse forms within the same "book" suggests the impermanence of fixed formal structure locked onto an individual page. The *Martyrology* is a series of books excessively avoiding closure. Within Nichol's prose, there is the suggestion that the sentence occupies an equal position of compositional unit; the sentence, as syntactical climax, becomes the aesthetic moment. As in chess, the invisible rules of grammar are made visible by the motion of a piece; the *process* of writing displays the consequences.

In *The Book of Hours*, Nichol, at the same time as he writes grief, includes a meta-commentary on writing *through* that grief. This year, it is this word "through" I am learning. How do you get to the other end when

To make sensual what is public
 freed from socks the creaking of the
 floor every sort of punctual on the
 morning those looking both ways for
 Sunday observe our own mark of
 rehearsal four apart well known the
 running is not a place of post to
 which replies.

you don't believe in ends? In "Hour 14" he writes: "not so much a continuity but a passage" (*Martyrology Book 6*). Rereading that poem, I recall my father's death two years ago, and the "passage" most people invoked to attempt comfort. The passage is the link, but passage is also the word that indicates this is *not* continuation. My father's love for linguistics taught me this. Regardless of the hour signalled, words carry on. The hour is marked by an exactitude that discloses emotions. Too many exits...

OUT OF CONTEXT

hockey in south africa**i****that was the day I watched you play tennis****your skin bright and alive and I don't mind so
much that this is the Glencoe Club and can't
everyone just tell I don't belong?****you say except for the tennis you don't have
anything to do with this place. your arm swings
wide and wonderful through air. through the
nothing that separates you from your opponent.
the South African who doesn't mind losing to a
woman. who stands in your kitchen, after,
arguing what temperature red wine and how long
should it breathe**

ii

up-&-across up-&-across your arms cut dough,
because this meal is real pasta and perfect skin and
the long day's breath into

you get him to talk about the releasing of Mandela
and how until he came to Canada he'd never seen
the man's face. that he resents not being able to
read the news in his own country and isn't that
terrible. do you remember that he was blond and
married? do you remember that he was a friend
of your brother's and your brother wasn't
around?

you don't stop there. who are we to talk? you
say. the Canadian government refusing to
negotiate land claims with Natives. you lean
forward when you ask this and I imagine you
brushing your fingertips against his skin, but you
don't

because I am breathing red wine. inhaling the
dark flavour of 68 degrees F.

iii

the hair on his knuckles is blond. you get him to say how his wife works in a group home for kids who have nowhere else to go, and one of the kids is coloured. you get him to say how this is a step in the right direction. you get him to ask for more wine just as my glass is empty and I'm thinking there are two ways I could go but then he does so I just keep going

I'm thinking I don't like him, I'm thinking I don't like this white man from South Africa (and where the hell is your brother?) and he returns and fills up my glass one more time and you say, what do *you* think of all this? what do *you* have to add? and your words mean me

iv

**you really do want me to say the inside of my
head**

**don't you know that red wine gives me migraines?
I say. I shouldn't be drinking this stuff at all. my
words already slurred, deformed. do you
remember your brother's in the next room
watching the play-offs? your brother has thick
shoulders and thick arms**

**I slosh more wine into my brain and you say I
guess hockey's not exactly your thing. I should
have said that for you. you get him to say that he
doesn't play himself, but it's becoming quite
popular over there. he and his friends make a
point of drinking at bars that have satellite dishes.
collect call from the NHL. so they can watch the
Oilers cream the Jets. or better, cheer on
Gretzky, especially now that he plays for LA and
knows what it means to sweat**

v

think about our prime minister mistaking hockey
for Canada's national sport. think about the stats
that say wife beatings increase during play-offs.
think about men who prefer hockey to basketball

but. the euphoria of the post-migraine

more wine, more delicious pain-inducing wine,
too late now. because I invite numbness, and
anyway

your brother walks in and we're talking hockey
now. the back of my neck slow and heavy. pretty
soon the lights will expand and thicken, like white
gravy. no more wine and besides

vi

my body craves pure oxygen

**your brother's voice wavy. my stomach keeps
swallowing. I believe in ice. you get him to say**

**the blood crawls from my fingertips up my arms
and when I open my eyes the right side of the
room has expanded twice the size of the left.
your brother says discipline. penalties**

**and you, managing to not see that it's my hand
reaching for his skin, instead of yours**

-ily ever after

i

**you never become the you in this poem. break
records over any guy's head and I'll hear the
distance**

**you never wander into my sleep. you remain
tilted lips and an entire evening of talking female
beauty. you give me a story then take it back
again. you strew words onto my pillow**

**you never learn chess. you never voice the silent
you or one hug from behind. and never disappear
penetration. don't promise empty. you never let
"let" emerge as the word to follow. true love:**

the name, the one, the follow into

ii

I used to own a 50s hat I wore with the gecko
pants you bought me

rhymes with yourself

I go back in time and phone you up before you
know me. list stats that only friends could quote.
I'm creating that future which already exists,
minus the chessplaying boyfriends. I call you up
and dictate a meeting

a story

iii

you ask me what your middle name is

**you ask me to transport Lion's Gate Bridge to
Edmonton**

you never ask me

you put books aside only pages from the end

you want to read every word I want to give you

**you study curing and enter a language of tissue
and disease**

you replace sleep with alcohol and massage

you allow the crying

iv

and if your eyes offend thee, pluck them out

**Roman poets valued sight and vision, swore on the
sight of their children, their elders, their beloved.
they didn't predict the future perspective of
magnifying glass**

**I tell you I will never again love any he more than
my eyes**

**you buy a record with your name on it then
become a star (the promised singing sensation) 20
years after the later. you wait for the light to
turn yellow. you label your clothes with purple
lipstick and red fire. you answer every one of my
pregnant sister's doctor questions. you give up**

you never give up

v

we twin ourselves

**you begin with the idea of he and pattern yourself
away from. your strategy is to castle on the
queen side. you move into:**

**the existings of future. you substitute openings
for plot. when he leaves and doesn't come back
you refuse comfort, embrace the blaming**

embrace the story

vi

**you catch my voice in a bar late at night but never
permit me to capture yours. you endure me
seeing your voice in the dark. in your car. over
the see-through telephone**

**another he enters the view. the sound-print of
flashforward. we no longer believe in that
definition**

**so I offer beginnings vii: a new name for the
translation of longing. your name has the double
letter I count on**

**you stop. you add an "s" to "he" and name it your
body. you hear me whisper this story and don't
disappear the volume**

you never stop

liquid diet**i**

the drive into Vancouver can be swim, light, open
into awayness. from the present difficulty of
grammar. I singulared swims into:

me, patterning myself one hour sooner

ocean waves and waves I crisscross English bay,
search for the souvlaki place that won't
materialize

then meet you for lunch, downtown, under the
giant ruler, under the humungous pencil. I tell
you the story of a woman fishing the sand at
English bay, don't tell you she wore a transparent
iguana on her shoulder

ii

every stupid memory begins in bed. one hour
before the now. you offer me what hasn't
happened. you come to the here and pull me out
of myself. out of the was. you believe in making
endings. you believe there's room for

your socks on the floor that first night. a youness

in August it rains and rains the promise of prairie
flood. you slip out, leave me to forget about
forgettings. you, out in 'couver where there is a
shortage of rain. I bracket a name there inside
that motel. wait for the outpouring of

hunger pangs:

for two months I subsisted on liquids. because
eating meant being alive. meant getting on with
the ending. except for the certainty of *click*, he
didn't give me ending. one swallow at a time.
fruit water. vegetable water. can't swallow more
than one swallow. the inability of my body to
follow orders

iii

the phone rings and your voice pulls me into one hour earlier in B.C.

my sister won't let them induce her labour. not even after hours and hours of nothing going on except pain. my sister sews me an "ant" shirt. pinks and greens and blues – and one purple anteater along the sleeve. to keep me in line. so I let you into the here and you lick the backs of my knees

you, an hour ago and ten minutes from the ocean. my sister's doctor burst her water. manually. the one time I figured out I could be having a migraine and no headache. a body still in the midst of shutdown. every nerve-ending overpulsed

I write a letter (one hour earlier) to Vancouver. begin when my sister begins her labour. so I'll know when to stop

platypus love**i**

they began in a bar. the two men stroking words
as if they were body parts

not my body

which had flung itself into a chair at the end of
the table. I couldn't touch their fingers, their
words. couldn't decipher a simple sentence. the
table sliced the room. the bar brimmed with
music videos and beer commercial couples. they
began with a verbal agreement that left me out but
also entangled me. I saw the model of love across
the room and reached out

I missed

the two men voiced their theology of the triangle.
a phonetics of contact I can't refuse

so I turned away. blanked out the expectations,
the geometrical possibilities, of the three. faced
the single man sitting next to me. began a couple
dialogue. invested in the power of two.
arithmetic so much simpler than geometry

platypus love ii

he had beautiful hands, that man, and he let me
stroke the creases between his fingers and charm
his still-soft emerging calluses. tingle, he said,
you make me tingle. as his word brushed against
my scalp my ears inhaled it

he was an equation I could rely on

but two is such an easy circle to disrupt. and
those two men, whose words I couldn't grab
articulated this trinity

whereas the hand I massaged belonged to only one
person

I clasped my palms together, trapping that third
hand between my two

an ending

platypus love iii

they leave me out these two men. two of them
and only one of me

convention suggests the *menage à trois* is in my
favour, but I guess at conspiracy

two penises promise more than one, they tell me,
but they tell me so many lies. when I reach my
palm towards one forehead, I stretch to touch the
other. otherwise, they tell me, our machine won't
function

but we've made this up in so many directions
nothing can break it, we can only end it

platypus love iv

or disappear. one of us could disappear, and the remaining two would continue. we've made this up so tight even the infraction of one angle wouldn't detract from this trilogy's energy

you tell me I am in the centre. but this constructs a linearity we have vowed to distort. there is only a bent and cranky contortion of the original line, at rest between three corners

so. we may each be seduced by the other, but my desire is ubiquitous. look:

I reach my hands toward your temple, toward your temple

platypus love v

they explain we are a bridge holding hands above
water. they discuss the implications of letting go

men like to believe in drowning as a solution to
love

but it is winter outside, and the river chokes on
ice floes that crowd the jagged banks, chokes on
extinction. how can they not understand that even
enfolded in this white of pillows and blankets the
season changes everything? they leave me out,
these two men with their private games and
contests. they expect me to choose

I prefer to disregard the hierarchy of the apex. a
triangle can be a wheel also. one that turns
devotion inside-out. devotion and exclusion and
and and and and and

platypus love vi

**the word femur vibrates my tongue. I lick your
leg to taste the murmur that grows within bone.
I'm in love with your body wrapped around the
sound of murmur. my tongue embodies your skin
your neck your eyelids**

**stand at one point of the triangle and see two
knees. a version of double**

platypus love vii

**one of you privileges the mind. one privileges the
body. why name you? I am the eager lover of
both**

**the one who worships the body is already a saint,
a lover beatific with specific longing**

**the lover of the mind neglects such concerns,
reaches instead for reflecting lovers to fulfill the
equation one plus one equals**

inseyed

i

**tonight, the migraine I am witnessing is about
light**

**a line inside goodbye reaches back
to the *impossible* suggestion of
caesura**

across and down (half again)

**but then, I could ride the wave over your
shoulder over**

**or, I could leave well-enough alone,
but**

**because the visioning of *not yet* for me is just
rain. the doubling turns over a wet elbow, a face.
turn over left over face over. the eye in othered**

ii

you paint and you paint and you paint until the
canvas displays only background. not the tear
stain wash, not the drip drip of *uh sircle within uh
sircle withan X unside.*

centre eye

Indian teepees and Roman shield design. who
owns italics? makes me think trapped, no spiral.
the British empire shrank down to its own size.
how will modern colonials dilute themselves?

then:

the blue not just the bright of the canvas. chalk
draws lines over roplex controlled pastels.
surface smudges, settled there in your glasses

i. slip of the tongue

involves verbal typos.
 involves the body, midflight to the ground. he
 says a word and you watch it stumble across rope
 before you hear it. mistakes we don't recognize
 as action

that "you" is a typo-
 walker. the page a net not for safety but for risk.
 the only thing scarier than trying to say what you
 mean is succeeding. as you do. tripping on
 commas and exclamation marks, you teach me
 how *not* to whisper into the phone. teach him
 how your lips promise home and surplus. teach
 us all to cross borders with our eyes closed, and
 our lips parted

a star is not the only kind of body
 that points away from itself

a you that has no flaws.
 except those so enormous, so pure, you slip them
 inside royal mondays and disguise them as
 translations, ice repeating the tempo of ocean

the sign of infinity is two zeroes
 – nothing, really –
 held together with a kiss

ii. slips of the tongue

you write your way
 through days, we skip grey stones – nouns –
 across rivers that twist and turn and change their
 minds too often [no. never too often]. as you
 breathe in water it becomes impossible to believe
 in dust or old age. but you do. you believe in
 fractures [no. fractions] and accidents.
 inspiration that can grow from a typo

excess defines
 playsure
 follicles and the inside of elbows & bellies

not limits or deadlines or the period
 at the end of the line

the you emerges from
 the shock of the page, seemingly coherent and
 whole, excited by sargasso and Venetian passion
 and the wizard of. your hair recalls the moon and
 your desire – as long as a novel – reaches all
 conclusions

caramel in the dark**i**

she is never in one place for as long as you can look at her. her hair tastes brittle against my teeth, glows neon caramel in the dark. when we meet she pours syrup onto my tongue, challenges a swallow. she asks for and I give her the history of my breasts, one always smaller than the other. she offers me the inside of a human-shaped sleeping bag in return. she hates the word lezzie, but I echo it back to her *lezzie-lezzie-lezzie-lezzie-lezzie* a train without destination

ii

in Junior High, "lezzie" was the only insult a girl
couldn't sidestep. I teach her the 2-step 15 years
later, and that becomes our teenage punchline.
she cycles the highway and my window catches
her for three inches between my bookcase and my
neighbour's building. I lick the perimetre of the
city, scribble in laughter as underlining

she thinks I'm telling jokes

she steps across frozen puddles in autumn, when
the danger of a crack is purely emotional. she has
memorized the first sentence of every book she
ever read. and her words, when she wants them
to, suckle my knees my ankles my elbows, then
retreat until I no longer recognize them

a drop of great heights**i**

**I loved a boy, once, whose lips were designed by
his last lover. who'd kissed him and kissed him
till his mouth was all anticipation and his longing
memory. when we met I was recovering from a
drop of great heights, from a love that I'd slipped
on, that I called falling**

really, I was thrown

ii

**that boy crawled inside my damaged arms but
wouldn't stay long enough to heal his mind. or
his expectations. I lost both, of course, for the
mind is a paltry substitute once the heart has been
stimulated**

some prefer the loneliness of sanity

**he disappeared through the gaps between my
fingers, wanders lost and upside-down in a world
that doesn't recognize hunger as emotion. his
want included his chest hairs, his knee-caps, his
achilles heel, but it was his lips that continued to
refuse water, holy or otherwise**

**having lost the ability to swallow, that boy
travelled to the arctic, unhinged his tongue from
the back of his throat. left it to freeze. there it
lingers, immobile, awaiting thaw**

iii

and my own body parts?

**I have dismantled and sewn them back together so
often I am all seams. my body a spiderweb scar.
a reminder**

**oh, but not of him. too many lovers have worn
through these limbs for any single memory. to
impress my skin with more than a trace of
indelible ink. no, the scars remind me I once
could be hurt. I once was whole enough to be
broken**

**the scars remind me I used to misplace the ground
beneath my feet. and I lament my forgotten talent
for stepping – blind – into open air**

5. Translating the Process: Target Poetry as Conspicuous and Presumed

Where the cyclops' eye is a site of damage, so are Odysseus's ears as he refuses them the relief of wax, forcing them to travel naked through the piercing songs of the irresistible sirens. Between the two oppositions that are Polyphemus and Odysseus, sight and sound misrecognize each other.

Odysseus is a man not used to heeding the warnings of the gods. Although he has been warned against the temptation of their song, Odysseus cannot resist experiencing the siren voices. He orders his men to tie him to his ship's masts, so that he might translate the siren songs from fatal irresistible music into tamed feminine melody. Everyone knows sirens call men to their death. If a sailor reveals his name, the sirens will call him and call him, so sweetly, he'll hurl himself overboard in the attempt to reach the promised taste of their voices. He'll then drown in their expectant arms. Odysseus wishes to steal the murderous intentions of their words, without the dangerous urge to succumb, to throw himself overboard into their waiting arms. All the sailors stop their ears with wax and go about their work unperturbed by the unrelenting song. Odysseus, however, driven mad by the call he cannot answer, tries to claw his way through the ropes that hold him fast, scrapes his nails across bare chest.

Robert Frost says, "Poetry is what gets lost in the translation" (cited in Honig 154). Odysseus wants nothing more than to hear the siren songs in pure form. Though he risks his life and his sanity, only the sound of the original will satisfy him. But once the sirens begin, Odysseus is trapped as container for their song, and driven mad by his inability to understand or

interpret their words. Odysseus traps himself in an endless loop of Classical Greek call-waiting: his men are deaf to his cries as well as the sweet seduction drenching his hair and skin and earlobes. The more he listens, the more irresistible the sirens' demand from him for an answering sacrifice. He has failed as translator. In the attempt to render the original "text" unadulterated by thick wax, Odysseus assumes he will not be affected by the text, assumes he will become invisible, lost in the passage of voice to ear.

Let me tell a story.

In kindergarten, I took part in a group activity called "the telephone game." The only tools necessary for this are several other people, and the ability to whisper. We sat in a circle and one girl whispered a sentence into the ear to her right (the direction we chose was always counterclockwise). That listener would whisper *exactly* (errors and all) what she heard into the ear on her right and so on until the final person in the circle (sitting immediately to the left of the original speaker), spoke her sentence out loud. The original sentence had always altered by the end of the line, which was the point of the game. In fact, we'd often whisper the words as quickly and garbled as possible so that an acoustic transference could triumph over more purely semantic ones. Sentences that resembled the original enough to be recognizable were considered a disappointment, almost a failure. The temptation to "cheat" was overwhelming. We delighted in this game, trying *not* to hear the intact original sentence. At the time, I had no idea I was engaging in the translative process, nor that I was promoting an idea of poetry that encouraged disjunctive syntax over meaning. We were children playing with words and breathing them, somehow askew, into the next telephone body. The final spoken sentence was not intended to be a pristine

reproduction of the original. Our satisfaction, our pleasure, came from the distorted speech at the end of the line. This game was an activity of communication involving a multi-transmitted message, a complicated route, and only one reply. The game celebrates mistakes and errors, rejects clarity and linguistic mimicry. If only Odysseus had allowed himself the pleasure of such surrender. Where the cyclops' eye is a site of damage, so are Odysseus's ears as he refuses them the relief of wax, forcing them to travel naked through the piercing songs of the irresistible sirens.

In their research book, *Rational Geomancy*, Steve McCaffery and bpNichol offer a "Report" on translation. They present "possibilities," "probes," and "alternate directives" (McCaffery & Nichol 27) to what they view as the traditional idea of translation, which "involves a shift in notation to present a common meaning to a linguistically different audience. To base translation on notational shift supposes that the method of codifying reality does not affect our perception of it" (27). This defines translation as an "informational service" (32) only. In contrast, Nichol and McCaffery develop a notion of translation which includes the homolinguistic. By this term, they include the writing activity that not only heterolinguistically traverses languages, but is also a "transmittance and reception within the same language" (27-28). This homolinguistic translation provides a means for translators to interpret poetry purely, predominantly, pleasurably at the level of sound, or shape, rather than meaning. Traditional translation, Nichol and McCaffery insist, "works best where the sole demand is that the translator provide a clear and exact transcription of the ideas in the original work and where the two vocabularies have developed identical symbolic distinctions"

(28). Interestingly, William Marsh prefers the term "transcription" to "homolinguistic translation" because of the musical resonance this term brings with it ("an arrangement for a different instrument") and because, within the notion of phonetic translation, the original is transcribed into the "phonetic alphabet" (Marsh email posting) of English (or any other language): the notion of sound takes precedence over that of message. These writers are not so much concerned with the process of shifting meaning from Source language to Target language, as they are with examining and revealing that process itself. Poets who engage in the homolinguistic translative activity wish to acknowledge and display the role of the translator, rather than hide or conceal that role.

I am interested, here, in Nichol's and McCaffery's notion of how linguistic difference can be a point of departure *and* of rearrival (41). "Total information," then, "is the translative process itself giving centrality to both translator and original text with the primary creative act of both original writer and translator asserted" (43). By transforming target language into source language, the continuum of semantic substitution is interrupted, bringing the act of translation into the foreground.

Pamela Banting, in her book of criticism on contemporary poetics, *BODY INC.*, explores how notions of *translation poetics* inform the poetry of Fred Wah, Robert Kroetsch, and Daphne Marlatt. This book takes on translation theory as a signifying practice, as a poetics which generates writing as well as interprets already existing writing. She addresses the fact that translation back and forth marks a place, a conjunction, where community can begin (Banting 110). Unlike traditional views of translation which limit its operation to the invisible and transparent act of linguistic transference,

Banting's trope of translation encourages the reader to witness the hand of the translator, and recognize translation as creative and performative. By suggesting that neither body nor text be situated as the "original" the other either represents or translates, she seems to offer a method of reading and writing that is generated out of the relationship *between* reading and writing, body and text. Within this *inbetween*, translation may occur: between reading and writing, writing and speech, theory and rhetoric; any passage from one sign system to another, Banting defines as translation.

I am interested in Banting's argument for a translation poetics, yet am disappointed to note that she merely shifts the definition of translation from a process that takes place between two different languages, to one that takes place between two different signifying practices. "Translation is a poetics" (228), Banting proclaims, again and again throughout her book. This presents interesting possibilities that extend beyond the concept of translation as merely metaphor. But by offering translation thus for her literary analysis, Banting perpetuates the standard view of translation, still, as a theory or method that upholds equivalence. Catriona Strang, in a talk given for the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver, says that translation "*pretends to transport meaning and contexts between languages*" (Strang "I Love" 1, emphasis mine²⁸). This notion of translation invariably fails. Arguing against notions of equivalence which "level differences and wipe out particular contexts," Strang critiques the construct of translation as "an

²⁸ The political implications of assuming a smooth, transparent and invisible intermediary, also introduces problems of equivalency in the process that Linda Alcoff calls "speaking for" others. Such an interpretative discourse conceals the role of interpreter (eg. white English-speaker translating the poetry of a Native Oral storyteller).

assumed metalanguage" (Strang "I Love" 1). She sees this construct as a "fraudulent" attempt to bridge languages and reconstruct a supposedly unified original condition. As an alternative, Strang prefers a homolinguisitic transliteration which carries over the sense of the original language in the act of further text generation.

The act of text generation was, for Jack Spicer, crucial to his own poetics. Tired of writing single unconnected poems – what he called "one night stands" (Spicer 61) – Spicer focusses instead on the "serial" poem, a form which continues despite the closure of each successive poem. This cycle of closure and continuation becomes one of sequence or repetition within a recurring form. "Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone" (Spicer 61). Although poets may confine the poem to a single page, the fact of the poems being published together inside one book announces to the reader a relationship between individual poems and sequences. This relationship generates transgeneric strategies. In his "After Lorca" poems, Spicer mixes modes of discourse from introduction (by the dead Federico Garcia Lorca himself) to verse poems to plays to letters. The "narrative" – which moves in disjointed and disjunctive serial jumps and starts – adopts translation as a generative mode of writing in which to produce more poetry. Spicer, translating Lorca without bothering to be "faithful" to the Spanish, is not interested in representing the original poem but, instead, presents his "translations" as fragments of a one-sided conversation. His translations of Lorca's poems generate, also, prose commentaries about these translations and about the nature of contemporary poetry. These prose narratives then generate more

translations. Spicer's "closure" of this series is a letter of "goodbye" to his "ghost." Having begun with a letter *from* this ghost, this ending is an ironic one.

Spicer's poems are directed, often, towards friends or other poets in an intertextual dialogue that gestures to a text outside the immediate reference of the reader. They operate, then, as extreme intertextuality, excessive transgenericity. His poems act as interruptions that occur within personal discourse, and not as response to, or explanation for, a source text:

Dear Lorca,

When I translate one of your poems and I come across words I do not understand, I always guess at their meanings. I am inevitably right. A really perfect poem (no one yet has written one) could be perfectly translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in. A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary. (Spicer 25)

Jacques Derrida, in his essay, "The Law of Genre," explains that the law of genre is the law of the general which absorbs specific members into its "whole," legislates similarity and commonality, and convicts individual texts which manage to surpass these absorptions as deviant. The statement, "This is not a poem," identifies not only a text that cannot be included in the genre "poetry," but preserves a prior-to-the-text ideal of genre distinction.

Spicer's "translations" call into question notions of genre because they refuse the "purity" of genre law, which Derrida announces at the beginning of his essay: "Genres are not to be mixed" (Derrida 223). By mixing and blending, not only across formal structures but also across languages, these

serial poems *exceed* "the law of participation" (Derrida 228), a law that restricts activity to members only. By encroaching upon or overrunning identifiable boundaries, "outlaw" forms of poetry rewrite those very boundaries. As Todorov notes, "transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed" (Todorov 160). And once transgressed, although it does not dissolve, the law changes. Membership, no matter how exclusive, suggests the possibility of inclusivity.

In a short essay in *Riddle Moon*, Eric Selland comments: "Translation can be a relationship between two languages in which the original inhabits the translation and the translator finds the target language already concealed in the original" (Selland 145). What appeals to me in Selland's clarification is the recognized agency of the translator. No longer hidden or invisible in a process that until recently considered overt translations to be "impolite," the role of the translator is both astonishing and disclosed. Catriona Strang, in her poetry book *Low Fancy*, has translated the words, meaning, visual representation and social history of the text of the *Carmina Burana*. According to her jacket blurb, the writers of these verses were "travellers, masterless clerks who studied, drank, wrote, prayed, screwed, gambled, and begged their way around the 13th century Western Europe." About such a historically specific context she says, in her talk: "There is no way I can translate this, no way to literally carry over what makes a bawdy Latin love lyric subversive or finds the political in a vernacular gambling song written in the form of a prayer." It is not the desire for a pure original she attempts to translate for her reader but, rather, "an engagement of specific beginnings" (Strang "I Love" 3). In *Low Fancy*, the reader is not offered the original ("authoritative") Latin songs, and so this "final" version becomes the primary

text: "But not susurrant. / Trip us is carmine" (*Strang Low* 11). One can detect a hint of Latin in these words, but cannot tease out original meaning.

According to McCaffery and Nichol, "Translations that attempt to remove the problem of the translator's function at source by simply ignoring it, eliminate the necessary presence of the translator as a conscious formulating force in the act" (29). Such translations also eliminate the influence, whether acknowledged or not, of the translator's own context and assumptions about the poetry. In his poetry collection, *Some Recent Snowflakes (and Other Things)*, Dick Higgins includes a section he calls "Telephone Translations." Based on the game I described earlier, Higgins translates single lines from a selection of poets writing in various languages and centuries. His first line – a linguistic translation – translates at a homophonic level in that the translation operates from the level of sound to sound, rather than from meaning to meaning. One example, from Sixteenth-century philosopher, Giordano Bruno, "En velut in sacrae speciem te extollere mentis—" becomes: "Envelopes are a sacred species, he tries to tell the mantis" (Higgins 82). From there, Higgins moves to further homolinguistic translations, again sound to sound, but these ensuing lines (usually six or seven) he translates from English to English: "And mellow as a rakish priest he prays they'll document his." And that line transforms into: "He must. It's a maukish point. He craves they'll brew some," (Higgins 82).

Published in 1977, Higgins's project anticipates by four years a dual poetic translation project by Doug Barbour and Stephen Scobie. In their Afterword to *The Pirates of Pen's Chance*, Barbour and Scobie admit their indebtedness to McCaffery and Nichol, whose concepts and method of homolinguistic translation they have "freely adopted and adapted" (143).

Translating “metonymically,” “acrostically,” and “structurally,” Barbour and Scobie homolinguisitically translate such source texts as Shakespeare, William Carlos Williams, Bliss Carmen, and the *Edmonton Journal* sports report. As an example of a metonymic translation, Scobie poetically interprets the final paragraph of Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*:

Poor men, poor men, such as we, they’ve gone and fled. I will
plead from electrical tower. I will plead from turret of plane. He
will uncover His face. He will not leave me alone. I will spread
His name in Parliament. I will welcome His silence in pain. I
have come through the fire of family and love. I smoke with
my darling, I sleep with my friend. We talk of the poor men,
broken and fled. Alone with my radio I lift up my hands.
Welcome to you who read me today. Welcome to you, darling
and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end. (307)

into this poem:

Him No. 2

He tells us how much money some people have.
He repeats himself.
He makes a comparison.
He reports a motion, and then an emotion.

He says he will ask for something
from various strange locations.
Someone else will apparently shave
and not go away.
He says he will mention this person’s name
in a political context.
He says that though it hurts him
he doesn’t mind not being talked to.

He says he was nearly burned
 in domestic situations.
 He confesses to intimate inhalations
 and spending nights in company.
 Along with someone else he talks again
 of those he mentioned to begin with.
 He says he surrenders to the media.

Finally, he welcomes the reader, that is you.
 He says you are depositing something
 very precious to him.
 He addresses you with endearments.
 He says you will notice his absence
 with regret for a very long time.

He says it is the end now
 and
 it is. (in Barbour 51)

Scobie's poem acts not only as a humorous comment on Cohen's original text, but also as a translation of this source text into an analysis of its semantic content. Strangely, he does not translate the *form*, as can be seen by his random insertion of line breaks. Translating at times from word to word or letter to letter, Barbour and Scobie move through various canonical and contemporary texts, never embracing meaning, but never wholly rejecting it either.

Both this project and Higgins's inform one that fellow writer and colleague, Susan Holbrook, and I have undertaken. Rather than choosing already existing texts, we attempt, instead, to translate each other's poetry. English to English, the source becomes the target, the target the source. By

writing these pieces, we show the process of translating another's words to be a generative act.

Our project came out of an investigation of how, in our own poetry, we attempt to explore notions of female desire. Both interested in disjunctive forms of narrative, we were intrigued to discover not only how each other's poetry would influence our own, but also how it would allow a changed route towards our own inevitable obsessions. Susan Knutson, speaking of her translation of Lola Lemire Tostevin in *Tessera* admits that her "misreadings" are not completely accidental, saying "I tend to err in the direction of meanings I desire" (16). For Odysseus, such overwhelming desire is an admission to fear. That same desire, our desire, is one that Susan Holbrook and I both aid and abet.

The series, "in translation" (170), opens for us the process of writing ourselves through that fraudulent attempt to write the other. Susan Holbrook writes a homolinguistic translation of a poem I write specifically for her and this project. The third poem in the series is my translation of her translation. We attempt, here, to remain "faithful" to the inspiration of each subsequent original text. Beginning a poem with an entire poem already written on the page, seems, at first, impossible to me. Our translations, then, become an expression of such impossibility: "a healthy clitoris lacks lacks" (171) becomes, "lick thy licorice heels" (172) because Susan's multidirectional seeing and hearing of my first line. This series is a transgressive poetics of inexact mimesis.

Language has always been part of bodies, perhaps because the body is what one experiences first in a friendship, whether visually or orally or simply imprinted and hinted at on the page. Sometimes Susan and I

disagree, through words, and sometimes we play with words. And sometimes words play with us, speak us, translate us. Translation is a logic of communicating, for how can we make words without anticipating response? Yet the words betray our meaning, which lags behind the visual / phonetic / frenetic / ludic / erotic possibilities words open to us. A betrayal that invites intimate and transgressive poetics. Such "translations," rather than constricting the lives we wish to imprint on the page, invite further conversations, words, dialogues, poems.

Translating source-language to source-language, for Susan and me, has meant expressing the impossibility of exact representation. We celebrate this impossibility. We slip and lose ground when one text is asked to speak for another. Our process is our product – a process that discovers words hidden inside others, or alongside, or underside. Echoing each other's words, however, we discover our own bodies, and our own bodies of language. "homoeopathic translations" (170) and "translogue" (177) target the words we want to speak, focus on the language we need, to express desire / death / grief / sympathy / health / sexuality. An excessively eventful year that has translated into 1995. We choose "homoeopathic" because that word speaks a poetic history of homolinguistic translations, and desire written through the body. Our bodies. Appropriately, these poems are not only readings of the complicated and moving events of our past year – they translate us, transform and invent us.

IN TRANSLATION

**[translations by Markotić
italics by Holbrook]**

lick thy licorice heels

*the symptom, who told you, the best poems come
from a planned love*

aches

*gauge what isn't pissible: one stone
for the outside.*

*desirous confusion. no body
smooches more mouthing watertight
handless hand hat clit soak*

*glace, a frosted cake, a hot-crossed medicine
therapeutic in fusion. how many o's in a
row. you're wise, dunce, but didn't understand
how green blew brown without even flexing*

*then we dove three floors. ages tune limp-finned magic
of our beasts.*

*so: my lone sissi boy
hintermouth full of chat today, to unveil
tonguing reads again trollops, widows*

*map small wonders: scrapes of mimicry dam up the
tub*

*if there are no bodies here, why weigh the gift
of residue? size up bonbons*

intrepid

*hang the gravity of this world, unearth it, be
value your slips in the wind's
bargain:*

look bathing pays

click click your heels

these myopic poems cum the best
form a planted love

arches

fissured astride

aug one eye chips away

a serious conflation. nobody
smooches anymore. mouthwatering accent
handles and lips and

double frosting; mad about middles
there are pews tinted fuschia. a ploy of colour
angles and border signs, rows and rows
the way you dance but won't stand under
arrow edges

(what's no longer possible is all we have)

flights and flights of released gravity, of
let-go longing. a tongue against the reed
licks

some lonely sis is a boy
in her wonder flutters a moth
ongoing lollipop design repeats the rows

and roads all won. ignore the pun, cry or clam
up

s'il y a nobody to hear. w x y genders who gives
up residing. public ice swallows

invalid

the released "T" sounds better at the end
when we interrupt your lisp. who wins
when we don't argue:

look, two clues one maze

hey chica you're slick

*my thesis on pompoms beat the rest
for detailed maps*

search

*gloze: o pitch sway
for star-lured fish*

*a conscious flirtation. buddies
moochers say no more. towering myths ascend
ladles and spills and*

*doubtful lusting; and dimples to boot
heat swept in a faint ruse: a play for looks
sins of robbery and slang, is a rose sour
wayward candy buttons to redundant
segue ways*

(that loon's posture in lieu of a shave)

*sand lights off a sealed grave in fits so
let's go lounging. attuned to guess her
skill*

*so melancholy is bossy
in she wanders smothering a flute
a pill-popper resigned to the wars going on*

*and doors all now. i rang, crawl up or
come down*

*a silly audit of bone. a b c dangers who gives
a ding. slow squalls upon us*

delivered

*Treasures attend the better wounds
in slippery trouble. snowed in
we agree on that.*

toqueless on cool days

I here interweave, rather than append, critical commentary which addresses this issue of somatic inscription, as well as issues of fidelity, collaboration, improvisation, and the differences crossed within and between our same-language, same-sex bodies. The angle of perception translates into and from the paradox of "error," our poems grow from duplicitous interpretations into multiplicitous songs, composed not to provoke drowning but to generate inventiveness, transformation. These translations, as a processual system rather than as purely semantic rereadings, offer us increased poetic possibilities. Often the "sense" of a line or stanza is translated from one poem to another by the suggestion of a simple rearrangement of the visual characters or by phonetic play through assonance.

We write this creative / critical collaboration as a dialogue about and through the process of homolinguistic translation. One of us offers the other a poem (which, being a gift of friendship, always reads as a love poem) and the receiver sets about to translate visually, phonetically, associatively, moodily, just *faithfully* enough to keep the conversation going.

Our central preoccupation began as the inscription of female desire, with how a dissection of a patriarchally-loaded source language might cut across desire. However, as we passed these poems back and forth we found that desire speaks alongside other experiences of our bodies, experiences such as illness, fear, and grief. During the writing of the second series, "translogue" (177) Susan experienced a crisis of sexuality, while I experienced the crisis of my father's illness as he slowly died of cancer. These discordant experiences informed our "linguistic wordplay" to emphasize, once again, how one's personal phobias and neuroses, attentions and intentions, are

transported into the poetry. Barbour and Scobie write that their translations take them “in directions [they] would never have gone without the stimulus of this translating process. The poems are unlike any [they] would ever write in [their] own voices” (Barbour 141). Our translation poems propelled us each in directions we needed to explore at the time of the writing, yet could not have done so in any more direct fashion. The arrow shooting from source language to target language in translation theory diagrams is apparently, as Susan Holbrook puts it elsewhere, “not so straight.” (Holbrook unpaginated) Instead, the arrow directs us to a more inaccurate and vital poetics.

translogue

what's a poem without something to eat

tell me about it

every anecdote expects a new skin

there is futurity in some sweat, palms wonder, & some gives marks for effort

the language of evaporation

can there be questions on the list of things i know

where is the pulp the sweet kind seeds and juice mainly

is it all over your mouth is it over

or is it promising, desire an acquired taste

the shape of this has got to go

leave a message before i get it, fire away, between coats

conversation might be dry or not

a pun throughout time is a treat

melt, but out

the very next trope, pecs and skin

the rest features some sweet psalms, under a dome hive, sparks or feathers

he languishes in a fever, deporting

the cancelled quest, leaving slim sins, no

west pulpit, kind of sweet, sees a jaundiced hand

tall, cover our mouths, cover his

risk of missing designs, quirky and aged

she paces this shag go-go

each massage befuddles, in fits and ways, between cunts

converted or not, night tries, or

tears might toughen you up

butter me

fevered nape, skeptical text

a sure test of so twee, small p is for parkas on fathers in a dumb winter

helen gushes forever, desporting

a censored sex, reveal skin ties, yes

pitbull guest, en suite, care for iced lemon in season?

ah over ow ow over shh

skirmishing signals, a dogged quicky

g's proliferate like sheep (go-go-go joseph)

stunt butterflies flit and sway over a peach corsage

made green tonight in toronto

night tears – tough on the young

bitter one

feverish naps scalps recall exits

surety also weeps, malls map the parkade on father's day – a bum winner

hell the legal usher for verse, sporting

a continued exit – veil, kin reinstated

pity ugly western suits – cared or wasted among treasons?

all over all over all over – shhhhhh

skr, msh, ng – signalling a slogged & quirky

life (prorated within sheets) go-ing go-ing go - - - -

start with bitter – flirt and flirt and – sage peacocks overstay

mad at grief – night, intermittent

dear tonight – thought on you and things

better one

wish to snap sticks and stones

sorely swept, all moms therapeutic traffic – a new album

here are galoshes for hiver, sprouting

a continuous text – live, aching you skated

pretty girl twisting sweat – we decorate your waist with reasons

shh your over alls over your shh

sk, rm, shng – an ally in signs logged & squeaky

the silence here of brackets, hyphens, dashes

street beneath – trifles land & cockamamy stories stay

a gift from me – light in your mittens

(ear) to sight – though not beyond sighs

one better

we should swap, lick, and phone

so rely on sweets, almost her perfect raffle – renewal, come

(ear) eye lashes – forever proving

a sensuous mix – dive arching, ousted

ready twirl, misting wet-wet correct our ways, twin teasing

hiss our vertical lover or hiss

squirm and shrug – a lily – inside goggled and seeking

(ear) - - - -

trees beyond rises, less 1 & and many cocky glorious days

adrift roaming. sight inner and. ends

Towards the end of the second of our series, Susan changes grief into gift. This translation extends beyond the homolinguistic replacement of one word for another, into the care one friend offers another in the context of a poem. As "translogue" (177) ends, Susan and I begin translating the enclosure of closure. Our translations are a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, a recitation of what the other has written, an precreation of what the other will subsequently create.

Process, then, becomes our poetics. This process shifts yet again when we write the final series "another transportation" (186). In these pieces, the force of the line draws us away from meaning and into language: the signifiers, as Norma Cole says, exceed the signifieds (Cole 120). The fun and flirtation mutates into a much more serious sequence of words and imagery, then transforms again into a formal play that suggests linguistic translations as well as structural ones. This, again, demonstrates to us the infeasibility of our translating a poem without inserting our own context into the translated.

The only female poets we have discovered who insert themselves into such a translation poetics are Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt. In 1985 they co-wrote the poem "Mauve," which offers both homolinguistic and semantic translations of each other's words. Ignoring the rules of translation suggests multiple ways for these two poets to resist a final, closed version of the other's poem. The connections, as much for the reader as for the writers, assume that the processual includes rewriting and revising, even after the published fact. "La réalité est un sursis au-delà" writes Brossard in her first line, "et du réel lorsqu'on observe" (Brossard *Mauve* 7) which Marlatt translates as, "Real that of the under-bent" and, "curves of the virtual we take for real" (15). What we take for real need not be an unachievable reality.

Brossard's and Marlatt's poetics emerge from a sense of the feminist poet whose texts can be read as translative acts. Their translations are points of departure, points of emergence. These poems explore the difficult area of feminist "body" writing. Since translation poetics involves a composition and reorganization of the body (physical as well as textual), Brossard and Marlatt are attracted to the possibilities and creative potential for a text which springboards from another text, rather than merely transcribing it. "For feminist writers, the notion of fidelity ... is problematic" (227), claims Pamela Banting. Unfaithful translations often provide generative and generating texts, texts which speak to another as well as to ourselves. For Brossard and Marlatt, the translative process is not only between two separate languages or two separate texts, but also between literal and figurative tongues.

Translation, it might be said, occurs constantly, at many levels and through various changing contexts: films are translations of books, musical notation is a translation of interpreted sound, syntax can be read as the translative act of organizing and writing down meaning²⁹. McCaffery and Nichol offer both parody and the found poem as translational activities within the hierarchy of source and transportation (30, 56). They decide, interpreting Valéry, that the act of translation "permits the writer to *borrow entirely* his content and *invent entirely* his form" (30). This interpretation offers a reading of translation as thievery, yet also acknowledges the artificial restraint of the translation process setting its own structural limits. A writer's

²⁹ When the president of the Conseil des Universités of the government of Québec solicited Jean-Francois Lyotard to write a report on the state of universities, Lyotard produced *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (xv). His response could be interpreted as a translation of this request.

personal preferences are introduced into the text, and preferences for structures or formal organization (for example, the Scobie translation of prose into lineated poetry) are also translated.

McCaffery and Nichol speak to the notion of translation, any translation, as a collaborative act. They note that Jerome Rothenberg considered translation a “gesture across race, cultures, times and individuals” (51). As well, they say, he “extends our sense of the poem as a specific act in a socio-cultural context, demanding that the reader necessarily become the last step in the translative act” (51). Necessarily, for the reader, the translation poem renders itself into the available original. Although I mistrust their use of “last,” especially in the context of their arguing *against* originary authority and *for* continuation and procession, I appreciate this invitation to the reader, emphasizing yet again the contextual influence each individual reading brings to a particular translation.

There is no immaculate translation; *all* writing is a version of adulterated endurance. “We are brought again to the pun as a type of equivocation which presupposes a double origin (from two voices) with two lines of destination to a double understanding” (McCaffery/Nichol 135). Grammatically, Nichol situates the pun as syntactical link between the visible signifier on the page and the constructed signified of his family history. The words twist and flip, reminding the readers of the instability of meaning; at the same time, the puns remind us we are reading comparisons. Punning is a conscious act to replicate one thing with another. Translation can be more than merely replacement, for the collaboration Susan and I endeavor, translation is generative.

and another

can a bankrupt disco heal the nation? call me

*the cold shoulder and the eye are given
in any language.*

the finger too, and lethal wet raw pants.

*roaming, a tree climbed, a smeared day
success.*

*a whodunnit's useless in the case of a loose tooth,
love, or a perfect framing*

an ode to ditto /ith an ear cocked for slashed implications

*the outside of my elbow smirks where it was torn. you know to need me. or, put
frankly over the phone: i miss needing you. there: anniversary waltz*

*heavy beliefs reinstate a petition for saints:
you see lucille you see lucille you see lucille you see lucille my name has
measles*

" , " she ca/wed, comatose

i've grown your watch, hairing. every fraction she loses a day. less is more

his tendons and dour pa/ws

*an o throughout wisht me with ya. whose donuts do you see? hey, first rate
mate, did you plant that one for my admiration?*

*global applause. your questions bully more than your commands. no, you
listen:*

i'm begging, helluva lot of tarts around

tarts with words thrum away tension; (is this his patent)

in the other portation

emily can tan his leather, can disrupt a bank

**gauges, nay vixens, are eye-to-
.shoulder locked**

.stamp war away legally figure too on a dance

**excessively rear into bed three clits
.ring for more**

**fame rings perhaps for nothing
.toulouse lautrec faces his own excess of donuts**

nations comply to slashed wrists & early cocks due to titillation

**dance again towards ann. towards you. towards needing. I miss the phone over
here, frank, you know how to needle me out of this stupor. north is the wit – one
skirmish wobbles into another. take it outside**

**easily shaming them, lucille sees lucy sees lucille sees lucy *ain't it pretty?* tit for
tat invents easy bleeding – mine**

**or invent inversions. a comma here, a slash there, becomes oblique if you mention
it that way. I'm not married to the idea, she cawed, you see?**

**Rome sits less than a day away. in fiction, every ring has the air of repetition.
watch, our suspended punctuation growls**

aw. and our tendency to hiss, slips

**mired in addition, you formate dips and lids
strike first across the question, then yodel what you saw before. *italics?* who ya
shitting? windows own me**

**you're *not* lispig, you coward, naturally rome yodels
our quest through the gully**

start round, forget hell's an oval, be megan

patient hiss hiss signals a decade. drums order where to start

toothy reputation

pie tin sigh sigh cog in a salad day. rum d'or for a weirder tart

ratatat sound. get hell for a novel, gum bean

*you're tone spilling, word yoking, more of nature's lollies
quench to the root your gullet*

*a dream date for your mate, Lik m' Stik
tricks i rest, your equestrian lacrosse, your deal, sway, barf
it licks? yahoo shindig! my woe swoons we*

a wand. a tour. a dance. this bliss

*still yadayadayada more or less. infection veering hastily for a preterite.
watch out: suspender situations grow*

*visions intervene: a moocow here, an ass there, bee combs
lick belief and don't mention it. but you said you wed! wanted the idea
of a present?*

*mashing them silly, lou seals liesel you caesar luce ellie susie lee:
ain't it a party? tut tut for inviting blessed meaning*

*more candy awards to sand: awards to you: awards to needing: I piss
the moan overheard, frankly, you know how to deal me out his tough
potroast. south with a twist – one ski missed blows to the bow:
ticket inside out*

rations placate toolshed twists & curly sock it to dilation

*for merigngues and sheep forego thin
lousy treacle faeces in his own. o nuts*

*ex's lively rear tickles bad
go for morning*

pats warm gay lily, a fig redundant

*gorgeous navy sex, look for a
chip on it.*

lime canteen slithers here, candy spurts bunk

6. Ubiquitous Enclosures, Visual Justifications

Once Odysseus has safely sailed away, the injured cyclops turns first to thoughts of revenge. Having successfully petitioned Poseidon to hinder and interrupt Odysseus's voyage home, he is at a loss what to do next. His entire identity has been focused on what is now a scar in the middle of his forehead. How can he remain a cyclops with no eye? Or rather, how can he call himself a one-eyed giant if that single eye has been rendered dysfunctional?

In some versions of the Medusa myth, Medusa must be looking at her victim to turn him to stone; in others, he himself need only glance at her scalp, crawling with phallic icons, for the transformation to be complete. Odysseus has stolen Polyphemus's glance, not just his eye, but his ability to view the world, to judge, to turn anything to stone. Polyphemus used to be all vision and now, well, now he is entirely something other.

In 1869 France, Charles Baudelaire, in his dedication of *Le Spleen de Paris* to his friend Arsène Houssaye, writes:

Quel est celui de nous qui n'a pas, dans ses jours d'ambition,
rêvé le miracle d'une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et
sans rime, assez souple et assez beurtée pour s'adapter aux
mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie,
au soubresauts de la conscience? (Baudelaire vi)³⁰

³⁰ (Which one of us has not, in times of ambition, dreamt of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, yet without rhythm and without rhyme, flexible and rigorous enough to adapt itself to the lyrical commotion of the soul, to the fluctuations of dreams, to the sobering reminders of one's conscience?)

The writing he imagines is a “serpent” that is, a monstrous hybrid, both head and tail: writer and reader “pouvons couper où nous voulons, moi ma rêverie, vous le manuscrit, le lecteur sa lecture” (Baudelaire v).³¹ Such a dream incorporates temporal markers into a more spatial design. In truth, says Mallarmé, “there is not prose: there is the alphabet, and then there is verse” (Mallarmé, in Silliman *New Sentence* 101). His statement elevates verse above the functional nature of all other writing. In contrast, the concept of prose as a “great container,”³² responds to the rapid success of prose as pervasive discourse. Prose may contain fiction, published speeches, essays, and sermons. Prose may also “contain” poetry.

Ron Silliman, theorizing the tradition of prose poetry, says that “a paragraph-centered poetry, informed but not limited by the French tradition, offered possibilities that went beyond a speech-based poetics” (Silliman “New Prose” 163). Contemporary (he is mostly concerned with American) poetry, then, is not to be read only as transcription of the spoken word. Poets want line breaks to emphasize a word, or stress its surrender to the subsequent line. In an essay on line breaks, Dennis Cooley examines the many different kinds

³¹ (*we can cut where we please, me my dreams, you the manuscript, the reader his reading*).

³² According to Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, in *The Emergence of Prose*: the absence of the public performing *jongleur*, placed writing in the position of “a kind of communication in absence” (Godzich 112), an address that required markers and notations to assist its audience in understanding the message. Prose, with its adjacent exploitation of the lack of a physical addresser (no single “performer” could be called to account for his words), became the “great container” (Godzich 126) for all modes of communication. As such, it disappeared into a transparency of form whereby it has become “that which frames but is not framed itself” (Godzich 72).

of line breaks and what they signify for poets who use them. "As a word points back to the line it completes or forward to the line it anticipates," he says, this hanging encourages a "mad series of erotic attachments and reattachments" (Cooley 82). This attaching and reattaching becomes, for prose poets, the disjunctive grammar and syntax of the disrupted narrative sentence. This new "line," although it does not mark speech rhythms, *does* recognize the Olsonian breath line in that its prose and prose punctuation are emblems of written speech. Charles Hartman insists that contemporary punctuation is "almost wholly the slave of a rationalistic, prose model of language. To punctuate correctly is to demarcate the hypotactic structures of the sentence" (Hartman email). This connection between speech and prose punctuation "means, in turn, that how a poet *chooses* to use punctuation can be extremely interesting" (email).

Silliman states that "[t]he collapse of speech-based poetics after a reign of nearly two centuries and the withdrawal of corporate capital from the field of serious fiction have profoundly destabilized either side of this equation" (Silliman 169). This "speech-based" poetics is driven by a notion of the sentence as written record of an oral origination. But the sentence, manufactured as it is between one full stop and the next, is more a literary concept than actual speech-based transcription. Steve McCaffery argues that prose breaks down the linearity of the poetic line: "Prose periodizes its significations within the unit of the sentence and the larger unit of the paragraph, which organize closures of a thetic, expository and narrative order" (McCaffery 185).

By ostensibly displaying the sentence as an entry to his text *The Black Debt*, McCaffery pushes the poetic elasticity of that prose, as well as making

apparent the accommodating trait of prose as convenient container. The words don't just fall onto the page in breaths, but reveal themselves as visual connections leading from one page to the next.

McCaffery's *The Black Debt* is a two hundred-page book consisting of two separate prose texts. "Lag," the first of the two, presents one continuous sentence that completes itself with a comma, indicating itself as fragment or partial text to a larger, unavailable whole:

the humanitarians hint samaritan hue,
 attack against effacement here, in the
 power of the plus we guarantee this real,
 id as a show in a major role, it takes the
 place of the history it's losing, computers
 build new archives, something diffuse
 set in, the concept of violence which
 harbours consumption, seven three two
 three nine, false logic extends turning
 sour at a lime, third world debt is when
 taxation matters, (McCaffery *Black Debt* 42)

There is no continuous narrative in this prose, no characters, no plot, no accumulation of meaning, but rather a phrase-specific dispersal. McCaffery's commas operate similarly to line breaks in a sequential poem. But what he presents instead of a straightforward narrative is a continuance of phrases –

wrapped around the possibility and potential of sentence closure – which invites readers to engage in the textual play at the level of signifier rather than signified. This contemporary disjunctive prose poetry does not recognize the edge or border between prose and poetry.

Elsewhere, McCaffery says that words

are invested into the sentence, which in turn is invested in further sentences ... [T]he paragraph emerges as a stage in capital accumulation within the political economy of the linguistic sign. The paragraph is the product of investment, its surplus value (meaning) being carried into some larger unit: the chapter, the book, the collected works. (McCaffery *North* 160)

The accumulation of words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into larger units is the capitalist activity McCaffery writes against in this book. He does not suggest that paragraphs *per se* imply an ideological danger, but that the cumulative activity of reading and writing interpellates the reader into the capitalist economy of narrative production and consummation.

Similarly in *Relation*, Diane Ward examines the significance of the line break with her poem "Say": "final authority / appears very slowly // in other words / appears very slowly" (Ward 39). Beginning with the word "final" would indicate the reader should distrust this speaking "authority," especially when "authority" immediately follows as the second, ironic, word. The repetition of a line in two couplets, then, does not solidify the statement so much as make the reader aware how contextually determined these "same" three words are. Ward's line breaks, far from presenting a reassuring authoritative voice who controls pauses and breaths, focus on line generation

rather than on connective associations. "History begins a seductive / mirror. Locks are largely / passable. The few retain power / over, over" (Ward 7). These lines from "Possession for Thirty Years," again, do not promise to fulfil sequential progress through enjambment. Instead, the syntax borrows from prose, indicating – with its periods and capitals – the possibility of continuous information, of narrative realization, packaged in familiar and recognizable form.

Towards the end of her book, *Relation*, Diane Ward offers a series of prose paragraphs entitled "Fade on Family," written in what appear to be ordinary sentences and paragraphs. Just as a sentence can be whatever movement occurs between two periods, so too is a paragraph the movement between two indentations. This is how to grow narrative. These pieces fascinate me because the textual event of the prose-poem immediately distorts a narrative tradition of sentences accumulating into paragraphs, and somehow resulting in photo album family stories. One paragraph succeeds the next, but the reader's understanding of where the sentence begins and ends becomes less and less reliant on the growing narrative of a family gathering than on the what happens within the gaps inserted between each paragraph:

Closely, books give up violent sentences. Pictures always could mean time. You sat backwards in my tenderness. Time stopped being for you. Functioning before my head, frames around the worlds, my eyes give up their limitations, contour without shape. Silly, I was meant in my mind as a statue and my inside eyes gave that up too, wanting to take away all it meant to you. ("Mother" 58).

Ward explores “what happens between” on the page, so that the paragraph is a metaphor for the interval of touch and recognition. “What happens” between two points of the narrative is the whole body as winter (57), fingers around white space (59), or the survival of perspective (60). The gaps and what (or who) fills them create a tension in Ward’s prose within which the reader grabs onto words, hangs onto the daydream of the sentence. Such a dream incorporates temporal markers into a more spatial design.

My series “reported speech” (211) begins from a speech-based presence that has not been lost, but repressed or translated from the breath line into the prose narrative. I begin each piece in this section with a quotation from the spoken word: speech, rather than writing. These quotations operate as titles, but also commentary or partial dialogue for what goes on below. Unlike the first section, “in turn” (37), however, these pieces do not recognize the hierarchy of titles or citations. The bolded quotations begin to invade the body of the text, reminding the reader of their (broken) promise to introduce each poem. This causes a reading that is both interrupted and continuous, in that the inserted quotations / titles contradict the top of the page authority a title otherwise commands.

In his article, “Reported Speech,” V. Voloshinov outlines the grammatical rules and formulations for how writers indicate spoken words. This is an examination not of poetic markers such as the breath line, but linguistic representation of how to report another’s spoken words. “Reported speech,” says Voloshinov, is “a message belonging to someone else, a message that was originally totally independent, complete with its construction, and lying outside the given context” (149). Reported speech,

then, is a transcription of dependence, at the same time as it purports to display the original independence. In my series, "reported speech" (211), I examine both spatial and temporal markers which indicate, to the reader or "listener," where the speaking ends and the reporting begins. Gérard Genette says that the "absent presence of the receiver becomes the dominant (obsessive) element to the discourse" (Genette 256). This holds true of my poems' oral narrative element, the assumption that reported speech is not only spoken *by*, but spoken *to*. This verse is predicated on the assumption that speech is prose, and puts pressure on such an assumption by "reporting" common and ordinary sentences as titles and interjections within more uncommon prose language. The visual markers of punctuation and even the alphabet itself suggest that the speech is a fiction, a dream of writing incorporated into prose verse.

Godzich and Kittay, when they speak of "verse," generally refer to verse as it existed *before* the emergence of prose. Specifically, they mean verse of pre-thirteenth-century France. However, their arguments and discussions on the interdependence of the two, and the gradual ascension of prose through later centuries, applies to contemporary ideas about prose and verse. Transcriptions from the classical Greek and Roman period assumed a trained orator whose role included the interpretation of the transcript at the moment of their verbalization. "Most ancient manuscripts seem to have been written in *scriptura continua*, without punctuation, even without spaces between words" (Godzich 134). As prose becomes the dominant written discourse, it becomes necessary to provide readers with an annotative practice through which to read these otherwise unmediated texts.

Having made its appearance during a time in France when news and entertainment was provided by a court *jongleur* who performed the verses he (and often many members of his audience) had memorized, prose quickly established itself as a form which, unlike the “lying” *jongleur* (in the employ of the courts³³) was capable of conveying the *truth*. “Truth,” then, no longer resided in the performer, but in “an unalterability, a document” (Godzich xviii). That prose so pervades our written world is not always obtrusive, nor even noticeable. By the time prose has become accepted as the authoritative form for transferring the truth from original event to paper, it is considered the written equal of speech. This acceptance has a lot to do with the fact that “prose attracted a wider and less literate audience” (Godzich 149), than did, of course, the few mediaeval verse manuscripts available at the time.³⁴

Although mediaeval verse existed in written form as well as in the memory of the *jongleur*, the truth of his words resided in his particular performance of events or stories. The movement then from his performance to the “objective” veracity of prose was one which demanded that the truth be simply transcribed, rather than reenacted by an idiomatic entertainer. Unlike *chanter* (sing), *conter* (recount), *dire* (speak), or *fabloier* (tell a tale), “prose was not a verb, was not seen as an action, did not bespeak an agent” (Godzich 81).

³³ Although equally suspect, the honesty and objectivity of transcribers of this new “signifying practice” was not doubted. “Who,” ask Godzich and Kiltay, “literally *stands* behind this text” (Godzich xix)?

³⁴ As Silliman points out, the rise of prose had as much to do – especially in English speaking countries – with the invention of the printing press (Silliman *New Sentence* 73) as with the decline of the court *jongleur* in France.

The implications of this lack of action and of actor to perform the action are that prose appeared to be stable, static, and permanent. As a fixed form, no "interpreter" could alter meaning at the expense of a "listening" reader.

This historical separation of prose and verse has generally been maintained through one genre being perceived as "natural" and the other as "artificial." This hegemonic see-saw persists until the turn of the nineteenth century. When William Wordsworth writes the second edition to his "Preface," he explains how his poetry incorporates the "language really used by men" (Wordsworth 321). In other words, he fashions his poetry to the common everyday language known as "prose." Wordsworth recognizes that the distinction between "prose" and "poetry" is not an essential one, but is implicitly historical. He says:

I here use the word 'Poetry' (though against my own judgment) as opposed to the word Prose, and synonymous with metrical composition.... The only strict antithesis to Prose is Metre; nor is this, in truth, a strict antithesis, because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose, that it would be scarcely possible to avoid them, even were it desirable.

(Wordsworth 324)

A century or so after Wordsworth published his "Preface," T.S. Eliot published a short article in the "New Statesman" on "the poem in prose." Eliot dismisses the cross-genre excitement generated by this new French form as a "'Nineties' aesthetic eccentricit[y]" (Eliot 158), which recurs "not only in France, but in England, not only in England, but in America" (Eliot 158). Its success leads him to query the definition of these two forms, suggesting that between them lies "a medium of infinite gradations" (Eliot 158). Such a

model of gradation, Eliot proclaims, would prove useless and so he reinstates their position to each other as binary opposites.

The difference for Eliot, then, also comes down to a separation between *verse* and prose, because what may “hesitate” between *poetry* and prose is, more likely than not, “neither” (Eliot 158). In his conclusion, Eliot decides that the “distinction between poetry and prose must be a *technical* distinction” (Eliot 159, my emphasis). Technically, the differences between the mechanics of syllable, stress, foot, and stanza, and the mechanics of the sentence and paragraph are what – still – divide verse from prose, although these are not at all guarantees for an absolute determination of poetry. Technical devices such as the comma, spacing, parentheses, or even the period belong as much to poetry as to prose.

Danny Karlin, in a review of M.B. Parkes’s history of punctuation, says

The history of punctuation is in part the history of authors’ attempts to wrest power from readers, and of scribes’ attempts to wrest power from both readers and authors, and of the attempt by institutions such as the Church to control every aspect of the production, transmission and interpretations of texts. (Karlin 15)

In a footnote to his essay on “Temporality and the New Sentence,” Steve McCaffery also gives a short summary of the history of punctuation. From around 600 AD until well into the 1800s, “the rationale for punctuation is based largely on residual orality” (McCaffery “Temporality” 8n4), and hence notation is based on the belief that what is written was and will be again spoken or performed. Directions are needed, not only to guide the reader’s interpretation of the text, but also “to allow the reader time to take a breath”

(McCaffery "Temporality" 8n4). But punctuation does not always guide a clear and forthright reading of the material.³⁵

All punctuation, then – whether adopted as helpful instruction for the reader, or as an agent for controlling powers of persuasion, or as poetic disruption of interpretation – signifies a recognition of the context of address, and acknowledges its reading audience. Godzich and Kittay say that "early punctuation seems to serve mainly to control breathing and mark pauses when reading aloud" (Godzich 134). The disruptive nature of writing, in terms of how writing is situated within the social world, calls for a focus on the words within a certain literary and historical context. This context frames how one writes into it and reads out of it. Silliman says that "in 'poetic language' (or, better, 'the poetic uses of language'), the referent or context is the message" (Silliman *New Sentence* 99). The reader, says Godzich and Kittay, "when faced with reading a text of heterogeneous discourses ... must come to terms with *positionality*" (Godzich 112). The position of reader is at the same time co-determinate with the final product and co-created by it.

Almost in frustration, Ron Silliman announces in his discursive book on prose theory, *The New Sentence*, that "[t]here is no sentence but a determinate sentence and this is fixed by the period" (69). Linguistically, we don't *hear* sentences the same way we *see* them. The marking of words between the periods, spaces, and capital letters organizes the writer's, and reader's thoughts on the page. This bookending the sentence as whatever

³⁵ "As early as the 15th century," McCaffery continues in his footnote, "we find punctuation being exploited for its capacity to *unclarify* and to create deliberate ambiguity." It is this ambiguity that interests McCaffery in his analysis of Karen Mac Cormack's recent prose poetry.

happens between two dots on the page allows for a further reading of the paragraph as whatever collection of "sentences" occurs between one indentation on the page and another. The period, then, "organizes" a sentence in much the same way as the line break does a verse line. Michael Davidson, in his essay, "The Prose of Fact," focuses on intersentential relationships such as syntax or grammar (rather than image, tone, or subject matter) as the basic unit of composition, and how the sentence announces itself as "poetry."

Poetic discourse, says Antony Easthope, is ideological "not simply because it is a historical product but because it is one which continues to 'produce' the reader who produces it through a reading in the present" (Easthope 24). Perloff adds that "when prose foregrounds marked patterns of recurrence ... we have poetry" (Perloff *Linear Fallacy* 867). Once poets began experimenting with "freer" forms based on recurring imagery or syntactic repetitions, the clear distinction between poetry and prose became indistinct. Perloff suggests the designations "free prose" and "prose lyric" (Perloff "Linear Fallacy" 855) as possible terminology for contemporary non-lineated verse. Silliman attempts a similar nomenclature with his phrase "the new sentence," which he offers as a label for the prose poetry practiced more and more by contemporary poets. "The new sentence," says Bob Perelman, expanding Silliman's definition, "with its relative ordinariness and multiple shifts, encourages attention to the act of writing and to the writer's particular position within larger social frames" (Perelman "Parataxis and Narrative" 316).

"The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space,

between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet" (Silliman *New Sentence* 92). The "new" sentence is a poetic one forcing readers to come to poetry from some law of definition other than that which insists the poetry equates rhyme or anything with breaks occurring well before the margins of the page. Perloff notes that "students coming to poetry today are increasingly taught that if a given text is lineated, then it's a poem" (Perloff *Radical Artifice* 135-136). This conflation of poetry into verse, and then of verse into the lyric³⁶ – by writers, readers, and critics – results in confusion about the possibilities of non-lineated verse. "Contemporary prosodists, perhaps because they must account for the difficult case of free verse, generally do equate verse – and hence implicitly the poem – with lineation" (Perloff *Dance* 153n4).

The difference between "verse" and "prose," seemingly, is located in the line break. Easthope, in his literary analysis of discourses and their means of representation, says that poetry is both "a distinct and concrete practice with its own independence, conforming to its own laws and effects," and also always "part of a social formation defined historically" (Easthope 21). The latter extends Easthope's notion that "line organization always takes a specific historical form, and so is ideological" (Easthope 24). "Line organization" is a "graphically enforced" (Karlin 15) guideline for reading. Free verse poetry, having discarded rhyme and metre, shifts the poetic emphasis onto the device of the line break.

³⁶ For instance, in the index of Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, the citation for Poetry reads: "see Lyric" (Culler 299).

Free verse has the approximate status, according to Paul Fussell, of the *Free World*: that is, "free, sort of" (Fussell 76). Fussell describes the traditions of free verse as relying on the technique of "enumeration," or syntactical repetition, all techniques common in other forms of poetry, though perhaps not so heavily inscribed in the sonnet or villanelle. Discussing the difference between verse and prose (as opposed to that of poetry and prose), Godzich and Kittay say that, "paragraphs and chapters aside (a significant exception), layout is not used to articulate divisions of prose as it is for verse" (Godzich 134). This comment could easily be made of contemporary prose poets. With the emergence of the prose poem, and other transgeneric forms, disparate writing modes and even specifically prosaic forms may also be absorbed into poetry.

Punctuation is control rather than the supposed "freedom" which attracts many poets to "free verse." The "new sentence," emblematic of an interlocking space between prose and poetry, conceives a "new" horizon for writing: capable of translating the terminal of the line break into the typographical marker of the period. Sentential poetry, and its coordinating punctuation, parallels the pattern of conclusion and recommencement established by the line and line break. The punctuation of the line break is here perceived as organized by the writer, *for* the reader, "joint producer," says James Scully, "of the poem" (Scully 111). Directives to the reader operate not simply as commands, but as communication and dialogue with an inscribed reader who is assumed to now co-produce the written text. For poets, the break in a line means as much a tentative continuation as it does a temporary conclusion. Ron Silliman writes that the paragraph "organizes the sentences in fundamentally the same way a stanza does lines of verse" (Silliman *New Sentence* 89). The end breaks of lines and stanzas "represent a

pause in reading" (Culler 183), which can be interpreted as either mimetic strategy (the formal organization represents speech patterns), or as a typographical device utilized to "bring about syntactic ambiguity" (Culler 184). In the prose poem, says Silliman, "the sentence (or something like the sentence) and not the verse line is the predominant compositional unit" (Silliman "New Prose" 158). His claim for a "new" literary sentence – unlike the linguistic sentence, which rests on a dictionary definition of "complete thought" (Silliman *New Sentence* 64)³⁷ – rest on how some literary prose has, predominantly at the level of the sentence, "interiorized" the "external poetic devices" of metre, stress, rhythm, spacing, rhyme, assonance which readers normally associate with verse.

In *Poetry as Discourse*, Antony Easthope discusses how, although "different metres are historically specific" (Easthope 52), certain of them attain a somewhat transhistoric "hegemonic form" (Easthope 65), a form which signifies "poetry." This is the case with the pentameter, for example. Once this has occurred, the form has undergone a process of "naturalization." This is done, Jonathan Culler says, "by talking about it [the form] in a mode of discourse which a culture takes as natural" (Culler 137). What results from this critical naturalization process is "a notion of the poem as spontaneously

³⁷ Since there appears to be no theory on "incomplete thoughts," I can only assume that such a grammatical "law" has come from a class sanctioning of "good" grammar – which displays one's status through education, versus "bad" grammar – which often demonstrates a particular idiom or dialect. Silliman comments on how such speech-writing characterizations reveal that "refined" speech is consciously patterned after an associative organization of writing, whereas the discourse of "creative" writing instructs students to "put down their thoughts as if ... speaking" (Silliman *New Sentence* 106).

generated product" (Easthope 67). The poem as a production, as a constructed artifice, has been suppressed and transformed.

In their "Introduction" to *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, editors Robert Frank and Henry Sayre also ask if "the character of the poetic line [is] 'natural' ... or [if] it is somehow determined by historical and cultural forces from outside itself?" (Frank x). Mediaeval court scribes would have been vehement about the "naturalness" of verse. Up until the twelfth century, even the Latin prose they translated was organized into verse form (Godzich xv). Part of the naturalization of a form involves its definition, in this case verse as distinguished from prose. Culler argues that the "most obvious" typography for poetry's formal organization "is the division into lines and stanzas" (Culler 183). Marjorie Perloff laments those simplified readings that would designate any text as "poetry" which displays a justified left margin and ragged right line breaks. At times, she says, lineation "seems to be no more than a convenient way of packaging the material" (Perloff "Linear Fallacy" 861).

The line as a measuring unit for poetry extends past merely notating a terminus and return. The line, according to Donald Justice, has almost as many versions as there are poets making use of it. He argues for a "Stevens's line" which, although influenced by imagist poets, did not fit the longer imagist mould (Justice 185-186). Justice traces a history of this line, which reaches from Milton's blank-verse to Stevens's "much looser and stretched pentameters" (Justice 192). Seamus Heaney, writing in response to a query concerning the line in contemporary poetry, says that in metrical verse, the line is a measure, "a frame across which the music and syntax has to be

stretched." But in free verse, the line is "a marker of time, a punctuating device, a pacer" (Heaney 191).

Even when poets disagree on the significance of line breaks and their measurement, they seem to agree that such measurement is necessary. These poets, through a disagreement on the level of notation, speculate that the line and its end stop is not, essentially, a representation of Olson's breath unit. Most contemporary poets, even while writing lineated verse, rely on their readers' extensive knowledge of prose and its syntax. Bob Perelman, in *Virtual Reality*, mixes couplets with free verse with prose stanzas with concrete poetry. In "State Heads," Perelman pushes his line endings to the far reaches of the page's margin, recuperating their ambition for prosody in the next line, which begins with a physical indent:

Poetry in our time speaks in cars and air conditioners too
 constant for broadcast thought to say more than I
 see (31)

The lines are so long, and the accompanying line breaks so far from where each line has begun, that the poem "tricks" its reader into a practice of continuation that suggests the rhythm and pace of "ordinary" spoken prose.

In his treatise on how we hear with our eyes, Garrett Stewart suggests, "we listen while we read" (37) and goes on to question: "What then is it that we think we hear, or hear in thinking?" (Stewart 37). This notion that readers approach poetry with an idea of how it sounds, situates the hearing reader within a conscious process that writes and rewrites sound. If a page is a register of aural limits, then when the reader comes to a page, s/he comes with expectations of limitation and surplus, expectations that s/he herself

fulfills, even as what is produced on a page is a plethora of letters, punctuation, word collage, drawings, font manipulation, numbers, lines, emblems, and all other postmodern insertions and interruptions delineated into and against the traditional lineated lyric.

Michael Davidson, in "The Prose of Fact," says that he is "interested in persuading the reader to read. To read language as an activity and not a solution to the problem of meaning" (Davidson 177). Dorothy Lusk has a similar intention. In her poetry book, *Redactive*, she invites the reader into a conspiracy of typographical errors and deliberate misprints. A typical sentence, "It's awful awful to haven't the agency of the gumption" (Lusk 51), lets the reader in on the joke. Her poetry is lightly sprinkled with commas out of place or the article "an" typeset in front of words that do not begin with vowels. This is the same editorial conspiracy that insists on square brackets after a grammatically correct quotation, revealing its "gendered" status: "the writer can have the mistaken impression that he [sic] still has to write down something" (Lusk 19). Lusk is inviting her readers into a game where the published text is not definitive, or authoritative, or even well proofread. The reader, she is saying, has final say about what is and what is not a sentence.

In my earlier poem, "the wood remembers," for example, the line breaks suggest to the reader a pause or break in momentum:

a lyric line that tempts
each
separate
note (74)

The reader is surprised by a line break which contradicts the predominantly prose poetry form. The punctuation of the break forces the reader to reconsider the force of the pause imposed by a period only; the reader must reread previous lines as well as reading forward to the note that concludes this stanza concerning music and rhythm.

In similar ways, I employ prose to generate a narrative, while at the same time halting the poem before it can transform into a short story or larger fiction. The narrative in these poems often promises characters and story, perhaps even a plot and plot twist: These are the techniques of fiction, the intense pleasure an author offers by fulfilling and denying her reader's narrative desires. But I do not actually provide the story. In "reported speech" (211) my sentences can be read as disjunctive events related through the persona witnessing and commenting on preexisting sentences. But, even if the reader accepts this authoritative reporting voice, the events do not add up to the "narrative" promised in the either the title or first sentence.

The legacy of this invasion by prose into virtually every genre of writing is that we all now "live in a world transformed by the historical event of prose's emergence and subsequent spread" (Godzich xiii). Prose has invaded and transformed our world by becoming the expression for truth (journalism), art (novels, short stories, even narrative poetry), and most oral speeches. Prose has also, necessarily, transformed poetry: "Once prose emerges, prose and verse become interdependent" (Godzich xiii). The "implicit distinction between verse and prose" (Godzich 134) today, is the framed context of the page: one with and one without margins. "Without edges or margins, what does prose look like?" (Godzich 171). In "The Marginalization of Poetry," Perelman says that "marginalization" goes

without saying (Perelman *Virtual Reality* 11). He then goes on to ask, "is this a line break / or am I simply chopping up / ineradicable prose?" (12). The flush left and ragged right margins emerge as "significant events, often interrupting" (13) his supposed intentions and diverting his words elsewhere. His form, then, becomes either "anti-generic" or "over-genred" (20) in that its imposition creates an effect, not unlike the effect of the page on justified prose fiction, wherein the reader reads through the formal marginalization in order to enter into the subject matter of poetry marginalization. This brings to mind Olson's most oft-repeated maxim that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (Olson 16), except, of course, content has instead become the extension of form.

REPORTED SPEECH

“Hegemonic sets of gender roles within marriage.”

evasive and constantly shifting stereotypes perhaps already constitute gender. required sexuality may be the body already conceived as social property. yank the Beggar’s Opera into the dominant phrase structure. emergent of feeling. go encompass a more complicated moral universe. except how do we read the state of the individual when we see the state of the body in 1711. 11 men invent the possibility that women do not require an orgasm to achieve pregnancy. yeast infections either

“Repeat the capitalism of narrative.”

elastics once snapped and hard buttons gone soggy
lose their skill. lazily refuse to substitute for one
of the men on the board game

eventually this meaning is what I'll use to reach
another place. enter somewhere already spoken
for but still quite vacant. to let in a splinter of
biography. yes during the night after she'd cut
off her hands I watched new skeletons composing.
gallop in which way for punctuation to anticipate
reading?

gradually I decide a question mark should replace
the dot. the period

definitely high school wasn't the only place to fail
a driving test. to be truly subversive one had to
wait till 65 or over

reminds me that my own dog used the trope of
tip-toes to sneak past the screen door. right
where I'm from is always where I've been with an
emphasis on *else*

each woman in veils is automatically sexy. yet
any man in veils is naturally ridiculous

“Scribbling woman and me.”

eventual metafictional feminism. maybe this isn't
the first time but why can't she remember her
lines? short breaks in the tv. voice in a vice grip.
put the emphasis on each monosyllabic word

don't think it happens all the time but we can't get
used to the discount they've put on matriarchy.
yielding such low low prices. see how ten flags
will be 2 short. timing and a guttural weep.
pretend this is still a good time for all

lately food is fashion

no way those adjectival qualifiers describe.
ending with my you. until the part in her hair
makes Julia weep. put that way where is the
squashed curve? even a gesture with his left hand
indicates speaker position.

“Never Bookending punctuation.”

nevertheless her hand no longer blinds the gaze.
effort suggests a fame that has been caressed

“Doctors who inject the lethal sentence or even supervise the execution lend the appearance of medical procedure to killing.”

what happens if you live in a bus and your life sentence becomes someone else's grammar lessons?

say that a wineskin doesn't only have to be filled with red or white. even water or other liquids keep its shape. experiment and fill it with sand. don't laugh. here and now. we could fill it with bits of coloured confetti. it depends who's impressed. depends which content is meant to shape which forms

sentences sometimes end way before the period and sometimes well after. resolution for that tiny dot of perfection can be a tricky landing

getting the female body recognized as an event of sex rather than cause

envisions my want to write poetry. you imitate stories that imitate poems. so why is that not a circle thaw?

we put on a funeral for representational art. this performance will be for a public observation that indeed there has been such a death. how to put that in the coffin? now what to throw in the grave

“Eyes believe themselves ears believe other people.”

Eaton's purple plains show off robes sloping gradually towards Hudson's Bay. yell how many dominoes make up a number. repeat how many playing fields we can level in one go

or attack the bark. kick-start the brevity

years later the blind boy says he can see whether he's holding a \$5 \$10 or \$20 by touch. he says this looks like a 2-dollar bill. radio parlour trick. kid's scopic review blurb

“Blind curve.”

“Exaggerated deliberation ahead.”

even the blind faith of the believer falls on deaf ears. should be a matter of handedness. some sort of levelling birth

:hand-over-hand

:hand-to-foot

:hand-made

:hand-it-over

his repeated excitement may invite desperation (deception) if the room is sad enough. habit of yesterday. you see the past belongs to rules. skimming the lid of my skin belongs to words I don't want spoken. now a gate swinging past its hinges

staring is the only time I've seen you seeing. going anti-clockwise twists under the sheets and manages nicely. young silent letters – singing consonants and vowels – startle the academic

“Clinging to the fax.”

Xmas will be here in the minutes and we both wait for returns. see me in the arms of the decade. examine these dates to see you in the centre of the word

“Do you use indoor or outdoor feminine hygiene?”

edible and attracting fluid subject position. nobody admits pleasure in chaotic sentence structure. entire weapons have been labelled for less. she passed out instructions to an audience of poets. secret was to listen to her lies. some graphic. some bio

opening wide we anticipate the resounding transformation of otherwise ignored placement

thinking has been known to lead to sentences complete or otherwise. etiquette of menstrual control is not always a personal choice

egotistically if it happens to you it happened to me too. otherwise known as the *share* syndrome. effective self government and other forms of confusement. the way others mean narrate. enuf. four generations scrunched up without a drop spilling. glacially changing an arm and one leg. guy's hobby you might say. ye old artefacts of the present tense but where's the body now?

“No, this country is universal.”

lengthwise the basic question for him is more than a twisted zero. originally my background was what I'd moved away from. mostly question period comes after the long answer. right angle explorations take a body farther north than one'd expect. those feminist utopias subvert what else in the contemporary world of conversion

notice the family as a stand-in for television. note the metaphors for identity and self

four times the cross for mass rage lands in the airport while we grapple with slotted spoons and line endings. subtly leaving out her scalp rub. but I was going to explain about feminist utopias. stories change. ensure the “make way for plot” plot. the road plan

“Non-identity politics.”

slumber or after a night on the town I have more than music on my mind. damp shoe laces and blood flow. which direction is one-way? you know I'd love to *study* the classics but first there's the problem of wedding woman and her photographic pose in snow

whereas poolside I'm watching a programme where every displacement has more to do with dispeplement than Calgary's underground poet. that ringside embrace shares the limelight with theoretical autobiographies

“Star wars available for 1899.”

9 times out of 10 the rhetoric of revision relies on the body as metaphor. remove the liberal pluralism and you’ve got a riot to curb

by following the analysis of the debate she accidentally recognized the narrator. reply that this isn’t the only way to tell stories. sub-plot development provides a structural necessity and detour

representing rather than neglect. they choose identity where I would redistribute what’s said

“Don’t spoil the fun.”

neglect takes the form of temptation. normal transparency. yielding to every nuance and. do both sides of the frontier include class divisions? so forget about recent theoretical thinking. guess this isn’t the only place the word word can be repeated. duet as opposed to the social construction of regionalism

more bracketting in order to inform the individual subject

“Trance-Poetics.”

somehow Colette's whistle covers my body parts.
she describes how her three husbands rotate the
narrative forward. december now. while he was
convalescing they printed new maps. so far the
grave itself is quadrupled. don't bet on siblings
related by earth. how could he be born in an
invented country when he lived to see its retreat?

then after addressing the letter she phoned to have
my mother pick it up. put that way why not show
him the text before it's distributed?

don't wait for the translation

“All criticism is autocriticism.”

**moebius strip – purple shaded – dark edges fade
towards lavender. rather than make a point of
this I digress towards another subject. travel the
path towards open explanation. no matter here’s
the wit of the story. yellow or cobalt blue
flowers beyond the orchid. dappled colonels
signalling purpose and named borders. spoiled
and unhappy flattery became the main currency of
interchange**

except they share each other

rhetoric left out the passion

“Not a medium but an agent.”

the perfect villain presents more than sideshow
comedy. your letter demands too many details I
have set it aside. emery boards and hollow
lipstick tubes collect more than signifying
rejections. *sincerely* evokes for me your name.
empty. yes more than no – one might say. yet ...

... to overlook the evidence. evidently the
problem was showing insertion. not flexible acts.
sufficient good judgment. traditionally
homosexuality is a biblical rather than
pathological crime. enter objectivity and
conventional marriage. explain dorian gray.
yardstick for age and decay. you give more than
a portrait less than a summation. notice he kept at
it till the ropes were all uncoiled. director of an
unselected idol. listen to me preach. how the
same year she died her son became known for his
neo-romanticism

“Mr. Crowfoot sitting on the subway seat.”

they selected the Maritimes as the subject of experience. expect to begin with a capital.

“Letter to letter.”

rip lengthwise and twist. then pop. piling the leaves to one side shifts the narrative from political to economic. cuz she's obsessed with notions of linguistic others. she writes a third novel later that day. you can tell the worst of it was his list of key words: subject – takeoff – frenzy – yearning. gems were rarely manifest destiny at the C-train. nor coyotes themselves

“Shift the pronoun and he has no history.”

yet his gender remains intact. though he didn't think to make the shift at the level of alphabet. thought invoking print venues would enable him to scrutinize the 80s. so the age of writing represents gender construct. taken outside this metaphor mosquito coils resemble spirals. stigmata in movies may trigger mysteries as much as painting the usual story. your precarious seriality

yet after a cold you find yourself gulping his illiteracy as confession. never the downstairs version of his art. the artefacts themselves comment on their criticism to achieve the goal of the smallest audience possible. even believing in a general reader

results in her enlisting poetry for the purpose of

“Form is not a fixture but an activity.”

**young Canada dreams schizophrenia. and wizard
technology and continentalism. music generically
travels across countries. specifically Montréal.
leaving the dual americanism and typical gender
roles to listeners. so music mediates the mutually
determined practice of the 49th parallel. let that
assert to the local identities coherent audiences**

**suspicious that each constructionist ideology
works disloyalty and the freedom of listening into
the African music equivalent to Native land rights**

**stop trusting that organized temporality will
exclude pleasure. ending with a drum**

“Men love porn & men love technology it’s perfect.”

to sex scientists

sleek metal reflects more than the rhetoric of long lines

sure muscular blueprints by the very act of doing a patient. the spider rewrites mucus desire of technique. everything is possible especially pop culture or lunch. he may lead lyrics to many publications. so poetry as promotion. not the chronic present. tv commentators who don’t know when to stop long after the red light flicks off. forget it you’ve got a lot of *stuff* in your head

donate mutant ghost movies and a backyard tent

trifle can be critical or not. this depends on the level. leaving women out has always been part of the boomerang equation. now interpretation can close down the bulb. but open the window and you’ll feel a raw breeze. easy to take over a position you don’t occupy. yield to occupy that position you don’t occupy... yes and working out from that I would attempt to lose my voice depending on to whom I am speaking. graphically ornate, she memorizes the tempo

“Optimum absorption. Nothing but books.”

sometimes dreams export their own punctuation.
now *scooting* settles the literary dream. my
clichés include rooms full of stacks and stacks of
book holding her motorcycle helmet. this means I
cross the room from the evens to the unevens. so
that not dreaming at all eventually I am assigned a
seat at my own table but not before you speak
your mind. distinctly not the opposite to lemon
peels and dew

“We thought he was innocent.”

took bold behaviour from one who takes more
than winning for granted. demoted they say he's
a hero. or you wouldn't believe how for one year
we waited. drowning in the heat

tell them I won't mention this now but when we
return there'll be more than you can imagine to
fill up that gap. please remember we bought that
thing. genius looks the same from above or
upside down

never engulf

false fallopian indicates I don't think about her
more than once

editing that may be too vital

“Like the prose back home.”

enclosed inside *prose* snuggles the French word
for dare. enhancing the inside *poem* as oh-um.
my lipstick and labial teeth – how can one tell the
difference? excessively I want to know why
picking up hitchhikers relates to my passport on
the highway. yearly long distance phone calls
already about how no more postcards. so
according to Hemingway it's a candlelighted
dinner. repressed phallic objects seem to be
shaped like a penis. see double. eyes who see
double glazed. double chocolate. eccentrically
percept

“Technically I’m psyched but I don’t feel it.”

tucked in disc. cuz visiting takes longer. really.
you’re more than apologetic. can the house rent
itself with those doors slamming notes. sand
litters my pockets. suburban wine can be so much
more expensive

every time you slip my pen into your mouth.
here from my minutia

a propane tank slides down the river and a plastic
factory explodes. stinging the air. repeat
breathing toxic. conceal that meanwhile I’m
waiting for the late edition. nil times we’ve
shared the same grimace but where to now? why
I definitely continue to owe her letters but she
never writes back

kidnap how it’s possible to theorize ending in
giant vulvas. sounds remarkable but what about
the inverse?

even I have trouble with the word expect applied
to knowledge

education is encouraged to last

“There are some things a husband should never know. Whether or not his wife has been to the moon is one of them.”

**merging from bottled breath – his quiet hand –
dares toward open throat. though remembering
isn't only about what you know**

wait for a black leather bag in the gutter

relationships are less than public discourse

**entertain the event before the end of this sentence.
endings can only predict beginnings**

**share each time you count to zero from the end.
donate a flight of zebras. show their rambling on
and then some**

ebb and proceed

**“Disjecta membra: a kind of movie that
you just can’t put down.”**

**not all interplay writes conclusion. no gloom
rests inside a computer screen. nancy wanted to
ask her if she still favours print dresses. sleep or
weep in chorus. simply naming it Down
Syndrome leaves out your left earlobe.
effectively I mean that in a medical sense. ethical
bodies usurp the position as primary motivator.
red yellow and pekoe. embracing backwards**

so tempt

“There is no such thing as a prose poem.”

mumbled the cyclops. shining her black leather.
rig construction tumbles into the valley of.
faraway and too many. yearly postcards to line
the ceiling. goes to show how many pairs of
boots fit into one box. x-rated continues his
morning fast. then he read that crocodiles have
no tongue. except when he looked inside there
was the rogue organ. not tied or mangled at all
just limp from exhaustion. nowhere near extinct

the pump was low and baby crawled out the side
window. well isn't that the way we harbour
expectation? nothing could prevent this story or I
could pretend these words belong to the same
sentence twice as often as you watch t.v.

“Virtual clause 2.”

2 lesbians who don't know their mother tongue.
even why the chapel they're building might be a
garage irreligious to the eyes of the beholder.
randomly I miss you. uproot that pinpoint look to
the place where we'd been

now can I carry what you see?

epitome and cunt could be the same word. diction
provides a cliché for how far along the beach you
should reach. half as far as we did. deaf
postcards shouldn't be photographs

“She learned to speak English by writing poems.”

“So Pre-purchase Pochahontes today.”

yearning for glimpses of boys on the bus. some narratives begin with closure, too. only we recommend all the books on this shelf. faint tinge of red against the Madonna. actual mothers and sentences block the armoured car

raging about what kinds of books get cut up and used as flypaper he offered this synopsis:

sophomoric. cuz the movie ends dramatically. yucky car chase and heroic underwater scenes. stimulating phone call just in time to intercept the homoerotica. or

7. Sounding Out a Thesis: Pushing the Prose Line

The ill fortune Polyphemus wishes on Odysseus ensures the trip home lasts ten years. But not all of the trip takes place while travelling. Odysseus lives with Circe for one and a half years and, in one version of the myth, they have a son, Telegonus, who decades later kills Odysseus whom he does not recognize. Odysseus also lives with Calypso for seven years and, in another version, they have a son, Telegonus, who kills Odysseus, the father he searches for but does not recognize. Perhaps Telegonus believes nobody is his father.

By the time he reaches his home, Odysseus has lost all his ships and his men have all drowned. Athena saves Odysseus's life, but Poseidon causes the people and ships which help Odysseus enter his harbour to change into stone. Once again, true to Polyphemus's request, Odysseus is alone. He enters his palace as a beggar and only his childhood nurse knows him. She sees and recognizes marks on his body as signifiers of pre-narrative episodes she, and not the reader, can remember.

Marks on the page are signals for how to read that page. "The fictionalizing of readers is what makes writing so difficult" says Walter Ong (177). Ong, a psychiatrist, writes an analysis of binary language opposition that, linguistically speaking ("Sight isolates, sound incorporates" [Ong 72].), tends to authenticate the lost paradise of obsolete orality. "Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit" (Ong 11). Nonsense. Just as music can be defined by its silences – by the *end* of the beat, rather than by the beat itself – so can sound be defined by its absences: poetry is white

noise with bits taken out of it. No more and no less than letters on a page defined by the spaces between them (or the blank page defined by the marks interrupting). The imprint of sound on the ear need not be differentiated from the displacement of reading onto the written. Communication means fall-out, means unaccounted for residue, never totally encompassed by sender and receiver, by message and context. The voiced "hello" sounding through a telephone becomes the equivalent of a written signifier that sits patiently on a page, waiting for reception.

"Think of the call," says Gerald Burns. "The ear puts us in the mode of being summoned, of being answerable and having to appear" (127-8).

Traditional poetry, so to speak, has been as much an experience for the ear as for the eye. What, then, happens to the lyric rhythm, the musical line, when poets move into the rectangular space of prose, the justified margins that compel the reader onwards, making breath lines invisible?

I myself am what one might term "immusical" in that my ear cannot recognize and name notes either in the air or on the page. Yet, I am not immune to the rhythms a poet's (to allow Fredman his possessive) prose is capable of performing. Trapped inside the arbitrary boundaries of that most artificial of grammatical constructs – the sentence – words generate words; poets still want to "get it right," "make it work," search for the "just right" sound, sense, tone. Michael Ondaatje, who used various rhythmic devices in his "poetic novel" about Buddy Bolden, *Coming Through Slaughter*, investigates the poetic possibilities of narrative in his long poem *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*:

On the fifth day the sun turned into a pair of hands
and began to pull out the hairs on my head. Twist

pluck twist pluck. ... Then with very thin careful fingers it began to unfold my head drawing back each layer of skin and letting it flap over my ears.

...

The wind picked up, I was drowned, locked inside my skin so sensitive as an hour old animal, could feel everything, I could hear everything on my skin, as I sat, like a great opaque ostrich egg on the barebacked horse. In my skin hearing Garrett's voice near me on the skin whats wrong billy whats wrong, couldnt see him but I turned to where I knew he was. I yelled so he could hear me through the skin. Ive been fucked. Ive been fuckd Ive been fucked by Christ almighty god Ive been good and fucked by Christ. (76-8)

The movement in this passage is from a normalized grammatical sentence and paragraph structure to the degeneration of sentence markers into one single stream of voice. Billy, attempting to describe the extreme heat of the ride back to prison, gets caught inside the metaphor of the sun's hands withdrawing moisture from his skin, pulling his body inside out. His cry, at the end of this passage, mingles with his keeper's, so that syntactically one cannot distinguish between Billy's "skin" and Garrett's exclamation, "whats wrong." As soon as Billy has iterated that his skin can hear Garrett's voice, most of the punctuation normally used in prose disappears mid-sentence: "billy"s name is not capitalized, although "Garrett's" is³⁸, and the distinction

³⁸ Similarly, in my own poetry I tend not to capitalize any words except proper nouns. This allows me to signal a naming process rather than a syntactical punctuation.

between the narrator and character is erased by the grammatical conflation of one into the other. Although he maintains periods to divide the sentences, Ondaatje deliberately employs confusing syntax and absent grammatical markers. This confusion is perfectly apt for Billy's narrative, in that his "left-handed" view of the world is metaphorically – and for him literally – stripped away from his body. Blind, he sinks gratefully into the shade of his horse's pounding hooves.

Given that Ondaatje uses sentences and paragraphs, given that his book arguably fits into the traditional western narrative of the rogue hero, what can be said about the *genre* of this writing? Beginning where Fredman stopped short, poet Bin Ramke asserts that "the prose poem is always a mediation as well as a meditation, and always concerns itself with authority – perhaps it is even accurate to say that poet's prose always concerns itself with authority" (Ramke 131). An 'authority,' in this case, that declares itself responsible for declaring responsible categories of writing. And responsible categories of reading, if it comes to that. For who, after all, decides what makes a book poetry or prose? Fred Wah, the poet who insists his words belong in the ever risky instability of poetics? Or Aritha van Herk, who insists she can read (and teach) Fred Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan* as a novel? The authority of the author may have been declared long dead, yet the wake continues. Prose poetry has little to do with the length of lines or elevated language that refers back to Classical Greece but, says Ramke, by chance making reference to Russel Edson's theory of refuse, "the poetry may be what is left over when we try to extract the prose" (133).

Coincidentally, prose extract is exactly the ingredient needed for my next metaphor. To begin with, a short history: In his succinct essay, "On the

Prose Poem: How We Listen to the World Speaking," Bruce Whiteman sums up information that has been gathered about this genre. He expresses surprise that, after the distortions and contortions so far performed on "all species of narrative, prosody, grammar, propriety – in short, the whole tradition of English poetry" (Whiteman 7), then "surely it is somewhat strange that such categories as poetry and prose continue to function at all as terms of discrimination" (7). Whiteman locates a "postmodern" consciousness within the form of the oxymoronically termed prose poem. Citing Aloysius Bertrand as its progenitor, Charles Baudelaire as the poet who named the form, and Arthur Rimbaud as his third, 19th Century French prose poet example, Whiteman moves into the French 20th Century (the Surrealists), as well as into Spanish (Jimenez, Lorca, Paz, Borges) and modernist American writers (William Carlos Williams, Robert Bly), before offering a list of contemporary Canadian prose poets (himself, Priest, Hartog, Kroetsch, Wah, Marlatt). "The basic characteristic of the prose poem is of course the controlling force of the sentence as opposed to the poetic line" (Whiteman 26). Although I'd like to agree with this simple definition, the "of course" bothers me enough to notice (with a now-sharpened focus) that in defining this mingled form, Whiteman immediately sets up a binary opposition between the prose and poetic line. But, to allow him to continue³⁹: "Ragged right poetry ... inevitably reflects the controlling consciousness of the poet as he chooses the initial, medial and final words of

³⁹ Whiteman's essay is extremely useful to anyone interested in an overview of the prose poem as genre, genre-blur, or simply a variation and combination of forms. I quote him at length because of this very usefulness, not to argue any literary conclusions his essay offers.

a line ... it is not the language that is dictating what is happening, but the writer's ego" (Whiteman 26). Extract the prose and we are left with the refuse of the (male) ego?

As Whiteman does not mention a she-poet's consciousness, I'd like to turn to Donald Wesling's essay on the narrative of grammar, in which he describes this writerly consciousness as "the prose poem's attempt to create less conventional conventions" (Wesling 187). Having moved, chronologically, from Baudelaire to contemporary avant-garde prose poetry, it makes sense that a form once chosen for its radical non-existence within a history of writing now becomes part of the construction of those conventions. "The narrative of the consciousness of the author and reader is the same thing as the plot of the poem's sentences, taken singly and together" (Wesling 176). This "plot" is indeed one of sentences, subterfuge, and de-con-ceits. The prose poem, irritatingly blunt and uneducated and impudent, is a form embraced by contemporary language-focussed poets (and the occasional unfocussed prose writer). It has, as the saying goes, become the apple of their collective eye.

So, there we have one critic decrying lined poetry as investing in a poet's consciousness, and another associating the author's (and reader's) consciousness with contemporary prose poetry. Binaries, binaries, everywhere; too many choices in sight.

In "dreams & other animals" (256), I wish to occupy the space of the page with my desire for a prose structure within a narrative poetics. Each piece includes fictional elements which pull the reader into a text which fails to keep its narrative promises. But does a disjunctive poetics signal the end of narrative or does it fail, strategically, to complete such an end? My

“promethean flaw” continues to be this attempt to address narrative within disjunctive non-lineated prose. The penultimate poem, “slogans” (269), collects rules, both of grammar and of the daily domestic, in a series of lists that sums up the conclusions of the previous poems and redisperses these “rules” into subsequent writings. The narrative, here, is one of continued metaphors, of speculation about gender and mythology, about women writers and the story of modernism.

Narrative, according to Gerard Genette’s theory of narratology⁴⁰, refers not to “the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself” (Genette 26). So that the “action” in a narrative is the telling itself; the relationships between narrator and narratee⁴¹, story time and discourse time, mimesis and diegesis. The text produced is never simply the written account held in an actual reader’s hand, but encompasses both the events that it recounts and the “activity that supposedly gave birth to it” (Genette 28). *How* a text presents, unfolds, reveals, uncovers, discovers, or executes its narrating becomes implicated in the narrative. “The narrating instance, then, refers to ... the entire set of conditions (human, temporal, spatial) out of which a narrative statement is produced” (Genette 31n). And the statement produced from these conditions, exists simultaneously as a narrative and as the event of the narrating.

⁴⁰ The terminology and structure of narrative analysis employed here come from Gerard Genette’s theories.

⁴¹ According to Genette, the “narratee” merges with the implied reader of the text (Genette 260).

Every text, whether poem or story, prayer or postmodernist long poem, presumes and establishes a reading subject. The "narratee" is constructed as male or female, poet-lover or bored student, as an integral part of the text, without which its form could not produce or generate itself. The narratee does not assume or identify with an ongoing story; rather, the narratee is a textual production which allows the narrator to present or perform the text. For example, a prayer recited in church assumes the narratee to be God, but the performance is one of communal participation. The closure, then, is not based on a story the narrator wishes to relate so much as the observance of customary completion.

Marlene Nourbese Philip, in her long prose poetry book, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, addresses the construct of the hero through a writing back, an unspoken narrative, to the colonizer who doesn't hear any voice but his own. In this poetry book, Livingstone is the narratee for Nourbese Philip's female Traveller. Her narrative, a mixture of prose and poetic forms, opens up a dialogue between a black woman talking back to the historical hero who has destroyed the African continent. Unfortunately, the narrator gives her subject, Livingstone, no agency whatsoever, and as a result he is too flimsy and easy a hero to topple. The conversation the Traveller has with this fallen figure is disappointing because she has won the argument before they even begin speaking. At the end of Nourbese Philip's narrative, Livingstone seems unable to say one word in his own defense (he even seems to agree to his need for a defense, which denies his role as colonizer). I wish to look at read this text closely as a book of poetry that engages in both prose and mythic narrative, yet does not entirely challenge either form or content.

Nourbese Philip betrays her own colonized project in writing a traditionally male narrative of the single traveller on a quest for truth. She describes her heroine as being on an "Odyssey" (49), and in doing so, perpetuates a traditional male narrative of search and discovery. Her traveller, then, is co-opting the idea of the colonizer who sets out to find the "right" path to take him home again. Like Odysseus, she already knows where she's headed before she even begins but, unlike him, she never strays from her determined path. In Classical quest narratives, the hero searches for what he does not have, or seeks answers to what are so far only questions. But this narrator already has the answers before she begins her quest, and already has the answers to questions she only asks in order to embarrass the previous figure of hero, Livingstone. Her journey is ultimately uninteresting to the reader because its objective is attained before she begins. Nourbese Philip's purpose is to question Livingstone's agenda. Yet she does not write that agenda into her text, merely assumes the reader knows as much, or as little, about Livingstone as she does. I question, then, her project's essentialism of the black woman speaking back to the white man. He discovers Africa but does not let Africa discover him. She has fallen into the same trap of which she accuses him. She has found exactly what she set out to find, has only asked questions she already knew the answers to.

As this narrative is an "odyssey," Nourbese Philip includes "monsters and exotic creates" (15) and, just as Odysseus's men are turned to pigs, one of the character's brothers are transformed into roosters (50). True to odyssean form, the Traveller is even betrayed by a beautiful woman (51). Like Hercules, the Traveller must answer riddles which show off her skill and resourcefulness in order to continue with her journey: "They refused to let

me go. Not until I answered three skill-testing questions" (19). Nourbese Philip accepts and buys into the structure of heroic narratives as telling the story of one who must surpass superhuman trials and tests.

I want to interrogate how this text relates to the *Odyssey*, or to any quest narrative. She leaves out the quest part, the "getting there is half the fun" part, we only get tiny pockets of her stays with the various "tribes" she encounters on her way, presumably, to (re)discovering Livingstone. These tribes, though differentiated by the scrambled spelling of their names (each, a variation of the word "SILENCE"), are too similar. We get no depth or texture to what she learns from each separate group and what she takes away with her.

The Traveller, aiming towards an ultimate subject that she desires to keep at a distance from her audience and from herself, directs her text away from Livingstone and towards an assumed narratee who follows and agrees with her (not unlike Stanley). This idealized reader changes from chapter to chapter, from page to page. The paradigm opens up space for a developing narratee to read and interpret the Traveller's presentation of her questing "self." When she reaches Livingstone, the narrator brings into the text an awareness and remembrance of Livingstone's atrocities that the narratee must also be equally aware of. The Traveller, though, aggressively suppresses knowledge that exists outside this immediate meeting by not repeating an actual event or action performed by Livingstone, thus ensuring he has no voice or chance at offering his version of the narrative. By suppressing his story, she secures his silence as well as offering her text to a narratee who must don similar literary blinkers.

The Traveller sees silence as a lack of words. But silencing is also about narratives that, although loud enough, simply do not get heard. Nourbese Philip's strategy is to somehow write the silence, but she does not achieve this. The reader hears no stories of Livingstone's abandoned wife or of the African people who showed him the way in, but instead hears how his "helpers made [us] coffee and a meal" (63), and then no more information about these native servants the Traveller assumes should, naturally, serve her as well. This poetry text, about reclaiming lost or suppressed narratives, reinstates patriarchy as it embraces a naive belief in "silence" as a triumphant answer to the silencing master text. But except for Livingstone's (through the Traveller's) assertion that he brought "the word" to a dark and silent continent, the narrative does not make clear why Nourbese Philip champions silence. In contrast, Aritha van Herk says about escaping dominant literary tropes, in her essay "In Visible Ink":

I long, finally, to escape the page, to escape ink and my own implacable literacy. But I do not dismiss language as primary, nor do I subscribe to the naive temptations of anti-intellectualism. Literacy is a powerful talisman. I deprive myself of it, even for a short time, to understand more completely its consequence in my life. (4-5)

Too easily, Nourbese Philip's narrative denies not only the literacy represented as somehow opposed to silence, but also the need for silenced stories to be heard.

The conversation between the Traveller and the Colonizer at the end of the book is flat and uninteresting, and does not achieve the desired climax of a black articulate woman speaking back to her silencing white oppressor:

The Traveller merely has to say to Livingstone "how very very stupid" he is for Livingstone to "look crestfallen again" (69). Nourbese Philip has made Livingstone an easy caricature or a cartoon of the white colonizing male. "Everyone understands ... the real author of the narrative is not only he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, he who hears it" (Genette 262). In that case, allow me an alternative reading: Livingstone might easily have claimed Africa was to be the bastard he fathered. What! the Traveller would exclaim, are you Zeus producing Athena from out of your own forehead? Africa, she would say, was there before Livingstone even knew of it. No, the colonizer would continue, no continent exists before the occasion of human cognition.

The desire to continue the idea of a reader who not only participates in story, but *is* story, frames the (postmodern) possibilities for subsequent narratives, that pass now from narrator to narratee, from narratee to narratee's narratee. "The most troubling thing [is] that the narrator and his narratees - you and I - perhaps belong to some narrative" (Genette 236). This seductive idea, that "you and I" are part of the story, invites readers into narrative texts.

Time is an adventure the narrator of this text challenges and restructures, as "the very length of the story gradually lessens the interval separating it from the moment of the narrating" (Genette 221). Genette differentiates between narrators who relay information at the moment of narration, or through a consciousness of a passage of time which shapes their narration. So, if a narrative is focalized through a particular narrator, that narrator, although also the protagonist, knows more about the story and its unfolding than does his created protagonist. "The narrator almost always

'knows' more than the hero, even if he himself is the hero" (Genette 194). The hero, then, is trapped in an unknowing which s/he directs towards the reader or narratee, whose role is to support and understand every sentence the narrator speaks. Nourbese Philip, in attempting to write a woman into the traditionally male role of hero, has reinforced the image of the "silenced" woman, tricked and castrated by colonizing narratives. In truth, says Hélène Cixous, "women aren't castrated, they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning. You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not dead. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885).

Many poets rewrite narratives that not only allow for the possibility of representing woman as "hero," but also allows them to critique established roles and hierarchies by undermining the structures supporting these fixed roles and predetermined hierarchies.

Traditionally, women's desire has been contained within the male dream of objectification. Says John Berger, "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting 'Vanity'; thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (*Ways of Seeing* 51). For women, then, pleasure has been inscribed within the restrictions of this image. Unable or unwilling to play Helen of Troy, many poets are beginning to ask if their only choices are to either continue this representation, or simply to reverse it. Many women (men, too, one assumes) want neither to be Daphne nor Apollo, trapped in the act of pursuit, fleeing a confining image of hunter and prey.

Feminist erotics displaces and replaces this narrative through a discourse of the body that does not merely essentialize women's difference, but allows for a difference based on lived experience, identity, and narrator/narratee reversals. Diana Hartog, in *Polite to Bees*, writes a series of prose poems which delve into narratives of heterosexual tensions. These pieces open up the dialogue between male and female representations, examine the problems inherent in any fixed narrative, and slip through to a poetic climax that insists on the reader's own participation in the stories and their language.

She refuses to locate her text in either poetry or prose, but moves back and forth, shifting the focus from word to sentence to paragraph break. Visually, these poems appear to be very short prose fiction, with paragraph indentations, quotation marks, and other conventional prose punctuation. But Hartog is writing an intergeneric text where she subverts reader expectation set up by the poem's structure. Although the pieces *look* like fiction in that they appear visually as short prose pieces, they satisfy a reader's desire and expectation for poetry. And once that expectation has been definitely established, Hartog again subverts it: by introducing more and more "fictional" elements (characters, dialogue, setting, etc.) into the pieces, and by presenting ones that do, after all, "look" like poetry.

"Spider Web" opens with an eerie and exhilarating promise of scientific knowledge, magic, sexual tension: "No one knows why a snake, slithering through grass, will refuse to cross a spider's web" (Hartog 41). The second stanza/paragraph, "A strand of web has the tensile strength of a line of music," pursues the story of the spider web, concurrently shifting the image to one of music and rhythm and also to measuring lines. The "strength" of

these invisible lines, although obviously fragile, is powerful, tenacious, and tough. The reader gathers a sense of evolution, moving from stanza to stanza, interrupted only by a blank line of page as the poem segues, zig-zag style, away from the web and out into the world of kisses, soot, and deception. Yet the impulse to read progression is a false one: "A web of lies can be spun from a single kiss." The poem demands a reading that includes discomfort and instability, sensuality and sexual infidelity, all spun out from a single line of poetry, a line rewriting the hierarchy of prose and of gender politics. The reader is still caught inside the metaphor of the web, but the web is no longer a sticky mass with a dense insect centre. The body's actions and reactions – "From his cheek, I pluck a small black spider" – are foregrounded in this piece and the language pushes the entire poem to a metaphorical level of poetic desires: "Imagine returning to your web just as the moon is freeing itself." The web at the beginning is replaced, again and again, by another web, a single strand cobbed in front of the reader's eyes. Meaning is tangled; pronouns catch on codified, yet wispy, boundaries. The piece concludes: "He says it was only one kiss," as if there has been some sort of resolution, as if the narrator has caught her lying subject. But the structure of the poem offers no such reassurances. The deception lies not in that there was actually more than one kiss, but in that a numerical defense is inadequate. The final "one kiss" of the poem, is the prose line the reader carries into the poems to follow.

Hartog's pieces rely on an internal hypotactic agreement where one sentence or line follows the next in syntactic harmony. The sentences appear connected to each other by structure, content, and narrative voice. Such associative linking of images proposes the piece as a fictional one that can be read linearly and for a sense of completion. Read paratactically, the

responsibility for reading meaning into the ordering of the pieces shifts onto the reader. The leap between pages is made by the reader. No overt explanation of why the pieces appear in the order they do is offered. Yet often one word, for example, "Another," situated as it is at the beginning of the butterfly poem, offers itself to the reader as syntactic stitching together of prior fabrications.

Often, Hartog plays on the sense of the magical and rule-dominated world of children's rhymes or superstitions. "To kill a spider shifts the weather; she doesn't care" (Hartog 12). This sentence uses the rhythms of nursery didactics to step out of the rule of prose, into the exception. Hartog uses the sentence to generate, then disrupt, the grammar of ordinary language. The title alone, "Polite to Bees," expresses a fragmentation of the complete sentence: who is polite to bees? how does one go about being polite (or for that matter impolite) to bees? The incompleteness of this sentence promises incompleteness within the text, stresses the importance of unfulfilled desires; an invitation, not to attempt closure, but to encourage absurd openings and false starts that trick words out of sentences and into an open-ended poetry. It makes use of prose without ever succumbing to the prosaic.

Periods, in prose, separate one sentence from another. In poetry, periods not only act as concentrated emphasis, but also punctuate themselves; the period behaves not only as a stopping point, but also as a reminder to the reader that minute linguistic instructions are constantly in effect. *Polite to Bees* punctuates its mostly prosodic pieces with the occasional verse poem, each one a series of sentences broken onto the page: "With the slightest of sounds, I can make his ears twitch; / by merely grinding the tip of the pen to /

this little period . for instance" (Hartog 29). The self-referentiality of that stranded period informs the reader how to read this poetry.

In "The Wrung Neck of a Swan," a young man must hold the beast to be sacrificed against his own beating heart. He approaches his mother's cottage, where his uncles have hefted the mortgage onto their shoulders, and breathes in her bruised scent: "His mother had been fine. She'd been ironing; and was buttoning a blouse on its hanger – squeezing the last button through a tiny stitched hole – when the breast pocket swung open" (Hartog 47). This action of opening reveals the mother's heart hidden (and broken) inside her domestic activity. The words "heart," "neck," and "breast" resonate throughout this piece, yet there is no final explanation for how the reader should connect them, for how to read the two narrative lines together into this final paragraph. Hartog carefully chooses each word so that the materiality of the language is a visible and tangible poetic language (the burden of the mother's mortgage that is literally carried out of the poem). At the same time, she gives her pieces a narrative push so that the poems move forward, in part, because of an expectation of plot that is only ever fulfilled by the polite restraint of stopping mid-climax. Hartog's pieces are earthy, fleshly, carnal, and lustful prose poetry. The structure of sentences built seemingly naturally into paragraphs allows the reader into the everyday discourse of polite conversation, but with the suggestive overtones of sensuality and beastliness. The subtitle: "A Bestiary," allows the reader into a text that promises magical beasts and impossible creatures.

The attempts, by writers as well as critics, to define and label "new" writing, invariably articulate a dissatisfaction with the traditional categories of "prose" and "poetry," and with the traditional grammars assigned to each. Do

the sentence and its notational accompaniment the period – as Ron Silliman asserts – configure the new prose poetry in much the same way as the line break has organized the free verse line? Perhaps the question is not if one form can combine with another (roughly, in this case, poetic devices with prosaic form), or even substitute for another, so much as it is a question of acknowledging the multiple and often devious ways in which poetry challenges and contradicts – by means of such combinations – the very forms it has established through historical usage. The opposition is not “verse versus prose⁴²,” but how poets actually conceive of a poetics of prose.

⁴² In fact, Michael Davidson discusses the etymology of prose and verse, which “both come from the same root, *provertere*, meaning to turn toward” (Davidson 170). The opposition between these two forms, therefore, is more historical than it is original.

DREAMS & OTHER ANIMALS

flying with eagles

a blind bird sucks rind on the highway. nibbles
tires beneath feet under blue blades. a salt shaker
isn't always. though sometimes a trapped circle
bends

the slur in your words divides a meaning I can't
perceive. how bent an obstacle for me to
overturn. how your arm swoops precious stones.
we replace oval emotions with this, the letter
asked for. eagles and other alphabets

my pen has stopped meeting paper. my fingers
grip inside-out. I am no longer anyone's lover no
longer

your spoken words soon. saccharine or
melodramatic. no[]. no

longer

the corner of often

my vocabulary full of Stein's feathers

**I haven't licked clean. multiple sorrows for any
one body**

**why you didn't order *oktopothe* or *krumbiathe*
from the yellow tray at work. from the improve
your word power pages**

**there is no direct line of dialogue – only the
coiled reach of my telephone desire, or your
voice**

**the streetlight marks time. don't argue with an
arrow of perception. yes, this is for you:**

**walk with me while I ramble in that other
language (though the disguise carries more). you
couldn't have missed her so easily, it must have
been fate, well overdue. I'm not just lacking
umbrellas, I'm lacking the shock of recognition.
the ring finger a promise that has lost its glue**

**I always remember the first time they met, there
on the bus, my nose pressed so close to the page.
Gertrude and her grammar, a mock tribute to
peripheral biofiction. where else can you go
when an hour takes less than a chapter?**

**I do – always – remember. that is my
promethean flaw**

a houseshape, like a paragraph

I know nothing, nothing but things. and how to
make them poetry

how her desire *her* makes *my* into choice. a
wander and a tangent. why rain doesn't sag my
skirt hems is ever more engaging than layered
discourse. I wasn't indiscriminate, the earth can
be a bed where she invites or offers. and isn't it
funny how mustard with flavour weighs more

not every body recognizes the body. or the one,
as suffix. you can add a comma, here, and make
sentence. you can remove the segue from its path
of anticipation, from its connective tissue, from a
conjunctive symbol in the middle

only don't go looking for thimbles. a watertight
house promises more than a bargain. windows
hyphen interior-to-exterior. this monologue
approaches difference, but only just. the pattern
repeats a performance seen but never read, layers
of membranes alternate

gulp that excessive prairie landmark. the
exception slips away. the cohen blue in the square
reminds more than you'll tell

only things promise things

lip service

language begins at the tongue

dreaming london doesn't mean it's the only dot on the map. not when you grow up different, not when shopping malls suffix every parking lot

but when it doesn't begin at the tongue? I've whispered with fingertips, written words that no longer know how to speak. Japanese chases itself inside Turkey then sits on the page a vision of China. appearances speak volumes. 1... 2... 3...

or like other times, when linguistics was a map of my mouth. when a sentence will end long after the period. you hadn't yet said. when Latin replaces math

you didn't notice, but "l" and "r" can be versions of the same letter. can be, to your ear, the same sound. listen, there's a reason dreams happen beneath eyelids. there's a pattern. trust me when I say I'm going to sew buttons on the underside of shirts, read them across ribs

hearing sideways in the morning, over the balcony may be your idea of verbal action. whereas I will be consumed by midnight, only not that mercuric. the street crams full of lawned intentions, remnants of camouflage and veiled postures

no Troy

mythology contradicts what our eyes reveal. only
the back of our heads bear testimony

H.D. lives inside the name of someone else. but
how much biography follows the self? how many
words mean life

a poem of one word after a poem
of
one word

inside-out. the paragraph of these lines breaks
into biography. a strategy of prose that disguises
rhyme as someone else's sentence. H.D. writes
stories onto a palimpsest of coded maps.
directions we'll lose later

distort the way home

the sparsity of a noun stands forever surrounded
by fences of prepositions which grow back every
year. last year's peeled version of a novel lies
skinned and terrified. by of in barriers which
above all beside or behind

oh, how long can a woman exist inside a crack of
air before she understands there's atmosphere
everywhere? Icarus blundered believing the
feathers enabled him to fly

when I close my eyes I see the crinkled blueprint.
but when I open them, only Egypt

the walls fall

restraint in language can be passion, too. H.D.'s
 myth of the myth. an ongoing poetics that refuses
 the dialogue of completion. each single
 word

no excess verbiage is the same as no excess

to the men looking in, girl-love is only an
 indulgent game. for them. quite an idea that
 women must always be more about men than each
 other

yet the stubborn energy of her "rotten pomes"
 fuses her longing, twins them into

the body and its desires. another translation

the quest for beginning constructs a shard
 of rock. descend, without peeking back

destruction may be the dress rehearsal of
 resurrection. how to read worlds into your own
 frame

the body – crooked with desire – no longer alone

after plurality, the first person pronoun

attached to the literal, he wanted reverberations.
he wanted syllables, the *I don't remember* defence

start (the beginning becomes sound) here:

not the you of this summer. I've only just noticed
that resistance to meaning. his meanness,
admitted. lately admitted and habitual. habitat.
guttural gyrations demonstrate a lack of control

Drumbeller : Valhalla. naming changes seasons.
from long distance into the barest of landscapes.
duration becomes what time my watch says the
big hand crosses the little. where one wrist-strap
crosses another. where your wrist hyphens his

that summer he hangs up the phone slams it down
and no peep from me until. his voice reaching
out from my machine bids welcome (I'm holding
back for more concrete documentation). until my
words speak over those words and they're gone

he takes his words into his hands

I could tell him that I've learned to love less [no.
more]. I could tell him how alone means
different meanings. I could teach him about
touchings and reincarnation of the physical

he takes the mortal words with him

the body traps

**why not wander. why
not a house on the hill
and jack in the basement
tilting. a song isn't
only notated on paper
a line
from a movie
repeats**

*why not step three
times to the left, and
twirl. past
tomorrow*

*'s internal cunt
swallow*

*playsure
of timing*

**your words, when you
speak, shine
between promise
and boundary**

***why not weep, into
my porcelain
vulva***

harpooned

in the bellybutton of the whale salt sea cracks my
tongue *look!* my eyes breathe winter or
cauliflower or

the small hollow of your back, or. your
breastbone, or

across marguerite coastlines you drum a name
into my collarbone, catch at air until the
reverberations of a salamander promise a
vibration of reptile delight

the grey and spent body of Jonah – no – Pinocchio
hesitates; washes ashore

double craving

**appetite invokes repetition. the rhythm of time-
shares**

**the body retains salt not water. salt sweats out of
the body with a tiny piece of genocide in every
pore. the body as photo-album. the mind has not
stopped, but each individual cell. each layer of
body inside body inside body**

a stretched name doubles detection

your palm the direction for a knuckle to cliché

and elbows only temper obsolete penalties

**regard the gayze: two girls, side-by-side, write
on each other's legs**

slogans

magnets on my fridge pin down next week's
intrusions, a promise that follows the drill. and
you tell me I'm in your words

*when two vulvas go walking
they BOTH do the talking*

pale lipstick and see-through jellybeans

when serial monogamy reinforces the region as
pornography, the frightened monuments we offer
name the pattern

a fraternity birth
a grateful cadaver

*sentences need subjects
plural subjects need plural*

in the mythology of the hardwood store, machines
narrate sexuality. the grease nipple. the male
plug. the female bolt

contamination by words

the minotaur dreams

inside the maze lives more than a minotaur. I seek buttons and dashes – a small drop of camomile, seven pins, fourteen very small stones from the alley

I'm not asking who gets to ask the questions, I'm asking who gets to punctuate them? it is possible the minotaur bull was female, pregnant, long overdue and desperate for escape into a quieter myth. why we ache for religions more gentle towards animals and virgins

Daphne runs into the tree headfirst. Apollo amazed and distraught to catch his catch so abruptly. he himself begged his gods to take her away, remove this easy conquest, leave him his impossible and unrequited love for nature. Daphne, her limbs spread out and thick, cracks in every direction away from herself; her cunt folds and pleats a thousand times. she has invented rings, one for every year that enticed her into this fairytale. Daphne does not consider herself saved, though she is grateful to avoid the virility of gods. she waves her limbs, claws at her new skin; she wants her body returned

beneath the firmly-rooted laurel, Apollo weeps, his lust transformed, organic, growing. Daphne does not bow down to regard the weeping god, nor does she bother about children who carve each other's initials into her clothing. she has become the wilderness for which Apollo lusted; the petrified proof of an intact hymen, unbuttoned. Daphne, the raging minotaur, pregnant with stillborn desires

8. Improvisational Prose Strategies of Disruption and Excess

In the tradition of Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Karen Mac Cormack's collection of poetry, *Quirks & Quillets*, "look" like typical (whatever that might by now have be determined to be) prose poems. Page-centred, one-paragraph long, rectangular justified sentences, Mac Cormack's poetry is an investigation of "the influence of literature on sunsets," proving the "space for heaving anything at all through windows" (13). Her work acknowledges the stubborn difficulty of words which cling to meaning:

Not rhythm yet repetition she said so it was written
to be recorded but if heard then listened to
attentively without false moves or the maximum
number of pauses in an attention span's treble clef
folds on a number the back lot serpentine telling
choir this voice. (11)

Visually, the structure of these pieces "rhyme" their appearance on the page: virtually square, and relatively equal in size to one another. Their rhythm is imbedded within the words, within the "false moves" that poets come to depend on when deliberately misinterpreting the world. Mac Cormack's collection does not recognize the seeing-eye I: "this voice" is not an identifiable self-contained "I," but rather includes a chorus of voices and tones and crescendoes for the attention span to disperse.

Such dispersal of a poetic voice attempts to focus the reader's attention more and more on the material physicality of reading, and at the same time shift intentionality onto the reader. Mac Cormack explores the strategies of

prose written against notions of closure. Beginning with the words, "The untried decibel of seamless hose unhurried sentence..." (9), Mac Cormack's text insists on its own right to take off into language play of every sort, to allow the reader to "see" how meaning can be constructed through a text which situates itself within a poetics of lyric tradition: "Not rhythm yet repetition she said" (11). In this fragment, Mac Cormack manages a meta-commentary on poetic devices. In her final piece, she acknowledges a diction that paralyzes the usually recognizable prose narrative that *promises* ending, yet, never delivers. Her prose feverishly runs from page to page, avoiding its own "inkless paces" (48) as it stumbles and trips over the blind rage of an anachronistic monster.

On the cover of *JOURNEYING & the returns*, bp Nichol inscribes the words: "as many exits and entrances as possible." The possibility these words promise is that one may exit and re-enter a poem from many directions, may approach a text from previously unknown openings or passages. The "genre" of the prose poem impels a formal articulation of the poet's desire to escape perceived generic rules and regulations, and to enter anew. The contradiction rests on this hinge: an exit that is also further entrances, and entrances which transform penultimate exits. The prose poem absorbs into its corpus as many entrances (for example, other genres) and exits (generic principles) as possible. Adena Rosmarin remarks, "we know that a poem is a sonnet in part by the way it closes" (Rosmarin 143). By disrupting the formal rules of genres, poets anticipate and encourage a literary antinomy. By rejecting closure, a prose poem is not offering an attempt at endless continuation of itself; rather, it is struggling – improvising in a way – against merely fulfilling expectation, both the reader's and the writer's.

William Carlos Williams proposes his text, *Kora in Hell*, as a set of improvisations that work against the inherited notion of poetry as studied, tired, and predictable. This idea of improvisation removes for the reader and critic the necessity of interpretation. The words on the page – indeed the pages themselves – become tactile objects freed from their obligations as mere conveyors of sense and meaning inviting the reader to decipher the puzzle hidden inside the linear momentum of sentences and paragraphs. These pages disrupt the impulse of the reader to “read through” transparent words or to read past the page to whatever “deep” meaning rests beneath it.

Steve McCaffery, in his essay on the general economy of writing, offers an economic strategy for approaching the written text as opposed to more conventional structural readings. The application of this alternative, he says, “would include all non-utilitarian activities of excess, unavoidable waste and non-productive consumption” (McCaffery North 201) as well as challenging the “conceptual dominants of traditional writing” (202). This “general” economy, concerned with distributions and with the order-disorder of circulations (201), is contained within (but not completely confined by) a restrictive economy “based on valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit, accumulation and cautious proceduralities in risk taking” (203). McCaffery goes on to reveal that the general economy is a “suppressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture within the restricted” (203), a rupture that questions “the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value with its privileging of meaning as a necessary production and evaluated destination” (203).

Resisting a poetics of restrictive economy means, for many poets, resisting inherited notions of how poems should look on the page. The lyric

tradition includes a unified and perceiving subject, a sender-receiver model of direct and transparent communication, and a formal construct of left-justified margin with jagged-right linebreaks. Jeff Derksen, in his long poem *Dwell*, plays with this acquired sense of form. The pieces shift from sentenced paragraphs to numbered stanzas to minimal words composed onto the abundance of space on the page. In "Neighbourhood," the left-justified-right-justified classification of lyric poetry is turned on its lyric ear:

does seam meander
 redundant anthropologist stigma
 matters erst stinger
 reverse severance cents
 [sense of public outrage] generic sea-level (50)

Each word of this poem (outside the square brackets) carries equal weight, there is not much emphasis or pivot on the linebreak, and the "does" of the opening line never accomplishes its suggested question. The pleasure of the linebreaks, then, are for their excessive eruptive qualities, for the intentional "public outrage" this "meaningless" poetry provokes⁴³. Derksen, in this piece, has inverted McCaffery's economy: the landscape of impenetrable language gets interrupted by the noise of transparent syntax. By imbedding this first-person speaking subject into the dominant racket of the undefinable noise of the rest of the piece, he compels the reader to understand the "interruptions" of grammar and of a perceiving consciousness as the "irregular fluctuations" that are irrelevant to the internal dialogue between the materiality of the words and the reader's appreciation of each line's tangibility.

⁴³ Derksen's poem doesn't recognize page breaks, although they are physically unavoidable, even as he takes pleasure in the linebreaks, although they appear here randomly imposed.

To suggest that the page is a unit of composition recognizes that, to some extent, the page has been constructed by a writer, and is presented as a compositional structure organizing how a reader understands the variations between noise and information. Yet accepting an omnipresent authorial intention as governing how that page is read assumes the notion of a preconceived message, separate and whole, waiting there for a perceiving interpreter to decode, to unscramble. As a site for the prose poem, the page doesn't just contain words, but provides liminal (and subliminal) spaces for words to proliferate. What's going on in formal poetry is not just the laying out of *words*, but also of the spaces, gaps, silences, and marked absences between words. In *Pause Button*, Kevin Davies spreads his words over the page in a deliberate disruption of the authority of either line breaks or margin. His pieces leap from left- to right- to centre-justified text, refusing to rest on any preconceived notion of lineated poetry. The lines break and regroup, break again, then slip off the page in a dynamic pursuit for even more intricate interruptions, to rewrite the image of page already built into the reader's anticipation. For example, after three and a half pages of stanzas that bounce from one solid margin to the other, Davies presents the reader with what appears to be a solid block of print, an ordinary paragraph, that sits complacently mid-page, its margins extending left and right, above and below:

— planned that way. Nevertheless you won't die
& you will work. It is that time again, up north, out
west, inside the netting & the tattered canopy,
inside the menu. *Proud* to be living on a planet.
yeah you bible managerial. Trash out in Cache
Creek can't wait for its first rat tenant. Belongs to
an entire community of reluctance. To be living on

a planet, that talks to itself. Snitches call this
 number. Stacks of obsolete sit-com laughtracks,
 in the storage area. (35)

even as the reader catches he/r breath for one page, the stanza subverts itself, breaks mid-sentence. The obvious comma at the end of a series of sentences stopped by periods halts the reader mid-halt, before s/he plummets down to the next line, only to stop again; the remaining chunk of blank space chases that lone insistent period.

Davies allows no stasis within the words, or any regulation of possible pleasure that might erupt on the page. Further into the book, he writes:

— The more valuable it becomes, the more rampant its
 assaults. You []
 might yourself be

the rejected plate, the chunk that falls & gets discovered
 (54)

This positing of “space” as an equivalent signifier to the words surrounding the brackets pens up ideological implications for the “you” addressed in this manner. Academically, square brackets indicate an outside authority commenting on some necessary point within the body of the original text. In Davies’s pieces, the outside authority has nothing to say, filling the authoritative space with an anxious silence. Or, even more likely, there is no “outside” authority, only the words generated within the world of the poem. Such a world resists the closure of meaning as the already decided absolute of words put together on the page. Instead, the process of writing is situated

within the process of reading as the poetry's materiality leads to excessive eruptions of pleasure.

These improvisational bursts of pleasure can be aligned to Williams's notion of the improvisational in that they deviate from the expected. Where a page full of prose sentences offers the reader a suggestion of narrative and story, the poetics operating within that prose may well override reader assumptions, disturbing the stability and reliability of prose as primarily a vehicle for narrative. At the same time, these bursts of poetic intervention within individual sentences offer the reader strategies for approaching the page that go beyond mere interpretation of the message, and give a reader pause to enjoy the language.

According to information theory, says Jurij Lotman, when "the level of noise is equal to the level of information the message will be zero" (Lotman 75). "Art" is the trope he suggests that turns this equation on its ear, so that "everything heterogeneous which can be correlated in some way with the structure of the authorial text ceases to be noise" (75). For poets, "everything heterogeneous" may well include: poetry, prose, drawings, computer screens, mimicry, quotations, sentences, punctuation, humour, criticism, narrative, or, as Williams says in *Kora in Hell*: "A poem can be made of anything" (Williams 70).

By choosing improvisation as a compositional strategy, Williams foregrounds the immediate and intangible in his writing. The first sentence of *The Great American Novel* states: "If there is progress then there is a novel" (Williams 158). The tease with which Williams engages the reader, begun in the title, pivots on the "If" of the first word. Progress is a relational term for Williams. His, "I was a slobbering infant" (158) throw-away line

encompasses that branch of poetry that insists on a perceived speaker who exists within a specific time frame. The joke twirls further into itself: there is progress, there *are* words and sentences following one after another until the “novel” is complete. Again and again, though, Williams questions an expectation based solely on the sentences and paragraphs the pages provide. “Here is progress –” Williams extends, “here is the substance of words – UMMMMM: that is to say...” (163). The “progress” proffered in the first sentence has degenerated into a noise that is the “substance of words.” Even this representation of sound, though, is not to be relied on as the excessive desire of the text. Resisting narrative closure at the same time as he offers “novel” in the title, Williams’s strategies for avoiding closure become multilayered offerings of openings and possibilities. That the book does come to an end does not limit the exploration of where the narrative may still progress.

The function of the law of genre is to absorb resistant texts back into the very categories they avoid. This is the “closure” of genre. Leslie Scalapino, in *Considering how exaggerated music is*, combines disparate modes and writing styles within one long piece. The voice in this prose poetry shifts and proliferates so that it is impossible to identify the one single speaker as ultimate authority, as representative of a unified whole. Instead, the persistence of an undesignated and unnamed speaker motivates the reader to understand and accept a writing that formally challenges readerly expectations for narrative closure. Scalapino’s poems range from short lyrics to slightly longer paragraphs. In the long poem, “Considering how exaggerated music is,” Scalapino develops an assortment of disjointed

sentences, ranging from observations of people in restaurants to treatment of gender construction:

Stranger when it is the male opening his shirt in public, and applying an infant to his chest as if he had breasts. Not even necessary for the infant to have the nipple. The children let out a few cries, the man puts them up to let them suck. Or as easily applies them to his back or his thighs. (56)

This poetry accumulates information, images, and a disruptive narrative content, all of which suggest an indistinct boundary between world and text, an improvisational moment that connects poetry and music, gender and genre, prose and poetry.

These moments within the text act as doorways, liminal entrances which open up the context of writing to include the compositional, to include movement; pleasurable gaps slammed open when we least expect them. Lack of a formal structure suggests, and provides, endings that resist closure. But within the model of accumulation and dispersal, the opposite is also true. The connections, as much for the reader as for the writer, assume that the "processual" also includes rewriting and revising. The adult male nursing his infant transforms, in a later poem, into a dinner guest who sets his napkin on fire, "so that," we are told, "people will imagine a cat flaring up like that under their noses" (Scalapino 67). He lights his napkin *as one would* light a cat with kerosene in the same way he nurses, even against his back, *as one would* an infant. These acts appropriate the imagination at the same time as the poetry comments on trespassing between world and page, between

gender and sexual roles, between language that represents desire and language that desires desire.

The central achievement of Gail Scott's prose-poem novel, *Heroine*, is how to create a heroine who does not exit the scene of the crime, who acknowledges the role of past heroines yet doesn't submit to the tradition of either victim or bride-to-be. The classical myth of Apollo chasing Daphne informs a contemporary notion that there is a limit to female desire. Versions of this story are repeated often: those entrenched images of the fleeing maiden and the pursuant young man. That female desire might stretch beyond the traditional possibility of being "caught" (in either death or marriage) is still considered to be a radical alternative in literature. Scott's heroine, splashing and pleasuring in her tub is, albeit in water rather than ink, writing her *self*. This text is not about the development of character through plot and closure, but rather about the importance of character-in-process as a means for a female character to tell the self. The heroine emerges victorious not because she has discovered and subsequently written an accurate account of her own experience, but through a recognition and expression of her desires.

Submersed in water, the heroine's body has become the story, a palimpsest version of her self she must write again and again to get it right. Not as an *undoing*, but a doing *more*. She dives into her bathtub in order to emerge whole and free and clean. She gets naked to avoid clothure. She doubles the ending to pleasure it into existence, into beginning. She masturbates and masturbates and masturbates her body into the text. She creates against finality, until the first word, "Sir," has metamorphosed into

the final word, "She—" (Scott 183). The book comes to an end, but the possibility of the text continues.

Scott ironically twists the happily-ever-after of love narratives. *Heroine*, although it covers the ground and the battle of love, is not a love story to end predictably in death or marriage. "Story," concerning women, is too often confused with a moralizing content, and "has typically meant plots of seduction, courtship, the energies of quest deflected into sexual downfall, the choice of a marriage partner, the melodramas of beginning, middle, and end, the trajectories of sexual arousal and release" (DuPlessis *Writing Beyond* 151). The content of *Heroine* is that the heroine is taking a bath and masturbating. Her "quest" is to *do it* until she is able to begin her own text. "If 'happily ever after' means anything, it means that pleasurable illusion of stasis" (DuPlessis *Writing Beyond* 178). The narrator, at the same time she is indulging her heroine in her illusion of stasis, is propelling that character forward in the text, forward to the list of possibilities that take up the last page.

The distance between the words in her head and the words on the page is a measure of the heroine's fiction – "I'm lying with my legs up" (Scott *Heroine* 9) – the space she creates so that she can step out and look back at the opening. "But I can't just sit down and write a novel about X. It all happens in the process of writing" (Scott *Spaces Like Stairs* 81). So her narrative is less about "X" the heroine, than about the process of writing that heroine into existence. Of writing that creates writing. The sentences in this prose narrative spiral both inwards and outwards – retelling, detailing, expanding, contradicting. This narrator doesn't desire completion, she doesn't desire ending. She desires desire, and its lack of imposed borders.

The concluding sentence of Audrey Thomas's novel, *Latakia*, suggests that the "best revenge is writing well" (Thomas 172). But for Scott, who does not wish to end, merely, on a note of revenge, who does not wish to end at all, the revelation is in the writing itself. How to create a female subject when woman has mostly been written as object? Scott rejects the final climactic movement, opting instead for the open-ended *process* of writing the feminine sexual self. Dreaming herself up as heroine, the narrator slips through the cracks of plot to reclaim her sense of language as poetry, to declare herself a writer of her own text, to give herself permission to follow wherever the poetics of narration meander. The narrative opens with the narrator already naked, and she remains so for the duration of the story. She has bared herself to the possibility of becoming her own heroine. By the end of the book, the narrator has invented herself.

The future is an angle (Scott 144), rather than a story-telling strategy. And this angle is what has been offered to Cassandra in Greek mythology. "Raising the issue of the future is another tactic for writing beyond the ending, especially as that ending has functioned in the classic novel: as closure of historical movement and therefore as the end of development" (DuPlessis *Writing Beyond* 178). The heroine who has spent the duration of the novel "floating around in" is the same heroine who has achieved her own recitation by the end of the book.

According to Marianna Torgovnick, the convention of endings indicates a resolution of sorts; a tying together of events or ideas. This tying together often functions in order that the "questions" which propel the reader forward in the narrative stop demanding "answers" of the text.

In any narrative, "what happens next" ceases to be a pertinent question only at the conclusion, and the word "end" in a novel consequently carries with it not just the notion of the turnable last page, but also that of the "goal" of reading, the finish-line toward which our bookmarks aim. (Torgovnick 3).

Scott's lengthy prose poem, as many do, refuses limitation, becomes a desire manifesto for its text as well as for its protagonist. *Heroine* is a discourse of desire; a breakup of prescribed longings.

The desire she expresses is not just sexual, but a desire to be her whole self. A desire to write, to speak of writing in a way that engages further desire. To break out of boundaries. "The aesthetic cannot be separated from the erotic" (Lenk 54). A desire for the "edge" of freedom, for visual aesthetics, for continuing narration. A desire for desire. Because it is not *what* the heroine desires, but *that* she desires. No limit in sight.

Ah, yes, the cyclops. Time for me to refocus:

In earlier versions of the Greek myth, Cyclopes have three eyes, the middle being larger, centred, and sometimes already blind. This is where mythologies of a "third eye" or magical inner vision are derived. By the time of Homer's epic, the Cyclopes have devolved into creatures whose visual perception centres on one singular eyeball.

T. S. Eliot says that, in "trying" to read a prose poem as either prose or as poetry, one finds oneself "failing in both attempts" (Eliot 158). Perhaps it is that very failure which makes so tantalizing the intermingling of prose and poetry, the "dream of totalization, of containing all" (Godzich 208). Of course prose poetry fails as a form; by definition it has to. An eye for an eye.

Odysseus and Polyphemus trade places, Baudelaire's serpent curls its tail back towards its greedy mouth, the myths continue. In a reverse dictionary, you can look up counterclockwise and discover widdershins there, the definition fracturing into the word.

My text's strategies of anti-closure are multilayered offerings of openings and possibilities. That this manuscript's epilogue (285) consists of two poems, rather than one, ultimately limits its exploration. This has become my desire manifesto for opposing binary constructions. Revealing the opposite of a construct reveals, also, its foundations. Odysseus having – finally – departed the scene, the cyclops is left eternally handicapped. The context of this act of violence is an audience of readers (and listeners before them) to whom eyesight is no trifling matter. In classical times, when eyeglasses are unheard of, Catullus' poetic refrain, "I love you more than my eyes" (III, XIV, LXXXII), resonates with myopic assurance.

The cyclops, already a monster, must now bear the mark of his useless distortion, as well as his physical hideousness. His third eye, in this hero-favouring myth, has become his only eye. Time for the cyclops to mutate, to challenge this now conventional construction that limits and contains his poetic potential. One only needs to listen to the cyclops to hear his poetry. And "where [he] ends up" is not only a question of where he begins, but also of the chimera who interrupt his story. Do not be afraid of punctuated desire. The cyclops is not dangerous. He's beautiful. And he's laughing.

EPILOGUE

architecture of difference

**the disadvantage of positioning monitors the self.
dissertations**

**wander from. why I haven't disengaged outside
the paradigm, the superstructure, the beyond**

**replication. this may still be the obvious solution,
subversion**

**and shorthand dialogue. discuss the implications,
your untold intentions**

**unless you argue the credible (crucible). because
I posit the you in narrative without foregrounding
plot**

**we forgo a manifesto. real life divorces the
margins, plurals the edges. take the displaced and
make happen a metaphor, disorient the body**

into discord, into disclosure

where I end up

minimal economics

and expectations of the narrow. the outline of the individual presupposes filling in other

statements. may I suggest decision, including connections with

unedited interviews. encapsulate isolation, continue the voice albeit through visual fields. accompaniment

lowers the world of self-limitation. belief in the hands-on, in the not-so-long-ago supposes need and ability

to imbed in the punctuation for desire. change insults the patriarch of versus lineage. but

why report responsibility? verbs ache as a move to disrecognition. cut our losses. now. subtract from the beginning backwards. widdershins. reverse towards me

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