INARTICULATE PRAYERS: IRONY AND RELGION

IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY

by

Jason St. James Lagapa

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As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Jason St. James Lagada entitled Inarticulate Prayers: Irony and Religion in Late Twentieth-Century Poetry and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Tenney Nathanson

Roger Bowen

Jeremy Green

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Dissertation Director Tenney Nathanson
Statement by Author

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For My Mother and Father
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Abstract

Inarticulate Prayers: Irony and Religion in Late Twentieth-Century Poetry examines irony and its implications for religious belief within texts ranging from the New York School Poets to the Language Poets and, in Caribbean literature, within the poems of Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite. Taking Jacques Derrida’s distinction between deconstruction and negative theology as a point of departure, I argue that contemporary poets employ ironic language to articulate an ambivalent, and skeptical, system of belief. In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Derrida contrasts his theory of différence—as a fundamentally negative and critical mode of inquiry—with negative theology, which ultimately affirms God’s being after a process of negation. My study asserts that contemporary poets, in accord with principles of negative theology, engage in inarticulate, self-canceling and negative utterances that nevertheless affirm the possibility of belief and enlightenment. By postulating the affinity between contemporary poets and the apophatic tradition, I explain how the work of these poets, despite often being dismissed as arid exercises in poststructuralist thought, productively draws on linguistic theories and also advances beyond the “negativity” of such theories. Moreover, as it intervenes in recent debates over the absence of a spiritual dimension to contemporary poetry, my dissertation opens new perspectives through which to theorize postmodern literature. Demonstrating that experiments in language and form are driven by an ironic
stance towards belief, authorship and literary tradition, *Inarticulate Prayers* ultimately redefines contemporary lyric and narrative poetry and asserts negation, inarticulateness, and contradiction as determining characteristics of postmodern writing.
Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes)
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it has nothing in common, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. God’s name would then be the hyperbolic effect of that negativity or all negativity that is consistent in its discourse.
—Jacques Derrida on Negative Theology

Dana Gioia ends his now famous essay “Can Poetry Matter?” with “six modest proposals,” the third of which soberly pronounces that: “Poets need to write prose about poetry more often, more candidly, and more effectively” (23). Although such a recommendation would seemingly be an approbation of the critical work written by language poets, who are often known as much for their poetics as for their poetry, Gioia
qualifies his proposal with a condition that reads like a pointed attack on Language poets. "They must also avoid the jargon of contemporary academic criticism and write in a public idiom" (23). The fifth proposal, which advocates that "poetry teachers...should spend less time on analysis and more on performance," also indirectly censures Language poetry by its assertion that "poetry needs to be liberated from literary criticism" (23). Even before Gioia's qualification about what type of language ought to be used in writings about poetry, the injunction that "poets need to write prose" already violates principles espoused by Language poets, who hold that criticism and poetry are not antithetical discourses and that poetry ought not to be necessarily opposed to prose.

In *The Marginalization of Poetry*, for example, Bob Perelman plays with the conventional distinctions drawn between prose and poetry through a highly self-conscious and ironic use of abrupt line breaks:

```
this may or may not be

a poem. The couplets of six-word lines don't establish an audible

rhythm; perhaps they aren't, to use the Calvinist mercantile metaphor, "earning"

their right to exist in their present form—is this a line break

or am I simply chopping up ineradicable prose?

(4)^2
```

Later in *The Marginalization of Poetry*, in an essay entitled "Language Writing and Literary History," Perelman provides a brief account of the beginnings of Language poetry and outlines the extent to which Language writing opposed the prevailing
conceptions of poetry advanced by the majority of university creative writing departments. Specifically, Perelman underscores how the poststructuralist theories that inform Language writing were inimical to proponents of mainstream poetry:

The aesthetics of this mainstream [poetry] are not without variation, but generalizations are possible, and were certainly made, polemically, by those involved in the formation of language writing: the mainstream poet guarded a highly distinct individuality; while craft and literary knowledge contributed to poetry, sensibility and intuition reigned supreme. The mainstream poet was not an intellectual and especially not a theoretician. Hostility to analysis, and, later, to theory, were [sic] constitutive of such a poetic stance. (12)

Gioia's proposals to distance poetry from analysis and literary criticism succinctly illustrate the hostility to intellectualism and theory of which Perleman speaks, and it would, moreover, be easy to dismiss Gioia's remarks as anti-intellectual, particularly when certain of his comments are taken into account: "Poems should be memorized, recited and performed... The pleasure of performance is what first attracts children to poetry" (23). Though Gioia's stated claims for widening the audience of contemporary poetry seem innocuous and neutral enough, his articulations of the direction that poetry should take is certainly polemical and relies on a premise that poetry can, and ought to, reach a wider popular audience by rejecting "difficult" poetics.

Gioia, however, is not alone in his chastising of Language writers influenced by poststructuralist thought. Indeed, it has become commonplace to saddle Language poetry with claims of being both abstruse and emotionally—if not spiritually—inert. Seeking to forge new directions for contemporary poetry, Kristin Prevallet, Alan Gilbert, Lew Daly, and Pam Rehm, the editors of the journal Apex of the M, argued in 1994 equally against mainstream poetry produced in Creative Writing programs and the poetics of Language
writers. Though there were two explicit targets, the emphasis of the editorial, entitled "State of the Art," was heavily shifted towards an assault on Language writing and its poststructuralist aesthetics:

We sense a desire in contemporary alternative poetry for a move away from the currently existing options in language arts, some of which might be seen as ranging between the deplorable one of mainstream, workshop poetry and the more complexly problematic one of an avant-garde dominated in its practices by a poetry espousing the priority of "language itself" over all other relations. (5)

Wanting an antidote to the perceived sterility of Language writing and to "a world more and more determined in its course towards anonymity," the editors of Apex of the M advocated "a commitment to heterogeneity and alterity, to the unknown and the unspeakable." Such a commitment to openness—a poetry of "otherness" and pluralism—would thereby provide their newly conceived poetry with the "material influx leading to love" (5). Thus, by way of contrast, one understands that Language poets, from the perspective of the editors of Apex of the M, write texts that are too negative and lack a connection to the sacred and the spiritual, or what is recurrently described by the editors as the unknown or the "mystical." From various negative accounts, then, one observes that Language poetry is often marked either by excess, assailed for being too informed by literary criticism, too deeply steeped in linguistic or poststructuralist theories and too difficult, or by deprivation, as being not quite spiritual, or "human" enough—as, in short, too austere.

The case against Language writing is an interesting one because the parameters of the debate actually lay the groundwork for a crucial understanding of Language poetry, specifically, and of postmodern poetry in general. Indeed, the very characterization of
contemporary experimental poetry as too negative focuses attention on how it should be interpreted. Contrary to what critics of language writing assert, negativity provides a precise index of the religious and sacred dimensions of postmodern poetry and also reveals the extent to which contemporary poetry diverges from poststructuralist thinking. To comprehend the negativity present in contemporary poetic texts properly—to ascertain its religious characteristics and its divergence from poststructuralist, one can productively consider this very negativity within the context of negative theology. In fact, the interconnections between negative theology, postmodernism and contemporary literature has recently been a subject of much critical inquiry and discussion. In the introduction to Negation, Critical Theory and Postmodern Textuality, Daniel Fischlin, for example, argues that theology is indispensable to understanding negation within postmodern theory and literature, asserting that the “relevance of negation to postmodern discursive practices cannot be considered without understanding its theological context—a context that has, ironically enough, played a significant role in shaping postmodern literary theories of the negative” (2).

Ironically, what the editors of Apex of the M find lacking in Language poetry, its sacred or spiritual dimension, is exactly that which evinces the theological implications of postmodern poetry. Indeed, the claim about the paucity of the sacred within Language poetry only serves to indicate how religion might take an indirect form in postmodern writing. The discomfort that the editors themselves express about invoking religion as part of their poetics, moreover, points to the significance of negative theology to the conception of language in contemporary poetry:
We would also want to open in the pages of this journal the question as to...whether the relationship with the other can exist independently of an acknowledgement of the sacred. Of course in utilizing the word sacred, or word spirit, we run the risk of being misunderstood...It should go without saying that we invariably and without hesitation separate our use of the words sacred and spirit from conventional religious systems. (6)

The anxiety of being “misunderstood” expresses a fundamental truth about negative theology; the editors fear that language does not adequately convey their conception of the sacred. The very focus on language and textuality by language poets and postmodern writers, and the concomitant impulse to use language both indirectly and experimentally, suggests awareness on the part of these writers of the inherent instability of reference in language. Indirection and negation becomes an important stage in the way that postmodern poets express matters of a spiritual nature.

The guiding premise of negative theology, or the apophatic tradition, is that God’s being or essence cannot be put into words. Any human postulation of God’s being fails, according to negative theology, because God is considered the ultimate unity, and the language that would be used to describe this unity is necessarily dualistic. Despite doubts about the possibility of an adequate human articulation of God, the principles of negative theology ultimately affirm God’s being indirectly; its systematic process of negation offers an oblique approximation of the divine. As J. P. Williams asserts, negative theology repeatedly acknowledges the inability of language to express God’s unity and therefore testifies to, and affirms, the transcendent, non-dualistic being of God:

there is no point of discursive rest: all that may be done is to undertake the process of considering concepts about the divine, provisionally affirming and then negating them, and then negating the negation too. This...version of apophasis must be conceived as an iterative process...(5)
As I shall demonstrate, this provisional, iterative process of affirmation and negation of which Williams speaks is a distinct mode within postmodern poetry and illustrates a connection between negative theology and postmodern poetics. Moreover, by postulating the affinity between contemporary experimental poetry and the apophatic tradition, I shall explain how the work of postmodern poets, despite often being dismissed as arid exercises in poststructuralist thought, productively draws on linguistic theories yet also advances significantly beyond the “negativity” of such theories. This contradictory iterative process, because it moves beyond the merely negative, also has bearing on the utopian and political implications of language poetry and postmodern writing, an argument I will take up in my conclusion. As I will suggest later, the contradictory mode of negative theology provides a fitting model for expressing, and resolving, what seems self-conflicted and inexpressible about Utopian discourse.

Jacques Derrida has strenuously argued for the distinction between deconstruction and negative theology. In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” for example, Derrida contrasts his theory of *différence*—as a fundamentally negative and critical mode of inquiry—with negative theology, which he argues is, at its core, an affirmative process. Such recognition of the affirmative principles of apophasis suggests how postmodern poetics advance beyond an absolutely negative stance. Indeed, by extrapolating from Derrida’s distinction between deconstruction and the apophatic tradition, I reveal the extent to which postmodern poets, in accordance with principles of negative theology, engage in inarticulate, self-canceling and negative utterances to affirm the possibility of belief and enlightenment.
Intriguingly, the criticism levied at Derrida and deconstruction sounds very close to the complaints made against language poetry and its negativity. In the mock voice of his detractors, Derrida characterizes the objections to his philosophical methods in this way:

You prefer to negate; you affirm nothing; you are fundamentally a nihilist, or even an obscurantist; neither knowledge nor even theology will progress in this way. Not to mention atheism, of which one has been able to say in an equally trivial fashion that it is the truth of negative theology (5).

Derrida’s defends himself against the charge that he has developed only a pale imitation of negative theology by qualifying, and clarifying, the defining characteristics of both negative theology and deconstruction. Derrida thus underscores how negative theology seeks to predicate God’s being whereas difféance operates as a radically negative logical mode; difféance “commands nothing, rules over nothing, and nowhere does it exercise any authority...Not only is there no realm of [différence], but [différence] is even the subversion of every realm.”

Derrida thus concludes:

No, what I write is not “negative theology.” First of all, in the measure to which [negative theology] belongs to the predicative or judicative space of discourse, to its strictly propositional form, and privileges not only the indestructible unity of the word but also the authority of the name. (7)

Derrida’s explication of difféance traverses some familiar ground of poststructuralism and postmodernism, with regards to his skeptical attitude towards language’s unity and the function of language as a medium of power. This skepticism, in turn, is shared by postmodern and language poets whose approach to language is critical and refuses to consider language as transparent. As Charles Bernstein argues, “poetry can interrogate
how language constitutes, rather than simply reflects, social meaning and values” (“The Revenge of the Poet-Critic,” 4). The tendency to conflate postmodern poetry with poststructuralist thought arises from common imperatives to think critically about language and representation, and the history of Language writing bears out the close relationship between critical theory and contemporary poetry. As Perelman points out, “Language writers have used structuralist and poststructuralist theory at times to furnish ad hoc support for negative assertions about the problematic status of description, self, and narrative in writing and positive ones about wider possibilities for meaning if more ambitious sets of reading practices are recognized” (15).

As Perelman’s remarks suggest, however, contemporary experimental poetry is not a mere extension of poststructuralist thought, and this is where Derrida’s distinction between deconstruction and negative theology can prove useful for the study of contemporary poetry. Strictly speaking, what distinguishes negative theology from deconstruction for Derrida is that “‘negative theology’ seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being” (8). While I do not think that postmodern poetry seeks to predicate the existence of a hyperessentiality, or ultimate being, I do think that the negativity present in much contemporary experimental poetry is best interpreted as an oblique affirmation of both aesthetic and spiritual concerns. Postmodern poetry shares with negative theology, to use Williams’ term, an “iterative process” of negation to generate an ambivalent, yet powerful, manner of belief, which in turn provides the basis of a provisional, contradictory and ironic poetics. By both adopting and moving beyond a
wholly negative mode, postmodern poetry draws significantly on the type of skeptical and critical enterprise frequently associated with deconstruction and poststructuralism but also importantly offers up poems that transcend the merely negative.

Shira Wolosky has previously and advantageously plumbed the relationship between negative theology and literary studies in her book *Language Mysticism: The Negative way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*. Wolosky argues that the preoccupation with the failure of language that so absorbs these three modernist writers corresponds to a theological concern about the ability to express matters of a spiritual nature. Inexpressibility within the work of Eliot, Beckett and Celan reads thus as a sign of the mystical; by its very deficiency, language provides a negative index for the sacred. The conception of language as deficient has a long history; as Wolosky asserts, there exists “an ambivalence toward language deeply embedded with the Western tradition, in which language is seen as at best wanting, at worst profane, compared with the truth it would express” (1). Falling short of an ability to express the truth, language nevertheless demonstrates—through its limitations—a sense of the ultimate and is therefore indispensable to a formulation of the mystical. Wolosky writes:

> A negative approach to language is almost central to the mystical desire for ultimacy, seen as a state beyond multiplicity, division, and dispersion—conditions closely associated with language....As the inexpressibility topos suggests, the assertion of what language cannot say is a traditional means for designating an ultimate realm beyond formulation. Negation and transcendence are thus closely allied. (3)

Wolosky’s assessment of the connection between the apophatic tradition and the works of Eliot, Beckett and Celan is persuasive, particularly as she argues that each poet represents a different response to a tradition that conceives of language as necessarily flawed.
Wolosky thus argues that language “acquires...an equivocal status that Eliot, in embracing the tradition, reproduces; that Beckett, in critiquing the tradition, exposes; that Celan, as against the tradition, significantly reformulates” (265).

While I find Wolosky’s argument about the relationship between theological concerns and inexpressibility both adept and convincing, my own analysis of negative theology and literature differs from Wolosky’s in several important respects. I focus on writings published after 1945, and as I demonstrate the willfulness of poets to be purposefully inarticulate, I emphasize the significance of an ironic process of enunciation to negative theology. Of the poets I write on here, only Jackson Mac Low published poems extensively before 1945. John Ashbery’s first published poems appeared in *Poetry* magazine in November of 1945, and his first book of poems, *Some Trees*, as is well known by now, was selected by W.H. Auden for publication for the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1956 (Lehman, 131). Despite actually being born in 1925, Jack Spicer frequently gave 1945 or 1946 as the year of his birth—the time at which, according to Robin Blaser, Spicer felt his poetic life began. In an essay entitled “Second War,” from *A Poetics*, Charles Bernstein theorizes as to why the year 1945 is a defining moment for contemporary experimental poetry. He asserts that “much of the innovative poetry of these soon-to-be fifty years following the war register the twined events of Extermination in the West and Holocaust in the East in ways that have not been accounted for” (197). Bernstein’s focus on this time period after World War II lends itself to a consideration of the relationship between negative theology and postmodern poetry, particularly as Bernstein contrasts the current poetic era with that of modernism in terms of a “crisis of
representation." According to Bernstein, this crisis, which is significant for modernism and postmodernism alike, gained an increasingly political edge for postmodern poets due to the events surrounding World War II:

To be sure, the crisis of representation, which is to say the recognition that the Real is not representable, is associated with the great radical modernist poems of the period immediately before and after the First World War. In the wake of the Second War, however, the meaning and urgency of unrepresentability took on explosive new force as a political necessity, as the absolute need to reground polis. That is, such work which had started as a heady, even giddy, aesthetic investigation had become primarily an act of human reconstruction and imagining. (200)

While Bernstein's emphasis in "Second War" is to suggest a common historical reference (and political response) for many of the most influential radical or experimental poets of the last fifty or so years (he even includes a "partial" list of innovative poets born in the pivotal years between 1937 and 1944), I would like to underscore Bernstein's discussion of the dilemma of representation and its implications for postmodernism. I will argue here that postmodern poets intervene against the dilemma of unrepresentability through oblique, indirect and negative forms of language and representation. As I have suggested previously, this propensity for contradictory, negative and oblique poetic forms is consistent with the principles of negative theology, and the tendency for negation and contradiction represents, furthermore, not so much a stance towards the lamentable failure of language as a willfulness on the part of postmodern poets to bend and distort the workings of language. Thus, unlike Wolosky's contention about modernist poets' preoccupation with inexpressibility, my study asserts that the negativity of postmodern poetry functions as part of an iterative process, to use Williams' phrase once more, which generates affirmations of beliefs with both aesthetic and religious implications.
The iterative process that I argue drives contemporary experimental poetry proceeds as a series of negations or as a progressive mode of contradiction. Though I will provide a fuller discussion of an experimental poetics based on irony and contradiction in the Conclusion, I shall briefly sketch here the workings of contradiction, irony and negation in postmodern poetry. First, it is important to understand this generative method of contradiction and negation as both an act of speech and as a dynamic process and logic in which language becomes an active and creative force. The iterative process of postmodern poetry thus finds an affinity with the apophatic method in various religious traditions. J.P. Williams’ discussion of the speech of Buddhist monks, for example, has bearing for understanding the contradictory and ironic aesthetic practices of contemporary poets:

[Buddhist Masters] opt for the language of paradox, apparently contradicting what they themselves have previously said and what is taught by others. The practice of turning around the received wisdom...became regular and was exploited by Dogen [Zenji]...The piling up of contradictions upon one another can [thus] take on an apophatic hue. (55)

Williams explains that Buddhist masters adopt a process of contradiction, in which even contradictory statements are later themselves negated and contradicted, in order to lead their pupils to an insight. This “piling up of contradictions” contributes to an explicit form of logic that is derived from a series of utterances and seeks to demonstrate the provisional nature of perceptions of the truth through the use of paradox and contradiction.

In *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*, Joseph Conte has argued for a similar provisional logic as a defining characteristic of postmodern serial poetic
form. Conte writes that seriality is appropriate to our current cultural period and our experience of reality: "no longer bound by the fixed, preordained orders of closure, the series articulates both the indeterminancy and the discontinuity that the scientist discovers in the subatomic world and that we are compelled to consider in our own interaction with reality" (19). Consequently, "poets such as Creeley, Oppen and Spicer have discerned a serial order that is 'protean' and provisional. It incorporates random occurrences without succumbing to formlessness" (11). My own analysis of contemporary poetry will draw on Conte's designation of serial form, yet instead of charting the relations between poems, I shall uncover the serial logic within poems. Such a shift in focus will demonstrate how aspects of serial form also occur at the sentence level and take the form of a speech act.

Exemplifying the iterative process of negative theology, like the paradoxes of Buddhist masters upon which Williams commented, the speech acts in postmodern poetry turn on negative and contradictory utterances, and one easily discerns the generative force of irony behind these utterances. Frank Kermode, in a response to Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking," has noted that negative theology is indeed closely related to irony. Citing a definition from the OED, Kermode explains apophasis "was a technical term in rhetoric: 'a kind of Irony, whereby we deny that we say or doe that which we especially say or doe'" (73). Irony, moreover, indicates how the provisional nature of postmodern poetry ought to be considered as generative; its significance is based on the production or the accrual of meaning in stages. As Linda Hutcheon has recently argued, irony is best understood as an active process that generates its meaning rather than as an inert layering
of opposite meanings. Hutcheon thus compares irony to what is called “triple-voicing” in music, in which two notes heard simultaneously produce a (composite) third note:

While, in reality, of course, one of the “notes” of irony is literally silent, unsaid, to think in terms of playing together of two or more semantic notes to produce a third (ironic) one has at least one advantage over the related image of irony as a photographic double exposure...[I]t suggests more than simply the overdetermined space of superimposition by implying a notion of action and interaction in the creation of a third – the actual ironic – meaning. (60)

Properly recognized as exhibiting this type of ironic, generative energy, negative and contradictory utterances within postmodern poetry may thus be apprehended as affirmative, and in the chapters that follow, I discuss how each poet of my study employs the language, and logic, of negation. To return to Bernstein’s dilemma of unrepresentability, I shall underscore how contemporary poets invoke an iterative process, based on a series of negative, contradictory and ironic utterances, to depict, however obliquely, the unrepresentable and intervene against it.

In each chapter, I demonstrate how the iterative process undertaken by a particular contemporary poet always yields an affirmation of belief after a process of negation and contradiction. For example, Chapter One, entitled “Heresies Will Implode: John Ashbery’s Apostate Poetics,” investigates the banal and commodified language of Ashbery’s poetry, searching for the endurance of religious belief amidst acts of apostasy, both poetic and religious. Chapter One proposes that Ashbery’s ironic and renunciatory tendencies in his poem “Tuesday Evening” signal a distinct poetic mode and enact a blasphemous rewriting of canonical modernist texts and New Critical essays, namely T.S. Eliot’s “Gerontion,” Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” and Cleanth Brooks’s “The Heresy of Paraphrase.” Transforming paraphrase into an art form, Ashbery makes a
paradoxical virtue of banal speech and inaugurates a version of the sublime incredibly made all the more powerful for its muted forms and clichéd expressions. My reading analyzes both Ashbery's own take on paraphrase and his invocation of the palinode—a poetic conceit in which earlier poems are recanted—and illustrates how various renunciations, of Eliot, of one's past, and of one's poetry, contribute to both the subject and form of "Tuesday Evening." Chapter One ultimately demonstrates how Stevens's sublime confrontation with nothingness in "The Snow Man" is reduced in Ashbery's ironic revision to a prosaic, but equally sublime, self-canceling utterance: "nothing and a lot," a phrase which yields insight into Ashbery's equivocal concept of faith and his ambivalent address to God.

Chapter Two shifts from an exploration of the contradiction inherent to acts of apostasy towards an investigation of the incoherent and fragmentary poetic language of Jack Spicer and Charles Bernstein and determines the implications of such language for both individual aesthetics and community politics. Chapter Two, "A Poem Is a Small (or Large) Malfunctioning Machine Made of Words," thus considers the syntax errors and messages of computer failure in Spicer's and Bernstein's poetry as inarticulate utterances that negate prevailing conceptions of what poetic language ought to sound like. Overturning William Carlos Williams' conceit that a poem is "a small (or large) machine" without redundant parts, both Spicer and Bernstein purposely disrupt their own poems with syntax errors and computer glitches as they create a poetics based not on mechanistic precision but on noise and dissonance. While both Spicer and Bernstein invoke errant language, Chapter Two addresses each poet's distinct embrace of error:
Spicer mobilizes his syntactic miscues towards a rendering of an unintelligible poetry, an ideal poetry of limited—and even nonsensical—vocabulary, while Bernstein employs syntax errors towards a subversive poetic and political practice. Thus, not unlike Ashbery’s exploration of the sublime effects of banal language, Spicer’s and Bernstein’s defunct machine language obliquely expresses goals of perfection: a linguistic or poetic utopia for Spicer and a poetically-inspired political utopia for Bernstein. Although Spicer’s poetic language evinces a “mechanical” breakdown, incoherence and nonsense are in fact closer to his actual ideals for poetry: that it should be composed of “an infinitely small vocabulary” and that it should approximate an incomprehensible and unspeakable “God language.” Bernstein’s affinity for the accidental or the contingent, on the other hand, forms the foundation of an entire poetry based on error. Indeed, Bernstein constructs his belief in the necessarily accidental quality of poetic language against Ezra Pound’s Imagistic dictum that advocates a direct and plainspoken mode of speech. Marked by an obstinate indirectness, Bernstein’s own poetic language refuses to speak “correctly,” negating any notion of “the plain sense of the word.” Reveling in irreverent speech and scandalous humor, Bernstein contests and blasphemes the modernist sacred text and its tenets, even as he advocates a utopian poetic and political community that draws heavily on religious and congregational metaphors.

Chapter Three extends its analysis of the political implications of negative language for local poetic communities to an investigation of the role of irony and derisive speech in postcolonial Caribbean culture and literature. “Caliban’s Profit: Cursing and Obscenity in the Work of Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite,” argues that the
obscenity in Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s poetry arises from both direct and indirect allusions to Shakespeare’s The Tempest, a play which has often been rewritten into allegory for the history of Colonialism. “Caliban’s Profit” investigates how Walcott and Brathwaite use obscenity not only to critique the inequity of Colonial power relations but also to formulate a poetics of irony that undermines Colonial language. Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s profaning of a Colonial “master” language, moreover, exemplifies the venerated Trinidadian tradition of picong, an art form composed of carefully crafted insults, which, in Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s hands, increasingly gains a subversive political edge. Furthermore, I demonstrate in this chapter how the use of profanity is as inventive and imaginative as other forms of vernacular within Caribbean literature, including patois or Caribbean “dub” language. Fundamentally, Chapter Three argues that obscenity, rather than being an aberration of poetic speech, is an integral part of a poetics that sacrilegiously rewrites canonical texts, invokes traditional religious forms, and reveals the ambivalence within Colonial discourse. The iterative process for Walcott and Brathwaite thus necessarily works through the negative language of profanity towards an affirmation of an innovative form of poetry, one that seeks a redefinition of artistic identity and purpose, colonial history and poetic language itself.

The last chapter returns to a more narrow definition of negative speech and aesthetics by examining the ramifications of contradiction and negation for subjectivity and the pursuit of an enlightened consciousness. Entitled “Something from Nothing: the Disontological Poetics of Leslie Scalapino and Jackson Mac Low,” Chapter Four argues that Scalapino’s and Mac Low’s poetry relies on negative and ironic utterances to
generate critiques of subjectivity and authorship. Situating Mac Low’s and Scalapino’s experimental writing techniques within the context of the Buddhist tradition of koans and the ascetic practice of meditation, known as zazen, I assert that paradox and repetition form the foundation of an anti-ontological poetics. Renowned for striving towards a condition of egolessness within their experimental poetry, Scalapino and Mac Low engage in a cogent practice of negation to arrive at the emptying of the ego. As Scalapino draws on the superficial images and serial nature of the American comic book and Walter Benjamin’s description of Baudelaire’s poetic technique as the “emancipation from experience,” she creates within her poetry a complex, negative space, one that correlates to fushiryo, the Japanese term for emptying of the mind. Mac Low, I argue, similarly critiques a Western conception of the ego by balancing the effects of order and disorder within his writing through his controlled use of chance operations and through his patient repetitions of lines, words, and fragments. In striking an equilibrium between contingency and constancy, Mac Low thus follows a paradoxical mode, one commonly associated with the koan, towards an investigation of both writing and consciousness. After recognizing Scalapino’s and Mac Low’s aspiration for a state of not-thinking, one realizes that it is an iterative process of negation that leads paradoxically to each poet’s sense of growth.

I intend with each chapter that follows to illustrate variations of my project’s central premise: that negativity is an integral aspect of contemporary experimental poetry. This negativity, however, is part of a larger ironic, iterative process that is consistent with the tenets of negative theology and is ultimately generative. In demonstrating this
premise, I attempt to refute charges that postmodern poetry is merely negative or an
abstruse and sterile expression of poststructuralist thought. Indeed, I have endeavored to
show that, contrary to assumptions about being spiritually bereft, postmodern poets do
seriously, yet skeptically, engage in theological inquiries into the nature of belief, faith
and enlightenment. Driven by such lines of questioning, contemporary poets develop a
dynamic, provisional poetics that has irony, contradiction and negation as its driving
force. It is important to note, however, that this recourse to negation is neither merely
nihilistic nor empty. Fischlin, in formulating what he describes as “negation theory,” has
made a similar assertion regarding the capacity of negation to entail, and affirm, all of
what goes unsaid in language or, in other words, language’s ghostly other:

Negation is the privative in language, for both utterance and inscription are acts
by which the possibilities of the unincluded, the unmentioned, the ignored, the
inchoate, the unaffirmed “otherness” of what is affirmed, the unformed, the
uncanny—in short, whatever would be required in order to range over everything
that a speech-act instantiates—emerge in the negative or lost dimensions of
discourse. (23)

I would add to Fischlin’s remarks that contemporary poets adopt a negative mode of
speech to place the unacknowledged aspects of language in the foreground. My study of
contemporary poetry, thus, has sought to reveal the negative and ironic strategies of
postmodern writing. Indeed, by recognizing how contemporary poetry is often
harmonious with, but truly distinct from, deconstruction and by understanding the
generative process of negation and affirmation, one realizes the truth of Derrida’s
conception of negative theology and its applicability to postmodern poetry: “It ‘is’ not
and does not say what ‘is.’ It is written completely otherwise” (4).

2 See also Charles Bernstein’s famous essay “Artifice of Absorption” that blurs the distinctions between prose and poetry, and Leslie Scalapino’s *The Public World / Syntactically Impermanence.*

3 See for example “The Poet in the Age of Prose” where Gioia dismisses “contemporary literature experts of the English Department who often prized difficulty for its own sake” and the “hyper-sophisticated or highly intelectualized aesthetics of academically fashionable writers like Ashbery” (249).


5 Despite claims to the contrary, the work of the poets in my study recurrently attests to their interest in religious matters. Hank Lazer also has addressed the *Apex of the M* editorial and argues that the work of experimental poets like Susan Howe, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, Nathaniel Mackery, Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein, frequently displays an engagement with spiritual matters, even if it is “practiced in an ambivalent or self-questioning manner” (6).


8 The experimental nature of much postmodern and Language poetry can be variously ascribed to such historical factors as the continuing legacy of modernism, the influence of poststructuralism on conceptions of language, or an interaction with, or response to, late
capitalism. Borrowing from Lyotard’s concept of the metanarrative, Bernstein himself suggests that contemporary experimental poetry differs from modernism in its attitude towards poetic purpose as well as conceptions of the poet as omnipotent: “After the Second War, there is a more conscious rejection of lingering positivist and romantic orientations toward, respectively, mastery systems and the poetic Spirit or Imagination as transcendent. The meaning of the modernist textual practice has been interpreted in ways that contrast with some of the original interpretations: toward the incommensurability of different discourse systems, against the idea of poetry as an imperializing or world-synthesizing agency...not only because these ideas tend to impart to the poet a superhistorical or superhuman perspective but also because they diminish the partiality, and therefore, the particularity of any poetic practice” (201).

Conte’s typology of postmodern poetry falls into two major categories: the procedural from, where a pronounced and self-conscious arbitrary structure (like Ashbery’s re-interpretation of the sestina or John Cage’s mesostics) determines the nature of the poem, and the serial form, which links several poems together whose relation is marked not by an evolving sequence but by “discontinuity and radical incompleteness” (15).
Chapter 1

Heresies Will Implode: John Ashbery’s Apostate Poetics

I mean how much more can I say, giving myself away, without negating the positive meaning of what I wanted to say and which has now subtly changed back to an elementary precept or something else one doesn’t much want to hear...

—John Ashbery, Section I, Flow Chart

...The differences more or less cancel each other at the moment of presentation: it’s like candy, like a star that doesn’t matter, like one’s feet bouncing to a joyful rhythm, a warning next time to any who might think of writing.

Section II, Flow Chart

How could he explain to them his prayer?
—John Ashbery, The Painter

John Ashbery prevails upon his reader not to take statements within his poetry at face value. Cultivating a sense of the unexpected and the uncertain within his poetry, Ashbery frequently contradicts himself, as he pursues a manner of speaking that rapidly cancels itself out. Indeed, so many contradictory phrasings abound in Ashbery’s poetry that one begins to discern in these contradictions a significant poetic practice rather than merely an idiosyncratic habit of speech. While a casual observation of the
purposefulness of Ashbery’s contradictions might initially invite comparisons to the paradoxes so esteemed by the New Critics, it becomes clear that Ashbery’s invocation of contradiction differs sharply from the New Critical emphasis on paradox. Whereas the new critics were prone to consider paradox as an ordering principle, a latent aspect of poems in which opposing tensions were reconciled and balanced, Ashbery’s contradictory utterances are more readily apparent and immediate. Ashbery’s relation to the New Criticism has been the subject of much critical scrutiny, and several critics have argued that Ashbery’s poetry ought to be read as antithetical to New Critical principles. For example, in his early study of Ashbery’s poetry, David Shapiro suggests a resistance to New Critical tenets on Ashbery’s part and considers Ashbery’s contradictory tendencies as incompatible with the New Critical embrace of paradox. According to Shapiro, Ashbery “tends to use paradox and ‘nonsense’ to achieve, not so much an ambiguity of the kind analyzed denotatively and connotatively by ‘The New Critics,’ as a pointing to logos by its extreme absence” (30). In After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America, Vernon Shetley likewise asserts that Ashbery eschews New Critical practices, suggesting that “the difficulty of Ashbery’s poetry arises in great measure from [a] decision...not to produce [poems] within the paradigms offered by the New Criticism” (104). Shetley primarily diagnoses Ashbery’s rejection of New Critical tenets by focusing on both Ashbery’s disruption of a poetic persona and his avoidance of creating coherent, discrete dramatic situations. While Ashbery’s use of paradox is not his main emphasis, Shetley does remark upon Ashbery’s tendency to construct abruptly shifting, contradictory sentences:
The New Critics delighted in teasing out ambiguities, but saw those ambiguities as building to form coherent, if paradoxical, structures; their notion of ambiguity was ultimately spatial. Ashbery’s syntactical puzzles, however, arise in the form of sentences that seem to change their projected shape mid-stream...Ashbery’s ambiguities are fluid rather than structured; they refuse to respond to the sort of treatment New Critical close reading would subject them to. (119)

If Ashbery’s paradoxes prove inconsistent with New Critical models as both Shetley and Shapiro claim, it is important to understand the workings of Ashbery’s particular contradictions. Consequently, what I would like to take up in my reading is something that is only tangential to Shapiro’s and Shetley’s account of Ashbery’s divergence from New Critical poetics. As I will argue, contradictory utterances form a distinct poetic mode within Ashbery’s poetry and contribute to aesthetics of revision and recantation that follows the pattern of negative theology. Furthermore, contradiction itself, on a larger scale, constitutes a governing principle for all of Ashbery's poetry, for Ashbery frequently defines his poems in contrast to other poems (his own and those of his poetic precursors) as well as other poetic practices, like that of the New Criticism.

Often involving an extreme contrast between phrases, statements and even other poems, Ashbery’s contradictory poetic utterances are more pronounced and turn more suddenly than a standard New Critical paradox. For example, Ashbery’s early poem “A Boy,” from his first book “Some Trees,” not only illustrates the quickness with which a statement is cancelled in Ashbery’s poetry, but also provides evidence, in seminal form, of an entire poetics based on contradiction and recantation. “A Boy” contains a statement that seems not so much a typically resonant or ambiguous New Critical paradox than a flat contradiction:
By itself, such contradictory phrasing might merely evince Ashbery’s interest in the absurd, indicating the influence of Dadaist techniques on his work or his willful invocation of the nonsensical or irrational. However, if this contradictory utterance is extrapolated further into a working poetic principle, Ashbery’s phrasing here reveals both the recurrence of self-canceling, contradictory remarks and the extensively intertextual nature of many of his poems. As with many of Ashbery’s poems, one text will repeat a phrase or image from another piece, with a poem functioning like a mirror for another.

Consequently, one might discern how “A Boy” prefigures Ashbery’s later poem “Wet Casements” from *Houseboat Days*, a book published almost 20 years after *Some Trees*. For the epigraph to “Wet Casements,” Ashbery selected a passage from Franz Kafka’s *Wedding Preparations in the Country* that recalls the lines from “A Boy” and to which “A Boy” itself also had previously, if subtly, alluded:

> When Eduard Raban, coming along the passage, walked into the open doorway, he saw that it was raining. It was not raining much.
> (28)

Kafka’s sentences from *Wedding Preparations* here do not strictly contradict each other but offer up a refinement and a revision of one sentence, and one interior thought, upon the other. Removed the context of Kafka’s story, Ashbery’s epigraph humorously underscores what seems neurotically repetitive and redundant in Raban’s thinking. Repetition itself, though, becomes a paramount motif in “Wet Casements” as the poet
cautions himself against the dangers of social interaction and the harmful effects of personal gossip.

I shall keep to myself.
I shall not repeat others' comments about me.

(28)

Both Harold Bloom and John Shoptaw have read “Wet Casements” as a meditation on selfhood, solitude and the desire to retreat from other people’s observation. According to Shoptaw, the poet is caught between the detrimental effects of isolation and the benefits of social interaction: “Privacy, Ashbery realizes, can be no healing alternative to publicity. The mirrors of other people, however distorted and reductive, are the only looking-glasses around” (201). While “Wet Casements” no doubt engages in questions of subjectivity (as do so many of Ashbery’s poems), another reading of the poem is possible, which indicates not Ashbery’s drive to be solitary but his entanglement with the statements, and poetry, of others. An ironic reading of Ashbery’s declarative statement is thus available which suggests a meaning that is the exact opposite of what it explicitly claims and provides a working dictum for Ashbery’s poetic practices. Ashbery, as a poet, will not keep to himself nor will he refrain from repeating the words of others within his poems. Thus, Ashbery’s proclamation against repetition points ironically to what might be considered the poet’s playful indulgence in echolalia—the “often pathological repetition of what is said by other people as if echoing them” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary).

Instead of a sole focus on subjectivity, then, Ashbery’s ironic injunction against repeating the comments of others leads to a sharper consideration of language and speech
acts within his poems. Properly understood as a specific mode of speech, the contradictions of Ashbery's poetry exemplify his development of a negative poetics of recantation: contradiction and negation, for Ashbery, contribute to a poetry that proceeds through a seemingly endless series of retractions. It is only after Ashbery engages in a process or series of negations—after, that is, multiple recantations—that the poet approaches what he has hoped to say. Through such halting speech, revisions and endless adjustments, Ashbery poetry follows closely the pattern of negative theology, which seeks to affirm something revelatory by way of repeated negation. A central premise of negative theology is that language is incapable of expressing the truth of divine or spiritual matters. As Shira Wolosky suggests, the apophatic tradition considers language to be impoverished when it comes to articulating the spiritual or divine:

“Almost by definition, mysticisms [like negative theology] demote and ultimately abrogate language. A negative approach to language is almost always central to the mystical desire for ultimacy…” (3). According to negative theology, it is only by systematically negating the effects of language that one might approach the truth of the sacred or the spiritual, and it is in this manner that Ashbery's contradictory and negative utterances function paradoxically as a process of affirmation.

Ashbery's poetics of negation, contradiction and retraction can be readily seen in "Tuesday Evening," a poem from the 1995 book *Can You Hear, Bird*. In terms of both form and content, the poem recurrently reveals how integral the act of recanting is to Ashbery's writing; various poetic principles, concepts and traditions, ranging from Cleanth Brooks' criticism of paraphrase to conventional conceptions of the sublime, are
posited and subsequently recast in Ashbery’s own poetic terms. From its outset, “Tuesday Evening” reads like a diatribe against the New Criticism as Ashbery invokes New Critical principles only to indicate his subversion of them. Ashbery also alludes to T.S. Eliot, as a New Critical icon, as a way of defining his poetry in contrast to his modernist precursors. Beyond a mere negation of New Critical central figures and tenets, however, Ashbery’s renunciations also closely approximate the methods of negative theology and its search for an articulation of the transcendent through negation. In this way, Ashbery partakes in a debased form of speaking to pursue his version of an adequate and sufficient, though altogether sublime, faith. Struggling to find a language to speak of the sublime, Ashbery replaces a grand language appropriate for the sublime with cliché phrasing and banal speech. John Morse has attested both to Ashbery’s appreciation of the banal and the poet’s attempt to plumb clichéd phrasing for more powerful significance: “Ashbery is at home in the typical. What is really original about Ashbery, perhaps, is only his awareness of typicality. Who else in English has thought so tenderly, so optimistically, of the meaning latent in the clichés his readers live by” (15)?

A poem some nineteen pages long, “Tuesday Evening” evinces Ashbery’s zeal for antithetical and contradictory poetics. Whether it is in contrast to traditional versions of the sublime or the ideas of New Criticism, Ashbery will base his writing process on repeated negations and revisions, and among Ashbery’s first revisions in “Tuesday Evening” is Cleanth Brooks’ assault on paraphrase.

In 1942, Cleanth Brooks was railing against paraphrase, adamantly warning against its heretical qualities and postulating the problems paraphrase raises for the
criticism of poetry:

To repeat, most of our difficulties in criticism are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase. If we allow ourselves to be misled by it, we distort the relation of the poem to its “truth,” we raise the problem of belief in a vicious and crippling form, we split the poem between its “form” and its “content”—we bring the statement into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology. (201)

Though no one would confuse John Ashbery with a follower of the New Criticism, it may nevertheless seem odd or surprising to find that the act of paraphrase would seemingly be advocated in “Tuesday Evening”:

Resist, friends, that last day’s dying.

The melodious mode obtains. Always remember that. At trying moments, practice the art of paraphrase.

*(Can You Hear, Bird, 140)*

Turning Brooks’ canonical beliefs on their head, Ashbery himself commits an act of heresy against the New Criticism, suggesting that paraphrase is an “art” and not a sin. Of course, it can be assumed that the utterance on behalf of paraphrase is made with Ashbery’s characteristic irony, so that in the moment that the “art of paraphrase” is proposed, it is immediately withdrawn. As Shapiro has remarked, “[t]here is a kind of simultaneous irony and depth to Ashbery’s work, as if a critic paused to announce that he was invalidating all his critical statements including the present one he was making” (25). Exactly what in Ashbery’s poetry one chooses to believe is consequently a vexed and complex problem, for the terrain seems slippery at best, as a line in the poem itself suggests: “A precipitous slide into belief must have occurred recently, but left no earnest
of its passing” (CYHB, 148). Ashbery’s poetry, then, enacts what Brooks claims paraphrase does; it “raise[s] the problem of belief in a vicious and crippling form,” particularly as the ominous sounding “slide into belief” seems to offer less than secure footing and, perhaps all the more pernicious, its sliding trajectory is difficult to trace. Of course, what Brooks meant by the problem of belief—the relationship of the beliefs of the reader to the poet’s belief system or the poet’s beliefs and their manifestation in the poem itself—is different from the problem of belief for Ashbery, who seems, at moments, to welcome the difficulties of religious questions and discourse within his poems, if not the outright “unreal competition” his poems might encounter “with...theology.” As I trace Ashbery’s engagement with matters of spiritual belief in this chapter, I will argue that Ashbery arrives at an enlightened transcendence through an agonistic relationship to theology. By turns blasphemous and revelatory, “Tuesday Evening” encompasses a broad range of contradictory speech acts, yet I will demonstrate further that Ashbery’s poem exists as a protracted meditation on faith and how faith itself can be called into being by language.

“Tuesday Evening” directly takes up the subject of retracted beliefs, as the poet invokes the poetic form of the palinode:

In seasons of strife we compose palinodes
against the breakers, retracting what was lithe
in our believing.
(CYHB, 144)

A palinode is “an ode or song recanting or retracting something in an earlier poem,” and though no previous poem is immediately given here as source material, belief—or what
was “lithe” in it—will come under scrutiny, made the object of revision. Ashbery’s apostate poetics, a near-infinite regress of retracted beliefs, guarantee, however, that even such renunciations do not subsist: “By evening, its heresy implodes / under an August moon; repercussions writhe in a context of mangroves” (CYHB, 144). With lithe, acrobatic beliefs turning rapidly upon themselves and the heresy of such reversals collapsing without much dissenting force, it is difficult to trace the origins of the initial belief or where one may arrive after its subsequent reversals and retractions. One concludes that it is the retraction, the apostate mode itself, that becomes paramount for Ashbery, though this too poses its own set of difficulties, for the equivocations of faith or belief are not even egregious enough to be measured:

After a sudden
denouement, the climate again turns bland; its apostasy
was too minute to register on God’s barometer
(CYHB, 144)

To take “Tuesday Evening” as a palinode, it is necessary to chart its retractions on multiple levels. Resultantly, one will understand that it is a poem that calls its internal beliefs into question, recants earlier poems (whether the works of other poets or those of the poet himself), and commits heretical acts of apostasy. In this regard, Ashbery will fashion a post-New Critical poem, one heretically involved with poems outside of its own hermetic or unified field and one whose “unreal competition” with theology is evinced by instances of renunciation and professions of faith. Ashbery ultimately employs this double movement between acts of renunciation and declarations of faith towards a
revised notion of the sublime. While critics, like Rob Wilson, have theorized a dynamic postmodern sublime which stems from "semiotic overload and media-driven bliss," Ashbery inaugurates a new version of the sublime that is necessarily muted and reserved, though no less an expression of wonder than traditional depictions of the sublime (200). In Ashbery’s formulation, one experiences a rapturous amazement in a reduced fashion, as the sublime is found quietly in what will suffice: “To have proffered / only this was sublimely sufficient” (143).

To recant or retract necessitates a backward looking perspective and much of “Tuesday Evening” is preoccupied with the past and time’s passing. The poem often gives equal voice to both a reassessment of youthful priorities and a meditative awareness of the elder years of one’s life. Not unlike Williams’ “Asphodel” or Eliot’s “Gerontion,” the poem takes the vantage point of an older person:

We like this, that
and the other; have doubts about certain things; enjoy pretension less
than we did when we were young;
(CYHB, 152)

The voice here, however, is more whimsical and comical than in Williams or Eliot, and contrary to the old man of “Gerontion,” whose thoughts are those of “a dry brain in a dry season,” the elder speaker of “Tuesday Evening” knows old age differently, recognizing that “[y]ou’re still young enough to talk through / the night, among friends, the way you used to do somewhere” (CYHB, 156). By way of contrast, the old man of “Gerontion” utters negative sentiments about aging, as in this stanza that mixes forlorn resignation with a yearning intimacy:
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use them for your closer contact?
*(Selected Poems, 31)*

No similar feelings of resignation occur for the speaker of Ashbery’s poem, who instead realizes that “the nifty feelings of those years has returned”:

I can’t explain it,
but perhaps it means that once you’re over fifty
you’re rid of a lot of decibels. You’ve got a tiger; so unchain it
*(CYHB, 155)*

All of the old man’s lost senses in “Gerontion” are here condensed into a single corresponding loss of decibels for Ashbery’s speaker, yet this loss is experienced favorably, as a jettisoning or getting “rid” of something extraneous or cumbersome. Ashbery’s most direct allusion to “Gerontion,” though, continues this pattern of overturning the earlier poem, as Eliot’s terrifying tiger (“The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours,” *Selected Poems, 32*) becomes itself a source of power: “You’ve got a tiger; so unchain it” *(CYHB, 155)*. A reading of Ashbery’s rewriting of “Gerontion,” in which old age is viewed as a virtue, the lessening of dexterity and the lost senses are overcome, and an allegorical tiger is made an ally and not an enemy, could be produced according to a Bloomian notion of influence. However, an alternate reading of “Tuesday Evening” as a palinode, as a retraction of the previous poem’s statements, is perhaps more fruitful, particularly as Eliot does not have a place in the Romantic lineage
or tradition that Bloom charts. Moreover, a Bloomian reading would fail to account for what other things are retracted and taken back in the poem; in short, it would fail to see “Tuesday Evening” as a love poem.

Even as old age, in contrast to “Gerontion,” is endorsed and as the viability of an elderly existence is extolled, youth still retains a haunting presence, in the form of a cryptic love affair, which plagues the memory of the speaker of “Tuesday Evening.” That residual traces of a difficult episode might bear heavily upon one’s consciousness is familiar ground for Ashbery. Shoptaw, for instance, argues that Ashbery’s “Fragment” refers to a “covert adolescent affair, a youthful homosexual relationship that, once discovered, reaches the level of scandal (117). The criminological discourse of the poem indicates such a reading:

Gradually old letters used as bookmarks

Inform the neighbors; an approximate version

Circulates and the incident is officially closed.

(DDS, 84)

Textual evidence exposes the nascent liaison, and attempts are made to contain the relationship, presumably as a way of terminating both the neighbors’ curiosity and the love affair itself. The inclusion of the “incident” into the material of a poem, however, suggests that no such finality exists, and the assumption that the matter is “officially closed” is proven misguided. A similar presumption of closure echoes in “Tuesday Evening”; nearly identical discourse and subject matter reverberate in the later poem, as the policing of youthful homosexual desire persists:

Because we’d swum
the Hellespont long ago, in our youth, we assumed the verdict

would be sealed by now. And you know, only anonymous
lovers seem to make it to the altar. The rest are branded
with a time and a place, and rarely know each other.
(CYHB, 142)

Crimes and indiscretions committed as a minor are sealed to protect a young person’s identity, yet the anonymity spoken of here extends to both young adults and to the cloaked nature of homosexual desire necessitated by a repressive society. To be a member of a group whose “love dares not speak its name” is to be rendered anonymous, and the altar described in the lines above connotes not so much a place of marriage as a site for sacrifice. Indeed, it is on the banks of the Hellespont that Phrixus sacrificed a ram to Zeus (the same ram which yielded the Golden Fleece), and so too does the site remain a place of sacrifice in “Tuesday Evening.” Appeasing the gods, however, now entails paring back one’s hopes: “[s]elf-sacrifice will be on the agenda, a lowering of expectations” (CYHB, 149). Such a dismissal of expectations amounts to its own act of apostasy, whose corollary definition is the “abandonment of a previous loyalty: [a] defection.” In “Tuesday Evening,” the speaker’s defection is of the heart and is a recognition of the pastness of the past, a stipulation to the end of a youthful relationship: “[a]ll the rotten / things that can befall a man. . . / already happened to him, leagues ago” (CYHB, 146).

Ashbery’s apostate poetics, his seemingly perpetual retraction of what has been said before, necessitates a hard look at what is given up in a defection of the heart, for it
has bearing on Ashbery's concept of selfhood. Disowning the past, and along with it, one's youthful liaisons, is simultaneously a disavowal of what others have said and a disavowal of oneself:

...if one is knocked flat on his ass

by vile opprobrium, he need only consult his pocket mirror: The sand

will seem to flow upward through the hourglass; one is pickled

in one's own humors, yet the dismantled ideal

rescued from youth is still pulsing, viable, having trickled

from the retort of self-consciousness in to the frosted vial

of everyone's individual consciousness noting it's the same as

all the others, with one vital difference: It belongs to no one

(CYHB, 152)

Combating the opinions and words of others becomes a way of shoring oneself up, though the lasting effects are doubtful. A look in the mirror quickly offsets the contempt—the opprobrium—meted out by others, yet such countermeasures leave one feeling less than solid, as both self and mirror seem to liquefy: "The sand / will seem to flow upward through the hourglass; one is pickled / in one's own humors" (CYHB, 152). The mirror, as pickling device, perverts as much as it preserves, and indeed, one is caught in a pickle, in the difficult position, between the awareness of an idealized existence and the recognition of its impossibility. Thus, the ideal self is first declared "pulsing" and "viable," and then, in true apostate form, the claim is later retracted, disavowed: the ideal
self “belongs to no one”—for having never been achieved. Shown to be unavailable or impossible, a concept of the self refracts into fragments, especially since the vital difference of “the ideal self” is that there is no difference; it is “the same as all the others.” The ideal self, lacking in difference and defined by refraction, is encountered as sheer repetition, a murkiness that Ashbery refers to, elsewhere in the poem, as “Okefenokees of / subjectivity” (CYHB, 148).

Nearly defined by refraction, self-consciousness is a hall of mirrors for Ashbery, endless reflections that regress in all directions, and this concept of subjectivity can be extrapolated to a larger theory of his poetry as a whole. A prominent conceit in Ashbery’s work, as in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” is the image “reversed in the accumulating mirror” (73). The accumulating mirror can even be considered as a trope for, or gloss on, the body of Ashbery’s work, a trope suggesting that an individual poem of Ashbery’s often encompasses other poems of his, reflecting and reinterpreting these poems in succession and in the apostate mode of revision. In light of this, “Tuesday Evening” can be read as a palinode, one that parodies, if it doesn’t fully retract and revise, the earlier mirror conceit of “Self-Portrait,” particularly as Ashbery shrinks Parmigianino’s elaborate mirror into a more pedestrian “pocket mirror.” There is, indeed, a direct parallel to the earlier poem, as “the dismantled ideal rescued from youth” of “Tuesday Evening,” echoes a section from “Self-Portrait”: “The forms retain a strong measure of ideal beauty / As they forage in secret on our idea of distortion.” Both poems advance similar statements about the ideal, and whether the ideal is one of beauty or an idealized self-image resurrected from youth, each is defined by distortion. Caught in the
hall of mirrors of Ashbery’s poetics, neither beauty nor an idea of selfhood has much hope of escaping deformation, especially as the “telling,” the poetic act itself, proceeds by distortion. As Ashbery says later in “Self-Portrait”: “The way of telling” interferes, “twisting the end result / into a caricature of itself” (80). Such “twistings” and disfigurations are characteristic of the “Mannerist [t]ensions” often noted in Ashbery’s poetry, but the distortions also underscore the mirror effect of one poem held up to another in Ashbery’s oeuvre. Just as “Tuesday Evening” reinterprets Parmigianino’s convex mirror, an earlier Ashbery poem, “The New Spirit,” prefigures the distortions of selfhood in both of Ashbery’s later poems: “And so it slips away, like the face on a deflated balloon, shifted into wrinkles, permanent and matter-of-fact, though a perversion of itself” (6). Published in 1972, the lines from “The New Spirit” anticipate the deforming qualities of the convex mirror of 1975 and embody the properties of revision that constitute another mode of Ashbery’s apostate poetics. The apostate label encapsulates that double movement between what is straightforward, or given, and its retraction; what is, in other words, simultaneously “matter-of-fact, though a perversion of itself.”

In what ways and to what degree can the double movement of Ashbery’s poetry, his apostate poetics, though, be considered heretical? Apostate poetics display a propensity for presenting subjectivity and one’s previous work in a perverted, or altered, form, yet an apostate nevertheless aims also towards perfectibility, towards an improvement based on an initial step of retraction. Here again, Eliot becomes instrumental in understanding “Tuesday Evening,” particularly as his ideas about heresy
articulate key issues of perfectibility for Ashbery. In *Eliot's Dark Angel*, Ronald Schuchard discusses heresy as invoked by Eliot, who first conceived of heresy in predominantly literary and not religious terms: “the charge of heresy is based on an author’s romantic self-consciousness and on his self-redemptive view of life, not on his departures from religious belief or dogma” (134). Schuchard argues that Eliot might have adopted his terms from Hulme, as Eliot was influenced by Hulme’s critique of the humanist position “which sees man as fundamentally good and capable of infinite perfectibility” (133). For Eliot, then, “heresy...grows out of [a] poet’s apparent ignorance or denial of humanity’s imperfect nature and soul...” (134). The never ending nature of Ashbery’s apostate mode, however, necessitates that the heresy of perfectibility will itself be eventually overturned and disavowed. As the line quoted earlier suggests, the notion of perfectibility will collapse upon itself as “its heresy implodes.”

Striving for perfectibility, in “Tuesday Evening,” initially takes the form of gardening, as we are urged figuratively to “open / your body and mind to all comers. They are both factory and garden / to the happy few...” (CYHB, 145). Gardening becomes an extended metaphor and recurrent motif in the poem, one that intimates regeneration and rebirth. Ashbery’s advocacy of gardening, and by extension perfectibility, would seemingly situate him within the category of a heretic, in Eliot’s criteria, and as a humanist, though this runs opposite to how many may read Ashbery. Jeffrey Perl, for example, considers Ashbery, as a disciple of mannerism, to be a counterhumanist: “Inversion, travesty, and obsessive negative allusion seem indispensable to [Ashbery’s] nonhumanist aesthetics” (17). By Perl’s own assessment,
however, the designations of humanist and counterhumanist do not fully obtain. Perl ultimately reasons that the humanist and counterhumanist divide amounts to two sides of the same coin: “Disputes [about modernity and between humanists and posthumanists] vary widely, from book to book, and from pair to pair, but unrelenting is the commitment to alternative worlds. The commitment is an illusion: the alternatives comprise one broken world together” (6). Perl further characterizes the division of loyalties of this single culture as ambivalence. The conflict between reading Ashbery as a humanist or a counterhumanist can likewise be reconciled as an ambivalence: Ashbery’s apostate poetics allow him to hold seemingly contradictory positions and to utter diametrically opposed statements. In this sense, gardening will not be a stable trope for Ashbery, as he alternately invokes both positive and negative images revolving around gardens. Again, in true apostate form, Ashbery will advocate humanist notions of perfectibility in one breath and retract them with the next.

Gardening, at first, is a positive trope that invokes a feeling of well-being in the poem. Being attuned to the climate and to nature ensures a sense of what can be perfected or renewed; the seasons themselves hint at fecundity:

Man must return to his earth,
experience its seasons, frosts, its labyrinthine processes, the spectacle of continual rebirth in one’s own time.
(CYHB, 149)

The cycle of the seasons serves as inspiration for work to be done, and though the seasons function mysteriously through their own “labyrinthine processes,” one who
gardens must labor knowingly and instinctively, harvesting before the harshness of winter arrives: “Still ripeness must soon be intuited; a coolant / freeze the tragic act under construction. Let’s husk the ear of its plenitude, forget additional worries” (CYHB, 153).

The landscape here reads as unmistakably rural and prosperous, and such prosperity gestures towards a “plenitude” beyond the sustenance of mere food. Properly tending one’s garden holds the capacity for change, and in accord with that, improvement or perfectibility. Through insightful, intuitive attention to the weather and land, one can “forget additional worries” and prosper with a sense of wellness. Both a spiritual and mental exercise, gardening, then, figuratively entails more than an engagement with the land. Indeed, Bonnie Costello has argued that, in Ashbery’s poetry, landscape is trope for knowledge in which “ideas are trees.” That ideas should be taken for trees hearkens back, for Costello, to Eden, and to the Tree of Knowledge; what the “Tree of Knowledge promises us [is] unity (despite its branching), rootedness, shade and protection, and, above all, ascent towards heaven” (72). Pruning one’s garden well means being adept around the Tree of Knowledge, with the harvest yielding both unity and the promise of self-redemption.

There is, however, something tenuous about the prosperity in Ashbery’s garden and consequently something insubstantial about the aspiration of perfectibility as well. As Costello notes, ideas often overrun Ashbery’s poetic landscape, and the effect can be a bewildering array of thoughts: “in Ashbery’s poetry the tree has dropped so many seedlings, each with its own assertive stem and precarious limbs, that we are now in a forest of symbols so vast that we cannot see it for the trees” (72). Pruning and upkeep of
the garden, in this sense, become increasingly cumbersome and difficult activities, and
the fecundity that once graced the landscape now seems overwhelming. The extended
metaphor of gardening bears signs of being an activity that is cursed rather than full of
promise, for functioning around Ashbery’s knowledge-filled trees is a daunting
experience:

Such are the passwords that tired Aeneas
wept for outside the potting shed,
when, face pressed into the pane, he sought Linnaeus’
sage advice. And the farm turned over a new leaf instead.

We can’t resist; we’re all thumbs, it seems,
when it comes to grasping mantras.
The oxen are waiting for us downstream; academe’s
no place for botanizing; the tantra’s
closed to us.
(CYHB, 141)

Rhyming Aeneas with Linnaeus, Ashbery humorously and anachronistically juxtaposes
the mythic Trojan hero with the 18th century Swedish naturalist. Shut out of the potting
shed, on the outside looking in, Aeneas is driven to tears, wanting advice from the
botanist who invented the “descriptive system designed to classify all the plants on earth,
known and unknown, according to the characteristics of their reproductive parts” (Pratt,
24). In light of Linnaeus’ classifying system, the suggestive line “And the farm turned
over a new leaf instead” implies, at once, an alternative sexual orientation and, in a more
ominous tone, a sense of its denial, the formal concealment of its activity and desire. Gardening, here, is also aligned with religion again, as the normally positive appellation of “green thumb” is rendered into its opposite, into a designation of clumsiness where faith is concerned: “we’re all thumbs...when it comes to grasping mantras.” Just as a lack of manual dexterity bars access to the tree of knowledge, the tantra, a late “Hindu or Buddhist scripture dealing with techniques and rituals, including meditative and sexual practices,” is equally “closed to us.” Gardening is still a governing trope, though its implications are no longer tied to prosperity and to humanist notions of perfectibility; instead, gardening is suggestive of matters that are sexually or spiritually unavailable.

As the stanza above suggests, perhaps “academe’s no place for botanizing,” but Ashbery’s poetry itself nevertheless remains such a site for a botany and a literary lesson, as scrutiny of the poetic flora can become a telling exercise, particularly in light of modernist works. In contrast to the sections in “Tuesday Evening” proclaiming the fecundity of the landscape, several passages chart the poverty of plantlife:

The sensuous green mounds
I’d been anticipating are nowhere to be seen. Instead, a dull urban waste reveals itself, vistas of broken masonry... (CYHB, 154)

Echoes of “The Wasteland” reverberate across this landscape; although, instead of April “stirring / Dull roots with spring rain,” a certain dullness belongs to the urban waste itself and the “vistas of broken masonry” recall the “heap of broken images” that Eliot himself borrowed from Ezekiel vi, 4, 6: “and your images shall be broken” (Eliot, 51). In the famous notes at the end of “The Wasteland,” Eliot advised the reader of “certain
references to vegetation ceremonies,” rituals that were patterned upon regeneration of soil and plantlife following periods of barrenness. Here, thwarted anticipations of growth, the absence of “sensuous green mounds,” underscore the vain attempts at humanist perfectibility. Surrounded by evidence of futility in perfecting one’s garden, a gardener might behold the landscape with dismay, an alienated despair that seems consonant with seminal tenets of the modernist condition.

Such allusions to “The Wasteland” are consistent with an observation that Perl has made of Ashbery’s poems, namely that “a startling number become explicit if modern humanism can be thought a subject” (15). Modernism is also in evidence elsewhere in “Tuesday Evening,” as other lines document the devastation of plantlife, in a manner reminiscent of Wallace Stevens: “Oh, and then / a great hurricane came and took away the leaves. The bulge / in the calceolaria bush was gone” (CYHB, 155). Harold Bloom has discussed the importance of leaves as a trope for Stevens, claiming that “the Homeric-Miltonic figuration of the leaves is a form that was to haunt Stevens to the very end” (54). According to Bloom, leaves signify mortality in Stevens’ poetry; Bloom argues, for instance, that in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens “locates his poem or fiction of the leaves ‘in the area between is and was.’ The trope is exactly Shelley’s ‘my dead thoughts...like withered leaves.’” For Ashbery’s “Tuesday Evening”, however, notes of a lethargy—so affectless as to be comical (“Oh, and then”)—shade the speaker’s remarks about the leaves and “the calceolaria bush.” This indifference provides a striking contrast to the (albeit subdued) lament of the speaker in another of Stevens’ poems, “The Snow Man,” who hears “misery in the sound of the
wind, / in the sound of the few leaves, / which is the sound of the land / full of the same
wind / That is blowing in the same bare place” (54). One wonders if the lines of
Ashbery’s poem parody Steven’s snow man—who “must have a mind of winter”—
particularly as a seeming caricature enters the landscape of “Tuesday Evening”: “He must
choose the stars or the snow, / a naked stick figure” (CYHB, 146). Ashbery’s stick figure
is a hyperbolic reduction of the already thin (“nothing himself”) snow man of Steven’s
poem, signaling less an encounter with the sublime, or with mortality, than with the
ludicrous or the cartoonish absurd. One might argue, as Bloom does, that the reduction in
“The Snow Man” is the necessary precondition for humankind’s self-divination: “the self
must be made divine because the human being stands now empty in the wreck of all past
times. But, before this god-making takes place in the self, the last mythologies must be
stripped from the human. This appears to be the purpose of the reduction in The Snow
Man” (63). Such “god making” seems unavailable, however, for Ashbery’s poem: while
the naked stick figure, like the snow man, approximates this state of being “stripped,” it
nevertheless wavers before the divining moment. Ashbery will provide, in contrast to
Stevens’ “god-making,” an anti-apotheosis; the stuck stick figure must choose between
“the stars or the snow,” between heaven and the void.

Neither “stars [nor] the snow” seem satisfactory alternatives, however, and such
deliberations evince a circumspect attitude towards faith in God and religion. Ashbery’s
anti-apotheosis, incarnated by an emaciated stick figure pondering the stars, signals a
certain poverty of religion. In this manner, faith is rendered as a futile and blank staring
at the sky and the extended spiritual metaphor of gardening is likewise dismissed:
Better to live in a fictive aura, I say, than
putter in one’s garden forever, praying to NASA (CYHB, 145)

"Praying to NASA" is a pointless enterprise, equivalent to a futile "putter[ing] in the
garden," and such a reliance on the concept of heaven leads to wayward results; anyone
inclined to search the skies will fall prey to "the celestial pantomime / [which] engulfs
them slowly" (CYHB, 147). That the heavens are a pantomime introduces a spurious
quality to faith and also raises the specter of imitation or parody which haunts spiritual
matters in "Tuesday Evening:

Reread Shakespeare; a fakir here
and there won’t sabotage the kernel of parody
(CYHB, 145)

A "fakir," in its various definitions, means a Muslim beggar, a Hindu ascetic, or an
impostor. While it seems impossible to discern from the context which definition of
"fakir" is intended, it seems just as difficult to infer whether the un-sabotaged parody that
is referred to is a parody of Shakespeare's style or a parody that Shakespeare has himself
written. In the midst of this uncertainty, determining the exact meaning of "fakir" is
perhaps less important than what the word cumulatively suggests. One can't choose
readily between the alternative meanings; one sees, instead, how the polysemy of "fakir"
yokes together religion with fraudulent imitation. Such a pairing of connotations is not
isolated to this single occurrence in Ashbery's poetry, as imitation itself is also raised to a
sacred level:

to salute the final duet
between our ego and the endlessly branching itineraries

of our semblables, a robed celebrant is already lifting the cruet

of salve to anoint the whole syndrome. And it’s their proper

perspective that finally gets clamped onto things and us, including

our attitudes, hopes, half-baked ambitions and psychoses: everything an
eavesdropper

already knows about us, along with the clothes we wear and the brooding

interiors we inhabit.

(CYHB, 153)

Yet again a hall of mirrors best describes Ashbery’s notion of subjectivity, caught as it is in the “endlessly branching itineraries of our semblables.” In contrast to Walter Benjamin’s notion of mechanical reproduction and its sapping of artistic aura, repetition could be said here to reinforce a religious aura, considering that “the whole syndrome” will be anointed by a mysterious “robed celebrant” (“The Work of Art, 217-251”). The ominous suggestion that “their perspective” will be “clamped onto things,” however, quickly voids any lasting or reassuring spiritual sentiment. Exactly who “they” are remains alarmingly unknown, which is all the more menacing because it is the inverse of what “they” know about us. Consequently, any intimation of an omniscient god is retracted and replaced with a more seamy figuration of omniscience: “everything an eavesdropper / already knows about us, along with the clothes that we wear and the brooding interiors we inhabit.”
Despite the skepticism involved in depicting religion and god as fraught with imitation, a question arises if a concept of god is so easily dismissed, and with it, the remnants of faith. Who, also, is the "robed celebrant," the being, who, priest-like, anoints the "whole syndrome?" One solution to the latter question is time, or the present, an entity previously described in the poem as being "robed": "One paddles in the backwash of the present, / laughing at its doodles, unpinning its robes, smoothing its ribbons" (CYHB, 150). Perhaps flirting with the present, playing with "its" clothes, not taking it too seriously, is Ashbery's notion of faith: a certain playfulness that amounts to an awareness of time, a simultaneous awareness of the present and time's progression into the future. In "The System," Ashbery talks of this simultaneity, of a single moment of happiness and its duration, as if it corresponds to something like faith:

And here we may say that even if the uniqueness were meant to last only the duration of its unique instant, which I don't for a moment believe, but let us assume so for the sake of argument—even if this were the case, its aura would still be meant to linger on in our days, informing us of and gently prodding us toward the right path. (77)

Ashbery in this passage is discussing his concept of "latent happiness," which Shoptaw describes as "the sensation of time: the feeling that past happiness (whether real or dreamt) permeates the present and is about to return (like Eliot's midwinter spring) in the near future" (153). For Shoptaw, Ashbery's notion of latent happiness draws upon a "radical profession of faith," a conclusion readily arrived at due to the spiritual connotations of the words "aura" and "the right path" in the section above and the recurrent religious discourse of "The System" overall. In "Tuesday Evening," faith is expressed by way of the weather, in terms of sunshine and its duration:
Only then will the sunshine
each weekday lodges in its quiver expand till the vernal
equinox rounds it off, then subtracts a little more each day,
though always leaving a little, even in hyperboreal climes where eternal
ice floes fringe the latitudes. On a beautiful day in May
you might forget this, but there it is, always creeping up on you.
(CYHB, 149-50)

The daily persistence of sunshine, despite its incremental subtraction, follows the model
set up in “The System” in which the aura of happiness “would still be meant to linger on
in our days.” Faith, it seems for Ashbery, obeys a logic of simultaneous accretion and
reduction and manifests itself in that space between the flash of an “unique instant” and
its duration or lingering into the future.

The reconciling of opposites, or the ebb and flow dynamic to faith, resembles
what Eliot, in After Strange Gods, calls a “first-rate blasphemy,” those equivocations
between faith and irreverence:

One can conceive of blasphemy as doing moral harm to feeble or perverse
souls; at the same time one must recognize that the modern environment
is so unfavorable to faith that it produces fewer and fewer individuals
being capable of being injured by blasphemy...Where blasphemy might
once have been a sign of spiritual corruption, it might now be taken as a
symptom that the soul is still alive. (52-3)

More succinctly, Eliot will state: “It is only the irreligious who are shocked by
blasphemy. Blasphemy is a sign of Faith” (Selected Essays, 45). Eliot’s blasphemy is
not unlike the double movement of Ashbery’s concept of faith and his apostate poetic
mode, and indeed, a description made by Jeffrey Perl about Eliot seems to hold equally true for Ashbery:

To hold two opposing positions simultaneously is a rare accomplishment, and a unique accomplishment...By searching out Eliot’s ‘stand’ on a variety of ‘issues,’ we have, inexorably, missed his ‘point.’ Whatever else altered as years passed, Eliot attended with alarming consistency to the dissolution of either/or choices. His particular concern was with the one theoretical distinction—identity vs. difference—which it seemed to him underwrote most binary thinking. **Opposed to, different from, similar to, identical with,** comprised too rudimentary a vocabulary and syntax for the expression of ambivalent and subtle relationships. (101)

These subtleties that Perl speaks of are not lost on Ashbery, though Ashbery’s ambivalence may sometimes find expression in his poetry in not so subtle language.

Ashbery ends “Tuesday Evening” with a blunt rejoinder to the end of Stevens’ “The Snowman,” who beholds in the landscape: “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Instead of the sublime emptiness that the snow man experiences, Ashbery arrives at a seemingly more prosaic encounter with nothingness:

> We all tagged along, and in the end there was nothing to see—nothing and a lot. A lot in terms of contour, texture, world. That sort of thing. The real fun and its clothing. (CYHB, 156)

Ashbery’s “naked stick figure” will find what it doesn’t have, “the real fun and its clothing,” and faith, in Ashbery’s narrowly defined terms, will be found in the space between “nothing and a lot.” The plainness of Ashbery’s speech seems appropriate here, characteristic of what other critics may consider Ashbery’s coolness or detachment but perhaps better read as an appropriate contemporary engagement with the sublime. John Koethe has argued that Ashbery’s passivity is wrongly understood as “the central
emotional tendency of his work” when such affectlessness rather indicates a belated, futile relation to the sublime. “Traditionally the self seeks to reestablish its claims in the face of the magnitude of the natural, objective world through the Kantian experience of the sublime. And it is mark of our [contemporary] distance from...[the traditional sublime] that the possibility of such a resolution is altogether absent from Ashbery’s poetry” (88). Though Koethe’s remarks largely ring true, an argument can be made that the very plainness of Ashbery’s language here inversely suggests instead the presence of the sublime; its vastness calmly understated as “a lot.” A certain asceticism marks Ashbery’s relation to the sublime, an unadorned, even banal quality, that masks a lurking sublime intensity.

To commit apostasy is to renounce one’s religious faith, yet as a poetic mode adopted by Ashbery, apostasy, with its many equivocations, amounts to an affirmation, however qualified, of faith. It is appropriate, then, that faith is itself fluid in Ashbery’s poetry, embodied as it is in a dynamic of accretion and reduction. Many of Ashbery’s apostasies are directed at the moderns and at New Critical tenets, and an inference to draw from such renunciations would be that the past is being jettisoned. Yet one can also discern a lingering of the past not merely because of the legacy of some of Eliot’s ideas in Ashbery’s works, but also because the controlling metaphor of gardening, and with it The Garden of Eden, in “Tuesday Evening” evinces a search for lost origins. Similar to his concept of faith, apostasy for Ashbery will ebb and flow, and his recantations will likely fold upon themselves; their heresies will likely implode.
What I am suggesting here is not far off from what Eliot argues about poetic tradition in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “What happens when a work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which precede it. The existing monuments from an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new...work of art among them.” My argument is that a similar “simultaneous” modification exists within the body of an individual poet’s work. *Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot.* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.,) 1932, 3-11.

Douglas Crase refers to the Mannerist qualities in Ashbery’s work as a “submerg[ing of] the subject in an elegance that knows just where and how far it is breaking the rules.” See “The Prophetic Ashbery,” John Ashbery, ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House, 1985) 137.

Costello writes, “If knowledge is a landscape, ideas are trees (a landscape consisting of many). The logical sequence of roots, trunk, branch, leaf and the teleological processes of growth are, as Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out, the model of Western thought” (72).
Chapter 2

A Poem Is a Small (or Large) Malfunctioning Machine Made of Words

Two bald statements: There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and:
A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's
nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in
any other machine, that is redundant.
—William Carlos Williams, Introduction to The Wedge

In both their cases, [Arthur Rimbaud and Lewis Carroll] would use
nonsense words occasionally, and this forced them to nonsense, which
was great.
But we don't exactly have to be forced to nonsense today. It's just a
way of doing things. It's a way of discipline.
—Jack Spicer, Vancouver Lecture 1, 1965

If one takes his work as testimony, Jack Spicer believes that poetry, like baseball,
obey a certain patterned and ordered logic. The logic of baseball is a result of codified
rules and quantifiable possibilities: “Where the batter either strikes out or he doesn’t. You either / catch it or you don’t. You had called for an inside fast ball. / The runners on base either advance or they don’t” (“Four Poems for the St. Louis Sporting News”, CB, 256). Informed not only by the rules of baseball but also by those of language (Spicer was a linguist by profession), Spicer’s poems often reflect his interest in linguistics and appear as rule-based as baseball, as in “Morphemics”:

The loss of innocence, Andy  
The morpheme—cence is regular as to Rule IIc, IIa and IIb  
[ence] and [sense] being more regular. The [inn-]  
With its germinated consonant  
Is not the inn in which the Christ Child was born.  
(CB, 235)

As Peter Gizzi has argued, however, baseball offers Spicer a model, not only for rule-governed activity but also for chance events and thus furnishes a model for poetic composition: “the repetitive narrative enactment of baseball and its division into serial units—innings and series—make it a model of both isolated events (poems) and larger arrangements (books). The arrangement of Spicer’s serial poems is also dictated, so the unpredictability of content…correspond[s] to the formal elements of a ball game” (193).

What Spicer admired about baseball is its “utter logic,” but his poetry bears evidence of his being similarly enamored of baseball’s contingencies, the bounce of the ball being comparable to the caprice of his poetic composition and word play (“Sporting Life,” CB, 222). Like baseball, language, poetic or otherwise, operates as much by adhering to norms as by breaking from them and is equally rife with moments not governed by rules. Spicer seems at home with these eruptions within the grammatical and linguistic order; he even counterbalances his pronouncements about logic with words and phrases that
signal and underscore variations from linguistic standards. For Spicer, what follows logic—what comes after it—is unruly:

Utter logic
Where a man is faced with a high curve.
No telling what happened in a game. Except one didn’t strike out. One feels they fielded it badly at second base.
Oceans of wildflowers. Utter logic of the form and color.
(CB, 222)

There is “no telling” what happens in a game, or in Spicer’s poetry, because its happenings so often are happenstance, accidental. Instead of the predictability and order guaranteed by rules, one feels, within Spicer’s poems, as if thrown a “curve,” amidst “exceptions” and wildness, like a random occurrence of “oceans of wildflowers” within a natural setting. Consequently, “Utter logic,” whether as a poetic or baseball ideal, readily dissipates, diffusing into mere “form and color,” abstractions that indicate that the lines of logical thinking, in many of Spicer’s poems, tend to be more fuzzy than clear.

I am less interested in Spicer’s fascination with baseball and its “utter logic” than in his own utterances of, and about, logic and in his invocations of linguistic norms. These are the moments at which his poems seemingly aspire to the rules of grammar and of language—only to break the rules and deface them. To return to Spicer’s poem “Morphemics,” which is, as its title suggests, a poem as much about language as anything else, the logic of the poem foregrounds the slippage of language and of morphemes, the shifting and sliding of its smallest of units. The poem urges us to think about loss (“The loss of innocence, Andy”); though, in this poem, it is words, not things, which fall apart, and loss is felt in the actual permutations of words.
Innocuous
comes from the same root. The trees
Of some dark forest where we wander amazed at the selves of:
ourselves. Stumbling. Roots
Stay. You cannot lose your innocence, Andy
Nor could Alice. Nor could anyone
Given the right woods.
(CB, 235)

Playing on the idea of language trees or sentence diagrams, Spicer reveals a hidden dimension to language, in which smaller words stem from larger ones, like so many leaves or branches issuing from a great tree of language, where, for example, “selves” separates from “ourselves.” Spicer suggests that we should look for and see the poetry within “the trees,” for there is a precariousness to the simple lapse between “words” and “woods,” and finding our way in language, and in poetry, is only impeded by not being attuned to its special nature or by not being “given the right wo[r]ds.”

That the small slip of a letter could produce a new word suggests a fuzziness to language, and Spicer’s poetry is populated by such a forest of slippages. One might consider Spicer’s poetry to be ruled by accidental permutations, a literature by default, or, to put it another way, it is a poetry defined by fuzziness, the failure of “utter logic” to be sheer, absolute and the failure of language to be always wholly unequivocal. In *Fifteen False Propositions Against God*, a serial poem dating eight years prior to “Morphemics,” Spicer connects again, within the fuzzy forest of his poetics, “words” with “woods,” in an allusion to William Carlos Williams’ “The Last Words of My English Grandmother”:

Fuzzy heads of fuzzy people
Like the trees Williams saw. Drop
The words drop
Like leaves from a fuzzy tree
(CB, 89)
Williams' poem was an ode to his grandmother's compromised, yet insightful faculties, her quick turnings between dementia and creativity: "By now her mind was clear-- / Oh you think you're smart / you young people...What are those fuzzy looking things out there? Trees?" (464-5). As with "The Last Words of My English Grandmother," Spicer's poem also hinges upon creativity, but it is the uncertainty of poem-making that instead becomes paramount: "I can't remember tomorrow / What I said tonight / (To describe the real world. / Even in a poem / one forgets the real world.)" (CB, 89). Evincing chance emanations from the "[f]uzzy heads of fuzzy people," both poems are testimonies to the failure of the mind and language to coincide perfectly and without difficulty, and both provide a gloss on the "fallen" state of Spicer's poetic language, in which "words drop / [l]ike leaves from a fuzzy tree."

Fuzziness, indeed, is key to understanding Spicer's poetics and his conceptions of language, and it can be argued that there is a fuzzy logic at work in Spicer's poetry. While the last few books of Spicer's poetry coincide with the inauguration of fuzzy logic (the origin of which dates back to 1965, the same year Language was published and the same year of his death), it is highly unlikely that Spicer would be familiar with this innovative theory of mathematics, yet his work uncannily predicts certain precepts of fuzzy logic. It may be imprecise, therefore, to apply the term of fuzzy logic to his poetics, but the concept of fuzzy logic nevertheless does open up a way to think about his work, particularly as the motifs of computers and machines become increasingly incorporated into his poetry. Beyond mere references to computers within his poetry, Spicer's knowledge of language and its workings is intricately informed by the
technology of computers; as Robin Blaser has succinctly put it, “he had a poet’s entrance to science, professional in the computer methods of studying language.” (“The Practice of the Outside,” CB, 314). The impulse to read mathematics and mathematical reasoning into Spicer’s poetry is, if not fully warranted by uncanny similarities to fuzzy logic alone, at least suggested by Spicer’s own interest in math. Indeed, Blaser notes “One of his last projects, of which there is no record, involved a fascination with Pythagorean numbers” (CB, 315). One witnesses Spicer’s affinity for mathematical and logical reasoning most directly in the omnipresence of conditional phrases, the prevalence of numbers (as in “A Fake Book about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud”), the formulaic nature of his serial poems, and the predilection within his poems for logical propositions and truth-arguments. Perhaps more than anything else, however, Spicer’s appreciation of the ambiguities of language tie him closely to the spirit of Fuzzy logic:

In its original and technological sense, fuzzy logic is a mathematical method, based on the theory of fuzzy sets, that helps machines to “reason” more like humans. Fuzzy logic is usually implemented by an algorithm, or program, for a conventional digital computer and, as such it is exact. But the method has also a subjective component—hence, essentially empirical and inexact—for it presupposes the translation in numerical form of the vagueness of human language and knowledge. (Sangalli, 16)

The ultimate aim of fuzzy logic is to create machines that think like humans and that are adept at translating imprecise language or conditions into working results or actions. For the purposes of this paper, I will not argue that Spicer’s poetry exactly coincides with the principles of Fuzzy Logic, but I will assert that Spicer advances his own form of fuzzy poetics which explores the ambiguity of human language and aspires not to the smooth efficiency of machines but to a nonsensical language marked by syntax errors and
intentionally flawed logic.¹ Incoherence and nonsense, moreover, are in fact closer to Spicer’s actual ideals for poetry: that it should be composed of “an infinitely small vocabulary” and that it should approximate an incomprehensible and unspeakable “God language.” Spicer, in this manner, bases his approach to, and understanding of, language on negation and can be aligned with apophatic thought and negative theology. Negation, according to Spicer, thus yields an appropriate language for poetry; once language is properly reduced or made incoherent, it is fit, in Spicer’s mind, for the purpose of poetry.

Spicer’s fuzzy poetics begin with a knowledge of the equivocal nature of language, and Spicer recurrently displays an awareness of the murkiness of abstract words and concepts. Indeed, words like “love” and “beauty” are explicitly noted by Spicer for their fuzziness:

I do not remember the whole poem well but I know that beauty Will always become fuzzy And love fuzzy And the fact of death itself fuzzy
("Fifteen False Propositions About God," CB, 91)

Spicer’s poetry and lectures often betray a suspicion about the pliability and manipulability of language, and a suspicion of how easily words are transformed or substituted for other words. In his first Vancouver lecture, Spicer makes his famous comment about the amorphousness of language, as he compares it with furniture:

“Language is part of the furniture of the room. Language isn’t anything of itself...And it seems to me that, essentially, you arrange. When you get a beautiful thing which uses the words and shadows of the words—the fact that ‘silly’ once meant ‘blessed’ instead of ‘silly’ as it now does, something like that—you ought to be very distrustful...” (Gizzi, 9).
Spicer here suggests that one ought to be distrustful because language uses or controls the poet more readily than the poet controls language, though this is not necessarily something to be lamented. Spicer in fact delights in such a program of distrust of language, as his ironic comments about truth, which seem paradoxically sincere and dishonest at once, illustrate. “Dear Sir: I should like to make sure that everything that I said about you in my poetry was true, that you really existed, / That everything that I said was true” (“Fifteen False Propositions About God,” CB, 88). Spicer’s dubious relationship language extends to efforts on his part to transcend literalism in his poems; Spicer hopes “That what the poems said had meaning / Apart from what the poems said” (CB, 88). Above all, Spicer displays a wariness towards words, despite the poet’s dependence upon them: “Words are what stick to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else. They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to” (“After Lorca,” CB, 25).

The fuzziness of language can consequently lead to poetic impulses that strive for machine-like precision, for the elimination of ambiguity, and Spicer initially appears drawn to the idea that a mechanistic entity is a driving force behind poetic composition:

At the base of the throat is a little machine
Which makes us able to say anything
(“Friday the 13th,” CB, 46)

Spicer’s remarks here transform the body of the poet into a machine and recall William Carlos Williams’ conceit that a “poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” in which “there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.” Like Williams’ ideal poetic machine, Spicer will draw on a model of mechanistic efficiency in an attempt
to advance a poetic language deriving from precision. Towards this end, Spicer's poetry will at times resemble computer language, a basic language based on simple equations and binary principles. Comparable to the moments, quoted earlier, which reduced baseball to utter logic ("Where the batter either strikes out or he doesn't. You either catch it or you don't.") Spicer's texts often exhibit a tendency for an either/or binary logic: "You either pick up the music or you don't"; "Either / the fire casts a shadow or it doesn't." (CB, 264, 253) The abruptness of these lines are suggestive of Spicer's legendary combativeness, his love for arguments, yet it is important to note that the phrases also reveal an underlying syntactic structure akin to a toggle switch, with two possibilities: either "yes" or "no," or, in electronics terminology, "open" or "closed."

The reductiveness of these binary propositions and syntactic structures yields a particular definitiveness to language, resulting in a theory of language whose very appeal is its stability—its ability to produce a readily quantifiable result or meaning. Though Spicer entertains these aspirations towards accuracy and refinement, a sense of catastrophe or impossibility nevertheless lurk behind his endeavors.

Unlike Williams' "machine made of words," Spicer's poetic machine is more prone to mechanical breakdown than optimum efficiency, resulting in a poetics of "mechanical" or linguistic failure. Locating in Spicer's poetry a binary logic at work that expresses a kinship with a computer, Blaser has asserted that Spicer's machine language is marked by obscurity rather than intelligibility and clarity:

[Spicer's Language] is a computer language, a language speaking by itself. Such a language may seem obscure because it is double—that is, holds a duplicity—it is a language bound to the breadth and distance of what it perceives. On the one hand, a belief is met by a disbelief, on the other, a visibility, a piece of ourselves,
by an invisibility. (CB, 290)

Discussing Spicer’s poetry as “a computer language, a language speaking by itself,”
Blaser conjures images of a poetic machine run amok, an artificial intelligence repeatedly
generating and doubling itself, spinning out of control. Such fits of poetic energy cannot
be sustained indefinitely, and the stress of continual composition eventually leads to a
breakdown. Within a different context, in his comparisons of the struggles of the poet
with the asceticism of monks, Spicer’s term for this type of collapse was acedia, which
was “a form of spiritual torpor. It is the ‘deadly sin’ of sloth and was primarily an
ailment of monks who worked as scribes, repeatedly copying sacred texts (Gizzi, 180).”
Elsewhere, Spicer describes the loss of energy or the incapacity for work as a form of
entropy, a mechanical failure available to both machines and poets, though each in their
own way:

The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that radios
don’t develop scar-tissue. The tubes burn out, or with a
transistor, which most souls are, the battery or diagram
burns out replaceable or not replaceable
(“Sporting Life,” CB, 218)

For the monk, the machine, and the poet, Spicer envisions exhaustion—broken circuits,
odies, and wills, a consequence of too much data interfering with poetic communication
and composition. Beyond a mere loss of energy or mechanical failure, then, entropy also
plagues poetic composition in a semiotic sense, as information overload. In an analogy
Spicer develops between radios and spiritual mediums, both experience a jamming of
their “frequencies,” as too many contradictory messages result in a saturation of signals:
“Spirit mediums get five or six different programs playing almost simultaneously, and
there are some which are definitely against the spirit medium...[If you take the first days of radio, I imagine the difference [in the abundance of] transmission of signals and static and so forth would have been enormous" (Gizzi, 17). Due this tendency for information overload, Spicer will have to abandon his goal for an utter logic within poetic composition, drowned out as it is by a sea of different voices, an entropic abyss of conflicting messages.

Indeed, more often than not in Spicer's work utter logic yields to nonsense, to utterances that are absurd, as if the aspirations towards a precise, mechanical poetic language proved untenable and the poet consciously abandoned such hopes for precision. In place of the cold certainties of “utter logic,” a different logic will assert itself, one which Ron Silliman has deemed Spicer’s anti-logic. Reading a line from “Thing Language” in which Spicer makes the ocean a metaphor for poetry (“No one listens to poetry. The ocean / Does not mean to be listened to. A drop / Or crash of water. It means / Nothing.”) Silliman remarks:

Foregrounded as the first word of a line, “Or” is a conjunction expressing disjunction, the syntactic and semantic functions standing in absolute opposition....The internal oppositionality of the word “Or” itself reduplicates the very anti-logic which underlies virtually every other device of the poem. Meaning in this work is negative not simply in the sense of being differential: meaning is negation. There shall be no diction without contradiction. (156)

The anti-logic of which Silliman speaks is a comprehensive negation, evinced by a thorough undoing of basic propositions in Spicer’s texts. Elsewhere, Silliman will label this anti-logic, this pervasive negation, Spicer’s overdetermination, arguing that “overdetermination is the essential Spicerian effect. No logos, it implies, can exist which
does not contain contradiction, negation or some effacing otherness within itself” (149). Thus, the binary logic of Spicer’s machine language that seemed to ensure precise articulations collapses onto itself, where the word “or” doesn’t yield, as Silliman demonstrates, two simple, possible answers but rather an excess of meaning, due to syntactic and semantic overload.

Spicer’s anti-logic, his overdetermination of meaning, possesses a peculiar theological dimension, one in which belief in God is construed or configured as nonsense. The very structure of Spicer’s propositions about God indeed leads to a poetry of the absurd—and of absurd phrasings—where God’s existence is rendered dubious. Conditional phrases, in particular, play a large role in the excess of meaning of Spicer’s anti-logic and of his doubting of God: Spicer assembles conditional phrases that lead nowhere so that theology becomes, by default, a tautology. Normally, conditional phrases are intended to fix or ground meaning, but in Spicer’s poetics, these phrases instead result in a dissolution of significance. Like computer language run amok, these conditional sentences give way to nonsensical articulations:

Get those words out of your mouth and into your heart. If there isn’t A God don’t believe in Him. “Credo Quia absurdum”

(“Four Poems for Ramparts,” CB, 253)

Phrased in conditional terms, the question of believing in God has the appearance of a logical assertion, one that can be readily ascertained. Unlike conventional conditional phrases, however, Spicer imbues this conditional with more uncertainty than certainty. Consequently, this proposition hinges upon a precarious starting point; the initial “if” hesitantly implies a reservation about God’s existence (because it is unknowable), even
as the phrase simultaneously asserts its given term, that “there isn’t a God.” The conditional phrase therefore seems at odds with itself and further approaches a nonsensical tautology: the second half of the conditional, the imperative “don’t believe in Him” is futile and unnecessary if the prior, granted term, which cancels God’s existence, is accepted as true. Presumably, for Spicer, the rhetorical import of the poetic line is that too often people believe in what doesn’t exist, an idea reinforced by the subsequent phrase in Latin: “I believe because it is absurd.” What must be emphasized is that absurdity itself is couched in language and grammar commonly used to solidify meaning and to advance logical assertions. Like the binary logic of either/or propositions which collapsed upon themselves, Spicer employs conditional phrases unconventionally to subvert meaning and certainty.

Other conditional phrases likewise lead to absurd and nonsense ramblings. Spicer, in this way, continues his assault on meaning by implying an underlying futility to logical propositions. In a section from “Thing Language,” three successive conditionals illustrate the descent into meaninglessness: “If you open the door does it let in the light? / Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz; buzz, buzz”; “If the day appears like a yellow raft… / Is it really on top of a yellow giraffe / Meow, meow, meow, meow. Meow, meow”; “If the door caves in as the darkness slides… / What can tell the light of whatever’s inside? / Knocking and knocking; knock, knock, knock.” (CB, 218) Like children’s nursery rhymes or riddles, these lines hint at ciphers to be decoded, but any hopes of unraveling the mysteries are quickly thwarted. Each of these conditionals is phrased as a question, yet none of them are readily answerable. The queries instead are demonstrative of what
John Hollander calls "poetic questions," whose "impulse to prove something ha[s] given literal way to another mode of figuration" (19). Such questions derive their power from what they choose not to assert, for "it is the suppression of the overt answer which gives the questions their poignancy" (Hollander, 21). With the answers to these intricate, conditional questions suppressed, their significance must be located elsewhere, namely in the very nature and form that the questions and answers take: each answer is onomatopoetic, a transcription and emphasis of pure sound. Two of the questions, moreover, deal with obscurity, of letting light in, while the third appears wildly nonsensical. Consequently, one concludes, that obscurity and sound themselves seem to be the point, the message conveyed, as each conditional points to its own incomprehensibility. Though the answers may be nonsensical, there is pattern to the responses: the buzzes, the meows and the knocks are all separated by punctuation (four "buzzes," then two; four "meows," then two; two "knockings," then three "knocks"), suggestive of some covert design. In this manner, the answers cling to some remnant of syntax, of form, even as they project randomness, and it is as if Spicer is asserting that syntax matters for its own sake. Spicer strongly insists, during such moments in his poems, upon the primacy of syntax and pattern over and above the actual meaning of words and sentences themselves.

With syntax so foregrounded, Spicer invents and advances a poetry of syntax error, an aesthetics of bad grammar and incomprehensibility. Reading Spicer's poetry as self-referential, as disclosing the "thingness" of language, its status as black marks on a page, Jerome McGann argues that Spicer's work is a poetry "pointing to itself." "The
composition of Spicer’s poem is thus an explanation, partly of itself, but more generally of writing as such; and this (textual) condition of the writing comes finally as a kind of celebratory event. What it celebrates is itself, its decencies of language” (115-7). While I agree with McGann’s assertion about the highly self-conscious nature of Spicer’s work, I would add to his assessment that Spicer’s poems also celebrate the indecencies of language, the moments when language is less than eloquent or proper. There is almost a truculent glee that Spicer derives from the breakdown of language and of syntax, as if awkward language possessed a virtue of its own. Utterances from his poetry often possess a thickness, one difficult to enunciate freely and smoothly: “(My morning had a telegraph key at here)” (“Intermission II,” CB, 231). Such thickness of phrasing is indicative of what McGann calls Spicer’s “immersion in the material resistance of language” (114). Spicer’s accentuation of this resistance of language demands strict concentration, jerking the reader into special awareness. Spicer even offers within his poem specific directions for the reader:

Sable arrested a fine comb.
It is not for the ears. Hearing
Merely prevents progress. Take a step back and view the sentence

(1945 sable arrested fine comb a)
(“Love Poems”, number 6, CB, 227)

Spicer’s special instructions for the reader intimates that the pleasure to be taken from the lines is not “for the ears” but is, instead, of a visual nature. Taking “a step back” and viewing the sentence shifts the effects of the poem from melodious, flowing sounds to a
matter of strained syntax and relations between words. By switching the reader's attention from sound to sight, Spicer ensures that the effects of awkwardness and syntactic error are paramount, for the unorthodox phrasing is more readily apprehended if it is first seen rather than heard. Spicer further reinforces the emphasis on syntax by slightly rearranging the words in a subsequent parenthetical line “(1945 sable arrested fine comb a).” Though the repetition of the line seemingly gestures at an additional disclosure of meaning, the full comprehensibility remains tantalizingly out of reach. Spicer’s lesson is, in the words of Ron Silliman, one in which “[w]hat stands revealed is the degree to which the process of the production and consumption of language is built upon sleight-of-hand, the card tricks of syntax” where “the rational is seen as the irrational” (159).

For Spicer, the impulse to disrupt syntax is a powerful one, and errant language becomes a key element of his poetry. Blaser characterizes this irregular tendency of Spicer’s poetics as an “ungrammatical disturbance,” one which preoccupied his life: “[Spicer] was always sitting in the midst of poetry. An ungrammatical disturbance…In The Place on Grant Street, 1957, he set up a ‘blabbermouth night’. It was, when I heard it, a kind of wonderful, funny jabberwocky that was spoken, full of a language alive to the tongue of anyone ready to stand up there” (CB, 315). In Spicer’s world and poetry, syntax errors, then, are meaningful, yet nevertheless nonsensical, utterances, charged with power. Such compelling force lies behind Spicer’s “ungrammatical disturbances” that he would even reportedly say on his death bed “my vocabulary did this to me.” Beyond his individual existence, Spicer assumes the effects of language to be
monumental, capable of ending civilizations, suggesting, albeit hyperbolically, that Greek sentence structure "was the real Trojan Horse.../ The Trojans / Having no idea of true or false syntax and having no recorded language / Never knew what hit them"

("Transformations II," CB, 233).

Elsewhere, Spicer calls this infelicitous language, with the power to bring both individuals and civilizations to an end, "Broken words." These "Broken words" well express, and explain, Spicer's poetic language and his frequent usage of unintelligible words; something perhaps best epitomized by the limited vocabulary and language of Jay Hemdon, the infant son of Spicer's friend, that Spicer incorporates into his poems: "And several also made a big whhuup. / Fire works / Broken words / But never repairing / Jay, justly suspicious, / Afterwards / Said, "Fffish" ("Apollo Sends Seven Nursery Rhymes to James Alexander, VII" CB,100). The "broken words" that are "never repairing" are, for Spicer, the substance of, and a key to, poetry, capable of explicating or deciphering it and its mystery:

Or, explaining the poem to myself, Jay Hemdon has only three words in his language
Door: which means that he is to throw something which will make a sound like a door banging.
Fffish: which means that there is something that somebody showed him
And Car: which is an object seen at a great distance
He will learn words as we did
I tell you, Jay, clams baked in honey
Would never taste as strange.
(CB, 98)

As Spicer says about his "translations" of Lorca's poems, "A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary," and Jay Hemdon's word cache, in all its brevity, comprises
a perfect poem (CB, 25). A simple vocabulary ensures strong poems; by contrast, to know more words, to “learn words as we did,” will cause the tongue to stick, tasting as strange as clams baked in honey and obliterating Jay’s private language or a poem’s perfection. For Spicer, poetry will aspire to “broken words,” for a poetry based on syntax error is best, especially when it is “So close to nonsense that the mind shuttles / So full of nonsense” (CB, 99). Spicer, indeed, raises nonsense to a level of poetic excellence, intimating, in his translations of Lorca, that an accidental and tenuous relation to meaning constitutes excellent poetry: “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...could be translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in” (CB, 25).

Spicer’s descent into nonsensical language, into the poetics of syntax errors and limited vocabularies, returns us to questions of theology in his work, for the unintelligible utterances of the poet are instances of what Spicer considers to be “God-language.” According to Spicer’s theories of poetic composition, the poet, entering into a trance, rambles incoherently, and, speaking nonsense, attempts to transcribe something like a religious ecstasy in his poems. Spicer calls this poetic state the practice of dictation, in which the poem is transmitted to the poet from the “outside,” via transmissions which Spicer variously attributed as coming from Martians, deceased poets, and radio signals. Dictation requires of the poet a tremendous amount of concentration and patience and a certain degree of self-effacement. As Spicer remarks, the poet is a vehicle or medium so “[t]hat essentially you are something which is being transmitted into, and the more you
clear your mind away from yourself, and the more also you do some censoring [the better]...because there will be all sorts of things...which will foul up the poem” (Gizzi, 7). The patience necessary for this poetic state rises to the level of a religious experience, demanding something like religious devotion. As Gizzi suggests, “Spicer describes dictation as a spiritual exercise with no assurances that what’s coming through is an absolute good and with a constant wrestling to keep oneself out of the way...” (Gizzi, 177). In “The Book of the Death of Arthur,” Spicer discusses dictation as a noble vocation, replacing the figure of the poet with that of the prince, in his retelling of the Grail legend. The prince, caught in his own version of a spiritual trance, is able to hear God-language, or the language of poetry, only after he filters his own interfering thoughts, “this horseshit, this uncomfortable music,” from his head:

A noise in the head of the prince. Something in God-language.
In spite of all this horseshit, this uncomfortable music.
(CB, 213)

Intriguingly, Spicer here associates “God-language” with unintelligibility, with “a noise in the head of the prince.” In this sense, it can be discerned that the omnipresent syntax errors in Spicer’s poetry are intended as a form of noise, as an instance of “God-language.” Like Spicer’s paragon of poetic translation, in which a perfect poem is written by a poet who doesn’t speak the original language, “God-language” exists as noise, as something which the poet does not comprehend. To approximate God’s language, then, Spicer reduplicates this incomprehensible and noisy, “other” language by transcribing nonsensical and incoherent “broken” words into his poetry. Noise, indeed, is the essence of poetry for Spicer; poets, according to him, must *intuit* the language of
poetry, rather than *hear* it, for hearing only inhibits poetic communication and composition. Invoking the myth of the tower of Babel, Spicer reveals that poetry is something inherently noisy and holy, God-like, and *not* for the poet’s ears:

"Tell me," I asked
"Where
Is Babylon?"
"No," she bellowed
"Babylon is a few baked bricks
With some symbols on them.
You could not hear them."

("Good Friday: For Lack Of An Orchestra," CB, 72)

Spicer’s understanding of poetry, quoted earlier, is that “[i]t is not for the ears. Hearing / Merely prevents progress” (CB, 227). In the context of this injunction against hearing, one can more properly understand his famous statement “No one listens to poetry.” Only within this renewed context, Spicer surely means not the futility of poetry and its lack of an audience, but its opacity, its noisiness: that it “is not for the ears.” To be intuited and not heard, to speak incomprehensibly, fulfills, for Spicer, his own Godlike command, as he continuously urges himself onward: “Poet be like God” ("Imaginary Elegies, I-VI," CB, 333).

Though Spicer may have been intrigued by the concept of “utter logic” within baseball, he is even more enraptured by the dissolution of logic, the failure of order to establish itself. Spicer’s concept of God is likewise marked more by imperfection than by perfection, and in deciding what appeals to him aesthetically, Spicer chooses noise over pattern, dissonance over harmony, as poetic ideals. In this manner, Spicer overturns William Carlos Williams’ conceit that the poem is a machine without redundant parts. A stark contrast to an efficient engine, Spicer’s poetic machinery readily malfunctions,
encumbered by nonsensical language and syntax errors. Spicer’s concept of the poet, no
model of efficiency either, is one of discordant excess: “The poet / Takes too many
messages...The Poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a / counterpunching radio”
(“Sporting Life,” CB, 218). Spicer’s take on poetry, then, is as extreme as Williams’ is
minimalist; the redundant, the unnecessary is purposely and happily its own mode of
being for Spicer, as his discussion of obscenity evinces:

In these poems obscene (in word and concept) is not used, as is common,
for the sake of intensity, but rather as kind of rhythm as the tip-tap of the
branches throughout the dream of Finnegans Wake...It is precisely because
the obscenity is unnecessary that I use it, as I could have used any disturbance,
as I could have used anything...which is regular and beside the point.
(Jack Spicer, preface to Admonitions, CB, 55)

As redundancies and unnecessary disturbances ascend in Spicer’s poetry, the clean lines
of “utter logic” will give way to a fuzzier logic and a poetry built upon nonsensical
language, replete with “broken” words and syntactic miscues. In a manner that would no
doubt please Spicer, one could readily ask of his poems: What are those fuzzy-looking
things?
The alphabet remains a still-underutilized technology.

—Charles Bernstein, *My Way*

I hear something of this comedic poetics...in the figure of Susan Howe’s Hope Atherton, a chaplinesque sojourner in the wilderness of signs, and in the sublime wackiness of her typographic inversions.

—Charles Bernstein, *My Way*

The comments that Charles Bernstein makes about Susan Howe’s poetry gives insight into how one may apprehend Bernstein’s own poems, for one finds in Bernstein’s poetry the same “wilderness of signs” that he ascribes to Howe and a comparable “sublime wackiness” of typography as well. Bernstein’s use of landscape tropes in his description of Howe’s work, furthermore, recalls the forests of Jack Spicer’s fuzzy trees and fuzzy poetics, and just as computer technology informs the terrain of Spicer’s poems, the advances, and problems, made possible by computers similarly influence the production of Bernstein’s poetry. Particularly in the group of poems assembled in Bernstein’s book *Dark City*, syntax errors and computer language—including large strings of typos and computer messages of malfunction—abruptly surface, occurring sporadically as unavoidable intrusions into the texts. Though Bernstein’s use of syntax
errors has a kinship with the computer-influenced poetry of Jack Spicer, Bernstein diverges considerably from Spicer's model. While Spicer mobilized his syntactic miscues towards a rendering of an unintelligible poetry, an ideal poetry of limited—and even nonsensical—vocabulary, Bernstein, I will argue, employs syntax errors towards a subversive poetic and political practice. This practice targets both "official verse culture" (Bernstein's term for mainstream poetry) and Ezra Pound's notion of "the plain sense of the word," all the while addressing the questions that most preoccupy Bernstein: the relationship between language and cultural and political reality. As Bernstein states it, "poetry can interrogate how language constitutes, rather than simply reflects, social meaning and values" (MW, 4). Towards this end, Bernstein will include in his poetry computer terminology and syntax errors as a way of disrupting the perception that language provides a transparent reflection of social reality. Bernstein will also develop, in contrast to Pound's espousal of direct and plainspoken mode of speech, a language marked instead by an obstinate indirectness and by phrasing that appears both ambiguous and arbitrary. There is, moreover, a religious dimension to Bernstein's rejection of the plain word: Bernstein's indirection both draws on irony as a way of negating Pound's poetic and anti-Semitic pronouncements and later prepares for Bernstein's playful use of religious discourse and metaphors.

Bernstein's inclusion of a specialized, technological language explicitly foregrounds the work, and the machinery, involved in the making of poems: syntax errors and messages of memory failure exist in the poems as unmistakable markers of computer technology. Bernstein seems interested in this technology not merely because computers
can aid the composition of poems but because the occurrence of computer errors and
malfunctions can represent the act of poetic composition itself: the chance accidents that
happen to language during the act of writing and the whimsical manipulation of language
by poets. This affinity for accidents forms the foundation of an entire poetry for
Bernstein: “Poetics must necessarily involve error. Error in the sense of wandering,
errantry, but also error in the sense of mistake, misperception, incorrectness,
contradiction. Error as projection...As slips, slides” (153-54, AP). Forging his aesthetics
of errors from a hybrid fusion of business discourse, colloquial speech, literary theory
and his own mordant, yet slapstick, sense of humor, Bernstein creates a negative
language, one that stutters and stumbles through its speech amid eruptions of computer
failure. Bernstein’s poetic language, in fact, refuses to speak “correctly” and proceeds
via error, negating any conception of “the plain sense of the word” and signaling a shift
in poetic terrain, where one encounters the sublime not in natural landscapes but in poetic
fields dominated by syntax errors.

Providing a context for the syntax errors are certain sections of *Dark City* which
read like an instruction manual, and Bernstein even assembles in the collage poems of
this book actual excerpts from computer manuals. The passages taken from computer
manuals often have an especially stilted quality about them, as in the section used in the
poem “Emotions of Normal People”:

```plaintext
With high expectations, you plug
Into your board and power up. The
Odds are shifted heavily in your
Favor as your logic simulator comes
```
On-screen. If there's a problem
You see exactly where it's located
& can probe either inside or
Outside with a schematic editor.
English-like commands make
Communication easy.

(DC, 85)

Placed within a poetic text, however, these lines of informational language begin to lose some of their dryness and gain some humor. Bernstein’s acerbic wit easily latches on to a statement like “English-like commands,” underscoring the saccharine, artificial quality of such a catchphrase and readily casting doubt on its claim to “make / Communication easy.” Whatever sarcasm is present, though, is tempered somewhat by hearing the buoyancy and encouragement that manuals must necessarily generate, yet this same buoyant energy, freed from its original association, seems to disperse in all directions, no longer tied to a specific corporate, or product-oriented, aim. Instead, lurking behind these sentences from instruction manuals, Bernstein’s poems suggest, is an entire other world, one ripe with humor, imaginativeness, and even lyricism. It only requires a shift in perspective to witness the alternative, and herein lies Bernstein’s take on language, that it is mutable, that language is ever changing and that it should never be monolithic. From this perspective of language, context and form can, among other elements, modify the rigid rationality of even the most prosaic manual. With its comparable layering of the dull and the exotic, John Ashbery’s poem “The Instruction Manual” provides a correlative to what lies behind Bernstein’s transformation of found material taken from
handbooks:

As I sit looking out of a window of the building
I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,
And envy them—they are so far away from me!
Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule.
And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning out of the window a little,
Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!
(Some Trees, 14)

Bernstein's quotation of manuals recurrently testify to the substance of Ashbery's poem, that there are whole lives of individuals behind instruction manuals and that behind the driest of words lie secret imaginations and fantasies. Both Ashbery and Bernstein hence comment on the libidinous undercurrents of business discourse, as they write poems that pointedly ask: of what other, exotic places do writers of instruction manuals dream and what other languages do they dream of speaking? Bernstein's quotation of instruction manuals, then, reveals language's double life, its internal splitting into multiple meanings. This fissuring of language on a smaller scale leads to what Bernstein tries to achieve as a whole, the fusion of several discourses within a single poem. "What you get is a mix of different types of language pieced together as in a mosaic—very 'poetic' diction next to something that sounds overheard, intimate address next to philosophical imperatives, plus a mix of would-be proverbs, slogans, jingles, nursery rhymes, songs" (MW, 25-6).

Bernstein's collage poems do indeed assemble a compendium of different
discourses in a dizzying array of multiple voices, speech patterns and specialized languages. The resultant effect sounds much like catching snippets of different television or radio programs while the channels are being surfed or the tuner is being adjusted. Over the space of twenty or so lines, for example, the reader encounters a stock analyst’s memo, a sentence equally at home in an economics journal or a psychological report, the computer specifications from an anti-bugging device, and a personal history:

The market’s internal technical condition is far from Overbought, which leaves Room to rally back to October’s 2500.

I think our big problem is inhibiting post-normalization.

Success demands getting more from available space, taking Efficiency to extremes, paying less for improved performance Moreover, 2440 sacrifices none of 2430A’s performance… We’ve made debugging easier with differential nonlinearity…

I’d like you to meet Jane Franham. Jane was my mother-in-law until I married Jim.

(“Emotions of Normal People,” DC, 88-9)

The shifts between discourses are abrupt and without clear connection; one surmises that any attempt to synthesize or process this information on a computer would seemingly crash it. Indeed, Bernstein includes in “The Lives of the Toll Takers,” a computer message of memory failure, indicating the likelihood of such a malfunction: “Then where
is my place? / Fatal Error F27: Disk directory full” (DC, 15). Simulating a computer failure, the message “Fatal Error F27: Disk directory full” similarly reads as an “error” for the reader of Bernstein’s poem as well: the phrase sticks out as an inassimilable line, one that resists, in Bernstein’s terms, a solely “absorptive” reading of the poem.5 Towards this end, Bernstein aims for a definite impermeability; he constructs poems that avoid a seamless appearance in order to thwart the possibility of a reader being drawn too far into the text. “I am interested in the dynamic of both being absorbed in the textual action and at the same time remaining aware of the structures producing the effect…Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt is a crucial model for breaking the empathic connection between reader and poem.” Despite its function as an impermeable phrase, the message of computer failure also answers the question (“Then where is my place?”) that it follows, proclaiming the difficulty of finding one’s place amidst the information overload of contemporary society and, certainly, amidst the varied discourses of many of Bernstein’s poems.

So many discourses compete for space that a number of Bernstein’s poems reach a cacophonous level, with even a few sections sounding like so much noise. Illustrative of an aesthetics of noise, illegible strings of characters and numbers replace readable messages of computer breakdown:

“Daddy, what did you
do to stop the war?”
We maybe all one body but we’re sure as hell not one mind.

(Tell her I had to change my plans.)

(DC, 27)

Though such typographical marks are available with the technology of the typewriter, there is an unambiguous suggestion that the incomprehensible lines stem from a computer, and further, that the strand of letters and numbers are exactly what a computer would spit out on its screen after it crashed. Like the message of a “fatal disk error,” the syntax error is a self-referential moment in the poem, another indication that the poem and the world can’t fully synthesize or organize all of the information that it contains. Bernstein’s tactics here coincide with Fredric Jameson’s contention that the global world system is not “unknowable but merely that it [is] unrepresentable” (53). For Bernstein, however, it is imperative that the poet must intervene against suggestions of unrepresentability: “But we can act, and we are not trapped in the postmodern condition if we are willing to differentiate between works of art that suggest new ways of conceiving of our present world and those that seek rather to debunk any possibilities for meaning” (AP, 93). Rather than complacently submitting to the overwhelming nature of current social order, Bernstein considers it the poet’s obligation to question the current political climate. In this sense, it is important to note that the syntax error is itself framed by lines with political overtones. The initial phrase “Daddy, what did you / do to stop the war?” appears an anachronistic holdover from the Vietnam War protest movement, and
there is a tendency to read the lines with Bernstein’s characteristic acerbity. The voice of these lines belongs, of course, to a child, but quoted as it is by Bernstein, the phrase loses its original naïve import. Instead, the line provokes a more current question, one more pertinent for Bernstein’s political purposes: prompting a consideration of where the “war” is being fought now. This reading holds true especially if the line is considered in the context of the subsequent one, “(Tell her I had to / change my plans.)” The “war” is being fought, for Bernstein, in and through language, and the “change [of] plans” indicates such a shift in battlegrounds. The line “We maybe all one body but we’re sure as hell not one mind” also attests to a combative political environment, intimating that the national or global body politic may occupy similar space, but does not come to a consensus. Discord, though, is something that Bernstein values: “What interests me is a poetry and a poetics that do not edit out so much as edit in: that include multiple conflicting perspectives and types of languages and styles in the same poetic work” (AP, 2). In Bernstein’s poetry, dissonance becomes a transcription of political dissidence, with so many voices vying for space.

Bernstein thus imbues the syntax errors in his poetry with political meaning; regardless of the nonsensical nature of a particular line or phrase, each inarticulate utterance advances his views of a necessary intermingling of poetry and politics. Whether the abruptness of a syntax error interrupts the reading process or an illegible string of characters and numbers signify dissonance, and hence a useful amount of political discord, language is both a vehicle and site of contestation for Bernstein. The capacity for language to achieve these political ends is contingent upon a certain
pliability or what Bernstein calls "the radical morphogenerativeness of language and its related instability and ambiguity, its unsettling and polydictory logics" (MW, 189).

Appropriating a term from Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Bernstein fleshes out what he means by this idea of the radical volatility of language and its polydictory logic:

The hidden language of the Jews: self-reproach, laden with ambivalence, Not this or this either, seeing five sides to every issue, the old pilpul song and dance, obfuscation clowning as ingratiating, whose only motivation is never offend, criticize only with a discountable barb. (DC, 23-24)

In Bernstein’s opinion, Gilman’s book “centers on the delusion that the Jews can never be ‘native’ or even competent speakers of their own language; for the anti-Semite rejects the possibility that Jews can assimilate into the language, and culture, that they can make it as their own” (MW, 189). According to the theory, then, the “true language” is the one which is hidden from Jews and from which Jews are barred. Contra the anti-Semite, Bernstein conceives of this position of non-nativeness or non-assimilation favorably, asserting the positive attributes of such a relationship to language: including indulgence in equivocation, “ambivalence,” mutability, “obfuscation,” and multiple viewpoints.6 Elsewhere Bernstein writes that this separation from one’s own language is integral to poetic composition, “I think of Edmond Jabes’s comment that a Jew, in his remarkable sense that Jewishness is the condition of writing, is always in exile, even in her own works” (153, AP). Bob Perelman has described this passage regarding the hidden language of the Jews from “Lives of the Toll Takers” as approaching “an aesthetic self-portrait,” noting the switches between “self-portraiture [and] self-mockery,” in Bernstein’s comments and reading the phrase “clowning as ingratiating” as “a sharp self-criticism of one basic mode of Bernstein’s rhetoric” (MP, 95). This self-referential
quality that Perelman notes gives Bernstein's appropriation of the term “the Hidden language of the Jews” its power, for comedic self-referentiality is what Bernstein strives for. Ideally, for Bernstein, a poet's comic attitude “deploy[s] hypocrisy in order to shatter the formal autonomy of the poem and its surface detachment; the sincere and the comic [existing] as [an] interfused figure, not either/or but both and. Our sincerity is always comic, always questionable, always open to mocking” (AP, 227).

Ultimately, Bernstein will argue that what a phenomenon like the “hidden language of the Jews” yields is “an aesthetic practice that repudiates the moral discourse of a right to speak as a racial or national patrimony, and also [repudiates that there fundamentally exists] a right way to speak” (italics added). Bernstein’s invocation of the hidden language of the Jews, moreover, raises the significant issue of who claims to speak the true language, for it is against such a claim that Bernstein establishes his poetics. Bernstein’s target is canonical: as he upholds the derided language of the Jews, he simultaneously indicts Ezra Pound’s conceit that there is “a right way to speak”:

Genocide is made of words like these, Pound laughing (with Nietzsche’s gay laughter) all the way to the canon’s bank spewing forth about the concrete value of gold, “the plain sense of the word.”

(“The Lives of the Toll Takers,” DC, 24)

In a purposely “sacrilegious” answer, Bernstein blasphemes Pound’s canonical pronouncements, both literary and anti-Semitic, all the while proclaiming his own poetics of polysemy and his belief in the necessary mutability language “there is no plain sense of the word, / nothing is straightforward” (DC, 24). Bernstein even counters Pound’s gold standard economics with a poetic plan of his own, borrowing as he does from business school discourse: “Business training turned / out to be just what I most needed.
Most importantly, I learned that for a business to be successful, it needs to be different, to stand out from the competition. In poetry, this differentiation is best achieved through the kind of form we present” (DC, 25). Bernstein adopts the language of commerce, stating his poetic impulses clearly:

Our new service orientation

not only changing the way we wrote poems but also diversifying into new poetry services (DC, 22)

Beyond merely aping the discourse of business and capitalism, Bernstein adapts his poetry after a business model, though Bernstein certainly focuses his efforts to ensure that poetry remains a viable and changing aesthetic form. Business strategies for innovation thus offer Bernstein models for making poetry that is constantly mutating and seeking differentiation, and Bernstein constructs in his poetry a corresponding machine language to match these commercially advanced strategies. If “differentiation is best achieved through the kind of form we present,” Bernstein will look to computers to help create this new form. In the manifesto-like essay, “State of the Art” Bernstein proclaims the virtues of formal innovation: “By form, I mean ways of putting things together, or stripping them apart, I mean ways of accounting for what weighs upon any one of us, or that poetry tosses up into an imaginary air like so many swans flying out of a magician’s depthless black hat…” (AP, 1). Yet again, computer terminology supplies a correlative for Bernstein’s poetics, as
witnessed by this section Bernstein excerpts from a manual:

Floating-point primitives upwardly
Compatible with target-embedded
Resident assemblers & wet-wet
Compilers & the fact that you can
Configure it yourself means you
Get exactly what you want

Moreover, all systems components
Are easy to install & reconfigure
Since interconnections use a
Floating interface.)

(\textit{DC}, 86)

One imagines that Bernstein, as he searched for texts to appropriate into his poem, was
drawn to phrases like “floating interface” and “floating point primitives,” phrases which
coincide with his desire to “play with the peculiarly visual space of the page” (\textit{MW}, 27).
Considering the radical bent of Bernstein’s politics, his zeal for all things running counter
to mainstream ideals, it may seem counterintuitive that Bernstein would mimic corporate
speech. A phrase like “the fact that you can / Configure it yourself means you / Get
exactly what you want,” however, registers with a great deal of irony under Bernstein’s
hands and mocks the breezy ideal of convenience inherent to consumer marketing.
Despite the considerable irony, the phrase also summarizes exactly what Bernstein would
hope for in terms of reading one of his own poems, as evinced by Bernstein’s call for an
ideal reader: “Let readers coproduce meanings and let meanings coproduce readers!”
(\textit{MW}, 187). This interactive relationship between reader and text, and reader and poet,
where one can re-configure aspects of a poem to “get exactly what you want” can be
gleaned from Bernstein’s take on the Internet:

The most radical characteristic of the internet as a medium is its interconnectivity. At every point receivers are also transmitters. It is a medium defined by exchange rather than delivery; the medium is interactive and dialogic rather than unidirectional or monologic. (MW, 75)

Incorporating the innovative aspects the internet into his own work, Bernstein endeavors to make his poems “user-friendly,” not in terms of their ease of comprehension but in terms of the need for the reader’s completion of the poems’ meaning. Bernstein’s configuration of words and fractions of words on the page often strive for a hanging, incomplete quality, arguably as an invitation to the reader to conclude the work of the poem.

Bernstein’s machine-inspired aesthetics of “Floating-point primitives” and “floating interfaces,” result in lines and words that hover seemingly in suspended animation, an effect which periodically lends his poetry an ethereal quality and poses interesting questions about the mutability of language. Though these floating characteristics have been in evidence in many of the quotes already used in this chapter, one witnesses this aspect of floating on nearly any page from Dark City, including this passage from “The Lives of the Toll Takers”:

I had
it but
I misp
laced
it somewhere
in the
Adapting Lacan’s concept of floating signifiers, Katherine Hayles has called technologically-informed attributes of literary works like these “flickering signifiers,” which are “characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions.” Hayles explains that flickering signifiers “signal an important shift in the plate tectonics of language” whereby “the signifier can no longer be understood as a single marker, for example, an ink mark on a page” (31). Instead, a flickering signifier has an arbitrary relationship to its signified, with each signifier changeable by a single command:

If I am producing ink marks by manipulating movable type, changing the font requires changing each line of type. If I am producing flickering signifiers on a video screen, changing the font is as easy as giving the system a single command (31).
Though Bernstein’s spacing owes much to predecessors like Pound, Charles Olson, and e. e. cummings, the computer glitches or syntax errors elsewhere in the poem mark his lines from *Dark City* as generated by a computer. More significantly, Bernstein’s periodic, and often humorous, inclusion of alternate phrases and words, where, for example, the parenthetical “my crime” substitutes for “my mind,” exemplifies Hayles’ condition of arbitrariness, under which changes are made possible “at a single command” and “the signifier is opened to a rich internal play of difference” (Hayles, 31). Such substitutions also satisfy Bernstein’s own requirements of “differentiation” and “diversification” within poetry and his goal of engaging “the radical morphogenerativeness of language.” Moreover, these flickering signifiers in Bernstein’s poems possess, and are possessed by, a ghostly quality, as the substitutable phrases and words hover near their counterparts. Indeed, a spiritual energy haunts the language that Bernstein uses, in which “g / houlis / hness is its own reward”:

> triple play

> on all designated (ghost) phonemes

(you mean morphemes)

[don’t tell me what I mean!]

*(DC, 26 and 13)*

An homage to Jack Spicer and his predilections for baseball, ghosts, arguments and linguistics, a voice from beyond aggressively interrupts Bernstein’s poem, enacting exactly what the passage seems to be about: the play of language and its amenability to metamorphosis. Here, flickering signifiers exist as the ethereal traces of computer
circuitry, the rapid fire electrical pulses that course through machines of high-technology, signalling language's swift capacity for change.

However drawn Bernstein may be to images of phantom signifiers and haunted phrases, of ghosts harboring within machines, he also seeks to ground his language and poetry more materially. Everywhere present in Bernstein's poems are bodily tropes and references, seemingly introduced as complements to the more ghostly or spiritual motifs. Digestive allusions recur frequently, suggesting a connection between language and the body—what Bernstein calls "the / b/ odily gumption of language" (DC, 26). If, as Hayles argues, "flesh...continues to be erased in contemporary discussions of cybernetic subjects" and in computer-generated models of human intelligence, Bernstein turns to the body with a vengeance, despite how heavily his poetics is informed by computers (Hayles, 5). Unabashedly acting upon the belief that "no approach / is to gross if it gets a laugh," Bernstein delves into intestinal and scatological humor to make his point about the necessarily material nature of language (DC, 14). Graphic and often crass in his explicitness, Bernstein enacts that of which he speaks, with so many words falling on the page like refuse matter:

always rec

onstricting (libidinal

flow just another

word for loose

st
Bernstein, in this manner, continuously seeks to assert the corporeal qualities of language: the "thickness of words ensures that whatever of their physicality is erased or engulfed, in the process of semantic projection, a residue tenaciously in-heres that will not be sublimated away...The tenacity of writing's thickness, like the body's flesh, is ineradicable..." (AP, 86-87). Commonly vulgar in his suggestiveness, Bernstein will not let the body disappear from his poetry: "A depository of suppositories (give it to me where it counts: one and two and one two thr eee" (DC, 18).

While Bernstein's bathroom humor certainly is meant to be understood on its own terms, the scatological impulse here also achieves another level of meaning: like Bernstein's repudiation of Pound's poetics of "straight talk," Bernstein includes the scatological as a refutation of Pound's equation of impurity and Jewishness. As Perelman has argued, Pound was plagued, by fears of poetic contamination. "No matter how Pound might try to purify, isolate, and sacralize his words by using Chinese ideograms,...by drawing pictures and employing musical notation...language itself was, as a social medium, impure, Jewish (that is social and historical) (TWG, 46). Pound's correlation between filth and Jews (along with democracy) is made paramount in a passage from Canto 91, quoted by Perelman:

Democracies electing their sewage
Till there is no clear thought about holiness
A dung flow from 1913
Bernstein appropriates Pound’s yoking together of Jews and filth and turns it inside out, rendering Pound’s “dung flow” less a defect and more of an asset. Bernstein’s rough language functions as, in his words, “roughage,” something he thinks is good for a reader’s “system”:

Anemic

Poetry—or roughage?—for the health-continent society? But

why prize distraction over direction, song over solemnity?

(“How I Painted Certain of My Pictures,” DC, 64)

Bernstein’s rhetorical questions are meant to castigate mainstream poetry’s cleanliness, its sing-song tendencies and its desire to distract from the political nature of art and poetry. Scatological humor consequently serves a purpose for Bernstein not unlike the one Bakhtin argues for Rabelais. Bakhtin isolates in Rabelais’ novels an entire logic based on several “series” dealing with the body, including the “food series” and “defecation series,” in which grotesque images of eating and defecating parody social conventions and provide analogs for complex social meanings. In a commentary as fitting for Bernstein as it is for Rabelais, Bakhtin describes Rabelais’ aesthetic intentions as “[aiming to destroy] the established hierarchy of values, at bringing down the high and raising the low, at destroying...the habitual picture of the world (DI, 177). Drawing from folkloric traditions, Bakhtin further demonstrates that bawdy and vulgar language has ennobling implications. “[Rabelais] wants to return both a language and a meaning to the
body, return it to the idealized quality it had in ancient times, and simultaneously return a reality, a materiality, to language and to meaning.” (DI, 171). Bernstein likewise has aspirations of emphasizing in his poems “the bodily rootedness of language, which is impossible not to hear but difficult to recognize and to articulate.” (AP, 184) The scatological strain in Bernstein's work thus endeavors, through coarse but purposeful language, to make visible what may be hard to recognize: “The sense of stain, as in soiling, . . . is crucial; but also, as in biochemistry, the stain allow[s] you to identify otherwise invisible substances” (MW, 31).

In contrast to Spicer’s syntax errors and nonsensical speech which were intended to approximate God’s language, Bernstein’s more secular poetics of error are based on a negation of Pound’s canon of “straight talk” and the pieties of “official verse culture.” Indeed, for Bernstein, there may be no God (“The only Higher Authority I know about is my landlord and I already paid her this month”) and no spiritual coda other than irreverent humor or comic blasphemy (MW, 187). Bernstein instead prefers to be an iconoclast, content to read “the riot act in the middle of / sacral pacts” (DC, 67). While there may not be a God for Bernstein to believe in, his poetics of negation do leave him with faith-based questions, as he asks, with perhaps unexpected solemnity: “Then what can I believe in” (DC, 26)? Bernstein is, of course, not searching for a religious experience, but it is striking that his language so often returns to spiritual discourse. Like his question regarding belief, Bernstein asks of the cybernetic machine that confronts him:

but who is writing,
what is writing? Nor

all your regret change one word of it; yet so long as the blood

flows in your veins there is ink

left in the bottle. FAKE A

WHISTLE TO WRITE (spiritus sancti)
(DC, 19-20)

As this passage suggests, there is something that animates Bernstein’s writing: whether it is, in the sequence of the lines, an artificial intelligence, the potent energy of the body or a holy spirit. Each of these, however, is only a name for what Bernstein truly believes in, the dynamic ability of poetry to effect political change. Bernstein doesn’t naively believe that poetry can change governments, but he does consider poetry part of public, and therefore political, discourse:

In its counterconventional investigations, poetry engages public language at its roots, in that it tests the limits of conventionality while forging alternate conventions (which, however, need not seek to replace other conventions in quest of becoming the new standard). Moreover, the contained scale of such poetic engagements allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of public space: of polis.

(AP, 219)

In contrast to Plato’s Republic where poets were banned and a philosopher-king ruled, Bernstein would populate his polis with poet-comedians, each of whom could act politically on a minor scale: “As a poet, you affect the public sphere with each reader, with the fact of the poem... The political power of poetry is not measured in numbers; it instructs us to count differently” (AP, 226). In his interactive polis, Bernstein thus is
searching out “No ‘mere’ readers only / writers who read, actors who inter / act” (DC, 20). Whatever inclinations Bernstein demonstrates towards religious discourse, he ultimately reconfigures the spiritual in plainer and more pragmatic terms, terms which are based on actions: “Holy is as holy does” (DC, 143). As Bernstein states at the outset of “The Lives of the Toll Takers,” his efforts tend towards the utilitarian: “Difference or / difference: it’s / the distinction between hauling junk and / removing rubbish, while / I, needless not to say, take / out the garbage / (pragmatism)” (DC, 9).

Bernstein’s poetics of error, whether generated by computers or his own whimsical, and often biting, sense of humor, always arrive at a similar juncture or goal: to advance a theory of political change through poetic innovation and to expand the reciprocal relationship between the reader and poet. Reading Bernstein’s poems, however, one often feels like the butt of Bernstein’s humor, even though Bernstein intends to be inclusive, as if he wants the reader to be part of an inside joke. Likewise, the rampant computer terminology and messages in Bernstein’s poetry can inspire in the reader feelings of alienation, the way one might feel in the presence of someone who comparatively understands more about the way computers work. Despite all of his talk about community poetics, Bernstein may come across, then, as an anti-hero in his many efforts to “derail trains of thoughts” (MW, 25). Bernstein, however, claims for himself no superhero standing, “the point [being] not to right wrong / but to come to terms / with error.” Abiding by his poetic intentions of error and errantry, Bernstein is willing to get as lost as we are: “It’s not only the wrong road but the wrong destination; still if there’s no way back, there’s company in the loss” (DC, 108-9). As Bernstein would remind us,
“It’s not an operating system it’s an operating environment” and getting lost in the wilderness of signs, and in the sublime forest of syntax errors, is half the fun (DC, 28).

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1 A precedent for the use of the term “fuzzy logic” to talk about poetry comes from Jackson Mac Low, who discussed with me, during a drive from Tucson to Phoenix, his term “fuzzy series” that he had used in the past. Mac Low’s application of the term also operated on an alteration of the principles of the mathematical concept. Conversation with the author, 1/22/01.

2 Spicer is, throughout his work, obsessed with what “explains poetry”: “Going to hell so many times tears it / Which explains poetry” (“Love Poems, 3” CB, 226).

3 Bernstein’s zeal to include substitute phrases for specific lines in his poems seems indicative of an anti-imagistic tendencies. Bernstein’s love of puns, and his transformation of proverbs counters a Poundian imperative of the mot juste: “I am enthralled by the possibility of word substitution---using an unexpected where a particular word is expected. For this to work with the torquing I want, it is necessary,
ironically perhaps, to find the exact right word; that word is, from another angle, exactly the wrong word, ‘le mot mauvais’ ” (MW, 70).

4 See my discussion below in Chapter Three that provides an extended analysis of Frank Kermode’s claim that negative theology can function as a form of irony.


6 See also Bernstein’s comments in “What’s Art Got to Do With It?” where he extends the term of hidden language to include intellectuals who denounce the influx of critical theory and cultural studies within the University: “The intellectual imagines that there is a hidden language of truth from which he or she is barred by reliance on the slippery and partial slopes of metaphorical language. In this fantasy, intellectuals, like Jews are exiled from a deeper connection to the world and so denounce their own language.” (MW, 37)
Chapter 3

Caliban's Profit:
Cursing and Obscenity in the Work of Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite

There are occasions when blasphemy must be seen as one privilege of the excluded Caliban.
—George Lamming, *Pleasures of Exile*

Rarely does a critic of Derek Walcott's poetry fail to mention his excellent command of the English language. John Figueroa, for example, describes Walcott as an "aficionado of English English," (Figueroa, 158) and Seamus Heaney, Walcott's close friend, and fellow poet, remarks upon the "sumptuous authority" of Walcott's use of language (Heaney, 304). Many commentators, pointing to the facility with which Walcott invokes West Indian dialects and vocabularies, also commend Walcott's adept incorporation of Creole into his poetry. Though less inclined to indulge in a formal English diction than Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite is likewise a poet whose remarkable expertise with language has garnered critical attention. Brathwaite draws deftly on Caribbean patois and dub speech, lending his poetry a rich, multi-lingual complexity, an
effect which leads June D. Bobb to proclaim that his “voice is always the voice of the community” (111). Noting Brathwaite’s mix of American jazz, Southern gospel and African drumbeat rhythms, Patricia Ismond further asserts that Brathwaite’s poetry artfully “sound[s] the varying strains that will create a language, a way of thinking and feeling peculiar to [black] experience” (222-3).

While the critical attention to both poets’ considerable verbal skills is no doubt apposite, such an emphasis on eloquence or verbal virtuosity obscures those moments when Walcott and Brathwaite purposely adopt language that is coarser to the ears. Indeed, by focusing their praise either on eloquently phrased Standard English or the verbal nuances and inventiveness of Caribbean vernacular, critics of Walcott and Brathwaite have tended to overlook swearing and obscenity as integral aspects of their poetry. Though the impulse may be to dismiss the profanity as an aberration of poetic language, these obscenities should not be taken as anomalies; on the contrary, Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s use of profane language indicates a larger negative poetics at work. Both poets employ a specific strategy of negation, in which swearing plays a part, to denigrate “proper” speech, rewrite canonical texts, subvert Colonial discourse, and engage in blasphemy. In their development of obscenity as a form of negation, Brathwaite and Walcott, I argue, adhere to the principles of negative theology, according to which one arrives at a transcendent truth, a knowledge of God, only through a comprehensive ritual of negation. Negative theology, or the apophatic tradition, asserts that God’s essence is unknowable and ineffable, beyond immediate human comprehension and articulation. Consequently, negative theology dictates that it is at best
possible to define God by what he is not (defined as not human or beyond human apprehension) and as an entity that exceeds the capacity of language. According to the principles of negative theology, then, the problem resides in the inadequacy of language, so that it is language itself that must be negated and transcended in order to gain spiritual insight. Such an impulse towards negation arises in Brathwaite's and Walcott's work particularly when the poets broach religious subjects, yet the act of negation in their poetry extends beyond spiritual concerns. Walcott and Brathwaite endeavor equally to refine their poetry and to gain spiritual insight, and it is by plumbing the negating capacities of obscenity that each poet is able to formulate his aesthetic ideals. Both Walcott and Brathwaite explore how coarse language can be more vital than traditional poetic diction, and each poet examines as well how obscenity can inform an innovative poetics that, paradoxically, is linguistically and spiritually redemptive.

It is important to note that negative theology is a critical practice which is fundamentally concerned with language. As J.P. Williams asserts, “apophasis is a second-order discourse, concerning not the divine subject, but the discourse which addresses the divine: it generates no statements about God, but statements about theological language” (4). I will argue in this chapter that Brathwaite and Walcott are analogously interested in obscenity for its metalinguistic and critical possibilities. Indeed, swearing for Brathwaite and Walcott operates similarly as a second-order discourse whereby obscenity negates or profanes “regular” or more standard language, including formal English, colonial discourse, and the verbiage of traditional literary works. Charting the etymology of apophasis, the Greek word for denial, Frank Kermode
underscores a similar doubleness to negative theology and the apophatic tradition, revealing an intrinsic irony to its negation of theological language. Quoting from the Oxford English Dictionary, Kermode writes that “[apophasis] was a technical term in rhetoric for ‘a kind of Irony, whereby we deny that we say or doe that which we especially doe’” (73). The negative poetics of both poets follow this ironic, double movement so that each poet affirms his belief in his poetic ideals even after initial acts of repudiation. For Walcott, it is only after negating colonial discourse as well as established models of historiography that he is able to affirm his belief in the power of his poetry and his own poetic will. Brathwaite, for his part, approaches the sacred only after a rigorous blaspheming of western and African gods and a rewriting of characters from the western literary canon. In both poets’ work, obscenity is always an indication of ironic and equivocal speech which seeks to affirm a belief, whether religious or artistic, after a process of negation. Taken as a whole, including both negative and positive utterances of belief, then, Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s poetry enact the mode of irony Kermode ascribed to negative theology, where one simultaneously denies the very things one says or does.

Brathwaite’s and Walcott’s negative poetics draw inspiration from Shakespeare’s Caliban whose cursing entails an inherent act of negation. Subsequent to Caliban’s famous lament in The Tempest about being taught his captors’ language, he makes a boastful claim about improving upon that newfound knowledge: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse.”

Caliban’s boastful words aim to negate Prospero’s edifying efforts and are followed by a curse itself: “The red plague rid
you / For learning me your language.” Caliban’s “improvement” is a viliness of speech that seems entirely appropriate to his aggrieved condition and situation. As Alden and Virginia Vaughan suggest in Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History: “Prospero’s legacy to Caliban is not a glorious new way to express himself but merely the means to curse his own fate and his oppressor’s power” (165). Shakespeare of course invests this scene of Caliban’s adoption, and adaptation, of Prospero’s language with considerable irony. In tracing a double meaning to the word “curse,” Shakespeare at once depicts Caliban’s unhappy, cursed existence and allows Caliban to give voice to his misery through the very act of cursing itself. Moreover, Caliban’s acerbic commentary, which both negates and modifies Prospero’s language, thus functions here as J.P Williams’ concept of a second-order discourse: Caliban’s mimicry and mockery of Prospero’s teachings pervert the newly-learned language into an ugly manner of speaking as Caliban makes Prospero’s language wholly his own. Apt to be trenchant and scathing, Caliban exhibits much inventiveness in his cursing, and his use of irony is reminiscent of picong, a West Indian tradition in which both Walcott and Brathwaite engage. As Paula Burnett remarks, “‘picong’ [piquant, sharp, hot]...is the Trinidadian term for the language of abuse elevated to an art form” (140). Caliban’s sharp tongue, then, serves a model for an ironic and undercutting mode of speech, with a special pertinence for Caribbean poetry. Indeed, such an inclination towards parody and satiric revelry is indigenous to Caribbean cultural expression³; as Burnett writes, “Caribbean culture is distinctively self-ironizing...Its folk forms, such as calypso and carnivalesque ‘robber talk’ make extravagant rhetorical play across the pleasure ground of language.”
Caliban’s situation and attitude towards language, furthermore, contributes to an understanding of Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s poetry precisely because Caliban’s predicament as a captive provides a dramatization of colonialism. The unequal relations of power between Caliban and Prospero have indeed led many to recognize in *The Tempest* an allegory for European colonization of the Caribbean and the New World. In particular, many poets and critics have invoked Shakespeare’s play to explore how the history of colonialism has been played out in language. Barbadian poet and novelist George Lamming, for instance, has argued that Caliban’s adoption of Prospero’s language is “the first important achievement of the colonizing process,” a process which ensures that “language is [Caliban’s] very prison” (109-110). Stephen Greenblatt concurs with Lamming and also argues that language was an instrumental element of colonization. Speaking of Columbus’ initial contact with Native Americans and his ensuing order to “carry off six of them,” Greenblatt asserts “The first of the endless series of kidnappings, then, was plotted in order to secure interpreters; the primal crime in the New World was committed in the interest of language” (17). While both Lamming’s and Greenblatt’s comments help to underscore the subjugating nature of this “linguistic colonialism” (Greenblatt’s term), it should be noted that Caliban’s cursing also entails a certain subversive quality, one which counteracts to a degree the force of the colonizer’s language. Greenblatt himself raises this issue: “Caliban’s nature is so debased that he can only learn to curse. But the lines refuse to mean this; what we experience instead is a sense of their devastating justness. Ugly, rude, savage, Caliban nevertheless achieves for an instant an absolute if intolerably bitter moral victory” (25). However coarse or rude
his mode of speech might be, Caliban remains a vocal and powerful critic of Prospero, and his words ring true above and beyond his monstrous appearance and behavior. Caliban is thus able to resist being fully assimilated to the vulgarity of cursing, and his newfound language, despite its negative edge, even yields beauty. As René Girard puts it, "for all of his physical and moral ugliness, Caliban is an authentic poet; the critics never fail to observe that some of the most beautiful lines of the play belong to him" ("Suggestion," 87).

In his critical writings, Derek Walcott has himself steadfastly rejected Caliban as a literary representative of, or model for, poets, preferring instead the figure of Robinson Crusoe: "poets and prose writers who are West Indians, despite the contaminations around us, are in the position of Crusoe, the namer" ("Figure of Crusoe," 36). Walcott’s desire to find in Defoe’s island-bound castaway “a more real symbol than critics claim for Prospero and Caliban,” however, remains somewhat unrealized, for his version of Crusoe sounds curiously close to Caliban: “Of course Crusoe has now gone mad. He has already shouted to God, which is the echo of his own voice, all sorts of terrified obscenities” (38). Much like Caliban cursing Prospero in his own tongue, Walcott’s Crusoe utters obscenities and blasphemes a god who strangely resembles himself, an “echo of [Crusoe’s] own voice.” That Walcott’s figure for a poet so closely resembles Caliban certainly prepares the reader for occurrences of obscenity within his texts, and the abundance of profanity in Walcott’s poems begs to be interpreted. In Walcott’s “The Schooner Flight,” for instance, cursing is intricately woven into the fabric of the poem in such a way that swearing nearly seems indispensable to it. The speaker of the poem,
Shabine, a wandering seaman conflicted between home and sea, and wife and mistress, expresses himself in a patois laced liberally with curses and obscenities. Walcott’s use of patois entails its own system of poetics, which includes grammatical irregularities, the fusion of diverse languages, and the development of edgy rhythms, all of which heighten the effects of cursing, as an integral element of vernacular speech itself:

A route taxi pull up, park-lights still on. 
The driver size up my bags with a grin: 
“This time Shabine, like you really gone!”
I ain’t answer the ass, I simply pile in 
the back seat and watch the sky burn 
above Laventile pink as the gown 
in which the woman I left was sleeping, 
and I look in the rearview and see a man 
exactly like me, and the man was weeping 
for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island. 
(CP, 346)

In such a passage, Walcott intends the obscenity to be read poetically. Indeed, as Geoffrey Hughes argues, there is a correspondence between poetry and profanity in which “certain affinities...can be observed. In both fields, the language used is highly charged and very metaphorical; extreme, pointed effects are created by alliteration or by playing the word hoard against each other, and rhythm is very important” (23). For Walcott, some fairly standard poetic and rhetorical devices, embedded as they are in curse words, are put into play here, like the synecdoche in which a body part, “ass,” substitutes curtly for the smirking taxi driver. The real Caliban-like acerbity, though, registers in the adjectival “fucking,” a word used as much to modify the size of the whole island and the extent of Shabine’s dejection as it is used to underscore, through the very act of cursing, an island’s cursed fate. Such intricacies of language, like the multiple meanings layered
in a single word, are not lost on Shabine, who proclaims that one’s personal history
allows for the ability to discern these differences within language:

Once the sound “cypress” used to make more sense
than the green “casuarinas,” though, to the wind
whatever grief bent them was all the same,
since they were trees with nothing else in mind
but heavenly leaping or to guard a grave;
but we live like our names and you would have
to be colonial to know the difference,
to know the pain of history words contain

(CP, 353-4)

Although Walcott may hope that his characters aspire to the position of Crusoe, the
namer, Shabine is savvy about the conventional and often arbitrary nature of names and is
even more aware that the act of naming is not always up to him. “To be colonial” is to
know, and live, the difference; all else is pretending, abiding by another’s language or
naming: “and we / if we live like the names our masters please, / by careful mimicry
might become men” (CP, 354). Forfeiting the position of the namer, Shabine, contra
Walcott, will again sound closer to Caliban than Crusoe: “But that’s all them bastards
have left us: words” (CP, 350).

Words, though, are worth fighting over, and in “The Schooner Flight,” Walcott
dramatically portrays Shabine’s contentious struggle with others over language. As a
poet-sailor, Shabine jealously stands guard over his words, trying to reclaim them through
poetry. Though Shabine may write in the colonizer’s language, he considers poetry to be
his sole property: “I have kept my own / promise, to leave you the one thing I own, / you
whom I loved first: my poetry” (CP, 354). The inverted syntax of these lines verges upon
an admission that poetry, and not his addressee, was his first love, and with poetry raised
to this sacred level, Shabine is fearful of its being defiled. True to Shabine’s fears, his words are literally stolen, as a shipmate snatches his notebook, and Shabine must defend his property with physical force. As Shabine expresses his anxieties about the desecration of his poetry, Walcott invests the scene with appreciable irony, for Shabine speaks, on behalf of his poetry, in the profaning language of swearing:

It had one bitch on board, like he had me mark—
that was the cook, some Vincentian arse

... Had an exercise book
this same one here, that I was using to write
my poetry, so one day this man snatch it
from my hand, and start throwing it left and right
(CP, 354-5)

The obscenity here is no mistaken or purposeless appeal to vernacular on Walcott’s part; it is as if Shabine must protect his poetry not only with forceful actions but with forceful language as well. Indeed, Shabine will say elsewhere: “I... have no weapon but poetry” (CP, 358). Walcott concludes the scene with a succinct and deft use of obscenity:

Some case is for fist,
some case is for tholing pin, some is for knife--
this one was for knife.

... There wasn’t much pain,
just plenty blood, and Vincie and me best friend,
but none of them go fuck with my poetry again.
(CP, 355)

Through his alter-ego Shabine, Walcott vehemently insists on the propriety of using the vernacular, and by extension, obscenity, within his poetry. In a well-known critique of
Walcott’s use of vernacular, Helen Vendler has asserted that a “mixed diction has yet to validate itself as a literary resource with aesthetic power,” yet I would argue that Walcott’s invocation of both dialect and obscenity rises to a level that is both powerful and artful (qtd. in McClatchy, 357). Walcott introduces obscenity with a sense of purpose and will, placing profane speech on an equal plane with more conventionally understood “poetic” language. While the harshness of Walcott’s use of obscenity may strike some readers as unfittingly coarse for poetry, Walcott has described his desire for a poetry that is discordant and somewhat unrefined. Speaking of the creative process for the writing of his book *Midsummer*, for example, Walcott discusses striving for a disharmonious effect. “I was trying to do something, I think that was against the imagination, that was not dictated in a sort of linear, lyrical smooth, melodic—but rather something that was antimelodic...[T]hat’s the most exciting thing—to feel that it is becoming antimelodic. The vocabulary becomes even more challenging, the meter more interesting, and so on” (Hirsch, 83).

While his embrace of obscene language serves to erase distinctions between what should be considered “pure” poetry and improper speech, Walcott also adapts his aggressive language towards an ironic attack of colonization. Shabine, for instance, does not reserve acerbity solely for the defense of his poetry; he also wields his caustic wit to register the inconsistencies of his colonized homeland. In “The Spoiler’s Return,” Walcott discusses his own propensity for sarcasm, likening himself to a biting insect: “So, crown and mitre me Bedbug the First— / the gift of mockery with which I’m cursed” (*CP*, 434). Exemplary of the tradition of picong, Walcott’s gift for mockery is a “curse”
he utilizes to satirize those in a position of power. Shabine, as Walcott's alter-ego, also
artfully and ironically plays upon language, deftly turning a phrase to level a critique of
colonialism. For Shabine, the legacy of colonialism reduces to a single line's punning
internal rhyme, as he acknowledges that his homeland has been eclipsed by empire: "I
had no nation now but the imagination" (CP, 350). Banned like Caliban, Shabine
vacillates between feelings of grandeur and humiliation; Shabine is either all or nothing,
as his mixed heritage suggests. Neither this nor that, Shabine mocks the colonizing
process: "I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, /
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (CP, 346). An ironic revision of the Whitmanian
self who contains multitudes, Shabine's multiple self acknowledges the failure of colonial
discursive practices. Colonial educators, intent on instructing the indigenous population
in British manners and history, aim to produce colonial subjects based on a British model,
yet Shabine's refractory identity resists such codification; his identity remains
overdetermined. Shabine occupies, thus, what Homi Bhabha calls the "area between
mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the
displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (86). In Walcott's own words, the efforts of
the colonial "civilizing mission" are met by a natural resistance in which "Versailles'
colonnades / [are] supplanted by cabbage palms" ("Names," CP, 306). Indeed, for
Walcott, mockery is what comes naturally; it is an innate condition of the islands and, by
extension, its people: "In the uncombed / in the uncultivated grass / Where was there
elegance / except in their mockery ("Names," CP, 306)? Walcott's recognition of
elegance in acts of mockery thus typifies his ironic sensibility. To be simultaneously
“uncultivated” and “elegant” is both to resist colonial conceptions of what it means to be “civilized” and to straddle the complex discursive poles of picong, where mockery and insolence are reconceived as art.

Adept at perceiving the intricacies of equivocal language, Shabine becomes increasingly wary of words that gloss over the lived experience of the colonized. Through irony and mockery, Shabine will actively attempt to produce a counter-language, negating what seems inaccurate in the speech around him. Shabine, for instance, negates the myth of historical progress as he discusses with his shipmate Vince the fate of boating-vessels in the emerging era of airplanes:

“One day go be planes only, no more boat.”
“Vince, God ain’t make nigger to fly through the air.”
“Progress Shabine, that’s what it’s all about.
Progress leaving all we small islands behind.”

“Progress is something to ask Caribs about.
They kill them by millions, some in war
some by forced labor dying in the mines
looking for silver, after that niggers; more progress.

(CP, 355-6)

Within the space of a few lines, Walcott truncates several hundred years of Caribbean history as this exchange between Vince and Shabine covers the earliest instances of colonial presence to the onset of its decline in the post-industrial era. Walcott’s deft temporal compression ensures that the idea of progress is not measured by historical time but instead becomes gauged in moral terms. As Shabine suggests, putting the question of progress to the indigenous Caribs, whose numbers were decimated under colonization,
translates the very concept of humankind’s advancement into a darker vocabulary. Indeed, Shabine derisively registers what is seamy about modernity’s claims of progress: “Until I see definite signs / that mankind change, Vince, I ain’t want to hear. / Progress is history’s dirty joke” (CP, 355-6). Here, Shabine’s history lesson echoes Walter Benjamin’s assertion from “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). For the majority of “The Schooner Flight,” obscenity remains Shabine’s prerogative, yet in a wry twist, Shabine renders colonial speech and its sense of “progress” itself obscene, revealed as “history’s dirty joke.”

While Shabine may regard the equivocations of Colonial discourse as obscene, profane speech itself constitutes a powerful weapon in Shabine’s negative counter-language and in Walcott’s poetics of mockery. Not content to assail progress alone, Shabine will personify history in an elaborate and extended satirical scene, and exemplary of his status as a sailor-poet, Shabine introduces his prosopopeia only in order to hurl vituperations at it:

I met History once, but he ain’t recognize me,

. . . . . .

I confront him and shout, “Sir is Shabine! They say I’se your grandson. You remember Grandma your black cook at all?” The bitch hawk and spat. A spit like that worth any number of words.

(CP, 350)

Shabine’s use of obscenity is quite obviously an index of the feelings of betrayal he has experienced under colonial rule, for in his allegory, Shabine not only represents himself
as an unrecognizable, nearly invisible, agent of history but also depicts himself as history's illegitimate son. The profanity further intimates Walcott's own fury over others who seek to deny the Caribbean its historical significance. Walcott has taken issue, for instance, with V. S. Naipaul's famous dismissal of West Indian cultural and political heritage:

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written?...The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation: and nothing was created in the West Indies...

(Quoted in "History and Picong...in the Middle Passage," 19)

Walcott's personified history echoes Naipaul's sentiments; spitting in Shabine's face, "History" repudiates Shabine much in the way that Naipaul disavows West Indian accomplishments. From Walcott's perspective, however, Naipaul's conception of history is a static, empty endeavor which merely yields self-aggrandizing monuments or myths. Walcott mocks such a consecration of history as the esoteric efforts of a few pedants, "scholars lamplit in their own aquarium, /...mouthing like parrot fish.../ their history lessons, / the bubbles like ideas which he could not break" ("The Star-Apple Kingdom," CP, 386-7). Walcott most directly rebukes Naipaul, though, by arguing that the production of art proves more pertinent for the Caribbean than empty tributes to a problematic colonial past:

In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.

("The Caribbean," 53)
Considering what has come before not as history but as the loss of history, Walcott pursues a method of historiography to record that absence: “he wanted a history without any memory, / streets without statues, / and a geography without myth” (“The Star-Apple Kingdom,” CP, 388). Shabine’s confrontation with “History,” the bitch who misrecognizes him, thus embodies Walcott’s central tenet about the antagonistic relationship between colonial history and his own art, where artistic “genius will come to contradict history” (“Midsummer,” CP, 500). For Walcott, the artist’s imaginative take on history proves to be a sound corrective to the static, and myopic, histories provided by more traditional scholars and historians of the Caribbean. As I will discuss later, Walcott advances an alternative historical method based on an artist’s propensity for self-consciousness and irony and on the admission of a flawed perspective.

Along with the undermining of concepts like history and progress, obscenity plays an integral role in Walcott’s revision of epic tradition in “The Schooner Flight.” Seamus Heaney has characterized Shabine as a “West Indian Ulysses” and recognizes elements of Joyce’s epic novel in “The Schooner Flight,” particularly in Walcott’s precise use of description to create “a poetry [derived from] stored sensations of the actual” (305). What few have traced, though, is Walcott’s substitution of profane language for the recognizable diction of Homer’s Odyssey. Shabine’s initial reference (“I knew when dark-haired evening put on / her bright silk at sunset”) to the Homeric epic tradition sounds like numerous Twentieth-century allusions to Homer’s descriptive epithets. More colorful and unusual, however, is the obscenity in Shabine’s subsequent epithet, which
transfigures Homer’s “rosy-fingered dawn” to a more graphic and disgruntled description of the sea at morning:

Next day, dark sea. A arse-aching dawn.
“Damn wind shift sudden as a woman mind.”
The slow swell cresting like some mountain range

.............

Be Jesus, I never see sea get so rough
so fast! That wind come from God back pocket!”
“Where Cap’n Headin? Like the man gone blind!”
If we’s to drong, we go drong, Vince fock-it!”
(CP, 358)

To call the dawn “arse-aching” expresses Walcott’s somewhat discrepant relationship to Western literary tradition; Walcott’s lines function at once as a homage to, and a defection from, canonized literature. For Ezra Pound, Hugh Kenner has said, “it had seemed pertinent to reaffirm Homer’s perpetual freshness,” (351) and Walcott makes a similar effort, one not unlike Pound’s “gesture of mapping one’s poetic origins against the idiom of current thought” (354). While Walcott does intend to reaffirm Homer, Shabine’s idiom, nevertheless, cannot be wholly honorific. Instead, Shabine’s obscenity alerts the reader to Walcott’s resistance to western literary tradition even as he invokes it. Shabine’s profanity, consequently, functions like a verbal tic erupting mid-recitation of Homer’s Odyssey and belies a more ambivalent relationship to the past literary texts. Stephen Slemon’s account of postcolonial literary resistance neatly describes Shabine’s interstitial position between tradition and its critique. “[L]iterary resistance is necessarily in a place of ambivalence: between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them” (108). Walcott’s simultaneous invocation of both the Homeric
epithet and the obscenity-laden epithet thus signals a more antagonistic attitude towards European literature than critics usually assign to him. Summarizing the dismissive attitudes some critics have towards Walcott, Patricia Ismond describes Walcott as a "poet's poet, the kind of luxury we can ill afford, and which remains Eurocentric. The European literary postures he continues to assume are evidence of this" (220). Profanity, beyond remaining true to the idiom of his character Shabine, breaches what has often been characterized as Walcott’s Eurocentrism. Noting Walcott’s invocation of both literary tradition and the vernacular, Burnett states: “Walcott contests the language politics that sets up false choices between orality and the literary, and he ironizes his own position between them as ‘jumped on by both sides for pretentiousness or playing white’”(139). Shabine’s use of obscenity thus indispensably provides a contact point between literary tradition and the vernacular as it ironically re-conceives the Homeric epithet.

If the revised Homeric epithets in “The Schooner Flight” only obliquely hint at a connection to the Odyssey, Omeros is Walcott’s longer and more complete homage to Homer and exists as a more sustained rewriting of Homer’s epic poems. Walcott’s Omeros appropriates the Iliad and the Odyssey to recount Caribbean history, constructing a layered narrative that juxtaposes the postcolonial present, the colonial past and even the era of World War II. In his broad retelling of the Greek epics, Walcott conflates a current day Caribbean with the ancient Mediterranean and presents Helen as a young Saint Lucian woman fought over by two native fisherman, Achille and Hector. Walcott rounds out the cast of indigenous counterparts to the Greek myths with Major Plunkett, a retired
British naval officer and expatriate, who is obsessed with Helen, his former servant. Interestingly, Plunkett, and not the indigenous fishermen, functions as an alter-ego for Walcott, for it is Plunkett who most closely resembles a writer as he tries to tell the history of St. Lucia and his country’s imperial past in the Caribbean. Walcott complicates this conceit, however, with yet another metatextual wrinkle, as Walcott himself intrudes periodically upon his own storytelling as an unnamed narrator. The effect of several storytellers, and various time shifts, is an epic poem which acknowledges the complexity of history and its representation by providing multiple perspectives and temporal contexts. Nana Wilson-Tagoe glosses Walcott’s strategies for historical representation in this way:

In Walcott linear time is the nightmare that the poet’s philosophical and creative writing continually interrogates...Walcott’s [analytical essays and poems are] groping for a vision of historicity not bounded by a single historical moment [or perspective]. For the single moment in history is that which explains and justifies yet remains circumscribed within the fixed event of the past (36).

As testimony to the difficulty of recasting history, Walcott’s unnamed narrator calls for assistance in an apostrophe to Omeros:

Except for one hand he sat still as a marble,
with his egg-white eyes, fingers recounting the past
of another sea, measured by the stroking oars.

O open this day with conch’s moan, Omeros
as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun
gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise
(Omeros, 12)

While Walcott appears more comfortable in negotiating his intermediate position between cultures in Omeros than in “The Schooner Flight,” his apostrophe to Omeros expresses
exactly the ambivalence of literary resistance noted above by Slemon. Walcott invests the lines with some nostalgia for reading Homer’s poetry as a young child, but, in so doing, he simultaneously acknowledges being a product of a colonial education. Though Shabine’s caustic anger may be missing from the narrator’s voice, Walcott does register some pathos in being an anonymous thing whose identity is cast, albeit softly, in the light of the British Empire: “a noun / gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise.” Summoning courage from Omeros is thus an endeavor which sadness with honor—an equivocal acknowledgement of indebtedness.

Walcott’s project in transcribing Greek epic poetry into Caribbean history is fraught with difficulty, for Walcott concentrates on grappling with history itself rather than on the events of heroic tales. Flaubert famously said of his Salomé “few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage,” and Walcott’s own resuscitation of Athens, Troy and St. Lucia is equally a tormented process (qtd. in Benjamin, 256). As some of Walcott’s characters in Omeros proclaim about the older island traditions of St. Lucia, “That was longtime shit” (Omeros, 112). Walcott’s engagement with history, furthermore, appears plagued by Naipaul’s presumption that history doesn’t exist in the Caribbean, due to Walcott’s repeated references to Naipaul’s dismissive words. Reeling from the memory of World War II, Plunkett, for example, imagines the Caribbean as a refuge “with its sunlit islands, / where what they called history could not happen” (Omeros, 28). Naipaul’s barbs against Caribbean history recur so frequently in Walcott’s poetry that one assumes Walcott burdens himself with the responsibility of vindicating Caribbean history contra Naipaul. Naipaul’s scathing
observation, moreover, doubly wounds Walcott: not only do Naipaul’s comments deny Caribbean achievements but they also deny the suffering endured under colonialism.

Tellingly, physical wounds figure in the depiction of several characters in *Omeros*. For Philoctete, a native fisherman wounded like his mythological namesake, his injured physical condition corresponds to the lived conditions under colonialism:

> “*Mais qui ça qui rivait-‘ous, Philoctete?*”
> “*Moin blessé.*”
> “But what is wrong wif you, Philoctete?”
> “I am blest wif this wound, Ma Kilman, *qui pas ka guérir pièce*. Which will never heal.”
> *(Omeros, 18)*

Punning on the French word for wound, “blessé,” Walcott laces Philoctete’s words with irony, as Philoctete describes his wound as a blessing, and in so doing, Philoctete will echo Caliban who sees his adoption of Prospero’s language as both a curse and a blessing. Major Plunkett likewise bears physical signs of the torment of history, yet Major Plunkett’s head wound, suffered during World War II in Africa, indexes both a condemnation of imperial conquest and a sense of guilt as a soldier of the empire:

> All history
> In a dusty Beefeater’s gin. We helped ourselves
> To these green islands like olives from a saucer,
> Munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate,
> Like a melon’s black seeds. Pro honoris causa,
> But in whose honour did his head-wound graduate?
> *(Omeros, 25)*

Despite guilty feelings of responsibility, Plunkett entertains the idea of writing Caribbean history anew, inspired by the tribulations, and beauty, of servant Helen: “Helen needed a
history, / that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her. / Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen’s war” (Omeros, 30).

With his slightly strained mental faculties and with his propensity for migraines and feelings of remorse, Major Plunkett unexpectedly embodies Walcott’s vision of an ideal historian, one who remains self-conscious, full of doubt, and critical of his own capacity to capture the whole of history. For Walcott, the figure of the historian and the storyteller must be one that is compromised in order to suit the fragmented and problematic nature of Caribbean history, as the unnamed narrator of Omeros suggests: “This wound I have stitched into Plunkett’s character. / He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme / of this work, this fiction” (Omeros, 28). Plunkett’s physical ailment renders him more sympathetic to the plight of the islanders, for he construes his wound to be an unfair accident of History. It is, however, his status as an amateur that makes him a fitting candidate to be a sound historian:

He had no idea how time could be reworded, which is the historian’s task. The factual fiction of textbooks, pamphlets, brochures, which he had loaded

In a ziggurat from the library, had the affliction of impartiality; skirting emotion as ship avoids a reef

(Omeros, 95)

Plunkett admits his ignorance about the task before him and tacitly acknowledges the impossibility of completely accurate or exact historical representation of real events. Linda Hutcheon has described such an inexpert and humble stance as characteristic of historiographic metafiction. “In neither [D.M. Thomas’s The White Hotel nor Graham
Swift's *Waterland,* do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history" (85). As an amateur, Plunkett can also avoid the trap of thinking that historians are disinterested observers. Historians strive for objectivity, yet Plunkett understands this pretense of impartiality to be a farce. Plunkett, indeed, scrutinizes such claims for neutrality, revealing skepticism even about his own pursuits:

> He murmured to the mirror: No. My thoughts are pure. They're meant to help her people, ignorant and poor. But these, smiled the bracelet, are the vows of empire.

(*Omeros,* 97)

Plunkett’s investigation of his motives provides a model for a historiography more pertinent for a history of the Caribbean, one that self-consciously examines its own perspectives. Disparaging traditional histories as inert and devoid of emotion, Plunkett also reinforces Walcott's prescription for Caribbean history, quoted previously: “what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.” For Walcott, artistic renderings of the past ought to disavow grand pronouncements about historical truth, stem from the imagination, and depart from history as it has been traditionally conceived. Nevertheless, despite these unconventional tactics in Walcott’s approach to history and despite a desire to hold British Colonialists accountable, Walcott also remains wary of revisionist histories which are an altogether reductive rewriting of the past. As Plunkett states, “It will be rewritten / by black pamphleteers, History will be revised, / and we’ll be its villians (sic), fading from the map” (*Omeros,* 92). Ultimately, Walcott finds both self-aggrandizing British Colonial histories of the Caribbean and sanctimonious
Caribbean nationalist revisions abhorrent, preferring, instead, an approach to history that values humility and self-consciousness as much as it does creative ingenuity to retell the past.

Plunkett’s discomfiture as a flawed, amateur historian mirrors Walcott’s own feelings of self-consciousness as a narrator of *Omeros* and as a writer within an epic tradition. In *Omeros*, Walcott frequently interrupts his own poem, evincing his doubt in being a narrator “since every ‘I’ is a fiction finally” (*Omeros*, 28). Plagued by uncertainty, Walcott must also occasionally coax a dissociated vision of himself to return to the telling of his poem (“Phantom narrator, resume” 28). “I think any work in which the narrator is almost central is not really an epic. It’s not like a heroic epic. I guess…since I am in the book, I certainly don’t see myself as a hero of an epic, when an epic generally has a hero of action and decision and destiny” (quoted in Hamner, 32). Naipaul’s influential figure lurks here, giving voice to a particular form of colonial self-recrimination. In “Another Life,” Walcott even directly quotes Naipaul, going so far as to name him within the poem itself: “‘We lived in a society that denied itself heroes’ (Naipaul)” (“Another Life,” *CP*, 272). Though Walcott certainly disagrees with Naipaul’s dismissal of Caribbean achievement, his quotation of Naipaul registers some remorse over the Caribbean refusal to think of themselves as heroic. Further, Walcott’s ambivalence about Caribbean heroes introduces an instability to the very process of writing his own epic poems. Robert D. Hamner has recently argued that “Walcott is too traditional to undertake an anti-epic,” yet I would argue that the genre of anti-epic or pseudo-epic precisely captures Walcott’s poetic aims: Walcott at once invokes the epic
tradition and purposely subverts it (33). As Walcott defines it, the epic tradition seems contrary to the nature of the Caribbean: “All of the epics are blown away with the leaves, / blown with the careful calculations on brown paper; / these were the only epics: the leaves” (“Another Life,” CP, 284). In forging his anti-epic project, particularly with regards to placing himself, or a representative of himself, in his poem, Walcott participates in a modernist tradition of epic poetry that has itself revised the genre of epic poetry. Walcott’s anti-epic is dependent upon a self-deprecatory stance, which presents the protagonist as an anti-hero, and corresponding self-referential figures may be found in the poetry of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Walt Whitman. For example, Pound’s self-portrait from the Pisan Cantos or his Sigismundo Malatesta, each strike a figure similar to the compromised, vulnerable and weakened protagonist of Walcott’s anti-epic. However, I would argue that Walcott also moves away from this modernist tradition in certain respects. Walcott does not approach history with the same sense of command with which Pound approaches history, nor does Walcott wish to submit history to a single ideological vision, like Pound’s limited, and limiting, focus on usury. Williams’ In the American Grain provides a closer corollary to Walcott’s anti-epic project, for in this collection of historical narratives, Williams shares with Walcott a critique of history as it has been traditionally written.

Walcott’s autobiographical poem “The Arkansas Testament” from 1987 throws into relief some of the elements of his anti-epic project and due to some similar motifs, also prefigures the later Omeros. An extended treatise on the self-reproach that stems from a life-long experience of racism, “The Arkansas Testament” recounts Walcott’s
journey through the American South a couple decades after the repeal of the Jim Crow laws. Though the purpose is never stated outright Walcott presumably, conducts his trip to Arkansas to receive a literary award or to give a reading of his poetry. Walcott’s tone throughout the poem, however, belies such a happy occasion and instead intimates an underlying racial tension to his visit. This trip is no return to the native land; Walcott depicts Arkansas as an alien region, where his own race is forefront in his mind. Walcott even parodies his difficult odyssey through Arkansas by describing a comparable journey he witnesses in his hotel room, thereby laying the foundation for his anti-epic: “A roach crossed its oceanic / carpet with scurrying oars / to a South that it knew, calm / shallows of crystalline green” (AT, 105). Walcott moreover characterizes himself as an uncourageous anti-hero, unfit to lead his people and an unfit protagonist for an epic poem:

I decided to stay unshaven,
unsaved, if I found the strength
Oh, for a day’s dirt, unshowered,
no plug for my grovelling razor
to reek of the natural coward
I am, to make this a place for
disposable shavers as well
as my own disposable people!

(AT, 107)

Walcott breaks with epic tradition by announcing his cowardice, and unlike most epic heroes, Walcott undertakes no action; he remains reflexive and meditative. Indeed, Walcott’s reading of both the Fayetteville landscape, which includes a memorial cemetery for confederate soldiers, and his interactions with local residents, (“a cafeteria / reminded me of my race. / a soak cursed his vinyl table / steadily, not looking up”) suggest that
Walcott's battles are mostly cerebral, a reckoning of how the past bleeds into the present (AT, 110). Though his anti-epic mode appears marked by passivity, Walcott alters the epic genre towards a specific end, to proclaim art as his salvation. Walcott finds redemption in resurrecting his poetic will: "Jet-lagged and travel gritty / I fell back on the double bed like Saul under neighing horses / on the highway to Damascus, / and lay still, as Saul does, / till my name re-entered me" (AT, 105). Walcott presents the hero of the anti-epic as concerned with verbal performance and the poem culminates in a bold articulation of the power of art.

While Walcott may be filled with apprehension as the protagonist of "The Arkansas Testament," he ultimately finds, as the title of the poem suggests, the inner reserve to take a verbal stand, proclaiming art's capacity for formal protest. Walcott, in this sense, engages in an altogether different type of swearing, switching as he does from obscenities to solemn oaths and diverting Caliban's legacy of cursing towards a more noble purpose. Phrased as a question, Walcott's pronouncement initially sketches the possibilities for his poetry tentatively:

Can I swear to uphold my art that I share with them too, or worse, pretend all is past and curse from the picket lines of my verse the concept of Apartheid? (AT, 115)

Walcott's question registers his doubt about the purpose of his poetry, yet his uncertainty points to what its function should be: poetry enforces a connection between himself and the people of the South and forces a recognition of the legacy of slavery. However
troubled and awkward it may be for him, his poetry is a reckoning with history and refuses to “pretend all is past.” In the end, Walcott emboldens himself to swear his artistic oath, even if it expresses an ambivalent combination of courage and fear:

this, Sir, is my Office
my Arkansas Testament
my two cupfuls of Cowardice,
my sure, unshaven Salvation,
my people’s predicament.
Bless the increasing bliss
of truck tires over asphalt,
and these stains I cannot remove
from this self-soiled heart.

(AT, 116)

Walcott’s declarations here entail the type of irony Kermode ascribes to negative theology. Only after negating the image of the heroic artist or the grandeur of the epic hero will Walcott allow himself to speak powerfully and courageously as an artist. Indeed, the self-recriminations make possible Walcott’s articulation of his experiences and the aftereffects of slavery, and so it is that a certain amount of ascetic denial on Walcott’s part leads to a reinforced sense of aesthetic purpose. Walcott thus redefines the epic through his use of a self-conscious anti-hero and achieves, through the genre of an anti-epic, an appropriate vehicle for the complex history of slavery.

Walcott’s ironic poetics encompass a wide spectrum of speech acts from the foul-mouthed enunciations of a wearied sailor-poet to the self-proclaimed un-heroic oaths of a Nobel Laureate. As an integral aspect of Walcott’s ironic poetics, obscenity necessarily entails the act of negation, whether it is the negation of traditional poetic diction, colonial discourse, familiar histories of the Caribbean, the epic form, or a poet’s self-conception
and heroic stance. In this regard, Walcott wields his obscenities with irony and towards
the end of an innovative form of poetry, one which seeks a redefinition of aesthetic
identity and purpose, colonial history and poetic language itself.
The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. [Nation language] is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as the noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning.

—Kamau Brathwaite, "Nation Language"

Everywhere present in Kamau Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* is a search for a beginning. Acknowledging the importance of beginnings and origins to Brathwaite’s poetry, Nana Wilson-Tagoe has recently observed: “for Brathwaite, ancestral memory...must be absorbed into a fluid future to liberate and transform the past” (194). As he traces a link between African history and the Caribbean present, Brathwaite incorporates the importance of temporal sequences into the very structure of *The Arrivants*. Brathwaite begins *The Rights of Passage*, the initial book of the trilogy, with a section entitled “Prelude,” so that the first of the interconnected texts itself commences with a distinct beginning. In Brathwaite’s reaching backward for origins, the reader discerns a religious preoccupation with genuses. Illustrative of such a concern with spiritual matters, “Prelude” even encompasses a prayer for household protection and a safe beginning: “So grant, God / that this house will stand / the four winds / the seasons’ alterations / the explorations of the worm” (*Arrivants*, 7). Though the blessing of a house
and of beginnings is a commonplace in many religions, what may be less evident is the significance of the prayer’s juxtaposition to other negative aspects of the Prelude. In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Jacques Derrida asserts that any ritual of apophasis or negative theology must commence with “the indispensable moment of a prayer,” so that the negative apprehension of God is first predicated upon a pious act (9).

Brathwaite’s prelude to Rights of Passage likewise engages in this interconnected mode of prayer and negation. The prayer of the Prelude seeks to generate hopefulness and endeavors to ward off any ill fortune, yet the prelude also contains a negative dimension seemingly at odds with the reverent, supplicating tone of the prayer:

Camels wrecked
in their own
shit
resurrect butter-flies that
dance in the noon
without hope
without hope
of a morning.
(Arrivants, 4)

The obscenity, and its corresponding sentiment of hopelessness, provides an antithesis to the optimism of the prayer, and this tension between prayer and anti-prayer underwrites Brathwaite’s entire trilogy. Here in the Prelude, oscillations between the negative and the
positive, between the image of a Camel decaying in its own feces and dancing butterflies, between hopelessness and resurrection, generate a poetic mode of irony, in which blasphemy possesses a paradoxically redemptive power. Although the profanity may seem antithetical to, and removed from, the act of addressing God, the prayer itself is predicated upon the negativity of the obscenity.

As Derrida suggests, the purity of prayer is contingent upon its defilement: “perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without what we glimpse as a menace or as a contamination: writing, the code, repetition, analogy…” (62). Derrida’s remarks, though they refer specifically to repetition in the texts of Dionysius, are nevertheless relevant for considering how prayer is contingent upon obscenity in Brathwaite’s poetry. For Brathwaite, the interdependence between prayer and blasphemy in the Prelude establishes for the rest of the trilogy an ironic poetics in which a religious solemnity is undermined by an irreverent and profaning mockery. While this ironic mode may appear largely negative, Brathwaite’s ironic poetics nevertheless ultimately affirm a stronger sense of the sacred because it is distilled from what would defile it. Brathwaite’s irony, moreover, directly influences his formal innovations. Patricia Ismond, among others, has noted that many critics consider Walcott and Brathwaite to be opposites, with Walcott representing a continuity with the English poetic tradition and Brathwaite, due to the radically experimental nature of his poetry, embodying a break with this tradition. Too much has been made of the divide between these two poets, and I think, further, that it is untenable to think of Brathwaite and Walcott in merely antithetical terms. However, it is also undeniable that Brathwaite
disrupts the syntax of his poetry, explodes standard orthography and modifies the spacing of lines and words on the page more fully than Walcott does. My analysis of Brathwaite’s and Walcott’s poetry and their use of obscenity thus attempts to recognize the similarities between their work, but it is also focused upon illustrating their significant differences. In contrast to Walcott’s profaning of Colonial history and his pursuit of anti-epic project, then, I argue that Brathwaite focuses his efforts within his poetry on the act of prayer. Indeed, prayer becomes the privileged form within which Brathwaite writes particularly because he is intent on exploding the form of lyric poetry.

Brathwaite’s frequent references throughout *The Arrivants* to African, Caribbean and Christian religions suggest both a poet deeply fascinated and concerned with spiritual matters and a poetry that approaches the status of prayer. Periodically, however, these invocations also display Brathwaite’s mocking sensibility, rendering his poems less like prayers than curses. In “Trade Winds,” for example, Brathwaite parodies the structure of a religious sermon’s “call and response,” in which a minister’s words are echoed and answered by a vocal, inspired congregation. The conventional affirmative function of a “call and response” sermon, however, falters in Brathwaite’s poem, as when some of the Biblical Commandments are mocked by a parroting, insolent voice:

‘Thou shalt have none other gods but me.’

Quick: erect a statue.

‘Thou shalt not covet they neighbor’s ox, nor his ass, nor his wife nor anything that is thy neighbor’s.’

Leave that to me.

(*Arrivants*, 168)
Providing both the commandments and their irreverent echo, Brathwaite further complicates the rhetorical structure of the “call and response” because it is uncertain exactly who is speaking. The responses are a skeptical elaboration of the commandments and conceivably could be uttered by a dubious and sarcastic populace (“Quick: [let’s] erect a statue”), or, more likely, a narcissistic god or a corrupt priest (“Leave that [coveting] to me”). Regardless of whose voice is speaking, Brathwaite ironically subverts God’s pronouncements with counter-statements and depicts Christianity as not fully assimilated within Caribbean culture. At the end of *The Arrivants*, Brathwaite includes a glossary for his use of African and Caribbean religious terms as well as a note of explanation, in which he asserts an underlying similarity between African and Christian religious traditions. “Though [divine possession] was a commonplace in the early Christian Churches, which, in many ways, were more African than what we have now come to understand as ‘European’ (the Day of Pentecost, for example), it is now no longer regarded as the norm in the Cerebral West” (*Arrivants*, 271). Despite common attitudes towards ecstatic experiences of God within African and Christian religions, Brathwaite’s poems repeatedly testify to discord between Caribbean culture and a Christian God. For instance, in “The Stone Sermon,” Brathwaite first captures the religious fervor of sermon through a lively meter and Black vernacular and then describes God’s perceived failure:

```
We is goin’ to leave
This rum an’ fancy dancin’,
brown-skin wuk-a-wukkin’

an’ involve we self in Jee-
```
sus Christ sweet flame.

........
we burnin'
Sistren an' Brethren
the black crack crackle into gold
(Arrivants, 255)

The preacher metonymically substitutes fire and flame for Jesus Christ's magnificence and glory, yet within the same poem, Brathwaite counterbalances the preacher's remarks with some antithetical figurative language to show the repudiation of Christianity. Water replaces the trope of fire to express a family's grief over their son's death by drowning, and through the crossing of figures, and a shift in the meter and tone, Brathwaite depicts the deep cultural resentment for a foreign religion:

Keep ya Cross
keep ya Christ

........
Sookey dead
Sookey dead
Sookey drownded.

Christ a-pick
Christ a-peck
Christ a-spite him
(Arrivants, 257)

Negating the first set of rhetorical figures and the meter of the initial lines, Brathwaite presents a hostile and resentful Christian God who overwhelms and eviscerates a family's child. Such a representation of Christ as punitive exemplifies Brathwaite's negative poetics and his blasphemous attack on Christianity. Brathwaite thus frequently depicts African gods as intimately present and as alternately beneficent and mischievous, yet
never punishing. By parodying a minister's sermon and overturning religious figurative language, Brathwaite's irony expresses a skeptical reaction to a Christian god whose actions and motivation appear diametrically opposed to those of African and Caribbean gods.

In addition to his revision of religious rhetoric and its speech patterns, Brathwaite's ironic poetics also extend to the act of naming. Appropriating racial epithets with an abundance of irony, Brathwaite modifies stereotypes and assumes a defiant stance against those who would deem blacks inferior. Section Two of Rights of Passage, “The Spades,” begins with a truculent embrace of racist terms:

To hell
with Af­rica
to hell
with Eu­rope too,
just call my blue
black bloody spade
a spade and kiss
my ass. O­kay? So
let's begin

(Arrivants, 29)

While Brathwaite’s tone here suggests a frank urging of getting beyond hurtful names and a hurtful past, Braithwaite’s irony makes this a more difficult passage than one might first expect. Echoing a familiar folk-saying, Brathwaite seemingly makes an appeal to literalism, by his suggestion to “call a spade a spade.” Brathwaite’s advocacy of the literal, however, undermines the metaphorical nature of the racial epithet, which likened African slaves to the black spearhead suit of poker cards. Moreover, Brathwaite
ironically *commands* the racial slur to be uttered, thus taking it over and mitigating its hateful effect. As Brathwaite confidently usurps the power of the racial slur, he initiates a self-determination ("so let's begin"), one that trumps claims of origins ("To hell / with Af- / rica / to hell / with Eu- / rope too"). Finally, even Brathwaite's proposal for literalism can be understood ironically. Brathwaite exposes the racial designation of "black" as a misnomer through a proliferation of colors that testifies at once to multiple shades of skin color *and* to the violent history of slavery which is borne by the body: "blue / black bloody."

Brathwaite's appropriation of racial epithets endows the poet with the power of naming, a power which Brathwaite wields with much playfulness and mockery. For instance, the speaker of Brathwaite's "Folkways" openly, and with a demonstrative obscenity, declares an identity of blackness for himself and again overturns racial stereotypes. "I am a fuck- / in' negro / man, hole / in my head, / brains in / my belly; black skin / red eyes / broad back / big you know / what: not very quick / to take offence" (*Arrivants*, 30). Espousing the negritude movement and the power of black identity, the speaker names himself a "negro," and ironically assumes what has been attributed to him: a lack of intelligence and overly physical nature. The speaker also pointedly leaves unspoken a myth about black male genitalia, suggesting that such myths are merely a product of the imagination. Brathwaite's poetic naming and word-making, then, purposely runs counter to racist presumptions and fantasies. Elsewhere in the Trilogy, in his invocation of the term "spade," Brathwaite further negates the assumptions oft associated with such an epithet: "Ever seen / a man / travel more / seen more / lands /
than this poor / land- / less, harbour- / less spade” (Arrivants, 34). Regardless of the enforced conditions or circumstances of the travel, Brathwaite’s point is to re-conceive the itinerant homelessness of the African Diaspora as worldliness. Brathwaite’s poetic naming even renders the noun “negro” into a verb to capture the black experience of migration: “so the boy now nigratin’ overseas” (Arrivants, 50). The logic of this transformation of noun to verb parodies colonial civilizing missions: if imperial powers represented their expansion as bringing light to the world, Brathwaite reverses these representations and depicts “nigratin’” as conveying (a positive) darkness to the world through the black Diaspora. In “Ancestors,” Brathwaite continues his parody of the colonial project, and its light of Enlightenment, through a description of his Grandmother:

telling us stories
round her fat white lamp. It was her Queen
Victoria lamp, she said; although the stamp
read Ever-Ready. And in the night, I listened to her singing
in a Vicks and Vapour-Rub-like voice what you would call the blues
(Arrivants, 240).

Brathwaite’s grandmother ironically names her lamp, referring to it as something which it is patently not. His grandmother’s lamp, a mass produced commodity standing in for an antique, again perverts, and thereby trivializes, the trope of England’s civilizing light shining on its colonial subjects. The slippage between the real object and its illegitimately-named copy exemplifies Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, of a “flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (87). Through his attention to naming, Brathwaite presents a folk-knowledge, a mode of storytelling that counteracts Colonial discourse even if commodity names, like “Vicks” and “Ever Ready”
permeate this counter-discourse. As a poetic-namer, Brathwaite remains cognizant of how pliable most terms and words are. Brathwaite thus recurrently rehearses how names can be read differently, and ironically, where, for example, “what you would call the blues” is not a simply melancholy song, but a music expressive of a wide range of emotions, from the elegiac and painful to the nostalgic and soothing. Likewise, Brathwaite’s poetics rely on an understanding of language that is polysemous, as he employs irony and parody to subvert Colonial discourse and to invest words with a renewed power.

Brathwaite’s irony also works intertextually at it engages black literary tradition and that tradition’s subsequent effect on the black community. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued that “the black tradition is double-voiced,” and The Arrivants provides an exemplary instance of “double-voiced texts that talk to other texts” (xxv). With a recurrent character named Tom in The Arrivants, Brathwaite alludes, and “talks,” to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and addresses the adaptation of “Uncle Tom” into a derisive term within the black community. Brathwaite’s Tom, however, is neither purely Stowe’s protagonist nor a caricature of self-effacing or obsequious behavior. Indeed, Tom eludes any single definition or characterization, particularly in light of Tom’s own self-reflexive thoughts and his reception among a younger black community, a new generation represented by his sons. As Wilson-Tagoe suggests, there is a complexity to Brathwaite’s Tom that avoids an easy, reductive characterization: “his archetypal New World Slave, Tom, becomes an ambiguous symbol. On one hand he is the outcome of the slave master’s sexual and economic exploitation of the slave woman;
on the other he is the new [symbol of] birth and survival…” (186-7). At first, Tom appears consistent with negative interpretations of Stowe’s character. Tom offers an assessment of his own life, recounting the failures in his personal history, and much like the refrains in Derek Walcott’s poems, Tom alludes to Naipaul’s infamous dismissal of Caribbean achievement:

So I who have created
nothing but these worthless
weeds, these need-
less seeds, work; who have built
but on silt, but on sand,
but on luckless salt,
dream; who
have forgotten all
mouth 'Massa, yes
Massa, yes
Boss, yes
Baas’

(Arrivants, 15, italics added)

Despite Tom’s name and the colloquial connotations the name suggests, Brathwaite ultimately undermines the reader’s expectations of Tom as unquestioningly servile: Brathwaite’s Tom remains resilient, and his true thoughts (I work; I dream) penetrate through a litany of negative images and words. As he subtly supplants the list of negatives (“luckless,” “needless,” etc.) with emphatic declarations of possibility, Brathwaite operates through indirection. Brathwaite’s tactic underscores the irony inherent to Tom’s submissive speech: when Tom says “Yes / Boss,” he is nevertheless saying no to his own defeat. Indeed, Tom is studied in the art of dissimulation, saying of himself: “[I] hold my hat / in hand / to hide / my heart” (Arrivants, 15). Pointedly, Tom claims about his conciliatory language, his “Massa, yes / Massa,” to “have forgotten all
mouth,” meaning that he has seemingly abandoned his native language or the ability to speak openly. Yet “having forgotten all mouth” could be a way to describe the mode of irony itself, for Tom’s “forgetting” of his former speech patterns describes well the duplicitous nature of ironic utterances. There is a subtle layering of a newly formed expedient and polite manner of speaking upon the forgotten, older language and mindset. Brathwaite thus produces a character who is self-aware and acutely conscious of his own speaking, and, by counteracting the associations that surround the “Uncle Tom” label, Brathwaite renders his Tom a character highly versed in irony.

At first, Brathwaite’s choice of Tom for his protagonist may seem odd, particularly for an epic poem that Brathwaite intends to be a narrative of redemption. It is, however, precisely through Tom’s status as an anti-hero that he is able to lead his sons and his community. Assessing Brathwaite’s poetic project, June Bobb has proclaimed, “[Brathwaite] engages the rhythms of Africa, the Caribbean, and black America against the backdrop of European conquest in a symphony epitomizing struggle, survival and enormous strength of will. He celebrates hope and possibility.” (41). Despite Brathwaite’s message of survival and possibility, Tom speaks of himself frequently as a failure, and Tom’s sons and his community mercilessly mock him. By his own description, Tom seems more like an anti-hero whose family is in sore need of direction: “But help- / less my children are / caught leader- / less are / taught fool- / ishness and use- / lessness and sorrow” (Arrivants, 14). While Tom is painfully aware of how he is perceived within his community, (“They call me / Uncle Tom and mock me”), he is nevertheless even more cognizant of his ability to be a galvanizing, if negatively-
perceived, force, as he occupies the position of a scapegoat (*Arrivants*, 19). Tracing the ritualistic aspects of sacrifices and their effects on society, René Girard has argued that a scapegoat performs a precise function, one which unifies the community:

...we must transcend the approach that limits itself to thematic analysis and renounce those prejudices that might lead us portray the "scapegoat" purely as a product of blind superstition, a nonfunctional device bereft of any operative value. In the scapegoat theme we should recognize the very real metamorphosis of reciprocal violence into restraining violence through the *agency of unanimity*. (*Violence and the Sacred*, 96)

In a strikingly perverse case of consensus, Tom is the target of hateful behavior by both whites and blacks. Indeed, Tom is the object of scorn, embodying both racist antipathy and black self-hatred: "They laugh and the white / man laughs: each / wishing for mercy, each / fearful of mercy, teaching their children to hate / their skin to its bitter root in the bone" (*Arrivants*, 20). While such repugnance is difficult to conceive as positive, Brathwaite depicts Tom as possessing a great capacity to absorb the misery of his community. Tom gives voice to his complicated role as scapegoat in a carefully crafted utterance that should be understood ironically "And I / timid Tom / father / founder / flounderer / speak / their shame" (*Arrivants*, 15). On the surface, Tom’s statement seems only self-deprecating, yet Tom outlines his role through a double meaning of the word "shame." Tom’s behavior exactly expresses what they are embarrassed of, a humiliating servility, but Tom also *speaks* their shame, for his existence articulates what has been dishonorably and shamefully done to blacks under the conditions, and legacy, of slavery. As Tom straddles a contradictory position between being the object of mockery and his
people's spokesperson, he utters an ironic prayer that is part supplication on their behalf and part indictment of both god and community:

5
These my children?
God, you hear them?

What deep sin
what shattered glory?

What harsh logic
guides their story?

When release
from further journey?

6
Ease
up, Lord.

(Arrivants, 21)

In a series of rhetorical questions, Tom at once ponders and postulates what has befallen his family and community, yet he knows that there is no "deep sin" which could explain racism nor any facile way to recover a race's "shattered glory." Tom's diagnosis is more apt, however, when he considers the "harsh logic [that] guides their story." Indeed, it is a "harsh logic" that perfectly describes the ambivalence of Tom's sons' towards their father: Tom inspires their self-hatred yet paradoxically he also arouses in them a great love. Moreover, Tom's contradictory position, as simultaneously both hero and scapegoat, also encapsulates the ambivalent and "harsh logic" which "guides" his sons' story. In making Tom the object of scorn and default leader of the "leaderless," Brathwaite exposes a community's social paralysis; it is a stasis brought about in turn by the harsh logic of Colonialism and its aftermath.
Brathwaite further dramatizes the "harsh logic" of Colonialism and its subsequent effects of social stasis in numerous negative songs that course through *The Arrivants*. The negativity of these songs is so extensive that the songs seemingly collapse upon themselves under the weight of pessimism. Tom, for example, will sing songs that recount his suffering and sink him further into an abyss. Burdened by history, the opprobrium of his community, and his sense of responsibility for the well-being of his people, Tom sounds an utterly hopeless chant of negation: "and now nothing / nothing / nothing / so let me sing / nothing / now / let me remember / nothing / now" (*Arrivants*, 13). Elsewhere in the trilogy, other poetic personae echo Tom's sentiments, speaking to an overwhelming sense of futility which threatens to eclipse the very ability to sing itself. The speaker of "Eating the Dead," for instance, articulates the desperation thus: "Illegal, illegitimate, / I cannot sing" (*Arrivants*, 221). Having been negated under the conditions of slavery, the speaker can only chronicle his non-being and the seeming fraudulence of any song that would stem from his negated position. In an intertextual reference to *The Tempest*, Brathwaite further delves into negative songs and rhythms as he invokes the name of Caliban as a figure for colonized people. Amidst the noise and music of Carnival, Caliban-as-colonial-subject finds himself compelled towards silence:

And
Ban
Ban
Cal-iban
like to play pan
at the Car-nival;
pran-
cing up to the lim-
bo silence
down
down
down
so the god won't drown
him

(Arrivants, 192)

The rhythm of the lines and the percussive force of consonants (Ban / Ban / Cali / Ban) here provide a stark contrast to the import of passage: that Caliban is forced into silence. Bent over backward, Caliban performs the ritualistic dance of the limbo, yet he is motivated not by the jubilation of Carnival, but by his fear of being silenced by a god who would drown him. Brathwaite thus alludes to Caliban’s subservient relationship to the powerful Prospero, and Caliban’s banishment by Prospero further implies the alternate meaning of “limbo,” as “a place or state of neglect or oblivion” and an “abode of souls that are barred from heaven because of not having received a Christian Baptism.”

Indeed, Brathwaite’s Caliban endures a banishment not unlike the one Shakespeare’s creature experiences, for the colonial Caliban must go “where the music hides / him / down / down / down / where the silence lies” (Arrivants, 193). Indeed, so persistently do Brathwaite’s characters attempt to record their plight that their recurrent negative songs seem to lead inexorably to silence; the negativity even results in a hypnotic and almost soundless echo: “no dreams / for us / no hopes / no scabs / to heal / in the hot / sun neither / no screams” (Arrivants, 28).

The frustration and loss of voice registered in these negative songs testify to a debilitating sense of inarticulateness that Brathwaite’s characters experience under
Colonialism and its aftermath. The inexpressibility of the characters, furthermore, evinces how Brathwaite's negative poetics correlate to the principles of negative theology. Negative theology dictates that knowledge of god is beyond immediate human comprehension and that one arrives at an enlightened understanding only after a ritualistic practice of negation. Central to negative theology is a belief that language interferes with a direct intuition of god; consequently, it is held that the faultiness of language itself must be transcended. Analyzing theological references in the texts of T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, and Paul Celan, Shira Wolosky has argued that the modernist preoccupation with language exhibits an underlying correspondence to negative theology. Eliot, in particular, concerns himself with linguistic failure in *Four Quartets* to such a degree that, as Wolosky asserts, the "defeat of language through negation not only is central to the progression of the *Quartets*, but is also a central topic within the poem. The problem of representation is something the poem both discusses and enacts…” (28). Like the many instances in the *Four Quartets* in which Eliot declares language to be imperfect, Brathwaite employs recurrent images of stones and pebbles in *The Arrivants* to suggest the unwieldy nature of language. Reversing the image of Demosthenes practicing speeches with small stones in his mouth to improve his enunciation, Brathwaite describes the difficulty that his characters have addressing god with recurrent references to figurative pebbles that impair speech. For example, in "Eating the Dead," stones symbolize the heaviness of words, as the poet laments: "My tongue is heavy with new language / but I cannot give birth speech. / Pebbles surround me" (*Arrivants*, 221). Brathwaite remains consistent with the precepts of negative theology as he prominently
depicts speechlessness, but he also provides a specific context of colonialism for his character's reticence. The speaker of "Eating the Dead" for instance experiences a loss of words because he struggles with "the new language" of the empire and because words seem empty compared with his plight as a colonial subject and with the neglect of an omnipotent god who could save him. In "Wake," the speaker even recognizes the futility of prayer itself, as the scriptural "Word" is burdened by stone-like syllables:

For the Word has been destroyed
and cannot live among us

...........

When I was hungry, you fed me books, Daniel's dungeons
Now I am thirsty, you would stone me with syllables.

We seek we seek
but find no one to speak

The words to save us.

(Arrivants, 212)

Later, as I will demonstrate, Brathwaite revives the image of pebbles, transforming it from a negative symbol of inarticulacy into a positive conception of eloquence. Here, however, it is important to note Brathwaite's echo of Caliban's resentment and irony; for the speaker of "Wake," who is "fed . . . books," still cannot speak properly, overwhelmed by a foreign language and by syllabic excess. The poet feels as if he occupies a doubly negated position, beyond articulation and salvation.

In a peculiar response to the frustration of linguistic failure, Brathwaite's poetic alter-ego, like other characters of the trilogy, engages in blasphemy, a reaction not conventionally associated with negative theology. Incensed by their inability to express
themselves, Brathwaite and his characters turn to angry and blasphemous attacks.

Moving beyond negative theology’s familiar attempt to negate, and transcend, language in order to grasp god’s true being, Brathwaite’s negative poetics lead to a desire to negate the gods themselves. For instance, as Brathwaite urges that it is “time to forget / the gods,” (Arrivants, 114) in “The Forest,” the poet’s rancor reaches a fevered pitch:

For Man eats god, eats life, eats world, eats wickedness.
This we now know, this we digest and hold;
this gives us bone and sinews, saliva grease and sweat;
this we can shit. (Arrivants, 116)

Contrary to the tenets of negative theology which seek insight into god’s essence, Brathwaite places humans in a dominant, central position, imposing human will on gods and the world. Seemingly fed up with spiritual matters, Brathwaite endorses a more materialist approach, replacing the sacred with the profane and distilling “shit” from a sacrilegious meal made of God’s being. For Brathwaite, blasphemous utterances are a way of displacing the feelings of powerlessness and inarticulacy initially brought about by suffering, and the poet revels in his poetic will-to-power: “But I can show / you what it means to eat / your god, drink his explosions of power” (Arrivants, 221). Resuming the image of the stone and his tactics of negation, moreover, Brathwaite specifically ties negativity to blasphemy:

it is not
it is not
it is not enough
to be pause, to be hole
to be void, to be silent
to be semicolon, to be semicoly.
fling me the stone
that will confound the void
find me the rage
and I will raze the colony
fill me with words
and I will blind your God.

(Arrivants, 224)

Brathwaite overturns the conceit of the stone that was associated with the difficulty of language and with speechlessness, and by so doing, he makes language his weapon of choice. Indeed, blasphemy will be the verbal “stone” with which the poet “will blind...God.” Brathwaite, furthermore, challenges the colonial subject’s position of silence. Wanting to negate the void of living in limbo, Brathwaite recognizes the imprisoning influence of an in-between political and verbal existence: an inert state epitomized by Brathwaite’s grammar lesson of the “semicolon” and the “semicolon.” After the emptiness of silence, Brathwaite desires fullness, knowing that to be filled with words is a form of salvation. Blasphemy, then, is a way of overcoming an enforced silence; its rage is an indispensable precursor to a formulation of redemptive prayer.

Throughout Brathwaite’s trilogy, there is a necessary interplay between the positive and the negative, damnation and redemption, and blasphemy and prayer. Negativity, in fact, makes enlightenment possible in The Arrivants, supporting Derrida’s argument, discussed previously, that prayer is contingent upon that which would contaminate it. Negative and affirmative “prayers” coexist in the trilogy, and while June Bobb has noted the political import of negative and positive aspects of certain poems, the theological dimensions of this dynamic have been largely neglected (Bobb, 115-6). As Brathwaite negates and affirms within the same poetic breath, one ascertains an irony to
his prayers, recalling what Kermode deems apophatic irony, in which “we deny that we say or [do] that which we say or [do].” Understood in this way, Brathwaite’s blasphemy is a necessary precursor to an affirmation of god, a reinvestment of belief after a ritualistic purging. Accordingly, in “The New Ships,” Brathwaite revises his conceit of the pebbles that impaired speech, transforming it into an image of eloquent clarity in which “smooth voices [are] like pebbles / moved by the sea of their language” (*Arrivants*, 124). An utterance in “Techiman” further recuperates the image of the pebble, with phrasing that nearly collapses upon itself and echoes that of “Four Quartets”:

```
But the way lost
is a way to be found
again;

the moist
stones, warm
pebbles of rain
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(*Arrivants*, 119)

Made a metaphor for raindrops, pebbles here articulate a softness not present in Braithwaite’s other references to pebbles. As a flowing and smooth image, “moist stones” reverse the previous connotations of stilted and impeded speech, and so indeed, Brathwaite’s conceit itself exemplifies how “the way lost / is a way to be found / again” by showing how a figure of deprivation is overcome. Such a movement from deprivation to fullness typifies both negative theology and Brathwaite’s poetics; both recuperate from the act of negation an affirmation. For negative theology, knowledge of god is achieved after ritualistic negation, and Brathwaite, likewise, presents god as arising from nothingness and silence. In Brathwaite’s poetry, we encounter a god that is inscrutable
and ineffable, yet this is only an initial stage. Significantly, Brathwaite is careful to assert that “God is dumb / until the drum / speaks” (Arrivants, 97). Much has been made of the rhythmic nature of Brathwaite’s poetry and the degree to which his language, line breaks, and meter all reflect an adept musicality. The extent to which the principles of negative theology inform Brathwaite’s poetry, however, shows in his pun on African rhythms themselves. Encapsulating the negative and the positive in a single utterance, Brathwaite teases much irony from the word “dumb,” making it at once signify both silence and the sound that a drum makes:

Dumb dumb dumb
now the drum speaks
flat palms open their lips
give light to the eyes
(Arrivants, 187)

Brathwaite thus simultaneously asserts God’s ineffability and the possibility for humans to sound God out. The rhythms of Brathwaite’s poetry, then, continuously testify to an attempt to articulate God’s being. Since such an articulation, according to Brathwaite and to negative theology, must necessarily proceed through acts of negation, God, in Brathwaite’s poetry, often appears imperfect and even suffers an often crass and blasphemous portrayal at Brathwaite’s hands. Brathwaite’s poetry thus enacts that of which it speaks; God is broken, rhythmically “beaten,” and rendered anew. As Brathwaite suggests of the colonial subjects and their ancestors, in the final lines of the trilogy, he, too, is “making / with [his] / rhythms some- / thing torn / and new” (Arrivants, 270).
Moreover, obscenity itself seems an internally conflicted mode of utterance, a manner of speaking that frequently cancels itself out, due to its conflation of the sacred and profane. As Geoffrey Hughes comments profanities often stem from either allusions to deities or to the human anatomy and its bodily functions, and thus "shows a curious convergence of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane" (4).

For the purposes of this chapter, I am defining the act of cursing widely in order to include spells and obscenity, and I am therefore extrapolating from Caliban’s meaning of curse as a charm or hex to include profanity. Along these lines, Hughes succinctly describes the evolution of swearing, from utterances made in God’s name to baser forms of profanity, in this manner: "The crude history of swearing, however named...is that people used mainly to swear by or to, but now swear mostly at" (4).

Jahan Ramanzani also argues that irony is an art form or practice historically found in Caribbean culture. "Although irony may seem to be a Western formalist concept, one of the world’s most vibrant figures for the ironist is the folk hero Anancy—the mystical spider who gives his name to animal tales and even to West Indian storytelling in general. Derived from a West African prototype, he is arguably the Afro-Caribbean counterpart to the Greek eiron..." See, for an extended discussion, "Irony and Postcoloniality: Louise Bennet’s Anancy Poetics" in The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English. 103-141).

See also Walcott’s “Crusoe’s Island” in which the castaway Crusoe seems as monstrous and inhuman as Caliban: “all the joys / But one / Which sent him howling for a human voice” Collected Poems 1948-1984, (69).

According to Derrida, Dionysius begins his initiation of Timothy in Mystical Theology, with a prayer, an apostrophe to God, and then, an address to Timothy beseeching him to be earnest in his own prayers. Derrida suggests that this splitting of Dionysius’ prayer violates the precept that a prayer must address God only. However, Timothy’s initiation, and the instruction of the reader of Mystical Theology as well, is dependent upon such a repetition of address and prayer, and therefore upon contamination itself. See Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” 48.

Later in the poem, Tom’s sons reconsider their cruelty and reassess their dismissal of him: “But where are the dreams / of that bug happy, trash- / holstered tropical bed / when Uncle Tom lived / and we cursed him? This / the new deal for we black grinning jacks?” (Arrivants, 36).

Homi Bhabha discusses the relationship between stereotypes and colonial discourse in a manner that is relevant for Brathwaite’s Tom: “An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known and something that must be anxiously repeated...” (66). Though Bhabha’s concept of fixity relates to the realm of discourse, I am arguing that such fixity has a real counterpart in terms of the social paralysis Brathwaite describes. Moreover, I would argue that stereotypes themselves function as verbal “sacrifices,” in which the status quo within communities is often maintained through familiar derogatory stereotypes.

Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.


Wolosky specifically asserts that language is inadequate to represent the unity of God because language is “by definition fragmentary. It is discursive and successive, partial in its unfolding” (16).
Chapter 4

Something from Nothing:  
The Disontological Poetics of Leslie Scalapino and Jackson Mac Low

When we talk about our way, there is apt to be some misunderstanding, because the true way always has at least two sides, the negative and the positive... We cannot speak in a positive and negative way at the same time. So we do not know what to say. It is almost impossible to talk about Buddhism. So not to say anything, just to practice it, is the best way.

—Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*

Leslie Scalapino’s writings require of their reader a tremendous amount of concentration, discipline, and patience. The sentences that Scalapino uses within her poems are often spare, affectless, and radically discontinuous, and because these sentences are frequently bereft of a stable or easily identifiable context, they can alternately produce a hypnotic allure or a jarring, disoriented sensation. Jackson Mac Low’s poetry equally poses a challenge to its audience, for similar disjunctive qualities arise in his works, and Mac Low’s compositional methods, including chance operations, acrostics, and non-intentional processes of text selection, lead to poems that resist straightforward syntax or a clear conveyance of meaning. In his preface to Mac Low’s
Representative Works 1938-1985, Jerome Rothenberg remembers his initial reaction to Mac Low’s play Verdurous Sanguinaria as being marked by confusion and discomfiture:

My own first response to Mac Low was one of resistance, which (since I was still inexperienced) I didn’t recognize as a sign that something important and new was going on... We just couldn’t get with it that night—although it touched off the obvious comparisons to things we said we admired: Dada or the works of Gertrude Stein: the great traditions of the 20th century experimental poetry & art. But it’s one thing to carry the torch for events already historical—another to tune in to the work of a contemporary moving in what seemed like a bewildering, even a “self-indulgent” direction. (Representative Works, v)

I have quoted Rothenberg’s reaction at length because I think that his remarks have bearing for an understanding of, and approach to, Mac Low’s and Scalapino’s writings particularly in light of Rothenberg’s characterization of himself as a puzzled initiate who only subsequently apprehends what he has observed. Like the efforts of a novice in some esoteric tradition, the readers and observers of Mac Low’s and Scalapino’s texts and performances must engage in a careful practice of focused attention due to the complex and abstruse nature of both poets’ writings.

That the work of these poets demands a level of nearly meditative concentration is not altogether too surprising. One might find a corollary in the fact that Scalapino and Mac Low develop their poetics in part from Buddhist principles and can point to their own introduction to Buddhism as formative for their poetics. Speaking of Gertrude Stein with whom she is often compared, Scalapino has remarked upon the prior, and far reaching, influence of Buddhist philosophy on her poetry:

Phenomenology and Stein’s view of the continuous present and her view of perception have some similarity to views of perception and phenomena in Tibetan and Zen Buddhist philosophy (such as that of the early Indian Philosopher Nagarjuna), which writings seem to me far more radical than
Stein’s and which had already influenced me before I came to read her.

(Frost, 22)

Mac Low similarly describes how the teachings of Buddhism are integral to his poetry.

“All types of Buddhism teach the ultimate illusoriness of the ego…Zen taught me both to try to minimize the expression of the ego during the act of composition and to let each word, etc., ‘speak for itself.’ Kegon [Buddhism] taught me to make manifest the mutual interpenetration of beings, especially in performance works” [qtd. in McCaffrey, 188]. The emphasis Zen Buddhism places on practice, or zazen, a disciplined exercise of meditation that includes proper sitting posture, breathing techniques and clearing of the mind, further points to important attributes of both poets’ work, including a fascination with the recursive process of writing and critiques of subjectivity within that process.

Acknowledging the influences of Buddhism on Scalapino’s and Mac Low’s work can help initiate readers into the intricacies of their texts, and one might even profitably focus on the very word practice itself. Indeed, considering the word practice, with its connotations of both methodology and repeated exercise, focuses the reader’s attention on their poetics, their poetic practice, and on the significance of repetition within their poetry. As Mac Low and Scalapino employ repetitive, ironic, and self-canceling utterances throughout their poetry, they forge a very self-reflexive approach to writing, yet this hyper-awareness of the methods of composition surprisingly leads towards a critique of traditional notions of authorship. Just as practitioners of zazen work to attain a level of egolessness through repeated efforts of meditation, Scalapino and Mac Low practice a self-reflexive discipline of negative poetics to challenge conventional Western conceptions of both the process of writing and the nature of being.
The negations inherent to Scalapino’s and Mac Low’s writings express complex philosophical and religious preoccupations with the nature of being. Asceticism and a goal of attaining emptiness, or non-thinking, are attributes familiarly associated with the negative way in Buddhism. To understand the role of negation in the Buddhist tradition somewhat further, however, one might productively compare Buddhist principles of negation with Christian negative theology and its premises about the impossibility of expressing God’s essence. For Christians and Buddhists respectively, articulations of God and of Buddha-nature fail to approximate the magnitude of which they speak.

Consequently, J. P. Williams argues that there is a fundamental consonance between these two traditions regarding the inability to express the divine adequately:

Apophatically minded Buddhists and Christians are both committed to negating both the realist ontology, and its contradictory, because an ontology is a conceptuality, and apophasis denies all conceptualities. Within the terms of the apophatic traditions, therefore, Buddhism and Christianity share what we might call a disontology, and are thus analogous (11).

This denial of conceptualities follows from the premise that God or enlightenment cannot be put into words or into conceptual categories because language and concepts are dualistic in nature. The divine is understood to be an ultimate unity whose very singleness and being would be undermined by dualistic thought or language.¹ Scalapino and Mac Low, I argue, likewise seek to eschew dualistic thinking within their writing and therefore draw on the apophatic tradition of negation to generate a disontological poetics. For Scalapino, her poetics of disontology primarily manifests itself in a radical negation and redefinition of the poetic sentence and in her efforts to demonstrate, often through irony, the emptiness of phenomena and reality. Mac Low, on the other hand, formulates
his disontological poetry by underscoring the fundamental disorderliness of writing, insisting on a process of endless revision, and making blank spaces integral to his texts.²

A frequent writer of essays about poetry and poetics, Scalapino makes the disontology of her own poetics explicit in commentaries on her work and those of other poets. Addressing what she calls “radical” or experimental poetry of writers like Robert Grenier, Philip Whalen and Jackson Mac Low, Scalapino provides a gloss on their writing that is equally relevant for her own poetry:

Contemporary avant-garde...practices...can be compared to Nagarjuna’s delineation of interrelation: both the practice and perception being modes only, or operations without entity. In other words, the ‘practices,’ so to speak, are continually only that and also not that. If procedures are used, the work (text, which may also be dance, performance, video) cannot be described as inherently those procedures. (The Public World, 57)

Scalapino’s point is that a poem ought to be distinguished and held distinct from the procedures or practice from which the poet works because a poem does not have an inherent existence but instead expresses a quality of impermanence or transience. To phrase it another way, a poem, for Scalapino, is not an embodiment of a theory, a reified object produced from a method; rather a poem is itself an ongoing action or process. Scalapino succinctly characterizes her conception of this aspect of poetry through an imperative statement: “one is to find out what is there, as occurrence” (54). Redefining the poem as momentary occurrence, as being in motion or as something without entity, Scalapino further concludes that a poem or writing doesn’t exist—or is, in other words, disontological. “Poetically in present-time this suggest to me that writing that is its syntactical and structural motion (doesn’t exist ‘there’ as a sole entity...nor in any other form than its moves)” (The Public World, 54). In re-conceiving the poem as an
occurrence, Scalapino follows a fundamental tenet of Buddhism. For, as Shunryu Suzuki has written, “the basic teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of transiency, or change. That everything changes is the basic truth for each existence” (102). In an attempt to enact this basic tenet of transience within her poetry, Scalapino must insist on the lack of a permanent, inherent existence of the poem, and it is within this context that writing “doesn’t exist ‘there’ as a sole entity” for Scalapino.

Scalapino’s fascination with impermanence, though, does not only stem from her involvement with Buddhism; she also productively draws on other disciplines like physics. In the epigraph to Way, for example, Scalapino quotes physicist David Bohm’s Causality & Chance in Modern Physics, in which Bohm argues against the possibility of defining an entity or thing with any precision because of its interconnection with other entities. Bohm develops his argument by stating that things, due to the passage of time, cannot be said to be self-identical. “Carrying the analysis further, we now note that because of the infinity of factors determining what any given thing is are always changing with time, no such thing can even remain identical with itself as time passes” (Way, 1). Adopting concepts about change from both physics and Buddhist tradition, Scalapino aspires towards a poetry of impermanence and in so doing, generates a disontological poetics that reveals the inherent emptiness of things, proving them to be without entity.

Scalapino primarily enacts the transience of her poetry through contradictory utterances, and this appeal to contradiction further situates Scalapino within both the Buddhist and the apophatic traditions. For example, in the quote from the paragraph
above, one sees how Scalapino elaborates on her comment about avant-garde poetic practices being "operations without entity" by saying that these practices are "only that" and "not that." While this statement seems to be a contradictory, and therefore meaningless, utterance, Scalapino here endeavors to formulate a non-dualistic understanding of experimental poetry. The very purposefulness and unabashed nature of this contradiction aligns Scalapino with what Williams refers to as the apophatic thinking of Buddhism. According to Williams, Buddhist masters realized that "words need, if they are to be skilful, somehow to undermine themselves, to incorporate apophatic markers which will alert the hearer to his/her need to break out of discriminatory thinking." Consequently, Zen masters, adhering to the notion that neither reality nor enlightenment can be accurately put into words, chose to "opt for the language of paradox, apparently contradicting what they themselves have previously said and what is taught by others" (55). Contradiction in this manner allows for an articulation of Buddha-nature because paradoxical or contradictory phrasing appropriately conveys the meaning of enlightenment indirectly. Indeed, it is through a series, or process of, negations that a teaching may be sufficiently apprehended: what may seem counterintuitive and irrational can achieve a level of reasonability when expressed through contradiction or negation. For example, Suzuki suggests there are benefits to embracing transience through a series of contradictory statements. According to Buddhist principles, transience of the world is what causes suffering, yet this transience can nevertheless be liberating:

We should find the truth of this world, through our difficulties, through our suffering...Pleasure is not different from difficulty. Good is not different
from bad. Bad is good; good is bad. They are two sides of one coin... So to find pleasure in suffering is the only way to accept the truth of transiency.

(103)

Such a passage exemplifies what Williams describes as a cumulative effect of contradiction, in which “the piling of contradictions one upon another can take on an apophatic hue” and thereby yields an insight through a series of self-canceling sentences (55). Scalapino, for her own part, adopts contradictory or self-canceling utterances to form an alternative method of reasoning to Western deductive logic.

In Scalapino’s writing, this mode of contradiction amounts to a rhythm or meter where the careful undoing of statements is a familiar tactic. Scalapino’s use of contradiction begins to take on a staccato rhythm in which propositions are pondered and then rejected, and the very rhythm of phrasing functions as part of the cognitive process, as in the following lines from Scalapino’s prose poem The Return of Painting. “There is no childhood—people are the same. Or they’re not at all the same” (The Return of Painting, 8). Here, the echo of a similar short phrase, in addition to the negative markers, reinforces the thought Scalapino is expressing. The exact gist of Scalapino’s meaning develops from both repetition and negation, as she suggests simultaneously and somehow sequentially that children ought not to be considered a separate class of people nor should all humans be deemed alike. In “Formalism, Feminism, and Genre Slipping in the Poetic Writings of Leslie Scalapino,” Laura Hinton describes this effect of simultaneity in relation to Scalapino’s much discussed adaptation of the comic book form. Scalapino “rejects a perception of motion based on linear or chronological time; rather she creates an image of back-and-forth motion, conveying a sense of simultaneity, just as narrative
frames are viewed simultaneously, before and after, in the comic book form” (135). While I agree that Scalapino disrupts a notion of linear time, I would argue that there necessarily remains a serial mode of accretion along with the simultaneous. Such a reading would thus acknowledge the “back and forth motion” that Hinton describes and the serial process of negation that is fundamental to Scalapino’s disruption of linear time. Moreover, what is thus particularly engaging in Scalapino’s phrasing is that knowledge is produced through a serial process of negations and contradictions that opens up the field of inquiry from one term to another. Joseph Conte has argued the importance of serial form to Scalapino’s poetry in which disparate lines of the poems are at once independent and connected, suggesting that: “each phrase or clause—linked in the paratactic manner common to seriality—is like free-floating particle” (276). Extrapolating Conte’s account of Scalapino’s serial form to a theory of knowledge, one may observe how Scalapino employs seriality to develop a mental process of negation that builds upon itself, so that “every element undergoes a gradual but ceaseless qualification” (278).

In another section from The Return of Painting, Scalapino describes the knowledge she acquires as a young person by invoking the same process of serial negation. Scalapino recounts watching as a student a film about a sit-in at a diner during the Civil Rights movement. “Seeing a film, as it happened, of some sitting in at a lunch counter in a dime store sit-in, the man throwing a milk-shake splashing covering the face of a young man seated, who bows his face” (The Return of Painting 37). While the film documents an act of protest from a specific historical era, Scalapino’s purpose in her
description is focused as much on her own sense of alienation within the disciplinary
school system as it is on the conditions of segregation.

Guided. Not Guided. Not having been guided seated in the class, having
done the worst on the test which is foolish, nothing, knowing that and
having to fight. Which theirs would be to be that other thing and then
supposedly be accepted but to be accepted will never be. To have to be
not oneself. Knowing that. Not Guided.

(The Return of Painting, 37)

Both the repetition of negations and the contradictory utterances reveal Scalapino’s
discomfort as she recognizes a parallel between being “guided seated in the class” and the
tension-filled actions of those at the sit-in. Epitomizing Scalapino’s own sense of “not
[being] guided,” the filmed sit-in erupts in violence, with “boys in [the] crowd [breaking]
loose, running—without recourse—and the men beating and clubbing a boy” (37). The
chaos of the scene compounds Scalapino’s sense that even with compliance with school
rules she may “supposedly be accepted but to be accepted will never be.” Scalapino
hardly intends to suggest here that her difficulties growing up rival the civil rights abuses
in the South, yet she does want to acknowledge similar power structures, where one is
forced “to have to be not oneself.” Scalapino thus carefully dramatizes the scene with
multiple layers; a young alienated person sits to watch a film about an entire segment of
the population itself alienated and subjugated. The spectacle of the film, furthermore,
reinforces the feelings of social separation in Scalapino as a viewer. Registering her
reaction through a series of negated utterances, Scalapino thus implicitly critiques the
school’s intended didactic pedagogical practices that transform a historical event into an
inert exercise of watching a film.
Interestingly, Scalapino nevertheless finds the disassociation sparked by the film ultimately both intriguing and productive. Presumably contrary to the desired effect of the film, the feeling of disassociation paradoxically situates Scalapino advantageously, allowing her to realize her own alienation. Charting the feminist implications of Scalapino’s writing, Hinton argues that Scalapino challenges conventional representations of the female subject by depicting and reassessing the alienated or isolated position of that subject within the political sphere. “The concept of ‘separation’ is a subtle one running throughout [Scalapino’s] work, indicating her particular view of [the female] subject’s a-positionality...Scalapino...achieves this effect through a gendered edge of ‘separation,’ expressing the paradoxical relationship between inside and outside that politically informs the subject” (133). While Hinton’s comments correctly identify Scalapino’s impulses to play with the position of the subject, I would argue that the separation that Hinton describes is also a function of enunciation, or more precisely, is achieved through negative utterances that are self-canceling. For Scalapino, a state of a-positionality comes through the process of a series of (stated) negations. In this manner, one might re-read “to have to be not oneself not as the mark of subjugation but as an edifying prospect of being marginal and announcing oneself as so.

For Scalapino, non-being, or disontology, is something that must be spoken or performed through language, and consequently, Scalapino willfully adopts negative or contradictory speech patterns within her poetry as a way of enacting this “not-being” in the world. Scalapino believes that language and speech has the power to repudiate familiar conceptions about presence, and she asserts that language, poetic or otherwise,
works to undo presence. Relating a story about the use of profanity by Black students in her high school, for example, Scalapino describes the playfulness and the artfulness of obscenity as a mode of speech and suggests that this mode of speaking effects a repudiation of being in the world. Admiring the musical nature of obscenity and its potential for complex verbal expressions, Scalapino first delineates the inherent irony of a particular expression of profanity:

As a youth while a student at Berkeley High School, I noticed the common usage (Black or African American) of a fragment of speech functioning as a musical phrase, “Sh(a)-ma-faa” (Shit-mother-fucker); usually spoken melodiously by boys to each other, rather than spoken by girls. The phrase had a benign, communicative use which was the exclamation of awe, or pretended exclamation of awe, [and] which was therefore a commentary meaning the opposite; or both at the same time, both ironic commentary on and exclamation of awe.

(The Public World, 57)

As an utterance, “Sh(a)-ma-faa,” embodies the principles of undoing that Scalapino strives for within her disontological poetics. Vacillating between establishing and canceling meaning, the ironic utterance wavers between saying and unsaying and between simultaneous statements of amazement and boredom. Scalapino further observes that this principle of undoing works equally on the level of social existence and on a linguistic or verbal level. Indeed, due to its self-reflexivity, the construction “Sh(a)-ma-faa,” as Scalapino asserts, steps outside the act of speech itself, performing a radical re-investigation of being and an undoing of presence:

It was nonreferential words, the obscenity taken into a different (not transcendent) usage by being that (by being obscenity). Therefore, it seemed to imply being outside the ‘social’ as the act of creating that ‘social’ (communing, as two people speaking to each other only then).

By their speaking they could go past the bounds of speaking—and were also outside of any ‘social’ apprehension and interpretation.

(The Public World, 57)
Scalapino’s explication describes the phrase “Sh(a)-ma-faa” as possessing nearly ritualistic or incantatory properties through which the speakers transform themselves. Magical properties aside, the performative nature of these utterances has real social implications and effects. A normal phatic utterance operates by “revealing or sharing feelings or establishing an atmosphere of sociability rather than communicating ideas,” yet the phrase witnessed by Scalapino operates in both a cohesive and non-social manner. “Sh(a)-ma-faa” works to achieve a connection amongst the black high school students, but it also simultaneously enacts the opposite, as it speaks to their alienation, and even, according to Scalapino, purposely performs a disconnection from society. The fact that the expression was non-referential indicates for Scalapino that the very act of speaking this particular utterance frees the speakers themselves from social conventions, so that “by their speaking they could go past the bounds of speaking—and were also outside of any ‘social’ apprehension and interpretation.” Here one understands that the a-positionality Hinton ascribed to Scalapino’s construction of the female subject equally arises from actual speech patterns and from the consequent effects of ironic and contradictory utterances on social existence.

Scalapino further depicts this extra-social or non-social space which is “outside of any ‘social’ apprehension and interpretation” through the motif of the comic book that courses through her texts. The comic book’s aesthetics inform Scalapino’s poetry on a variety of levels, including her equation of syntactic units with the frames of a comic book, in which “each of the lines or the paragraphs is one of the frames of the comic book” (Orion, 157). However, Scalapino also relates the comic book form to being,
stating definitively that "the comic book is the self" (*The Return of Painting*, 64). Though Scalapino may use the comic book as a figure for one's identity, it is an image of the self that bears little resemblance to the Cartesian subject. In fact, Scalapino appears drawn to the comic book precisely because it radically transforms matters of time and space and consequently disrupts the parameters of subjectivity. As mentioned previously, Scalapino employs the comic book as a way of depicting non-linear time within her poems, but she adopts the form of the comic book to challenge conceptions of space as well. Admitting a fascination for the spatial dynamics of comic books, Scalapino has discussed the appeal of the box or frame of the comic and the box's corresponding manipulation and alteration of the page. "I even like the idea of the visual shape of the comic book being those different boxes that are all over the place" (Frost, 17). As Scalapino further describes the comic book in terms of a negative space and depthlessness, she details qualities of the comic book that epitomize her disontological poetics. Composed with a poem's recognizable line breaks but often reading like an essay, *The Pearl* veritably straddles the lines between essay and poem as Scalapino discourses on the comic book's flatness and emptiness and the consequent effect the comic book has on being:

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the form of the comic book so
it doesn't matter
the self—that's the
same form
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This was said earlier than (this). There wouldn't be a sense of time.
there—is no—future
This is arbitrary—was.
So that repression would not be a way of giving depth.

(*The Pearl*, 101-2)
Scalapino’s words here modify both the comic book and the self by ironically playing on the meaning of *matter*. A genre whose cultural importance has been traditionally overlooked, the comic book “doesn’t matter” and thus becomes, for Scalapino, a perfect vehicle for denying the self’s substance, which itself “doesn’t [possess] matter.” As Scalapino attests elsewhere, the comic book, though it is meant to signify the self in her poetry, paradoxically exists as an inert and empty space: “There isn’t a life, that is apparent in the comic book” (*The Pearl*, 139). As a result of its framing properties and its artificial, box-like constructions, the comic book functions equally to delimit space and represent a circumscribed, if not an outright negated, existence: “So that repression would not be a way of giving depth.” The negative space of the comic book in Scalapino’s hands thus becomes an important way of negating subjectivity, for she recurrently represents the self as empty.

Scalapino further explores in her writing the aesthetics of the comic book and its relation to negative space by quoting Henri Matisse and juxtaposing his work, as representative of high art, with the more “low” or popular form of the comic book. Matisse’s words emerge abruptly in *The Pearl* with the disjunctive force of a non sequitur and sound so deadpan, quoted as they are by Scalapino, that they suggest an ironic commentary on her part:

> Here they’re dancing dragging the floor and the constructors foxtrotting fast and suavely. The second-partner constructor is there. My line drawings are the purest and most direct expression of my emotion. (Matisse.) group, in the very center slight leaping.  

(*The Pearl*, 103)
While Scalapino may very well appreciate Matisse’s art, his advocacy of emotion and expressiveness seems at odds with the lack of affect in the majority of Scalapino’s poetry. Her quotation of Matisse thus remains tantalizingly ambivalent, expressing an apparent admiration for Matisse but with a discernible hint of reservation and skepticism, exemplary of what Mikhail Bakhtin called double-voiced locution. According to Bakhtin, a double-voiced utterance “serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (Bakhtin, 324). Quoted within Scalapino’s poem, Matisse’s sentence, then, speaks for itself, recounting a belief in the emotional depth and direct expression of his drawings, yet his words also convey Scalapino’s repudiation of depth and her slight mockery of emotional expressiveness. A more viable model than Matisse for Scalapino’s take on depth and emotion may be the visual artist Cindy Sherman whose photographs have been described by critics as exemplifying postmodern aesthetics of depthlessness. David Harvey, for example includes in *The Condition of Postmodernism* an anecdote about his viewing of a photography show by Cindy Sherman and his surprising realization that all of the photographs from the exhibit were of the same person—the artist herself—in various, and often melodramatic, guises. Harvey writes that the photographic images, though theatrical in nature, conveyed not expressiveness but a sheer, artificial quality in which “the plasticity of the human personality [demonstrated by] the malleability of appearances and surfaces is striking” (7). Scalapino herself has discussed her own writing in similar terms of superficiality and even alludes to Sherman’s photographs and
their muted and flattened effects. Commenting on her desire to create erotic literature purged of its emotional or volatile charge, Scalapino describes a passage from her book *Defoe* in blank and impassive terms:

It’s as if in music you could get a deadpan, a neutral tone, and actually do something with that neutral tone, if such existed. It seems always to stay that same thing, but it produces responses in you. It doesn’t have depth, and because it doesn’t have depth, you have a reaction to it. That’s what I think about Cindy Sherman’s work, for example. There’s something interesting about giving a surface that doesn’t have depth.

(Frost, 8)

Unlike the expressivity of Matisse’s line drawing, Scalapino’s comic book aesthetics aspire towards a negation of tone, depth, space and subjectivity, and it is exactly to this sense of the negated that Scalapino envisions her readers responding. Further indicative of Scalapino’s disontological poetics, Scalapino surmises about her own and Sherman’s work that “there is and is not the expectation of that being the “real” person” (Frost, 9).

Scalapino’s development of her poetics around negative space aligns her poetry with negative theology and its tenets about the inexpressibility of divine essence. Indeed, in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Jacques Derrida focuses much of his attention in his discussion of negative theology on the Greek word *khora*, which possesses almost identical spatial properties to Scalapino’s adaptation of the comic book and the disontological poetics the comic book inspires. Using Plato’s *Timaeus* as a source text, Derrida explains that the khora is the space in which the demiurge, Plato’s creator of the material world, begins the cosmos. Derrida further describes the khora as an impossible space, a space paradoxically already in existence, though it pre-dates the sensible world of the cosmos. As Derrida argues, the khora “must already have been there, as the ‘there’
itself, beyond time or in any case beyond becoming, in a beyond time without common
measure with the eternity of the ideas and the becoming of sensible things” (35). Beyond
time and beyond becoming, the non-space of the khora would also be something that escapes categories of being:

Under the name of khora, the place belongs neither to the sensible nor to the
intelligible, neither to becoming, nor to non-being (the khora is never described
as a void), nor to Being: according to Plato, the quantity or the quality of Being
are measured against its intelligibility...there is something that is neither a being
nor a nothingness. (36)

Though Derrida is careful not to describe the khora as a void or as an instance of non-
being, the khora is nevertheless something nearly impossible to designate and is not
something that could be said to have being, for it is, as Derrida asserts, neither sensible
nor intelligible. Like the khora, Scalapino’s comic book is a space equally difficult to
describe and is also a space that rejects common conceptual categorizations:

the men sagging swaying as they carry the sedan chairs on the slope,
and breathing. Which is the comic book.
being inside itself—so it’s the same as that, and so it can’t come out
can’t come out—of what—?

(The Pearl, 126)

Here, repetition, directionless propositions, dashes that signify the halting of speech, and
even an exasperated question mark, all indicate speech faltering before the negative space
of the comic book. Producing a state of ineffability, the comic book defies understanding
and, comparable to the effects of the khora, seems only to inspire contradictory utterances
as well as statements of incomprehension:

Why be in the comic book. We simply are in it.
Yet we must try to be in it. I don’t know how.

(Orion, 207)
Because the khora defies intelligibility and resists articulation, it functions within negative theology as a model for the inexpressibility of God’s essence. Articulating the khora thus approximates speaking of God, for both the khora and God can only be described obliquely or in the negative. As it begins to take on a ritualistic or incantatory quality, speech about the khora forms a practice of negation and contradiction intended to yield an indirect, and negated, intuition of the divine or of enlightenment.

By understanding the negative space of the comic book, and the analogous negative space of the khora, one may more properly appreciate how Scalapino predicates her poetry on Buddhist principles and negative theology. For Scalapino, the comic book, and its negative spatial properties, provide a figure for both a faulty perception of reality and an impaired visual sense that paradoxically yields a better “seeing” of the truth. Scalapino often performs a mantra of negations that testifies to impoverished faculties of perception, yet these hymns to negation lead at times to an unexpected statement of hopefulness. Urban homelessness and violence, a familiar motif within Scalapino’s poetry, provides the context for the following quote in which a group of homeless people is being manipulated by one person, a bully who coaxes the crowd into harassing the patrons of a grocery store:

Some homeless people are by the Safeway, where they congregate.

The instigating bully has a way of flattering them.

they see that
or don’t—and it isn’t there. They’re not interpreting it that way
   Then seeing it on the retina is reading memory only.
   They say—who really are all right (if that is)—that to approach anyone or
   the stream in that manner makes no sense. Not that sense is there. it. isn’t. and
   we are open. (Orion, 208)

What is paramount in the scene is Scalapino’s focus on the crowd’s (lack of) perception
of their manipulation by the bully and, more generally, their social state of poverty. With
her attention focused on the act of perception, Scalapino first postulates the possibility of
sight and then quickly negates it. Abiding by the negative spatial properties of the khora,
Scalapino strips her initial postulation (“they see that / or don’t”) of any objective or
ontological status (“it isn’t there”); in a simple tautological phrase, there is no “there”
there. Accordingly for Scalapino’s disontological poetics, the space that she delineates,
like the space of the khora, is neither intelligible nor sensible, (“Not that sense is there. it.
isn’t,”) and exists, if at all, only as an absence. Despite a repudiation of the senses and
the overwhelming sense of negation in the passage, the final tone is one of optimism and
levity, and the statement “we are open” connotes a wisdom that has been predicated upon
negation.

The rejection of sight, moreover, has a symbolic significance, one that relates to a
Buddhist repudiation of reality, particularly as the passage above relates to the inability of
perceiving one’s social manipulation. In language that again demonstrates the power that
negation possesses to develop an insight, Scalapino advances a theory of reality in line
with Buddhist principles:

The deconstruction of our view of reality is oneself in one time not maintaining
either one’s own subjective view or the social or phenomenological inter-
pretation of occurrences. Nor is this ‘not holding a view.’

("The Recovery of the Public Word, 54")
Reality, thus, is something to be undone, requiring a person to situate themselves in an impossible or a-positional space, outside of oneself and outside of society, like the “places” (“sh(a)-ma-faa,” the khora, or the comic book) discussed earlier. In formulating her view of reality, Scalapino alludes to Nagarajuna’s formulation of the real, which proceeds from a series of negated and contradictory propositions: “Everything is real (tathyam), not real, both real and not real, and neither real nor not real” (qtd. in “Public Word,” 55). Scalapino’s own statement about reality, and the one from Nargarajuna on which she draws, critiques an objective belief in the real and indicates a skeptical thinking intended to transform conceptual categories. J.P. Williams argues that such repeated affirmations and negations like those of Nagarajuna should not be understood as a synthesis of polar opposites but as a process intended to “circum[vent] our tendency to read dualities as either-or” (172). Praising the practice of this mode of logic by the Thirteenth-century Japanese monk Dogen Zenji, Williams explains that the contradictory affirmations and negations are intended to reach a higher truth:

Dogen consistently avoids resolving dualities, either in favour of one term absolutely, or by positing a new synthetic term. Rather his insistence upon a strictly nondualistic nondualism leaves...his only option being...to entangle his words with paradox and with constant re-readings, [so] that these very entanglements become presentations of the Dharma. (173)

Scalapino’s invocation of negative spaces, and the negative utterances that seem to proceed from them, thus performs, through indirection and contradiction, a radical critique of conventional concepts of reality and becomes a way to present enlightenment itself.
While Scalapino bases her deconstruction of the view of reality on a Buddhist-inflected premise of being outside both a subjective and a social perspective, a perhaps more familiar precedent for this line of thinking can be found in Walter Benjamin’s essays on Charles Baudelaire. Scalapino herself alludes to “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in Orion, even going so far as to provide the title of Benjamin’s book Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism as reference within the text of her poem. In his essay, Benjamin assesses poetry in the modern age, arguing that urban existence, including over-crowded streets, new technologies (the telephone, factory machines, conveyor belts etc.) and cultural innovations like newspapers, film and advertisements, has contributed to a climate “increasingly inhospitable” for lyric poetry (155). Marveling at the difficulty facing the modern poet, Benjamin accordingly frames the matter this way: “the question suggests itself how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm” (162). Drawing on Freud’s theories that it is the function of consciousness to provide protection against such overwhelming stimuli, Benjamin outlines a process in which the poet must parry the disturbances of the modern age by using his (poetic) consciousness. For Baudelaire, the foremost shock arose from the masses of people in Paris, as Benjamin asserts, “of all the experiences which made his life what it was, Baudelaire singled out his having been jostled by the crowd as the decisive, unique experience” (193). Baudelaire’s response to the crowd consequently was one of disassociation; Baudelaire endeavored through the composition of his poetry to step outside of himself, to secure, in Benjamin’s words, “the emancipation from experiences” (162). Baudelaire’s imperative was thus to remain
outside, detached from experiences, for “if the [shock] were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience” (162). Such emancipation from experiences exemplifies what Scalapino means by the “deconstruction of [the] view of reality,” and she seeks the establishment of a viewpoint that transcends both a subjective and social perspective. Adopting Benjamin’s terminology of emancipation, Scalapino formulates her theory of the comic book and proposes a poetics that views reality from “outside” of the self and civilization:

To be emancipated from experiences, in the comic book – to be it as such.

to have no other self
than in the comic book

and so for one not to be in rapport with it-or with experience-as being Baudelaire’s discovery.

Being outside of the experiences of the civilization-that can be by these not having order. (155)

Scalapino, as I have argued previously, considers the comic book, like the khora, to be a negative space. “[T]o have no other self / than in the comic book” is thus for Scalapino to relinquish one’s identity and to empty it of substance, and the negative spatial properties of the comic book equally ensure its exclusion from the social realm as well, being “outside of the experiences of the civilization.”

Stemming neither from a subjective nor a social perspective, the comic book, Scalapino’s trope for an aesthetic practice and a way of (non)-being, is perhaps best understood as a mode of contemplation—or more specifically as a mode of not-thinking. In this way, Benjamin’s description of the emancipation from experience corresponds closely with the Buddhist concept of not-thinking (or Fushiryo), an emptying of the mind
which is undertaken to attain enlightenment. Like the consciousness that acts as a buffer to shocking experiences, Williams explains that *Fushiryo* functions similarly as a filter of (albeit less traumatic) stimuli. “*Fushiryo* might thus be taken as standing for something like the quietening of the mind as a result of not responding to the stimuli of thoughts as they arrive” (165-6). Scalapino herself makes explicit reference in *Orion* to a Buddhist concept of not-thinking as she designates the comic book as a contemplative practice:

> Not using the mind—is contemplating—in the comic book.
> The newspapers have created the impression of disjointed experiences.
> But I don’t read them.

anyway, we’re not in these experiences
is the impression created by the newspapers which
do not allow us to make connections
Not having historical experience—is the comic book as the form of the se-

Not having historical experience—is the comic book as the form of the serial novel. Though popularly we’re supposed to be in them—this is a deprivation created by the newspaper themselves.

Scalapino here couches the comparison between not-thinking and the comic book in a seemingly paradoxical statement. The contradictory phrase may be more readily understood, however, if taken simply: “Not using the mind,”—as an emptying or clearing of the mind—is an active form of “contemplating,” however negatively construed it may be. Scalapino, moreover, specifically contrasts this not-thinking with the act of reading a newspaper and the newspaper’s detrimental effects on one’s consciousness. In this, Scalapino’s denunciation of newspapers alludes once again to Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire, where Benjamin laments the stultifying and isolating effects of newspapers:
Man's inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience. Newspapers constitute one of many evidences of such an inability. If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its intention is just the opposite...to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader.

In light of a comparison to newspapers, Scalapino's advocacy of fushiryo or "not using the mind" thus begins to assume more complexity. The newspaper, as both Benjamin and Scalapino conceive of it, encourages a sense of disorientation and mindlessness, an effect not to be confused with the negating, yet productive, purpose of "fushiryo."

Designed to relay a large amount of information in a relatively small space, newspapers epitomize the abundance of stimuli that Benjamin argues assaults the modern age. As a recourse for those bombarded by information or burdensome thoughts, the Buddhist notion of non-thinking intends, by comparison, a reduction in the amount of stimuli. In an anecdote which could be read as an allegory for the stimuli present in contemporary existence, Shunryu Suzuki explains how beneficial such an emptying of the mind might be:

When you walk along the brook you will hear the water running. The sound is continuous, but you must be able to stop it if you want to stop it. This is freedom; this is renunciation. One after another you will have various thoughts in your mind, but if you want to stop your thinking you can.

Drawing from Benjamin's analysis and Baudelaire's poetic practice of experiential emancipation, Scalapino unfolds a concept of clearing of the mind first by employing the comic book as a trope for contemplation and then by contrasting this mode of contemplation with the overwhelming and isolating effects of the newspaper. In
designating the comic book as an act of relinquishing or renouncing ideas, Scalapino again imputes negative properties to the comic book: not merely a figure for a negative space, the comic book represents the act or process of intellectual negation as well.

Scalapino demonstrates another important distinction that obtains between the newspaper and her concept of the comic book regarding how each might produce perceptions of social order and of reality. Critics of mainstream newspapers frequently object to the form and content of newspapers and, skeptical of the newspapers’ interests, claim that an image of political stability and order is often too readily or artificially manufactured. David Spurr, for example, argues that an underlying emphasis of newspapers is to minimize the more troubling political implications of news events:

Thus the press presents a dynamic image of the world that is curiously both volatile and stable, in which periodic explosions into disorder are always brought somehow back under control. This restoration of order, however, is not simply the subject of journalistic observation and approval; it is also a structural element of narrative representation: the story imposes its own order quite apart from, if supplementary to, the order restored by official action. (44)

As Spurr suggests, stories within newspapers follow a teleological narrative arc in which periods of crisis are followed by the resolution of the crisis and the maintenance of order. Scalapino’s conception of the comic book, by contrast, observes a non-linear mode of exposition and perception, one that corresponds more closely with a Buddhist critique of objective reality. In denouncing claims of objective reality, Scalapino also aligns herself with the economic poor and gives voice to those whose interests are not necessarily served by mainstream newspapers. Scalapino, in fact, can be an eloquent spokesperson on behalf of the impoverished, particularly when she attests to social inequities: “those
who are without social power are less inclined to see reality as orderly” (153). Scalapino thus imagines her poetics not only as being in accord with the conditions and perceptions of the poor, but as providing an alternative model for apprehending reality based on fluid notions of time. Initially, one might think that the series of boxes of the comic book lends itself to linear thinking. In her conception of the comic book, however, Scalapino remains committed to a disrupted sense of time and offers the comic book as an antidote to the artificial representation of history that she equates with newspapers. “Not having historical experience – is the comic book as the form of the serial novel” (158). Negating the orderly history of the newspapers, Scalapino advocates in its place a serial unraveling of time that is anything but linear. Scalapino’s articulation of the serial nature of the comic book defies a straight line; time bounds backward and forward with volatile leaps: “The serial – but then being before it / And afterwards there’s only that” (158). The serial representation of time as unwieldy thus avoids the pat account of crises or problems and their resolution and thus coheres more closely to people’s actual experience of events and of reality as disorderly, or at the very least, as less than orderly. In another formulation of the comic book Scalapino returns to a Buddhist imperative of emptying the mind, as she links a serial, non-linear concept of time with fushiryo: “Not using the mind – which then occurs in the frames of the comic book after” (157). Scalapino intends, consequently, for the comic book to be a revolutionary way of depicting reality within her poetry, particularly as thinking in a non-linear fashion opens up an alternative to the representations of reality as it is put forth in newspapers.
Along with being a figure for the perception of reality, the comic book, with its negative spatial properties, has ramifications for the way that Scalapino constructs her sentences, and these negations at the sentence level further exemplify her disontological poetics. Indeed, the comic book, because it “exists” as a negated space like that of the khora, yields a principle of writing that necessarily encompass gaps or lacunae. With regards to such blank spaces, Scalapino’s emulation of aspects of Baudelaire’s poetry ceases; whereas Benjamin had said that Baudelaire “envisioned blank spaces which he filled in with his poems,” Scalapino’s disjunctive writing in turn produces these blank spaces (162). In writing sentences that integrate gaps or blank spaces, Scalapino engages in “torquing,” a defining characteristic of what Ron Silliman has described as “the new sentence.” A theory of innovative prose poems written in the seventies, the new sentence forsakes preserving context in favor of torquing, a kind of pressure that pushes and pulls between poetic lines and sentences and creates a certain amount of tension. “This continual torquing of sentences is a traditional quality of poetry, but in poetry it is most often accomplished by line breaks, or by devices such as rhyme. Here poetic form has moved into the interiors of prose” (89). Unlike fiction, which proceeds by “syllogistic leaps” that elide gaps in narrative continuity, the new sentence promotes the ruptures within writing, and the normal caesura associated with line breaks are instead inserted between sentences within a larger paragraph unit. With poetic form pushing “into the interiors of prose,” moreover, the new sentence leads to the focus of attention being placed on language, on the interrelationships between words and between sentences,
rather than on an overarching narrative. As it eschews narrative coherence, the new sentence thus raises awareness of the gaps between sentences themselves:

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. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be. (92)

It is through Scalapino's adherence to some of the writing procedures of the new sentence that her disontological poetics are realized. As I have mentioned, the blank space revealed by the new sentence corresponds closely to the negative space of the khora and epitomizes a poetics based on principles of emptiness and negation. A selection from the trilogy, which I shall quote at some length, bears out both Scalapino's relationship to the new sentence and the negative mode of her poetry:

Write. The somewhat older woman who lived though having slid or floated out of the car and lying in the rain. Her fingernails from the moment presumably of the accident lose their moon lines registering the shock to her light body which return later. She had not been wealthy form birth having the opposite of that circumstance—and not identifying with it as identity. The leathery transparent old rhino being busted in high grass light as the young-then, of that somewhat older, woman standing in the boiling sun earlier on a railway platform providing shade by casting a shadow on the young woman who was a little girl, beggars on the platform as the girl leaned over vomiting in the sun-but not identity. ("The Return of Painting," 12)

Within this single paragraph, Scalapino compresses a heterogeneous mix of discourses and narrative modes. The paragraph begins with a metafictional command to write and abruptly shifts to a narrative about an older woman that had begun several pages earlier. Scalapino's abrupt narration of the scene mirrors the contingent nature of the older woman's accident, yet Scalapino mutes any emotion one might expect from a description of an accident. Scalapino also refuses to augment the scene with any narrative depth, for
the character's additional background information seems instantly neutralized and flat. The character description of the woman being "wealthy," furthermore, serves, if anything, the negation of identity. Scalapino's acknowledges that the woman's poverty ("the opposite of that circumstance [of wealth]") as a youth was not formative of identity: "not identifying with it as identity." Alongside the narrative of the older woman, and the speaker's reflection on the woman's non-formation of identity, Scalapino juxtaposes a story of a rhinoceros culled from a novel and also includes yet another narrative, one involving the speaker as a young girl. The effect of the layering, or compression, of narratives is somewhat akin to Pound's use of ideograms, although Scalapino's multiple references and narrative sources appear more randomly selected than Pound's. Indeed, Hugh Kenner asserts that Pound's approach to ideograms was to discover an underlying coherence between its composite elements: "For this was [Pound's] belief, which he had from his bones and also from Fenellosa, who had it from Emerson who had it, maybe, from Chu Hsi's organicism, that in nature are signatures, that they attest a coherence..." (449). Scalapino, by contrast, seems intrigued by the non-identity, or difference, of the constituent parts, resulting in a more kaleidoscopic poetic form than the balanced structure of the ideogram. Scalapino's form, a paragraph of new sentences with ill-concealed gaps between heterogeneous narratives, reflects the passage's ostensible content: a lack of a stable, or even present, identity. The final line of the paragraph punctuates all of what precedes it: the passage, from the imperative to begin writing, the accident experienced by the older woman, the speaker's philosophical reflections on
identity, a hunting story fit for a Hemingway novel, and the minor trauma of a vomiting little girl, ends with an all-encompassing and mantra-like negation: “but not identity.”

The negative utterances that permeate her writing, from Scalapino’s critiques of identity to her skeptical approach to conceptions of reality, demonstrate the link between Scalapino’s disontological poetics and negative theology. Much in accord with the apophatic tradition, the overriding impulse to this poetics is skeptical and negating, yet Scalapino’s critique nevertheless initiates a process of attaining enlightenment. In fact, the resultant effect of the skepticism and negativity within Scalapino’s poetry is not an overwhelming sense of pessimism but instead the development of a state of calmness. Unlike other moments in Scalapino’s writing that point to a characteristic postmodern affectlessness and muted emotion, these instances of calmness, by contrast, result from ritualized acts of negation. As Shunryu Suzuki asserts, such calmness can derive from an effortless yet principled activity that coheres with the Buddhist practice of zazen:

When you practice zazen you should not try to attain anything. You should just sit in the complete calmness of your mind and not try to rely on anything. Just keep your body straight without leaning over or against something. To keep your body straight means not to rely on anything. In this way, physically and mentally, you will obtain complete calmness. But to rely on something or try to do something in zazen is dualistic and not complete calmness.

(122)

Scalapino grounds her conception of calmness within the comic book, once again proving that the comic book for Scalapino is as much a contemplative mode as it is a figure for her aesthetic principles. Initially, Scalapino is simply declarative: “the comic book is calm” (Orion, 157). Later, in a footnote to a footnote, Scalapino indicates, however, that the state of calmness achieved in the comic book arises from a serial, repetitive practice,
like the practice of zazen: "(The comic book is calm because it is serial)" (Orion, 171).

This exercise is founded upon negation, and Scalapino expresses herself through a paradoxical, self-canceling utterance; recalling the space of the khora, the state of calmness is all pervasive yet is absent of interiority or depth: “calm throughout but / not inside / or inside too.” (Orion, 171) Calmness, for Scalapino, is a process in which identity is negated, in which the sense of self is transcended, and once a concept of the ego has been evacuated, calmness will result. Since the social worth of individuals in the United States so often is measured by wealth or by employment, Scalapino’s paradigmatic example of an eradicated ego revolves around work. This emphasis on work also explains the prominence of the homeless and transients, the “bums,” in Scalapino’s poetry: if courtesans were Baudelaire’s muses, Scalapino finds inspiration in the lives of the poor, for she identifies, in part, with the anonymity of their condition. In this way, Scalapino’s entire trilogy may be considered an homage to the working poor and to the homeless. Scalapino herself finds dignity in conditions that many would look down upon, and she describes such dignity as a state of calmness:

Fireflies other calm insects.

it’s trash. She’s been doing nothing and her life is nothing – and so invalidated is calm

not from it
not from being invalidated

(176)

Though Scalapino considers some of the menial jobs she has done as necessarily humiliating, the work itself functions for her as an exercise in negating the ego, one which possesses calming effects. Not seeking validation through her work, Scalapino escapes
identifying herself by her occupation, though her freedom from such an identification poses a problem for some of those around her who would try to place her:

had met this same woman another time who is speaking of jobs says did you have those jobs simply to be cool?

I worked for this old woman—and I loved her, so it's producing itself. say. a servant. dependent—couldn't make the bed right. waiting on her guests and they were shocked at being the menial—so this is getting too much attention for a menial.

(220)

Scalapino strongly asserts what was important to her about her job for the "old woman," yet the force of the quote above ultimately pushes towards a sense of egolessness: Scalapino’s “I” is replaced by an anonymous activity of “being the menial.” Scalapino, though, evacuates this activity as well; this way of “being” is really a disontology, easily invalidated and overlooked, so as not to get “too much attention.” Anonymity, however, is exactly what the practice of Scalapino’s disontological poetry ought to amount to; the lines and non-spaces of the comic book work toward a negation, an invalidation, an emancipation and, at length, a calm enlightenment:

the line and the other line
and the light in it

Being invalidated – is calm

the jewel

from what? So is this.

which is emancipated from experience anyway

(177)
Scalapino proposes her aspirations for calmness in such a muted manner that the striving itself may strike the reader as unremarkable. Even this muted quality, however, is consistent the process of negation and with Buddhist principles of enlightenment. Emblematic of the apophatic tradition that proceeds towards divine understanding through negation, Shunryu Suzuki explains the attainment of enlightenment in negative terms. “If you continue this simple practice every day you will obtain a wonderful power. Before you attain it, it is something wonderful, but after you obtain it, it is nothing special” (47). The subtlety of Scalapino’s approach to calmness thus seems highly appropriate. In this regard, Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire once again seems instructive for Scalapino’s poetry:

[Baudelaire] indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock. He paid dearly for consenting to this disintegration—but it is the law of his poetry, which shines in the sky of the Second Empire as “a star without atmosphere”

(194)

Benjamin’s words, however, must be inverted in Scalapino’s case: in her own recording of the shock of contemporary existence, Scalapino’s poetry offers a diffuse calmness: an atmosphere without the star.
His thoughts limped in boring leaden sentences, their rhythms flaccid, diction all dolled up, themes unclear, audience out of focus. As usual, he had no idea what part of him was addressing what other part for what—if that made any sense or sense made any of that.
—Jackson Mac Low, *Pieces O’ Six*, VI

You have a way with words, the wrong words.
—Jackson Mac Low, *Pieces O’ Six*, XXIX

Written in a single school notebook between 1983-1987, *Pieces O’ Six*, a series of thirty-three prose poems, displays Mac Low’s characteristic impulse to follow a predetermined set of rules for composition. Though the poems that comprise *Pieces O’ Six* are not produced by the chance operations for which Mac Low is renowned, there are formal guidelines to the pieces that nevertheless yield unpredictable outcomes. “The only ‘rules’ were that they had to be prose and to occupy six notebook pages in the longhand. How many pages they would occupy when typed or printed was immaterial. Variations in my handwriting caused variations in the number typed, and later printed pages” (7). Despite being less rigorously programmatic in its compositional methods, *Pieces O’ Six* contributes to a larger understanding of all of Mac Low’s writings particularly because many of the prose pieces in *Pieces O’ Six* discuss the act of writing and thereby provide insight into Mac Low’s idiosyncratic poetic practices. Mac Low, for instance, offers in the fifth poem of *Pieces O’ Six* a telling vision of writing dominated by mysterious letter codes, electronic pulses and sound waves. Adopting the hackneyed discourse of the pulp science fiction novel, Mac Low depicts an act of communication
that seems a skewed, nightmarish version of his own computer-generated and chance compositional methods:

The technical-minded lifted webs of inquiry suspended from massive towers of crisscrossed logs. Transmissions were sent on little-known wavelengths in hopes of eliciting clear telepathic responses from the seeresses, but few were surprised when none was forthcoming. A letter code was devised to facilitate the search, and its avid proponents struck a note of confidence. They dealt in semaphoric harmonies as farther-flinging voyagers do in pulsars. Trusted and kindly scanners of the skies might have assisted their altruistic strivings if their relevance had been clear from the ordinary start.

(30-31)

Presenting a menacing and hyperbolic portrait of a semiotic system run amok, Mac Low here describes a method of communication that is reliant upon an intricate set of procedures. Although exaggerated, the very intricacy of this fictional model of “semaphoric harmonies” and “letter codes” resembles the complex directions that Mac Low frequently includes in the prefaces and postscripts of his books. In the afterword to *Barnesbook*, for example, Mac Low explains the diastic methods that he has used:

Then in June 1989...Charles O. Hartman sent me a computer program called DIASTEXT, which is an automation of one of the “diastic reading-through-text-selection methods” that I first developed in January 1963...Most of these methods use a “seed” or “index” word or phrase that is spelled out by reading through a source text to find words that have, successively, the seed’s letters in corresponding places, e.g., if I use “Barnes” as the seed and these first two paragraphs as a source text, I produce the line:

Barnes early work O’Connor wonderful compose

(47-8)

Steve McCaffrey has recently commented on the importance of Mac Low’s directions to his poetry, asserting that Mac Low “see[s] the methods themselves akin to concept art” (195). Considering the method of composition to be the first incarnation of a poem, Mac Low even gives the methods he uses equal status to the poems. “The methods are what
come by inspiration... The actual poems aren’t secondary, but they certainly follow... So
the poem’s first actualization might be the method; the second actualization, the
particular poem, the third would be the performances” (qtd. in McCaffrey, 195).

Mac Low’s assertion of the equivalence between method and poem reveals a
question that recurrently plagues Mac Low regarding the origin of his writing. Mac
Low’s proposition that the methods are products of “inspiration” disguises the fact that
Mac Low frequently professes not to understand writing and its workings. While Mac
Low periodically voices a realization that the process of writing is beyond rational
comprehension, he also insists that this state of miscomprehension, of not knowing, is
actually productive for his poetry. Comparing his poetic methods to the cryptic qualities
of Buddhist koans, Mac Low affirms how beneficial a sense of the incomprehensible is to
the creation of poetry. “Like the seemingly senseless koan, the products of
nonintentional selective or generative procedures may stimulate intuition to leaps it might
never otherwise dare” (Barnesbook, 52). Adhering to his belief in the imaginative and
intuitive workings of the mind, Mac Low endeavors to foster conditions that would keep
what is inexplicable and bewildering about writing intact. Mac Low consequently
develops a disciplined practice of negation and contradiction that continuously
destabilizes his writing, and he employs, moreover, an endless system of revision, not to
clarify his writing but to ensure its disorderliness and unruliness.

Mac Low perceives writing to be radically unpredictable, and his poetry
continuously explores and demonstrates the contingent nature of writing. However,
rather than advancing an image of the poet as the shaper of the chaotic and unruly
imagination as a Romantic poet might, Mac Low presents himself as comfortably existing within linguistic and imaginative disorder. Mac Low, for example, proposes an understanding of writing's inherent negativity in "Pieces O' Six—XIII," citing a peculiar logic in which the inclinations of the poet or writer are repeatedly thwarted. "But as usual here, what there was to be said wasn't known till after it had been said, that is to say, written. In writing whatever turns out to be what was written, the writer may not know what is going to be said, much less what is going to be written" (69). The lesson that Mac Low gleans from writing is its fundamental mutability, and he further suggests that writing proceeds according to its own uncanny will. Speaking of a European's use of an American colloquialism in "Pieces O' Six—XII," Mac Low also underscores how language, like writing, possesses an inherently alien quality: "He may not have chosen the words. The words may have just come out. That's the way language happens. Words and ways of using them accrete and change within and between particular people...Explicit rules are taught in schools, but people's language actions often don't follow those rules" (63).

Throughout these various assessments of the act of composition, Mac Low imagines writing and language to be necessarily protean and accidental and presents writing as almost being derived by some other source than human. In another strangely fantastic scenario examining the act of writing, Mac Low even envisions a culture for whom writing was completely foreign, allowing him to formulate what is radically "other" about writing:
One from a completely nonliterate culture—in which even the possibility of writing is unknown—would only see a series of arabesquelike patterns separated by small spaces. What might such a person, watching a writer write, think the writer was doing? Would the watcher sense any connection with speech or thought? (74)

Mac Low’s postulation of a non-literate culture rehearses familiar arguments about the arbitrary relationships between signs and signifiers and between language and its referents, and Mac Low seems almost gleeful in considering the possibilities of an utterly incomprehensible language. Mac Low’s gleefulness, however, later approaches a Kafkaan level of anxiety in which the writer perceives the gaze of the observer as alternately intimidating and absurd:

If a nonliterate observer were watching me write this now, I’d probably find it hard to keep on writing. I’d become—ironic epithet—“self-conscious.” All my ideas would dry up, and I’d probably burst out laughing at the solemn, steady, close-range nonliterate gaze at my moving hand and pen and their residue. (78)

As he ponders feelings of self-consciousness, and the irony of the term “self-consciousness” (can there be any other type of consciousness?), Mac Low makes explicit integral aspects of his negative poetics. Mac Low intends to preserve all that resists comprehension within writing and to enhance, through his compositional methods, writing’s intrinsic disorderliness. Later on in his confrontation with the nonliterate, Mac Low describes an unexpected impulse to explain writing: “Maybe I’d try to show the nonliterate one what and how the letters and words and sentences mean. I’d consciously begin the cultural infection.” One might more clearly understand the motivation of Mac Low’s methodological directions in light of his metaphor of infection. Though Mac Low admits to feelings of dutiful obligation to the nonliterate (Mac Low’s ironic, figurative term for the reader of his poetry), he sees his explanation as an *infection*, a contaminating
force that alters the structure or stability of what it invades. Likewise, Mac Low’s explanations of his methodologies do not necessarily stabilize meaning or ensure the coherence of his poems, though they might make his poetic practice more comprehensible. A passage from “Pieces O’ Six – XXIII” in which Mac Low ponders the nature of being and the origin of the universe corresponds to the contaminating or infecting impulses of his writing strategies. Mac Low postulates:

Even the few who still believed that being had been created from its opposite thought (usually conceived tacitly as an infinitely rarefied material) that some kind of cause had been at work—if not the venerable First Cause necessary in Aristotle’s cosmogony or the Creator God..., then some unspecifiable structural impurity lurking in nonbeing that forced the spawning of its opposite. (116)

Suggesting that being and the universe begins from a structural impurity and originates from nothingness, Mac Low proposes a model of creativity founded upon the anomalous. Such a description perfectly describes Mac Low’s take on the creative process of writing; his methodologies are structural impurities or cultural infections intended to trigger the random workings of the unconscious, maintain the protean nature of writing, and challenge the tendency to normalize writing or make it conventional.

For writing to be able to resist normalization, however, it paradoxically requires revision, and Mac Low frequently emphasizes the importance of this revisionary process to his poetics. Commenting on his methods in the afterword to Barnesbook, for example, Mac Low expresses the need to alter the texts produced by his non-intentional methods and the DIASTEXT computer program:

Previously I had only reformatted and repunctuated the raw DIASTEXT output [RDO] and changed some lower-case letters to capitals. Then in July I began deleting many contiguous repetitions of words... The whole-word whole-text-as-
seed diastatic method is especially prone to produce such repetitions, and though they sometimes seem worth keeping (I'm especially fond of the many repetitions of "contradictions" in "Let it Go"), after a time they palled on me. It seemed legitimate to include the option of deleting contiguous word-repetitions in my method, just as I had previous included reformatting, repunctuating, etc. (50)

At times, Mac Low appears almost abashed about his writing methods, finding himself compelled to legitimize or justify his procedures. Whatever emotion is present in these justifications, though, is an index of the importance that Mac Low places on the revisionary process. Even the justifications themselves indicate the act of revision: Mac Low extrapolates the principle of revision to include himself, as something to be seen again anew. "I feel sympathy for my self of the middle 1950s since in the 1980s other changes have been happening in and to me. I find myself questioning all my beliefs and ways of working—questioning though not rejecting" (Representative Works, xvi). While Mac Low does not want to reject "compositional methods followed over [more than] a quarter century," he does feel impelled periodically to reevaluate his aesthetic beliefs (xvi). Mac Low achieves this reevaluation through the act of revision: by instituting change in his procedures and by altering how he conceives of himself. In recognizing how he has himself changed over the years, moreover, Mac Low demonstrates his subscription to the Buddhist belief in the illusoriness of the ego:

Then what are the bases of objections to the pronoun I? Some base them on the Buddhist notion that the I is an illusion. The content of the notion is that the I is a composite of elements that gather together, persist awhile and then disperse...after which there is a new gathering together, etc.—innumerable times within one physical lifetime...so that I therefore has no 'self-identity.' (178)

Mac Low finds that the Buddhist notion of a pluralistic self has significant implications for his poetry: "Ambiguous, absent, or multiple I's allow readers to share with authors the
making of meanings” (181). If readers negotiate the meaning of a poetic text, Mac Low envisions the revisionary process as including the reader as well. The reader thus becomes an integral part in fulfilling the destabilizing or non-normative aspects of writing. Taken to its logical end, such a principle of poetry in which multiple self-conceptions yield an infinity of poetic texts or works enacted by an untold number of readers. Revision, as Mac Low conceives of it, is an expansive and endless enterprise and generates what is perpetually provisional about his poetics.

Indicative of his belief in multiple selves and his investment in revision, Mac Low counts himself as his principal reader and urges self-contradiction to be a primary aesthetic principle within his works. As he makes revisions, Mac Low draws on his belief in an evolving self, and he proposes that a text ought to be looked at from a detached, disassociated perspective. Mac Low likens this proliferation of selves, and the subsequent revisions, to work done by a committee, suggesting that such work entails the ebb and flow of consensus and dissent typical of any group project:

Writing revised long after its composition is a temporal collage, a committee work. Its writer’s a parent who grants offspring no autonomy. But isn’t turning back to authorize an earlier version—having second thoughts about second thoughts—just as much a later self’s interference with an earlier’s decision? Of course. But at least an earlier self’s consulted—one still earlier than the first reviser.(112)

Mac Low’s revisionary practice, in which selves comment on previous selves, corresponds to a poetics in which difference, negation and non-identity are integral components. These poetics of negation and difference primarily manifest themselves in Mac Low’s predilection for irony and contradiction. Mac Low expresses his appreciation for contradiction and irony most directly in “Pieces O’ Six – XXXII,” an homage to the
artist and poet Kurt Schwitters, whose artwork of found objects and randomness mirror Mac Low’s own contingent poetics. Through a collage of quotations from two biographies of Schwitter, Mac Low pieces together his own essay on Schwitters, much of which focuses on contradiction: “He cared nothing about contradicting himself even though he thought artworks had to be konsequent” (171). Later in the piece, Mac Low will again underscore the purposefulness in contradiction to Schwitters’ work: “The liveliness of Schwitters’ art may well have arisen from the widely noted contradictoriness of his existence” (174). Perhaps what has the most bearing for an understanding of Mac Low’s own poetry are the comments Mac Low makes about Schwitters’ I-drawings, which were derived from castoffs from a copy printer’s store, for Mac Low distills from the I-drawings an epigram about the making of art: “IN THE CASE OF i, THE ACT OF THE ARTIST IS SOLELY THE DISASSOCIATION OF A GIVEN OBJECT THROUGH THE SINGLING OUT A PART RHYTHMIC IN ITSELF” (170). Mac Low intimates here that the found object I-drawings relied on Schwitter’s disassociation from, or dispossession of, himself, a method of self-contradictoriness or self-cancellation. Though, for Schwitter, it is the object itself that is “disassociated” and singled out, Mac Low implies, due to the emphasis on contradiction in his piece, that the artist’s self is equally disassociated, made plural.5 Mac Low’s highlighting of this sentence also achieves an effect of contradiction in its own right, for the sentence pulls in opposite directions; “disassociation” ironically infers both an act of isolating—or singling out—and a splitting—or making plural—of identity. Beyond diagnosing a principle of contradiction central to Schwitter’s life and
artworks, Mac Low thus opens up a reading of his own works and poetic practice that are synonymous with Schwitters’ aesthetics of disassociation, irony and negation.

One might also find a corollary for Mac Low’s aesthetics of difference and irony in Paul De Man’s famous reading of Yeats’s “Among School Children.” Many critics have read the last line of the poem “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” as a rhetorical question, one that suggests the dance and dancer are identical. De Man, however, postulates that a literal reading of the question is possible which underscores the non-identity between dance and dancer:

For it turns out that the entire scheme set up by the first [rhetorical] reading can be undermined, or deconstructed, in the terms of the second, in which the final line is read literally as meaning that, since the dancer and the dance are not the same, it might be useful, perhaps even desperately necessary—for the question can be given a ring of urgency, “Please tell me, how can I know the dancer from the dance”—to tell them apart. (12)

De Man’s point here is that, especially within literary texts, differences between figurative and literal readings often cannot be decided with certainty. According to De Man, language frequently thwarts the act of interpretation; efforts to discern a definitive understanding of language founder within an abyss of “undecidability.” Mac Low himself alludes to “Among School Children” as he contemplates the act of writing and the integrity, the wholeness, of the writer. Confronted with the premise that writing begins as the firing of neurons, Mac Low asks a series of questions to ascertain the seat of writing: “But bluntly speaking, where is agency? In the neural process? In the unvoiced inner voice (the one “in one’s head”)? In the subvocalized voice? In its organs? In the audible voice?” (70). As he ponders these questions, Mac Low relates the dilemma to Yeats’ poem: “And if so, who is the writer? Or does the writing precede—or bring into
being—the writer?...Who or what does the writing (or the speaking or the thinking)? Is this a companion case to Yeat’s chestnut tree and dancer [?]” (70). Just as he believes in the non-identity of selves in his revisionary process and the corresponding Buddhist concept of multiple selves, Mac Low here introduces a principle of difference to the act of writing, one that divides the writer into constituent parts. Failing to situate the origin of writing in any certain space, whether in the neurons, an internal voice, or the throat of the writer, Mac Low proposes a fundamental difference between the writer and the act of writing, comparable to the explicit difference between the dancer and the dance. While Yeats’s formulation of the relationship that unites dancer and dance stresses a synecdochic harmony characteristic of modernism, Mac Low ruptures such a unified relationship in his model, consistent with his viewing of writing as an alien and conflicted process. Mac Low’s attitude towards writing, then, more closely approximates De Man and his premise of language’s inherent undecidability. Though Mac Low does not focus on the irreconcilable distinctions between figural and grammatical readings of language, he does describe writing as encompassing an inherent gap or, in deconstructive terms, an aporia. Whether the gap exists between the writer and the text, Mac Low’s directions and his actual poems, or within the writer and her numerous selves, Mac Low insists upon an aporia that disrupts the unity of writing as well as the unity of meaning. In this regard, Mac Low also displays an affinity with Leslie Scalapino and the negative space of her poetics. For Scalapino, the negative spatial properties of her poems coincide with her concept of the comic book, in terms of its use of circumscribed boxes, its appeal to a flattened or depthless aesthetics and its repercussions for subjectivity. Mac Low
similarly predicates his poetics on negative spatial properties, but he conceives of this space as a disruption of the unity between writer and text and as a fissuring within writing itself.

“6 Gitanjali for Iris,” a series of poems from Mac Low’s book *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, illustrates the ironic and purposely contradictory tendencies of Mac Low’s poetics as well as his understanding of the inherent gap within writing. Mac Low explains that the poems arose during a period in 1960 when he and his wife, Iris Lezak, started living together. “Iris had come to live with me on April 10th; we were deeply in love, & our sexual life was very happy” (71). In an effort seemingly designed to avoid sentimentality, Mac Low marked the occasion with poems derived from an acrostic method which spells out the sentences: “My girl’s the greatest fuck in town. I love to fuck my girl” (71). To supply the words for his acrostic, Mac Low uses a book of love poems from Rabindranath Tagore entitled *Gitanjali* (“Offerings”), taking the first word from Tagore’s book that corresponded to the letters of his “romantic” sentiments. Encrypting the profane nature of his feelings through playful and clever methods, Mac Low is able to generate an ironic dissonance within the poems, as he expresses at once affection and a disingenuous vulgarity. Each of the poetic pieces from “6 Gitanjali for Iris,” then, operates as an exercise in creating a gap between paired elements: between method and poem, source text and foundational sentences, reverence and irreverence. For Mac Low, the method, the ironic sentiment, the original sentences and the disrupted source text all function as the poem, but importantly, it is none of these in isolation that lends the poem meaning. Instead, the poem is created in the tension between its
constituent parts, so that the significance resides in the space between poetic elements. One discerns this sense of dispersal and tension, for example, in “Gitanjali for Iris, III” especially when, as I’ve done here, the first letters of each word are underlined to expose the original sentences:

```
Me You
God is renew life
Sleep
The heart even
God renew even again, the even sleep the
Fear undisturbed. Come keep
Is noontide
The on with noontide
```

(13 seconds of silence)

```
Is
Life on venture even
The on
Fear undisturbed. Come keep
Me You
God is renew life
```

(Representative Works, 87, underlining added)

Just as Mac Low asked where the seat of writing resides, his Gitanjali poems question what constitutes a poem or makes it work. I would argue that these poems work by generating meaning that is in flux or in movement and by acknowledging the space between the poem’s parts—an effect mirrored by the 13 seconds of silence built between the poem’s stanzas. In apprehending the full complexity of the poem, one continuously must discern the lines produced from the acrostic method from the original sentences. Linda Hutcheon has described irony as operating on a similar model of dynamic interaction. Instead of understanding irony as a mere layering of two meanings, the
ironic and the literal, Hutcheon describes irony as being created through an active process, as she compares it to the triple-voicing in music.

While, in reality, of course, one of the “notes” of irony is literally silent, unsaid, to think in terms of playing together of two or more semantic notes to produce a third (ironic) one has at least one advantage over the related image of irony as a photographic double exposure...[I]t suggests more than simply the overdetermined space of superimposition by implying a notion of action and interaction in the creation of a third – the actual ironic – meaning. (60)

Likewise for Mac Low’s Gitanjali poems, meaning is not a simple matter of elements being superimposed; Mac Low intends for the sentences, “My girl’s the greatest fuck in town. I love to fuck my girl” to recede and surface alternately as the poem is read. Such a vacillating movement also parallels the irony of the poem, which not only swings between affection and mock disrespect but also expresses the complex emotions of an evolving relationship. Despite being appropriated from Tagore’s book, the words accurately convey Mac Low’s feelings which encompass both an excited sense of renewal and unadulterated fear: “Me You / God is renew life / Sleep / The heart even / God renew even again, the even sleep the / Fear undisturbed.” Through his use of an acrostic method and irony, Mac Low allows the reader to perceive two things simultaneously, like the dancer and the dance, but, contra Yeats, Mac Low continuously underscores the gap, the distinction, however slight or large it may seem, between his poetic elements.

In later poems, Mac Low has relied on the presence of a gap or blank space within texts and performances, as he recognized the importance of silence to both language and music. For example, his Gatha poems, based on Buddhist hymns and written within the squares of graph paper, and his Asymmetries, derived like the Gitanjali poems from
"acrostic-chance" methods, both incorporate blank spaces and silences. In the directions to *Asymmetries*, Mac Low outlines the connection and significance between blank spaces and silences, and he insists that silence be given equal status to words in the performance of the poems. "Blank spaces before, after, and between words or parts of words, between lines of words, and before and after whole Assymetries are rendered as silences. Each silence lasts at least as long as it would take the individual to read aloud any words or word fragments printed above or below the blank space" (107). Mac Low’s observations about the importance of silence to language no doubt stem from the influence of John Cage, but blank spaces within Mac Low’s texts also indicate his thoughts about the nature of being. Indeed, the negativity of the blank space, for Mac Low, connects both being and writing, and this related negativity becomes the foundation for his disontological poetics. Much as Scalapino concerned herself with critiques of subjectivity, Mac Low uses writing as a tool to demonstrate the illusoriness of the ego and a corresponding belief in non-being. In the twenty-seventh piece of *Pieces O’ Six*, for instance, Mac Low develops the conceit of a stopped clock to express his thoughts about being and writing, both of which, encompass a gap. Tellingly, Mac Low begins a description of the stoppage of time with a couple of terms normally associated with writing, and from these terms he extrapolates a description of being that is necessarily interrupted:

The ellipsis. The lacuna. The caesura. The quantum leaps. Across/over/under, "from" one side "to" another of. The illusion of I going on...being I am experiencing? When awaking, how/why does the I awaking identify with the eye that has been seeing the dreams being awakened from? This is the end of time. At the still point. When a clock stops, time goes on.

* (Pieces O’ Six, XXVII, 138)
As the broken clock provides Mac Low with the opportunity to contemplate his existence, he acknowledges that a mechanical clock and time are not the same, and he recognizes a corresponding discrepancy between his individual self and his mind. Tellingly, Mac Low also examines the relationship between the “I” of his self and the “eye” of his dreams in a convoluted, yet astute, poetic question: “why does the I awaking identify with the eye that has been seeing the dreams being awakened from?” One ought to read the act of dreaming here as Mac Low’s trope for both writing and being, and one might therefore discern Mac Low’s postulation that an ellipsis necessarily cleaves writing and being from the individual self.

An earlier section of the Twenty-Seventh piece about a stopped clock bears out Mac Low’s conception of an ellipsis separating being and writing from the individual ego. The section is an exercise in stream-of-consciousness writing and follows loosely connected thoughts that vary upon the phrase “time flies”—a concept antithetical to a stopped clock. In the passage, Mac Low relates multiple elements, including time, writing, shit, a fly and the brain, and even simulates the mind at work through the permutations of the writing exercise:


Mac Low’s portrayal of a mind at work at first glance seems overwhelmingly negative. The depiction of the interconnected thoughts furthermore proceeds by catachresis, enacting another disruption of the Yeatsian unity through Mac Low’s use of
overdetermined metaphors. "A repugnant sponge" in operation, the brain sifts its "inner sill" creating writing in the form of "thickened" "excremental signatures" and "syntax [that has] lost its wickets" over all of which a fly periodically lights and then passes. In Mac Low's exercise, consciousness is thus nothing more than the "thin scum surface" of a "black lake." The negativity of the passage, however, is deceptive; Mac Low presents the mind as a black, messy and unruly space in order to illustrate writing's disorderliness and to disrupt any identification of the being with an intact ego. Surprisingly, the stopped clock, whose very stillness unexpectedly inspires contemplation, eventually becomes an apt figure for being, particularly as Mac Low depicts consciousness as a "black lake," one that is fraught with activity though apparently calm. In developing such an image of consciousness, Mac Low is consistent with Buddhist thoughts about being and the practice of zazen. Mac Low's stopped clock thus echoes Shunryu Suzuki's description of being,

> Even though you look as if you were sitting quietly, all your activity, past and present, is included; and the result is your sitting is already there. You are not resting at all. All the activity is included within you. That is your being.  
> (Suzuki, 106)

In nearly identical language, Mac Low ends "Pieces O' Six – XXVII" by outlining the implications of the stopped clock for the nature of being:

> The clock that stopped is not. The natural, mystical, and topsy-turvy end of all things. Nothing, but not just plain old nothing. Each present occasion emerges from and is haloed infinitely by pasts and vectors toward futures. Time inheres in being but is not being, nor is being time.  
> (140)

Reading these lines, one sees Mac Low demonstrating how writing inheres a gap. Mac Low here writes a sentence that is both independent of and dependent on, or continues
into, the sentence that follows it (The clock that stopped is not...[t]he natural, mystical, and topsy-turvy end of all things). Moreover, the statement (that a stopped-clock is not) is a seemingly self-evident remark about the clock’s futility, yet the statement resonates with a meaning that transcends this simplicity. Mac Low’s contemplation of the clock suggests that its defunct state has implications for understanding non-being. As he urges an understanding of time in which the present depends upon both the past that precedes it and a future it anticipates, Mac Low asserts his disontological beliefs: such a telescoping of time has significance for understanding being because it implies that no self, like no concept of the present, is a discrete, unified entity.

Mac Low’s adherence to the Buddhist principle of multiple selves and to his belief in interrelatedness of past, present and future primarily finds expression in the form of repetition in many of his texts. Repetition, both within the poems and in terms of the permutations of a single poetic method, functions moreover as a key aspect of his disontological poetics, particularly because repetition negates traditional conceptions of the poetic voice and demands that the attention of the reader be focused on the words themselves. Furthermore, repetition also demonstrates the affinities between Mac Low’s writing practices and the Buddhist practice of *zazen*, the daily, repeated exercise of meditation. In Mac Low’s poems, repetition thus takes on some traditional significance of the sacred and the spiritual, as in the act of a mantra in which words are uttered repeatedly or in terms of ritual, in which highly structured religious acts are rehearsed again and again. At one point in “Pieces O’ Six—VI,” Mac Low ironically dismisses repetition, yet this declaration nevertheless underlines the ultimate importance of
repetition to his work: "Repetition basically was boring, despite that he did it again and again, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after soon-forgotten decade" (35). Adopting a curmudgeonly voice, Mac Low playfully comments on repetition with a statement that is itself redundant and circular, and he thereby underscores the suggestiveness, the meaningfulness, of repetitive utterances to his poetry. No empty gesture, repetition, as a facet Mac Low's work, ought to be read for the significance that accrues with each recurrent instance. Indeed, though randomly generated and seemingly nonsensical, Mac Low's repetitions in *Barnesbook*, for example, participate in the production of the meaning of the poems. Mac Low's poem "Barnes 2," indicates how repetition signifies in multiple ways, first as alliteration ("louder locust" and "jacket-jumped") and later as a visual rendering of a swarm of locusts, the predominant image of the following passage:

To them knew louder locust,
    to thousand-and-one creased unbuttoned jugs,
    warmer such jacket-jumped,
    stile-unbuttoned jacket-jumped,
    jacket-jumped,
    jacket-jumped,
    jacket-jumped,
    jacket-jumped
claws' slumber glasses knew lands.
(19)

The repetition of "jacket-jumped" seven times is certainly not as wieldy a number as the "thousand and one" or more locusts it is meant to approximate, yet the repetition does suffice to suggest the magnitude of a locust swarm. Each instance of the word "jacket-jumped," though, also contributes to the pace and tone of the scene. Along with the short
lineation, the repetition heightens the sense of quick jumping locusts, and even the mesmerizing drone of the “louder locusts” becomes increasingly enhanced—and louder—with each repetition.

Other repetitions in poems from *Barnesbook* reinforce less the composite imagery of a passage than exemplify and enact Mac Low’s disontological poetics. Towards this end, repetition functions within Mac Low’s poems as a negation of the author’s identity through a shift on the reader’s part to the words themselves and through a negation of the conventional syntax of writing. Both subject matter and form (or method) in the following passage from “Barnes 1” attests to the goal of negating the ego, an effect dependent upon repetition:

```
Impersonal impersonal impersonal impersonal
“fortitude,”
nor for that
“fortitude”
attention.
```

(*Barnesbook*, 12)

Mac Low’s repetition of the word “impersonal” slows the attention of the reader, insistently directing the reader to a contemplation of the concept of impersonality and the process of emptying the ego. In a manner that has bearing for Mac Low’s work, Bruce Kawin has argued that Gertrude Stein’s repetitions allow her, and her reader, to focus on a specific word at a particular moment, a method indicative of her belief in a continuous present. “In a process not of emphasis but of beginning again and again, [Stein] describes what something is, and what it is now, and what it is now” (126). Focusing attention on the present, repetition has the effect of isolating a moment, which is an effect that is comparable to meditation and the practice of *zazen*. Indeed, Kawin’s commentary
on Stein suggests that repetition enhances mental activity, like the process of meditation: “Implicit in this method of capturing the instant is the assumption that the instant could be looked at hard and precisely” (127). Each instance of the word “impersonal” in the passage above ideally requires individual attention, yet paradoxically, the word “impersonal” loses its individual uniqueness when placed alongside a word that is identical to it (a consequence that the word itself ironically suggests). It is exactly this type of vacillation between intense concentration and the purposeful loss of identity that approximates the practice of zazen meditation. Kawin suggests as much by saying that repetition proceeds in evolving stages, from a numbing sameness to an energetic force:

Beyond [a certain] point, the repeated word loses its original meaning: it becomes routine or cliché, a blank wall, a falsified memory, or a drone. But repeated past this point, the word can become a force, the drone primary sound. By repetition, a proposition can become a secular mantra. (170)

For Kawin, repetition does not necessarily entail a religious dimension, but for Mac Low, his repetitions do push towards the spiritual. Echoing Kawin’s description of the furthest possibilities for repetition, its potential to develop a dynamic force, Mac Low surrounds his meditation on the “impersonal” with words like “attention” and “fortitude,” although in Mac Low’s poems these words indicate the process of enlightenment. Determination and focused attention are indeed necessary to combat the repetitiveness of the practice of zazen, as an analogy by Suzuki suggests:

But we may find it not so interesting to cook the same thing over and over again every day. It is rather tedious, you may say. If you lose the spirit of repetition [the practice of zazen] will become quite difficult, but it will not be difficult if you are full of strength and vitality. (56)
Repetition for Mac Low is equally a matter of writing and of meditation, and he incorporates the eradication of the ego, as the objective of *zazen*, into the process of writing.

Mac Low subscribes to a goal of self-effacement, for he believes such self-abnegation leads to stronger poems and the possibility of enlightenment. Repetition, revision and contradiction are important methods that Mac Low employs to detach himself from his writings and to arrive closer to this state of egolessness. In pursuing such a stance of detachment, Mac Low explores the inherent negativity of writing and honors what he considers to be incomprehensible about it. Indeed, the less that Mac Low feels he understands about writing and the processes of the mind, the more he believes his writing can be truly productive and spiritually redemptive. As Mac Low says, “the obscurely manifold resources of the mind, when called upon directly as well as obliquely, produce a “richer” poetry, and a poet writes primarily to help the poems come to be...[M]aking artworks for their own sake is a way of *pursuing* one’s salvation with diligence” (*Barnesbook*, 52).

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1 Williams writes: “So the nondual cannot accurately be described in language, which is ineluctably dualistic. Nor can the conceptual intellect apprehend the divine, both because it too works in terms of P and not-P, and also because it imposes upon experience with the subject/object distinction (8).

2 Steve McCaffrey, in an essay on Mac Low, formulates his own term for poetry that seeks to displace the lyric self called “postontological poetics.” McCaffrey’s reading of Mac Low is extremely compelling, yet his concept of postontology purposely avoids a grounding in Buddhist thought: “Mac Low’s ‘dharmas’ need not be channeled into nonoccidental influences and practices (Zen and the cabala) but can be understood as a critical manifestation of Western Writing’s ‘other side’: Bataille’s part maudite with its
links more to indifference, indeterminacy, and outlay than to the logic of instrumental accumulation that would harness writing to a use inside intention” (189).


4 Critical of the “mosaic form” of the contemporary newspaper, David Spurr has recently argued that the newspaper’s form and its narrative strategies produce an alienating effect in its audience. “A story on Vietnamese boat people is made spatially and rhetorically equivalent to a story on the lottery and another on a corporate takeover. All are recounted in the same tone, all compete to displace one another in the visual field” (44).

5 Mac Low also quotes Walt Whitman’s famous line about contradicting himself in *Leaves of Grass.* See “Pieces O’ Six – XXXII,” (173).

6 In an interview with Richard Kostelanetz, John Cage discusses the importance of silence to his work and its correspondence to Buddhist tenets. Referring to a performance at the Naropa Institute, Cage says: “At any rate, when I finished the fourth part, with its long silences up to eleven and twelve minutes, and just a few letters otherwise, I felt there was no need to change the timbre of the voice, and also no need to speed it up and slow it down...[except] to establish a tempo for a line whether it was a part of a silence, so there would be a movement toward a center, or a coming to quietness, or you might even say, a coming from the loss of the aspects of language, to a having the simplest elements of music. I thought this would be appreciated in a Buddhist situation” (Kostelanetz, 125). See also pages 66-7 of Kostelanetz’s interview for remarks by Cage about the relationship between silence and Buddhist thought.

Conclusion

In a well-known passage Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely to think this [historical] development [of capitalism] positively and negatively all at once; to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment.

—Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

To have one’s speech or thinking described as contradictory is to stand accused of being less than rational, articulate or reasonable. The contradictions within postmodern poetry, however, express a distinct logic and should not be dismissed necessarily as a failure of reason. On the contrary, such contradictions may be best apprehended as an alternative form of reason that opposes a strictly linear progression of thought and also functions as a distinct poetic and critical program. As I have tried to demonstrate, contradiction and negation in contemporary experimental poetry is part of an iterative process—one consistent with the tenets of negative theology—that generates affirmations of theological belief and forms a significant poetic mode despite what seems like an overwhelming negative stance or sensibility. Properly apprehended as a distinct aesthetic form, the negations and contradictions within contemporary poetry help to illuminate key
aspects of the current cultural period and prove to be consistent with many theories of the postmodern. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, argues that contradiction is indeed a defining characteristic, and principal mode, of postmodernism. As she addresses what constitutes postmodernism, including its ideological presuppositions, its aesthetic practices and its relationship to modernist art and thought, Hutcheon asserts: “Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3).  

For example, historiographic metafiction, the genre Hutcheon privileges in her discussion of postmodern theory and practice, hinges upon a contradictory aesthetic conceit, best exemplified by novels “which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 5). The preeminent contradiction that Hutcheon perceives within postmodernism and poststructuralism, though, is one that many others have pointed out as well and that appears inescapable: to denounce meta-narratives, to engage in anti-foundational thinking (as Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty, among others, have encouraged us to do) is to participate in a meta-narrative or in what amounts to foundational thinking oneself. Rather than conceiving of this contradictory logic or aesthetic as flawed, Hutcheon sees the inherent contradictions of postmodernism as a way of acknowledging what is problematic in one’s own thinking. Hutcheon argues: “the formal and thematic contradictions of postmodern art and theory work to...call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response...[and does so] in a self-aware way that admits its own provisionality” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 13).
In his discussions of postmodernism, Charles Bernstein insists upon the writer's agency and the viability of political critique within artistic works. Arguing against Frederic Jameson's contention that there exists a lack of critical distance in the postmodern era and that all art conforms to the logic of late capitalism, Bernstein suggests the possibility of overcoming what seems incapacitating or severely limiting, socially and politically, about the current cultural period. For example, in an essay entitled, "In the Middle of Modernism in the Middle of Capitalism on the Outskirts of New York," Bernstein asserts:

But we can act, and we are not trapped in the postmodern condition if we are willing to differentiate between works of art that suggest new ways of conceiving our present world and those that seek rather to debunk any possibility for meaning.3

Bernstein's claims here have the vehemence of a manifesto, yet he does not immediately outline poetic methods that would provide a manner of "conceiving" or representing our current world. Instead his focus in the essay is on a critique of postmodern theories that leave no alternative to an overly commercial aesthetics in lockstep with capitalism. While Bernstein elsewhere does delineate a radical poetics, most notably in "Artifice of Absorption," I think that a poetics of contradiction and negation epitomizes both what Bernstein requires of postmodern art and what he himself practices within his poetry. To return to Hutcheon's remarks, contradictions within postmodern art and thought can "call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response," and it is through the recognition of contradiction within postmodern art that one can
apprehend the problem of postmodernism (conceived, say, as the logic of late capitalism) and identify a critical response to it.

What I have sought to explore is the extent to which contradiction and negation constitute a dynamic aesthetic process, and I have wanted to analyze how several contemporary poets innovatively employ negation in their work. Of primary concern to me were contradictory and negated speech patterns. Consequently, I reveal the force of phrasings and speech which pull in opposite directions, including John Ashbery’s self-cancelling utterances and palinodes, the koan-like paradoxes in the work of Leslie Scalapino and Jackson Mac Low, and Jack Spicer’s use of antithetical propositions of logic. Similarly, I also explored what could be construed as an anti-poetic language, like the machine-error language of Charles Bernstein’s texts and the obscenity-laden prayers of Derek Walcott’s and Kamau Brathwaite’s poems.

All of these examples of antithetical poetic speech suggest that inarticulacy, indicated by the prominence of contradictory and self-canceling speech, is a central motif and concern in postmodern writing. As I have tried to argue, moreover, these contradictory and negative utterances of postmodern poets correlate to the principles of negative theology. While negative theology may seem an archaic subject for the study of postmodernism, the apophatic tradition is truly not such an incongruous or odd choice for contemporary experimental poets to adopt, especially when one considers that some central concerns of postmodernism revolve around the issue of representation. Jameson, for example, has contended that the most prominent challenge facing contemporary artists and thinkers is finding ways to represent “the new global space” of multinational
or late capitalism. Jameson suggests, however, that this "global world system" has hitherto been "unrepresentable." It is, however, against such a problem of the unrepresentable that the tactics of negative theology prove beneficial, offering a model for dealing with the challenge of representation within postmodernism. The central dilemma of negative theology concerns the impossibility of articulating or depicting God's being through language; in seeking a recourse this problem, the apophatic tradition develops an indirect method, choosing to confront what is inexpressible with negative statements and oblique methods of representation. Caught within a similar situation of the unrepresentable themselves, postmodern poets will adopt comparable oblique representational strategies as they develop a poetics of contradiction to confront current theological and cultural concerns.

Jameson frequently returns to the question of representation, and the discourse that he employs to address postmodernity coincides with the language of negative theology. In "The Antinomies of Postmodernism," for instance, Jameson outlines one more example of the problem of representation that ironically reveals the power of contradiction as a representative force or process.

Contradiction is always one step before representation: if you show it in its conflicted moment, you freeze it over so rigidly that it tends to take on the form of the antimony. If on the contrary you anticipate its resolution, you empty it of all of its negativity and generate the impression of a rigged ballot, a put-up job, a sham conflict whose outcome has already been arranged in advance. *(The Seeds of Time, 5)*

By outlining the complications of representing contradiction, Jameson unexpectedly reveals the power of contradiction itself as a method of representation. The very volatile
or unstable nature of contradiction, what makes contradiction impossible to represent, renders it a viable figure for dramatizing that which is impossible to articulate. Such an understanding of the representative capacity of contradictions illuminates the poetic practices of contemporary poets: in formulating their contradictory and negative poetics, postmodern poets endeavor to speak an impossible language whose very contradictions possess an exceptional representative power. While I do not think that each of the poets in my study directly intends to illustrate the new global world system, their poetics of contradiction forge an alternate form of representation that has bearing on ways of contemplating and depicting the larger cultural moment of postmodernism. Despite seeming like a model of paralysis, contradiction holds things in tension but never, as Jameson suggests, in a frozen form. Continuously placing its opposed terms in flux, contradiction avoids stasis and thus may present exactly the type of reasoning necessary to think through the problems of postmodernism. Jameson argues precisely this point, that contradiction is a powerful conceptual force, in what I have selected as the epigraph to my conclusion. “Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely to think this [historical] development [of capitalism] positively and negatively all at once; to achieve, in other words, a [dialectical] type of thinking... without attenuating any of the force of either judgment.”

Jameson’s conception of an alternative, impossible form of thinking might aptly be given the name of irony in postmodern poetry. For each of the contemporary poets I discuss, irony indeed informs the contradictory impulses in the speech patterns of their work. Moreover, an ironic stance is not only indispensable to the management of
opposing tensions within their texts but is also productive of aesthetic and theological insights. Hence, John Ashbery’s equivocal system of faith arises from articulations both sublime and clichéd in nature, and Jack Spicer’s vacillations between utter logic and fuzzy (il)logic produce a nonsensical poetry that matches his conception of an ineffable “God language.” For their part, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite frequently indulge in the scathing use of *picong* and obscenity, yet this practice nevertheless yields a solemn and reverent poetry. Similarly, Leslie Scalapino renders the volatility and violence of urban existence in the calmest tones, and Mac Low’s irruptive writings, which somehow balance order and chaos, lead to poems that open up the imaginative capacity of consciousness.

Perhaps it is Charles Bernstein’s poetry, however, that best expresses the power of contradiction that Jameson outlines. As I argued in Chapter Two, Bernstein appropriates the language of business, using it at cross-purposes and applying it towards his own political ends in a critique of consumer culture and capitalism. In this strategy, Bernstein endows business discourse with an ironic, subversive edge and exemplifies what Jameson asserts is a fundamental “postmodern antinomy whereby what is anti-Utopian turns out to be Utopian in its most fundamental significance” (*The Seeds of Time*, 7). Strangely enough, Jameson arrives at this insight, only after considering its opposite, as he realizes that images of deprivation in Soviet “Second World” cities obscure the homogenization of culture in capitalist societies. Jameson laments how the “imagined drabness of the classic Second World city,” the empty store shelves and long lines in Soviet Moscow, came to represent the failure of Utopian projects, while the commodity excess of the
American marketplace stands as a mark of a prosperous heterogeneity. Jameson concludes, however, that this imagery is only a reversal of reality:

Our conceptual exhibit comes more sharply into view when we begin to ask ourselves how it is possible for the most standardized and uniform social reality in history [the consumer society of late capitalism], by the merest ideological flick of the thumbnail, the most imperceptible displacements, to reemerge as the rich oil-smear sheen of absolute diversity and of the most unimaginable and unclassifiable forms of human freedom.

(The Seeds of Time, 32)

Bernstein, for his part, seems adept at such reversals, and his ironic adaptation of the logic of late capitalism finely illustrates how a poetics of contradiction and negation might work. As Bernstein appropriates the language of business, he liberates what is lurking inside, and at the very least, he seeks to transform the anti-utopian elements of capitalist discourse into his utopian (broadly defined) political project. It seems, consequently, fitting to close with Bernstein’s words from Dark City, which instruct how a politically progressive poetry might paradoxically learn much from the strategies of corporate businesses:

Our new

service orientation

mean

not only changing the way we wrote poems but also diversifying

into new poetry services.
Citing specific examples from architecture, film and literature, Hutcheon observes an inherent disjunction in postmodern art; as in the film *Brazil*, for example, the contradictions arise from “the co-existence of heterogeneous filmic genres: fantasy Utopia and grim dystopia; absurd slapstick comedy and tragedy...the romantic adventure tale and the political documentary” (5).

Hutcheon makes reference to the work of both Stanley Fish and Christopher Norris in making this argument about the difficulty of escaping the grounds of one’s own critique. See Stanley Fish, “Critical Self-Consciousness or Can We Know What We Are Doing” lecture, McMaster University, Ontario, 1986 and Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory after Deconstruction*, New York: Methuen, 1985.


*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 53. This is, of course, the very type of cynical remark that leads Bernstein to claim that Jameson “manages to make Adorno look optimistic,” see “In the Middle...” 95.
Works Cited


