University of Alberta

Peripheral Blue: Walter Benjamin, Susan Howe, Phyllis Webb, and the Poetics of Apprehension

by

Barbara Gail Langhorst

©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 2004

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Library and Archives Canada

Published Heritage Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et Archives Canada

Direction du Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-96293-8
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-96293-8

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing the Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou aturement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Abstract

Form and content are not opposed but awe-posed, for all that they lie in a phonetic alphabet. This thesis attempts to amplify Walter Benjamin's messianic theory of history, even though, as he says, an act of translation is but "a tangent [that] touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity" (*Illuminations* 80). This metaphor enables us to envision each tangent, each line of thought, each life, a line, an endless reduction of a recursive body of re-search/ing, iterative, fed-back to all other points in the system. Our agency is determined in, by, and through perception. To mime conditions where readers take on the ethical stance of "testing" (229), I offer a deliberately disorienting trail, mere fragments of gloss, a parataxis of peritexts, my response to the poetry of Susan Howe and Phyllis Webb—women whose writings are radical even among avant-garde poets. This project is designed for those familiar with the close reading styles of hermeneutics and deconstruction yet it aims to produce a radical shift in epistemology. It requires readers to let apprehension play, reading the constellations as monads. Though the process defers closure, it does not deny *meaning* as such; the *mean* (the middle, the surface, the cover) is a human necessity. We stutter through. We constantly impose such closure (order) as is demanded of our creativity (chaos) in the name of agency (ethics), and this offers renewed perceptions, knowledge, and actions. What we do *matters*. By reading the relations in our milieu, we can learn to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of [present] danger" (255)—and, in doing this, we teach others to see their own moments for apprehension, intervention, and healing.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for my family

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Acknowledgements

Many, many thanks to all who have made this degree and this text possible. I have relied shamelessly on family and friends, co-workers, colleagues, and students—thank you all for your grace and good sense, your wonderful humor and vitality, your faith and support. Thanks especially to my supervisor, Douglas Barbour, whose truly radical poetics and commitment to the project inspired and sustained me, and to committee members Dianne Chisholm, Daphne Read, and Lynn Penrod, whose rigorous thinking drew me to view the writing in new ways, time after time. I thank Dawne McCance, external examiner, for her generous, engaged response, and Jim Mulvihill, chair, for conducting the defense with order and harmony.

I thank my children, Matthew and Rosie, my sister, Maureen, and my aunt, Agnes, for their constant love, encouragement, and critical insights. My friends Elizabeth, Al, and Shaun Harms, Shawna Lemay, Jean Richardson, and Mary Smagler were wonderful throughout the process, and my colleagues at St. Peter's College and at the University of Alberta showed me a faith that never wavered. My thanks, too, to Gary Kelly for including me in his project and in the Summer Research Institute—these experiences aided me a great deal in very material ways.

Finally, endless thanks to my partner Michael, without whose courage and example I would never have attempted this degree.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Table of Contents

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Abbreviations

Texts by Benjamin (Walter)

AP	"The Author as Producer," in Demetz, *Reflections*, 220-38.
D	"D [Boredom, Eternal Return]," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 101-19.
I	*Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).
N	"N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," in Eiland and McLaughlin, *The Arcades Project*, 456-88.
OLaS	"On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in Demetz, *Reflections*, 314-32.
OWS	*One-Way Street*, in Bullock and Jennings, *Selected Writings*
R	*Reflections,* ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).
SW	*Selected Writings, Volume 1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1996).
TPH	"Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Arendt, *Illuminations* 253-64.
TPI	"Theses on the Problem of Identity," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1996), 75-77.
TT	"The Task of the Translator," in Arendt, *Illuminations,* 69-82..
WAAMR	"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Arendt, *Illuminations,* 217-51.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Abbreviations (continued)

Texts by Howe

BH	*Bed Hangings* (New York: Granary Books, 2001).
BM	*The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).
DP	*Defenestration of Prague* (New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1983).
FS	*Frame Structures* (New York: New Directions, 1996).
MED	*My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985).
NM	*The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1993).
PA	*Pierce-Arrow* (New York: New Directions, 1999).

Texts by Webb

HF	*Hanging Fire* (Toronto: Coach House, 1990).
NBB	*Nothing But Brushstrokes: Selected Prose*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: NeWest, 1995).
WB	*Wilson's Bowl* (Toronto: Coach House, 1980).
WL	*Water and Light* (Toronto: Coach House, 1984).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Introduction

In/justice and Apprehension

The brooder, whose startled gaze falls on the
fragment in his hand, becomes an allegorist.

Walter Benjamin

No one ever obliges us to know...
We must, that is all, even if we comprehend imperfectly.

Umberto Eco

When Miriam Nichols writes that "[Susan] Howe positions her work outside the purview of States, because the State with its juridicial apparatus is a device that substitutes for the kind of love that can't be actualized in time," she names this Howe's "antinomian heresy, that there is a higher court than those which regulate social behaviour" ("Tensing" 51). However, Nichols identifies her own text as "a critical fiction" (41) and claims that "the irreparable...opens up a dimension of ethical thought in which judgement is forever forestalled because the particularity of historical subjects and events can't be fully articulated" (51). Although she grants that historical "narration... can bring to light former injustices, and it can create powerful arguments for social justice" (51), what Nichols elides in this paradigm is that Howe's activity of writing innovative poetry, like Nichols' text, is itself an act, a judgement (of Western society and of linear forms of representation, to begin with), whatever impact it might have. My aim in this project is not to end the judgements readers and writers continually must make but to turn our mode of apprehension to poesis, pattern and resonance flashing up with urgency. In my introduction, as in my

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

chapters, I will map out a theory of poetic perception, describe and illustrate reading strategies that underwrite both theory and project, and attempt to alarm my readers to act upon what lies about them.

Say what you mean.

We eviscerate meaning. We take off on tangents.

No matter how focused an investigation into the heart of its object (in whatever terms we have defined this), inevitably we discover that what appears to our own eyes fully-fleshed, the corpus of our learning, is, in all its relations, but the most slender of threads, disembodied from almost everything to which it relates. When we discern this, we may be tempted to simplify still further—and construe our limited success as failure.

What we see as events are tangles of such tangential initiatives; these are inscribed in the smallest details of matter. If we find our knowledge and agency provisional—resting on an infinite number of choices made by beings over whom we have no control—this in no sense denies the urgency of our ethics: that we attend is urgent precisely so. If we resist the temptation to absolve ourselves of an original penance (to find ways of working with *what is*, of attempting to remedy conditions in which we are complicit), we may trace each pursuit loosely enough to follow more marginal, less linear, patterns—in the knowledge that even so, from a distance, our work will inevitably appear tangential.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

We can read differently.

This is not a simple task. We need to become attentive to what has been elided in the name of simplification, definition, or design. For instance, my opening tangent and my translation of the translation of tangent theory leave absent an image described by Walter Benjamin:

> Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense. (TT 80)

What is a tangent but a sequence of points? Walter Benjamin's poetic use of words reveals an image far more profound: he acknowledges the definition, capturing the "one point" where a tangent "touches a circle"—but *his* point changes all. When he differentiates "this touch" from "the point," we see a new distinction: he holds verb and subject, action and matter, identified by the tangent's *relation* to the circle (that pivot that orients the "straight path to infinity") within the third, that burst of *energy* transmitted in that single touch.

If we picture a tangent from a position perpendicular to its trajectory, it reads as a single point; we perceive two-dimensional tangents as (one-dimensional) points simply because of our perspective. Each point in each tangent stands a circle—a series of smaller points—wherein innumerable other tangents (each appearing as points from a particular distance and perspective) touch briefly. Now imagine each tangent in immediacy, mapped in three

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

dimensions, a body pursuing its digressive course—or in four dimensions, patterned in time. Viewed in detail, as an infinity of intersecting tangents, these life trajectories would move, I believe, in terms that match Benjamin's description of Baroque allegory: each search follows "an endlessly preparatory, digressive, voluptuously hesitant manner" (W. Benjamin qtd. in McCole 143).

If we ignore the poesis of Benjamin's word-image, we miss its subtlety. Consider what lies (lacking) in this version of Benjamin's theory re-presented in critical discourse: "A good translation is, according to Benjamin, a tangent which touches the original at the 'infinitely small point of its sense' before pursuing its own course" (Wohlfarth "Measure" 38 82n).

The text before you asks its readers to adopt a radical mode of making meaning. Rather than a traditional argument, I offer you a thesis (theses) in fragments. In assembling my collage, I have drawn on the writings of Walter Benjamin, whose "work on the readability and representability of a dialectic residing within things and within existence" (Weigel x) demonstrates a profound epistemological and political shift. I contend that his ability to read not only antitheses but paradox, and to perceive therein patterns—in minutiae and debris, in texts as in global politics—existed because "without being a poet he *thought poetically*" (Arendt 14).

Benjamin's work offers a theoretical armature designed to activate an intensely poetic way of reading. He performs his theory, never stopping to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

define his terms, but rather exploring concepts throughout his work, leaving his audience to work meaning through contextually. This is best. Readers who take up his texts closely will discern infinitely more subtlety, more complexity, in his thought than I can hope to offer here, yet some explanation of the tenets with which I have assembled my project is necessary. I ask that you bear in mind that each point we touch upon is not simply a line of thought, but a body reduced to an ember.

To perceive the poetry in which we inhere, we must first shift our focus of attention. Benjamin asserts that, in seeking what we call fact—what we believe to be the unmediated knowledge of phenomena—we miss the point, for the way we have been trained to read cannot produce objective truth. The heart of our learning, that moment where we touch what cannot be seen, can only be discerned in its relations: "The idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena—or rather of their elements—determines the relationship of the phenomena to each other. Ideas are timeless constellations" (W. Benjamin qtd. in C. Jacobs *Language* 4-5).

This shift in emphasis from *what* we see to *the way* we see must not be mistaken for a leap from chasing content to pursuing form. As Sigrid Weigel points out:

> [T]he traditional *oppositions* within established epistemes—above all that between content and form, but also that between theory and practice, politics and art, context and text, individual and collective, and so on—are not treated discursively by [W.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Benjamin], but, in his thought-images and figurations, cease to obtain altogether, are not integrated or sublated, but quite literally cease to obtain, in that they are represented in that third, the image. (x)

Nor is the "image" to be confused with the merely pictorial:

> Benjamin regarded images in terms of their property as writing (*Schrift*) rather than as representations…Where Benjamin does devote attention to particular works from art history, such as Dürer's *Melancholia* or Klee's *Angelus Novus*, these images become for him meditative images, as he termed them following a visit to an exhibition of Klee's work. (Weigel 49, 51).

In other words, Benjamin offers a way of reading (seeing) relations too pervasive to be discerned by direct observation: our only means of apprehending them lies in our ability to perceive the connections, constellations as images, marking repetition and variation.

In poetic terminology, these relations might be described as "prosody." As we know from the process of learning to read prosody in poetry, patience and practice are critical:

> [T]he literary student struggling with a first attempt at *scansion* may think it impossible that such an apparently mechanical procedure can ever yield insight. An experienced reader of poetry, on the other hand, recognizes the 'fingering' of an iambic pentameter line as inwardly, as instinctively and unconsciously,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> as the average pianist knows the C-major scale…I like to think of all the labours of poetic analysis—including scansion and prosodic analysis—as rehearsal for a performance. They are not the performance itself; but without them the performance, the experience of the art, will be lacking. (Adams 1-2)

Note that the image of piano practice stands in for a detailed explanation of "all the labours of poetic analysis—including scansion and prosodic analysis" because descriptions and demonstrations of these two tasks (determining meter, rhythm, and rhyme, and deciphering "figures of speech" and "poetic devices") occupy the entire remainder of the book's two hundred and seventeen pages—and this is but a single primer of contemporary ways to read fairly traditional poetry. When we turn to avant-garde texts, we are faced with what Craig Douglas Dworkin identifies as "the difficulty of talking about visual prosody; we lack a sophisticated critical tradition and ready vocabulary" (389). This is a significant gap, for marking these relations is crucial to comprehension: "Ignoring a text's visual prosody is like refusing to read all the words, or claiming that a particular section is simply insignificant."

Reading the medium of our existence (in all its dimensions) requires that we attend to points, lines, bodies, and history. Given the difficulty with which we scan the relations within representations (which are, by definition, renderings), how can we read events, and with which tools? The following section from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" discusses ways to address our most central concerns obliquely, in the individual

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tangent—and simultaneously offers many of his most critical concepts in context with one another:

> Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled[1]; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed. (TPH 263)

[1] Arendt notes that this refers to "[t]he Hegelian term *aufheben* in its threefold meaning: to preserve, to elevate, to cancel" (TPH 263n).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

You may be unfamiliar with the term "monad" which lies near the centre of this quotation. Let us hold this in mind, for the moment, as we attempt to read Benjamin's theory of history from the margins. The passage asserts that the distinction between "universal history" and "materialist historiography" lies in the fact that "materialist historiography is based on a constructive principle"—a theory of reading/writing the relations between events—while "universal history" relies on simple mathematics—it is without a "theoretical armature," in that "its method is [simply] additive."

In "universal history," then, time appears linear and progress seems teleological, driven through "homogeneous, empty time." In this mindset, the future appears to lie vacant—open—and the present seems inflected only in simple ways by decisions past. Each individual pursues goals based on a barbarically reductive notion of cause and effect, one that offers neither the desire to see nor a method with which to read the impact of one's choices on our milieu: this is the dream from which Benjamin calls us to awaken.

The "materialist historiographer" shows the way; he sees in a revolutionary manner. His "[t]hinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (262-3). The state of concentrated poetic distraction that Benjamin describes is so radical that it cannot be identified with "thinking" at all (which might be conceptualized and experienced as one thought after another). Benjamin insists that "[t]o articulate the past historically does not

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). The flare of memory, that moment where the tangent touches the matrix of history, enables a reader to perceive a particular material configuration at a given instant as a web, a dialectic composed not only of thesis and antithesis, but of paradox rather than sum. He finds that the centre of "the nourishing fruit of [what he now sees as] *the historically understood* contains time as a precious but tasteless seed" (TPH 263 my emphasis).

Whatever we "encounter[]" as the "historically understood" through Benjamin's radical praxis stands a "monad" for the rest of his work, a fragment offering a pattern of relations between part and whole. Although Benjamin argues that time is so precisely inscribed that the entire order is visible in the smallest, most marginal part of the material world, it is the task of the materialist historiographer to discover social configurations that she can *read.* Recall the image of the tangent and my amplification. What is explicit in the whole is implicit in the finest detail of each part, and in every combination thereof. The implications of our choices (past, present, and future) are inscribed in every second, every scrap—but how can we discern a workable level of detail without becoming overwhelmed by greater magnification?

As Graeme Gilloch explains, "Benjamin is engaged in an archaeological excavation of the city to salvage its fragments so that they can be refunctioned. Each element recovered is monadological, containing within it the totality whence it came, and is also illuminating as part of the montage in which it is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

assembled" (18). In a moment of perception heightened by the shock of seeing relations, the prosody of events, we experience "a configuration pregnant with tensions"(262) as (what Benjamin would term) a "dialectical image"—"in which the historical object comes into being in the momentary intersection of past and present" (Gilloch 35).

Benjamin pushes his readers to the brink of the un/intelligible. Rather than offering us something we might recognize as history, he gives us instruction in ways of reading relations:

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. (263)

In this passage we can discern one of his many images of awakening: he marks the "telling" of beads as the distractedness of habit, wherein only rote memory functions, and differentiates this from the critical awareness available when innervated distraction, peripheral vision focused on the play of tangents, permits images of the past to flare up, offering fresh insight. In this state, details previously viewed as marginal stand in relief, juxtaposed with images from the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

past, and all can be read afresh. He strives to push readers to the altered state required for heightened perception, asserting that we can step outside ourselves in this way: "the human body in a state of distraction has no distinct boundary" (qtd. in Weigel 27). His now-famous image of the *Angel of History* portrays this state of inspired distraction:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (TPH 256-57)

This passage stands the object of innumerable readings. It is radical in its complete indictment of every institution established by humanity. What we most need to see, at this point, is that in our everyday lives we stand bemused by the phantasmagoria of acquisition, (this storm of) progress, yet the state of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

engagement offers critical perception, for "the progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment [distraction] with the orientation of the expert" (WAAMR 234). If we could be trained to manage the "mechanism" through which we direct our attention (Hardcastle), we could use this shift in focus to see differently. Reading the margins frees us from the habitual—the blinded pursuit of whatever holds us prisoner for the moment—and permits us to perceive time obliquely. If we recall Benjamin's claim that what lies at the centre of the "historically understood" is "time as a precious but tasteless seed" (263), we see that time, then, does not flavour experience, but rather contains and refracts it. Benjamin implies that, could we but read it, time itself would yield all patterns—but we can only approach it peripherally, reading what is historically understood by discerning constellations.

We must be trained to perceive the poesis of relations. The paradox inheres: we are in no way exempted from acting ethically by the knowledge that the order of the cosmos dwells in its minutiae: "If Benjamin threw the traditional language of Western metaphysics into the junkroom, it was to rescue the metaphysical experience of the objective world, not to see philosophy dissolve into the play of language itself" (Buck-Morss 223). It is not enough to see that the immortality of marginal labour rests within the transience of the work. If each word, each text, stands a monad inscribed with a luxury made possible only by an oppression invisible in its enormity, we must bear witness—ethically.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The political force of this Benjaminian mode of perception exists in the agency generated "at a moment of danger" (TPH 255)—a point when decisions can be made. That these decisions are provisional, forever open to review and further action, does not deny that they are actual. Part of the problem, as Benjamin saw, is that "the conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion" (234). He reflects that:

> Fools lament the decay of criticism. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to adopt a standpoint. Now things press too urgently on human society. The "unclouded," "innocent" eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naïve mode of expression sheer incompetence. Today the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved, and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen. (*OWS* 476)

This limits our sensitivity to representations that defamiliarize and make strange, the very things that might awaken us.

Of these, avant-garde poetry perhaps remains the most marginal, even with audiences "trained" to "read" "literature," because, in our state of hurry, contemporary audiences resist the unfamiliar or are merely titillated by it. The

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

failure to communicate (a flash of insight, a political moment, or a method of apprehension) is the condition of possibility in any form of communication. This is amplified in a genre that (by definition) attempts to cling to the cusp by breaking rules. As Auden wrote to Frank O'Hara, "I think you...must watch what is always the great danger with any 'surrealistic' style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue" (qtd. in Perloff *Frank O'Hara* 62). This remark describes a response to poetry (of any kind) commonly expressed by readers trained to read for plot—narrative structure—even within poetry.

Innovative poetry requires a willingness to invent reading strategies not often demanded of readers, and the problem of "fatigue" raises questions when positioned with Benjamin's notion of "shock": how might we prevent this most valuable aspect of innovative text—its ability to defamiliarize through shock (especially in a text predicated on "authentic non-logical relations")—from producing the numbing, the automatism, that the avant-garde Russian Formalists identified and so ardently resisted? Why are innovative films or texts (designed to awaken an audience) so often regarded as boring or abstruse? How to preserve the *ostranenie*?

In his study of the rise of the periodical as not only a critical forum but an element structuring a society, creating classes by acculturating readerships to particular modes of reading, Jon Klancher writes that:

> The periodical writer both names and colonizes the social group to whom he writes, drawing into the public those still

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> unincorporated into the universe of public discourse. Every decision of style, topics, print size, page format, and above all the particular frame of its textual community is geared toward that discursive colonialism" (25).

Audiences become acculturated to a *mode* of reading (wherein all material decisions contribute to what is perceived as content), though that requires desire and experience.

A readership trained to scan a fragmentary world exists. However, it remains largely disengaged from the study of either history or poetry—and most innovative texts (and historical configurations) appear incomprehensible if viewed without engagement. Those not prepared to read, those lost in the habitual (or exhausted by shock), those unacculturated to looking for patterns of repetition and variation, stand bewildered before the avant-garde. This is deeply ironic, because, as Marjorie Perloff writes, contemporary Western life is "a tissue of ...clichés, sentimentalities, and slogans" (*Radical Artifice* 183). What audience stands most exposed, most in need of a form of perception designed to read through the trauma of constant shock? Who most need ways to find ethics and agency but those habituated to fragmentation, shock, and indeterminacy?

The difference between a monad and a scrap of refuse lies in our ability to read. To read, we must discern—and discerning, see. The "historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

monad"—and he "encounters [a subject] as a monad" only where he can perceive the relations of the whole in the particular. In his search for "the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (263), Benjamin holds the material, social, and historical as one. He inhabits the margins of history, seeking patterns of relations that structure injustice, seizing "the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263).

We can learn strategies with which to read our moment (and the reasons to do so) in the mimetic, already political poetics of innovative writers such as Susan Howe and Phyllis Webb. Like Benjamin, Howe and Webb are deeply political, committed to issues of ethics and revolution; all are devoted to the exploration of trauma and history. They wrestle with issues ranging from self and subjectivity to agency and complicity, and they attempt to negotiate order and system with zealous creativity. They balance careful research with poetic modes of apprehension. All are drawn to the visual, the flash of insight, and the notion that language is, to call upon Howe's word, "covery" (*Singularities* 56). Like Benjamin, Howe and Webb use the grammar of mourning to spell mysticism, history, resistance, art, action, confinement, and revolution in details both graphic and political.

What makes Webb and Howe most appropriate for my project here,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

however, is their use of form *as* content: bold and brilliant juxtapositions set in play resonance and reverberation, cacophony and silence; passages of apparently lucid prose and wildly experimental poetics jostle one another, defamiliarizing all; and, in a Benjaminian way, each line offers a fragment that enfolds the oeuvre—despite the diverse range of topics addressed in the career. My strategy is to add a collage of critical and theoretical texts to selections from their poetry, illuminating relations, joining all in a form of avant-garde poetry of my own. The shift between what seems familiar and what is formally or structurally outside our experience offers a useful ground for training in a poetics of apprehension. It demonstrates that poetry offers more than a re-circulation of knowledge drawn from other sources: our praxis of reading is a matter of ethics. It is critical that we read with resistance as well as engagement, for what appears transparent conceals the relations that bind events. As Sigrid Weigel puts it, "what is at stake is therefore a praxis that can operate with images—a *politics of images*, not a figurative or metaphorical politics" (10).

My process in this project has followed stops and starts. I first thought to provide close readings upon which to write actual lessons. I began with grand plans to illustrate how one might teach the work of a spectrum of innovative poets: Lyn Hejinian, Michael Palmer, Steve McCaffery, bp Nichol, and Robert Kroetsch, to name a few. For my examinations, however, my broad cast of poets quickly proved impractical, and I gradually came to see that rather than *prescribing* a pedagogy, or *describing* one, I could perform it, in a fashion designed for its specific audience... and here my readers have trained through

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

years of reading nuance, structure, play.[2]

My chapters demand that readers attend to resonance and play on many levels. Rather than describing this process therein, I will briefly demonstrate here the close reading that combines with Benjamin's theory to underwrite the project. Readers will note the limitations in this style of reading—it presents the piano lesson in all of its scales.

Howe meditates on texts that resist in a number of ways. Some are obscure, unavailable, or, like much of Howe's own, impossible to reproduce on a word processor. In *My Emily Dickinson*, however, Howe deals with ways to reference the unnameable more closely; for instance, she draws upon Dickinson's poem that begins "Each Life Converges to some Centre" as the occasion for a dramatic and disturbing rumination of her own:

> God is hidden. Random subtraction of Love across infinite Empty. Ferocious contradiction. The nuptial Yes, communion confiding, connecting—union with another soul is only another illusion. Humanity must obey mechanical and supernatural necessity. Obedience is necessary for survival, obedience and docility like the lily who toils not. Eve, Lucifer, Edmund, Heathcliff, and Pleasure are reckless and disobedient. I must be obedient to the dominant social system until Death blows

[2] Inspired by teaching, my dissertation is clearly not designed for first-year students, but for instructors with the skills to structure masses of theory often presented in an apparently chaotic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the door open. Liberation from life is Death. Will that annihilation be an Orphic transformation or another prison? Was Psyche's lover Eros, or a monster? Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson, educated, reclusive, visionary women, rebels from a sin-obsessed Fundamentalist religion, *felt* God and Nature separating from each other. (Howe *MED* 77)

I read this as a prose poem, written in parataxis, although certainly there is a drive here that pushes insistently forward at the same time other elements resist. Given the experience of my audience here, I won't detail the musical quality of either Howe's or Webb's writing, but their use of (sometimes half or visual) assonance and alliteration, for instance, is quite remarkable. Consider Howe's: "The n*u*ptial *Y*es, **com***u*nion **con**fiding, **con**necting—*u*nion with a**n**other so**u**l is **o**nly a**n**other ill*u*sion." While the repetitions and variations carry the reader through and about, connotation wrestles with logic. "God" and "Random" are aligned by position (first in each sentence), by capitalization, and by paradox. The Western conception of "God" with a capital "G" suggests its Christian equivalent: "Love" (which, perhaps ironically, closely follows "Random")--yet, this "God" is complicated, in the very first sentence, by His described location. He is "hidden" (unknowable, certainly, but why hiding?) and "Random," a "subtraction of Love." What can "Random" mean for order and hierarchy? Surely a "subtraction of Love" is the antithesis of conventional

---

manner. I design projects for students suited to their tolerance of ambiguity, although the same principles and topics apply.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Christian platitudes? And how can "God" exist, even hidden, "across infinite Empty"—which Howe consecrates a proper state (as designated by its capital)? Howe rewards the reader who gets this far with her argument: "Ferocious contradiction" (the predatory adjective seems to describe both the poetry and "God"—the "contradiction" Himself). Again, the capital of "the nuptial Yes" (the Word itself the sublime form of obedience) aligns itself as another name for "God" Himself. At the same time, it invokes notions of marriage and of vows--both between humans and between human and divine. The line, taken with all the human intimacy of "communion confiding," problematizes the notion that humans can ever join one soul freely to another, let alone to "God." The "communion" of mortal spirits is but "another illusion"—which reads as bitterness and implies that this is not the first set of appearances to disappoint. The word "Obey" and the twice-mentioned "obedience" are linked with "necessity" and "necessary" in the next two sentences to emphasize the absolutely powerless position of humanity (though the critical eye will recall that this discussion is from a human perspective). Howe's allusion to the biblical verse Matthew 6:28, "the lily who toils not," emphasizes not God's provenance but rather the "docility" and "obedience" of the female subject. "Eve" appears immediately, positioned next to "Lucifer" and paired with "Pleasure" (bookends of evil with "Eve" as the first and "Pleasure" the last). All are "reckless and disobedient." Howe's repetitions begin to hint that she is deliberately contemporizing religious dogma: "I must be obedient to the *dominant social system* until Death *blows the door open*" (my emphasis, to mark the two shifts in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tone.) The first offers a critical twist to the expected "Law" and the second leaps into dramatic terms to present what could be a radical opportunity, a terrorist attack—or the work of the Big Bad Wolf. Positioning "Death" beside "that annihilation," Howe seems to foreclose on the question she poses about the potential for "Liberation" (release from an earthly "prison"), yet "annihilation" here could signal what Caygill terms "an active, even religious nihilism which nests within the decay of experience" (XIII) or, as Benjamin phrases it, that moment when "the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled" (TPH 263).

Howe's text is ambiguous but the mood is one of determination; Howe refuses to leave the status quo standing. She recuperates Dickinson's reputation as a strange recluse by paralleling her with the romantic figure of "Emily Brontë" and casts the pair as deliberately "educated, reclusive, visionary women"—reading these as *chosen* roles...which, by the terms of her own discussion, would suggest disobedience. The question then rests on whether this is disobedience to God or to Man. Howe suggests that *this* portrait of a domineering "God" is a flawed projection cast by men. How could these "visionary women," these "rebels from a sin-obsessed Fundamentalist religion," not be alienated from a society of the industrial revolution, where, as Howe asserts, they "*felt* God and Nature separating from each other"? By this time in the book (page 77) our sympathies have been securely attached to Emily Dickinson, and certainly my twenty-first-century sensibilities find the map of an easy route to salvation ("obedience to the dominant social system") problematic.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"God" remains unfathomable, hidden, difficult, but not beyond question. Indeed, He has been "*felt.*"

The Nonconformist's Memorial (a provocative title for one with antinomian leanings) offers an interesting supplement to *My Emily Dickinson.* As Rachel Tzvia Back notes, "the poet *must be* a nonconformist, for the poem is 'an immediate *act*' (23; my italics) that always draws its force from going 'the obscure negative way,' from 'Turn[ing] again' and 'Moving away' (33) from literary norms and expectations"(163). The poem opens with the Roman numeral I, bold and high, positioned over the large word "T U R N I N G," under which, in tiny italics, we find "*The enthusiast suppresses her tears, crushes her opening thoughts, and—all is changed.*" This is followed a few returns later by "Mary Shelley *Journal*, Feb. 7, 1822. / Marked by Herman Melville in his copy of *Shelley Memorials*." This page, odd though it must seem, requires careful review by the reader: it marks the moment when enthusiasm (or energy) turns to text (or matter), although certainly this does not facilitate communication with any sense of transparency. It may seem odd to postulate that Howe's work, in particular, might be interpreted as a gesture toward order in a field of anarchy—yet these few lines, read in the context of *The Nonconformist's Memorial,* establish a pattern of women (nonconformists, Romantics) who, bearing messages, attempt literally to find that "*all is changed*" in the world. That this passage was marked by Herman Melville in his copy of the *Journal* sets up another set of resonances concerning materiality, writing, fictions of subjectivity (identity), and agency. Howe, an American woman, is reading and re/citing the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

text once possessed and annotated by an American man, a writer who has inspired her own work. She opens by citing the marks he inscribed on a journal (a document bearing at least the connotations of intimacy) by a woman whose literary advantage lay in that she was British,[3] the (dispossessed) child of writers, well-connected to literary society by her husband the poet. Howe testifies to the press she places upon pattern; *The Nonconformist's Memorial* ends with a section almost seventy pages long entitled "MELVILLE'S MARGINALIA"—and this drives us back to re-read the entire book.

Returning to the beginning, and following the traces left by Howe, we find the beginning of "**THE NONCONFORMIST'S MEMORIAL**" followed by a series of biblical citations, which, a note at the bottom of the page informs us, are drawn from "*The Gospel According to St. John.*" Howe quotes John 20.15-18, where, in the first line, the risen Christ addresses Mary Magdalene in the universal (as "Woman") and charges her with a message: "say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and *to* my God, and your God." Howe and this Mary, then, aligned by Howe's text, share a mission, but how to deliver that message? The next pages are formally more recognizable as "poetry," moving in a fairly thematic approach (but one tinged with theory) from the top of page four:

> Contempt of the world
> and contentedness

[3] "I don't have a real sense of audience and never have. I have always felt very isolated. I don't know if it has something to do with being a woman writing in an experimental tradition—I hate that word, experimental—but anyway, I have Melville in mind. He tries to place himself as an American writer amongst English writers." Susan Howe qtd. in "Four-Part Harmony" 22.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Lilies at this season

Other similitudes
Felicities of life (1-5).

Who is the subject of these actions? Did Christ permit his own crucifixion through "contempt of the world/ and[/or] contentedness"? Or does contentedness rest, here, in "contempt of the world," for Mary in *this* Christ-changed world, with its lilies, its "far away historic fact" (12)? What of the almost coinciding, the "similitudes" and "Felicities" (4/5), manifest miracles seen yet not perceived, history and immediacy tied yet broken by lines, conventions of breath? The poetry suggests biblical text recalled in bewilderment:

Flesh become wheat

which is a nothingness (13-14)

and Howe's Mary Magdalene portrays confusion at both death and resurrection. These lines evoke both Christ's claim to be "the bread of life" (John 6.35) and his assertion that "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12.24). The poem also echoes Matthew 8:20 ("foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head"), but extends parallels from Christ's situation to contemporary societies, raising questions of material in/justice for those who resist or are abandoned by rationality:

Often wild ones nest in woods
Every rational being (21-22).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

That the Magdalene has just been sent "Run then run run" (20) (three hard-stressed verbs in four syllables) drives us onto page five—a calm in the storm, six double-spaced lines almost centred in a moment seemingly grounded simultaneously in text and the messenger's moment of crisis:

> The act of Uniformity
> ejected her
> and informers at her heels
> Citations remain abbreviated
> Often a shortcut
> stands for Chapter (23-8).

From this position—the hurried frantic push to set down thoughts, "informers at her heels" (we harry her, Howe, as with the informers we demand, "whose heels?--Mary Magdalene's? Susan Howe's? Mary Shelley's? our own?")—Howe tells us we can only know "citations [as] abbreviated," mysteriously monadical, each part representing the whole, yet each only a standing-in-for a canonical "Chapter." In our leisurely haste, we can only take "shortcut[s]"—we are a/pproxi/mate—we stutter and divide until some gathered (puckered?) meaning enables us to "stand for" what we believe to be the truth of that moment.

At this point, Howe begins to illustrate the visual aspect of the poetry more emphatically. Some lines shadow one another, hanging upside down on one page, bolt upright on the page facing. For instance, page six has three such couplets where we can read only the top line of the pair (the other lies upside

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

down--in effect, a shadow cast-- legible only to those who can read in reverse): "In Peter she is nameless" (30) suggests possibly the ubiquity, the inconsequence, or simply the consonance of woman, follower, or prostitute--even of witness to a resurrected Christ. Where is the in/justice in this? But there is an underside, a submerged text: how are we to deal with this? In our desire to know, we might turn the text upside down time and time again to read each line as it appears in sequence: "Actual world nothing ideal" (31). The next couplet begins with an apparently paratactic fragment: "headstrong anarchy thoughts" (32) yet holds "A single thread of narrative" (33) (p)laced tightly upside down below this. The final couplet begins "She was coming to anoint him" (34), with "As if all history were a progress" again upside down beneath it. If you map this out, you can see that the reading oscillates and vibrates differently depending upon the strategy you employ to read it—illustrating the very complexity of the reading act: text is NOT transparent. For instance, we can read all of the upright first lines together first as a narrative, aware that a full line lies unread beneath each, choosing not to *read* what hangs below, or let it resonate:

In Peter she is nameless
. . . . . .

headstrong anarchy thoughts
. . . . . .

She was coming to anoint him
. . . . . (30, 32, 34).

If we reverse the perspective, what *made sense* a minute ago is now obscured, and we read:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

As if all history were a progress
. . . . . .

A single thread of narrative
. . . . . .

Actual world nothing ideal
. . . . . (31, 33, 35)

In posing the problem as narrative itself, Howe takes on the whole through the part, here demonstrating problems inherent in Christianity and Western thought. Her next page (facing) replays the same lines, all of them reversed, so that what was inverted before is now legible. The spacing is different, and, by this time, we should know that this must be significant. She reiterates what we've already figured out, and allows us to practise it; this time we can read upside down, and, checking that the order is the same, we see that specifics have been added:

As if all history were a progress
She was coming to anoint him

A single thread of narrative
headstrong anarchy thoughts

Actual world nothing ideal

In Peter she is nameless
The nets were not torn

The Gospel did not grasp (36-43).

What slips through this net? We may read "The Gospel did not grasp" as a failure—the failure of text to grasp an audience, to apprehend a moment, to capture the singularity of a name in history. "In Peter she is nameless" while in John she is first universal ("Woman") and then particular ("Mary")—but only a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

fixed "Mary" to those in the know, as Howe's invocation of "Mary Shelley"[4] illustrates. When Howe uses the "net" as a model for reading--or writing, or apprehending--she shows how limited a consciousness based on a "single thread of narrative" would be—and yet, by positioning Peter next to "The nets were not torn," she suggests that the illusion that even a net can catch meaning whole is also dangerous. If believing "As if all history were a progress" puts us in peril, we must never forget that it is beyond our grasp to weave a theory of consciousness that will not leave elements elided or inverted and obscured. Meaning is at best partial, and always dangerous. We can only read in increments, shifting our perspective and repenting (literally repositioning) as necessary.

My third chapter meditates on Webb's *Wilson's Bowl*. Like Howe's texts, it is deeply political in both ethical and aesthetic ways, and it performs the private (grief) in the social (formations that drive tragedy). If Howe's work is difficult to discuss, Webb's is equally so—and I invite readers to take up the poetry in different yet complementary ways. Like Howe's, many of Webb's poems appear disjointed, their parallels and contradictions making sense only when read as part of a grand collage. However, Webb's writing is particularly useful as a primer for reading representations of all kinds "against the grain" (W. Benjamin TPH 257) in that it *appears* transparent at times--presenting the danger

[4]On page 1 of *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, Howe begins by re-citing from Herman Melville's copy of Mary Shelley's *Journal,* Feb. 7, 1822: "*The enthusiast suppresses her tears, crushes her opening thoughts, and—all is changed.*"

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that readers may be misled, seeing conventional narrative and lyric instead of contradiction or critique.

In *Wilson's Bowl*, Webb boldly presents those fictions so long construed as *self, justice*, *evidence*, and *ideals* as section titles, for instance, that appear objective (even simplistic or banal), but that, acting as captions, mirror their contents askew: "PORTRAITS," "CRIMES," "ARTIFACTS," and "DREAMS AND THE COMMON GOOD" (23, 39, 59, 75) riddle images, and the specifics with which Webb dances through her heterogeneous assemblies reveal the most unlikely of correspondences. It seems obvious why the text—a witness to suicide—should be prefaced by "Poems of Failure," yet that certainty fails when tested, and new connections must be made when the preface turns out to be a meditation upon anarchy, contradiction, women's agency, and Kropotkin.

The first "Poem[] of Failure" (p. 13-14) establishes a pattern for reading what follows; we find that what is incongruous is, at the same time, also meet. The poem begins with layers of ordered confusion: Webb sets the paradoxically anarchist Russian prince Kropotkin next the enigmatic image of "the little lady" in danger of falling, establishing the method of defamiliarization and juxtaposition:

> I.
> A picture of sweet old Prince
> Kropotkin on the wall
>
> will the little lady fall from
> her chair?
>
> 'Our Meeting' out of Goodman
> out of *The Empire City*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

knowledge? that we are
inconsolable

and now take off from there
to leave the Flying Dutchman
coming home

let the Prince hang
the little lady float

is there a shadow following the
hand that writes
always? Or for the left-handed
only?

I cannot write with my right.

I grasp what I can. The rest
is a great shadow.

Nevertheless, when the boat
moves through the islands
pushes clumsily onto the dock
another chapter is written
shadow moves up the gang
plank with us is Chapter
7, 11, 13?

To be reconciled with the past
is redemption but unreal as hell
if you can't recall the beginning
and of time, who can get back there?

redemptive anthropologists, archae-
ologists, bones, stones, rings of
trees …

The old Prince hangs on the
wall, rain-stained edges
of the portrait

and there—up goes the little lady
and no shadow falls

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

'Loyal to the silence of our impasse ...
we look at each other...we do not go...
in the faith that we are inconsolable ...
we are resting in this hell.'

Oddly assorted though they may seem, the images here conduct Webb's readers on a journey that circles instances of (experiences we might term) failure, trauma, and knowledge. The title aligns her failure with Kropotkin's,[5] but this failure has the potential to be read as productive. Webb's strategy is risky: what does it mean to publish failure in a society geared toward success and achievement? Benjamin portrays "progress" as the critical error throughout history (TPH 258). Webb shows us what is perhaps central to all trauma—the fear that we will fail—to protect ourselves or another, or have done so already. This fear consumes us, for we fear it to be truth—yet it is only in "knowledge? that we are / inconsolable" (7-8). When we find "sweet old Prince / Kropotkin on the wall" (1-2), we may attempt to pass by without recognizing ourselves in his caricature, reframed and flattened by the weight of good intentions, no longer an agent but a mascot. Without this cognitive twist (that we are Kropotkin), we cannot bear the notion of failure and stagger to our healing.

In the "knowledge? That we are / inconsolable" (7-8), Webb raises the fundamental question mark to hammer at the image of our helpless state, and the poem cracks. Drawn by our attachment (to fact, to solidarity), compelled by our complicity and our resistance to paradox, we ponder the shock. The words reverberate; we read that "we are" (7) not even on the same line as inconsolable"

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(8) and that even "that we are" (7) is (a) subject to question. Even her sure return at the end to (what she marks '' in lines 40-3) *a source* ironically unsettles "knowledge," and clarity is not forthcoming.[6] Read by convention, in the order of progress, our "knowledge? that we are / inconsolable" (7-8) has become our "faith" (42)—yet the argument is convoluted. In the source (literally, Webb's source), we have instead "faith," and thus "knowledge" (which, by tradition, comes after the Fall), lies in ascendancy, colouring the words throughout, until we find, at the end, that this flawed "faith" holds us prisoner. This draws us back to a crucial distinction between forms of certainty (central to my thesis), as does the appropriation and collage of genres of representation: (wall) portrait with fiction(al character) and legend (the "Flying Dutchman"), theory (Kropotkin's) and novel (Goodman's) and poetry (Webb's). Webb commands "let the Prince hang / the little lady float" (12-13), not only overthrowing (conventional aristocratic) authority and natural law (gravity), but using the historical/fictional image thus created to cast "a shadow following the / hand that writes / always?" (14-16). Hinting that this would include those who write history, Webb identifies herself with the questionable (right-brained) and marginal "left-handed / only?" (16-17), carrying this synechdoche through to "grasp what [she] can" (19), purposefully tangling tactile and visual cues in the apprehension of the poet/seer. Although she holds the Prince and the little lady

---

[5] He attempted deliberately to set aside his title, only to have it affixed him again and again.

[6] unless we are familiar enough with the text to seek out the unnumbered "Notes to the Poems" at the end of the book, where we learn that "[t]he quotations at the end of this section are

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as counterpoints, one "hang[ing]" (12), the other "float[ing]" (13) instead of "fall[ing]" (3), the repetition of the first-person pronoun (18-19) leads us to associate Webb with "the little lady" (3, 13), reading both as constructs yet part of literary history. The doubling of "shadow" draws attention to its philosophical and material nature: If "[t]he rest / is a great shadow" (19-20) past Webb's poetic "grasp" (19), still "shadow moves up the gang / plank" (25-6) in prime form: "Chapter / 7, 11, 13?" (26-7).

Webb asserts, then, that history (though always represented as fiction) has actual implications—but how to shift them? She might be echoing Benjamin's messianic cry, while admitting a further degree of doubt and dismay ("To be reconciled with the past / is redemption but unreal as hell" [28-29]). Her description of history resonates with Benjamin's Angel of History (TPH 257-8), but also with more general notions of the historical materialist. The problem of how to approach "[h]istory...the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (261) to find even the most provisional human agency is central: "[t]he class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist" (254).

Like Benjamin and Howe, Webb infuses her text with the search for what lies hidden; her quest "[t]o be reconciled with the past / is redemption" and the

---

from Part 3, Ch. 12, 'The Dead of Spring'" in "*The Empire City,* a novel by Paul Goodman, [which] was the beginning of [Webb's] interest in anarchism" (*Wilson's Bowl* 87).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reiteration of "hell" (29, 43) call attention to the fact that none have found "the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (TPH 264) yet. Webb lists seekers in ponderous titles, working in iambs until the "árchăe- / ólŏgĭsts" disrupt the pattern. She contrasts these concepts of profession with hard stresses on the artifacts from which they draw meaning:

> Rĕdémp|tĭve án|thrŏpól|ŏgísts,| árchaĕ-|
> ólŏgĭsts,| bónes, stónes,| rings ŏf
> treés…| (35-37)

If this introduces Wilson Duff and his occupation, it also leaves the answer to Webb's question ("who can get back there?" [31]) hanging, a science arcane, the ellipsis her own. Her return to "The old Prince" (35) and "the little lady" (38) leaves "no shadow [to] fall[]" (39)--this time a contradiction of the excess Webb describes earlier ("the rest / is a great shadow" [19-20]). Here the poem's ambiguity and ambivalence reaches its height, for it includes the possibility that "great shadow"/"no shadow" can exist together, dispelling the either/or binary. If the "great shadow" (20) is all that is beyond human apprehension, the absence of the shadow suggests a flawed certainty ("knowledge?" [7]). She testifies that the suicides (of Duff and Berliner) create torment, a fiction of anarchy: "in the faith that we are inconsolable… / we are resting in this hell" (42-43). In writing (a form of knowledge), Webb has limited but real agency; her reading of this agency, subjectivity, and discernment is subtle and complex. See "Poems of Failure II":

> Insurrectionary wilderness of the I
>
> am, I will be, forcing the vision

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to something other, something out
side the sleep of dreams riddled
with remembrances. (10-14)

The heroic "I / am" plays the biblical signifier for God against a notion that depicts the double bind of human will ("I will be"), both as disobedience "forcing" individuality and agency, and as soul seeking "something other, something out" (12) of the daily experience, the muddled rush of memory that tosses us, generating only partial achievements and slight successes. This suggests that the problem is not that we cannot act, but rather that we must—seeking after perfection in provisional, approximate ways. Even in deciding "we are resting in this hell" (I.43), each decision is an act of will, a choice, a (dis)obedience. When "up goes the little lady / and—no shadow falls" (38-9), it is because the poetry carries (the "shadow" as) the unknowable—not as interpretation or translation, but held open in as much possibility as can be maintained without losing the reader's attention.

These dissections are meant to illustrate not only themes and topics but also the close critical reading that poetry courses often teach. The problem with this type of labored engagement is that it so carefully masticates the passage being consumed as to reduce or alter the flavour of the experience. Certainly it crushes the structure of "time as a precious but tasteless seed" that inheres in "the historically understood" (TPH 263).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Neither hermeneutics nor deconstruction offers a conceptual model for reading, witnessing and practising the engagement that Benjamin's theory supports. Hermeneutics, focused on finding meaning through interpretation, holds that "we have no true objectivity in matters of textual interpretation because our interpretations are always restricted by our historical situation and the limits imposed by our concepts and practical concerns" (Kerby 91). The method offers no light by which to read the tangents we pursue. Though hermeneutics accepts that meaning is relative (91), it fails to postulate that relations (in images, of past to present) are what we most need to find. Without Benjamin's theory, it fails to produce the moment of "the historically understood" (TPH 255) reached when "the flow of thoughts...arrest[s]" (262) as "a memory ...flashes up" (255). On the other hand, while deconstruction sounds compatible with Benjaminian methodology in that it "seeks to inhabit the margins of traditional systems of thought in order to put pressure on their borders and to test their unexamined foundations," it denies metaphysics "by displacing its conceptual limits" in a free play of signification (Adamson 25). As Weigel puts it, for Benjamin, "that [dualistic opposition] between content and form...quite literally cease[s] to obtain, in that they are represented in that third, the image" (x). Neither hermeneutics nor deconstruction theory discover, let alone read, either monads or dialectical images. Uultimately, both beg the question defined by Benjamin's revolutionary praxis: How can we access the "'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (TPH 263)?

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The techniques of close critical reading are useful in that they train readers to seek out repetition and variation, and that is my assumption here: that you will trace numerous threads and textures throughout each section of the dissertation, bearing filaments and fragments in relation to one another, studying contradictions and ironies as well as connections. We are well advised to attend carefully to placement, as well as language, for:

> Just as the idea does not serve for knowledge of phenomena, but rather, configures the relation of phenomena to each other, so translation does not preserve either the meaning or even the syntactical relations in the original, which, in turn, did not...Still, with every turn we must reconfront the question of meaning... Just as *translation* is haunted by the meaning of an "original" and originary meaning, so *similarity* too is staged in a linear temporality. (C. Jacobs *Language* 13-14).

Know that this explanation, this prose introduction, is offered hesitantly. It might well have been entitled "Affixed Site, or A Lecture on the Whether" to acknowledge the attached chapters as a proving ground, an unsettling montage of quotations carefully arranged that may seem to suggest that what is visual is most critical, despite the irony that this play of *site/cite/sight* hinges upon an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

auditory trick.[7] Certainly Benjamin emphasizes the visual, yet he carefully insists that "the manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well" (WAAMR 222). In a text determined to exhort readers to adopt poetic ways of knowing (and where knowing is a-question), the aural must bear weight. My gloss for the remainder of the averted title ("A Lecture on the Whether") intends not only to reflect my admiration for experimental performance[8] but also my dilemma, positioned here between the ethics of form I advocate and the need to fix my sights on the degree required. Hamlet's "whether"—

> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—
> No more; and by a sleep we say we end
> The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to.
> (3.1.56-63)

seems appropriate in a thesis charged (no, fueled and driven) by first-year teaching,[9] one that ponders whether action does matter, and, if so, how an apparently esoteric praxis such as reading poetry might offer students from a

---

[7] This is the site of my work; it is a re/citation; it proposes a new form of sight; and, at the same time that this is a/fixed, it is provisional, if we read the prefix "a" as in "amoral" or "ahistoric."

[8] In interrogating the limits of agency, my "lecture" here also intends to introduce innovation by recalling John Cage's *Lecture on the Weather*—and its avant-garde nod to the antinomian Thoreau.

[9] Hamlet, that hero of indecisiveness so often objectified in first year English essays, leads a life in great need of poetic judgement, and suffers the hazards of ignoring the flash of memory.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

variety of disciplines a model for responding to the barrage of information to which they are subjected throughout their lives.

Although I name names (as protocol requires), I ask the reader to bear these uneasily. In many places, for instance, you will find double references such as: "he [Bruce Andrews] makes you familiar with the unfamiliar" (page 101 in my Chapter Two). My preference would have been to have left the pronoun alone, ambiguous, slipping between names--a stammer of possibilities, and a puzzle, perhaps driving you back to a library or libraries, where you might re/envision years of research (and, with some irony) our profession's devotion to (what passes for) certainty. I attempt to break with convention by quoting texts within another--in order that some traces of the trail are retained[10]—but this is a mixed gift, for it denies innumerable others left unnamed. Furthermore, the name itself is only a help for readers in the know (those familiar with the writers of a marginal discourse); for those who know not, authors' names offer the potentially misleading claim that each thought belongs to a single writer—a notion that deserves scrutiny. I note, too, with chagrin, that the convention of inserting names both saves time and designates property—both notions central to the bourgeois relation of language in the academy.

"Poetic faith" requires that you engage in wordplay. By Western

[10] Each "qtd. in" marks the path of a pedagogy that is always already in process, but the opportunity is not simply to assimilate "facts" but to set all vibrating, whether in harmony or cacophony, showing aspects otherwise masked by our habitual reliance on the "authority" of the printed word or name.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

convention the lowest form of humor, the play of multiple and contestatory relations, the pun is a liminal site of tenuous meanings. Partaking in the conditions essential for poetry, it cuts across signifiers and referents with brazen naïveté--and this is admittedly a naïve project, a dream of resistance and agency *through poetry* in a time of global neo-colonialism. We are tenants, at best temporarily-abled. The very spaces that *du liest* [you read] are *leased*; it is in reading these *least* spaces that we may find a measure of agency. I hold to an image of such human agency as intense, urgent, and desperately difficult--as in Benjamin's terms, present as the "the strait gate" that exists in "every second of time" (TPH 264), and constant as "an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds" (*R* "Surrealism" 192).

What, then, are the politics inherent in the poetics of reading/events in this manner? Benjamin's writings theorize that language is provisional, but not indeterminate (OLaS). Its nature is essentially poetic (Arendt "Introduction" 4, 14), and cannot be limited to aesthetics (W. Benjamin WAAMR). It is relational, contiguous, contextual, allegorical, and visual. Read the world as poetry and everything shifts—profoundly. Recent psychological research indicates that despite the capacity of human brains for parallel processing, subjects *actively choose* what to pay attention to very early in the process of perception (Hardcastle). No physical reason has been discovered that can account for this "bottleneck" of information in test subjects. If attention is a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"mechanism," and is focused early in the information-gathering state, our patterns of attention (such as reading) can be (re)learned. We must not mistake the play of poetics for mere game. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, the way we apprehend culture (in)forms political change:

> Benjamin makes us aware that the transmission of culture (high and low), which is central to this rescue operation, is a political act of the highest import—not because culture in itself has the power to change the given, but because historical memory affects decisively the collective, political will for change. Indeed, it is its only nourishment. (Buck-Morss xi)

How minutely do the politics of "transmission" relate form to agency? The levels crackle with fractal urgency—and with poetries. What and how we teach is critical. My dissertation is open-ended, yet not, I hope, indeterminate—except in the sense that any reader is always ultimately free to accept, modify, or reject what is posited. It attempts to portray a series of decisions within decisions. Hoping to provide the scholarly reader with some of the confusion generated in first-year students first confronting difficult poetry, I have tried to tangle multiple threads with resonant fibres in each chapter, to fray these, and interweave, to resist closure and generate possibilities, but ultimately this is a means to support a thesis—or rather, to have theses, and antitheses, appear for each reader, for each reading.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

You will note that the symbol with which I space the pieces of my montage is indeed a cliché, a circle within a square. It is also a reversal—a round peg within a square hole, a page signifying excess, all that human language fails to encompass, and (one view of) the simplified form that each tangent of "knowledge" proposes. The mark might be read in many ways: the stamp of a pencil eraser by a bored student within a standard box on an examination (or an evaluation); a smearing by one trying to correct an error; the bottom of a bell within its tower (and all the histories with which such a site/sight is fraught); a ring of media sandwiched in a translucent diskette; a recursive spiral read from a particular angle and distance, set within the frame of human understanding; a stone bowl pictured on the cover of a book of poetry; or a mouth, held open in a cry, flared within its moment.

Briefly stated, Chapter One explores Benjamin's theory and the critical texts that have clustered to it. It addresses the possibility of understanding in ways not commonly associated with certainty (poetries, dialectical images, flashes of history, things that we know only by their cover). Although for Benjamin form and content are inseparable, the texture of the language, the cover, is significant, and previous readings shape subsequent layers. I posit, following Benjamin's lead, that meaning is a desperate dance, a stutter of seeing, a place where we perceive pattern or form in cosmic chaos and the banalities of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

detritus. What seems to be a dialectic between experience *as* language and Benjamin's "insist[ence] that experience is not primarily linguistic, that it does not take place within the field of linguistic signification" (Caygill xiv) is resolved in the idea of the cover—the bundled sock that is neither form nor content. If, for Benjamin, "The mental content distinct from the linguistic entity in which it is communicated is thus communicability itself" (Gashé 87) where "[t]he communicable, consequently is that part of a spiritual being that is linguistic" (88), "[c]ommunicability [is] understood as language's communication of itself as communicating, is, in things, 'the residue of the creative word of God' ([R] 331) and thus oriented by the horizon of this divine source'" (89)—this residue can indeed be apprehended in "the possibilities of a discontinuous experience of the absolute" (Caygill xiv). In other words, Benjamin challenges Kant's "basic assumptions that (a) there is a distinction between the subject and the object of experience and (b) that there can be no experience of the absolute (Caygill 2). If we look for the prosody of representations and events, we may apprehend "the communicable" that is revealed in the prosody of relations, images, moments of insight and agency. Provisional and limited as these may appear to us, they offer our only sites for intervention.

Chapter Two offers a response to Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson.* My innovative reading of an innovative reading of an innovative poet and her historical and literary context attempts to read the idea of the avant-garde itself as innately ethical, inherently reading relations—always struggling to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

defamiliarize and destabilize once-radical poetries and politics that have become complacent in their complicity. As Hank Lazer points out, "It is not the newness of a method but the oppositional nature—socially, institutionally, politically—of that art that makes of it a vanguard" (Vol. One 66). Howe invites readers to view the persistent patterning of (what passes for) "knowledge," reading text through text after text, re-citing, seeking the alliteration of ideas[11] and their dissonance or variation, noting the very material way that these are presented.

What lies outside my text, namely the fact that "Howe's artifacts include the marks, smudges, corrections, archaic spellings or mis-spellings, ambivalent usages and references, marginalia, and unusual tropes in the manuscripts of her subjects" can only be gestured at here because of its texture; its nature is cover: "she...creates artifacts with her typographics: lines that intersect, collide, overtype, or create odd angles on the page such that they cannot be paraphrased (Nichols "Tensing" 49). Her project, then, relates to Benjamin's on multiple levels: she attempts to recover the material (as well as the spiritual) and to explore the contradiction, fragmentation, and tangential nature of experience and agency. Furthermore, she shares his critique of the narrative of progress: "much of Howe's writing works toward discovery of semi-erased traces of suppressed lives[;] she seems aware that her own investigation can never escape the possibility that she is simply adding another layer over what it wants to

[11] Carol Jacobs notes that in Benjamin's terms, ideas are relations rather than phenomena. *Language* 4-5.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reveal (Perelman 136). I attempt to trace the theory of poesis presented in Chapter One (particularly the juxtaposition of constellation upon constellation, the unity in the monad and the whole, the relationship between fragment and fabric) throughout this chapter, while taking up problems facing poets—both those alienated (such as Dickinson) and those positioned liminally on the cusp of the "official" contemporary avant-garde Language Poetry (specifically, Howe). I take up especially the politics of perception, and the marginalization of poetry as a means of communication. I question whether the mode of discernment we need is always already oscillating outside our focus, unexplored even in circles of those who might recognize and apply it. How can such poetries be rendered (in)accessible even within the academy, and with what consequences? How might we instigate a dialectic of reading by encouraging audiences to critically engage the fragmentation they encounter in all aspects of popular culture?

In Chapter Three, I turn to *Wilson's Bowl,* where Phyllis Webb offers a poetry that appears to alternate between the experimental and the lyric. Like Howe, Webb takes as her subjects the marginal and dispossessed (as well as cultural icons)--yet in Webb's exploration, the negotiations surrounding subjectivity and agency may be more difficult to pick out. Although *Wilson's Bowl* stands a witness to trauma on a very personal scale,[12] it presents a model of

[12] Webb notes: "My friendship with Lilo Berliner sprang out of our mutual interest in petroglyphs—Indian rock carvings. Before she committed suicide she left her letters from the noted anthropologist, Wilson Duff, on my doorstep. Their correspondence had a peculiar intimacy, perhaps made possible by the fact that they never met. These poems are my attempt to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tracing that which we experience as a "self"—lyric moments—destabilized and set in a pattern of necessary action and repeated failure. Webb breaks down binaries, those moments of closure imposed when we define terms in the attempt to theorize what we mean. My chapter on Webb asks what the limits of theory might entail. In what ways do the narratives of trauma reveal an engagement that goes beyond the uncanny, the return of the repressed? Benjamin's theory suggests that if the unconscious is structured in monadical relation to the cosmos, we must find ways to retrieve and tolerate memory. That "the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially *not available* to its own speaker" (Felman 24) presents the stutter in its most extreme form: static.

If my approach to Benjamin and Howe takes up the question of agency, Webb's writing encircles it: she, too, marks a profusion of beginnings and "failures"—from revolutions, to poems, to friendships, to suicides—but she staggers towards healing; she meets Dominick LaCapra's model of "trying to see the ways in which that relationship really can be worked out in different areas of life: the relationship between normative limits that you want to affirm and the possibility of transgressing those limits, which is the only way in which you get a newer normativity" (*Writing* 153-4). Webb takes the imperative to witness, to articulate what cannot be said, noting that even radical testimony (like each avant-garde) bears the tendency to become simplified, rote, empty. For me, Webb's

---

deal with Lilo's obsessions and death." A few paragraphs later, Webb comments that "Wilson Duff...had committed suicide...in August, 1976." *Wilson's Bowl* 88.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

struggle for ethical action evokes Benjamin's image of the Surrealists, who "exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock" (*R* "Surrealism" 192). She marks the enormous pedagogical potential inherent in innovative poetry. Her texts are not so intimidating that students cannot find a footing, yet they subvert expectations subtly, facilitating the activity that lies at the heart of all teaching: not the dissemination of mere facts, but rather the transmission of an engaged critical praxis. Webb's poetry trains us to see through social milieux focused on self-gratification and success, and helps us to understand our role as agents: if we are see-rs, we must also witness, acting with ethics in all the dimensions of our lives.

What good might this do? What agency could there be in writing or reading poetry? In teaching texts that demand a poetics of apprehension, we offer students practice in reading representations of all kinds against the grain. We encourage them to read not only what they perceive as content but to engage with what the texture of representation and form—language and media—mask and reveal. We cultivate skills and modes of attention that may permit them to see history as something other than a triumphant march of progress. That we teach poetry as a way of reading does not by any means imply that the only response to poetry lies in writing poetry—although we may learn to speak it—but whatever actions we choose, our agency can be increased by attending to the prosody of events and experiences.

All too often scholarly skepticism dominates and dismisses experimental forms and ideas that hone critical edges; many readers lose their trust in the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

author when faced with shards of words slapped akimbo on the page—as is the case, at times, in the work of Susan Howe or Phyllis Webb. In the site where, if, what Coleridge termed "the willing suspension of disbelief...that constitutes poetic faith" (5) were administered even provisionally to Walter Benjamin's most mystical claims) a critical praxis for reading everything from advertisements to coffee grounds could be illustrated, we may be tempted to turn away in bewilderment, lacking the faith to move beyond convention. This thesis, like the innovative writing it treats, requires at least a willing postponement of certainty, of endings, and of judgement. It follows conventional format (the *MLA*) religiously, and thus it breaks down--in places you may feel uncertain of who has spoken what--yet poetic faith asks that you temper your reactions to respond by evaluating, reflecting, contrasting whatever disparate materials and sources it may present. The thesis is intimately concerned with history, poetics, and politics—indeed, the chapters could be read in this light, in that order—and yet here the goal is to convey more than "content."

What might be termed the "form" of the following chapters, though unusual, is not without precedent. Readers will recall that in his *Arcades Project* Benjamin proposes the "[m]ethod of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show" (N1a, 8). We must note that the "text" from which this statement hails never reached its final form. We can only speculate just what that might have been had the advance of the Nazis not intervened in his research and ended his life. However, that the project remains a ruin testifies

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

more intimately to the barbarity of Benjamin's own audience. Mark Lilla gently insists that "[s]ome responsibility for the wreck of the *Arcades Project* must be assigned to Adorno, who in a series of long letters forced Benjamin to reconceive the project again and again" (107). Weigel echoes this: "the possibility of presenting his construction evidently threatened to evade him in the mass of material gathered for his *Passagen* [*Arcades*] project, although he was constantly producing different schemes for ordering it" (37).

There is no finished work of Benjaminian fragments and quotations, then, to imitate. By choosing the montage style, I mean rather to *animate* a critical, essentially poetic theory that attempts to provide readers with constellations of vibrantly (un)familiar perceptions. My innovation here is to translate Benjamin's theory into an approach, a series of tangents intersecting Susan Howe's and Phyllis Webb's avant-garde poetry, to train readers to find their own ways, however unfamiliar the terrain. Poetry offers ways of knowing. The process of reading prosody—in difficult texts, as in difficult poetry—offers a mimetic praxis of Benjamin's theory of relations and image. My montage means to shock readers into seeing that their positions in history (in all that that entails) are irreducibly complicit—but that, by directing the manner in (and the matter to) which we attend, we alter conditions ethically.

This thesis struggles to inject a new level of urgency and agency into research. It returns to the tangent with which I began this introduction: what are

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the patterns of injustice that we perpetuate in our failed apprehension of meaning, in history, the accumulation of all that is daily excluded from our consciousness (child slaves picking cocoa on the Ivory Coast, the homeless in our cities, the lack of alternatives for those we term "mentally ill," to name but a few)? (How) do we act?

It is perhaps not by accident that the leaps in thought and style found here repeat the charged tangential nature of engaged class discussion. Poetic relations read the order of the cosmos, surely written large in the life of Walter Benjamin, whose only "progress" mimed the digressive, Baroque approach he studied. The image of his tattered path, marked by stops and starts, breakages, persecution and "bad luck," is re/marked by writers such as Hannah Arendt:

> With great acumen Adorno has pointed to the static element in Benjamin: "To understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the conversion of extreme agitation into something static, indeed, the static notion of movement itself" (12)

and Rachel Tzvia Back:

> Hartman writes in his analysis of "Benjamin's angel, '[c]riticism approaches the form of fragment, pensee, or parable: it both soars and stutters as it creates the new text that rises up. . .against a priori text that will surely repossess it'" (120)

and Irving Wohlfarth:

> The truly actual, which lodges 'in the oddest and most crabbed of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> phenomena,' points from the heart of the present beyond itself. In this sense, the hymnic happiness of the Messianic present is also the Messianic promise of a happiness yet to come. A coming fulfillment is being symbolically anticipated in the performative act of promising it. Benjamin's announcement thus prefigures a Messiah who constantly defers his arrival: it announces the projected journal Angelus Novus, who—had he ever arrived on the doorstep—would in turn have announced the Messiah. Such deferral is not, however, a series of empty postponements. If the 'true price' of genuine actuality is its transience, its reward is a fulfilled intimation of immortality ("Measure of the Possible" 18).

Fragmentation also punctuates the work and writings that surround Howe and Webb, stuttering a form of persistent failure in the face of both persistent effort and undreamed-of success. The image is mimetic, point after point as powerful in its silences and separations as in its intermittent manifestations, a monad of our experience of articulation itself—an act that calls attention to the materiality of the word at the same moment it marks the brokenness of human agency. This, then, is my exercise. It calls for your heightened attention, asking that you apprehend relations, patterns, resonances, on your own, often without commentary, though not without suggestion. Although each entry has been most carefully placed, you must read before, behind, and in the spaces, reflecting through the reading and experience you bring to it. Read "against the grain" (TPH 257) of convention; attend to nuance and form as to detail and structure;

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

consider how meaning arises in contiguous, isolated, and unnamed elements; attend to aural, visual, and sensory patterns, and allow memory to animate all.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter One

Running for Cover: An Invocation of R(ui)n(e)s

> *If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Where for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of experience.*
>
> Walter Benjamin

> *The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced upon the reader. It is up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves the amplitude that information lacks.*
>
> Walter Benjamin

> *The read image, by which is meant the image in the Now of cognizability, bears to the highest degree the stamp of the critical, dangerous moment which is at the basis of all reading.*
>
> Walter Benjamin

In 1916, the very year that Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistic*s was published, Benjamin was already wrestling with what he perceived to be the *bourgeois* relation to language: "It is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention" (OLaS 69). His indictment points out what is at stake, from a very material perspective, in the transmission, translation, and production of *knowing*:

> However, the rejection of bourgeois linguistic theory by mystical linguistic theory likewise rests on a misunderstanding. For

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> according to mystical theory, the word is simply the essence of the thing. That is incorrect, because the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word, and known in its name by a human word. This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not emerge from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation. Rather the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. (OLaS 69)

> What philosophy needs, [Benjamin] writes, is the "epistemological foundation of a higher concept of experience," which will make "religious experience logically possible." This theological conception of experience is echoed in a 1918 letter to Scholem, in which Benjamin states that all ethics need a foundation in metaphysics, in order to understand "the absolute divine concept of order." (Lilla 85)

What might promise to be an endlessly deferred meeting of deconstruction with mysticism seems fruitless to pursue—and nor is that the project here. Still, that "translation theorists…buck normative models of translation by celebrating the impossibility of equivalence, acknowledging that each language bears its own particular metonymic and metaphoric relations" (Holbrook 2) speaks to the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reasons why theorists such as Derrida and Benjamin stand worlds apart in how they (are) read.

As Sigrid Weigel puts it:

> The constitution of meaning of which [Benjamin] is in pursuit is quite different from a 'grammatology' oriented around the modern conceptualization of the sign. It is not a *différance* (Derrida 1976) operating within a range of linguistic material that he is concerned with, but the origin of ideas and their crystallization in linguistic figurations: linguistic images (*Sprachbilder*) which precede and provide the basis for the archives of metaphor, rhetoric, and iconography. (53)

> Granted, deconstruction *as* a hermeneutic method denies the past as a 'fixed point,' draws the present emphatically into interpretation, and claims to be both anti-ideological and philosophically radical. But it cannot bring to a standstill what is experienced as a continuous restlessness of meaning, because there is no image of the present as the moment of revolutionary possibility to arrest thought. In the absence of any 'magnetic north pole" whatsoever, deconstructionists 'decenter' the texts as a series of individualist and anarchist acts. Change appears

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> eternal, even while society remains static…Fashion masquerades as politics. (Buck-Morss 329 my emphasis).

We can never prove that something non-phenomenal does not exist…simply that it cannot be apprehended, fixed, revealed, in language. Words bounce off, each pronouncement provisional, codified, barely touching *what is* but still defining *what is unseen* in the process.

What is at stake is a sense of agency.

> In the end, Benjamin writes in his essay on language, the original sin of language is its denotative function. The name should speak the thing itself, should make the thing as God's speech creates the world. But the human names for things instead point to something else: 'The word is meant to communicate *something* (outside itself). That is effectively the fall from grace [*Sűndenfall*] of the spirit of language [*des Sprachgeistes*]' (Benjamin 1980a, 153). In not being or speaking the thing, language becomes a *Vexierbild* [picture-puzzle], open to complications, turnabouts, and interpretation. (Rugg 146)

> You find yourself emptying by increments to receive the impress of things. The root of asceticism thus conceived is ravishment by

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> objects; you are silenced by the gleam of their oddness, turned-awayness. What does it mean to become nothing? someone once asked a good man in the desert. "It means to place oneself beneath irrational things and to know that they are without blame." Let the importance of the world totter pomp. Retrieve all names, assertions of similarity, the world of the slight glance, of course—this happens when you look hard—but refuse, further, the allure of posturings justified by the old hierarchies. (Lilburn *Living* 20-21)

Weigel remarks that "At first no greater contrast seems to be imaginable between the images and the discursive methods of the two thinkers" Benjamin and Foucault (33), who worked "decades apart" in the archive of the Bibliothèque Nationale (36). Indeed:

> [I]f Foucault, in his approach to the history of discourses, sees the archive as taking on concrete form in those systems "that established themselves as *events* (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and *things* (with their own possibility and field of use)' (1972: 128; [Weigel's] emphasis), then it could be said that Benjamin quite literally proceeds from the things and the events themselves and is, as it were with a reverse perspective, in search of their statements. (36)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The Kabbalist's manipulation of letters for new ways of seeing is a form of studying *relation*: it is not simply that the consonants matter as clues to content, but the effect their proximity or distance has upon the constellation and all that that evokes. What patterns are formed, and what insights do they reveal?

"The view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language—this view, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall" (OLaS 63).

"Reading can nevertheless function as a mode of bearing witness to an event that is repeatedly relived as and through its forgetting" (Dawson 51).

"A shadow refers not only to an imperfect imitation of something else but also to the play between light and dark as perceived by the eyes" (Back 112).

"In reality, our relation to the past and the future is much more complex than it appears. In the past, in what is behind us, lies not only what was, but also what could have been. In the same way, in the future lies not only what will be but also all that may be" (Futurist poet P.D. Ouspensky's 1911 *Tertium Organum* qtd. in Perloff *The Futurist Moment* 128).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

I could have started from an even older and no less unfruitful debate: what is the relationship between form and content, particularly in political poetry...The dialectical approach to this question—and here I come to my central point—has absolutely no use for such rigid, isolated things as work, novel, book. It has to insert them into the living social context. (AP 221-2)

What Derrida terms *différance* is, in Benjamin's eyes, nothing other than the 'nomadic' wandering of the fallen, errant sign...The infinite progress/regress of signs *qua* means coincides with the viscous flow of a 'homogeneous, empty time' (GS 1,701; IU, 262): the lapsed chronology of a 'progress' that progressively propels itself away from Paradise. (Wohlfarth "Jewish Motifs" 163)

Being seduced by a thing is not honouring it: such immolation is a form of willful self-absorption, not devotion, not honouring. The virtuosity of the cicadas is just vocal; they don't actually say anything; they are Lysianic; not only are they not dear to the Muses, they do not profoundly hear them; not hearing, they are not spoken through. Because they have been seduced, they can't

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> bring one to divine places. They have greed but no madness. (Lilburn *Thinking* 115)

Fritz Breithaupt describes "the famous passage of the sock":

> A young Benjamin puts his hand in a sock and grabs the end of the sock, the seam, in order to pull out the *Mitgebrachte* as the "content" of the sock. However, when he turns the sock inside out, there is nothing: nothing more than the sock, nothing but a cover without an inside or content. 'It taught me that form and content, cover and covered are one and the same.' (194)

In her introduction to (the writings that we now know as) Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt contends that "what is so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he *thought poetically* and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language. Linguistic 'transference' enables us to give material form to the invisible...and thus to render it capable of being experienced" (14).

> The aim of the whole process is the maximization of creativity and complexity through novel combinations. Any assemblage, in that it is composed of a series of positive and negative prehensions, can be understood as a point of view or perspective

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> on the universe as a whole since it constitutes a particularlized expression of the data it has prehended…As "outside," however, He is paradoxically nowhere else but in the world. (Nichols "Subject" 117).

> This comedy rests upon repeatability, a structure Benjamin also sees made possible in modernity by technical means. In its repetition, the event is detached from its original context and shows by this very possibility that, even in its first appearance, it does not have a true content, but instead consists of nothing but a mere mask or cover that hides the essential emptiness below. (Breithaupt 199)

"In fact, language—and by extension literature—is the site of certain loss, founded as it is on '[a]bstractions of the world's abstractions' (28), revolving as it does around the forever absent" (Back 114).

"[T]o know is to put to death other forms of knowledge" (Ma "Articulating the Inarticulate" 474).

> The earlier Benjamin appears to have entertained a conservative idea of tradition as something fixed and perhaps inviolable, as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

his images of the tree and the hieroglyph may suggest. With tradition so conceived, commentary can be no more than a tantalizing mirage, for the modern on his sickbed will necessarily twist out of shape the words he grasps in the paroxysms of his own spiritual fever. It is no wonder that Benjamin was mesmerized by the ideal of exegesis but never undertook it as a vocation. At the end of his life, however, he evidently began to think that this state of fever was not just a symptom of modernity but the condition of humanity at all times, immersed in the dangerous medium of history. Such a perception would certainly have jibed with the findings of his friend Gerhard about Jewry in the Mediterranean world of late antiquity, or in the Rhineland, France, Provence, and Iberia in the Middle Ages. If tradition, including the tradition deemed canonical in the proper theological sense of the term, is actually a dynamic response to history, daring and at times revolutionary in the treatment of its antecedents, commentary is no longer a delusion but a constantly available vehicle for innovation in a cultural system of overarching continuity. (Alter 84).

The invocation of nothingness violates conventional assumptions that revelation should be of something definite and definable.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Scholem probably had in the back of his mind the kabbalistic cosmogony, in which the Infinite, the *'Eyn Sof*, transposes itself into the created world through the mediation of the *'Ayin*, the divine primordial nothingness. (Alter 109-10)

"Rather than pass the time, one must invite it in. To pass the time (to kill time, expel it): the gambler. Time spills from his every pore.—To store time as a battery stores energy: the flâneur. Finally, the third type: he who waits. He takes in the time and renders it up in altered form—that of expectation." (D3, 4)

"Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful of silks" (D2a, 1).

"Benjamin believes an author presides over a text—not as a creator or dictator but as a witness and a messenger" (Naylor 329).

Kristjana Gunnars notes that:

> speaking of Emily Dickinson, Susan Howe suggests that *In the Theatre of the Human Heart, necessity of poetic vocation can turn creator to corruptor* ...'Poetic vocation' is not simply the act of writing poetry. It is also the act of reading. Of finding poetic language in the midst of 'mechanical empiricism.' The

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

vocation of responding to another language when it appears. (79-80)

"Monotony feeds on the new." Jean Vaudal, *Le Tableau noir*; cited in E. Jaloux, "L'Esprit des livres," *Nouvelles littéraires*, November 20, 1937 (cited in D5, 6).

Coleman Barks translates Rumi, the revered thirteenth century Sufi mystic, thus:

> Recognize that your imagination and your thinking
> and your sense perception are reed canes
> that children cut and pretend are horsies.
>
> The knowing of mystic lovers is different.
> The empirical, sensory, sciences
> are like a donkey loaded with books,
> or like the makeup woman's makeup.
> It washes off. (Barks 5)

"A surface is nothing more nor less than the relation between two things. Two bodies touch each other. The surface is the relationship of one to the other" (Charles Hinton qtd. in Ouspensky *Tertium Organum* 35 qtd. in Perloff *Futurist Moment* 129).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"There is no exact referent; what we call a referent is an indeterminate chunk of experience constructed of more or less momentarily cohesive bits of data selected by a multitude of psychobiological processes" (Gannaway 111).

> Benjamin understandably wanted clarification on the idea of the nothingness of revelation. At the same time...he appropriated the image himself in his answering letter (July 20, 1934) and spoke inscrutably of Kafka's attempt 'to feel his way toward redemption' from within the 'inside lining' of nothingness. (Alter 107-8).

In the dialectical image, the present as the moment of revolutionary possibility acts as a lodestar for the assembly of historical fragments" (Buck-Morss 338).

"The signifier is an uncertain entity, concealing and revealing at one and the same time" (Back 115).

Chaos theory holds that the flap of a butterfly's wing could so alter meteorological conditions as to produce a tornado--consequences are thus both mathematical and unpredictable. What if we read this multiplication of fractals,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

this "self-similar, symmetry across scales, pattern inside of pattern—a common idea in Western culture, such as the notion of the world in a grain of sand" (Gannaway 82), as a monad for the Angel of History's endless catastrophe? Or, to the apprehensive, apprehending eye, Benjamin's "strait gate" (TPH 264)?

> On the other hand, there is constituted out of the difference between text or image and meaning, out of the gap between literal and allegorical reading, a field of interpretation which is bound up in the history of power-knowledge-systems, both in their establishment and in their dissolution. In this respect, precisely this field of allegorical interpretation is one in which an explicit or hidden battle for control over knowledge is fought out, a knowledge which, with the aid of the structures of the imaginary and through the interpretation of all forms of imagistic perception, becomes inscribed in the experience and everyday life of individuals. (Weigel 99).

Benjamin, following Brecht's dictum that "The main thing is to learn how to think crudely," argues that "[c]rude thoughts, on the contrary, should be part and parcel of dialectical thinking, because they are nothing but the referral of theory to practice...a thought must be crude to come into its own in action" (qtd. in Arendt 15).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Benjamin's essays are also often so filled with twists, turns, qualifications, and ambiguous references that one can plausibly infer several differing positions from them. This is characteristic of his entire mode of juxtaposing contradictory positions, or fragments of positions, and weaving them together—albeit with so many loose threads that the pattern or design of the argument appears, disappears, and shifts from one reading to the next. (Handelman 22)

As the rise of mechanical reproduction and electronic media attest, there is, however, a particular genre by which "knowledge" "is communicated to the bourgeoisie--namely, the narrative.

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. Awakening (N2a, 3)

"Though the text above is enigmatic and resistant to interpretation, it seems evident to me that the words of the text are anything but haphazard and have, in fact, been chosen and placed on the page with great deliberateness" (Back 43).

> The quotation marks indicate that what is cited (and re-sited) is not new but is the reiteration of what has already been; an intended repetition of the Same in which the singularity of the past's content is itself maintained. (As will be indicated it is Benjamin's description of the "historical object" having a monadological structure that will render this singularity impossible…). (A. Benjamin 242)

"The power of our mythologies about reality tends to make us deny anything that doesn't fit. Our current world view is built on the belief that what is is meant to be and permanent, and that progress is linear and predictable, onward and upward forever" (Gannaway 87-8).

"Rather, we must suppose that the gift of producing similarities—for example, in dances, whose oldest function this was—and therefore also the gift of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

recognizing them, have changed with historical development" (*R* "Mimetic Faculty" 333).

"'For an experienced event is finite,' Benjamin writes in his essay on Proust, '—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it'" (Alter 104).

Scene: an evening reading at a small college in an abbey in south central Saskatchewan. The poet Sue Sinclair pronounces that fiction, with its insistent "what happens next?" pulls readers through time. "Poetry, instead, forms all around us."

Time stops.

> The internal enemy is the bourgeois belief in 'progress.' For when the smoke has cleared, progress turns out...to be that of the bourgeoisie. It is, in other words, the hegemonic ideology with which the victors colonize the minds of the defeated. Would-be progressives abet fascism, Benjamin argues, by reducing it to a relapse into barbarism...[the] new opium of the people, a false, secular religion which can only be counteracted, according to Benjamin's first Thesis, by the introduction of actual theology

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> into the apparatus of historical materialism. (Wohlfarth "Measure" 27)

"Literacy problems, in the ordinary sense, are much less serious than, and are probably even caused by, the problem that people cannot think through the complexities, subtleties, contradictions, and ambiguities of their own world" (Gannaway 19).

"So long as the precognitions needed [to focus on the university system as a whole] are absent, the only possibility is to liberate the future from its deformations in the present by an act of cognition. This must be the exclusive task of criticism" (*SW* "The Life of Students" 38).

> In many places, Proust himself made it easy for them to view his *oeuvre*, too, from the time-tested, comfortable perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism. After all, nothing makes more sense to the model pupils of life than the notion that a great achievement is the fruit of toil, misery, and disappointment. The idea that happiness could have a share in beauty would be too much of a good thing, something that their ressentiment would never get over.
>
> There is a dual will to happiness, a dialectics of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> happiness: a hymnic and an elegiac form. The one is the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss; the other, the eternal repetition , the eternal restoration of the original, the first happiness. (*I* "The Image of Proust" 204)

"It is a peering into the shadowy underside of revelation as it is understood in the Kabbalah, however camouflaged that underside may be by the exuberant fecundity of kabbalistic interpretation" (Alter 110).

"The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well" (WAAMR 222).

Psychological researcher Valerie Gray Hardcastle explains that "it is better to think of the information flowing in our brains as a recursive spiral instead of as a directed vector"—as "attention shapes how things are processed to begin with." (How) would a poetics of perception influence attention, and thus decision making?

Educator Gloria Gannaway discusses physicist David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*:

> It is very difficult not to treat knowledge as a set of basically

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> fixed truths instead of descriptions of moments in a process, moments which are abstractions from the indescribable flux of reality. The form of our language continually introduces a tendency toward fragmentation, thus putting a strong but subtle unconscious pressure on us to hold a fragmentary worldview. As much as possible, Bohm says, our atomistic attitude toward words should be dropped and replaced with a particle physics view that would see words as only 'convenient abstractions from the whole movement,' and language as 'an undivided field of movement' (41). (Gannaway 76)

"When I love a thing I want it and I try to get it. Abstraction of the particular from the universal is the entrance into evil" (Howe *MED* 117).

If we peer intently at science today, we find images that resonate with Benjamin's theory of the monad: "What Mandelbrot originally termed the 'fractal' geometry of nature involves the iteration of comparably complex details on every scale" (Hawkins 12).

Can we consider simile as relational, tentative, modest, awkward, drawing attention to itself, structured (order), a hinge (as (if) or like); and metaphor as immediate, epiphanic, bold, elegant, naturalizing a self as other, impetuous

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(creativity) pinned, a stake through the heart?

> It is this elegiac idea of happiness—it could also be called Eleatic—which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory. To it he sacrificed in his life friends and companionship, in his works plot, unity of characters, the flow of the narration, the play of the imagination. Max Unold, one of Proust's more discerning readers, fastened on the "boredom" thus created in Proust's writings and likened it to "pointless stories." (*I* "The Image of Proust" 204)

"In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows" (N1, 1).

To go forward downward
Search for the dead

Benevolent woods and glades
Hamadryads

Plots and old-plays

A fictive realm
Words and meaning meet in
Feigning

without a text and running from
true-seeming

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Florimell flees away into the forest

Hide her there
an illusion (fiction)

Beauty of the world
becoming part of the forest

and the reeds
(thousands of years) Night

monadical and anti-intellectual (Howe *DP* 27)

It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram in a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall.

Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. (*I* "The Storyteller" 108).

"Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology" (N2, 1).

Walter Benjamin quotes Max Unold, who claims that:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Proust managed to make the pointless story interesting. He says: "Imagine, dear reader, yesterday I was dunking a cookie in my tea when it occurred to me that as a child I spent some time in the country." For this he uses eighty pages, and it is so fascinating that you think you are no longer the listener but the daydreamer himself. (*I* "The Image of Proust" 204)

"In the little hunchback [of *Berlin Childhood*], we have a model for reading; we are now invited to flash quickly through the images offered, all the time retaining our awareness that the motion we perceive is illusory, since we have already experienced the fragments as separate images" (Rugg 174).

> But while both versions of the autobiography close with the little hunchback, in the last version of *Berlin Childhood*, his book disappears, exactly like the photographs of Kafka and Benjamin and the Chinese painting. The presence of the voice and the absence of the picture book cannot, however, be taken as a final victory of sound over sight, for the little hunchback remains in the final version as the invisible watcher who sees the various scenes depicted in the autobiography's segments. (Rugg 173-74)

The desire for possession--and thus production, and reproduction--underwrite

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

capitalist imperialism: "the writtenness of his speech means that what it says is portable, usable by anyone under almost any set of circumstances" (Lilburn 114-15). Benjamin's theory of the bourgeois view of language (wherein words are arbitrary, conventional...portable) begs to be united with his belief that the bourgeois perception is a stutter of "progress"--the "storm" that drives "catastrophe" and "history" (*SW* OLaS 69; *I* TPH 257-58). The hunt for *knowledge*, *experience* apparently *rendered portable* in print (and thus *powerful*), becomes the play of information, simulacra, in electronics, both predicated on acquisition and consumption: the fundamental error—the fundamental horror of "what next?"

"If my eyes are blindfolded and if my hands are chained to a stick, this stick separates me from things but I can explore them by means of it. It is only the stick which I feel, it is only the wall which I perceive" (Weil 55).

> Although the *difference* between use and exchange seems immediately available to intuition, use-*value* and exchange-*value* are in the *same* form—the value form. To put something in the value form means to abstract it, so that it can be measured...if the counter-intuitive Marxian lesson—in the value form, both use and exchange are abstract, and the capital-labor (power) relationship is that capital uses the abstract(ed labor)—is learnt,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the socialist grabbing and saving the difference (surplus and/or interest) for redistribution can mean the difference between crisis-driven and strategy-driven globalization. (Spivak 1-2)

"John Locke's Essay *Concerning Human Understanding* helped to form Edward's conviction, and one quite relevant to Dickinson's writing process, that words are annexed to reality by sensation" (Howe *MED* 49).

> These two readings, and the two levels or movements of Marx's text that they portend to disclose, coexist, but their relations are agonistic if not contradictory. On the first reading, Marx seems altogether committed to the validity of concepts like abstract labor power, the binary opposition between use and exchange value, and "naturalistic" historical inevitability. He calls the "recent discovery that the products of labour, so far as they are values, are but the material expressions of the human labour power spent on their products" something that marks "an epoch in the history of the development of the human race" (p. 322). On the second reading, he is taking a critical distance on these concepts and indicating that they apply only to an alienated state of society. The status of [exchange] value, as the expression of abstract labor power, is itself that of an expression or articulation

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of alienation. (LaCapra *Soundings* 175)

"Ideas 'do not serve for knowledge of phenomena and in no way can [phenomena] be criteria for the existence of ideas...The idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena—or rather of their elements—determines the relationship of the phenomena to each other. Ideas are timeless constellations'" (W. Benjamin qtd. in C. Jacobs *Language* 4-5).

"Absence is always present in a picture in its right relation. There is a split then how to act. Laws are relations among individuals" (Howe *FS* 6).

Laura Hinton (187) quotes Charles Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption":

> as if meaning was a husk
> that could be shucked off or a burden that could be bucked. Meaning is not a use value *as opposed to* some other kind of value, but more like valuation itself. (6)

> Poetry, then, which functions according to the notion of the poet/speaker as an independent subject who, having 'found his voice,' presents a situation seen from a single point of view, fosters the key ideological concept of bourgeois society: the self-sufficient, self-determined individual free to participate in the marketplace. (George Hartley qtd. in Lazer Vol. One 66).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> And just as children do not tire of quickly changing the bag and its contents into a third thing—namely, a stocking—Proust could not get his fill of emptying the dummy, his self, at one stroke in order to keep garnering that third thing, the image which satisfied his curiosity—indeed, assuaged his homesickness. He lay on his bed racked with homesickness, homesick for the world distorted in the state of resemblance, a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through. (*I* "The Image of Proust" 404)

"Overcoming the concept of 'progress' and overcoming the concept of 'period of decline' are two sides of one and the same thing" (N2, 5).

> Destruction for Benjamin, Benjaminian blasting, it can be argued, is maintained by relation. Both the dialectical image and 'now time' are relations. And yet they are more than simple relations. Part of the departure from simplicity pertains to time and part to repetition. It goes without saying that these two parts are related. Opting for the distinction within quotation—the absence and presence of marks as always signifying more than that which is given by the either/or of absence/presence—will

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

capture these two interrelated parts. What has to be taken up, therefore, is quotation, to be understood as a form of repetition. (A Benjamin 242)

If the poststructuralist motif of the "death of the subject" means anything socially, it signals the end of the entrepreneurial and inner-directed individualism, with its "charisma" and its accompanying categorical panoply of quaint romantic values such as that of the "genius" in the first place. Seen thus, the extinction of the "great moderns" is not necessarily an occasion for pathos. Our social order is richer in information and more literate, and socially, at least, more "democratic" in the sense of the universalization of wage labor...This new order no longer needs prophets and seers of the high modernist type. (Frederic Jameson qtd. in Perloff "Lyric Subject" 409)

The good news announced by the angels of yesteryear is drowned out by news that is hardly deserving of the name—the age-old news of a Fall from the name. This nameless catastrophe is mutely named by the speechless expression on the angel's face. It is the wide-eyed, wide-angled, apotropaic gaze of the Medusa as camera(wo)man. (Wohlfarth "Measure" 20)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Of perhaps greater importance is an insight that accompanies that suspicion, namely, that with our growing belief that film media can reveal the shape of our world, even the shape of ourselves, we must counter photographic power with a return to older, mystical ways of reading, valuing the magical nature of photographs and language over their (only apparently) denotative nature. (Rugg 152)

> There were not always novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; not always tragedies, not always great epics; not always were the forms of commentary, translation, indeed, even so-called plagiarism, playthings in the margins of literature...we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms. (AP 224).

If "all writing that takes itself with a fatal seriousness to embody knowledge of lasting importance...confuses representation, here analysis, with the thing itself...imagines it identifies without remainder" (Lilburn 117-18), this error may well be the essential component of the bourgeois relation to language, "the deception that lies in all writing—that the reproduction of an experience is equal to the undergoing of the experience; it does not confess the vicarious nature of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

writing itself" (117).

Kristjana Gunnars, quoting Northrop Frye's *The Great Code,* appears to evoke both Dickens and Benjamin, portable property with the bourgeois theory of literature:

> *Epigrammatic comments*, he writes, have been taken out of the literary texts of their origins and copied and memorized out of context (217). It is as if a given text displays itself as an encasement of useful comments one may remove at random. *What is happening here*, Frye explains, *is that the work of literature is acquiring the existential quality of entering into one's life and becoming a personal possession.* (Gunnars 18)

> For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. (TPH 256).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The theatre of this literary confusion is the newspaper, its content 'subject-matter,' which denies itself any other form of organization than that imposed on it by the readers' impatience. And this impatience is not just that of the politician expecting information, or of the speculator looking for a tip; behind it smolders that of the man on the sidelines who believes he has the right to see his own interests expressed. (AP 224)

> The fact, then, that Kafka's sundry pupils, advocates and students and victims of the law, should be scrutinizing scriptures that defy understanding, is only a modern version of what is the authentic process of receiving revelation at all times—or, to put it in slightly different terms, it is a peering into the shadowy underside of revelation as it is understood in the Kabbalah. (Alter 109-10)

> Unlike Twain and Strindberg, who pile photograph upon photograph in an attempt to delineate an identity distinct from all others, Benjamin sets photograph against photograph to show how they cancel out individual features, disrupting the denotative value of photographs and opening them to a reading of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit (nonsensual resemblance). (Rugg 170)

"Like Twain, Benjamin constantly reworked his autobiography, changing his mind about experimental narrative strategies, writing in small textual fragments, publishing the fragments before the whole (sometimes under a pseudonym), and leaving, finally, a massive task for the editors" (Rugg 152).

"Scientists don't look for what cannot be ordered, but we should not conclude that there is nothing that cannot be ordered. This view parallels the Uncertainty Principle of quantum physics" (Gannaway 93).

> Think of yourself as Ayin and forget yourself totally. Then you can transcend time, rising to the world of thought, where all is equal: life and death, ocean and dry land. Such is not the case if you are attached to the material nature of this world. If you think of yourself as something, then God cannot clothe himself in you, for God is infinite. No vessel can contain God, unless you think of yourself as Ayin. (Matt 71)

"All nonidentity is infinite, but this does not imply that all identity is finite" (TPI 75).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Even the landscape of redemption that is a vital element of the tradition is a projection into the future of the Edenic past reported in revelation. This orientation toward the past differs essentially from the Greek myth of a golden age because its crucial moment is not the myth of Eden but the dynamic event of revelation that makes relentless demands on all subsequent generations, compelling them to construe and absorb its meaning by engaging in a process of continuous interpretation. (Alter 99-100)

> The segments of Benjamin's autobiography lie strewn before us as we turn to look at the little hunchback looking. It is at this point in the narrative that we realize that we will now have to read backward in order to gain the proper perspective. The autobiography, which begins as a book in European script, to be read from left to right, now becomes a Hebrew text, in which we must read from right to left. (Rugg 178)

"A political tendency is the necessary, never the sufficient condition of the organizing function of a work" (AP 233).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> What Benjamin indicates about (Proust's) literary work is its necessary camouflage as referential language. It apparently provides access to life, to a self existing outside and prior to the text: it offers a plenitude of language which provides a link to a realm external to itself. This feint is intrinsic to the text of fiction, to the text that invariably pretends to be that which it is not. (C. Jacobs *Language* 57)

> The true measure of life is remembrance. Retrospectively, it traverses life with the speed of lightning...He whose life has turned into writing, like old people's, likes to read this writing only backward. Only so does he meet himself, and only so—in flight from the present—can his life be understood. (*R* "Conversations with Brecht" 209-10)

Andrew Benjamin cites N 19, 1, wherein Walter Benjamin speculates that "It could be that the continuity of tradition is only an appearance. But if this is the case, then it is precisely the persistence of this appearance of permanence that establishes continuity." A. Benjamin continues: "The force of this description is that it gives to tradition the structure of narrative" (243).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In "Aphorisms on Imagination and Color," Benjamin writes that "Hebbel may have been on the right track when he said that individuation was original sin" (*SW* 56).

> The depth of primordial being is called Boundless. Because of its concealment from all creatures above and below, it is, 'Nothing,' meaning: No one can understand anything about it—except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is 'I am becoming.' (Matt 67).

Linda Rugg's biographical account of Benjamin's autobiographical tendencies reads experience as a stutter that we, habituated to the smoothing ways of narrative, can almost never perceive:

> The traditional notion of memory experienced before death –'life flashing before one's eyes'—takes on a relationship to the flashing photographs of cinematography, thus linking photography to the idea of a text written *in extremis*. The flashing pictures also point up the illusion in cinematic continuity, since what we experience as 'motion' in film depends on our inability to perceive the gaps between photographs. (173)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Benjamin attempted to construct a counter-discourse by unearthing buried markers that expose 'progress' as the fetishization of modern temporality, which is an endless repetition of the 'new' as the 'always the same'" (Buck-Morss 56).

"We live in a consumer culture predicated on forgetting or else on highly selective remembering" (McRobbie 166).

"But Benjamin's reference to the hunchback as an imagined construct, imagined by himself, does not necessarily imply self-hatred. Instead, it indicates and articulates the powers that work to force us to construct ourselves negatively" (Rugg 180).

"The child [Benjamin], groomed for compulsive mimesis in the bourgeois world that builds identity through the accretion of things, disappears into the world of objects depicted in the text" (Rugg 167).

"For the leap into the apparatus, enabled by and rehearsed in the cinema, also entailed a leap into the capitalist market, into the world of commodities, into mass consumption" (Hansen 59).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Rugg reports that"[o]ne of the arresting features of Semitic script...is its reduction of words to their consonantal roots. If vowel markings are eliminated, each word becomes a *Vexierbild* [picture-puzzle], open to a variety of readings" (141-42). This relates to the Kabbalistic manipulation of letters for new ways of seeing, a form studying *relation* rather than *content*: it is not the letters that matter primarily (they are only standing in) but the effect their proximity or distance has upon the constellation. What patterns are formed, and what insights do they reveal? Is the belief that human experience is continuous founded on a defiant anti-Kabbalistic insertion of vowels? We cannot grasp our lives as distinct moments, so we "know" them to be continuous?

Nonetheless, "Benjamin and Scholem both strongly opposed any cult of pure immediate experience, including Buber's *Erlebenismystik* theology, which proclaimed the superiority of intuitive ecstatic experience (*Erlebenis*) to the truths mediated through language" (Handelman 20).

"It is in fact the framing of the narrative in 'images' that places such weight on the order of the segments and gives them such density. The shift from a continuous to a discontinuous structural principle occurs in the transformation of *Berlin Chronicle* into *Berlin Childhood*" (Rugg 153).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The turning inside out exposes that which resisted appearing, the nonphenomenal nucleus. But it does not show the true content of the nucleus; rather, it shows the phenomenal cover from the inside, as a cover. What was previously understood to be real and substantial turns out to be a mere cover, deception, and fiction. (Breithaupt 194)

"The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history" (TT 71).

"History is a history of fiction, or more precisely, history is a delay of the ending of fictions" (Breithaupt 194).

"History is then doubly a fiction. It is not the passing of time but the pacing of capitalist production manifest in the language of consumer culture" (McRobbie 166).

"The mask (the sock) is displayed from both sides: the mask as reality and as a staging of reality. For this split cognition, Benjamin coined the term "dialectic image" (Breithaupt 194).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> An epiphany enables you to sense creation not as something completed, but as constantly becoming, evolving, ascending. This transports you from a place where there is nothing new to a place where there is nothing old, where everything renews itself, where heaven and earth rejoice as at the moment of Creation. (Matt 99)

> This whole turning back toward origins was the fundamental expression of the rebellion against the German bourgeois patrimony that we noted earlier in regard to all three writers. The controlling cultural concept of that legacy, as George Mosse has observed, is the idea of *Bildung*—moral aesthetic education by gradual steps in response to the demands of social discipline always oriented toward the future, toward the achieved self that the educated person has the potential to become. (Alter 99)

"The dialectician cannot look on history as anything other than a constellation of dangers which he is always, as he follows its development in his thought, on the point of averting" (N7, 2).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Chaos is more than a theory; it is a method, a way of doing science...a new way of seeing" argues Gloria Gannaway (88); it "contains a strong element of the poetic" (91).

> Resolute refusal of the concept of 'timeless truth' is in order. Nevertheless, truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea. (N3, 2)

Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that Benjamin felt that:

> His trip to Moscow in 1927 had convinced him that the problem of cultural education was just as acute in a postrevolutionary society where the Communist Party's attempt to teach the 'classics' of European literature popularized bourgeois values 'in precisely the distorted, dreary fashion for which, in the end, it has imperialism to thank.' (467 10n)

Sue Sinclair writes that:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> A difference, perhaps the primary difference, between fiction and poetry, is that fiction is concerned with forward momentum, is always asking *what next*, *what next*? Fiction is beholden to time, to narrative, to chronology. Even when fiction plays with chronology (à la postmodernism), chronology is still the rule relative to which all else occurs…Poetry, as I understand it, is fundamentally unconcerned with time." (1)

"This notion of a perpetually renewed--and perpetually missed—opportunity is Benjamin's version of Trotsky's demand for "permanent revolution" (Wohlfarth "Measure" 14).

"[Benjamin] disputed the idea of progress, historically and philosophically. He could not therefore participate in that account of Marxism which saw history as moving, progressively, toward socialism" (McRobbie 155).

"In fragmentary images the essences appear concretely, but it is the philosophical construction that, even if invisible, gives support and coherence to the whole" (Buck-Morss 77).

"Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (TPH

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

263).

"Capitalism will not die a natural death" (Wohlfarth "Measure" 14).

"Uncertain of Marxism as a political practice or as a theory of history, Benjamin pursues his own singular path, drawing on Marxist ideas" (McRobbie 167).

"Whoever delves into mysticism cannot help but stumble, as it is written: 'This stumbling block is in your hand.' You cannot grasp these things unless you stumble over them" (Matt 163).

"An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one" (AP 233).

> For the true sign of decadence is not the collusion of the university and the state (something that is by no means incompatible with honest barbarity), but the theory and guarantee of economic freedom, when in reality people assume with brutal simplicity that the aim of study is to steer its disciples to a socially conceived individuality and service to the state. (*SW* "Life of Students" 38)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> According to Benjamin himself, Brecht even suggested [imperialism] was the background to Rimbaud's *Le Bateau Ivre*: 'what it describes is not an eccentric poet going for a walk but the flight, the escape of a man who cannot bear to live any longer inside the barriers of a class which—with the Crimean War, with the Mexican adventure—was beginning to open up even the more exotic continents to its mercantile interests.' (Kraniauskas 144)

Discussing Benjamin's essay on surrealism, Marcus Bullock writes that:

> The intoxication of the process, for [Benjamin], lies in the equal critical force a consciousness schooled in the nature of intoxication may direct against the powers of fascination exercised by images of the future. Seduction preponderates over critical rigor if the future is dissolved into irreality, because the dangers to be negotiated are transfigured into objects of delight for a renewed state of intoxication. ("Bad Company" 68)

> When Benjamin praised montage as progressive because it 'interrupts the context into which it is inserted,' he was referring to its destructive, critical dimension (the only one that Adorno's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> observations recognize). But the task of the Arcades project was to implement as well the constructive dimension of montage, as the only form in which modern philosophy could be erected. (Buck-Morss 77)

"What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value. But we should make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography." (AP 230).

"The general context into which Walter Benjamin and his colleagues of the Frankfurt school were born was that of an Imperial—and recently unified—Germany in which nationhood and colonialism mutually re-enforced each other in the dominant ruling imaginary" (Kraniauskas 143).

We can conceive of a radical poetic pedagogy that attempts to fulfill the role that Benjamin claimed for criticism, wherein, by "offering a formulation of these ["robust"] questions, the critical text fulfills the task of bringing the poetic text's productive intentions into the open, thereby placing the public in the 'disquieting position of having to think for itself'" (Witte 123). This praxis stands foretold by Benjamin's reaction to "Brecht's new periodical *Versuche* (Experiments)": "the critic Benjamin saw for the first time, in the medium of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

avant-gardist poetic texts, the confirmation and implementation of his theory of a functional literature" (122).

> Against the grain of narrative, however, "One Way Street" foregrounds, as in the above fragment [Underground Works], the symbolic organization of space: topography...Given its status as an avant-garde literary work—it contains most of this movement's contradictory anti-institutional gestures—of all Benjamin's texts this one has received surprisingly little attention. This is because, paradoxically, it has not been *read* as an avant-garde text at all! (Kraniauskas 145)

"Empirical understandings of the world are partial at best, the halo and the apparition—all that is mysterious and at the borders of understanding—have a genuine power over and purpose in our lives" (Back 44).

> Thought reveals itself only through contemplating a little without content, contemplating sheer spirit. The contemplation is imperfect: you understand—then you lose what you have understood. Like pondering a thought: the light of that thought suddenly darkens, vanishes; then it returns and shines—and vanishes again. No one can understand the content of that light.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> It is like the light that appears when water ripples in a bowl: shining here, suddenly disappearing—then reappearing somewhere else. You think that you have grasped the light, when suddenly it escapes, radiating elsewhere. You pursue it, hoping to catch it—but you cannot. Yet you cannot bring yourself to leave. You keep pursuing it. (Matt 114)

> Everything originates in the incandescence of revelation, which is then sustained through time in the myriad mirrorings and refractions of exegesis. The whole system is imaginatively focused on the great moment of its origination, however bold and surprising the 'spontaneity' of later interpreters. Even the landscape of redemption that is a vital element of the tradition is a projection into the future of the Edenic past reported in revelation. (Alter 100)

"Bernd Witte is surely right, in this regard, to point out that Benjamin's reluctance to join Scholem in Palestine accords with his long held 'plea for an establishment for the spiritual values of Judaism in the context of European culture' [Witte 114]" (Kraniauskas 140).

"The child in the autobiography is represented by the things and places that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

surrounded him, by the words that forced him to resemble those things by forcing him to contemplate them, preoccupy himself with them and become occupied by them" (Rugg 147).

"Marx is looking at the circuits of capital, the birth of whose originary accumulation cannot be philosophically grasped, only narrativized" (Spivak 5). "The attempt to philosophize it leads to theology" (Spivak 34 12n).

"For the revolutionary struggle is not between capitalism and spirit, but between capitalism and the proletariat" (AP 238).

"The problem with the Surrealists in [Benjamin's] view was their 'undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication': they refused to wake up and see the joke. History for Benjamin, on the other hand, only 'begins with awakening'" (Kraniauskas 146).

"What is methodical in excavation is the return to the same subject matter. But even the "most meticulous examination" of the subject matter guarantees no discovery. That remains a matter of luck. The method of searching [for Benjamin] consists in making room for luck" (Frey 141).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter Two

Re citation: Howe to begin again[1]

Come afterward compiler
the impediment of words
torn to pieces by memory
Susan Howe

word flesh crumbled page edge

The shadow of history
Is the ground of faith

A question of overthrowing.

Susan Howe

Disoriented by all (that cannot be said) he(a)r/e/d, wondering how to approach Susan Howe's poetics of explosive p/reservations, I happened upon an essay that I had once deemed routine, a formality, mere coverage of one of Howe's more obscure texts, an article authored by a name I didn't recognize, published in a journal no longer received by the University of Alberta. I glanced at the title, "'The paper being still et with ink...': Animality and the Poetics of the Gift, or Howe's *hau* in Susan Howe's *a bibliography of the king's book; or, eikon basilike*"—and recalled it as the one text I had tried to wriggle out of reading on the basis of its beginning, its title, alone, before my exams...only to have my supervisor pronounce that it sounded interesting, and

[1] This chapter was entitled before I read the Talisman Interview, wherein Howe remarks: "Here I was thinking about Dickinson and English writers of her time, and I more or less happened on Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. And it was a mind-boggling thing, I so nearly missed it. Anyway I had to begin again." (49)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

would be worth a look. What passes for(e) knowledge?

Consider beginnings.

The essay's epigram:

> Every sentence has its end. Every day is broken by evening. A harrowing reflection is cast on meaning by gaps in grammar, aporias of historic language" ([Susan Howe, 'The Difficulties Interview" 17] Howard 126).

The first line casts me back to my own beginnings, here, on Howe, and in my chapter on Benjamin: "'The Stutter is the plot'—or so Charles Olson supposedly once quipped...(Foster 67)" (Howard 126).

What is a stutter but a stammer of beginnings? What is an "avant-garde" but a break from what has become habitual, a re-beginning, a-new? And for the angel of history—isn't the catastrophe of each ending not in the beginning afresh, but in each foundering that proceeds amidst a narrative of acquisition and accumulation? How to cease the hubris of our placid, pleasant lives?

Each avant-garde begins as a corrective to the latest corruption, a drive to liberate a society. Yet for all its innovation and rarity, innovative poetry attracts precious little attention. Obviously, not all in scarce supply simply drives popular demand: a mass of (media-hyped) appetites, consumers lack both the exposure to alternative poetry and the willingness to suspend disbelief long enough to enjoy it. Why choose a literature, then, wherein, as Rachel Tzvia Back puts it, "[t]he quest for meaning—the struggle through silence for

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

speech as enacted on the page—becomes meaning, the only meaning available, valuable in and of itself" (117)? Why select reading that is purposefully broken and full of contradiction? The work Back backs is that of poet Susan Howe, a writer whose poetry is in many places so apparently arbitrary as to seem intractable, so frustratingly resistant to convention that letters float freely and lines lie scissored horizontal shards of meaning(lessness)—or so it appears. Recall, however, that the cues of parentheses, colon, dash, and italics I essay to use in the beginning of my chapters were hardly the conventional grammar of typographical play that they have become in academic circles over the last decades. Howe seldom resorts to any of these. She does, at times, write in pages of what seems to be lucid, vibrant, poetic prose—wherein she apparently narrates supplements to the history of her poetry; this seems a pedagogic strategy designed to enable and disarm readers while she continues to use all the poetic tactics she can muster. It is not my purpose to pontificate here about the prosody, but rather to meditate on the contradictions and complexities her work invokes. Indeed, I grant the difficult work of struggling with syntax, form, and prosody a grace for the reader. It is my hope that you will be compelled to take up one or more of her texts and work through it. Her pedagogical technique resembles the immersion method used in second language teaching, wherein students seize hold of cognates and seek to integrate them with concepts already grasped, struggling to construct provisional meanings, always subject to context and further intelligence. Words that resist recognition are held in mind as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

teachers encourage students to accept uncertainty, doubt, and failure...to map out indeterminate constellations and concepts as they begin to recognize provisional meanings through patterns.

We can teach some of these formal strategies for a literacy of poetics, just as we do for traditional reading. In this regard, much of the criticism on Howe's work is instructive and thoughtful, yet often it attempts to walk the reader doggedly through the experience of the poetry.[2] Too careful deconstructions are like guidebooks to a foreign country: informative, interesting, but something for the tourists—and the very problem with the reception of innovative texts lies in the fact that few readers will come to inhabit territories scarcely scouted by an avant-garde, for "[t]he conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion" (WAAMR 234). What is in the order of an avant-garde? "What voice when we hesitate and are silent is moving to meet us?" (Howe *MED* 22).

"Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves exclusion and repression" (Howe "Encloser" 178).

"Shouldn't one rather methylate one's work, like spirits, to guarantee its

---

[2] Rachel Tzvia Back's *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Alabama: U of Alabama P, 2002) is a fine example of this type of reading. Back's attention to nuance and detail is supplemented by careful reflection. In her third chapter, she draws on the trope of "brush[ing] history against the grain" (W. Benjamin TPH 257) to demonstrate Howe's "'historical consciousness' (*Europe of Trusts* 13)" (Back 60).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unpalatability to the other side—at the risk of making it unpalateable to everyone" (W. Benjamin *Briefe* 531 qtd. in Wohlfarth "No-man's-land" 155).

"Progress seems to be forward but where forward is—uncertain" (Howe *MED* 77).

What does it mean that Susan Howe's *The Nonconformist's Memorial* is indeed a meditation on what it means to be martyred: "Marginal. Belonging to the brink or margent./ The brink or brim of anything from telepathy to poetry" (92)?

"It is not the person standing at the source who can tap the full power of 'intellectual currents'; rather, it is the one standing in the valley who generates energy from the gradient or distance from the source" (Weigel 16).

> The "Arcades Project" is not so much an unfinished text as a series of texts in various stages of completion. It is neither a coherent nor a single piece of writing, but rather an agglomeration or plethora of interconnected, related enterprises, begun at various times, dropped, taken up with renewed zeal, transformed, and eventually abandoned in favour of something else. (Gilloch 100)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Rather than a transit interrupted, art, construed historically, had reached the end of the line because it had moved onto a different plane of consciousness. That would be the plane of philosophy, which, because of its cognitive nature, admits of a progressive developmental narrative (Danto 135)...And one way of reading this narrative would be that it all at once stopped seeming important to artists to work under the auspices of a narrative which at most permitted the most minute increments of progress under its auspices (147-8)...None of this has much to do with the deconstructionist account. Rather it has to do with the structural pluralism that marks the end of art—a Babel of unconverging artistic conversations. (148)

"Mercenary and racist as it soon became, originally this had been a plantation of religion" (Howe *MED* 45).

"Susan Howe has received considerable acclaim, and justly so, as one of the most important poets of our time" (Lazer *Opposing Poetries* Vol. Two 60).

"New sentences imply continuity and discontinuity simultaneously, an effect that becomes clearer when they are read over longer stretches" (Perelman 67).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"New sentence writing can in fact require more attention rather than less from its readers, but if that attention is not granted, then the results might make a reader feel as if she was suffering from ADD" (Perelman 62).

Lesson plan: Discuss the history of the avant-garde to demonstrate why chronology might matter, paint it as a stutter of beginning, a dialectic, margins punctuated by expletives and innovation. When boredom slips into automatism, is that good or bad? (Formalists would say it's bad; Futurists see a different type of automatism, a connection with *what is unconscious*). Walter Benjamin (in WAAMR) takes up the significance of engagement; he urges that the film audience must be positioned as critic rather than passive consumer, and points to the potential for "the distinction between author and public…to lose its basic character" (230-35). If only the audience would realize that it has to take on the perspective of the camera, testing—how not to be distracted by the set and its paraphernalia? "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice" (228-33).

"In other words, the world as it appears phenomenally has undergone a process of selection *before* turning into material to be processed by consciousness" (Michel 732).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Occult tendency of opposites to attract and merge. Hesitation of us all, one fire-baptized soul was singing" (Howe *MED* 22).

For Dickinson, as for Benjamin, "Time lived forward is only understood backward...social existence merely negates spiritual progress" (Howe *MED* 54).

In "A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike," Susan Howe turns to a question that evokes Benjamin's preoccupations: her discussion of Milton's denunciation of the "ritual" and "dogma" he locates in King Charles I not only asks what it means to defend the "new rationalism," but its "intellectual consciences as informed by God" (*NM* 48)—forms of thinking that may well drive the bourgeois pursuit of progress.

> As opposed to the direct perception of the cataclysmic event, we have doom on the far side of the media undermining our brains. We do not believe our senses; the level of automatism we have to deal with is of an order the Formalists would not have believed. The necessity for technique is absolute in the face of this fact. (Watten 15)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Method: Train students to read the world as they read a poem—stutter through at first, then repeat, again and again, playfully, inquisitively, comparing and contrasting, drafting responses--marginal, provisional, revisioning, repenting--looking for the underside, using boredom to propel.

"The vital distinction between concealment and revelation is the essence of [Dickinson's] work" (Howe *MED* 27).

"The collage leaf on the cover thus emblematizes what is to come inside the book: it announces a new conception of the page-as-such, the page as 'field of action' or, in Russian Futurist terms, as simultaneity, as the fourth dimension beyond space and time" (Perloff *Futurist Moment* 141-2).

> Thus, for example, a man under interrogation who has been lying may break down and admit 'I am lying'. He means that the liar is, as it were, someone else represented in his discourse, though the single shifter of the first person covers both I's. The situation would be even clearer if he said 'I have been lying', discarding one self and adopting another, that is, speaking about his previous untruthful self as a character in his own discourse as much as to say 'he was lying, not me'. The 'I' speaking and the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> 'I' spoken about can never be the same. (Easthope 44)

"Rilke writes in one of the Duino Elegies, 'Strange to see meanings that clung together once, floating away / in every direction'" (Howe qtd. in Foster 49).

> While Howe's earlier field compositions and word grids challenge their audience's reliance on conventions of reading (left-to-right, top-to-bottom), pages from her more recent books, with their rotations and inverse mirrorings, thoroughly subvert and frustrate a reader's expectations by eliminating the very directional axes on which those conventions are based. (Dworkin 391)

> As she went on through veils of connection to the secret alchemy of Deity, she was less and less interested in temporal blessing. The decision not to publish her poems in her lifetime, to close up an extraordinary amount of work, is astonishing. Far from being the misguided modesty of an oppressed female ego, it is a consummate Calvinist gesture of self-assertion by a poet with faith to fling election loose across the incandescent shadows of futurity. (Howe *MED* 48-9).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"In the figure of the destructive character the paralyzed melancholiac has been transformed into a doer whose acts restore the light of judgement to an allegorically perceived world" (Wohlfarth "No-man's-land" 161).

> For safety, the 'enlightened' eighteenth century turned God to a sensible watchmaker whose World-clock ticked perfectly. It no longer required winding by him, or by his chosen representatives on earth. After the French Revolution, the antique conception of sovereignty, with all its mixed capacity for evil and for beauty, was effectively broken in the Western world. (Howe *MED* 83)

"The linguistic and visual choices that Howe makes are not arbitrary, just as their meaning(s) is not open-ended" (Back 5).

"The way to understand her writing is through her reading" (Howe *MED* 24).

"It takes a poet to see how urgent this subject of line breaks is" (Howe qtd. in Foster 49).

Howe speaks of her use of mathematician Rene Thom's concept of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Singularity": "It's the point chaos enters the cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else" (qtd. in Foster 62).

> E[dward]F[oster]: If the icon is not presence—if, as you say in your introduction, "the absent center is the ghost of the king" (by which I understand authority and so the origin of meaning), then what is left in words themselves? What is in the word?
> S[usan]H[owe]: That's it. It's the singularity. It's a catastrophe of bifurcation. There is a sudden leap into another situation. The ghost (the entrance point of a singularity) is the only thing we have. And a ghost represents death...I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other. (Foster 65)

> In this way, time becomes space, and space is perceived as surface. Ouspensky quotes Charles Hinton: "A surface is nothing more nor less than the relation between two things. Two bodies touch each other. The surface is the relationship of one to the other" (*T[ertium] O[rganum]* 35)...What is important, for our purposes here, is that what we might call the "Ouspensky strain" manifests itself as an insistence, on the part of the artists, on noncausality, nonlogical relationships, the simultaneous existence on a surface plane of seemingly unrelated verbal and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

visual events (Perloff *Futurist Moment* 129).

"Pedagogic side of this undertaking: 'To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows.' The words are Rudolf Borchardt's in *Epilegomena zu Dante*, vol. 1 (Berlin 1923), pp. 56-57" (N1, 8).

"Language constructs the "reality" perceived. And this means that perspective, as in the polar bear scene in Howe's *Frame Structures*, is always shifting and that the subject, far from being located at the center of the discourse, as is the case in Wright's poem, is located only at its interstices" (Perloff "Lyric Subject" 432).

"A poet is never just a woman or a man. Every poet is salted with fire. A poet is a mirror, a transcriber" (Howe *MED* 7).

"The reader must read as much meaning into the space between the lines and between the stanzas as in the lines and stanzas themselves" (Back 27).

"Ignoring a text's visual prosody is like refusing to read all of the words, or claiming that a particular section is simply insignificant" (Dworkin 389).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"In my college classes, I always start by saying, 'Don't analyze or paraphrase the poems, but first read and reread them, memorize and recite them, and then tell me what you like and don't like.' And then revisit those judgments in a few weeks and in a few months" (Bernstein 55).

"It is just this otherness of language—its restlessness and refusal to settle in one place, its pull toward the margins and the unexpected, its musical ability to contain both itself and its counterpoint—that Howe uncovers, cultivates, and foregrounds in her work" (Back 9).

"The shifts in line justification and word placement...suggest that language is always in danger of becoming an enclosed space but that the poet refuses to let forms play their accepted role" (Perloff "Lyric Subject" 428).

"All will, all human striving, must be oriented toward re-establishing in Death the lost harmony of Ideal beauty. Affirmation in negation, all motion, all direction is toward this predestination. One wrong step may subvert right purpose" (Howe *MED* 63).

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation *à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day. (TPH 254)

And while the 'alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds' has on the one hand the precisely opposite implication to the shots fired at the tower clocks during the July revolution 'pour arrêter le jour'...it is also the case that both—the functioning of the alarm clock, intensified into immeasurability, as also the violent arresting of the tower clocks in order to make 'remembrance' possible—have the same ultimate effect. 'Irrités contre l'heure', both are strikes (*Anschläge*) against clocks, strikes of the now-time (*Jetztzeit*) against the measured, continuous, linear progression of time—or 'homogeneous, empty time', as Benjamin will call it in the historico-theoretical theses. Yet between these two images a difference may be remarked upon, readable as an allegory of the difference in conceptual armatures that give the texts of 1929 and 1940 their respective

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> characters: *body- and image-space* in 'Surrealism', and the *dialectical image* in the theses on the concept of history. (Weigel 16-17)

> Viewed in such contexts, the first line of the poem becomes a literal demonstration. How to read it in the traditional sense becomes then entirely irrelevant; for the line is designed to show, through its form, how a patriarchal, linguistic order is being 'wrestled from' the dark life (Quartermain 78) and how history as the record of winners violates and murders history as an actuality through editors' pencils, erasers, scissors, and knives. (Ma "History Revised" 726).

Walter Benjamin and the bourgeois relation to language: the avant-garde, always already passed, the problem not how to be original but how to break through idioms, negotiate mediums--where "medium" includes "seer."

"Perhaps the most important way of examining the prospects held open by iterative reworking (the other repetition) and the monad is by reintroducing the concept of the foreword and with it the relationship between foreword and repetition" (Andrew Benjamin "Time and Task" 244).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The OED reminds us that *innovation* was once synonymous with sedition and even treason…Indeed, it was not until the late nineteenth century that *innovation* became perceived as something both good and necessary, the equivalent, in fact, of avant-garde…Benjamin, for that matter, had no use for the Dadaists who were his contemporaries, dismissing them as instigators of little more than "a rather vehement distraction," designed "to outrage the public." (Perloff "After Language Poetry" 1-2).

> *Watten*: The semantic shift is one way to make things strange; Shklovsky is doing that in his prose. But I don't think this [poem by Bruce Andrew entitled "Funnels In"] is working like that. One gets completely exhausted by all this semantic shift; you hear it as sound and wait for the meaning to catch up. The fact that the semantic shift is constant doesn't make for any new perception; it works out of a kind of automatism to begin with.
>
> *Lyn Hejinian*: Because it overloads? (Watten 18).

"Might and might . . . mystic illumination of analogies . . . instinctive human

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

supposition that any word may mean its opposite. Occult tendency of opposites to attract and merge" (Howe *MED* 22).

> According to the old grammars, parataxis involves placing units together without connectives or subordination. 'I came. I saw. I conquered.' is paratactic...Parataxis of a more thorough and disorienting kind than anything the old handbooks could cite is the dominant if seemingly random mode of our time. It is hard to imagine escaping from atomized subject areas, projects, and errands into longer stretches of subjectively full narrative—not to mention a whole life. As targets of the media we are inundated by intense bursts of narrative-effect. (Perelman 59-60).

"To dampen such dangerous individualism, the early Fathers of Massachusetts Bay, by using the colonists' love for the sermon as a field of action, cleverly manipulated the growing body of colonial writing" (Howe *MED* 40).

"This Hobbesian notion dear to many Puritans, that every man in a primitive state of nature has the right to take what he can, led in one direction" (Howe *MED* 39).

"When writing of Howe, the critic is forced to be aware of the choices and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

splices that have made her own interpretation possible. It is thus that she is endlessly driven back to Howe's original words" (Williams 127).

Selinger writes: "You knew that this new grammar would aspire, like the 'shock and subtraction' of Dickinson's letters, to startle you into a new way of perceiving" (1).

"The kind of literary parataxis I will be discussing can be totalizing, too, but since its broken surface is antinarrative it can seem to be a mere symptom of contemporary atomization. The tension between symptom and critique will be constant here" (Perelman 60-1).

"Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current" (TPH 258).

> Howe's poetics underscores not only the importance of writing, but also the consequences of reading, and the necessity of developing a pluralistic, participatory –hence prophetic and visionary—modality of reading. Prophecy entails not an appropriation or consumption of the language nor the reversal, the swallowing up of ourselves. Rather, prophecy agitates the space of language: it opens rifts, insists on waywardness, to be

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unhoused in and by language. (McCorkle 1)

"As Howe understands, stationery—the pen, the ink, the paper—is not, as Mangan suggests, always 'immobile,' but it is always 'static': that is, the 'noise' in the channel of poetry" (Dworkin 401).

Sigrid Weigel writes of "theorems which in Benjamin's texts often remain implicit or concealed in the form of quotations" (xii).

"The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes "The Death of the Author" 1968 qtd. in Perloff "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject" 1999 407).

"The book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred"
(Barthes 1968 qtd. in Perloff 1999 407).

"Our everyday language, Ashbery suggests, is a tissue of just such clichés, sentimentalities, and slogans" (Perloff *Radical Artifice* 1991 183).

"For Shklovsky, 'a work is created artistically so that its perception is impeded,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception'" (Watten 24).

"The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert" (WAAMR 234).

"The effect of this on a listener involves what the Formalists called 'rhythm as a constructive device.'...what actually happens is that the rhythmic parallels turn into a meaning-structuring device" (Watten in Watten 17).

"As Howe understands, stationery—the pen, the ink, the paper—is not, as Mangan suggests, always 'immobile,' but it is always 'static': that is, the 'noise' in the channel of poetry" (Dworkin 401).

"Art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences—where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn" (N9a, 7).

"When we move through the positivism of literary canons and master

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

narratives, we consign our lives to the legitimation of power, chains of inertia, an apparatus of capture" (Howe "Encloser" 178).

The combination of Howe's own prolific eccentricities with her scholarly attention to Dickinson's "eccentricities of spelling and punctuation...her carefully marked variant suggestions for wording certain poems...[and] Johnson's method of listing and numbering her suggestions for word changes" (*MED* 5) is intense, remarkable. It is a model of the myriad negotiations between generative play and provisional judgement that offer the only agency possible in a world such as this.

"The case against transparency, against instrumental value and straightforward readability was the cornerstone of Russian Formalist theory" (Perloff "After Language Poetry" 4).

"[T]o use the sentence as basic unit rather than the line is to orient the writing toward ordinary language use" (Perelman 65).

"*Bob Perelman*: All of a sudden the nonsyntactic or unusual phrases take on the same weight as the clichés. By playing back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar, he [Bruce Andrews] makes you familiar with the unfamiliar" (qtd. in Watten 18).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Most literary criticism is based on calculations of interest…Orders suggest hierarchy and category. Categories and hierarchies suggest property. My voice formed from my life belongs to no one else. What I put into words is no longer my possession. Possibility has opened." (Howe *MED* 13).

"Howe positions her work outside the purview of States, because the State with its juridicial apparatus is a device that substitutes for the kind of love that can't be actualized in time" (Nichols "Tensing" 51).

"Even critical and scholarly work which pays close attention to the disruptive possibilities of visual prosody runs the risk of neutralizing the very disruptive potential it identifies" (Dworkin 405).

"The vivid rhetoric of terror was a first step in the slow process toward American Democracy" (Howe *MED* 38).

"A strength of Howe's writing, though, is that it is not an avant-gardism or aestheticism severed from history. Precisely the opposite: Howe's poetry in particular, with its anxious spiritual tracking, constitutes a contemporary version of the Puritan journal" (Lazer *Opposing Poetries* Vol. Two 66).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"History breaks down into images, not into stories" (N 67).

"Poetry, Bernstein argued, is never really 'natural' (e.g., 'I look straight into my heart and write the exact words that come from within'); rather, it emphasizes its medium as being, constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, & so an artifice" (Perloff "After Language Poetry" 4).

"Howe expands the notion of the field to a composition with the *page* as unit of composition, not a line or a syllable count or a sentence" (Lazer *Opposing Poetries* Vol. Two 65).

> Trilling's persistent concern was to preserve literature as a site of engagement, as a kind of exemplary *trouble*. So he famously complained that teaching modern literature inoculated the disturbance that was modernism; and he generalized that "American literature as an academic subject is not so much a subject as an object of study: it does not, as a literature should, put the scrutinizer of it under scrutiny but, instead, leaves its students with a too-comfortable sense of complete comprehension." (Trilling *Liberal Imagination* 292 qtd. in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Rasula 133)

"The question of whether a decentered subject can be a political agent and oppose centralized power is of course quite problematic" (Perelman 121).

> I think there is a truth, even if it's not fashionable to say so anymore. I do think it's urgently necessary to bring Dickinson's manuscripts to light. I believe there are stories that need to be told again differently. I believe with Walter Benjamin that the story is in danger of being lost the minute someone opens one's mouth to speak; but you've got to. (Howe qtd. in Keller 30-31).

"So-called 'innovative' writing that is fragmented, asyntactic, non-sensical, etc. can be just as fetischized [sic] as anything else" (Perloff "After Language Poetry" 5).

"The idea that our visible world is a whim and might be dissolved at any time hung on tenaciously. It was this profound conception of obedience to a stern and sovereign Absence that forged the fanatical energy necessary for survival" (Howe *MED* 39).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Dickinson and Stein meet each other along paths of the Self that begin and end in contradiction...By 1860 it was as impossible for Emily Dickinson simply to translate English poetic tradition as it was for Walt Whitman. In prose and poetry she explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with a reader. (Howe *MED* 11)

"For Brecht, 'the continuity of the ego is a myth'...while according to Pound, 'One says "I am" this, that, or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing'" (Easthope 53).

Quoting Nichols, quoting Howe, "[q]uoting Emerson...[she] suggests that the effect of such editorial improvements is to create 'the appearance that one person wrote all the books' (BM 141)" (Nichols "Tensing" 50).

Part of the error of progress--belief that (fallen) language can reveal transparently: "'The lure of all texts,' writes Elizabeth Wright, 'lies in a revelation, of things veiled coming to be unveiled' (1989: 112). Howe's revelatory closing diction seems to partly pull a veil aside" (Back 119) in that it teaches a process of perception, contextual, contiguous, contingent, each flash of the past fleeting, tangential.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

By explicitly marking the noise in the channel and the noise of the channel itself into data—that is, making them a part of the message ("Sound," as Cage might have characterized it, "come into its own")--Howe briefly short-circuits the parasitic economy and reminds readers that the facile distinction between 'message' and 'noise' must ultimately deconstruct itself. (Dworkin 404)

"The ambiguous paths of kinship pull me in opposite ways at once" (Howe *MED* 7).

"Sounds and spirits (ghosts if you like) leave traces in a geography" (Howe qtd. in Foster 48).

"Her talent was synthetic; she used other writers, grasped straws from the bewildering raveling of Being wherever and whenever she could use them" (Howe *MED* 28).

Teaching as marginal(ia): acts of poetry using received texts, exegesis--but also radical composition of exercises. Form counts.

"It seems that there is a very thin veil between some outside force, and some

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

very solid grounded force. That veil, that transparency, is where the instant is. And it's like an instant of arrest" (Howe qtd. in "Four-Part Harmony" 21).

"Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (TPH 262-3).

"An end to sleepwalking through technique. There is an identity between technique and its effects; for the Formalists, everything in the work exists in order that it be perceived" (Watten 9).

"Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?" (Howe *MED* 11).

> While much of Howe's writing works toward discovery of semi-erased traces of suppressed lives, she seems aware that her own investigation can never escape the possibility that she is simply adding another layer over what it wants to reveal: "discovery" [an imperializing term if ever there was one] may always be "covery." This is the dilemma that the warring singularities of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

her work reveal. (Perelman 136)

"I am suspicious of the idea of a canon in the first place. Because to enter this canon a violation has usually been done to your work no matter what your gender may be. And besides, the more you go into something the more you see that the canon is only the surface, only the ghost's helmet" (Howe qtd. in Foster 60).

"The 'end product' of the Surrealist method might be this: to free the mind so we can have it" (Watten 31).

> It was, of course, the opposition to this romantic paradigm that prompted the theoretical discourse of Language manifestos in the first place...the dialectic, in other words, has shifted ground, and it now seems more useful to look at special cases within the language movement and related alternative poetries rather than at the group phenomenon.
>
> Indeed, the paradox is that, like the earlier avant-garde movements of the century, Language poetics may well become the most widely known when it starts to manifest notable exceptions." (Perloff "Lyric Subject" 433)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The poetic movement known as language writing or language poetry began to take shape in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early seventies and a few years later in New York City, with a smaller nexus in Washington, DC. While language writing has, by the mid-nineties, become a recognized literary-historical term, there never was any self-consciously organized group known as the language writers or poets. (Perelman 11)

In brief, I see the matter this way: change can and does take place in works of art for non-esthetic reasons—for example, when one language influences another, or when a new "social demand" appears. Thus a new form appears in a work of art imperceptibly, without registering its presence esthetically; only afterward is that new form esthetically evaluated, at which time it loses its original meaning, its pre-esthetic significance.

Simultaneously, the previously existing esthetic construction ceases to be palpable; its joints become calcified, so to speak, and fuse into a single mass. (Shklovsky *Third Factory* 53 qtd. in Watten 16)

She is, in other words, a poet of technique—I am somewhat

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> perplexed to realize, since it was her subject matter that so interested me at first, and continues to absorb me. Her subject is the world of history, legend, and the most papable of natural things, such as the snow. Still, her technique was always of interest for how one might accomplish a narrative without a narrator, or with a minimum of intrusive narrator asking for one's trust. (Butterick 312)

"It has seldom been realized that the listener's naïve relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told" (W. Benjamin *I* "Storyteller" 97).

> Infold me bird and briar you
> fathom we cannot to another
> declare characters in written
> summit granite cramp marble
> Simple except a blank that it
> Present present presentness.
>
> (Howe *BH* 10-11)

An intransigent belief in transparency underwrites our odd if highly fetishized notion of *origin*ality as the new: our faith that content survives context is so

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

deeply ingrained in academic discourse that we maintain an intricate, honour-bound system of marks indicating the use (value: determined by fluency and name) of intellectual property enforced by levels of legislation.

> A new sentence is more or less ordinary itself, but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance: new sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences. This is on the immediate formal level. From a larger perspective, the new sentence arises out of an attempt to redefine genres; the tension between parataxis and narrative is basic. (Perelman 61)

> Freed from a recognition of the signifier and buffered from any response from an increasingly passive consumer, the supermarket novelist's language has become fully subservient to a process that would lie outside syntax: plot. The dynamic implicit in the novel's rise toward the illusion of realism is this divorce, conducted in stages over the centuries, of the tale from

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the gravitational force of language…This dream of an art with no medium, of a signified with no signifiers, is inscribed entirely within the commodity fetish. (Silliman qtd. in Perelman 61-2).

"A politics in and a politics of American poetry can never arrive at a full collaboration between writer and reader without the deliberate location and cultivation of an audience" (Rasula qtd. in Perelman 19).

"Pierre Macherey's description of the discourse in a fiction applies to the discourse in this bibliography: 'sealed and interminably completed or endlessly beginning again, diffuse and dense, coiled about an absent center which it can neither conceal nor reveal'" (Howe "A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike" *NM* 50).

"The foundation of identity that is a presence revolves around a recognition of absence" (Back 110).

"'This is how we came to resume writing, that we might free ourselves of literature'" (Silliman qtd. in Perelman 14).

"Everything in a commodity culture argues with temporality. The future must

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

be insured against, the present must be extended whatever the cost, and the past must be made to serve the needs of the present" (Nichols "Tensing" 48).

> "Literature" here is the hierarchical, bureaucratic sum of school, anthologies, curricula—what I am calling literary history; "writing" (for which I am reading "language writing") is both practice and utopia. But I find these two areas impossible to disentangle: the literary arena, which finally means the social arena, surrounds and constitutes each act of writing. (Perelman 14)

> The Formalist analysis is not so easily assimilated. Starting from the separation of signifier and signified in Saussure, the Formalists identified poetic language with the dissociative techniques of the Russian Futurists. This separation ultimately tended toward the idea of design in the presentation of language. The direction is outer, or many persons, hearing the work. The self is seen mechanistically as the amplifier or conductor of language that exists outside the "materials" at large. (Watten 34)

> It is the artifact, rather than perception or the dance of signification, that organizes her texts and marks the difference

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

between present knowing and the otherness of historical subjects…Howe's artifacts include the marks, smudges, corrections, archaic spellings or mis-spellings, ambivalent usages and references, marginalia, and unusual tropes in the manuscripts of her subjects, but she also creates artifacts with her typographics: lines that intersect, collide, overtype, or create odd angles on the page such that they cannot be paraphrased. (Nichols "Tensing" 49)

Surrealism was above all a defense of the self and its value in art. And Surrealism is the movement involving method par excellence. While the method was continually being worked out, it never rested in a fixed social role. The Surrealists were addressing great instability in like terms. When conditions changed, the moment of efficacy of "the self" disappeared, and the content of Surrealist method was irrevocably changed. (Watten 35)

Both [Robert Browning's] "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and [Emily Dickinson's] "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—," written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, are triumphantly negative poems. Their authors, alien explicators of ruin after the Tablets of the Law were broken, live on in archaic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> time beyond future. At the end of each poem, austere originators have unselved identity, memory, poetic origins—Originality. Each lyrical "I," liberated from individual will, will die into action. (Howe *MED* 69-70)

Audience: found (wanting) the suspension of certainty, of *de fin* ition, convention, expectations; the retention of history, context, image; perception of relations, connections, patterns, resonances; the necessity of reading backwards, sideways, upside down.

> Repetition once thought beyond the purview of the Same opens up the possibility that what is given, repeated, is presented such that its occurrence may be the result of a working through, or a reworking, that is itself no longer contained by the Same. What is given is given again. The re-giving is neither simple iteration nor a repetition of the Same. Work is the divide. (Andrew Benjamin "Time and Task" 244)

> Rachel Tzvia Back writes that "the changing amount of space between words and between lines, the occasional use of parentheses and hyphens, the repetition of certain words and the highlighting of others through italics or capital letters all signal

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the presence of a *language system,* which signals the presence of meaning" in Howe's *Articulation* (43).

> This leads directly to the Formalist analysis of rhyme. "Juxtaposition on the basis of partial similarity of two otherwise dissimilar notions is the principle of poetic creation"..."rhyme is an organized violence which proliferates meanings." In advertising and elsewhere, the Formalists' model for perceptibility is now built into the psychology of everyday life. (Watten 11)

"There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living. The conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology" (Howe *MED* 13).

> On this heath wrecked from Genesis, nerve endings quicken. Naked sensibility at the extremest periphery. Narrative expanding contracting dissolving. Nearer to know less before afterward schism in sum. No hierarchy, no notion of polarity. Perception of an object means loosing and losing it. Quests end in failure, no victory and sham questor. One answer undoes another and fiction is real. Trust absence, allegory, mystery—the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> setting not the rising sun is Beauty. No titles or numbers sewed the poems into. No manufactured print. No outside editor/"robber." Conventional punctuation was abolished not to add "soigné stitchery" but to subtract arbitrary authority. Dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem. Hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing. (Howe *MED* 23)

"Instead of a library I should have built a monument to doubt" (Lemay 2).

"Both poverty and possession revolve around desire—desiring what is absent and desiring what is present (spirit or language) but uncontained and not ever owned" (Back 117).

"Nature is an inexplicable puzzle, life exists on a principle of destruction; every creature must be the relentless instrument of death to the others, or himself cease to live" (Emily Bronte, "The Butterfly," *Five Essays Written in French*, p.17, qtd. in Howe *MED* 62).

Dickinson "must have been wrestling with the knowledge of her extraordinary ability, and the contradiction between visionary illumination—Grace, and simple human longing for worldly recognition" (Howe *MED* 73).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Christ healing the sick, raising the dead, etc.—that is the humble, human, almost low part of his mission. The supernatural part is the sweat of blood, the unsatisfied longing for human consolation, the supplication that he might be spared, the sense of being abandoned by God" (Weil 79).

If, following Jacobs (following Benjamin), ideas are relations—"constellations" —what does it mean that there is no code to signal the plagiarism of form? Or its failure?

"Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them" (N1a, 8).

"It is not the newness of a method but the oppositional nature—socially, institutionally, politically—of that art that makes of it a vanguard" (Lazer Vol. One 66).

"Dualism of visible and invisible" (Howe *MED* 45).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the "now of recognizability," in which things put on their true—surrealist—face. Thus, in Proust, the importance of staking an entire life on life's supremely dialectical point of rupture: awakening. Proust begins with an evocation of the space of someone waking up. (N3a, 3)

"How do I, choosing messages from the code of others in order to anticipate in the universal theme of Language, pull SHE from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE. Emily Dickinson constantly asked this question in her poems" (Howe *MED* 17-18).

> [Language writing] has been more united by its opposition to the prevailing institutions of American poetry. During this period, American poetry has been dominated by writing workshops and creative-writing departments with large networks of legitimation...the more basic facts of modernism were shunned. The poet as engaged, oppositional intellectual, and poetic form and syntax as sites of experiment for political and social

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

purposes—these would not be found. (Perelman 12)

"People don't need to be taught to have their own voice, they've got it, you know, the idea of going to school to learn that . . . it's so often the school that knocks it out of them and makes the people feel stupid for speaking the way they do" (Bernstein 49).

> Although Howe's use of archaic word forms is certainly meant to lend authenticity and historicity to her poem—as Linda Reinfeld points out, a good deal of the "language of 'Thorow' is drawn from old journals and accounts documenting the history of the Lake George region" (98)--it also serves to destabilize the poem's language and enhance its "primal indeterminacy." (Naylor 332)

"Benjamin wants to illuminate the dialectic of awakening in order to complete the surrealists' task of loosening the grip the capitalist construction of the individual has on the self" (Naylor 328).

> Both [Benjamin and Howe] advance a critique of the narrative of progress that dominates modern historiography. These critiques are animated by both writers' desire to explore history's elisions

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> for evidence of the "anonymous, slighted" voices silenced by "progress." Second, and as a result of their critiques, Benjamin and Howe unsettle traditionally received notions of authorship by exploring the "art of quoting without quotation marks." (Naylor 324).

"Is a poetics of intervening absence an oxymoron?" (Howe qtd. in Keller 1).

> With the recognition that there can never be static-free channels, Howe's aggressively 'noisy' work resists the temptation to elegiacally view the dynamics of medial systems as mechanisms for loss. Rather, it celebrates their falters and disruptions as an 'ecstasy of communication'; with an ear attuned to the pleasures of noise, Howe writes from out of the static: ex-static, indeed. (Dworkin 404).

"I find the unreflected expression and valorization of 'group' identity as problematic, politically and aesthetically, as the unrefracted expression of 'self' identity" (Bernstein 46).

"Howe's poetry is built on an aesthetic of parataxis" (Naylor 333).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Quoting or imitating another poet's line

is not benign, though at times
the practice can look like flattery.

In the regions of academic discourse,
The patterns of production and circulation

are different. There, it—again—goes
without saying that words, names, terms

are repeatable: citation is the prime
index of power. Strikingly original language

is not the point; the degree
to which a phrase or sentence

fits into a multiplicity of contexts
determines how influential it will be.
(Perelman 3-4)

The use of quotation marks sustains the continuity of tradition—its 'permanence'—while allowing, as has been indicated, the intrusion of the discontinuous. It is, however, a discontinuity that is absorbed and as such becomes part of the 'permanence'. Another type of discontinuity—itself discontinuous with the type cited above—is present in 'quoting without quotation marks'. In this instance the discontinuity is intended to endure. (It is thus that narrative and monadological structure are in a fundamental and effective opposition. Each will demand a different time and,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> with time, ontology, such that their difference is really only explicable in ontologico-temporal terms.) The absent marks signal the disruption of its own context. And yet the interplay of absence and disruption on its own is far from sufficient as a description. The mark's absence is not the only determination. Despite this absence there is still a quotation and thus a form of presence. All that is missing is that which maintains it, the quotation, as a quotation, namely the marks. Absence and presence, in this context are not mutually exclusive. (Andrew Benjamin "Time and Task" 243)

"This is the process of viewing Emptiness without design or plan, neighborless in winter blank, or blaze of summer. This is waste wilderness. Nature no soothing mother, Nature is annihilation brooding over" (Howe *MED* 21).

> Still to be established is the connection between presence of mind and the "method" of dialectical materialism. It's not just that one will always be able to detect a dialectical process in presence of mind, regarded as one of the highest forms of appropriate behavior. What is even more decisive is that the dialectician cannot look on history as anything other than a constellation of dangers which he is always, as he follows its

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

development in his thought, on the point of averting. (N7, 2)

"And just as Benjamin's ["Theses on the Philosophy of History"] does not reconcile the opposition between destruction and redemption, Howe's poem does not reconcile the opposition between complicity and redemption" (Naylor 331).

> With no continuous transfer from stimulus (the origin of vision) to sensation (the mental or artistic representation) whereby the integrity of the percept is maintained throughout the process of apperception, meaning must be the effect of a *translation and construction of the percept* through an essentially autopoietic process—the effect of the generative possibilities of a given medium (e.g., the sense of vision). Put yet another way, meaning is never transported from one place (outside) to another place (inside). *It always emerges.* (Michel 732-33)

> It is a poetry of phrases and fragments best read as elements of a collage in which the reader supplies the connections—connections rendered even more indeterminate by the absence of punctuation. The elision of almost all hypotactic markers in this passage, furthermore, makes it virtually impossible for the reader to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> "master" it by applying the grid of traditional grammar. (Naylor 333)

"I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government. I know this and go on searching for some trace of love's infolding through all the paper in the libraries I come to" (Howe *BM* 4).

> What this means here is that the contrast—the absent and present quotation marks, coupled to the continuity of quotation—is between two fundamentally different forms of repetition. What is emerging therefore is that far from providing either a false path or the simply peripheral, repetition, though more significantly the anoriginally present divisions within repetition, can be taken as central to any understanding of Benjamin's construal of the task at the present; a construal demanding the recognition of the ineliminable presence of reciprocity. (A. Benjamin "Time and Task" 243-44)

"A struggling community at the edge of mapped earth, whose citizens too often witnessed the malevolent power in nature, couldn't at first tolerate the chaos of a mystical vision of grace as free imaginative force. To quell real terror, they must discipline nature, smother the arbitrary power of Jehovah with a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Covenant" (Howe *MED* 46).

"In a lecture at Yale (1943) Breton states: 'I insist that Surrealism can be understood historically only in relation to the war: I mean from 1919 to 1939—in relation at the same time to the war from which it issues and the war to which it extends.'" (qtd. in Watten 47).

"Is it possible to actually say nothing and only exhibit history through a montage of images? And, given this possibility, is it also possible to present a revolutionary content through this montage without the author stepping on stage? The answers for Benjamin [are] answers that recognize rather than reconcile the contradiction" (Naylor 329).

"The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian" (W. Benjamin N4, 4).

"For some, language writing was too programmatically political to be poetry; for a number of New American poets and their supporters, it was too poststructuralist to be political" (Perelman 13).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"A phenomenon, perceived many times, and no longer perceptible, or rather, the method of such dimmed perception, is what I called "recognition" as opposed to "seeing." The aim of imagery, the aim of creating new art is to return the object from "recognition" to "seeing" (Russian formalist Shklovsky's *Mayakovsky and his Circle* 114 qtd. in Watten 8).

"Locke supplied [Jonathan Edwards] with an idea of the Universe as organized around the act of perception. If language imposes on the understanding names which familiarity has deadened, how does a minister preach a sermon when words and images have become predictable?" (Howe *MED* 50).

"For Breton, this automatic reading can be accomplished against the most ordinary, indistinct backgrounds: scrap heaps or coffee grounds, which brings the argument back to seers and tea leaves" (Watten 45).

"Identity is ever only possible as misrecognition." (Easthope 44)

"The recognition of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian" (N4, 4).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"She embraces a wide range of referents, even if those references float and hover" (Butterick 319).

"[Emily Dickinson] built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse, backward through history into aboriginal anagogy" (Howe *MED* 21).

"The automatism, the big dream that we live in, has a great deal to do with the forms that we write in now. That dream is only further confused by 'the self'" (Watten 29).

"Initial of creation. In the beginning was the Word. Relation of opposition; misprision – double meaning and uncertain" (Howe *MED* 16).

"My assignment is not to memorize the already memorable but to memorize what may seem at first impossible to memorize, to get inside the rhythms of works that at first might resist just such a full-bodied sounding" (Bernstein 56).

"Howe does not re-write a text to subvert history but to realize the subversion

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that the instability of such texts inherently reveals" (Marsh 5).

"Naming is an essential step in the capitalist process of appropriating and mastering nature in order to convert it into private property" (Naylor 333).

> "*Nominalism. n.* The doctrine that nothing is general but names; more specifically the doctrine that common nouns, as man, horse, represent in their generality nothing in the real things, but are mere conveniences for speaking of many things at once, or at most necessities of human thought; individualism." Charles Sanders Peirce wrote this definition of nominalism, a doctrine he abhorred, for William Dwight Whitney's *Century Dictionary* (1889). (Howe *BH* 41)

"There is some metaphysical thing about the word, and perishability, and about having no audience" (Howe qtd. in "Four-Part Harmony" 22).

"Benjamin contends that the image marks out the tension inherent in a moment in history, and, as such, it represents the "caesura" in the dialectic rather than its resolution" (Naylor 327).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Break[] the automatism of the poetic "I" and its naturalized voice" (Perelman 13).

"Howe's preface surely stands as an indictment of the barbarism of contemporary commercial capitalism, but the most intriguing aspect of Howe's poem in this regard is the way in which she implicates the poem's "I" in her critique. 'I am / Part of their encroachment'" (Naylor 335 quoting Howe's "Thorow").

"To break the pentameter, that was the first heave" (Ezra Pound *Canto 81,* qtd. in Easthope 51).

"It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity (N19,1).

> If poetry can be essentially defined as an art of rhythm, Mallarmé redefines rhythm and thus radically rethinks the event of poetry as such through the rhythmical unpredictability of free verse which, in unsettling the predictability—the formal structure of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> anticipation—of the Alexandrine, reaches out for what precisely *cannot be anticipated.* (Felman 27)

"When poetry becomes a commodity, the first things that drop away are space and eccentricity" (Howe qtd. in "Four-Part Harmony" 22).

"Awakening began where the Surrealists and other avant-garde artists too often stopped short, because in rejecting cultural tradition they closed their eyes to history as well" (Buck-Morss 261).

Linda Reinfeld's aim in writing about Charles Bernstein's poetry:

> is in part an attempt to rescue it from premature dismissal because of its supposed difficulty, to demonstrate that it is in fact not too difficult for an audience accustomed to reading the experimental writing and critical theory of our time—Derrida and Barthes and Adorno as well as Stein and Beckett and Joyce. (50-1)

"Even though almost all language writers were based outside the university, language writing was accused of being academic before very many academics had heard much about it" (Perelman 14).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Technique, for Breton, on the other hand, was dialectic—automatism was a paradigm for method rather than an end in itself. The logic of inspiration, itself to a degree "objectified," was in its timely approach to a larger scale. While the advantage of [Bernadette] Mayer's techniques is their adherence to the quotidien, there is no further integration. The "permanent avant-garde" vaporizes, leading to more conventional roles. As actually happened, in Mayer's later editing of *United Artists,* the stylistic opening-up returns all these ideas to "the self." (Watten 56-57).

One of the first transcendent, eternal truths that needs undermining, both Benjamin and the surrealists agree, is capitalism's claim for the precedence of the individual—of the self as a *cogito* that has as its essence an inalienable right to consume...The self as a site of dream imagery precedes the self as a consumptive *cogito*. And the principle of montage gave the surrealists and Benjamin a technique with which to present this precedence in writing. (Naylor 327-28).

Building on the avant-garde principles of montage, Benjamin offers

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> his notion of the dialectical image as a means of disrupting the narrative of progress that governs most forms of historical writing. Although Howe's poetry is certainly indebted to the European avant-garde movements of the first half of this century, she offers a distinctly American version of experimental poetry. Working the vein opened by Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H. D., Wallace Stevens, and Charles Olson, Howe's unique form of collage poetry also disrupts the narrative of progress that plays such a dominant role in American historiography. (Naylor 337).

"Action will always be part of the present's weave" (A. Benjamin "Time and Task" 244).

"To the process of rescue belongs the firm, seemingly brutal grasp" (N9a, 3).

"Sometimes I think my poetry is only a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began" (Howe qtd. in Lewis 126). What if the body hasn't been found? How to read a poetry by its absence?

"I am an insomniac who goes to bed in a closet" (Howe *BH* 39).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter Three

To What End? Phyllis Webb's provisional, political d(i/st)ance

Consider the dead
for whom we make elegies
how they differently
instruct us.

Phyllis Webb

In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* Cathy Caruth ponders "what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (5). She posits that "what returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). Caruth's work on trauma suggests that telling and retelling a narrative can "permit[] history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (11); this observation, although elegant, is perhaps not enough. There is the danger, in narrative (as in history), for texts to become automatic, habitual, each one a door slammed shut on a danger about to be repeated, the possibility to avert fresh disaster lost in a/version itself: forgetting through fixation.

The very interstices of our disasters, however, offer the poetry, the agency, that we dismiss in/habit. How are we to perceive this, and how communicate it? If, in the Russian Formalist sense, it is the method through which "recognition" returns to "seeing," poetry offers a means by which we might "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (TPH

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

255). This is, of course, an approximation: flashes may be other-wise, more affective than visual. In teaching, we aim to see eyes light up, faces reflect a change from *knowing* to *seeing*, *knowing* ourselves that all articulation is provisional, a process of tangents and inadvertencies. *Seeing* short-circuits simple progression, subverts teleological security, generates feedback loops and recursive spirals. What models might transform pedagogy from a narrative of facts into a poetics of reading, history, politics?

I first read *Wilson's Bowl* without seeing that the failure (of narrative) facilitated my many desperate, disparate, and repetitive forays that in turn offered me a form of poetry, a constellation of ideas, reflections catching the memories and thoughts I thought I carried in the flash of theoretical and poetic possibilities. Though *Wilson's Bowl* explores a maze of topics, it is both whole and wholly unfinished...it offers readers numerous sites at which to find constellations of concepts ranging from psychoanalysis to Op Art to Russian anarchy—and we find there the bearings these bring to the subjects of suicide and trauma, loss and agency. Reading around and in the body of Webb's writing this time, I attempt to layer a cover for my theory, loosely, a ball of yarn, loopy and recursive, weaving through my experiences of *Wilson's Bowl*—and I recall my first year of teaching, and the science student who showed me what a pedagogy of poetics might mean. Reading the "Poem of Failure" that I discuss in my introduction (29-30), she marked the slippage of "knowledge" and "faith" in the poem's re/vision (lines 7-8 and 40-43), the doubleness in inconsolability. I read these again, still, imperfectly, dodging between terms of order and chaos,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

ethics and aesthetics, knowledge and agency.

> In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. To be named—even when the namer is Godlike and blissful—perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning. (*OWS* qtd. in Weigel 84).

"These are days when no one should rely unduly on his 'competence.' Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed" (*OWS* 447).

"[L]etters, phonemes, syllables, rhymes, shorthand segments, alliteration, assonance, meter, form a ladder to an outside state outside of States. Rungs between escape and enclosure are confusing and compelling" (Howe qtd. in Nichols "Tensing" 51).

"A pain can only be undergone; it cannot become a communicable object of knowledge" (Nichols "Subject" 121).

"Beyond every 'circumstance,' then, some other thing puts me at a loss for just

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the right words. What other thing?" (Derrida "Max Loreau" 94).

"I refuse to publish because I refuse to write. What I've written I hoard, hoping the poems will eventually turn into satisfactory failures" (Webb *WB* 37).

> Thus the recognition of the illness as hysteria makes little difference to the patient; but to the doctor quite the reverse. It is noticeable that his attitude towards hysterical patients is quite other than towards sufferers from organic diseases...He regards them as *people who are transgressing the laws of his science*—like heretics in the eyes of the orthodox. He attributes every kind of wickedness to them, accuses them of exaggeration, of deliberate deceit, of malingering. And he punishes them by withdrawing his interest from them. (Freud qtd. in Felman 23; my emphasis)

> It is strange how the dead appear in dreams where another space provides our living space as well. Another language another way of speaking so quietly always there in the shape of memories, thoughts, feelings, which are extramarginal outside of primary consciousness, yet must be classed as some sort of unawakened finite infinite articulation. Documents resemble people talking in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> sleep. To exist is one thing to be perceived another. I can spread historical information words and words we can never touch hovering around subconscious life where enunciation is born in distinction from what it enunciates when nothing rests in air when what is knowledge? (Howe 1998 "P[ei]rcing Virtue" 56).

"The relaxation of scholarly rigor that seems to be indicated in the title of her *My Emily Dickinson* is actually a most strenuous act of attention—the conjuring of an immense latent historical content. The 'my' is about the *genitive* nature of subject formation" (Nichols "Tensing" 50).

> "'The Kropotkin Poems' revolve around many subjects but centrally around power, the problem of power, as I see it, and I think the theme is failure. The failure of so much—one's own personal life failures, the failure of societies to live without repressive authority, the seeming unevolvingness of political and social life, and the grand failure of the human experiment. Pessimistic? Well yes. But there was a dream. There have been many, but I've chosen Kropotkin as my guide, or benign father figure, because of his particular dream. Why Kropotkin? Or who the hell is Kropotkin? To be brief, he was the chief theoretician of communist anarchism, perhaps the most idealistic of all

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> political philosophies, frequently dubbed a 19th-century romantic aberration, or alternatively confused with chaos and terrorism. Peter Kropotkin was born in 1842 in Moscow. He was a Russian Prince who served as personal aide to Tsar Alexander II. He was a geographer and explorer and scholar, a political activist, a prisoner, an escapee, an exile, an anarchist revolutionist, an old man, a very old man, a dead man—who has come to me through books and dreams and wrote himself into my poems. However, he's not so much the subject of the book as the guiding spirit. (Webb "Script" 101)

"This new humanism (Olson's 'human universe') was meant to place knowledge in quotations, or better, reposition it as a practice, rather than an authoritative tradition" (Nichols "Subject" 115).

"Prayer in *The Martyrology* serves as a positioner; it underscores the smallness of the narrative voice inside a language world it has not mastered, but it also rises up with that voice as the evocation of the Other and the place of the impossible" (Nichols "Subject" 120).

> Yahweh is a speckled bird pecking at treebark.
> We are the insects most excellent to his taste. (Webb *WL* 14)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"'Grand collage,' then, is an open form which allows for discontinuity and disjunction as well as correspondences and recurrences" (Butling "Post-Duncan" 63).

"Only he who can view his own past as an abortion sprung from compulsion and need can use it to full advantage in every present. For what one has lived is at best comparable to a beautiful statue that has had all its limbs broken off in transit, and that now yields nothing but the precious block out of which the image of one's future must be hewn" (*OWS* 467).

> [*Wilson's Bowl*] is inspired by what Webb identifies as the 'strange network of connections,' or wavelengths, contained in the correspondence between Lilo Berliner, a librarian at the University of Victoria, and Wilson Duff, an anthropology professor at the University of British Columbia. Although the two never met, they established a mystical bond through their correspondence that obviously fascinated Webb…Wilson's outlook was "very Freudian and western" and he said he listened for "the two hands of God"; Lilo's intellect was more intuitive ("she was Jungian and oriental"), what Webb describes as "casual, absurdist, at times abandoned" and possessed of an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"inner logic" which closely resembles that of Webb herself: "Lilo listened for the sound of one hand clapping and heard it in spirals and circles." (Webb *Talking* 148 qtd. in Potvin 55).

To Whom It May Concern:

The books in the Emily Dickinson Room have been repeatedly studied and examined with the hope of finding annotations in the handwriting of Emily Dickinson. After years of study, no one has found a single mark that could be positively assigned to her.

In the process of this fruitless examination the books have suffered, and many of them have been transferred to the repair shelf. In order to avoid more useless wear and the shattering of 19th century publishers' cloth cases, we have closed the Emily Dickinson Room Library for further examination.

Yours Sincerely,

Roger E. Stoddard

Curator of Rare Books

(Howe *Midnight* 131)

[P]resence of mind is an extract of the future, and precise awareness

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> of the present moment is more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events. Omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or to use them: that is the question. The two are irreconcilable. (*OWS* 482-3).

> Psychoanalysis, in this way, profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of the testimony, by submitting, and by recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to *possess*, or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially *not available* to its own speaker. (Felman 24)

"What are the mechanisms for bringing about agency that would enable people to engage in civil society, in political activity?" (LaCapra *Writing* 152).

> Discerning the story is not merely an attractive way of coming to know someone or something: it is the basic form of understanding for whatever is actual (and hence has a history). In its narrative a story discloses its subject in its wholeness as, in the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

light of its context, it relates its origin, development and end—or, instead of its end, its present state and prospects. When these are sufficiently grasped, there is nothing more to inquire into…

Narrative form, however, is not the only characteristic of stories which needs to be considered. Another quality which a story may have is indirectness of reference. In some cases a story provides a way of grasping what cannot be directly apprehended. As a result different stories, using incompatible thought-forms, may nevertheless express the same basic understanding. Whereas Hegel suggests that in philosophy we can pass beyond pictorial representation to grasp the thought which is the real, it may be rather that we are limited to moving in our apprehension of the ultimate nature of things from a less inadequate to a more adequate but nevertheless indirect story. If so we are in danger of confusing the form with the content—a content which may not be expressible except indirectly—whenever we are tempted to treat such stories literally.

As well as being indirect, a story may also be its own meaning in the sense that the only way to express its point is to tell it—or another story. This is not the case with all stories. (Pailin 268-69)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"[Webb's *Water and Light*] is also a difficult book to read because the reader finds herself, as in Webb's previous books, drawn into clusters of meaning particles rather than offered narrative paths or epiphanic lyric moments" (Butling *Seeing* 37).

> The power of a country road when one is walking along it is different from the power it has when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text when it is read is different from the power it has when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text. (*OWS* 447-8)

"If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices" (Howe

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Encloser" 180; *Birthmark* "Incloser" 47).

"I have learned to pay attention to so-called mistakes" (Webb *Talking* 60).

> In love-making, in writing the long poem—delay is both—delay is both technique and content. Narrative has an elaborate grammar of delay. The poets of the twentieth century, in moving away from narrative, abandoned (some willingly, some reluctantly) their inherited grammar. Poets, like lovers, were driven back to the moment of creation; the question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in the beginning itself. (Kroetsch *Treachery* 117-18)

> Enfoldment and unfoldment are actually encounted [sic] quite commonly in ordinary experience. For example, whenever one stands in a room, the order of the whole room is enfolded into each small region of space, and this includes the pupil of an eye which may happen to be there. This latter order is unfolded onto the retina and into the brain and nervous system, so as to give rise somehow to a conscious awareness of the order of the whole room...These notions of enfoldment and unfoldment can be understood in terms of the Cartesian order as being only particular cases of movements

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> of fields not having the kind of general necessity that we would attribute, for example, to laws of nature. Rather what is significant for such laws of physics is considered to be the order of separate points. What we are proposing here is to turn this notion upside down and say that the implicate order will have the kind of general necessity that is suitable for expressing the basic laws of physics, while the explicate order will be important within this approach only as a particular case of the general order. (Bohm 354)

"What he [John Thompson] wants us to recognize is the characteristic way a ghazal *moves*—by association and imaginative leaps rather than in linear, discursive fashion" (Glickman 50).

> The issue in the critical construction of both Nichol and Marlatt is whether the net effect of the text is productive or recuperative. By productive I refer to a process of multiplying linkages akin to rhizomatic "becomings" as these have been explicated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: the narrative line is complicated through an excess of connectives, to the point where it begins to change form. By recuperative, I mean the possibility that this proliferation of connections may be subordinated to a linear narrative, or a foundational signified. (Nichols "Subjects" 112)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Although he argues the connections among the "crude, holy, natural, political, [and] sexual," Harrison's ghazals do not, nor do Rich's attempt anything like the interpenetration of the sacred and the profane found in the work of such writers as Hafiz, Mir, and Ghalib, as Peter Sanger has pointed out (7).

John Thompson's *Stilt Jack* does attempt such a marriage of sacred and profane, so that his book is a stunning and often frightening example of what Russell and Islam call "'real love'—that is, divine love—[which] embraces not only the love of God in the sense in which the modern understands it, but a man's complete dedication to his ideas in life, ideals which he will serve to the end, no matter what suffering this may bring down upon him" (207). (Barbour 107)

Indeed, in his theoretical and autobiographical repetition of Freud's story, Lacan could not possibly have known that his text on trauma, like Freud's, in effect anticipated his own crucial loss and trauma: for it would be some years after this seminar that Lacan himself, like Freud, would survive the death of his own child, Caroline, who would be killed in a car accident. What Lacan passes on in his moving retelling of the dream once told by Freud, even while he is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> in part unaware of its full reality for his own future, is the testimony to the tragedy of the father's survival: his survival of a child who unexpectedly dies before her father in an accident. Quite uncannily, Lacan's life will repeat Freud's loss of his own daughter Sophie to a fever, a disaster that was, at the time of writing, the unknown future of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Lacan's transmission of the future of Freud's text on repetition, and, in general, the passing on of psychoanalytic writing, does not consist in the knowledge of a death that could simply be seen, but in the transmission of, precisely, an act of awakening. In opening the other's eyes, the awakening consists not in seeing but in handing over the seeing it does not and cannot contain to another (and another future). (Caruth *Unclaimed* 111)

"One wonders what is taking place. One wonders what a place is, the right or just place, and what placement is, or displacement, or replacement...What is a place, then, a right or just place when everything seems to be ordered, and seems to begin, by the mourning of this replacement?" (Derrida "Sarah Kofman" 169).

> Now I see that the opposite of knowledge may not be ignorance but mystery; that the opposite of truth may not be lies but something else again: a revelation so deeply imbedded in the thin places of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reality that we cannot see it for looking: a reverence so clear and quiet and perfect that we have not yet begun to fathom it. (Schoemperlen 270-71).

More specifically, according to the temporal logic of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action," trauma was constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences—a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed. For Freud, trauma was thus constituted by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was intrinsically traumatic, and a temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation. (Leys 20)

In many ways the ghazals, as oriental lyrics, are a natural progression from *The Naked Poems* [sic], her 1965 volume of Sapphic haiku. In that book Webb created a larger narrative structure out of intense lyric moments by writing in suites, and then organizing these suites (five, like the five ghazal sequences of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> *Water and Light*) into a "story." In this way the static form of each brief poem was transcended, and a different kind of unity was discovered than that of the single lyric. A minimalist vocabulary of images—not metaphors, but colours and objects—was replayed again and again, so as to accrue value merely by the fact of repetition. (Glickman 51).

Webb, quoted by Glickman, does not mention "*progress*sion" (my emphasis): "*Naked Poems*...are attempts to get away from a dramatic rhythm, from a kind of dramatic structure in the poem itself, and away from the metaphor very often, so that they are very bare, very simple" (51).

"She [Hana in *The English Patient*] has been so affected by the deaths of soldiers whom she has nursed that she abandons 'the relational imperative created by [all] names'" (Susan Ellis qtd. in Dawson 54).

"Passages of prayer [in *The Martyrology*] are not ironized in any way, and for some readers they will be too fraught with a contaminated belief system to be audible as anything else. At the same time, it is easy to show how the narrative has been reworked to underscore the temporal, imperfect qualities of the historical narrative and its actors" (Nichols "Subjects"112).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

1965: Phyllis Webb, *Naked Poems*.

A kind of hesitation even to write the long poem. Two possibilities: the short long poem, the book-long poem. Webb, insisting on that hesitation. On that delay. On Nakedness and lyric and yet on a way out, perhaps a way out of the ending of the lyric too, with its ferocious principles of closure, a being compelled out of lyric by lyric:

> The poet, the lover, compelled towards an ending (conclusion, death, orgasm: coming) that must, out of love, be (difference) deferred. (Kroetsch *Treachery* 118)

The first suicide occurred in August 1976 when anthropologist Wilson Duff methodically wrote letters, laid out newspapers on his office floor at the University of British Columbia, called the security police, and shot himself dead. The second suicide comprises Webb's dedication to her poem: "In memory of Lilo, who walked into the sea, January, 1977, Salt Spring Island." (Williamson 161)

"In his awakening, the father's response repeats in one act a double failure of seeing: a failure to see adequately inside and a failure to see adequately outside"

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(Caruth *Unclaimed* 103).

"Freud's innovations as clinician stem, indeed, from his concern with how *not to dismiss* the patient's testimony—as medical doctors were accustomed to do in hysterics' cases—even when the physician does not understand this testimony" (Felman 23 my emphasis).

> And at this stage in my life, a genuine shift began to take place where I could no longer accept these analyses. And that's why Kropotkin began to disappear. Because I realized that his was just one more male analysis of the society as it is, one more projection of a possible utopia, and just felt discontent with the models I had chosen. (Webb qtd. in Sujir 34).

"Freud creates the revolutionized clinical dimension of the *psychoanalytic dialogue*, an unprecedented kind of dialogue in which the doctor's testimony does not substitute itself for the patient's testimony, but *resonates with it*, because, as Freud discovers, *it takes two to witness the unconscious*" (Felman 24).

> The stakes of this poetics include a distinction between love and justice, and, I would argue, between poetry and politics. Historical narration feeds the present-tense need for political and social action,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> and as Lambek says, narration can establish belongings and entitlements. It can bring to light former injustices, and it can create powerful arguments for social justice. It is a crucial task. But already embedded in the form of the revisionary act is the judgement that initiates the gesture. The irreparable, however, opens up a dimension of ethical thought in which judgement is forever forestalled because the particularity of historical subjects and events can't be fully articulated. From this point of view, we can never reach a verdict because we can never get past the enigma of the "who" in "whodunit." (Nichols "Tensing" 51)

"[N]o amount of ironizing will secure a position in language that is safe from reproach or free from responsibility" (Nichols "Subject" 124).

> Character is unfolded in [the protagonist in a comedy of character] like a sun, in the brilliance of its single trait, which allows no other to remain visible in its proximity...For the character of the comic figure is not the scarecrow of the determinist; it is the beacon in whose beams the freedom of his actions becomes visible. To the dogma of the natural guilt of human life, of original guilt, the irredeemable nature of which constitutes the doctrine, and its occasional redemption of the cult, of paganism, genius opposes a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> vision of the natural innocence of man. (*R* "Fate and Character" 310-11)

"As I said, not everything will be clear on first hearing, but don't worry about that. It may help to know that themes and subjects are introduced in the preface that will be developed in the book" (Webb "Script" 101).

"In the Greek classical development of the idea of fate, the happiness granted to a man is by no means understood as confirmation of an innocent conduct of life, but as a temptation to the most grievous offense, *hubris*" (*R* "Fate and Character" 306).

> [I]t's interesting that the acting-out/working-through distinction—and it's a distinction, not a dichotomy, or a separation into different kinds or totally different categories, but a distinction between interacting processes—is one way of trying to get back to the problem of the relationship between theory and practice. (LaCapra *Writing* 144-5).

> Jacques Lacan suggests that "naming constitutes a pact by which two subjects simultaneously come to an agreement to recognise the same object" (qtd. in Butler 152). Although he does not argue that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> names guarantee identities, Lacan suggests that they are offered and received as guarantees. Moreover, he suggests that a proffered name enacts an image of otherness, a "not I," against which an individual can confirm his or her own identity, and consequently constitutes name-calling as a process of self-recognition. (Dawson 52)

"The process of reality [in Hegel and Whitehead] is thus presented as a story with directivity. Its outcomes are not the unintended product of the interplay of chance and necessity but the outworkings of activities influenced by a goal." (Pailin 274).

> Through the doubled writing in her long poem "Wilson's Bowl," Webb contemplates and enacts in writing a woman's suicide by drowning. This writing presents itself to the reader's gaze like a prism; language shards of refracted light make particular zones and shades available to attentive readers. Webb pushes beyond the acceptance of suicide as simply a "mystery," freeing us from romanticized cultural mythologies about taking one's life. (Williamson 155)

"Though dancing does not necessarily involve a couple (of human beings), music and movement must always be coupled in the dance" (Hulcoop 156).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Images: A Way of Seeing and a Way of Thinking

Images seem to speak to the eye, but they are really addressed to the mind. They are ways of thinking, in the guise of ways of seeing. The eye can sometimes be satisfied with form alone, but the mind can only be satisfied with meaning, which can be contemplated, more consciously or less, after the eye is closed (Wilson Duff 12).

It is not so easy to make a dominant culture relative, historical, or malleable by declaration as Olson wanted to do, nor is it easy to turn an uppercase "I" into lowercase subjectivity, simply by pronouncement. This is why the double tension in Nichol and Marlatt, between cultural givens and productive becoming, seems important—not for radicalism of thought because radical it is not—but because it offers a model of change that is not simply cognitive. It shows how traditional cultural paradigms might be made to shift through constant small adjustments. (Nichols "Subject" 123)

"Wilson Duff saw native art as a medium through which relationships held in the mind are given physical form" (Ridington 239).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"What occurs in some sonnets—especially those of Shakespeare—is the way of all ghazals: a surface tension of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, wordplay, and associative imagery holds together a structure discursively obscure" (Glickman 50).

> For before such prophecy or warning has been mediated by word or image, it has lost its vitality, the power to strike at our center and force us, we scarcely know how, to act accordingly. If we neglect to do so, and only then, the message is deciphered. We read it. But now it is too late. Hence, when you are taken unawares by an outbreak of fire or the news of a death, there is in the first mute shock a feeling of guilt, the indistinct reproach: Were you really unaware of this? Didn't the dead person's name, the last time you uttered it, sound differently in your mouth?...To turn the threatening future into a fulfilled "now," the only desirable telepathic miracle, is a work of bodily presence of mind. (*OWS* 482-3)

"It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible" (Felman 34).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Consider "[t]he lyric sequence as chiasmus, as crossing place, an intersection which modulates codes in multiple directions" (Carr 72).

"Webb's precise attention to prosodic structures is integral to her process of seeing in the dark in that it allows her to be simultaneously active and receptive: while the conscious mind works actively with the formal ingredients in the poem, the rest of the psyche remains open to associative processes and intuitive leaps" (Butling *Seeing* viii).

"With respect to enormously significant events, this process starts on the level of naming: How do you name the event?" (LaCapra *Writing* 160).

"[A] cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it enters into moral relations" (*SW* "Critique of Violence" 236); it is the need to know the *moral dimension* of an experience that invokes the violence of trauma.

"I can't give you a nice, neat answer about feminism or lesbianism or bisexuality or who I am because I hope I'm still changing--...I really see evasion as a psychic strategy, and a rather important one too" (Webb qtd. in Williamson "Read the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

poems" qtd. in Williamson 155).

> History and secrecy—that's what I said
> as a member of a panel whose topic was
>
> *Why Poetry*? And why not, I asked,
> my right brain humming sedition. (Webb *WL* 55)

"It was only with the publication of *Ghazals of Ghalib*, in which such fine contemporary American poets as W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, and others created versions of Ghalib's original poems from prose translations and notes by Aijaz Ahmad, that the poetic potential of the *form* manifested itself for poets in English" (Barbour 104).

> The poet, that is, weaves and asserts correspondences, so that words and the world they presume to represent become a grand knit of relations. This suggests that the world can be known as such, or at least differentiated, objectively from the self. That may in fact be impossible, but Oppenheimer's belief at least allows him to see the poem as an imagined construction rather than as a transcription of something impartially and objectively perceived. (Blevins 72)

> The sublime is a sort of secular sacred, related to that which goes beyond ordinary experience and is almost, if not altogether,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> transcendent. Within the Nazi phenomenon you had something like a fascination with unheard-of transgression, bound up with this fear of ritual contamination that led to behavior that is otherwise unintelligible or seen only in terms of general psychological or sociopsychological categories (peer pressure, careerism) and universal traits of human behavior (hatred, sadism)...So you have the combination of these two seemingly antithetical things: the morally beautiful, remaining decent—and the typical cases given by other people are the German who loves his wife and family, goes home, is a wonderful family man, feeds his canary, loves his dog, and so forth, in a word, remaining morally upright...and at the same time engaging in these incredible unheard-of scenes of mass devastation, which constitute a kind of negative sublime. (LaCapra *Writing* 165, 167)

"Following Claude Levi-Strauss's demonstration that the 'savage mind' is really a scientific mind that uses natural images rather than abstract symbols to create 'a science of the concrete,' Duff was in search of 'an advanced mathematics of Haida Art'" (Sullivan 329-30).

"Wilson is not even the ostensible subject of the poems, in spite of the title of the book; he is displaced by the connective female narrative voices which offer one

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

woman's response to another woman's drowning" (Potvin 55).

> There is no question of the "moral world order" being restored; instead, the moral hero, still dumb, not yet of age—as such he is called a hero—wishes to raise himself by shaking that tormented world. The paradox of the birth of genius in moral speechlessness, moral infantility, is the sublimity of tragedy. It is probably the basis of all sublimity, in which genius, rather than God, appears. (*R* "Fate and Character" 307)

"If there is a mystical power in the poems, it is at best deviously present in the way Webb's 'anti-ghazals' subversively engage the theme of 'the mystic love of the worshipper for the Divine Beloved' (Islam 9), while fulfilling the desire of the form for 'the complex, the apocalyptic, and the moral' (Ahmad xx)" (Barbour 111).

> Many poets today seem interested in the narrative form, or at least in trying to find new ways of propelling a poem in a longer sequence other than the narrative, so that by necessity they investigate narrative and either come up with time or place or fragmentation, experimentation, as the propellant motion, but the study of narrative is a beginning. (Munton 84)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> It's difficult to measure the immediate impact of *Ghazals of Ghalib* on the general poetry-reading public, but it certainly had its effect on some of the participants. Adrienne Rich, especially, found the form so congenial to her poetic explorations of the time, that she included sequences of ghazals in her 1969 volume, *Leaflets*, and in her 1971 volume, *The Will to Change*...partly because the form offered her a means by which to deal with much complex and recalcitrant material:
>
> > ...The continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single ghazal. (*Leaflets 59* qtd. in Barbour 105)

"Chaos implies a nonlinear world, where order is not dominant, but complimentary" (Ainslie 316).

"Did Wilson ever think of that / before he shot himself so tidily / in his office?" (Webb *WB* 70).

"In a recent elaboration of Deleuze's reading of Bergson, Dorothea Olkowski shows how this Irigarayan notion of the third—the in-between, the interval—might

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

be extended. In Bergson, the interval lies between two kinds of becoming, perception and memory (Nichols "Subject" 122).

"There is no creation, there is only transformation. Opposites, transforming into each other" (Wilson Duff qtd. in Webb's *Talking* 139 qtd. in Butling "Post-Duncan" 73).

> The notion of the class war can be misleading. It does not refer to a trial of strength to decide the question "Who shall win, who be defeated?" or to a struggle whose outcome is good for the victor and bad for the vanquished. To think in this way is to romanticize and obscure the facts. For whether the bourgeoisie wins or loses the fight, it remains doomed by the inner contradictions that in the course of development will become deadly. The only question is whether its downfall will come through itself or through the proletariat. (*OWS* 469-70)

"I thought I'd start with a series of quotations as a jumping off point for our discussion rather than using question/answer. This format, by the way, was inspired by your essay, 'The Question as an Instrument of Torture' [*Talking* 39]" (Sujir 30).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"The sublime is, in some sense, an excess, an excess that overwhelms the self" (LaCapra *Writing* 155).

"Silence is transformed into something powerful, rather than annihilating, celebrated as a period of waiting and discovery" (Potvin 51).

"Theorems...in Benjamin's texts often remain implicit or concealed in the form of quotations" (Weigel xii).

"[A] mask is not primarily what it transforms, that is to say, what it chooses *not* to represent. Like a myth, a mask denies as much as it affirms. It is not made solely of what it says or thinks it is saying, but of what it excludes" (Lévi-Strauss qtd. in Williamson 144).

> Teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> students or the audience—the recipients—can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could *recognize* [see?], and that no one could therefore truly *learn*, *read* or *put to use*. (Felman 55)

> Having tried time and again to write, having failed over and over, I had to admit to myself that something else was preventing me from writing beyond all the "mitigating circumstances": fatigue, false emergencies, frantic running around, doing too many things at once, living at an absurd pace—I remember Max [Loreau] once accusing me of all this, as we were parting on a train platform in Brussels, during what turned out to be our last meeting. He seemed to reproach me for these things as though they were a kind of distraction, diversion, or means of escape, far from that intense interiority to which one might retreat or fold in upon, to which he knew how to bend or give in, if only better to think space and reopen the outside, each time as if for the first time. (Derrida "Max Loreau" 95)

"The trick by which this world of things is mastered—it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method—consists in the substitution of a political for a historical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

view of the past" (W. Benjamin *R* "Surrealism" 182).

"In the face of life's horror—luckily most people notice it only on occasion, but a few whom inner forces *appoint* to *bear witness* are always conscious of it—there is only one comfort: *its alignment with the horror experienced by previous witnesses*" (Canetti qtd. in Felman 14).

"Now I see that the opposite of fact may not be fiction at all, but something else again, something hidden under layers of color or conscience or meaning" (Schoemperlen 270).

"I've read enough about the creative process to know that scientists go through a very similar process to artists in making their discoveries. The artist produces a work; they produce a discovery, or theory. I was at the time of writing *Hanging Fire* very interested in physics" (Webb qtd. in Kamboureli 27).

"If literature is the *alignment between witnesses*, what would this alignment mean?" (Felman 14).

> One of the crucial problems with ethics is the relationship of normative limits and that which transgresses or exceeds limits. You

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

also have to try to see the ways in which that relationship really can be worked out in different areas of life: the relationship between normative limits that you want to affirm and the possibility of transgressing those limits, which is the only way in which you get a newer normativity. (LaCapra *Writing* 153-4)

The past, says Hegel, presents us with an unrelieved panorama of sin and suffering…Our reaction might be one of "moral embitterment," a jeremiad of condemnation at so much unnecessary loss. Or, in a more reflective mood, our reaction might be "disinterested sorrow" at the wasting of past glory. But in either case the basic feeling is of "the profoundest and most hopeless sadness, counterbalanced by no consolatory result."

Such powerfully negative emotions require relief. Our response is obvious. We withdraw into our own subjectivity, seeking the "quiet shore" of our private aims and interests, finding in them a refuge from the dolorous vistas provided by our inheritance. This self-indulgence is a balm that eases the pain of such endless public tragedy. But this is a counsel of despair, a form of fatalism. We have allowed our aspirations to be imprisoned by the past. Its givenness has circumscribed us. We have made a separate peace with human history, on terms that give us some

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

momentary personal happiness but that do nothing to arrest the widespread and ongoing social decline. (Allan 313-14).

Image of Mask

In this matched pair of masks, the supreme masterwork of the entire exhibition, everything comes into focus in the eyes. The first thing to see is that the artist deliberately and carefully made the two the same; they are two masks of the one face. The second thing to see is that in their most vital feature, the eyes, he made them profoundly opposite. They are, with full self-consciousness, a paradox. What the paradox is about is whatever "masks" are about, and whatever "seeing" is about. For example, think of one as the husband and the other the wife, or one as the mask and the other its mirror. Or think what self recognition really means. (Duff 162)

To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude.

And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others...By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a stance or a dimension *beyond himself.* (Felman 15)

> I wonder if I am more worried about my appearance than any of the scholars who have already made it into the Reading Room. I approach the desk directly facing the entrance where an elderly lower grade official (Security—but with horn-rimmed glasses, wearing what could be a J. Press tweed sports jacket) politely if firmly asks me to present my credentials. He needs to check a license, credit card, and proof of academic affiliation. "Susan Howe," I answer, but before the words are out I realize that both license and credit card say "Susan von Schlegell" and wait for the impact of this coming and going of a second self. I worry about it a good deal these days. I explain that though legally I use my married name I am also a poet and Howe is the maiden one. Feminism has shattered that outmoded custom. Now I am paying the piper for not having chosen the best and bravest path in 1965. (Howe *Midnight* 122)

Who is this *I* infesting my poems?...*I* am the mask, the voice, the one who begins those lyrical poems, *I wandered lonely as a cloud...I am worn out with dreams...* (Webb "Performance" *HF* 67).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"There is an effect of stammering in that poem, too, of delaying the moment of articulation, of hesitancy" (Kamboureli qtd. in Kamboureli 23).

"I have a lot of faith in the activity of artistic formation going on at a subliminal level (Webb qtd. in Sujir 35).

The World is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff is almost without hint that Duff's death was a suicide. Lilo is not mentioned. Yet just before the carefully worded "*Epilogue*: The Eulogy given at Wilson Duff's Memorial Service," the book closes with a poem by "Phyllis Webb, Department of English, University of Alberta," and that poem ("Imperfect Sestina") is full of refraction and "twins"—a reading by and for seers:

> VI
>
> Six times six I multiplied the vision by the mirror.
> Now any mask can show me all those twins.
> Loving-beholding and mercy pecked upon a stone
> until the moon came down and said, "Illumination."
> The pool stood still, but I think earth hovered under Raven,
> And on the path the signs of love and crossing. (339)

> The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was *not* direct, to attempt to master what was never fully

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> grasped in the first place. Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. (Caruth *Unclaimed* 62)

Webb: poet, "youngest [CCF] candidate," "spiritual politics" (Potvin 37), taught some courses (Butling *Seeing* 143), radio shows, critic, writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta 1980-81 (Hulcoop 152). In 1982 [before *Water and Light*, before *Hanging Fire*], Webb received the Governor General's Award for Poetry for *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems*; in 1992, she was inducted into the Order of Canada. In 1993, she turned to painting and collage (Butling *Seeing* 160-61). Now (in 2003), all of her books of poetry except the *Selected* are out of print. Abstract.

"Repetition as recurrence, but also as struggling, moving through mere sound to syllables and towards meaning—words…but it seems to me that you also locate meaning in pure sound, in the way in which sound engenders meaning or more sounds" (Kamboureli 23).

"[T]he process of reading through imposture might enable us to forego the desire for stable identities…in favour of a reading practice that considers how 'our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place' in the departure from 'sense and understanding'" (Dawson 52 citing Caruth *Unclaimed* 56).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Perhaps it was not what he took to be Freudian muddles that most provoked Wittgenstein. Freud's peculiar strength was to say what could not be said, or at least to attempt to say it, thus refusing to be silent in the face of the unsayable" (Bloom 113).

"I am only a partial fiction" (Webb "Performance" 19).

Then lay your rose on the fire;
the fire give up to the sun;
the sun give over to splendour
in the arms of the High Holy One;
for the Holy One dreams of a letter,
dreams of a letter's death--
oh bless the continuous stutter
of the word being made into flesh.
(Cohen 299)

"Psychoanalytic theory, however, is nothing other than a finally available statement (or approximation) of a truth that, at the outset, was unknown but that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

was gradually accessed through the practice and the process of the testimony" (Felman 25).

"Peggy: Sometimes I hear you screaming between the paragraphs and poems. That doesn't really bother me. Screams should be heard and not seen. And anyhow the poems and paragraphs eventually proceed before the amorous invisible, governed by need and the form of its persuasions" (Webb "Letters to Margaret Atwood" *WB* 38).

"History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (Benjamin *I TPH* 261). Each word, an act, a judgment--the "strait gate" (264) through which the next set of possibilities open.

"The fortuneteller who uses cards and the palmist teach us at least that this time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present)" (*R* "Fate and Character" 308).

"This is an extreme and interesting paradox—how something traumatic, disruptive, disorienting in the life of a people can become the basis of identity formation" (LaCapra *Writing* 161).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"And this would seem also to explain the high suicide rate of survivors, for example, survivors of Vietnam or of concentration camps, who commit suicide only *after* they have found themselves completely in safety" (Caruth *Unclaimed* 63).

> Mays and Davey had a devastating effect on both Webb and the study of her work...Buried under all the excrement, junk, garbage, and other effluvia of critical warfare were some genuinely useful insights, such as Davey's and Woodcock's acknowledgement of Webb as a transitional poet. Like virtually all poets who began writing before the advent of postmodernism, Webb intermittently echoes T.S. Eliot in her work—sometimes to offer a corrective. More important, as Davey suggested, she cleared the way for something new, although he passed right over it in his haste to dispatch her to the realm of the dead and best forgotten. Today, critics are now able to explore the possibility that long before Davey began railing against the "elitist, formalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial" philosophy of literary modernism, Webb had already seriously undermined it. (Relke 75)

Unlike "the subject who knows," "the subject who undergoes figures this tension

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

differently; it others its own sublime indeterminacy" (Nichols 119), as:

> the position from which the deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that 'there is no metalanguage'; that no utterance can say precisely what it intended to say; that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance; is *the position of metalanguage* in its purest most radical form" (Zizek quoted in Nichols "Subjects"128 13n).

"In the guise of a confession that seeks above all to demystify and deconstruct itself, *Notes from the Underground* can indeed be read as a belated *testimony to a trauma*, a trauma that endows Dostoevsky with the sickness of the one who 'knows'—with the underground vision of the one who has been made into a witness of his own firing squad" (Felman 21).

"Once again, then, in Freud's writing of his dreams, as in Dostoevsky's writing of his Notes, the testimony differentiates itself from the content of the manifest confession which it uses as its vehicle, the confession is displaced, precisely at the very moment that we think we grasp it" (Felman 23).

"[D]esire is always the desire for the other" (Weigel 98).

"Truth is not singular and fixed but a temporary condition of balance and harmony

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

within the flux" (Butling "Post-Duncan" 68).

> "Who she was," in other words, is here implicitly expressed by the survivor as a radical and irretrievable *loss,* one of the most devastating losses—dispossessions—inflicted by the Holocaust, one of those "answerlessnesses," of those answerless questions, through which the Holocaust inexorably made one pass. The narrator herself does not know any longer who she was, except *through her testimony.* This knowledge or self-knowledge is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge *does not exist*, it can only happen through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it. It can only unfold itself in the process of testifying, but it can never become a substance that can be possessed by either speaker or listener, outside of this dialogic process. (Felman 53)

> One wonders about such things insofar as a book always comes to take the place of the body, insofar as it has always tended to replace the proper body, and the sexed body, to become its name even, and occupy its place, to serve in place of this occupant, and insofar as we collaborate with this substitution, lending or giving ourselves

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> over to it, for this is all we ever really do, we are this, we like this, and each word speaks volumes for lending itself from the very first moment to this spiriting away of the proper body, as if already at the behest of the proper body in question, following its paradoxical desire, its impossible desire, the desire to interrupt itself, to interrupt itself in sexual difference, interrupt itself as sexual difference. (Derrida "Sarah Kofman" *Work* 169)

"Like character, fate, too, can be apprehended only through signs, not in itself, for—even if this or that character trait, this or that link of fate, is directly in view, it is nevertheless a relationship that is meant by these concepts, never accessible except through signs because it is situated above the immediately visible level" (*R* "Fate and Character" 304-05).

"I send you the output of a random number generator. No matter how many numbers I transmit, you will be unable to continue the sequence on your own. Every number comes as a surprise; *every number conveys new information.* By this reasoning, the more random or chaotic a message is, the more information it contains" (*Chaos Bound* qtd. in Blevin 62).

> k, k, k, kaw, kaw.
> The burning on the hillside, ineffable
> smoke, 'what does not change is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the will to change'
k, k, k, kaw
the drummers' drums echoing across
the bay, they won't go away
drums or echoes.
Insurrectionary wilderness of the I
am, I will be, forcing the vision
to something other, something out
side the sleep of dreams riddled with remembrances.
k, k, k, the Prince in his dungeon
exploring his way
why is he so saintly, the reaches
of his mind so vast and intimate?
('The main structural lines of Asia are not
north and south, or west and east; they are
from the southwest to the northeast....')
Kropotkin, old Prince Peter
with your forty barges on the Amur
with your hammer in Finland
dressed up in your merchant's costume
dressed up as a *page de chamber*
dressed up as an eight-year-old Persian
Prince with real jewels in your belt for
Madame Nazimova 'who was a very beautiful
woman.' Peter, sweet Prince for Nicholas
for Alexander ('and have signed myself ever
since P. Kropotkin.')
And your Alexander, your brother, suicided
in Siberia. (Webb *Wilson's Bowl* 15)

This text, a stammer, each interruption a/frayed hesitation, order re-imposed in fear and frustration, a dis-rupture of beginning; each stuttered syllable a re-sounding testimony to insistent resistance, re-current origins and endings, and disordered fecundity—chaos.

"Written to her cousin shortly after returning from Cambridge where she had been treated for some mysterious eye trouble, Emily Dickinson who had to carefully

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

conserve her reading, chose passages from 2 and 3 *Henry VI*." (Howe *MED* 92).

"This often happens: that you look at an earlier trauma as a way of not looking too closely at contemporary traumas" (LaCapra *Writing* 171)—or, as a way of apprehending fresh trauma indirectly.

"It might seem that the sensible response to such difficulties is to give up the attempt, even though it would mean that we could not warrantably claim to find ourselves in an intelligible universe which is supportive to human values rather than in a multiverse of pointlessly interacting items. Difficulties, though, do not entail impossibility" (Pailin 272).

"For example, most of the poems devoted to [Webb's] male mentors critically interrogate her relationship to them" (Glickman qtd. in Carr 70).

"When, in a skeptical culture, we assume that what we know must be the whole of what there is to know because there is no transcendent realm, we absorb the impossible" (Nichols "Subject" 120).

> I want to be done with our language of vision. Our language is a language of cops, a language of reports. We spend our time

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reporting others, directing traffic. But I don't want to be a cop. Vision is founded on speech, not the contrary. Speech is the emission of space (spacing . . .) [sic]. We must find a way to leave in words only the residue of vision that is indispensable to their being "received." (Max Loreau qtd. in Derrida "Max Loreau" 102).

Jacques Lacan has referred displacement to the trope of metonymy (understood as the mechanism of desire), and he has correlated condensation with metaphor. This initial step in the development of a new rhetoric (whose end is not yet in sight) provides valuable insight into temporal processes as well as into the attempt to represent them. Metonymy constitutes a time line of different, serial events which one tries to integrate through a metaphoric concordance of beginning and end. For Lacan this effort can never fully succeed, for desire (unlike need) cannot be satisfied, although the quest for satisfaction (the prototypical *quête de l'absolu*) motivates utopian yearning (including the yearning for full narrative closure and theoretical totalization). (LaCapra *Soundings* 35)

Increasingly aware of my avoidance of the subject as a result of my

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> father's suicide...I watched the students find their own paths to the poems which they approached with a mixture of puzzlement, fascination, admiration, and uneasiness. Our inarticulate discomfort, the silences where we could not speak made Webb's work all the more intriguing. (Williamson 156).

"Like Melville's Bartleby, who shadows her *Melville's Marginalia*, Howe prefers *not* to be a little reasonable, prefers to go to the wall rather than accept the inadequacy of love to complexity and thus the improbability of personal or social redemption" (Nichols "Tensing" 52).

"That's where I am moving—right to the point of having to say why am I losing my memory and then thinking, well, it's perhaps because I'm moving to a more mystical approach to life. A more trusting one, waiting to return to the beginning. Waiting for, not necessarily the answers, but the music one hears and then follows" (Webb qtd. in Sujir 40-1).

"We are living with the great catastrophe" (Webb qtd. in Sujir 41).

> As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.
>
> What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive *practice*, as opposed to pure *theory*. (Felman 16-17)

"The curious thing about this stunning theoretical event is the way in which its very generality hinges, paradoxically, on its accidental nature: on the contingency of a particular, idiosyncratic, symptomatic dream" (Felman 26).

"One of the goals of historiography (including historiography as a working through) is an attempt to restore to victims, insofar as possible, the dignity of which they were deprived by their oppressors" (LaCapra *Writing* 178).

"One of the reasons is that survivors found—in different countries, for different reasons—that they didn't have an audience" (LaCapra *Writing* 158).

"(...Yes, it is as if we spend our lives finding clues, fragments, shards, leading or misleading details, chipped tablets written over in a forgotten language. Perhaps

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

they are a counting of cattle, a measuring out of grain. Perhaps they are a praising of gods, a naming of the dead. We can't know.)" (Kroetsch *Treachery* 129).

> What is profoundly surprising, Mallarmé implies, is not simply that the verse is broken, but that the breaking of the verse picks up on something that the political dimensions of the French Revolution have inaugurated, in their accidenting both of classes and of dogmas, but failed to consummate, failed to achieve completely. The revolution in poetic form testifies, in other words, to political and cultural changes whose historical manifestation, and its revolutionary aspect, is now noticed accidentally—accidentally breaks into awareness—through an accident of verse. The poetic revolution is thus both a replica, and a sequence, an effect of, the French Revolution. (Felman 28)

"The postulation of a drive to death, which Freud ultimately introduces in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, would seem only to recognize the reality of the destructive force that the violence of history imposes on the human psyche, the formation of history as the endless repetition of previous violence" (Caruth *Unclaimed* 63).

Susan Howe: actor, artist, poet. Long years as visual artist, long years as marginal avant-garde poet-scholar--then Poet-Scholar-Academic. *Bed Hangings* a puzzle

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for a professor. Then *The Midnight* with illustrations. How to find a position, to witness?

"A satisfying metaphysical story thus has the difficult task of finding a way to combine the intelligibility of the process with contingency in its events" (Pailin 271).

"Other readers, however, most of them from a younger generation of critics, have not been similarly convinced that textual density adequately qualifies the narrative component of *The Martyrology*" (Nichols "Subjects"109).

> S[usan]H[owe]: I have a real problem teaching workshops.
> R[obert]C[reeley]: I'd advise students to read. Study with someone who intrigues you, or provokes you, even confuses you.
> S[usan]H[owe]: People have to find their own voices somehow. To me poetry is, I hate to say it, something holy, and I hate to confuse it with a career. (qtd. in "Four-Part Harmony" 22)

> One of the things I find interesting about you is that I know you to be a very self-conscious feminist in your everyday life, but when it comes down to print you tend to skirt the issue. I have in mind your wonderful essay "Message Machine," in *Language in Her*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Eye. Feminism and gender issues are present in it, as they are in your poetry too, but in an oblique, almost subliminal way. You don't always thematize these issues in a direct fashion. Is there a specific reason for this? (Kamboureli 28)

Despite her impressive publication record, Kofman was often passed over for tenure and promotion at the Sorbonne, where she remained a *maître de conferences* (the equivalent of an untenured associate professor) until 1991, when she was finally appointed to a chair. With the publication in the late 1980s of *Smothered Words* (a book dedicated to the memory of her father and to the work of Robert Antelme and Maurice Blanchot), her writing took an increasingly autobiographical turn. Between April and September 1993 Kofman wrote *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, an account of her childhood between the ages of eight and eighteen.

On October 15, 1994, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Nietzche's birth, Sarah Kofman took her own life. (Brault and Naas 167)

"They do not see in it the image of what they themselves will one day be, of what unbeknownst to themselves, they are in the process of becoming."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> ...They are thus seen not seeing, and, visible as nonseeing, visible as blinded, they are being diverted, distracted from the fascination for that thing there, diverted by the distracting distance of this *right there*, and this distraction is their very position of objective knowing or learning, their very gaze, their point of view and their doctoral objectivization: "and their solemnity is not the sort that can be awakened by the mystery of death." (Derrida qtg. Sarah Kofman in "Sarah Kofman" 179)

> [B]eyond every Thing, the theme, task, and unrelenting desire of Max: to try to the very end to turn, to make fold, or rather to let fold of itself, to turn inside out, to operate through this operation of writing and voice, through the initialing of the work, this turn that converts both body and thought to the reengendering of this origin of the world, and to recapture the becoming apparent of the appearing rather than what has appeared (Derrida "Max Loreau" 95).

"But perhaps the testimony *has* to be precocious, perhaps there is no other way" (Felman 54).

"[T]his passive process of awaiting the words, listening for the words, and then

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

writing from them, responding to them, that it led me so much outward. This very inward, private process, led me more and more outside. It connected me, it associated me with the outside world" (Webb qtd. in Kamboureli 30).

"In Webb's case, the playful, the affirming, the erotic dimensions of her work were largely overlooked...The concluding lines of 'Breaking' are often quoted to demonstrate Webb's despair:

> What are we whole or beautiful or good for
> But to be absolutely broken? (*SP* 55) (Butling "I Devise" 15)

> Aside from the difficulty of accepting that awakening to a child's dead corpse could ever be understood as an escape, the force of Lacan's reading, in the way I understand it, clearly suggests that the encounter with the real cannot simply be located either inside or outside the dream, but has to be located in the moment of the transition between the two, in the movement from one to the other. This is what Lacan precisely calls "the gap that constitutes awakening." (Caruth *Unclaimed* 142 9n)

> In Israel, they didn't want to listen to survivors basically because the Israelis were trying, for understandable reasons, to construct a different kind of state with a different kind of political agent. So in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> a way, the aim was to go from victim to agent, without passing through survival and the process of working through the past (LaCapra *Writing* 158).

"For only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dream be addressed from the superior vantage of memory" (*SW* "OWS" 445).

"Bourgeois existence is the regime of private affairs" (Benjamin *OWS* 484).

"A related concept is Charles Olson's opening line of 'The Kingfishers': 'What does not change / is the will to change'... Indeed Webb has said that Olson's line has hovered over her throughout her writing career (Interview) and she quotes it in section II of 'Poems of Failure'" (Butling "Post-Duncan" 69).

"Acting out, on some level, may very well be necessary or inevitable, even for secondary witnesses or historians" (LaCapra *Writing* 143).

"Sound patterns, puns, repeating words...can dictate meaning and form as much as the author's 'intention'" (Butling "Post-Duncan" 77).

"[Webb] seems to know from a very deep place that one of her jobs as a poet is to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

sit with the unanswered, unanswerable questions, and answer them, in many mutually contradictory ways, always acknowledging that the questions remain" (Scheier 123).

> Lacan, in other words, reads the story of the father as a survival inherently bound up with the address of a dead child…Lacan resituates the psyche's relation to the real not as a simple matter of seeing or of knowing the nature of empirical events, not as what can be known or what cannot be known about reality, but as the story of an urgent responsibility, or what Lacan defines, in this conjunction, as an *ethical* relation to the real. (Caruth *Unclaimed* 102)

"For although even true luxury can be permeated by intellect and conviviality and so forgotten, the luxury goods swaggering before us now parade such brazen solidity that all the mind's shafts break harmlessly on their surface" (*OWS* 454).

"The self is never at home in its own immediate experience" (C. Jacobs *Language* 12).

> [T]he breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that…is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (Caruth *Unclaimed* 3-4)

> There is no one of these readings that I would choose to omit, and yet they rest on incompatible ways of constructing the subject. If we demand of the subject ethical accountability, we imagine him as a free and discrete agent and strategically ignore his interpellation in a socio-linguistic order. If we attend to that order in its potentiality to be otherwise, and focus on destabilizing the subject, or if we respond to her as sheer affect—the infolding of a world sublime in the infinity of its detail, and combinatory possibilities—we begin to lose the language of action. In the play between the different differences, however, we might look for the flexibility to respond to the givens of the moment with what wisdom is ready to hand, and, as well, re-imagine ourselves, our values, our delights, and our social spaces as they might become. (Nichols "Tensing" 53)

"Many established poets, particularly A.J.M. Smith, felt that the only suitable audience for poetry was one's fellow poets" (Knight 120).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"However, rather than simply registering such confinement, a poem such as sequence I of 'A Question of Questions' [in Webb's *Wilson's Bowl*] constructs a female subject who resists domination by refusing to answer the questions marked on her body/writing" (Carr 70).

> One has to try to approximate an understanding of why this was happening (to the extent it was happening) ['taking a carnivalesque glee in the suffering of others'] because I don't think this was unique to the Germans but was something that had happened elsewhere (although it should not be seen simply in universal psychological terms...But it is a possibility for virtually anyone, and one has to recognize it as a possibility for oneself. I would be tempted to suggest that it's only with the recognition that one has some chance of resisting even reduced analogues of certain kinds of behavior, including victimization, in one's own experience. (LaCapra *Writing* 168-69)

"Delay is the mother of beauty. Delay can become a misnaming of death. We have, we are told, in moving from Modern to Postmodern, moved from dialectic to diacritic. Thus we make new dialectics" (Kroetsch *Treachery* 132).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"If we understand the dialectical image fundamentally as the outcome of a penetrating mode of *seeing* that inevitably constructs as much as discovers its objects as it brings them to visibility, we may conclude that the apprehension of dialectical images is inseparable from (a disavowed) intervention and expertise" (K. Jacobs 216).

> In a way, Mallarmé suggests that he speaks too soon, before he is quite ready, before he quite knows what his subject is about...Such precocious testimony in effect becomes, with Mallarmé, the very principle of poetic insight and the very core of the event of poetry, which makes precisely language—through its breathless gaps—speak ahead of knowledge and awareness and break through the limits of its own conscious understanding. By its very innovative definition, poetry will henceforth speak *beyond its means*, to testify—precociously—to the ill-understood effects and to the impact of an accident whose origin cannot precisely be located but whose repercussions, in their very uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of the testimony. (Felman 29-30).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Closed for Alterations

In a dream, I took my life with a gun. When it went off, I did not wake up but saw myself lying for a while as a corpse. Only then did I wake" (*OWS* 477).

> For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence...To put it somewhat differently, we could say that the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others. (Caruth *Unclaimed* 17-18)

> I ate no pleasant bread. The fast
> unbroken for weeks,
>
> then I Daniel looked and saw—
> but what do you care for the grief
>
> of what I Daniel understood by
> books the number of the years of desolation?
>
> Confusion of faces, yours among them,
> the poetry tangled, no vision of my own to speak of.
>
> The hand moved along the wall.
> I was able to read, that's all. (Webb *WL* 39)

Following Pound's suggestion, for instance, Duncan pays attention

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to the tone-leading of vowels. This is one way of generating structure and texture in a poem (i.e. an 'objective' presence) while also preventing the synthesizing ordering impulse from taking control. If one lets the vowel sounds determine what word comes next, then meaning is discovered rather than imposed. (Butling "Post-Duncan" 59).

I did not have to reach Dante's "Midway this way to life" to experience the dark wood, the lost way. If lostness returns, recurs, and becomes the problematical, then one learns ways out, though I don't, and few do find their way to Dante's Rose of Paradise. And, as Proust says, "the only true paradise is always the paradise we have lost." You can't go home again, but the way out is sometimes via the way back. (Webb *NBB* 6)

Meditating on the typographical symbol—? —superimposed on medieval instruments of torture ("hook/sickle/scythe/to cut us down this/mark?") [Webb "A Question of Questions" *WB*], she establishes the way in which interrogation may obliterate the subject: "and who are you in this / school / room / torture chamber…you cannot answer" (47). (Carr 69).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> These things must be taken on progressively, with caution; otherwise, beware of suicide. In the end it is a matter of returning to animal life without renouncing thought, of reintroducing phosphorescent life into thought: it is difficult not to slip at one point or another. And all it takes is for one to indulge in these practices in solitude—every theatrical dimension being suspended—and very quickly one no longer understands the others. The task is to be able to keep company with both madness and the others. And madness is so tempting for us who have learnt only to keep company with others. . . .So tempting and so frightening. (Loreau qtd. in Derrida "Max Loreau" 101).

"I ask if a woman could have made them / the two stone masks / that can nest together" (Webb *WB* 70).

"Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer" (unnamed student qtd. in Felman 58).

> But it is quite beyond doubt that the development of writing will not indefinitely be bound by the claims to power of a chaotic academic and commercial activity; rather, quantity is approaching

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the moment of a qualitative leap when writing, advancing ever more deeply into the graphic regions of its new eccentric figurativeness, will suddenly take possession of an adequate material content. In this picture-writing, poets, who will now as in earliest times be first and foremost experts in writing, will be able to participate only by mastering the fields in which (quite unobtrusively) it is being constructed: statistical and technical diagrams. With the founding of an international moving script, poets will renew their authority in the life of peoples, and find a role awaiting them in comparison to which all the innovative aspirations of rhetoric will reveal themselves as antiquated daydreams. (*OWS* 456-57)

S[maro] K[amboureli]: I think that by resisting the lyric you also resist a certain kind of closure, the lyrical ending that is part of the whole lyric tradition, romantic or not. Think, for instance, of "A Model of the Universe," where you begin the last stanza in the conditional mode, but that conditional structure is not completed, just hangs there, the gap at the end being emphasized by the ellipses.

P[hyllis] W[ebb]: I cannot bear to finish that thought. (Kamboureli "Seeking" 35).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Standing In: In/conclusions

Only images in the mind vitalize the will. The mere word, by contrast, at most inflames it, to leave it smoldering, blasted. There is no intact will without exact pictorial imagination. No imagination without innervation.

Walter Benjamin

Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated... We have witnessed the evolution of the 'short story,' which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.

Walter Benjamin

The poetries of Susan Howe and Phyllis Webb examine what it is to be liminal, in peril. As I consider this, I recall my first year as a teacher, and the science student whose reading of the first "Poem of Failure" from *Wilson's Bowl* (13-14) demonstrated to me how quickly she could learn to test her perceptions with probing, tangential plays and resonances. Tracing the slippage between "knowledge" and "faith," the doubleness in which we lie, inconsolably, this young woman began to show me what a poetics of perception might mean. Her type of reading asks that we hold each word against its others, a *Vexierbild*, seeing "what about this? and this?"—knowing that reading, meaning, can be a dance of attention, intuition, *seeing*. Although I have tried repeatedly to do so, it would be difficult to pinpoint what is most generative in this poetry, for therein lies its merit: not in its indeterminacy (for it addresses acts within representation), but in its openness.

I am reminded of a model of communication as a game of tennis: if I hit

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the balls so fast you can't see them, "it precludes our playing tennis at all. If I just hit you easy ones, you would get them back, but it would become boring ... If I hit the balls hard enough so that you can get them back over the net if you extend yourself and expand, then we have growth going on" (Emery 91).

At first, the first essay.

I warn my class sternly not to begin with "Throughout history" ... and still, time after time, two or three students (hapless, forgetful, focused on thesis or comma placement) find themselves irresistibly drawn to commence with the single phrase I have abjured ... and how boldly they repeat the disaster that is over-generalization. This is but a small matter, surely, on a first assignment--but oh, how such clichés do circulate. The error is fundamental, part of a phenomenon that Walter Benjamin describes as "the bourgeois view of language" (OLaS 69): our very relation to language prevents us from seeing the specificity of the present, which is "the medium of all historical knowledge. Certainty now lies not in the 'eternal image' of a past that 'will not run away from us,' but in a present which is constantly escaping us" (Wohlfarth "Measure" 23-4).

When I began, I was convinced that Benjamin called for innovation in something we might consider "research methodology": to perceive the catastrophe that is "progress" we need only learn to conduct "materialist historiography" (TPH 262). I have since come to see that this mission rests on

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

one with which we are all most intimately concerned, namely the poetics of apprehension itself. Though Walter Benjamin's famous reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* threatens to be the most ubiquitous image of his legacy, there is one more reading to render.

In a student essay, we might be tempted to complain that Benjamin's text is ahistorical, eliding the specificity of moments of the past and present. His point, however, differs from the lie of generalization not only in its content but also in its form. Intensely poetic, it exceeds the epic in both scale and implication. Indeed, the image identifies the *relations* between events and agency throughout history: the error that we seem doomed to repeat is as fundamental as our relation to language. We are unable to read (let alone to name or to act upon) the relations before us—unless we are transported into the subject-position of divine messenger. The evidence ("what has been smashed") testifies to our insistent cultivation of those modes of thought that privilege hierarchy and consumption. Without human agency, the Angel is trapped, a mute witness to the endless accumulation that we recognize as "progress," and that he can only see (and witness) to be debris.

I offer the following re/vision (of provisional agency) to the Angel of History:

> A vigil of ravens by the side of the road, disturbed by my vehicle,
> flaps off patiently, the many/one wide black heart beating,
> rising/contracting, never losing sight of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

smashed fox it is intent on resurrecting, strand by torn thread.

Consider the tropes of the fragment, the tangent, the stutter, and the poetry in relation to the following paraphrase of "the mystical teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the 'Ari' of sixteenth-century Tzfat…Bear in mind that the Ari speaks entirely in symbols and metaphors":

> Originally, there was only Ayn Sof, the Infinite—all of reality was God. In order for the universe to exist, God had to withdraw from some part of that reality. This metaphorical withdrawal (tzimtzum) left a "place" devoid of God's presence, where the cosmos could come into being.
>
> God did not abandon this empty space, but projected a beam of light, which became a mass without form inside that space. From that mass, all levels of reality came into existence. God at that point injected another ray of light, which began to create "vessels"; these represent facets of God's activity and God's qualities, and each contains a portion of that light from Ayn Sof. This process was interrupted, however, before it was complete. Some of the vessels were not strong enough to contain the divine light. The vessels shattered into bits (shvirat hakelim).
>
> The ray of light returned to Ayn Sof, while the vessels fell and became the world of reality, including the material word. Some

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> of the divine light adhered to the shattered vessels, much as oil remains on an earthen vessel even after it is poured out. Thus there are sparks of God's light trapped in every piece of reality. God is unwhole, separated from some of God's own light. Through prayer and action, a person can liberate and raise these sparks and repair God's unity. That process is known as tikkun—repair of God, repair of the world, repair of the universe. (Spira-Savett)

"Madness is a form of perception alien to the community" (*SW* "Perception is Reading" 92).

If trauma is generated by knowledge (a new interpretation of an earlier experience) (Leys 20), what is traumatic is not simply a feeling of a trust betrayed (the first sin), but guilt (the second) that one has failed to recognize an experience in time to prevent it. These failures (in a fallen world) are inevitable: to think that we recognize (when we do not see), to resist divination, and to judge for oneself. If we take a passage from the Book of Genesis as a monad, we can read the signs that predict fundamental injustice through millennia, in cultures east and west:

> [T]he serpent said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad." The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Genesis 3.4-7)

The opening of their eyes is the first trauma, and from this derives the need for cover. As the *NIV Women's Devotional Bible* glosses this text, "Eve's attention is riveted to the tree—not the garden full of goodness, not God's gracious fellowship, just the tree. It looks good; it pleases the eye; it is desirable" (5). This focus--this "rivet[ing]" the eye to desire one thing--blinds us from the first to anything but our apparent separation from the object (of knowledge). Desire so channeled numbs perception, causing habituation, desensitization, familiarity; the failure to recognize thus creates the lack of agency; knowledge itself comes from seeing action as human choice, knowing human inadequacy. This creates paralysis, because to choose means to close: every choice excludes realms of possibilities. Instead of recognizing and bearing an infinity of possibilities, linear narrative shows us a reductive model of experience. Time moves. Closure and exclusion are intensified, fetishized. We thirst after "what next," the emphasis resting on "what" as intensely as on "next." What happens when we limit desire (to things, people, events)?

In our world we can only choose now. We see just(ification in) what we choose. So limited, we crave progress, point after point, each tangent a point in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the stutter of history, a frenzy of will, a rape. Aware of the irony and urgency in this—our limited form of agency—I envision a pedagogy that would include interpretations of all kinds (including those disciplines "the humanities" now abandon to science, or law, or business, for instance), that attempts to mark relations between phenomena and still to restore the flesh to the paradigmatic, to return our way of seeing to include the marginal, the peripheral, and the absent—in the least spaces, now as throughout history.

> The philosophy by which Benjamin considers the visible world as a screen of disrupted appearances will resemble the theory of abstract painting in that it requires that he both look at the world and look away in the same process. The idea of looking away here means an absolute skepticism about the authority of representation...As with those paintings whose weakness must be evident if he is to trust his sense, he must search for the confidence to so fix objects that he can unmask them as deficient in their appearances, or ultimately invisible. Only then will they release the eye from that fascination with their apparent meaning and value which presently holds a disjointed society in its thrall. (Bullock "Blauer" 180)

Shoshana Felman proposes that:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> [T]eaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not taught: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience—the recipients—can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could *recognize*, and that no one could therefore truly *learn, read* or *put to use*. (55)

> The silence, hesitation, evolution, and frequency or rarity of words give the historian studying the colour blue an extremely important body of evidence. The difficulty that the Greeks had in naming blue recurs in classical Latin (and later in its medieval form). There were, of course, numerous terms for blue (*caeruleus, caesius, glaucus, cyaneus, lividus, venetus, aerius, ferreus*), but they were all polyvalent, chromatically imprecise, and sometimes contradictory. The most common word was *caeruleus*, whose etymology evokes the color of wax (*cera*—a color between white, brown, and yellow); it denoted certain shades of green and black before attaching firmly to the blue spectrum. (Pastoureau 26)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Can a twist in time mend our ability to attend? Even the most reductive of linear narratives can be woven into poetry, repetition after variation, threads traced through and ripped back after each reading. Penelope's strategy might serve here as a model—not to pursue perceived perfection, but to await it actively, to prolong the state of possibility, to contain desire, to give form to it only in expressing a memory.

This is an exercise in patience and humility. My experiment here is designed to demonstrate a strategy of apprehension based on poetry but my purpose is not to create an audience for avant-garde poetry alone (which, it might be argued, represents a fetishized form of progress, by definition the newest of the new) but to introduce texts that lead readers to work to apprehend their poetics. I like Felman's notion that teachers and students both witness and offer testimony to the accidents that constitute learning (55)—that the iteration and reiteration, the stutter, the echoing, help to make sense of the play of interpretations and knowledges. By testifying and witnessing in poetic ways, we not only defer closure and read "memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (TPH 255), but we teach a new way of seeing, of knowing—in all the irony that that bears—more intuitively and humbly.

The error lies in
the state of desire
in wanting the answers (Webb *WB* 52)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

How minutely do the politics of "transmission" relate form to agency? The levels crackle with fractal urgency. A few summers ago, I was granted a fellowship for a new configuration in learning. For our participation in a set of seminars inspired by the title *Culture and the Modern State,* six students were paid $2,500 each; in comparison with graduate coursework, I judged the readings to be heavy, and (but) because (although) we wouldn't receive grades or credit, discussions were engaged and provocative. Topics ranged across continents and centuries, but we returned again and again to questions of agency. We read various accounts of what resistance might mean, including one wherein a bakery worker reports how he subverted the social fabric by lying to his boss, claiming that he had a skin condition, in order to preserve his moustache. It consoled us to agree that this was a waste of ink, but then we could not render a verdict as to whether the spray-painting of the Global newsvan at the *Free Trade of the Americas* conference in Quebec constituted a move more political. Both professors present asserted that it did. I countered that it did not. It reminded me too much of the student protests I had participated in during the winters of 1991 and '92: when, in –30 degrees, huddled, freezing students took to chanting slogans such as "Gogo[1] SUCKS!", I knew that we were not going to leave them quaking with fear, or convince anyone of the brutality of charging tuition increases of fifteen percent per *year* to people already living on loans and minimum wage

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

work. It seemed to me that we were far more likely to reassure already callous politicians that education has no effect on agency, and that it would not produce the dangerous critiques so long deserved. As for the paint job—although it may well have attracted new members to the cause, it leaves the protesters looking like petty vandals—especially to an audience who craves a connection with the real it cannot find, and thus sates itself on the oddly homogeneous array of *reality* television shows ranging from *Survivor* to *For Love or Money* to *Dog Eat Dog, Fear Factor*, and the like.

And what connection might the world of university graduates have to *reality*? Consider the University of Alberta's alumni journal, entitled *new **trail***. The ideology of the "new" can be dangerous enough, but coupled with "trail"? Exploration? Conquest? Pioneering? Destruction of indigenous peoples and habitats? As an organ that ostensibly exists to recognize the achievements of those graduating from the largest university in the province self-proclaimed the most prosperous in Canada, the magazine attempts to build camaraderie—and draw forth funds from those who feel the need to give something back.

This might seem justifiable—it *is* voluntary—were it not for the dangerous terms in which it defines success. Consider the summer 2001 issue's final article, "Abundance of good attitude," wherein the then President of the Alumni Association asserts that "you reap what you sow." Although he does recognize that some people "*out there* have real problems" (my emphasis) and have to "deal with

---

[1] John Gogo, Provincial Minister of Advanced Education in 1991.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

things that are out of their control," he has bounced back from what the writer terms "adversity": "the real estate firm he worked for in Ontario went bankrupt, but [he] picked himself up, and after some phone calls and a timely meeting in the Calgary airport, he eventually wound up back in Edmonton working for...a real estate development firm whose widespread holdings include hotels in Edmonton and Jasper." Now he makes time to volunteer with "the River Valley Alliance and the University of Alberta ... he feels that the river valley gives the city a beautiful and unique, physical focal point, and the University is a 'huge factor in Edmonton's growth and success and vitality.'" The writer leaves him standing on the golf course, of all places, under a "beautiful Alberta sky, feel[ing] the sun on his face, and think[ing] to himself that, all in all, life can be pretty darn good."

This representation infuriates me; I am particularly outraged that it reinscribes the stereotypical myth of post-secondary education, the Eurocentric metanarrative that individual merit governs access to "achievement" (whatever that might be) and wealth. To be honest, I have no idea whether this article in any way reflects the man himself. I've never met him. But the *trail* looks oh-so-familiar... Hollywood has been projecting it for at least sixty years: "College boy makes good!" The not-so-subtle subtext in the profile reads that if you support the U of A, you can send your children where they'll become prosperous and generous. The notion (that we receive in life what we have earned) is an appalling untruth, as illustrated by far too many people. This construct sets apart a new elite, a beneficent upper class who has the luxury of time and energy to volunteer—

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

despite the fact that, here and across the globe, billions of people work hard. And find no time on the golf course to reflect upon the magnificence of nature.

Why talk of the minutiae that inflect our bourgeois lives? The paper I produced for *Culture and the Modern State* dealt with the surprising politics of white paint and other home fashion trends. How political can it be, you may ask, to waste space, ranting about the economies of time lost and hours spent shopping for the perfect shade of sage silk? Deluged by the blatant rhetoric surrounding *America Under Attack* or the latest *War on Terrorism* on CNN, who cares that home decor stores are something Walter Benjamin might term a "monad" for something which Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt describe as *Empire*?[2] Who cares that the Hudson's Bay brazenly prints "Shopping is Good" on each cash receipt, and croons this appalling slogan across the airwaves? Good for whom? Do *we* (whoever *we* might be) really need more, and why? Did the crisis in New York intensify an already consuming desire to escape, withdraw, and feather our nests? Who cares?

In Edmonton, Alberta, winter arrives: "Tuesday night about 260 men stayed at the [homeless] shelter" and "some...have no winter coats and are using

---

[2] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000). Their model of global capitalism predicts 9-11 and the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq: "The legitimation of the imperial machine is born at least in part of the communications industries ...This is a form of legitimation that rests on nothing outside itself and is reproposed cease-lessly by developing its own languages of self-validation" (33). Contrast the total casualties in the World Trade Centre with those infected by HIV in Africa alone; measure US rhetoric with Hardt and Negri's words (published more than a year prior to 9-11): "Moral intervention often serves as the first act that prepares the way for military intervention...These enemies are most often called terrorist, a crude conceptual and terminological reduction that is rooted in a police mentality" (37).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

second-hand socks as mittens" (Warwaruk B1). Dave Chalmers, "who has worked at the shelter for six years" claims that he's "never seen it so bad"—the shelter has no hats, mittens, long underwear, or coats to give out. Conditions smack of the nineteenth-century Manchester represented in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton,* wherein labourers flock to the promise of jobs in the city, only to perish, housed in slums, from illness and unemployment. As if to support my outrageous comparison, one week after the homeless article, our mayor celebrates the fact that "Edmonton [is] named best G-7 global business centre" (Ovenden B1). The article implies that we have re-built Paradise, yet the argument self-deconstructs, to my mind, when it proclaims that:

> Federal cabinet ministers and national business leaders toasted Edmonton for leading Canada to be declared the most cost-competitive industrial country by KPMG. This is the third consecutive time Canada has won the title, aided chiefly by the low Canadian dollar and the *lowest labour costs* among the nine countries analyzed. (my emphasis)

Hardly a cause to celebrate—we can infer that these lowest labour costs mean that workers here receive the lowest wages. To be fair, not everyone shares the mayor's priorities: one week later, *Journal* writer Bill Mah points out that the "City's success leaves some behind" (B1). Our fabulous centre for business has "one of the nation's top suicide rates," "the gap is growing between Edmonton's richest and poorest citizens and...large numbers of people are declaring

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

bankruptcy." A civic report regarding "the impact of funding and program cuts" isn't due to be tabled until September.

How does this relate to teaching, alumni, and politicization? We need to read everything, even reading material as apparently innocuous as home décor magazines, in critical ways—as poetry. We crave particular representations of something we call "beauty" in our lives. Fashions are pernicious in what they perpetuate: time and resources wasted, not only in dreaming, but in the endless work of shopping and re-creation. The consumerist dogma here is just as misleading as *new trails*'s discussion of "adversity." In one magazine, a prominent designer asserts that *anyone* can have luxury, because the simple elements (a china cup, fresh mint) are always available:

> Every moment in my life counts," she says, noting how easy it is to make those moments enjoyable if your senses are poised and receptive. "Every night, I take a tray with flowers and fresh mint tea to bed with me. It doesn't matter if you have a window box of fresh mint or a whole field of it. It's not about making a production. It's about stopping for a moment, and enjoying. It's about having a beautiful tea (no tea bags hanging out of cups!) with yourself. I buy flowers and Belgian chocolates. I sleep on soft sheets, and I eat off fine china, even—in fact, especially—when I'm by myself. I have elegance every day, and everyday elegance. As a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> result, I feel good about myself, and confident. (Barbara Barry qtd. in Ettlinger 28)

Well might we ask what makes "every moment in [a] life count[]." The interlinking of self/value/acquisition in this passage is astounding...and note that although the article suggests that *simple* luxuries yield *natural* elegance, the by-line itself admits that this is most definitely a production! The evidence lies in the number of props that Barry uses to cultivate her attitude. More urgently, we might ask what perceptions (and productions) Barry might cultivate with her senses "poised and receptive" in a Benjaminian sense? As it stands, Barry's confident self-appraisal is part of the phantasmagoria of contemporary media: she intensifies readers' anxieties about their own lifestyles, suggests that following her model will yield a beautiful life, creates her own authority, and generates the market for this type of magazine. The text proclaims this in its title: "a talent for sensible advice." That it presents conditions both imaginable and unattainable for the majority of its middle-class-homemaker target-audience is not in question. The decor dream is escapism; as one colleague put it, home decorating shows are soft porn: you get to watch, but you don't have to do anything.[3] The image of mint tea resonates with the dream we saw earlier: college boy makes good. Send your money to the Alumni Association and dream of altruism and higher education--or send your children, dreaming they'll be prosperous and generous. And so we see two *trails* here that may lead to very similar endpoints: first, that of tracing the dream,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

feeding the machine, being lulled into inactivity by hours wished away; and secondly, that of tracking trends and aspiring to an environment defined by acquisition and hierarchy.

Having witnessed live, on CNN, the Gulf War, 9-11, and the various military actions against what George Bush has termed the "Axis of Evil," twenty-first century audiences are increasingly immune to the beneficial effects of shock. Rather than awakening viewers, contemporary film and television have produced an ever-greater craving for technological marvels and special effects. We fail to recognize our own complicity, let alone do we perceive the point of power that Benjamin identifies for us, namely the position of the critic (WAAMR 228). Rather than acknowledging our orientation with the camera (228) by adopting a political stance, we recognize television as pure entertainment. It is all too easy to be lulled to sleep—by comedy and horror alike.[4] As Miriam Hansen writes, "the technical media restrict the play of involuntary memory or remembrance" and "what is...lost is the element of temporal disjunction in this experience, *the intrusion of a forgotten past that disrupts the fictitious progress of chronological time*" (45 my emphasis).

When the Revolution erupted, white was therefore a royal color

---

[3] I am indebted to my colleague Lisa LaFramboise for this excellent simile.

[4] And, indeed, Alexander Pope intuitively predicts this outcome in his mock-epic *The Dunciad* (1742), where Dulness reigns, supported by hack writers, who literally put England to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> (among others) and a mark of command. It was between 1789 and 1792 that this color increasingly became that of the counterrevolution. This role for white may have been started at a banquet at Versailles on October 1, 1789. It is said that while the king's bodyguards were feasting that day, they trampled on the tricolor cockades, which had become very popular since the events of July. In place of these they hung white ones that several ladies of the court distributed. This event caused a great stir among the populace and was one of the reasons that a crowd of Parisians marched to Versailles on October 5 and 6, besieging the chateau and eventually taking the king and queen back to Paris. From that point on, the counter-revolutionaries strove to replace every tricolor cockade they found with a white one. (Pastoureau 154)

When I think about my earlier plans for my dissertation, I am astounded at the way my focus prevented me from seeing. My intent then was to discuss, very formally, the political force of nineteenth-century journals, as viewed through the writing of a woman named Ellen Mary Clerke. (As history will demonstrate, intent often has little to do with effect.) I was drawn to Clerke for her remarkable agency in contributing more than fifty essays to major Victorian journals on topics

---

sleep. It should be noted that although Pope suggests a relation between widespread passive reading and political impotence, he does not theorize the connection between sense and perception.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as diverse as "The Future of Petroleum" and "Social Geography." At the same time, she did manage to publish a volume—a treatise entitled in the feminine vein, namely *Fable and Song in Italy*. I noted her comment therein that, through the shift from orality to print, information began to slip "to the mind, through the eye" (ix) —but I could not see that my interest was being drawn to *perception* (rather than *reception*) and agency. Intrigued by the thought that Clerke saw the ways that print signified—shifts in insight, memory, and culture—I could not see how this fascinated me, nor how it would bear a significant relation to my future work. My energies were elsewhere absorbed.

Teaching for the first time, I was amazed by the rows of bored or troubled eyes that waited upon whatever representations I might produce in the guise of knowledge, in the name of Introductory English. On good days, half-raised hands demanded that I define the terms I had grown so used to bandying about: *agency*, *politics*, *history*. Frustrated with explanations, I turned to the language of image: hand splayed upon my face, middle finger laid flat along my nose, eyes framed by fingers, I told my students each digit symbolized some element of my ideology. (In my defense, I recall Benjamin's "there is no better start for thinking than laughter" [AP 236]). I had them plaster their own hands upon their faces until they could imagine such a condition habitual—and I told them that although we seem to see past, even to determine, the values and practices we construct, they condition our perspective, determine our experience—and are far more easy to detect in others than in ourselves. From my own coursework, I knew myself (a) subject/ed,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

interrelated, complicit, the servant of every evil from the perpetuation of the Eurocentric literary canon to global capitalism. Unwilling quite to accept a postmodern surrender, I emulated those of my professors who argued for a critical space, a self-reflexive moment ... and this led me to teach texts such as Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* to first year students still bewildered by Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us." In observing my class, I discovered that those who learned to read the play of poetry could transfer the same skills to prose. I intuited that students needed to struggle with theory as with poetry: reading structure, tenets, and nuance, through rhythm, repetition, variation. Contiguity seemed critical.

I spent a lot of time in the copy room that year, and learned about the politics of a location where I stood somewhere between student and instructor, receptor and disseminator, working with both oral and literary modes of information. I tried out much of the advice I came by there. Stephen Slemon assured me that to be a good teacher, you need to fall flat on your face—frequently. My teaching became urgent, provisional, experimental in a tortured sort of way. This extended a kind of permeability to the boundaries of my research, as well, though certainly I did not see all that came to mind. When Dianne Chisholm, waiting for the copier, urged me to adopt Walter Benjamin as a theorist in my study of the nineteenth century, I read *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Benjamin's remark that "[t]he manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances" (222) left me unsettled, confused, provoked: it inflected everything, from CanCopy logs to the ratio between TA wages/expenses. Certainly it related to Clerke's "to the mind, through the eye." I failed, again, to see what was before me.

At the end of my first year, I was far more interested in pursuing the problems of agency within a radical theory of pedagogy than I was in Victorian women's access to print. Intrigued by the possibility that even first-year students could be politicized by a reading praxis based on poetics and defamiliarized text, I abandoned Clerke. Within a month, I sought counsel, shifted centuries, and assembled a committee. As I researched theory, Walter Benjamin's remarks returned to me. I audited the graduate course on his work, and discovered writings ranging from *One-Way Street* to *Theses on the Philosophy of History.* I wrestled with the problem of applying the theory of a writer best characterized as modernist, even romantic, to that which might be categorized with avant-garde postmodern poetry. What distinction lies between the terms? The avant-garde is generally thought to be political in the sense that it challenges accepted norms and values. It is defined relationally—by its position countering whatever the prevailing tradition might be. In this sense, certainly Webb and Howe are avant-garde, for they are both innovative and experimental in their challenges to personal, local, and global history. However, they do not share what some have called a postmodern malaise—the belief that action is inevitable but impossible to direct. Though their method (collage) highlights the fragmentary and aligns

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

concepts throughout history in a postmodern style, it is inherently political, and exudes several romantic qualities: they refer to the writer's position as seer or prophet; they call for the protection of nature; and they address spirit. Their positions, with Benjamin's, are modernist in the belief that agency exists—despite the insurmountable problems they encounter in attempting to wield it; this fits his romantic longings for social change, for the supernatural, for the rehabilitation of the critic's role. Perhaps the question most often avoided is what to do with Benjamin's messianism—yet, read dialectically, it is part of a coherent conceptual and perceptual model that accommodates theories drawn from contemporary psychology to photography, literary exegesis to religious texts, and physics to poetics.

Benjamin's project is to awaken the sleeping bourgeoisie to the fact that "history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (TPH 261). Indeed, Benjamin's methods of reading and writing in similes and images instruct us in the methodology of reading and writing the relations (ideas), between stars (phenomena) (C. Jacobs *Language* 5). As Susan Buck-Morss points out, "critical constellations of past and present are at the centre of materialist pedagogy. Short-circuiting the bourgeois historical literary apparatus, they pass down a tradition of *dis*continuity" that opposes the continuity of history as written by the oppressors (290). As Carol Jacobs explains, "the image can never be presented—except as a relationship between particular images" (51).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This, then, is my project: to propose that teaching poetry can constitute political action by shifting perceptions on a scale that could touch nearly every person on campus. The skills of reading resonance and play in repetition and variation are part of learning to read prosody, and could be activated by Benjamin's theory, whether in the poetry of Introductory English or in the representations students encounter (or better, seek out) in the remainder of their time. This is not a matter of training students to read in formulaic ways. My experience as a student (in coursework and in the summer research institute) and as a teacher (in almost six years in the classroom) convince me of Benjamin's argument. We need to consciously reframe not only the content but also the principles upon which our instruction is delivered.

I am struck by Nancy Chodorow's comment that "I have argued that the most important feature of early infantile development is that this development occurs in *relation* to another person or persons" (77 my emphasis). Can we read her account of the "good-enough mother"—one who facilitates her child's development in coping with anxieties and externals—as an allegory for the good-enough teacher? Both parent and instructor act as witnesses, evaluating and reinforcing: both offer methodological analysis and critique; both present and represent testimony (in the form of multiple repetitions of personal, social, and historical narrative). Both attend to form—manners, socialization, production—acknowledging that, to some degree, we can only move within a system. Both

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

wrap what cannot yet be apprehended in layers of language. Both (if they are wise) permit the learner to witness that failure and success are a cycle, a circle, a part of experience that needs to be processed.

> Geist ("spirit") goes out
> mostly at one stroke blue
> Invisible he will not know
> the hand and hand's field
> Those annotations so often
> cryptic as if the Middle Ages
> breathed and moved again
> From the Husserl-Archives
> but not as Body after all
> (Howe *PA* 88)

As I write this, I am in my second year of teaching at a small college in Muenster, Saskatchewan. I have twenty-three students in introductory English, and seven in my Canadian Literature course. Ten more have indicated that they will register for the evening class on "Culture" that I will teach in addition next term. The college boasts a reputation with writers across Canada, and its advertising posters proudly proclaim Daphne Marlatt's comment that it has been "declared a nationally-known center for writing." I try to teach my students to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

read on a variety of registers at one time. This year I started the first class of English 110 with Swift's PREM as the object of the SPAM haiku I had them write before reading Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* and discussing SPAM webmail, the rise of print culture, the anthology form as a collection of selected tidbits, and the significance of "processing." The preparation for my upper level class is more demanding. Most are students whom I taught last year, although one has joined us after three years of religious studies at a large university. Four of the seven are enrolled in the college's Writing Diploma program. One, aiming at a masters in neuropsychology, takes the rest of her courses at the University of Saskatchewan but returns to Muenster for Canadian Literature.

So far the single most useful model I've come up with has arisen from my dissertation: I tell them that historical events are like the Invisible Man: we can assume he's there, because whatever we throw over him takes on a form. If we toss a large rug at him, this lends a much different perception than if we bandage him in gauze, cover him in papier maché, or (following avant-garde poet Steve McCaffery's performance) drench him in milk and roll him in Alpha-Bits. What is important is that the cover has texture, and that itself becomes part of our reading, and, hence, our perceptions and reactions. The real trick, whichever mode of perception we choose, is to foresee the "moment of danger" before it happens by looking at representations of the past and present.

My politics in teaching at St. Peter's range from a commitment to rural communities and local economies to the exploration of spirituality. The smaller

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

class sizes allow me to experiment with methods of instruction, to design courses whose texts range across histories and media, and to encourage students to learn to witness (and seize) political moments before they encounter larger institutions of learning.

> *It is a profound truth that a well-ordered house is a dangerous thing.*
>
> *Gershom Scholem*

These narratives are not "truth." I attempt to offer some of the orderly discussion required by the dissertation form, yet simultaneously to problematize the very notions of perception, history, narrative, autobiography…to illustrate "a moment of…danger" for both reader and author, examiner and supplicant. In writing this text I have wrestled with whether knowledge may mean agency, if teaching can ever be more than a form of complicity. I cling with Benjamin to the hope that it can be, that there may be a "strait gait" (TPH 264), for, as he writes:

> *To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger…Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.* (TPH 255)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Works Cited

Abbot, Donald N., ed. *The World is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff.* Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1981.

Adams, Stephen J. *Poetic Designs: An Introduction to Meters, Verse Forms, and Figures of Speech.* Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997.

Adamson, Joseph. "Deconstruction." *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms.* Gen. Ed. Irena R. Makaryk. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. 25-31.

Ainslie, Peter. "Chaos, Psychology, and Spirituality." *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences.* Eds. Robin Robertson and Allan Combs. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 1995. 309-17.

Allen, George. "The 'Conning' of History." *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy.* Ed. George R. Lucas, Jr. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. 313-22.

Alter, Robert. *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Arendt, Hannah. "Introduction." *Illuminations.* Walter Benjamin. 1-51.

Back, Rachel Tzvia. *Led By Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Barbour, Douglas. "Late Work at the Kitchen Table: Phyllis Webb's *Water and Light.*" *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 103-17.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Benjamin, Andrew. "Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present." Benjamin and Osborne 216-250.

Benjamin, Andrew, and Peter Osborne, eds. *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience.* New York: Routledge, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project.* Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.* Ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.

---. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings.* Ed. & intro Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1978.

---. *Selected Writings: Volume 1: 1913-1926.* Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996.

Bernstein, Charles. "On Poetry, Language, and Teaching: A Conversation with Charles Bernstein." *Boundary 2* 23.3 (1996): 45-71.

Blevins, Richard L. "From the Muddle Out: Chaos Theory and Some Poems by Joel Oppenheimer." *Talisman* 20 (Winter 1999-2000): 60-68.

Bloom, Harold. "Freud: Frontier Concepts, Jewishness, and Interpretation." Caruth *Trauma* 113-127.

Bohm, D., and B.J. Hiley. *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory.* London: Routledge, 1993.

Brault, Pascale-Anne, and Michael Naas. "Sarah Kofman." Derrida 165-67.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Breithaupt, Fritz. "History as the Delayed Disintegration of Phenomena." Richter 191-203.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991.

Bullock, Marcus. "Bad Company: On the Theory of Literary Modernity and Melancholy in Walter Benjamin and Julia Kristeva." *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 22.3 (Fall 1995): 57-79.

---. "In a Blauer Reiter Frame: Walter Benjamin's Intentions of the Eye and Derrida's *Specters of Marx.*" *Monatshefte* 93.2 (2001): 177-95.

Butling, Pauline. "Phyllis Webb as a Post-Duncan Poet." *Sagetrieb* 18.1 (Spring 1999) 57-77).

---. "Preface: 'I Devise. You Devise. We Devise." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 14-17.

---. *Seeing in the Dark: The Poetry of Phyllis Webb.* Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1997.

Butterick, George F. "The Mysterious Vision of Susan Howe." *North Dakota Quarterly* 55.4 (Fall 1987): 312-21.

Cameron, Zanne. "Abundance of Good Attitude." ***new*** *trail* (Summer 2001): 50.

Carr, Brenda. "Genre Theory and the Impass of Lyric?: Reframing the Questions in Phyllis Webb's Lyric Sequences." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 67-79.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

---, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Caygill, Howard. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience.* London: Routledge, 1998.

Chodorow, Nancy J. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Clerke, E.M. *Fable and Song in Italy.* London: Grant Richards, 1899.

Cohen, Leonard. "The Window." *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs.* New York: Vintage Books, 1994. 299.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions.* Volume II. Eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. No. 7 of The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Bollingen Series LXXV. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Dawson, Carrie. "Calling People Names: Reading Imposture, Confession, and Testimony in and after Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient.*" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 25.2 (2000): 50-73.

Derrida, Jacques. "Max Loreau." *The Work of Mourning.* Eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 91-103.

---. "Sarah Kofman." 165-188.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Duff, Wilson. *Images Stone B.C.: Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture*. Victoria, B.C.: Hancock House, 1975.

Dworkin, Craig Douglas. "'Waging Political Babble': Susan Howe's Visual Prosody and the Politics of Noise." *Word and Image* 12.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1996): 389-405.

Easthope, Antony. *Poetry as Discourse.* New York: Methuen, 1983.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. London: Picador, 1984.

Emery, Stewart. *Actualizations.* New York: Doubleday, 1977.

Ettlinger, Catherine (writer), Ray Kachatorian (photographer), and Beverly McGuire Schnur (producer). "tea with BARBARA BARRY: a talent for sensible advice." *Victoria* (July 2001): 28.

Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." Caruth, *Trauma* 13-60.

Foster, Edward. "Susan Howe." *Postmodern Poetry: The Talisman Interviews*. Hoboken, N.J.: Talisman House, 1994. 48-68.

"Four-Part Harmony: Robert Creeley and Susan Howe Talk It Out." *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 124 (April 1994): 21-22.

Frey, Hans-Jost. "On Presentation in Benjamin." *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*. Ed. David S. Ferris. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Gannaway, Gloria. *Transforming Mind: A Critical Cognitive Activity.* Ed. Donaldo Macedo. Series in Language and Ideology. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1994.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Gashé, Rodolphe. "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language." *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin.* Ed. Rainer Nägele. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988. 83-104.

Gilloch, Graeme. *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City.* Torquay: Polity Press, 1996.

Glickman, Susan. "'Proceeding before the amorous invisible': Phyllis Webb and the Ghazal." *Canadian Literature* 115 (Winter 1987): 48-59.

Gunnars, Kristjana. *The Rose Garden: Reading Marcel Proust.* Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1996.

Handleman, Susan A. *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas.* Jewish Literature and Culture Series Ed. Alvin Rosenfeld. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street." Richter 41-73.

Hardcastle, Valerie Gray. "The Puzzle of Attention: The Importance of Metaphors." *Philosophical Psychology* 11.3 (Sept. 98): 331-54 <http://mechanism.ucsd.edu/~pp/pp/11_3.html>.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Hawkins, Harriet. *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture, and Chaos Theory.* New York: Prentice Hall, 1995.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Hinton, Laura. "Centering Margins: The Language Poets Reconsidered (as Women)." *Contemporary Literature* 41.1 (Spring 2000): 180-88.

Holbrook, Susan. "Mauve Arrows and the Erotics of Translation." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 61 (Spring 97): 232-41.

Howard, W. Scott. "'The Paper Being Still Et with Ink…': Animality and the Poetics of the Gift, or Howe's Hau in Susan Howe's *a bibliography of the king's book: Or, eikon basilike*." *Imprimatur* 1.2-3 (Spring 1996): 126-41.

Howe, Susan. *Bed Hangings*. Pictures by Susan Bee. New York: Granary Books, 2001.

---. *Defenestration of Prague*. New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1983.

---. "Encloser." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof, 1990. 175-96.

---. *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979*. New York: New Directions, 1996.

---. "Incloser." *The Birthmark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993. 43-86.

---. *The Midnight*. New York: New Directions, 2003.

---. *My Emily Dickinson*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985.

---. *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. 1989. New York: New Directions, 1993.

---. *Pierce-Arrow*. New York: New Directions, 1999.

---. "Renunciation is a P[ei]rsing Virtue." *Profession* (1998): 51-61.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Hulcoop, John. "Webb's Water and Light." *Canadian Literature* 109 (Summer 1986): 151-59.

Jacobs, Carol. *In The Language of Walter Benjamin.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Jacobs, Karen. "Spectacles of Violence, Stages of Art: Walter Benjamin and Virginia Woolf's Dialectic." *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 203-42.

Kamboureli, Smaro. "'Seeking Shape. Seeking Meaning': An Interview with Phyllis Webb." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 21-41.

Keller, Lynn. "An Interview with Susan Howe." *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (Spring 1995): 1-34.

Kerby, Anthony. "Hermeneutics." *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Gen. Ed. Irena R. Makaryk. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. 90-94.

Klancher, Jon P. *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.

Knight, Lorna. "Oh for the Carp of a Critic: Research in the Phyllis Webb Papers." *West Coast Line* Eight 26.2 (Fall 1992): 120-27.

Kraniauskas, John. "Beware Mexican Ruins! 'One Way Street' and the Colonial Unconscious." Benjamin and Osborne 139-54.

Kroetsch, Robert. *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New.* Studies in Canadian Literature 4. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Soundings in Critical Theory.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

---. *Writing History, Writing Trauma. Parallax: Re-Visions of Culture and Society.* Series eds. Stephen G. Nichols, Gerald Prince, and Wendy Steiner. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Lazer, Hank. *Opposing Poetries.* Volumes One and Two. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996.

Lemay, Shawna. "A Merciful Act of Corroboration." Unpublished poem, 2002. 1-2.

Lewis, Kent. "Susan Howe's Poetics of the Bibliography." *West Coast Line* Ten 27.1 (Spring 1993): 118-27.

Leys, Ruth. "Freud and Trauma." *Trauma: A Genealogy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 18-40.

Lilla, Mark. *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics.* New York: NYREV, 2001.

Lilburn, Tim. *Living In The World As If It Were Home: Essays.* Dunvegan, Ontario: Cormorant Books, 1999.

---. " Philosophical Apokatastasis: On Writing and Return." *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy.* Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2002. 95-119.

Ma, Ming-Qian. "Poetry as History Revised: Susan Howe's 'Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk.'" *American Literary History* 6.4 (Winter 1994): 716-37.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

---. "Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-method in Susan Howe." *Contemporary Literature* 36.3 (Fall 1995): 466-489.

Mah, Bill. "City's success leaves some behind." *Edmonton Journal* (February 5, 2002): B1.

Marcus, Laura, and Lynda Nead, eds. *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin.* London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998.

Marsh, Nicky. "'Out of my texts I am not what I play': Politics and self in the poetry of Susan Howe." *College Literature* 24.3 (Oct. 1997): 1-14. August 26, 1999. <wysiwyg://bodyframe.71/http://ehostvgw5. epnet.com/fulltext.asp>.

Matt, Daniel C. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism.* San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995.

McCole, John. *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Perception.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

McCorkle, James. "Prophecy and the Figure of the Reader in Susan Howe's *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time.*" *Postmodern Culture* 9.3 (May 1999). June 7, 2003 <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/ toc/pmc9.3.html>.

McRobbie, Angela. "The Passagenwerk and the Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies." *Cultural Studies* 6.1 (January 1992): 147-69.

Michel, Andreas. "Media Theory: On the Legacy of the Avant-Gardes in Carl Einstein and Walter Benjamin." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 96.4 (Fall 1997): 729-40.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Munton, Ann. "Excerpt from and Interview with Phyllis Webb, January 1983, Salt Spring Island." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 81-85.

Naylor, Paul. "Writing History Poetically: Walter Benjamin and Susan Howe." *Genre* 28.3 (Fall 1995): 323-338.

Nichols, Miriam. "Subjects of Experience: Post-cognitive Subjectivity in the Work of bp Nichol and Daphne Marlatt." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 25.2 (2000): 108-130.

---. "Tensing the Difference: Daphne Marlatt, Karen MacCormack, and Susan Howe." *Tessera* 27 (Winter 1999): 39-54.

NIV Women's Devotional Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

Ovenden, Norm. "Edmonton named best G-7 global business center." *Edmonton Journal* (January 30, 2002): B1.

Pailin, David A. "Narrative, Story, and the Interpretation of Metaphysics." *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy.* Ed. George R. Lucas, Jr. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. 268-81.

Pastoureau, Michel. *Blue: The History of a Color.* Trans. Markus I. Cruse. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Perelman, Bob. *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Perloff, Marjorie. "After Language Poetry: Innovation and its Theoretical Discontents." January 15, 2000. <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/after_langpo.html>.

---. *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*. New York: G. Braziller, 1977.

---. *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

---. "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject." *Critical Inquiry* 25.3 (Spring 1999): 405-34.

---. *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Pope, Alexander. *The New Dunciad, as it was found in the year 1741. With the illustrations of Scriblerus, and notes variorum*. London: T. Cooper, 1742.

Potvin, Liza. "Phyllis Webb: The Voice that Breaks." *Canadian Poetry* 32 (Spring/Summer 1993): 37-63.

Rasula, Jed. *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects 1940-1990*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996.

Reinfeld, Linda. *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

Relke, Diana M.A. "Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology: Digging in Critical Graveyards and Phyllis Webb's Gardens." *Canadian Poetry* 42 (1988 Spring/Summer): 66-99.

Richter, Gerhard. *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Ridington, Robin. "Trails of Meaning." Abbott 239-47.

Rugg, Linda Haverty. *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Scheier, Libby. "Kicking the Dogma Under the Table: Some Thoughts on Phyllis Webb." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 122-24.

Schoemperlen, Diane. *Our Lady of the Lost and Found.* Toronto: Harper Collins, 2001.

Selinger, Eric Murphy. "My Susan Howe." *Poetry in Review* 20.1-2 (1995): 1-15. January 25, 2003. <http://80- web12.epnet.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/citation.asp?tb=1&_ug=dbs+0>.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet. The Norton Introduction to Literature.* Eighth Edition. Eds. Jerome Beaty, Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays. New York: Norton, 2002. 1670-1769.

Sinclair, Sue. Letter to the author. 24 November 2002.

---. Poetry reading. St. Peter's College, Muenster, Saskatchewan. 18 November 2002.

Spira-Savett, Jonathan. "Rosh Hashanah: Creating the world, Repairing the world." December 14, 2003. <http://www.socialaction.com/08-2002/creating_the_world.phtml>.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "From Haverstock Hill Flat to U.S. Classroom, What's Left of Theory?" *What's Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory.* Eds. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas. New York: Routledge, 2000. 1-39.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Sujir, Leila. "Addressing a Presence: An Interview with Phyllis Webb." *Prairie Fire* 9.1 (1988 Spring): 30-43.

Sullivan, Rosemary. Rev. of *Nothing But Brush Strokes*. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 67.1 (Winter 1997): 328-330.

Warwaruk, Jody. "Forecast sends chill through homeless." *Edmonton Journal* (January 24, 2002): B1.

Watten, Barrett. *Total Syntax*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

Webb, Phyllis. *Hanging Fire*. Toronto: Coach House, 1990.

---. *Naked Poems*. Vancouver:Periwinkle Press, 1965.

---. *Nothing But Brushstrokes: Selected Prose*. Gen. ed. Smaro Kamboureli. The Writer as Critic: V. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1995.

---. "Script for Readings from 'The Kropotkin Poems' for *Anthology*. Recorded 25 June 1970. Broadcast 1 August 1970." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (Winter 1991-92): 101-02.

---. *Talking*. Hatley, Quebec: Quadrant, 1982.

---. *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*. Toronto: Coach House, 1984.

---. *Wilson's Bowl*. Toronto: Coach House, 1980.

Weigel, Sigrid. *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. Trans. Gustav Thibon. 1952. London: Routledge, 1997.

Williams, Megan. "Howe not to erase(her): A Poetics of Posterity in Susan

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Howe's Melville's Marginalia." *Contemporary Literature* 38.1 (Spring 1997): 106-33. June 7, 2003. <www.ipl.org/div/litcrit/bin/litcrit.out.pl?ti=mel-878>.

Williamson, Janice. "'*You may read my signs but I cross my path and show you nothing on your way*': The Feminine Suicide Narratives of Phyllis Webb." *West Coast Line* Six 25.3 (1991-92 Winter): 155-74.

Witte, Bernd. *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*. Trans. James Rolleston. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Wohlfarth, Irving. "No-man's-land: On Walter Benjamin's 'Destructive Character.'" Benjamin and Osborne. 155-182.

---. "On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin." *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin.* London: Routledge, 1989. 157-215.

---. "The Measure of the Possible, The Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin's Actuality Today." *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin.* Eds. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998. 13-39.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.