

(Un)concealing the Hedgehog

Modernist and Postmodernist American Poetry
and Contemporary Critical Theories

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Wydawnictwa Naukowego
Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

1962–2012

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY IN POZNAŃ
SERIA FILOLOGIA ANGIELSKA NR 37

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POZNAŃ 2012

ABSTRACT: Ambroży Paulina, *(Un)concealing the Hedgehog. Modernist and Postmodernist American Poetry and Contemporary Critical Theories*. [O (nie)skrytości jeża: Modernistyczna i postmodernistyczna poezja amerykańska a współczesne teorie krytyczne]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012. Pp. 388. ISBN 978-83-232-2483-9. ISSN 0554-8144. Text in English with a summary in Polish.

The book is an attempt to explore the affinities between contemporary critical theories and modernist and postmodernist American poetry. The analysis focuses on poststructuralist theories, notorious for their tendency to destabilize generic boundaries between literary, philosophical and critical discourses. The main argument and the structure of the book derive from Jacques Derrida's essay "Che cos'è la poesia" [What is poetry?] in which the philosopher postulates the impossibility of defining poetry by comparing a poem to a hedgehog – prickly, solitary, untamed, fragile and protective, rolling itself up into a ball at the first sign of danger or when in the hands of the reader-intruder. The metaphor captures thus the fragility of the relationship between poetry and the world. The book examines this relationship as exemplified by the erinaceous poetics of high modernists (William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein) and their postmodernist followers (Bruce Andrews, Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Bernstein, A.R. Ammons, Susan Howe, Ellen Hinsey) In the study I employ also other poststructuralist theories, such as the notion of the text and the pleasure of the text formulated by Roland Barthes, the theories of metaphor as seen by Paul Ricoeur or Paul de Man, and gender-sensitive theories of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

KEY WORDS: Modernist American poetry, postmodernist American poetry, poetry and metaphor, deconstruction, linguistic experiment, contemporary critical theories, the poem-as-hedgehog, specters of literature, quasi-transcendentalism, metaphysics, language in crisis, erinaceous poetics, poe(t)heories, feminine écriture, erotics of reading and writing, text of pleasure

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Publikacja dofinansowana przez
Rektora Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu
oraz Wydział Anglistyki UAM

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Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012

Cover design/Projekt okładki: Agnieszka Frydrychewicz
The photograph on the cover courtesy of Jerzy Kamionowski
Typsetting and formatting/Skład i formatowanie: Pracownia Wydawnicza WA UAM

ISBN 978-83-232-2483-9

ISSN 0554-8144

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Acknowledgments

In the course of my work on the book I received the support and help of many people, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them.

The idea for this book originates from my days as an undergraduate student at the School of English of Adam Mickiewicz University, and I want to express my gratitude to Professor Marek Wilczyński, who introduced me both to the best of modernist poetry and to Derrida's essay "Che cos'è la *poesia*?" to which I owe the conceptual framework and title of my book. Professor Wilczyński's seminars and lectures were a genuine adventure, while his theoretical fascinations proved very contagious; I am greatly indebted to him for most of my research discoveries. I also want to thank him for his faith in this project at a stage when it was nothing more than a vague idea. Also, the book would not have been written without the support of the late Professor Andrzej Kopcewicz, my first academic mentor, who was always ready to offer his time, kindness and friendly advice. My thanks go also to Professor Agnieszka Salska, whose books, presentations and essays about poetry remain an endless source of inspiration and whose tenderness in approaching a poem is an unattainable ideal. I would also like to thank Professor Cristanne Miller, Professor Heinz Ickstadt, and Professor David Cottington, whose experience, interest and advice helped me to crystallize my ideas. I am also infinitely grateful to my first and most patient readers, Krzysztof Majer and Jerzy Kamionowski; without their help, painstaking proofreading and unwavering support, the book would not have been finished.

My friends, colleagues and students from the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University also contributed to this project in many ways and my personal debts to them are too numerous to list. However, I would like to mention Paweł Stachura, whose friendship, expertise in literary theory, and intellectual support was of great help to me; Agnieszka Rzepa, Kasia Kuczma, Krysia Potoczny, Dagmara Drewniak and Janusz Semrau from the Department of American Literature, who were patient with me and often endured the side effects of my stress and darker mo-

ments; my friends Magda Marczuk, Magda Zapędowska, Agnieszka Molska, Karolina Rataj, Ula Kizelbach, Agnieszka Lijewska, Dominika Ruszkowska, Marcin Turski, Paweł Scheffler, Ryszard Bartnik, and Magda Piotrowicz, who offered moral support when I needed it most.

I am also indebted to certain institutions and to those who make them. The first of the former is naturally the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University, with Professor Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kołaczyk as its inspiring *Spiritus Movens*; Professor Jacek Fisiak, who kept asking me about the progress of the project; Professor Jacek Fabiszak, who was always generous with his time and sound advice as the Vice-Director of the School of English; the Staff of the Dean's Office, who were helpful and supportive throughout (special thanks go to Paulina Szeszuła, for her kindness and her care); and the Publishing Center at the Faculty of English, especially Michał Jankowski, Agnieszka Frydrychewicz and Ewa Kowalkowska, who kindly put up with my endless revisions and questions. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the JFK Institute at the Free University in Berlin, where I did research on the project in 2008 – the JFK Library Staff could not have been kinder or more helpful, while the general atmosphere was very conducive to fruitful work.

Special thanks go also to Jurek Kamionowski, for finding the right and the most poetic turn of the road for the cover photo, and for allowing me to peruse a photograph from his private collection.

Finally, I want to thank my Family, my loved ones, and closest friends – my Mom, Agnieszka, Karolina, Piotr, Łukasz, and Kajko, Krzysztof, Jurek, Magda, Agnieszka, Monika, Antek, Zofia, Witold, and Ninka – for their unconditional love, relentless encouragement, and infinite patience.

Two subchapters of the book (2.2 and 4.3) are revised versions of my published articles: “Sluggish Movements and Solid Illusions of the Modern Road Poem: William Carlos Williams’ “Spring and All” and Rosmarie Waldrop’s “The Road is Everywhere or Stop This Body”, from a collection *Metamorphoses of Travel Literature; Through Literary Traditions, Centuries, Genres and Theories*, edited by Grzegorz Moroz. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 39-48; and “Your Thorns Are the Best Part of You: The Female Poet and the Question of Non-conformity in the Poetry of Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensa* 44: 509-530. I would like to thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing and *Studia Anglica Posnaniensa*, for the permission to use them in the book.

Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Works

Primary Sources

A.R. Ammons

ACP *Collected poems*
ASP *Selected poems*
PW “A poem is a walk”

Bruce Andrews

LS *Love songs*
CW “Code words”
TC “Text and context”

Charles Bernstein

AA “Artifice of absorption”
AP *A poetics*
AWH *All the whiskey in heaven: Selected Poems*
CD *Contents dream: Essays 1975-1984*
CI *Controlling interests*
CL *Close listening*
OM “Objects of meaning”

Ellen Hinsey

CM *Cities of memory*
WFT *The white fire of time*

Susan Howe

- B *The birth-mark: Unsettling the wilderness in American literary history.*
ET *Europe of trusts*
FS *Frame structures: Early poems 1974-1979*
MED *My Emily Dickinson*
NM *Non-conformist memorial*
Sing *Singularities*

Mina Loy

- LLB *The lost lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*

Marianne Moore

- BMM *Becoming Marianne Moore*
MCP *The complete poems of Marianne Moore*
MMCP *The collected prose of Marianne Moore*
MML *The selected letters of Marianne Moore*
MMR *The Marianne Moore reader*

Gertrude Stein

- BTV *Be time vine and other pieces (1913-1927)*
FIA *Four in America*
GP *Geography and plays*
LB "Lifting belly"
LIA *Lectures in America*
MOA *The making of Americans*
PP "Patriarchal poetry"
TB *Tender buttons*

Wallace Stevens

- WSCP *Collected poems of Wallace Stevens*
WSL *Letters of Wallace Stevens*
OP *Opus posthumous*
SouvP *Souvenirs and Prophecies*

Rosmarie Waldrop

- AE "Alarms and excursions"
Dis *Dissonance*
RW *The road is everywhere or stop this body*

William Carlos Williams

- A *The autobiography of William Carlos Williams*
EK *The embodiment of knowledge*
GAN *The great American novel*
I *Imaginations*
WCWSL *The selected letters of William Carlos Williams*
WCP I *The collected poems of William Carlos Williams. Volume 1.*
WCP II *The collected poems of William Carlos Williams. Volume 2.*
WSE *Selected essays of William Carlos Williams*

Walt Whitman

- SoM *Song of myself*

Theoretical sources

Roland Barthes

- DA "Death of the author"
LD *A lover's discourse: fragments*
PT *The pleasure of the text*
RB *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*
S/Z *S/Z*

Hélène Cixous

- DC "Decapitation or castration?"
LM "The laugh of the Medusa"
TS *Three steps on the ladder of writing*
V "Voice I..."

Paul De Man

- ALR *Allegories of reading*
 EM “Epistemology of metaphor”

Jacques Derrida

- AL *Jacques Derrida: Acts of literature*
 AP *Aporias: Dying-awaiting (one another at) “the limits of truth”*
 AR *Jacques Derrida: Acts of religion*
 AT “Of an apocalyptic tone recently adopted in philosophy”
 AVE *Apprendre à vivre enfin*
 BB *A Derrida reader: Between the blinds*
 C *Circumfession: Fifty-nine periods and periphrases*
 CCP “Che cosa è la poesia”
 CIN *Cinders*
 ES “Ellipsis of the Sun”
 GD *The gift of death*
 GG *Geneses, genealogies, genres & genius: The secrets of the archive*
 HAS “How to avoid speaking: denials”
 LI *Limited Inc.*
 LOBL “Living on/Border lines”
 MP *Margins of philosophy*
 OG *Of grammatology*
 OM “The originary metaphor”
 ON *On the name*
 P *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*
 PC *The Post card: From Socrates to Freud and beyond*
 PM “Plus de metaphor”
 Points *Points ... Interviews, 1974-94*
 Pos *Positions*
 RM “The retrait of metaphor”
 Silk “A silkworm of one’s own”
 SM *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*
 SP *Signsponge*
 SPC “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan”

| | |
|----|---|
| SQ | <i>Sovereignties in question: The poetics of Paul Celan</i> |
| TP | <i>The truth in painting</i> |
| WD | <i>Writing and difference</i> |
| WM | “White mythology” |
| WP | <i>The Derrida reader: Writing performances</i> |

Martin Heidegger

| | |
|------|--|
| BT | <i>Being and time</i> |
| DT | <i>Discourse on thinking</i> |
| EB | <i>Existence and being</i> |
| EHD | <i>Erläuterung zur Hölderlins Dichtung</i> |
| ITM | <i>An introduction to metaphysics</i> |
| OWA | “The origin of the work of art” |
| OWL | <i>On the way to language</i> |
| PLT | <i>Poetry, language, thought</i> |
| PMD | “... Poetically man dwells. . .” |
| WAPF | “What are poets for?” |
| WCT | <i>What is called thinking?</i> |

Paul Ricoeur

| | |
|-----|-----------------------------|
| MEP | “Metaphorical process” |
| ROM | <i>The rule of metaphor</i> |

Introduction

The poetic or ecstatic is that *in every dis-course* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of un-knowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of the dice.

(Derrida WD 261)

Poetry is the smallest
trickle trinket
bauble burst
the lightest f
windseed leaf tip r
snowdown e
poetry is the breaks e
the least loop d
from o
the general curvature m
into delight
poetry
is the slightest f
hue, hint, hurt r
its dance too light e
not to be the wind's: e
yet nothing d
becomes itself o
without the overspill m
of this small abundance

(Ammons ASP 81)

As beautifully articulated by Ammons's oxymoron "the overspill of this small abundance", reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's succinct phrase "sumptuous destitution" (Dickinson 1961: 594), the experience of a poem entails a continuous oscillation between supersignification and understatement. The substance of a poetic text, which, in the poet's apt words, is "the slightest hue, hint, hurt", is surcharged with meaning, paradoxically through its frequently cryptic and perforated nature – full of "bauble bursts", "loops", gaps, detours, enigmas, repressions and omissions. The word "freedom", emerging and reasserting itself on the vertical margin of the poem, signals the impossible task of taming and grasping the "lightest" and "slightest" form of the poem. The right-hand justification of the margin is another hint that freedom is an implicit element of the composition and that even when we strive to trace the poem's contour and delimit its meaning, we are bound to acknowledge its ultimate independence. As William Carlos Williams observes, a poem should be read as "an illegible script" whose task nevertheless is to "increase our knowledge of the world" (EK 75).

This paradox of illegibility which is informative and telling brings us to the hedgehog metaphor, which has inspired the title, the structure and the critical thrust of my book, and which captures the fragility of the relationship between poetry and knowledge. The metaphor originates from Derrida's famous essay "Che cos'è la poesia?", in which the philosopher compares a poem to a hedgehog – prickly, solitary, untamed, fragile and protective, rolling itself up into a ball at the first sign of danger or when in the hands of an intruder. Derrida locates his hedgehog on a highway, which exposes it to the multiple perils of the world, including our attempts to tame it in the repeated efforts of reading and interpretation. Simultaneously impermeable and dependent for its existence on its being "rescued", absorbed and familiarized, the hedgehog beautifully reveals the paradoxes and problems of the interpretational process involving modernist and postmodernist poetic practice. For Derrida, interpretation means attempting the impossible, a perilous traversing of the road, an ever "denied translation" (Derrida CCP 291), with the hedgehog always escaping, always in retreat or defensively rolled up, and hardly visible before you hit and destroy it. "Translate me, watch, keep me yet awhile, get going, save yourself, let's get off the autoroute" (CCP 295), pleads Derrida's hedgehog, suggesting that we should nevertheless make an effort to watch for it, and try to take it off the road and into our heart. Despite the protective needles which serve to dis-

courage us from breaking through its defenses, despite its vulnerability, and its disappearance in the very question “What is poetry?”, the hedgehog bears and sustains the promise of mystery and “teaches us the heart” (Derrida CCP 299). “I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart, *that which*, finally, the word *heart* seems to mean and which, in my language, I cannot easily discern from the word itself”, Derrida argues, exploring the multiple semantic resonances of the phrase “learn it by heart”, which names both interiority and exteriority of poetic knowing: “the independent spontaneity, the freedom to affect oneself actively by reproducing the beloved trace” (CCP 295). For Derrida, this erinaceous nature of poetry enables it to exist beyond rigid oppositions, closed cultural contexts, critical frames and the thick web of logocentric categorizations. Questioning the separateness of such categories as reason and rhetoric, argument and heightened aesthetic sensibility, the hedgehog “disable[s] memory, disarm[s] culture, know[s] how to forget knowledge and set fire to the library of poetics” (Derrida CCP 299).

Through the highway metaphor Derrida signals several things. The first one is the epistemological orientation of poetry, the hedgehog’s remaining always “close to the ground” and the essence of the human experience. The hedgehog is directed both outward and inward, simultaneously suggesting the fragility of its position as well as its estrangement from and ill-adaptedness to the depoeticized contemporary world. Derrida’s metaphorical highway undoubtedly also embraces the established and habitual ways of thinking and writing about poetry which “throw the hedgehog onto the road” (CCP 289), only to flatten, frame and run it over in a desire to fix its meaning in “an absolute unique form” (CCP 293), to tame its otherness and unveil all its guarded secrets. Through its relation to the heart and its consequent power to affect the reader and to shape his cognitive and emotive rapport with the world and language, the hedgehog also denotes the poem as an act of communication and translation. The reader of a poem, in Derrida’s view, can be both a guardian and an intruder of its secrets; a comfortable resident in its often uncomfortable space, at ease with its gaps, stumbling blocks and murky grounds, and a relentless searcher after and an uncoverer of truth, desiring its complete unconcealedness, struggling with the poem’s difficult, broken or failed communications.

The metaphor can also be extended to poetry’s marginalization and alienation in the social world, its being always “on the edge” and having “a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference” (Derrida AL 48, emphasis

original), somewhat paradoxically coupled with a yearning for a shared space of communication. In “Soonest Mended”, John Ashbery (2002: 87) thus describes the difficult condition of poetry writing: “Barely tolerated, living on / the margin / In our technological society, we are always having / to be rescued/ On the brink of destruction, like heroines in *Orlando Furioso* / Before it was time to start all over again.” Here, the Derridian hedgehog-poem occupies the precarious position of language “on the brink of destruction”, a marginalized form which nevertheless is trying to work its way to the center of our attention through “a telling silence”, strategic miscommunications, “trinkets” of sense or withdrawals of meaning.

Thus, the image of the hedgehog on the autoroute discloses the difficult space of interpretation: to perform reading, to come closer to the poem-hedgehog, is to face the outer limits of the hermeneutical enterprise which inevitably involves crossing over the space of error, radical undecidability, and failure. For Derrida, as Vincent B. Leitch observes (1983: 236), interpretation is always transgressive and “provides continuing access to the edge”. Furthermore, in the particular case of poetry, interpretation is less promising to the kind of reader whom the French philosopher describes as “the fearful reader, the reader in a hurry to be determined, decided upon deciding” (Derrida PC 4). To answer “the call” of the hedgehog on the autoroute, we need to abandon our desire to *break* through the hedgehog’s multiple defenses in search for “a transcendental pass, a password to open all doors, decipher all texts and keep their chains under surveillance” (Derrida TP 12). Instead, we are invited to embrace and cherish the poem’s unpredictability, its otherness, and its sometimes unreadable “encryptions”.

The intention of this book is to examine the full implications of the hedgehog metaphor, which, as I shall argue, entails the major tensions and interpretive powers hidden within the enigmatic script of the modernist and postmodernist poetic practice: the increasingly strained and critical relationship between art and the world, and the equally problematic relationship between poetry and its readers. Likened to a hedgehog – its ambiguity stemming from the Grimms’ tale “The Hare and the Hedgehog” in which the latter outwits and consequently “outruns” the former by being “always already there”¹ – poetry seems the best site for a Derridian interplay of

¹ In the original tale, titled “The Hare and the Hedgehog”, the hedgehog wins a bet with an arrogant hare bragging about its supreme running skills. The hedgehog and his

presence and absence, inscriptions and encryption, immediacy and displacement, of truth and its deconstructive shadowy trickster-wife, trace. Like Grimms' clever hedgehog, the poem destroys any certainty and frustrates our hermeneutical efforts, confronting us with a continuous flight of its sense. The situation exemplified by the tale and Derrida's re-reading thereof renders poetry as a perfect ground in which the operations of the trace come to the fore as generating being and presence, and in which the activity of interpretation affirms its own, often splendid, catastrophe.

Derrida's definition of the poem as a hedgehog, along with the main ideas and imperatives from his essay "Che cos'è la poesia?", lend the structure to this study and serve as a binding force for the whole. However, this definition, as well as other concepts formulated by the French philosopher, bears strong traces of Martin Heidegger's thinking about language and poetry – a debt Derrida often acknowledges in his use of Heideggerian terminology. Inevitably, I shall also partake of this legacy and use some of Heidegger's ideas to aid or clarify my own argumentation. The notion of the unconcealedness of the truth, which Derrida builds upon, modifies and glosses in his concept of *différance*, is especially relevant to my interpretation, and this notion shall feature prominently especially in the first part of my investigation, in which the dominant concern is the epistemological insecurity of the modernist poem. Derrida's theories, themselves never considered as monolithic, proved inspirational also to many other critics and theoreticians, such as Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Charles Bernstein, whose work I shall be also referencing whenever they prove relevant and parallel to or expanding on Derrida's "erinaceous" ideas. Not only do their critical practices exhibit parallel and complementary currents of thinking and methods, betraying a similar deconstructive impulse, but they also frequently use erinaceous aesthetic to enhance their theoretical claims, thus bridging the gap between theory and poetry.

In keeping with Derrida's metaphor of the erinaceous nature of the poem, the first chapter is to expose the tension between the poem-as-hedgehog and the world; to examine both the proximity and the rift between poetic language and being – the letter's simultaneous embrace and

wife place themselves at the opposite ends of the race field and whenever the hare reaches the end of the line, they pretend to have covered the distance, shouting "I am already here!", thus confusing the hare until he drops dead from exhaustion. See Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms (1997: 777-780).

betrayal of life and spirit.² Its goal in particular is to test the boundaries and operations of two logocentric polarities – presence and absence, the voice and its textual trace. As shown by the French theoretician, despite the difficulties, the hedgehog’s doom is to cross the road and face the epistemological and ontological perils of the encounter. In the opening section of the chapter, I shall take Derrida’s metaphor of the hedgehog-on-the road somewhat literally and discuss William Carlos Williams’ and Wallace Stevens’ road poems in which the tension between poetry and the world as well as the vacillation between presence and absence are particularly evident. In this part, I will examine the spatial metaphors in Williams’ “The Road to a Contagious Hospital” and Stevens’ “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” which, although acknowledging the crisis of language and the loss of the poet’s authority as a purveyor of truth, still expose the modernist dreams caught up within the Western metaphysics of presence, origin, and being. Following Derrida’s assumption that language is originally figurative and partaking of his own insistent use of the metaphorical, in the second subchapter, I will look into the Derridian concept of the *retrait* of metaphor – a peculiar tension between the literal and figurative, as well as between the revelation and withdrawal of sense. This tension is poignantly felt in Marianne Moore’s poetry, and especially in her animal poems which will fall under scrutiny in this part. The referential dimension is in a constant struggle with the rhetoricity of the word in Moore’s works, and her metaphor often exposes the infinite hazards of language and becomes a tool of inquiry into the undecidables of both discourse and life. The chapter will close with a comparative reading of Wallace Stevens’ “Snow Man” and Marianne Moore’s “The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing”, the juxtaposition of which can serve as a perfect summary of the strained relationship between the mind and the world, as seen by the two poets. This analysis will be buttressed with Charles Bernstein’s terms of absorptive and anti-absorptive poetics (as explained in his poem-cum-essay “Artifice of Absorption”), which tie in well with Derrida’s definition of the poem as a prickly and enigmatic hedgehog. Bernstein identifies absorption and im-

² Derrida thus speaks of various betrayals inscribed in the act of writing: “What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit’s relationship with itself. It is their end, their finitude, their paralysis. Cutting breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing spiritual creation in the repetition of the letter. . . . it is the principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being” (Derrida OG 25).

permeability as “the warp & woof of poetic composition – an / intertwining chiasm whose locus / is the flesh of the world” (AA 86). A close analysis of the two poems mentioned above will show the relationship between these two forces and the metapoetic sensibility of both authors for whom anti-absorptive language is a mode of knowing and being.

“The text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination”, observes Roland Barthes in his 1968 essay “The Death of the Author” (DA 148), announcing “the birth of the reader” capable of halting and reducing the multiplicity of signification. Chapter Two, devoted to the reader-text relationship and the question of communication, will combine feminist theories and Roland Barthes’s deconstructionist concepts of the Text as formulated in his later works, especially *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1977), *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) and his *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), in an attempt to explore the hedgehog-like erotics of modernist poetry. Both Barthes and feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray use Gertrude Stein’s method of “composition as explanation”, which becomes particularly valid for the study of modernist female poets. In line with Stein’s thinking, rather than *communicate*, the Text in the critics’ discursive practice *performs*; it does away with the compulsion of meaning and ideational mimesis, providing pleasure without the need to inform and represent, and stretching the limits of the critical and the literary. Barthes himself explains this new orientation of criticism, which tries to harmonize the language of critical commentary and that of literary work, as follows:

Certain books of criticism have, then, come into existence, offering themselves to be read in the same ways as works that are literary, properly speaking, although the authors of these books are, as to official status, only critics and not writers. If the new criticism has some reality, it is there: not in the unity of its methods, even less in the snobbism, which – it is convenient to say – sustains it, but in the solitude of the critical act, affirmed henceforth, far from the alibis of science or of institutions, as a deliberate act of writing in the full sense of that word (*un acte de pleine Écriture*). Formerly separated by the worn out myth of the ‘proud creator and the humble servant, both necessary, with each in his place, etc.,’ the writer and the critic now meet in the same difficult situation, facing the same object: language.

(Barthes qtd. in Davidson 1968: 376)

As Derrida affirms in an interview, “‘Good’ literary criticism, the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or counter-signature, an inventive experience of language, *in* language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read. This text never lets itself be completely ‘objectified’” (AL 52). The poetic and critical texts under scrutiny “give up on the purity and linearity of frontiers” (AL 52) and oscillate between poetry and criticism, dramatizing their own discursive method and rhetoricity, dazzling the reader with the richness of sensual metaphors, their digressiveness, self-consciousness, seductions of signification and resistance to meaning along with the fragmentariness of their forms. With the aid of Barthes’s eroticized deconstruction, fuelled by his concept of the pleasure of the text, the chapter will look into the poem as a Text rather than Work (Barthes’ distinction), a form of a love letter to the reader which deifies our hermeneutical habits, offering us instead “an erotics of art”.³

“To read is to desire the work, is to want to be the work”, argues Barthes in *Critique et Vérité* (1966: 78-79), envisioning the text as a beloved body and reading as the erotic play in which the reader himself/herself becomes the lover. The activity of reading – “the taking of the hedgehog to heart”, in Derrida’s words – is an act of love, a form of “intense curiosity” (Barthes 1978: 199), which translates into an incommunicable desire for the Other. One of the problems which this desire poses is that of the text’s metalinguistic boundaries: the reader in the works under scrutiny is positioned at once outside and inside the text, and is required to both activate the excessive tropes of desire and see through their discursive energies. Both a voyeur and the object of the critical gaze, the reader enters and partakes of the text’s perversions and appellations. Given the rather fragile tissue of the modernist Text, whose fragmentary, multilayered and perforated nature invites attentive and delicate treatment, the reader-lover faces the challenge which is in itself worth examining.

My intention in the second chapter is thus to examine this challenge and its consequences for the interpreting consciousness through a study of the erotics of both writing and reading in the selected works of Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy. The main concern of this part of my book will be to explore how women poets write themselves into the tropes and figures of the lover’s discourse – “the memory of the sites

³ Echoing Barthes’ assumptions, Susan Sontag (1982: 104) argues in “Against Interpretation” that “in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art”.

(books, encounters) where such and such a thing has been read, spoken, heard” (Barthes LD 9), analyze ways in which they deconstruct the existing representations of love and relationships and determine how they manage to escape the logocentric and patriarchal traps of discourse. The sexual pleasure infusing Stein’s love poem “Lifting Belly”, in which “meaning and sex become the object of a free play” (Barthes RB 133), will be confronted here with Mina Loy’s densely intertextual and boldly deconstructive fragments of the lover’s discourse in her *Love Songs*. In the second part of the chapter, oriented towards “the ideological shadow” (Barthes PT 32) of Moore’s guarded, discursive, and intellectualized pleasures in her quilt-poem “Marriage” will be juxtaposed with the anti-patriarchal and non-referential word-play of Stein’s “Patriarchal Poetry”.

Chapter Three will place the hedgehog “at the end of metaphysics”, in accordance with Derrida’s statement that the poem beautifully protects the secret of the Absolute Other, the ultimate mystery of the Divine. The presiding philosophical “spirit” of this part will be Derrida’s quasi-transcendental sensibility supported with Heidegger’s concepts of the unconcealedness of the truth, which – like Derrida’s poetic hedgehog – simultaneously “slips through the hands” and is “always already there.” As observed by J. Hillis Miller, the main critical directions are those whose assumptions are purely “metaphysical” and those which simultaneously affirm and subvert those presuppositions (1979: 18-19). Vacillating between the Heideggerian *alētheia* and Derridian dissemination, the poems discussed in this chapter problematize the loss and affirmation of the metaphysical meaning. Derrida partakes of Heidegger’s notion of unconcealedness of being and truth based on the contrary impulses of sealing off and revealing of sense, as he also sees literature as a secret, “the Omnipotence-Other (*Tout-puissance-autre*)” (Derrida GG 47) something that is both private and public, held in reserve but meant to be exposed, something that both offers and destroys itself in revelation. As “the absolute space of the secret... the experience of the law that comes from the other” (Derrida GG 48), literature serves to expose us to the Absolute Other, or “the Wholly-Other” (Derrida GG 17), which is the idea of divinity.

Metaphysical concerns inform the work of many modernist poets, who confronted the bankruptcy of absolutes and its corrosive influence on the whole culture. However, the poets in whose work the “end of metaphysics” is continuously performed in the language of the spectral and the secretive are Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens. Their choice for an

analysis of metaphysical themes in modernist poems was dictated by their profound interest in the role of poetry and the possibility of truth in the world emptied of absolutes, with “gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolv[ing] like clouds” (Stevens OP 206). Although both recognize the anti-theological bent of modernity, they nevertheless vehemently refuse to go beyond the humanistic subject and his need for divine truths and spiritual life. In their poetry, as will be shown, reflection on morality does not come to an end and the verbal mirages conceal the desire to find “the trace of the fugitive gods”, and “stay on the gods’ tracks” (Heidegger PLT 250). This part will examine ways in which modernist poets dwell in the crisis of Western metaphysics and demonstrate how, in agreement with Heidegger’s postulates, “the arrival of the truth of Being” in their poems can realize itself more poignantly and lastingly also in “its failure to arrive” (Heidegger qtd. in Kaufman 1988: 235).

In the last chapter, I will follow the poetic hedgehog and watch some of its transformations in contemporary poetic practice, with the hope of determining how it responds to and runs counter the anti-metaphysical emphasis of postmodern poetics. These deliberations will be illustrated with the poems by Rosmarie Waldrop, A. R. Ammons, Charles Bernstein, Ellen Hinsey, Bruce Andrews and Susan Howe. As will be shown, their version of the poem-hedgehog, delighting in the radical fraction of the signifier-signified complex, less distrustful towards the mobility of the sign, finds the true and only home in the realm of difference, or, to borrow from Derrida, “differential referring” (LI 148) improvisation, and becoming. Since it is not so firmly grounded in the principles of unity, completeness, illumination and truth, nor feels nostalgic or guilty of their loss, the postmodern hedgehog opens new possibilities of utterance, deliberately subverting the spatial tradition of Western metaphysics and transforming poetry into a conversation – a reciprocal dialogue between the reader and the text. Thus, in this part, language as an event and temporality which fuses performance and cognition will be in the center of my attention. The choice of the poets for this section is dictated by their aesthetic and thematic affinity with the modernists on whom the preceding chapters focus. It needs to be said, however, that the selection also reflects my intensely personal response to “the solicitations and provocations”⁴

⁴ Explaining the lack of homogeneity in his literary choices, Derrida admits that all the texts that he writes about are “in response to solicitations or provocations” (Derrida

that these contemporary poets encourage. “When choosing a text I am called”, writes Hélène Cixous (1993: 5), “I obey that call of certain texts or I am rejected by others. The texts that call me have different voices. But they all have one voice in common, they all have, with their differences, a certain music I am attuned to, and that’s the secret.” Since critical and interpretative decisions in a study of this scope need to be made and since they are inevitably subjective, I must admit that the texts discussed in this part were chosen also on account of the very music to which my mind and heart respond. It is therefore my hope to impart its intriguing allure to the reader of this book.

One may still be tempted to ask why Derrida and his deconstructive method of endless counter-readings are positioned at the heart of the basic procedural methodology of this book. Deconstruction, itself born out of the crisis of criticism, has been widely assaulted and denounced as an empty, self-annihilating method by modern humanistic scholarship, whose advocates found themselves “tortured by the play of difference with no end” (Leitch 1983: 45), spreading widely and contaminating literary studies. Derrida’s attempted break with the established structures and hierarchies of Western thought through metaphoric and self-cancelling terminology estranged many critics and contributed to the growing skepticism towards deconstructionist practice. John D. Caputo aptly captures the negative aura surrounding Derrida and his followers:

It is not uncommon to portray Derrida as the devil himself, a street-corner anarchist, a relativist, or subjectivist, or nihilist, out to destroy our traditions and institutions, our beliefs and values, to mock philosophy and truth itself, to undo everything the Enlightenment has done – and to replace all this with wild nonsense and irresponsible play.

(Caputo 1997: 36)

Despite the notoriety of Derrida and his practice, there seems to be no other approach which so stubbornly defies, simultaneously disrupts and affirms the existing tradition, infinitely extending the activity of reading in ever fresh waves of interpretative insights and revisions. Marianne DeKoven perceptively argues that deconstruction “is to critical theory what experimental writing is to literature: they both posit the same princi-

BB 41) and that he is attracted especially by those texts which “are very sensitive to the crisis of literary institution” (BB 42).

ple and make the same attack. They both posit the principles of literary incoherence or indeterminacy: of ‘pluridimensionality’ or polysemy; they both attack the cultural hegemony of sense, order, linearity, unitary coherence” (1981: 7). Caputo expresses a similar conviction about the role of this critical practice:

Deconstruction gives old texts new readings, old traditions new twists. It urges the regularizing structures and normalizing institutions – everything from literature to democracy – to function more freely, more open-endedly. Deconstruction exposes them to the trauma of something unexpected, something to come, of the *tout autre* which remains ever on the margins of texts and traditions, which eludes and elicits our discourse, which shakes and solicits our institutions.

(Caputo 1997: 18)

Indeed, this open-endedness of deconstruction and its penchant for bringing out the unexpected and the subversive in a text is the quality much sought-after in the experience of the poem. In the Introduction to *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge defines the impact and potential of Derrida’s method thus: “Deconstruction is indeed contradictory (It is also impossible, Derrida likes to say – and it doesn’t exist.) It *is* both careful and irreverent, it *does* both acknowledge and traverse borders, it *is* both very old – older than philosophy, Derrida claims – and very new, not yet born, perhaps” (AL 26). On account of its contradictions, the method seems to resolve the difficult position of the writer of the postmodern condition, as defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.

(Lyotard 1984: 81)

The situation of the critic vis-à-vis avant-garde poets of both modernist and postmodernist sensibility is synonymous with the one described by the French theoretician. Consequently, Derrida’s approach helps to see the work of art as a form in search of new rules and critical frameworks, offering, in Markowski’s words (1997: 49), “a unique economy of sense” which does not easily yield to monolithic theoretical paradigms.

I have chosen Derrida not only for the beauty, metaphorical opulence and flexibility of his hedgehog metaphor, but also because there is a sustained passion for literature in his entire oeuvre. In an interview, Derrida claimed even that philosophy was a “detour for him to come back to literature” (Saluzinszky 1987: 22), if not a separate literary genre (Markowski 1987: 52). His influential investigations of the most challenging poets and writers of modern times, such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, Stéphane Mallarmé, Maurice Blanchot, and Francis Ponge,⁵ signal that his philosophical and theoretical training owes as much to the literary and the poetic as it does to the philosophical. In answer to the question about his literary sensibility and the subordination of the poetic to philosophical discourse in his work, the philosopher stated: “I do not read the genre of this body as either philosophic or poetic. This means that if your questions were addressed to the philosopher, I would have to say no. As for me, I talk about the philosopher, but I am not simply a philosopher” (Derrida BB 143). Indeed, Derrida is much more, for his ambiguous answer and life-long interest in the poetic betrays a desire to go beyond rigid generic distinctions. In line with my own interpretational angle, the French philosopher stresses also a critical and theoretical edge in all literary practice, but especially in twentieth-century modernist texts (see Derrida AL 41, 52).⁶ Literature for him is “a place at once institutional and wild, an institutional place in which it is in principle permissible to put into question, at any rate to suspend, the whole institution” (Derrida AL 41). This attentiveness to both the wild and the restrictive in a literary text makes him a philosopher-poet who is extremely conscious of the possibilities, nuances and the destabilizing capacities of the word. Just like the poets discussed in this study, Derrida is both reflexive and playful; like them,

⁵ See especially Derrida’s essays “Before the Law”, “Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book”, “Shibboleth”, “Two Words for Joyce”, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce”, *Signsponge*.

⁶ These “twentieth-century modernist, or at least nontraditional texts”, the philosopher argues, “all have in common that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature. They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: ‘What is literature?’ Or ‘Where does literature come from?’ ‘What should we do with literature?’ These texts operate a sort of turning back, they *are* themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution” (Derrida AL 41).

he is not afraid of settling in the uncertain, to hear the voice of the unspeakable, to explain the disharmonies in our convictions about the world.

Derrida and other deconstructionist and poststructuralist critics whom I will be referencing here loosen the critical control, allowing poetry to breathe freely its mysteries and the infinite surplus of meaning, thus granting the reader access to the levels of language that resist the approaches of more traditional scholarly discourse. Importantly, when approaching a poem, the practitioners of deconstruction do not assume the priority of critical discourse over *materia poetica*; rather, they recognize the elusive position of both. As shown by Leslie Hill (2007: 107), the point of deconstruction is “not to subordinate specific texts to theory; it was more a matter of studying the limits of theorization.” A strong penchant for provocation and attention to the tiniest particles, folds and disturbances of the text makes these theories especially applicable to the experimental concerns of both modernist and postmodernist poetry. As shown by Leitch, in the hands of Derrida and his fellow deconstructionists, criticism went “beyond pedagogical and academic functions toward a separate literary-philosophical realm of its own” (1983: 117). Although charged with “disclosing again and again the ‘abysm’ of words” (Bloom 1979: ix), it is in this ‘abysm’ that deconstruction located something which Derrida himself calls “the various structures of resistance” (LO 84-85) – the edges in need of softening; the margins which can suddenly become centers; the frameworks and boundaries which, in spite of their ordering and teleological thrust, crumble and communicate confusion and difference when probed from multiple angles and approached without bias.

Poetry contains an inherent self-disruptive potential; in light of deconstructive theories, it is itself the highest form of criticism – often, as Leitch admits, much ahead of any school of criticism (1983: 95). Misreading, which according to deconstructionists is the only possible form of reading, acknowledges and accepts the ultimate untranslatability of the hedgehog-poem, its need to be “supplemented” by yet another reading, another text which cannot be reduced to an undifferentiated literary matter. Writing on the responsibilities of the critic and the poet in her poem “Picking and Choosing”, Marianne Moore compared both of them to the hunting dog, defining their task as that of “putting us on the scent” (MCP 56). The deconstructive method, often by speaking the language of poetry, takes up that task as it “picks and chooses” without dogmatism and re-

fuses to integrate and smooth out the discontinuities usually leveled by a more unicursal critical discourse. As noted by Rachwał and Sławek in their study of Derrida's literary sensibility, deconstructive approach is a trap for the reader/critic who "wishes to escape the text, go beyond the text, flatten and smooth the folds of textuality". Deconstruction, the critics observe further, "opens the space of the *(de)scriptible*", (Rachwał and Sławek 1992: 200), keeps infinitely open and fruitful our interpretational "hunting" and supplementing. As observed by cognitivist and philosopher Daniel C. Dennet (1996: vii), "[f]inding better questions to ask, and breaking old habits and traditions of asking, is a very difficult part of the grand human project of understanding ourselves and our world." I see Derrida's deconstructive impulse, which infuses all other theories employed in my readings, as particularly responsive to this profoundly human need for a fresh way of asking and understanding. Aware of the difficulties inherent in his own method, Derrida confesses:

Sometimes I see it as a terrifying and painful war, but at the same time I know what life is. I will find peace only in eternal rest. So I cannot say I have come to terms with contradiction, though I also know it is what keeps me alive, and indeed makes me as the very question you were recalling: 'How to learn, how to teach [*Comment apprendre*] how to live?'

(Derrida AVE 49 qta. Hill 2007: 8)

The profoundly philosophical questions which Derrida asks seem worth the struggle, the frequent failures and self-contradictory results that his method entails. Apart from offering us the pure pleasure of rereading and misreading, it can help us comprehend the principles and existential anxieties that have generated the diversity and the radical experimentalism of modernist and postmodern periods. Poetry, reflective of our increasingly destabilized relation to "reality", grapples with similar questions to those posed by the French philosopher, for, as suggested by Wallace Stevens, language and life meet in "the intricate evasions of as", proving that "the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life" ("Ordinary Evening", WSCP 486).

What I personally find most rewarding about Derrida's method, despite the potential pitfalls of its too faithful an application, is that he sees literature as "the space of the promised speech" (Derrida HAS 18), the language of infinite promise, the fog from which – as he himself con-

fesses about Maurice Blanchot's writing – “there come to [him] only fascinating gleams, and occasionally, but at irregular intervals, the flare of an invisible lighthouse on the coast” (Derrida AL 221). To encounter his hedgehog theories is thus to see this promise, to catch those uncertain gleams, and to realize their power to open up rather than delimit, to present the mind of the poet and the experience of modernist poetry as continuous enchantment, a creative and resisting movement of thought that, in Wallace Stevens' words, “can never be satisfied” (“The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”, WSCP 247).

Derrida defines the problem of interpretation as the question “*how not to betray* a text whose self-betrayal is the very condition of its readability, for nothing ever became readable unless it betrayed itself, gave itself away” (BB xix). On a similar note, Martin Heidegger suggests in his *Discourse on Thinking* that a poem is a mystery, an enigma that shelters and directs our thinking, but which should not be solved (DT 35). My book is intended to show poetry as an opening to the enigmatic otherness of thought, with a secret that reluctantly gives itself away. In this act of self-betrayal-cum-denial, the boundaries of language and our readerly habits are often stretched to their outer limits, but they can be also transcended, questioned and broadened. In Martin McQuillan's words,

[w]hat is called literature ... draws an undecidable line between the secret as absolute secret and the phenomenal appearance of the secret as such. Literature offers the secret at the same time as jealously guarding the secret (not in the form of an encryption that is potentially knowable but as an absolute deprivation of the power to choose between reality and fiction). Literature allows one to read at the same time as denying the power to read (in the sense of a determinable or saturable interpretation). Literature presents the right to read while simultaneously disconnecting that right from any position of authority that would determine or govern the reading. It does all this in the form of an event in which denied the authority to *read*, one can only read, and so yield to the otherness of reading as the arrival of what may come in the form of fiction. That is the arrival of the secret, “the other as that which happens”.

(McQuillan, Introduction to Derrida GG ix)

The passage summarizes Derrida's view of literature, as McQuillan, after Derrida, advises the readers to submit to the otherness of the text, and to learn to respect its secret. The theoretical resources and concepts I will be using in this study, all of which bear a stamp of Derridian subversive

thinking, recognize and teach us how to value and enjoy the secretive nature of literary language and form, encouraging their non-totalizing and inconclusive explorations.

Poetry, to borrow Harold Bloom's apt metaphor, is "a shield of a greeting, its defensive and communicative functions inextricably mixed" (1986: 37).⁷ As I shall argue on the pages of this book, our understanding of these two functions in experimental modernist and postmodernist poetry can be enlarged by the investigation of the intersections and alliances between poetic and theoretical discourses.

The comparative method that I have chosen allows for the intensification of the joys of each greeting and each new encounter inscribed in a poem – the juxtapositions and comparisons of the poets on which most of the structure of my book is based infinitely increases the amount of interpretational surprises and discoveries. Since the oeuvres of the poets gathered here have been surveyed in different ways in their totality by many other critics, I have decided to limit my analysis to case studies of selected poems, with the hope that their careful scrutiny and comparison with the aid of the theoretical tools indicated above will yield a more intense and distilled pleasure than a more comprehensive overview of their entire practice. Close reading is also commensurate with Derrida's own method of approaching literary texts, as it suits well their erinaceous and secretive nature.

"Whoever wants me to take deconstruction to heart and insists upon difference stands at the beginning of a dialogue, and not at its end", Hans Georg Gadamer asserts in his essay "Destruction and Deconstruction" (1989: 113). After the German philosopher, I understand the endeavor of the deconstructionist critic and theoretician not so much as an elucidation of the text in a critical paraphrase that leads to full comprehension, but rather as a sensitive living and sharing the experience of reading the text. Such an approach works towards exposing the poem's ungovernable difference as it destabilizes our habitual responses and disseminates meaning. With the hope of making this difference gratifying and enjoyable, I would like to offer to the reader this venture into the space of greeting and dialogue between modernist and postmodernist poetics and contemporary critical theories.

⁷ Interestingly, Paul Celan, one of Derrida's favorite poets, similarly claimed in a letter to Hans Bender, that he "cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem" (2003: 26).

Chapter One

The Modernist Hedgehog on the Road

Many roads are being broken – what a wonderful word – “broken”!
– Mabel Dodge, “Speculations”

The hedgehog metaphor employed by Derrida to describe the experience of the poem can serve as a guiding thread in problematizing the nature of modernist poetry as well as its epistemological and aesthetic anxieties. Derrida uses the figure of the hedgehog to pose the question “what is poetry?”, at the same time effectively destabilizing the possibility of its definition by announcing the untranslatability of poetry, its essential equivocality, and its resistance to any consistencies or binary logic.¹ Like Derrida’s hedgehog, described as “an imparted secret, at once public and private, *absolutely* one and the other, absolved from within and from without, neither one nor the other” (CCP 295), the modernist poem makes available to its readers the contradictory, paradoxical and undecidable within discourses, structures and thought. What is central to Derrida’s considerations and, as will be shown, to those of modernist poets, is the tension between our desire for “the absolute inseparation of ideal meaning from the body of the letter” (CCP 295) and language’s proclivity for crisis, grounded in the discrepancy between the boundless difference incorporated into signs and our efforts to understand language and interpret poetry as, in Heideggerian terms, the

¹ It is interesting to note that the same question was posed earlier by Roman Jakobson, who frequently professed his proximity to the poets of the avant-garde, such as Marinetti, Khlebnikov, Majakovski, and who devoted many of his works to the study of the universal grammar of the poem. In his hedgehog essay, Derrida is clearly evoking Jakobson’s essay “What is Poetry?”, in which the latter admits in accord with own Derrida’s argument that it is difficult to define a poem, with the borders between the poetic and nonpoetic increasingly destabilized in modern discourses. However, while Jakobson defends the possibility of separating the “poeticity” of a given text from its other functions, Derrida argues against it, faithful to his conviction that poetry is a secret that cannot be translated into the universal language of grammar and rhetoric. See Jakobson (1987a: 368-379).

“setting-itself-to-work of the truth” (OWA 75). The tension stems largely from the discursive principles and critical habits of traditional poetics, which relies on the concepts of identity, contextual determinacy, unity, purity and reliability of meaning, all derived from the assumption that there is a fixed vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. Derrida sees danger in such reasoning, especially when applied to the experience of poetry, which often foregrounds the non-semantic and favors difference, dispersion of sense, polysemy, and ambiguity. “The poetic or ecstatic”, argues the philosopher in his essay on Bataille, “is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of un-knowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of the dice” (WD 261). This openness to the loss of sense, un-knowledge and play eases the rule of the transcendental signifier and allows for a freer reading, without the anguish of rigid determinations.

According to Derrida, defining poetry, which operates at the limit of discourse and translatability, is like throwing a hedgehog onto the road and running the risk of losing it in the process. This is because each poem is meant as a space of contact and communication, often a difficult or denied one, or one in which – as the philosopher argues – upon entering you can already hear “the shore of the departure” and see “the catastrophe coming” (CCP 292). Interpretation, inevitably an act of mastery and control, stops the flight of signifiers in a poem, as it insists on order, but also fractures the text. For Derrida, reading poetry is a voyage into the unknown, which requires “setting fire to the library of poetics” (CCP 295), abandoning the baggage of absolute convictions and interpretational habits. As the philosopher postulates in *Writing and Difference*, there are two kinds of interpretations: that which “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign”, and the other kind, free of the dream of “full presence” and reassuring truth, affirmative of absence and play (WD 292). With the hedgehog always ready to slip through our hands, its letter always non-substitutable, the philosopher advises us to employ the latter variety, equipping ourselves with a special mixture of alertness and blindness, which allows us to avoid the traps of running the hedgehog over and tearing it apart.

Bearing Derrida’s advice in mind, in this initial chapter I aim to attempt the impossible and catch the modernist hedgehog “between paths and autostradas”, as it is “crossing the road”, with its “pointed signs to-

ward the outside”, exposed to the accidents and wounds of misinterpretation, and “venturing toward the language of the other in view of an impossible or denied translation” (Derrida CCP 291). The intention is to examine the erinaceous discourse of modernist poetry at its points of vulnerability, failure, crisis and untranslatability. Furthermore, using Derrida’s deconstructive theory of the poetic text, Heidegger’s concept of the poet as “a stranger on earth”² trying to uncover the gap between language and reality, and Charles Bernstein’s idea of the anti-absorptive artifice, the chapter aims to test the poem’s defense mechanisms, its “prickliness”, its outer and inner layers of impermeability, its stages and degrees of “rolled-upness”, and its various ways of resistance to the grounding and absorption of meaning (Derrida CCP 291).

“Language”, observes the French philosopher in his essay “Writing before the letter” (OG 6), “is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it” (emphasis original). For Derrida, the uniqueness of poetic language lies in its ability to face and overcome this “menace” and the fear of limitlessness inscribed in language. Recognizing our desire for meaning, poetry nevertheless enables us to step outside our systems of representation and comprehension, and to acknowledge the existence of that which refuses to “hold still within names, nor even within words” (Derrida CCP 291). The landscape poems put under scrutiny in the present chapter will dramatize this problem, by exposing their own intentions to subvert the full disclosure of truth and, like Derrida’s *istrice*, to withhold and defer our passage across and into their guarded spaces. Their landscapes, apparently familiar and domestic, in an erinaceous manner, which combines blindness and alertness, put the critic on guard, forcing him to lose his “ground” and to experience the collapse of the familiar “territorial” boundaries, as they assume unreal, strange, and confusing aspects, screening the congenial, displacing their centers, destabilizing their

² Heidegger cites Georg Trakl’s poem “Frühling der Seele”, explaining further that the word “strange” comes from the Old High German and means “on the way to...”. In reference to the language of the poem, the strangeness captures the idea of the suspension of the truth between the origin and its destination and its thriving in the “twilight” in-betweenness of a non-revelation, where the darkness contains and shelters the blueness of meaning (See Heidegger OWL 161).

spatial and rhetorical architectures, and deferring their indefinite meanings. “Resisting our intelligence almost successfully” (OP 171), as Wallace Stevens would have it, they simultaneously testify to art’s task of “teaching us the heart” (Derrida CCP 235) and question our epistemological pursuits for final truth and knowledge.

1.1. ~~Crossing~~ the Road: William Carlos Williams’ and Wallace Stevens’ peripatetic poems

Explaining the meaning and the philosophical sources of his metaphor in an already quoted interview, Derrida distinguishes between two kinds of hedgehogs: *der Igel*, the poetic animal of German descent, and the poetic *istrice* or *herisson*, “the counter-hedgehog”, with its Italian and French roots. The first variety is further subdivided, embracing both Schlegel’s concept of art as “the total fragment” and Heidegger’s vision of a work of art as revealing Being (or, to use Heidegger’s own term, as a “setting-itself-to-work of truth”, OWA 72). Schlegel – explains Derrida – perceives art in hermeneutic and organicist terms, as “a fragment totally detached from the surrounding world and closed on itself like a hedgehog” (Points 302)³, but which nonetheless contains this world in the perfection and totality of each of its constitutive and fragmentary parts. The Romantic hedgehog, in its insular circularity is thus a defined and complete form, containing a kernel and totality of meaning. Heidegger, on the other hand, opts for art as *alētheia*, e.g. unconcealedness of truth, or the “truth already opened”, with its erinaceous logic of “the always already here”. “Poetry”, says Heidegger, “never takes language as a raw material ready to hand, rather it is poetry which first makes language possible. Poetry is the primitive language of a historical people. Therefore, in just the reverse manner, the essence of language must be understood through the essence of poetry” (EB 306-307). Poetic language is here the site and the inauguration of Being, “the letting happen of the advent of the truth” (Heidegger OWA 72). In other words, through the foregrounded materiality of its form, it makes the truth appear to us. Therefore, Heidegger’s hedgehog carries the task of the primordial naming, establishing and dis-

³ Derrida paraphrases Schlegel’s words: “A fragment must like a small work of art be quite separated from the surrounding world and complete in itself like a hedgehog” (Points 302).

closing the truth of Being, and thus enables a return to the original thinking that did not separate being from meaning. Both hedgehog varieties have their shortcomings, as they call for a higher concept of univocity, the “ante of authority and monumental totality”, “a gathering together” (Derrida Points 302) in the idea of source, founding or origin all of which control the fragmentation, dissemination and plurality of voices inherent in language. Heidegger explicitly demands a return to the source, to “the origin as emergence”, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*: “the beginning must be begun again, more radically, with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that attend a true beginning” (ITM 39). Poetry, the philosopher believes, is the language directly involved in the disclosure of being. However, while Schlegel’s *Igel* cannot step outside the hermeneutic circle, the Heideggerian hedgehog suffers from a fear that our responses to poetry and art, ridden with preconceptions and the “tranquilized obviousness of everyday speech” (Heidegger BT 311), will hide rather than reveal what is to be interpreted, covering the authenticity of being. Schlegel’s and Heidegger’s hedgehogs, as Derrida shows, are troubled by a desire for plenitude and origin. They also reveal a strong element of nostalgia for a certain theological and transcendental idea derived from the larger concepts of the Infinite and Eternal in Romanticism, while in the post-romantic sensibility of Heidegger a similar nostalgia comes from the conviction that we were thrown into reality’s continuing ruin and that our task is to return to that primal wonder and fullness, to bring the originary truth back “into the open from hiddenness or oblivion” (Heidegger BT 57). Thus, Heidegger searches for this pre-metaphysical, undifferentiated state of Being, while Derrida, as aptly observed by Morny (1988: 512), “seeks instead a way to decipher the traces of this lost plenitude in the language of literary and philosophical works”. It is from this searching that the third hedgehog variety emerges, namely Derrida’s poetic *herisson*. It seems to overcome the polarities, dangers and limitations inscribed in the two other kinds, as, by making “the aleatory of language and nomination” its essence (Derrida Points 305), it escapes the totalizing foundations, the gravity and the hermeneutic circularity of Schlegel and Heidegger’s concepts, frees the polysemy from the constraints of origins, strategic messages and destinations, remaining always “low, close to the earth, humble” (Derrida CCP 231-232). Derrida’s *herisson* is thus liberated from the anxieties of its German counterpart as it dwells in the trace-structure of the sign, which puts in question the ideas of origin, presence

and totality. Carrying the constant risk of its own effacement, the hedgehog points to our enclosure in the metaphysics of presence and symbolizes a suspicion toward the idea of an originary truth. The *herrison* forces us to change our mental habits and reveals the traps of both ontohermeneutical and epistemological ways of experiencing the world.

In his essay on Kafka's "Before the Law", Derrida states that literature is "destined to remain improper" (AL 210), deprived of essence and unreadable, "if one understands by this the impossibility of acceding to its proper significance. . . The text guards itself, maintains itself – like the law, speaking only of itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with itself. It neither arrives nor lets anyone arrive. It is the law, makes the law and leaves the reader before the law". Thus, we cannot possess the law of the letter, we are situated always "before the law", before the shut door of the text, forever provoked by the secrecy of its significance. As shown by Derrida's analysis of Kafka, to enter into the relation with this law, we need to disrupt it, as literature "*can play the law [jouer la loi]*"⁴, repeating it while diverting or circumventing it . . . In the fleeting moment when it plays the law, a literature passes literature" (AL 216). Thus, literature contains the possibilities of its limits and its own erasure.

Deconstructing Levi-Strauss' *La vie familiale et sociale des Indiens Nambikwara*, Derrida employs the metaphor of the road to describe the peculiar nature of writing:

... writing as the possibility of the road and of difference, the history of writing and the history of the road, of rupture, of the *via rupta*, of the path that is broken, beaten, *fracta*, of the space of reversibility and of repetition traced by the opening, the divergence from, and the violent spacing, of nature, of the natural, savage, salvage, forest. . . . it is difficult to imagine that access to the possibility of a road-map is not at the same time access to writing.

(OG 107-108)

For Derrida, the road is thus an instance of writing, of fracturing and cutting, of carving out; it is a spacing which opens up the landscape for differentiation and inscription. Writing envisioned as the road can never be one with the world, as it breaks at the borders into "the natural, savage, salvage, forest", creating edges, crevices, inevitable rifts and disjunctions.

⁴ *Jouer la loi* means both "playing at being the law" and "deceiving the law" as well as "playing the law". See the translator's footnote in "Before the Law" (Derrida AL 216).

For even if we decide to step off the route cleaved by the word, we will always produce another rift, another detour or path that ruptures the wholeness of the natural. As observed by Geoffrey Hartman in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, to understand is to go through “the detour of the writing / reading experience”, with the detour “meant ironically, for there is no other way. The new theory, whether we approach it through Heidegger or Derrida, puts the straight line in doubt. Writing is a labyrinth, a topological puzzle and textual crossword” (Hartman 1980: 244). The notion of pristine undivided presence that could be conveyed and reached through the map of language or via a unicursal path from the signifier to the signified is only an illusion – the language is already there; it has never left.

The road, as seen by Derrida, also implies a movement, and with it a possibility of dis-location, wandering, erring, losing one’s bearings in the wilderness of signs and clearings and not arriving at the desired destination. The border constituted by the road sets off difference, while the trails produced by writing, just like the bifurcating paths, can lead one astray, the landmarks turning into traces meant to deceive and seduce.

The road metaphor, with its rich epistemological and linguistic implications, is peculiarly well suited to the study of modernist American poetry. Faced with the crisis of consciousness and the finality of knowledge, and recognizing a growing distance between text and actual experience, the poets of the modernist period nevertheless sought new ways of linking the experiential and the poetic form. Their road poems register the rift between the word and the world, as well as the poets’ desire to prevent language from further cutting and rupturing. All those considerations can be fruitfully illustrated with the untitled opening poem from William Carlos Williams’ early volume *Spring and All* (1923), anthologized as “The Road to the Contagious Hospital” or “Spring and All”. It foreshadows Derrida’s *via rupta*, as it opens and breaks the path of nature, cutting into the vernal horizon, positing a difference between *logos* and *physis*, exposing the tension between all the three kinds of hedgehog discourse and interpretational approaches defined by the French philosopher. As Joseph N. Riddel argues, Williams is a poet of beginnings, sharing the Heideggerian sense that modern man is “‘blocked’ from his sources”, equipped with the language which “has failed him by divorcing him from the power of his beginnings” (1986: 86). In Riddel’s words, the poet envisions his role as that of a “participant in the act of ‘inaugural naming’; therefore, his *place* is the place where language breaks out, where we are brought into the presence of its first appear-

ing, its beginning to take ‘shape’, its flowering” (1986: 86). This flowering, however – to quote Heidegger again – is not without “all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that attend a true beginning” (ITM 39). In one of the prose passages separating the poems in the volume, Williams argues that there is “a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa – all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon” (WCP I 177), echoing Heidegger’s concern with the human tendency to disguise or suppress things in everyday understanding, thus failing to see their naked immediacy. Dreaming of a world freed of the necessity of “recording it”, aware of the “between” of time and cognizant of the imperfect medium of art and the word, both of which remove us from reality, the poet strives to turn his volume into a struggle to overcome the gap between language and the world, between the word and thought, and to uncover a possibility of authentic contact between them.

As noted by J. Hillis Miller, Williams’ poetry is “an affirmation of the supreme value of presence and of the present” (1985: 368) and his goal is to get rid of the screen, “the vaporous fringe” (WCP 97) which separates human consciousness from the present moment. On a somewhat similar note, Eliot observes that “[l]anguage in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified” ([1932] 1999: 313). Like Eliot, Williams is afraid that this perfect adherence might indeed be more difficult now that the condition of culture and language is far from healthy and, in Eliot’s words, “words strain / crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place” (1952: 175). Williams offers a solution to this crisis of contact between the object and the word: “The word must be put down for itself, not as symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole ...” Williams proclaims, imagining the poet’s task as “an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from ‘reality’” (WCP I 22). Elsewhere, the poet observes that “imagination goes from one thing to another. Its true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself. The associational or sentimental value is the false” (WSE 11). At the same time, Williams recognizes the subversiveness of modern life, which counteracts this reductive dream and destabilizes the position of the poetic language vis-à-vis reality:

Now life is above all things else at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before – always new, irregular. Verse to be alive must have infused into it something of the same order, some tincture of disestablishment, something in the nature of an impalpable revolution, an ethereal reversal, let me say. I am speaking of modern verse.

(a letter to Harriet Monroe, WCWSL 23-24)

Aware of this “tincture of disestablishment”, and in search for a modernist version of “the total fragment”, the poet consciously addresses the theme of spring – with its powerful, unifying and circular myths of origin, growth and rebirth – and opens it to the stubborn inadequacy, opaqueness and indeterminacy of language. As if defying the directness, clarity, classicizing cleanliness and verbal minimalism of the Imagist and Precisionist⁵ program, Williams makes his “road to the contagious hospital” a real *tour de force* of poetic “mottledness”, as he flaunts the poem’s erinaceous prickliness in its verbiage, its obscure and muddy imagery, the ugliness and brittleness of its sounds, and its torn and strained rhythm:

⁵ American painters known as Precisionists – just like European Futurists, Cubists, and Purists – found inspiration in the modern landscape, urban space, the world of modern technology and the machine, in which they discovered a new realization of the classical principles of order, ancient purity, perfection as well as economy of structures and forms. In 1922, art historian and critic Lewis Mumford wrote of “the promise of a stripped, athletic, classical style ... which shall embody all that is good in the Machine Age: its precision, its cleanliness, its hard illumination, its unflinching logic” (Quoted in Murphy 1994: 34). Gail Stavitsky (1995: 16) enumerates the tenets of Precisionism: “precision, objectivity, simplification, and architectonic structure”, “a highly refined, selective realism”. Friedman similarly describes Precisionist works as presenting “an idealized timeless state of absolute order ... brought to an icily defined and flawless finish” through “simplification of form, unwavering, sharp delineation and carefully reasoned abstract organization” (Friedman 1960: 12). Williams was linked to the group not only by his interest in art but also through personal connections, as he frequented New York galleries and moved freely in the most influential art circles and salons, such as Stieglitz’s 291, or Arensberg and Kreymborg’s coterie. He knew most Precisionist painters in person, and some of them even became his close friends. His acquaintance with Charles Demuth began at the University of Pennsylvania and extended into a lifelong friendship; they often met at Marsden Hartley’s studio, where they discussed avant-garde art and literature. The Arensberg circle led him also to a discovery of another member of the movement, Charles Sheeler, which resulted in an artistic collaboration and friendship. For an in depth-study of Williams’ Precisionist connections, see Bram Dijkstra (1978), and Henry M. Sayre (1983).

By the road to the contagious hospital
 under the surge of the blue
 mottled clouds driven from the northeast – a cold wind. Beyond, the
 waste of broad, muddy fields
 brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen
 Patches of standing water
 The scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
 Purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
 Stuff of bushes and small trees
 With dead, brown leaves under them
 Leafless vines–

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
 Dazed spring approaches –
 (WCP I 183)

The first four stanzas not only subvert the myth of rejuvenation and the joyous vision of the transformative dimensions of nature associated with spring, but they confront the reader with the crisis and dispersion of language, and the difficulty of keeping the stubborn letter “close to the ground”.

As if partaking of Walt Whitman’s Romantic hopes, Williams’ dream is “[a] world detached from the necessity of recording it, sufficient to itself, removed from him [the poet] (as it most certainly is), with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent – moving at will from one thing to another – as he pleases, unbound – complete” (*Spring and All*, WCP I 206). This imagined completeness and unboundedness of world and man, which in *Song of Myself* led to a fusion of the word and experience, of language and flesh, in the greatest poem – America – seems no longer possible in Williams’ work, where reality becomes an “illegible script” (EK 74), whereas the focus and clarity towards which the poem progresses prove increasingly difficult to achieve.

The crisis is already signaled through the image of the poet situated “by the road”, which subversively echoes Walt Whitman’s frequent sun-lit itineraries along infinitely open roads and unlimited horizons of both the world and the mind. Whitman’s leisurely loafing on the summer grass, in direct and palpable contact with the outside world, and infused with the ease, confidence and completeness of his transparent self is substituted in Williams’ poem by an impersonal eye wandering across a cold and inhospitable “waste of muddy fields”, attempting to rejoin and embrace the

disharmony and opacity of the scattered patches and fragments of the modern landscape. What is more, while the Romantic poet defines his destination expansively and broadly as the “orchards of spheres” (*Song of Myself*, l. 799), “the journey-work of the stars” (*Song of Myself* l. 662), or as “speeding through heaven and stars” (*Song of Myself* l. 781) and tracing of “the runaway sun” on “the roofs of the world” (*Song of Myself*, ll. 1337, 1334), Williams cuts his predecessor’s cosmic yearnings short and delimits Whitman’s all-embracing transcendental vision by replacing it with a much humbler and literally pedestrian path to the contagious hospital. Whitman’s far- and high-reaching fields of grass, consisting of individuated spears, each of which becomes a microcosm of the universe and extends easily into a linking thread in the unifying design of the “handkerchief of the Lord” (SoM l. 103), all lose their Romantic vitality on Williams’ road to the contagious hospital. Haunted by the cold breath of lingering winter and the uncertainty of what is yet to come, they are reduced to a disorganized and lifeless motley of dry weeds, twiggy stuff of bushes, and dead brown leaves. Among those traces and echoes of the Romantic song, and in the imperfect shadow of the scattered images of Williams’ poem, however, there skulks the modernist hedgehog, which – unlike Whitman’s “uniform hieroglyphic” (SoM l. 107), whose meaning can be known because “[a]ll truths wait in all things” (l. 648) – places itself under a constant threat of erasure and, just like Williams’ reluctant spring which resists translation, effaces itself in the trace-structure of language, leaving the “dazed” reader in a description without a place.

One of the elements which align Williams’ poem with the Derridian hedgehog is the poet’s use of metaphor. The poet’s anti-metaphorical ideal is expressed in the following passage:

A word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface. . . . It may be used not to smear it again with thinking (the attachments of thought) but in such a way that it will remain scrupulously itself, clean, perfect, unnicked, beside other words in parade.

(WSE 34)

And yet, this objectivist dream of “no ideas but in things”, a dream of cleansing the word and giving it the directness and palpability of a thing, seems to be thwarted from the very first lines of “The Road to the Contagious Hospital”, weighed down with the accumulation of metaphoric lan-

guage which obscures the clarity, blurring the outlines of the represented landscape and committing us to the drift of the familiar into *différance*. In his essay “The Originary Metaphor”, Derrida elaborates on the idea of the untranslatability of erinaceous poetry, as he problematizes the nature of literalness, arguing that all language is originarily metaphorical and poetic, and “carries the anguish of dispersion” (Derrida OM 271). “The language”, argues the French philosopher further, “pro-regresses, to the extent that it masters or effaces the figure in itself” (Derrida OM 271). Williams’ poem could be viewed as an instance of such a process of “pro-regression of language”, as it simultaneously gestures towards the precisionist purity, nakedness, literalness and exactness of the word – the word-as-contact – and points to its irreducible, essential opacity and indirectness as a tool of description and representation. Hartman aptly summarizes this contradictory pull of Williams’ practice, arguing that “the strength of *pure* poetry resides, like all poetry, in the impure elements it cuts out, elides, covers up, negates, represses . . . depends on” (1980: 121). In his *Embodiments of Knowledge*, the poet himself thus defines the goal of poetry: “Or, if not the increase of knowledge in an absolute sense, it may be the representation of knowledge from an illegible script” (Williams EK 74-75).

Williams’ notion of the poem as “a representation of knowledge from an illegible script” resonates well with Derrida’s vision of poetry as an act of translation, of reading under erasure. In the opening poem of *Spring and All* this opacity and illegibility is indicated on several levels of the composition. The image of the road leading to the hospital, a vital part of Williams’ own everyday routine as a physician, implies a concrete and particular path, the here and now of the graspable world with the hard materiality of things which language is trying to approximate and with which it is trying to engage. The life-protecting function of the hospital is counterbalanced by the modifier “contagious”, suggesting a transgression of limits, transmittability of danger and a heightened risk of death or loss. This combination of protection and loss – Williams’ hedgehog-poem seems to suggest – is inscribed in the moment of writing, which is always open to the alterity of its destination and can never rest in the ultimate unity or truth. The absence of an identifiable speaker increases the impression that Williams’ road is being written into existence rather than experienced.⁶ Thus, before

⁶ Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* that “[w]riting in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the carrier of death [because it signifies the absence of the speaker]” (OG 29).

the reader reaches the strange, de-romanticized and eliot-esque image of the “sluggish, dazed spring” which contests the freshness, fullness and transparency of Romantic vernal metaphors, he is forced to wade through the surges, patches and scatterings of the fragmented landscape described by means of an almost Faulknerian sequence of labored and foggy adjectives that Williams chooses as an invitation and entrance to the poem.⁷ The string “mottled”, “muddy”, “the reddish, purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy”, is a Derridian “knot” in the text, whose clumsiness and undecidability weigh heavily on the emerging picture, as if mediating the inadequacy of description to the poet’s vision, with the words merely brushing and approximating the elements and the anticipatory mood of the observed scenery. “Stuff”, the word to which the sequence leads and in which it climaxes, is not any less opaque, allowing the poem to rest – as Comens (1995: 102) aptly remarks – “in all that escapes specific determinations, on a substance that is, as it were, only posited”.

The imperfect and indeterminate words gesture both towards and away from reality, bursting from a combination of strongly sonorous *r*’s and *m*’s, and acoustically weaker but forceful labials and plosives, which invade, contaminate and usurp the first stanzas, eventually overshadowing or shielding what they are so clumsily trying to name. The inflectional suffix ‘-ish’ in the adjectives “reddish” and “purplish”, suggesting a vagueness and want of color, also gesture towards failed control, as there seems to be no definite ‘master-word’ that would capture the *almost* of color of the oncoming spring. Williams’ dream of a poem that would “crystallize the imagination” and become “a perfection of new forms as additions to nature” (I 116-117) proves a difficult task as the smudges of imperfections remain part of the creative process.⁸ The patches of images

⁷ Williams’ failed attempts at cleansing language so that it can display the contours of experience in this adjectival sequence can be placed against a similar penchant for strings of adjectives in Whitman’s landscape poems. However, Whitman is seen gesturing towards plentitude, complexity and fullness of both experience and descriptive language.

⁸ In an essay about the poetry of Marianne Moore, Williams praises the clarity and perfectionism of Moore’s language, revealing his own desire for the crystalline word: “Miss Moore gets great pleasure from wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts. For the compositions which Miss Moore intends, each word should first stand crystal clear with no attachments; not even an aroma. . . . With Miss Moore a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the

and their uneven rhythm also refuse to be gathered into a Schlegelian “totality of the fragment”, thus indicating the incompleteness and fragility of the order deprived of its metaphysical grounding, the vulnerability and uncertainty of the spring born in the torrent of disseminating words masking the absence of any external, transcendent authority.

Distrustful towards the Romantic conviction about the direct link between the Mind, the World and the Word, Williams spells out the difficulty of achieving the univocality, freshness and clarity of reference. A curious deferral of the main subject through multiple enjambments, the continuously “forking” image of the road, the “scattering” of other images, and the slow and groping pace of the opening stanzas, suggesting difficulties and struggle, reveal the poet’s repeated efforts to turn language into “twiggy stuff” which could be bent more forcefully with each subsequent line to serve the goal of conveying life’s instantaneity. “This verse”, argues Charles Altieri, “is not reporting on a scene, but carving out the edges one takes in the energies produced by the conjunction of details” (2006: 46). The “muddiness” and “mottledness” of words, as well as their gravity and extended time not only augment the prevailing horizontality and drowsiness of the landscape, but also delay our progress towards its ultimate shape and meaning. When the reader has almost settled into the overwhelming sluggishness and heaviness of these stanzas, the subsequent part brings the moment of awakening:

They enter the new world naked,
Cold, uncertain of all
Save that they enter. All about them
The cold, familiar wind –
Now grass, tomorrow
The stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined –
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf
But now the stark dignity of
Entrance – Still, the profound change
Has come upon them: rooted, they
Grip down and begin to awaken.

(WCP 183)

smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface. Now one may say that this is a word” (I 317-318).

The pace in the second part of the poem clearly quickens, the words become edgy, crisp, compressed and tangibly lighter – evidently, the “profound change has come upon them”. As observed by Altieri (2006: 47), the verbs seem more impatient now, more energetic and dynamic, as if they also could not wait to disclose the signs of seasonal change. The sequence “Entrance – Still, the profound change” both introduces and “stills” this change, however, reflecting the uncertainty and the risk of exposing and opening this newly born language to the Other of the empirical world, which seems to be always already caught within the opacity of metaphor and our anguish to see through it. This anguish is contained even in the more assertively sounding line of the seventh stanza, “One by one objects are defined”, which seems to overcome the uncomfortable metaphorical groping, the smudges and oppressive inaccuracy of the initial lines, and turns our attention to the actual happening of language, to the now in which language, cut off from its numinous and transcendentalist roots as well as the vitality of the beyond, seems to be finally at home. “[R]ooted, they / Grip down and begin to awaken”, observes the speaker, for it is the acts of defining, their rootedness in the grip of the word rather than that of the world, that brings this “dazed” landscape to life. We become witnesses to Derrida’s concept of the originary character of metaphor, the moment of the world’s awakening or disclosure in language to which the poet lends his voice. The grip is thus a metaphor for the hold of language over the world, the act of metaphorical rather than metaphysical grounding or correlation, which temporarily stabilizes the landscape and prevents an endless deferral of meaning. The persistent use of the present tense further suggests that the myth of the origin might not necessarily be a process or inception, but a provisional unity of the world signified and forged in language, the unity realized in the moment of its poetic articulation, but always inhabited and haunted by the principle of change and *différance* – “the now of grass” which embraces both “the dead letter” or “stillness” of its withered leaves and a regenerative promise literally and metaphorically enclosed within the “stiff curl of the wildcarrot leaf”. An identity forged in language – as the oscillation between opacity and clarity, immediacy and absence, between the mud of amorphousness and the grip of the naked outline in Williams’ poem demonstrates – is constituted simultaneously by concealment and revelation, the former being an integral part of the poem’s revelatory longings.

Desiring a poetics of contact and fusion in the world withholding its “crooked inviting fingers” (Whitman SoM l. 449), Williams anticipates the deconstruction of the spatio-temporal view of existence as he throws his “dazed” hedgehog-poem onto the road only to discover that writing “deals with word and words only” (*Spring and All* WCP I 225) and that language always dislocates and dis-places the immediacy of experience, realizing itself in a continuous movement between desire and a promise of its fulfillment. The poet acknowledges the inevitable “cleavage” (*Spring and All*, WCP 219) which the imagination and language as its tool produce in “all the phases of experience” (WCP 219). As noted by Bremen, the poet’s “desire to express the ‘new’ in his poem ... to read the signs of the modern in all their immediacy, ultimately lies entombed within the signs of his own poetic inscription” (1993: 18). In “The Road to the Contagious Hospital”, the Adamic myth of the origin – with its metaphysics of insecurity, expectancy, entrance, beginning and pure presence, and with its belief in naming and the generative power of words – is threatened with the *herisson’s* “always already there”, the paradoxical “stiffness of the curl” of language, implying the unsettlingly provisional verbal order outside which the encounter with the world and its “nakedness” seems increasingly unthinkable and impossible.⁹ The delight of the naked phrases lying “bodily” close, assuming independent shapes and actualities, is a profoundly spatial dream of a presentness of language, of words as three-dimensional objects in space, ones that can be turned inside out and cease to be mere ghosts of a lost presence. As Miller observes in *The Linguistic Moment*, when Williams “at last takes possession of the presence of the present ... it is a present ... that is not perceptual but linguistic” (1985: 281).

In his self-reflexive poem “Portrait of the Author” from the 1921 collection *Sour Grapes*, a volume which precedes *Spring and All*, the poet foretells his later anxiety concerning the desired complicity between words as vehicles of representation and the represented reality. Interestingly, the promised portrait of the author begins with a thrice-attempted and thrice-failed description of birches budding in early spring:

⁹ Studying the problem of origin in Williams’ poetry Joseph N. Riddel aptly observes: “Williams is certainly in the ‘Adamic’ tradition of American poetry, as one of our major critics has called it; but he stands at the near end, the doubly-self-conscious end, of that tradition. He writes in and of a time when, in Wallace Stevens’ words, the old gods have been ‘annihilated,’ leaving us ‘feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents’ (1986: 77).

The birches are mad with green points
the wood's edge is burning with their green,
burning, seething – No, no, no.
The birches are opening their leaves one
by one. Their delicate leaves unfold cold
and separate, one by one. Slender tassels
hang swaying from the delicate branch tips –
Oh, I cannot say it. There is no word.
(WCP I 172)

The whole poem soon turns into an interplay between presence and absence, the closed and the open, motion and stillness, tenderness and violence, new beginnings and the apocalyptic end. Each line seems to perform a repeated beginning – an uncertain stroke of a painter trying to adjust his mind and bridge the gap between his subjective desires and the objective reality of the vernal landscape. The “mad” and fiery greenness of the first “draft”, which recalls the bold blurring of late pointillism or the violence of Jackson Pollock’s paint-pouring technique, is followed by the next “sketch”, with the colder and careful realism of the draftsman’s close-up on a separate detail. The burning flame of the wood’s green edge, implying the exuberant imaginative and emotional energy which veers towards abstraction, is here assuaged and stilled by a shift to the subtler and quieter images of delicate leaves and their “slender tassels” swaying from branch tips, indicating a search for a more rigid and austere format in which to convey the tension between objective weather and subjective thought. Using painterly shifts of perspective undoubtedly inspired by the works of Cézanne and the Cubists, which enable him to juxtapose the lush and uncontained overflow of green with the hesitant unfolding of a separate leaf, Williams disrupts the spatio-temporal continuity of landscape description and loosens it for the shifting approximations and insights of his imagination.

And yet, to contain the vitality and growth of spring within a single poem seems another task beyond attainment. Although, as J. Hillis Miller (1969: 291) observes, the undertaken efforts of finding the exact word presuppose Williams’ need for a perfect identification of mind with reality, later expressed in his slogan “No ideas but in things”; nevertheless, the contrast contains the germ of the poet’s doubt in the possibility of naming. The sequence of thrice-repeated “no’s” separating these two descriptions and the poet’s resigned confession (“Oh, I cannot say it. There is no word”) reveal that the troubling contradictions of experience vacil-

lating between our desire for perceptual plentitude and the discontinuities of the mind cannot be easily resolved in the medium of language. The poet, modulating his perceptions, realizes that he cannot reconcile the singularity of his vision and will with the words' tendency to displace presence, to produce another detour to the desired object or phenomenon.

The synthesizing gestures towards expression and representation seem to collapse under the contradictory impulses of the ordering thought and the imperfections of the initial metaphors. Derrida sees in the very idea of reflection a split, an incision and rift, claiming that any image, any doubling "splits what it doubles" (OG 36). Williams' poem resonates with a similar conviction: his portrait subsequently bursts into images of chaos and terror as the mind and language yield under the weight of spring's overbearing vitality: the world, outlined at the beginning of the poem, disappears "torn into shreds" and "wrapped by this flame"; the poet's room – previously a "sweet space of comfort" – is now swallowed up in darkness, with "every familiar object changed and dwarfed", and crushed by "a might that splits comfort, blows apart [its] careful partitions" (WCP I 172-173). If we take these conflicting images of spring as an objective correlative of the eponymous portrait, as the poet's "song of himself", we can see how, in Williams' words, "the imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world" (Williams WCP I 178). In Williams' version of the myth of a beginning, destruction and absence occupy the central position, for – as Anne Fisher-Wirth (1989: 113-114) observes – loss is a necessary part of the poet's discovery, and plentitude often comes in the company of lack. Just like the previously discussed poem, Williams' "Portrait of the Author" echoes and glosses Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Whitman's easy loafing on the grass is an invitation to a more intense and tactile contact with the world, a contact which leads to a greater self-awareness and knowledge, while Williams' portrait turns spring into an apocalyptic experience in which the "fury of lilac blossoms" evokes terror as well as a desire for forgetfulness and self-erasure, a desire to "drink and lie forgetting the world". The Romantic poet lingers and begins anew where his poem ends, as he melts into the road and filters into each "you" that he encounters on his way, becoming a sustaining part of "the dirt" under men's boot-soles (l. 1339) and a nourishing "filter and fiber of [their] blood" (l. 1343). Williams' author seems to repeat the Whitmanesque gesture of addressing the brotherly "you" encountered on the road:

O my brother, you redfaced, living man
ignorant, stupid whose feet are upon
this same dirt that I touch – and eat.
(WCP I 172)

And yet, his address is far from the welcoming and tranquil expectancy of Whitman. Instead, it is ridden with fear of erasure, which generates convulsive emotions: a violent craving for contact and communication, for establishing an imaginative connection, a desire for mutual recognition, for a counteraction of being seen, touched, heard, and understood:

Answer me. I will clutch you. I
will hug you, grip you. I will poke my face
into your face and force you to see me.
Take me in your arms, tell me the commonest
Thing that is in your mind to say,
Say anything. I will understand you -!
(WCP I 173)

A sequence of desperate, increasingly forceful and invasive gestures, such as clutching, hugging, gripping and poking, reveals the modernist poet's estrangement from the world and a growing gap between reality and the mind, a denied access to the once intimate other or "you", a gap which cannot be bridged and filled with a Whitmanesque poetics of exuberant presence and hyper-absorptive contact. Williams' frenzied tactile appeal as well as the excessively violent and possessive grip of the world remain unreciprocated, diffused and frustrated in the splits, crushes, and blows of the subsequent lines, in which the poet succumbs to the conditions of negativity and fragmentation. In the final stanza they give way to a threat of the poet's disappearance into the page and an erinaceous retreat:

And coldly the birch leaves are opening one by one.
Coldly I observe them and wait for the end.
And it ends.
(WCP I 173)

Thus, subjective cries and desires yield to a less vulnerable position of distance. The coldness of the poet's eye and that of the leaves accentuate both the separateness of consciousness from reality and the double lack experienced by the imagination that cannot quite locate itself either in the world or in the word which tries to bridge the cleft between them. Whitman's

“waiting for you”, with its promise of encounter and conversation, becomes here a silent “waiting for the end”, the end which comes with the last word of Williams’ poem – rupturing the attempt at extending and delineating the self and its relation to the world. A foreign and detached observer rather than “part and parcel” of the world as it is with Whitman, Williams’ author offers his reader a difficult “(dis)closure”, a portrait which ends but fails to provide a conclusive “frame”, for it derives from the world with absence and want rather than presence as its center. The portrait of the artist, the beginning and framing of the self is thus contained within that which ends, within the word which not only refuses to become an idea or a metaphor that would absorb and bind the self to the scene, but which, like our hedgehog, only teases us into an “opening” of its secrets in the repeated acts of self-centering and self-searching, and then slips away into silence, hiding its secret anew. The constitutive possibility of the self here reaches its literal and figural end, as it is marked by erasure which belongs to the structure of the poem. Consequently, the final “And it ends” both closes and opens the poem, converging with the end of the text and of the poet’s search for the grounding and the limits of his self. It leaves the poem and spring both unfinished and complete, as both the imagination and language seem to progress towards self-cancellation.

Presence in Williams’ writing, as this self-portrait manifests, is a difficult victory; in Anne Fisher-Wirth’s words – “it can be summoned but not named, embraced but not possessed, experienced but never fully described – is immanent, not transcendent” (1989: 51). The author’s portrait becomes thus the language which both creates and terminates, the language that is here forced to intersect not so much with the empirical landscape as with the poet’s emotive moods, desires and the transforming energies of his mind which it foregrounds and approximates. However, as both the initial abortive attempts and the coldness of the last stanza acknowledge, it fails and escapes also this introspective pull, hinting at the otherness and independence of the word and of the inner and outer realities.

Poetry, states Williams in *Spring and All*,

affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but –
As birds’ wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight.

(WCP I 235)

Affirmation through flight constitutes the frequent paradox of Williams' desire for a perfect presentness and material fullness of language. Commenting on Williams' goal, Coffman observes: "One quality that has always dominated his work is its objectivity: he has tried to bring the word as close as possible to the object" (1951: 222). In *The Great American Novel*, the poet broods on language that could "come to be leaves, trees, the corners of his house" (GAN 166-167), seeking a word that would not be *about* but which would have the gravity and form of a leaf, the physical completeness of a tree, the depth of an edifice. Derrida observes in his essay "The Closure of the Gramme and the Trace of Difference" that "[o]nly presence is mastered" (MP 65), and in his *Spring and All* Williams aims at precisely such mastery. In Miller's apt words, Williams uses names to "take possession of the presence of the present, that eternal moment in which we alone live" (1985: 381).

By choosing spring as the central metaphor of the whole volume and thematizing it in both of the cited poems, Williams tries to affirm the power of language to create and assert presence; however, he also undertakes the task of "reawakening letters", to quote from a reference in his autobiography to an earlier volume, *Kora in Hell*, a book also based on vernal myths. In the autobiography, the poet compares his role to that of the physician-obstetrician, arguing that "he enjoys a wonderful opportunity actually to witness the words being born. Their actual colors and shapes are laid before him carrying their tiny burdens which he is privileged to take into his care with their unspoiled newness" (A 360-361).¹⁰ "The Road to the Contagious Hospital" is a poem in which the reader can witness such a birth of language, with each word struggling out into the world and taking on shape and color before our eyes. Thus, the poet "makes spring happen", but, as Miller observes, it is "spring without spring", made of "words energized by nature but detached from nature, no longer a symbol of it", the spring "almost about to come". (1985: 389)

"The poem is made of things – on a field" (A 333), Williams argues, it "is new, immediate – It is so because it is actual, always real. It is experience dynamized into reality" (I 134). In this way, the poet renounces the purely mimetic relation between the poem and the world. In *Spring and*

¹⁰ Brian A. Bremen (1993: 85) devotes a whole chapter of his book to the relationship between Williams' medical practice and his career as a poet, arguing convincingly that this relationship was "symbiotic" and that the role of a doctor "provided the clearest model of Williams' aspirations for his writing".

All he is more explicit about his vision: “Poetry is not a description nor an evocation of objects or situations, . . . poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it – It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action . . ., it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but–” (WCP I 234-235). Commenting on the same passage, Gilbert finds the suspended sentence indicative of Williams’ “ongoing ambivalence with regard to representation” and of “a real tension . . . between the mimetic and transcriptive function of Williams’ poetics and the nonmimetic, dynamic quality of the poem as he describes it” (1991: 108). “The Road to the Contagious Hospital” registers this tension, as it simultaneously longs for representational faithfulness and independent “thingness” of the poetic word. Expressive of Williams’ urge to name and affirm the immediacy of experience, his language reveals also its sovereign reality and the anti-mimetic pull, as the erinaceous discontinuities and obscurities of the poem obstinately refuse to be gathered into an aesthetic whole. Thus, despite the poet’s efforts, the experiential and the discursive cannot be seamlessly and completely fused in the poem, and the road unveiled to the reader inevitably branches into a *via rupta*, paving the way for the deliberately disruptive strategies of Wallace Stevens’ work.

Wallace Stevens sees the task of the poet differently, which draws him even closer to the Derridian concept of the poem-as-hedgehog. In the Whitmanesque “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”, he defines the role of the poet as that of “the angel of reality” or / and “the necessary angel of the earth” (WSCP 496), foregrounding the figure of mediation as the indispensable element of poetic practice. The poem has a dialogical structure and opens with an exchange between “one of the countrymen” and the angel:

One of the countrymen:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,

Seen for a moment standing in the door”

(WSCP 496)

The lines contain a premonition of the erinaceous play of insecurities to come, as they supply the first element of “in-betweenness”—the angel, usually a messenger of Heaven or an intermediary between the realm of the spirit and material reality; here, however, he lacks the “ashen wing” and “wear of ore”, sheds his “tepid aureole” and becomes an advocate of reality, a messenger of New *Haven* rather than New *Heaven*,¹¹ in whose sight people can “see the earth again” (WSCP 496). It also evokes the angel envisioned by Walter Benjamin: “The angel, however, resembles all from which I have had to part: persons and above all things. In the things I no longer have, he resides. He makes them transparent” (Benjamin quoted after Bloom 1986c: 25). The angel curiously affirms loss, an absence that returns, reaffirming and transcending itself. Stevens’ image of an ill-adapted angel suspended in the door, and made visible only in the apprehension of his flight, in the threat of his disappearance, contains both Benjamin’s angel and Derrida’s fugitive *herisson* which opens the poem up for the workings and dissemination of *différance*. The question which follows confirms this direction of Stevens’ thought:

.... Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,
A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?
(WSCP 497)

The insistence on and the repetition of figures of imperfection, lack, provisionality, half-vision and half-meanings ground the reader in a different realm than Williams’ groping for the organic fullness of form, pulling us closer towards a full poetics of the *herisson*. In my analysis, it will be exemplified particularly by one of Stevens’ last masterpieces, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, which, in Roger Gilbert’s words, is a “major culmination of the genre, one that carries to a new level of sophistication the walk poem’s meditative tendencies” (1991: 75). As I shall try to demonstrate, Williams’ wary hedgehog, clinging to the road and struggling to

¹¹ Jarraway points out this pun in the poem’s title in his book *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief* (1994: 18).

retain the gravity, completeness and roundedness of a naked organism is, in the Derridian sense “lifted off the autoroute” in Stevens’ work, veering towards dispersion or self-destruction, exhibiting an inherent split at its heart.

Undoubtedly one of the most splendid examples of peripatetic poems in the American literary tradition, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” registers Stevens’ meditative musings during an evening walk in New Haven, a town located at a small travelling distance from his hometown Hartford.¹² The movement, both temporal and spatial, is felt on many levels of the poem, but it is not the birthing and originating struggle from Williams’ “Spring and All”: in the hesitant structure, the unstable and shifting imagery, the incessant movement and restlessness of language, Stevens introduces his hedgehog – a much swifter and more elusive “creature” than that of Williams, and one which more openly and willingly confronts us with its own difficulty and obscurity. The nature of this difficulty is similar to that expressed in Williams’ poems, and it can be summarized by the following line from Stevens’ opening stanza: “The vulgate of experience. Of this / A few words, and yet, and yet, and yet–” (WSCP 465). The self-reflexive suspension of the sentence discloses one of the *herisson’s* prickly truths, namely an impossible dream of telling “the vulgate of experience”, of capturing “the ordinary” of life, which features prominently in the poem’s title. Already in its opening verses, the poem, like Derrida’s playful hedgehog, at once invites and excludes the reader through multiple verbal screens, half-presences, and missed communications: “Appearances of what appearances, / Words, lines, not meanings, not communications” (WSCP 456).

Centering the first half of the poem on the image of the house, Stevens may seem to be seeking some stabilizing truth – the familiar which can arrest the “liquid lingering / Like watery words awash” (WSCP 496):

¹² Stevens loved walking, a habit that he developed as a child in Reading. As noted by Lombardi, he walked the two miles to his office in Hartford, meditating, absorbing the landscape, and often composing his poems on the way. Stevens himself confessed: “A great deal of my poetry has been written while I have been walking. Walking helps me to concentrate and I suppose that, somehow or other, my own movement gets into the movement of the poems”. Stevens, quoted in Thomas Francis Lombardi (1998: 44).

... We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself
(WSC P471)

The goal echoes Williams' own search from *Spring and All* which carried the promise of directness and precision, that dream of words without the "aureoles" and "greasy contexts", such as the poet admired in Moore's work (Williams WSE 128). However, as we progress from the houses "composed of the sun" (WSCP 465) that in Stevens' metaphoric inventory often indicates palpable reality,¹³ through the houses "composed of ourselves" (466), which turn into "an impalpable town, full of / impalpable bells, transparencies of sound", "impalpable habitation", "the indefinite / confused illuminations and sonorities" (466), to the final "shade that traverses / A dust" (489), we are bound to realize that such a permanently habitable truth is an illusion, that what seems a palpable vision is an indefinite desire, "a hill of stones" which cannot quite "make beau mont" (466). The uncertain, pebbly and slippery surface of the ground on which we stand contemplating Stevens' hedgehog is indicated already by the initial rejection of a mere "journalism of subjects" (467), which could register only the immediate circumstances and topography of New Haven. Instead, the poet offers us continuous interplay between the familiar and the strange, reality and illusion, dream and consciousness, darkness and light, coldness and heat, reflection and "the plainness of plain things". Williams' desperate attempts at bending language to name the essentials, to endow words with the power that could match the creative power of spring, seems a lost cause here as the deeper we delve into the poem's tissue the more precarious and indefinite seems our position in it. From its first lines, Stevens' hedgehog-poem defiantly pulls us away from the concrete place into its wonder-world of

¹³ Heringman, for instance, observes that "the sun, yellow, the tropic south, summer, physical nature: these symbolize the realm of reality, disorder, the actual" (1965: 1). In "Sunday Morning", we can find the following thought of the poet: "[we] live in the old chaos of the sun / the old dependency of day and night" (WSCP 70).

the mind's obscurity, the "less legible meanings of sounds" (488), the "swarming activities" (488) or the impermanent permanences (472) of thought.¹⁴

Stevens' imagination creates a Derridian *herisson* through his skillful manipulation of spatial and sensual imagery which uncovers a new receptivity to experience and spatiality. Like Derrida's hedgehog – suspended between autostradas, often found on the edge of the receding road or seen fleeing beyond the boundary of vision and touch – "An Ordinary Evening" emerges from the notions of the threshold, in-betweenness, edge, limit, door, contour and distance.¹⁵ Significantly, the season chosen by Stevens is not spring, as in Williams' poem, but the beginning of autumn – the time of transition between the lush fullness of the summer and the bareness of winter. The choice is well suited to the work's meditative character, for neither the mind of the poet nor the language which is its extension need to be stabilized or anchored here; instead, they follow the "mobile and the immobile flickering" of autumn, willingly locating themselves "[i]n the area between is and was", finding a perfect equivalent for the "presences of thoughts" in "the whirlings" of leaves in the gutter (474).

Stevens' "flickering" town is a space of liminality, "poised at the horizon's dip", "at the edge of the afternoon" (483), in the twilight zone of the day's turn. However, even the autumnal frame dissolves in the lines which, as suggested by Lensing (2001: 102), merge different seasonal orders, as the line in which "[t]he hibernal dark that hung / In primavera . . . / Becomes the rock of autumn" (476). The edges and the contours are not meant to sharpen our vision, as was the case in Williams' poem; they are what

¹⁴ In a letter to Louis Martz, Stevens himself described the idea of the poem thus: "I wanted to have something that would relate to the poem's occasion but not directly. So I fixed on this idea of a poem about a walk in New Haven, but then branching out". Martz recalls a conversation with the poet who said that "it really got so far away from the base that New Haven hardly appears in it. It's only the title, really, but that's the way things happen with me. I start with a concrete thing, and it tends to become so generalized that it isn't any longer a local place". Martz quoted in Brazeau (1983: 175).

¹⁵ Stevens' use of spatial metaphors has been pointed out by many critics. Placing Stevens in the Heideggerian frame of "dwelling poetically", Frank Kermode calls Stevens "a poet of thresholds". See especially Kermode's essay "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut" (1980: 265). Jacek Gutorow similarly observes that Stevens' poetry is "strongly informed by images and metaphors relating to space, location, site, architecture, exterior and interior (house, home, room), and they often manifest themselves by way of spatial, and not topical relations and interdependencies" (2007: 151).

Stevens aptly names as “the indefinite, / confused illuminations” (466), blurred and destabilized in their constant shifts, fractures and bifurcations, and in the continuous interplay between the inside and the outside. The edge is here a Derridian mark of difference, which does not delimit sense but creates a margin, space for new rifts and further movements of the poem’s secrets. The familiar doors thus open onto “[a] mirror / a lake of reflections in a room” (468), whereas reality is an infant that “kneels always on the edge of space / In the pallid perceptions of its distances” (469); the incredible day becomes credible only in “its misted contours” (470). The quoted lines pull towards a discontinuity of space which either recedes, breaks or disappears in the self-reflexive imagery of the poem. The streets of New Haven do not unveil as the road did in Williams’ spring poem – whose desired movement is from “mottledness” to clarity, from absence to the naked presence, from death to life – but, rather, appear curiously oneiric, absent and surreal from the start, “snuffed out / By these obese opiates of sleep” (467), “[o]bscure, in colors whether of the sun / Or mind” (466), and filled with “the cold volume of forgotten ghosts” (468). Some of those “ghosts” are the “lions of the spirit” which constantly cross paths with “the lion of reality”, until “real and unreal are two in one” (485). The lion, the figure often used by Stevens to suggest the duality of the mind and the world,¹⁶ “must stand potent in the sun”, but it soon turns into “a cat of a sleek transparency”, “shining with a nocturnal shine alone” (473).¹⁷ In this

¹⁶ In one of his letters, the poet describes the relationship between the mind and reality as follows: “I want to face nature the way two lions face one another – the lion in the lute facing the lion locked in stone. I want as a man of the imagination to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man’s imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality” (WSL 345). The metaphor also features prominently in his “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”, where we can come across an image of a lion which “roars at the enraging desert, / Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise, / Defies red emptiness to evolve his match (WSCP 384)”.

¹⁷ The image of the cat echoes the opening of Eliot’s peripatetic “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, where the yellow fog of the night is enlivened and becomes a cat: “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes / Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening / Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains / Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys / Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap / And seeing that it was a soft October night / Curled once about the house, and fell asleep” T. S. Eliot (1999: 24). However, while Eliot’s image “rubs” its visual concreteness, its striking sensuality and imagistic consistency against the reader’s imagination, Stevens’ cat, al-

interplay between nocturnal and diurnal light, three-dimensional objects begin to shed their material substance and relax their grip on reality. Elements of the cityscape move and become textualized or transformed: the marble statues are lifted and float free “like newspapers blown by the wind”, “the shadow of bare rock, / Becomes the rock of autumn, glittering” (XV); the seasons lose their distinctive contours.

Drawn into the bizarre universe of Stevens’ hedgehog-poem, we kneel dangerously on the edge of space and non-space, of the graspable and the elusive, barely discerning our whereabouts; as in a dream, we are swallowed into its curious world of indefinite visions offering no certain foothold – nothing “ontologically permanent”, to use Jarraway’s words (1993: 312) – for each image, and each cry, as the poet himself acknowledges, “contains its converse in itself” (WSCP 471), a trace which sustains the presence of its “profound absentia” (469). Thus, amassing its powers of indeterminacy, and unveiling the obscurity of its colors, the poem forces us to thread our way through its repeated polarities and contradictions. Here everything is “as unreal as real can be” (468); the physical town, “the actual scene”, lures us into “its metaphysical streets behind all actual seeing”, its “hallucinations in surfaces” (472), as if enacting a suspicion that the living presence is always already an inscription, a trace, “a larger poem / for a larger audience” (465).

Stevens’ hedgehog-poem crosses the road in many senses of the word – it traverses the familiar-strange cityscape of New Haven, crossing our way and leaving a trace for us to follow, while at the same time cancelling, erasing itself and constantly misting the contours of the created reality in the impatient movement of each subsequent stanza. Harold Bloom (1977: 306) notes that Stevens does not feel at home in New Haven and it is exactly this sense of estrangement that “unsettles the self” (and language) in the poem. However, it does also unsettle the reader, whose attention is constantly tested by the meandering shifts between real and unreal sensations and their refracted sense. To cross means “to run counter, to oppose, to confront in a troublesome manner” (OED), and the reader is made to experience such resistances and confrontations at every turn of line and thought. There is a vague gesturing at a substantiality in placing the mind “[a]lways in emptiness that would

though “sleekly” transparent, has a tendency to disperse in the nocturnal shadows of the poet’s abstract and discursive elaborations.

be filled / In denial that cannot contain its blood” (467), as if beneath this elusive flow of affirmations and denials existed something at once beyond and within our cognitive grasp. As Harold Bloom (1977: 306) acutely avers, “the text is almost impossible to read, that is, the text keeps seeking ‘reality’ while continually putting into question its own apotheosis of reality”.

Referring to the role of the critic in deconstructionist practice, J. Hillis Miller argues:

Deconstruction does not provide an escape from nihilism, nor from metaphysics, nor from their uncanny inherence in one another. There is no escape. It does, however, move back and forth within this inherence. It makes the inherence oscillate in such a way that one enters a strange borderland, a frontier region which seems to give the widest glimpse into the other land (“beyond metaphysics”), though this land may not by any means be entered and does not in fact exist for Western man.

(1986: 231)

Stevens’ peripatetic musings seem to take us into a similar “borderland”, a “frontier region” in which we are constantly teased out of and back into the actual, as we try to steady the uncertain referential realm of the poem and reach the edges of this perplexing, and frequently non-specular space. However, seduced by mirages of shapes and meanings, “[w]e fling ourselves, constantly longing / on this form / We descend to the street and inhale a health of air / To our sepulchral hollows” (470). The quoted lines skillfully capture the experience of the poem as defined by Derrida: a feeling of longing and failure as its full significance always escapes us, and yet a sense that with each self-cancelling thought our “sepulchral hollows” are filled with something fresh and nourishing.

As a space of in-betweenness, Stevens’ imaginary walk in search for “the poem of pure reality” (471) produces a temporalized experience of space, one seen as a certain mode of existence – an activity of disclosure, understood in Heideggerian terms as an interplay between revelation and concealment rather than as a container of objects that exist in space or a simple sum of their relations.¹⁸ This activity, requiring a certain openness

¹⁸ The idea of space as a mode of existence was formulated by Martin Heidegger in Chapter 7 of his *Being and Time*, and also in the earlier *History of the Concept of Time*. In these works the philosopher rejects both the Newtonian absolute space and Leibnitz’s concept of space as a certain “order of coexistences”, both of which presuppose that space is

and attentiveness to the possibilities and relations inscribed in space, produces a *différance* which, in Derrida's words, is "the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation—in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being—are always deferred" (Pos 25). New Haven, seen through "the eye made clear of uncertainty" (471), is an impossible dream, for "[w]e do not know what is real and what is not" (472), and the pedestrian ground under the poet's feet constantly slips into nontransparent hallucinations (472), activities of the mind and language, forever preventing a deeper proximity of the world as it is.¹⁹

an independent, objective entity, in which we exist. Heidegger identifies three types of space: world-space, regions (*Gegend*), and Dasein's spatiality. The first type is the physical space which can be imagined as a container of sorts, inside which objects exist. The region, in turn, is a functional space in which our daily activities are realized, while Dasein's spatiality is a peculiar form of *dis*-placement. This notion removes the dichotomy between the subjective and objective perceptions of space, and is integral with his concept of Being-in-the-World. "The homogeneous space of Nature", Heidegger explains, "shows itself only when the entities we encounter are discovered in such a way that the worldly character of the ready-to-hand gets specifically *deprived of its worldhood*" (BT 147, 112), which is to be understood as a way of disclosure that requires a particular spatial participation, open to the unsettledness, the unsheltered mode of being-in-the world. Our awareness of space as something solid is replaced by a sense of our being as an occurrence, a conscious confrontation, a continual movement of un-grounding leading to a hermeneutic freedom. Although Stevens might not have been familiar with those concepts, he was undoubtedly very much aware of the changing perception of material reality and space, whose stability and solidity had been questioned by new developments in science, psychology and philosophy. Revealing his preoccupation with the issue, in one of his essays he quoted C. E. M Joad's remark on Bergson: "Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed? There is no answer. Philosophy has long dismissed the notion of substance and modern physics has endorsed the dismissal. . . How, then, does the world come to appear to us as a collection of solid, static objects extended in space? Because of the intellect, which presents us with a false view if it".

¹⁹ In his detailed study of the seasons in Stevens' poetry, George S. Lensing sees in the poet's "mental indulgences"(as he calls the composition of "An Ordinary Evening") "a kind of madness, or a view of the world by inebriation, hypnosis, or some other stubborn delusion" (2001: 103). Interestingly, the critic interprets them as reflexive of Stevens' "dread of a failure to find accommodation in the world of ordinary lives and its attendant loneliness" (103). However, the aporetic movement of Stevens' thought seems to suggest not only the confusions of the imagination grappling with "the momentary terrors of its extremities" (Lensing 2001: 103), but also those of language, which builds "impalpable habitations" and often fails to capture and convey in a pure form the properties of the real. The

Although seemingly committed to the same search for the absolute visibility of thought in language, a similar “plain sense of things” and clarity of perception that underlies the poetic goals of Williams, Stevens is divided between “One part / Held fast tenaciously in common earth / And one from central earth to central sky / And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind” (WSCP 468). For the author of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, poetic discourse hazards a precarious location between “the commonplace” and “the miraculous / Conceptions of new mornings of new worlds” (WSCP 470), thriving also in the separation between the world and its human conceptions. This separation enables the poet to create a peculiar *topos* within which the epistemological access to being is possible only through the indeterminate and open set of infinite possibilities and evasions.

Contrary to the organic thrust of Williams’ poem, whose goal was to display how meaning comes both *in* and *with* the spring of the word, Stevens’ peripatetic musings collect but refuse to hold together the contraries and dissimilarities of “each beautiful enigma” (472) constituting his vision. The harmony or the Derridian “consummation of the present” (Pos 28), if achievable at all, here seems extremely fragile and temporal, for it is rooted not in the urgency of our present being, but in the shifting recollections of consciousness, “the never ending meditation” (WSCP 465) which is governed by the structure of disclosure and concealment. “Reality as a thing seen by the mind is not that which is but that which is apprehended” (WSCP 468), argues the speaker in the poem, observing further that “In the metaphysical streets, / the profoundest forms / Go with the walker subtly walking there / These he destroys with wafts of wakening” (473). The passage simultaneously creates and undercuts the connection between depth

arrangement of the cantos, which – as Lensing observes – move from distortion to increased bareness and “visibility of thought”, may indeed testify to a desire that Stevens and Williams share, namely the need for the poem to be, rather than merely describe. However, the final lines of the poem seem to contradict this ordering and simplifying thrust, as they place us back in the “less legible meanings of sounds”, “Flickings from finikin to fine finikin”, “the edgings and inching of final form” (488), all of which concentrate on the difficulty of finding the perfect form and which sound self-mocking, and point to the word and form of the poem as failed approximations and provisional fulfillments. The closing image of reality as “a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (489) also refuses to anchor the poem in the visible, solid and distinctive. Shade, as aptly observed by Harold Bloom (1977: 337), is “a disjunctive force”, another uncertain and destabilizing factor of transition and indefiniteness.

and surface, between the physical and the metaphysical, as if the world could reveal its truth only in the mind's repeated destructions of the unity of understanding and living. The word "waft" is very adequate here, as it contains the ephemeral lightness, impulsiveness and imbalance of the poem's movement, which can be juxtaposed with the gravitational, "gripping" and crystallizing pull of Williams' crafted line. To emphasize the uncomfortable relation between the world and the poetic form, Stevens – unlike Williams, who believed vehemently in the corruptive influence of linguistic obscurity²⁰ – reduces the recognizable sensual detail, refracting the familiar elements of New Haven's topography and weather into a curiously disembodied and nondescript mindscape.

Interestingly, as if echoing Williams, Stevens promises in canto IX that "We seek / Nothing beyond reality"; however, as the poet further admits in a line which sounds very Emersonian (Bloom 1977: 321), within it he seeks

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,
The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air
(WSCP 471-472)

The Emersonian "script", with "the spirit that goes roundabout", seems to be opening the poem to that upward, infinite thrust of "the heavens and high, night air", to what transcends language, leading us back to the rich metaphysical scene of Romanticism, which remains inscribed in the poem. Although Stevens' lines are actively haunted by the Romantic and Transcendentalist structures of thought, it cannot wholly control them, as it realizes itself in abundance, vitality and, to borrow from Bloom (1977: 306), the "copiousness" of its unstable, spectral and colliding images. The curious dematerialization of Stevens' description suggests that a poem, in his own rhetoric, is "a sense in the changing sense / Of things", "a text that is an answer, although obscure" (478), a "cry... / Not wholly spoken in a conversa-

²⁰ Referring to the poetry of Gertrude Stein, Williams observed: "Everything we know and do is tied up with words, with the phrases words make, with the grammar which stultifies. . . . it's the words we need to get back to, words washed clean". ("A Pound Stein", WSE 163)

tion between / Two bodies disembodied in their talk, / Too fragile, too immediate for any speech” (WSCP 471). This fragile but simultaneously immediate form, a conversation or a cry that is “not wholly spoken”, resounds with the Derridian supposition that literature is something like a “‘specter’ – a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. . . . There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed” (SM 6). For Derrida, literature is a secret, always something withheld, kept in reserve, something that is yet to come, a promise of the truth which resists total signification; and Stevens’ poem is an excellent example of those spectral qualities of the literary experience described above.²¹ It offers us a “description without place”, for – although it does not dissociate itself entirely from the order of representation, from “the ordinary” of New Haven – it does not belong to it, either, reminding us always of the existence of the unaccountable, the *différance*.

In his essay “Nuances of a Theme by Stevens”, Denis Donoghue observes that “Stevens loved to declare a theme, and then go *walking* (emphasis mine) around as if it were a cathedral or a blackbird; he loved the process of thinking, not the thought that presses for a conclusion” (1965: 227-228). Similarly, Jarraway, in his analysis of “An Ordinary Evening” writes: “[t]he implication from the very first line of the poem, then, and on into the rest of its thirty-one sections, is that Wallace Stevens writes a text without closure, a vast reticulated web characterized only by ‘an and yet, and yet, and yet—’” (1993: 314). Thus, Stevens chooses for his erinaceous poem the mode of peripatetic sauntering and the possibilities of disclosure granted by it not only to evoke the mutability of thought, but also to disclose material reality and language as an event, an interaction that can lead in many directions. Language in his poem is a continuous motion in itself, a “swarming activity” which is part of a “never-ending meditation”.

As I have stated earlier, Williams closes “On the Road to the Contagious Hospital” with the image of gripping down, awakening and resurrection, hoping that language can adhere to reality and be turned into a source of new life. If we juxtapose this closure with Stevens’ final “dust, a force that traverses a shade” (WSCP 489), the difference between their aesthetic

²¹ I will discuss the spectral qualities of Stevens’ poetry in Chapter Three, where I look into the metaphysical concerns of modernist poetry.

sensibilities becomes apparent. Williams' poem, as noted by Roger Gilbert (1991: 107), "is committed to the raw material of sense data" and tries to capture "the particular objects and impressions that enter the poet's consciousness". Although Williams often fails to achieve his goal, he aspires to straightforwardness, immediacy and transparency of meaning. Stevens, in turn, prefers to leave his readers with a shade of meaning, if not with its beautifully sustained evasion, which neither rejects nor affirms the potential lack of truth behind his "edgings and inchings of final form" (WSCP 485). Miller describes Stevens' poem as that which "constantly pulls the rug out from under itself, so to speak, blows its cover. It constantly deprives itself of that origin or ground with which it seems at the same time to provide itself" (1985: 4). Indeed, the conjunction of dust and shade in the closing lines confirms this strategy, as the dust is dispersed and effaced, becoming "a force" in "a shade", suggesting that reality vanishes in its representation and that the interpenetration of the word and the world does not necessarily give birth to Williams' clarity of outline. Jarraway (1993: 227) insightfully notes that Stevens wants to "hold men closely in discovery by, paradoxically, with-holding metaphoricality's own disco-verability, allowing itself to be manifested in the speed of movement, the velocities of change, in the act of discovery itself". Thus, New Haven dissolves and reveals itself in the dust of Stevens' with-holdings and velocities of change, "in a place of transcendent truth... offering us a text instead – 'A text that is an answer, although obscure'" (Jarraway 1993: 17). Williams, on the other hand, breathes into and awakens his words to the materiality of life and tries to make his hedgehog-poem part of the road itself, a full presence that can become one with the objective reality – a word which is not about something but, as the poet himself affirms, "an addition to nature" (WCP I 226), and of "a physical more than literary character" (WCP II 54-55). The dream of the poet, strongly felt in the vernal, originating power of his road poems is "to enter a new world, and have there freedom of movement and newness" (WCPI 219).

1.2. The hedgehog's (un)spoken secrets: A Derridian *retrait* of metaphor in Marianne Moore's animal poems

It is a great thing indeed to make a proper use of the poetical forms, as also of compounds and strange words. But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor

–Aristotle, *Poetics*

Habitually, usually, a metaphor claims to procure access to the unknown and to the indeterminate by the detour of something recognizably familiar.

–Jacques Derrida (MP 118)

Metaphor is a process of tension, and energy, manifested in the process of language, not in the single word.

–Martin Foss, *Symbol and Metaphor in Human Experience*, 61

all the minutiae – a
resemblance has some-
how been maintained, to wisdom that is formidable
only in darkness. Truth is no Apollo
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.

–Marianne Moore, “In the Days of Prismatic
Color” (MCP 41-42)

Considering the question of the tropological nature of human discourse in his essay “The Epistemology of Metaphor”, Paul de Man observes:

Contrary to common belief, literature is not the place where the unstable epistemology of metaphor is suspended by aesthetic pleasure, although this attempt is a constitutive moment of its system. It is rather the place where the possible convergence of rigor and pleasure is shown to be a delusion. The consequences of this lead to the difficult question whether the entire semantic, semiological, and performative field of language can be said to be covered by tropological models, a question which can only be raised after the proliferating and disruptive power of figural language has been fully recognized.

(EM 30)

De Man’s inquiry into the epistemological role of metaphor reveals some of the concerns addressed also by Derrida in his numerous insights into the role of figuration in contemporary philosophical and literary discourse. “All language is language about denomination”, observes the former in his *Allegories of Reading*, “that is, a conceptual, figural, metaphorical language. ... If all language is about language, then the paradigmatic linguistic model is that of an entity that confronts itself” (ALR 152-153). Acknowledging the confrontational, metalinguistic nature of metaphoric language and its “proliferating and disruptive power”, de Man ponders over the issue whether “the metaphors illustrate a cognition or if the cognition is not perhaps shaped by the metaphors” (ALR 16). De Man goes so far as to speak of a

doubt or epistemological threat posed by tropological modes of thinking and the catachrestic power of metaphor. In his 1978 Geneva lecture, delivered during a Colloquium titled “Philosophy and Metaphor”, Derrida poses a similar question: “What is happening, today, with metaphor? ... And without metaphor what is happening?” (Derrida WP 102). The philosopher traces back the etymology of the Greek term *metaphorikos*, reminding us that it refers to means of transportation. “*Metaphora*”, continues the French philosopher, “circulates in the city, it conveys us like inhabitants, along all sorts of passages, with intersections, red lights, one-way streets, crossroads or crossings, patrolled zones and speed limits. We are in a certain way – metaphorically of course, and as concerns the mode of habitation – the content and the tenor of this vehicle: the passengers, comprehended and displaced by metaphor” (WP 102). Employing a series of spatial metaphors to explain the very term, Derrida enhances his argument that metaphoricity is the inescapable condition of man’s cognitive response to the world,²² with metaphor being a vehicle which simultaneously creates and gets its user through the “limits and patrolled zones” of language, a vehicle which helps him “comprehend the subject” but at the same time “carries him away, displaces him at the very moment when this subject believes he is designating it, saying it, orienting it, driving it, governing it ‘like a pilot in his ship’” (Derrida WM 103).²³ Just like his unruly hedgehog-poem, repeatedly and compulsively returning onto the hostile road that threatens its very exist-

²² In “The Ellipsis of the Sun”, Derrida observes that “all species of words can be employed, or in effect are employed, *metaphorically*, if not as figures, at least as *catachreses*” (ES 235).

²³ Derrida develops his argument on the metaphoricity of all language in the following passage: “I am trying to speak *about* metaphor, to say something proper or literal on this subject, to *treat* it as my subject, but through metaphor (if one may say so) I am obliged to speak it *more metaphorico*, to it in its own manner. I cannot *treat* it (*en traïter*) without *dealing with it* (*sans traïter avec elle*), without negotiating with it the loan I take from it in order to speak of it” (WP 103). In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur similarly observes that “it is impossible to talk about metaphor non-metaphorically... in short that the definition of metaphor returns on itself” (ROM 18). Interestingly, Tito Perlini sees the all-pervading metaphoricity in Derrida’s own critical practice: “When he approaches philosophical subjects, Derrida shows himself to be dangerously inclined to metaphorizing, which translates into a phosphorescent halo that, enveloping the page, hampers the perception and precise definition of the conceptual web of the discourse. Speculation, with Derrida, tends to convert itself into metaphor. . . .” (“Ontological come violenza”, *Nuova corrente* 63. 24, quoted in Stellardi 1998: 125).

tence, Derrida's metaphor is epistemologically ambivalent – essentially “intractable” and paradoxical, at once “sure and dubious” (Derrida WM 104, 261), because it lets man control and steer his thought only to a certain point, beyond which “drifting or skidding” begins (Derrida RM 103).²⁴

Addressing Heidegger's “Das Wesen der Sprache”, according to which “the metaphoric exists only within the boundaries of the metaphysical”, Derrida introduces the concept of a *retrait* of metaphor, explaining it in the following passage:

The word *retrait* (a trait in addition to supplement the subtracting withdrawal, the *re-trait* expressing at once, at one stroke [*d'un trait*] the plus and the minus), designates the generalizing and supplementary return only in a sort of quasicatachrestic violence, a sort of abuse I impose on language, but an abuse that I hope is overjustified by necessity of good, economic formalization. *Retrait* is neither a translation nor a non-translation (in the current sense) in relation to the text of Heidegger; it is neither proper nor literal, neither figurative nor metaphoric.

(Derrida RM 118)

The concept, as indicated by Morny (1988: 515), reveals Derrida's weakness for *double entendres*, since, just like *différance*, supplement or *pharmakon*, the word *re-trait* marks both a re-turn, replication, or repetition of a certain trait and its retreat, or withdrawal. “The rich polysemy of the word” (RM 114) – Derrida observes – can be useful in conveying the energy and substance of Heideggerian poetics and thought, including his concept of the *epochè* of being, which signifies being's self-concealment and withholding. In Derrida's words,

The whole of this aforesaid history of Western metaphysics would be a vast structural process where the *epochè* of Being withholding itself, holding itself in withdrawal, would take or rather *would present* an (interlaced) series of guises, of turns, of modes, that is to say of figures or of tropical aspects [*allures*] which we could be tempted to describe with the aid of rhetorical conceptuality.

(RM 114)

²⁴ Evoking the etymology of the word “metaphor”, de Man reaches a similar conclusion: “tropes are not just travellers, they tend to be smugglers and probably smugglers of stolen goods at that. What makes matters even worse is that there is no way of finding out whether they do so with criminal intent or not” (EM 19).

Thus, metaphor can be taken to mean a supplementary fold that makes room for both a beginning and deferral of sense. It is a temporal adumbration, deviation and exile of identity and sense via the detour of figures which nevertheless promise their return to light. As a more specific example of such a *retrait* of metaphor, Derrida borrows Heidegger's *quasimeta*-phor of language as the House of Being, in which the familiar and familial of the house encounters the *unheimlich* (uncanny) and unnamable of Being. The tension between the two elements disrupts and destabilizes the very concept of metaphor, which – in the habitual use – “claims to procure access to the unknown and to the indeterminate by the detour of something recognizably familiar” (Derrida RM 118).²⁵ Here it is the familiar and the contiguous of the house that is affected more profoundly than Being, for Being draws into its proximity and “promises more about the house than the house about Being”, as it sheds its anti-metaphoric, indefinable uncanniness onto its neighbor and defamiliarizes it in this relation (Derrida RM 120). Being frees both “the unlimited extension and [the] withdrawal of metaphoricity” (RM 121), with language-as-dwelling becoming a space of shelter and withdrawal, in which we lose distinction between the predicate and the subject, the aforementioned vehicle and tenor. Metaphor itself, argues the French philosopher after Du Marsais, can be described in the same vein as a “borrowed home” (RM 113), at once protective and alien, proximate and distant, familiar and threatening, expanding and limiting in its provisional security, into which the being and truth “re-turn” and withdraw.

Being thus especially prone to “the chance and risk of *mimēsis*”, figurative thought, which deviates from the simple naming of a phenomenon, often obscures the very thought which it is meant to convey. As Ricoeur also demonstrates, metaphorical meaning “denies the well-established distinction between sense and representation, ... compelling us to explore the borderline between the verbal and the nonverbal” (1978: 149). As a result, the truth of metaphor is never secure, for it derives from the process of metaphoric displacement, which triggers signification when the nonmeaning that precedes language clashes with “the truth of language” (Derrida WM 241), or with something which is considered the “proper” meaning of words. Metaphor thus suspends the referential function of

²⁵ In Heidegger's words, “[l]anguage is rather the house of Being, in which living there man ek-sists, in that he belongs to the truth of Being by assuming its guardianship”. Quoted after Derrida (RM 120)

language,²⁶ introducing – to borrow Ricoeur’s observation on the metaphorical modes of discourse – “a tension between all the terms in the metaphorical statement” (Ricoeur 1975: 77)²⁷. Defined in such terms, metaphor contains “the possibility of non-truth”, and realizes itself in “the moment of detour in which the truth might still be lost” (Derrida WM 241). As observed by Joy Morny (1988: 512), Derrida’s concept of metaphor denounces and criticizes “any metaphysical claims to truth and absoluteness”, stressing the rhetoricity of all truths and the possibility of their being subverted “by those very forms of language that sustain them” (Morny 1988: 512).

Derrida’s concept of metaphor, infused with Heideggerian sensitivity, foregrounds certain elements characteristic of Marianne Moore’s poetic practice. At once defensive and communicative, dubious and sure, familiar and uncannily strange, Moore’s metaphor can be accessed only with the cautiousness and care advocated by Derrida in his hedgehog essay “Che cosa’è la poesia?”. In “Picking and Choosing”, the poet asserts: “Words are constructive when they are true; the opaque allusion—the simulated / flight / upward—accomplishes nothing” (MCP 45). Facts, the poet argues, should not be clouded, for “art is exact perception” (“Qui S’Excuse, S’Accuse”, BMM 346); however, her often super-mimetic descriptions – apparently resisting metaphoricity, as they frequently foreground the literal and the visual – produce a strong effect of defamiliarization, raising the epistemological problem of the objectivity and transparency of language, as they destabilize the conceptual message which they are meant to convey and put in question the belief that perception can indeed ever be exact. Perhaps more than any other modernist poet, Moore fulfills Derrida’s condition of the poetic meta-

²⁶ Ricoeur observes that poetic language seems especially prone to the suspension of the referential function as it “is no less *about* reality than any other use of language but refers to it by the means of a complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language” (MEP 151).

²⁷ In his aforementioned extensive study of metaphor, *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), Ricoeur distinguishes three levels of tension in metaphorical figuration: “a) tension within the statement, between tenor and vehicle, between focus and frame, between principal subject and secondary subject, b) tension between two interpretations: between literal interpretation that perishes at the hands of semantic impertinence and a metaphorical interpretation whose sense emerges through nonsense; c) tension between the relational function of the copula: between identity and difference in the interplay of resemblance” (ROM 292).

phor which lies in the unity of loss and profit (WM 212), as she is convinced that “[l]iterature is a phase of life. If one is afraid of it, the situation is irremediable; if one approaches it familiarly what one says of it is worthless” (“Picking and Choosing”, MCP 45). Thus, her language tends to oscillate between reserve and familiarity, exactitude and opaqueness, and is often at ease with paradox and the constitutive opacity of language. In Susanne Juhasz’s apt formulation, “what is ultimately responsible for the complexity of her poetry is its stance of not talking about what it is talking about, talking about what it is not talking about: a provocative, delightful, infuriating irony that plays off itself with a dazzling shimmer” (Juhasz 1976: 42).

For my hedgehog-oriented analysis, I have chosen Moore’s animal poems, as these in particular expose her deconstructive imagination, demonstrating the complex operations of her metaphor based on gleams and frequent aporias of significance. “Poetry is an unintelligible unmistakable vernacular like the language of the animals – a system of communication whereby a fox with a turkey too heavy to carry, reappears shortly with another fox to share the booty”, confesses Moore in a review of Wallace Stevens’ *Ideas of Order*, adding that “Wallace Stevens is a practiced hand at this kind of open cypher” (MMCP 329). Employing this witty and complex animal metaphor to define “the unintelligible unmistakability” of poetic language, Moore reveals her penchant for implicit and indefinite communications, which require close cooperation between the two sides of the poetic transaction to bear the weight of their heavily coded message.

The two foxes communicating through “open cipher” are just one instance of Moore’s zoological figuration and proliferation of metaphors, for the pages of her poetry swarm with half-strange and half-familiar creatures, many of which are very rare, legendary or imaginary (e.g. unicorns, dragons, chameleons, salamanders, plumed basilisks, pangolins, octopuses, or echidnas).²⁸ Among the most persistent elements of her

²⁸ It is noteworthy that Derrida also frequently employs animal figures, imagery and metaphors in his texts, often with a view to deconstructing the animal / human distinction, but also to show the metaphor as a vehicle for secrecy, for keeping the truth hidden. Apart from the hedgehog used in his discourse on poetry, Derrida uses the figure of the cat in his essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am” to expose the limitations of the binary oppositions in our thinking about animals and human beings, offering at the same time a critique of the anthropocentric metaphysical tradition. In “Scribble (writing-power)”, the philosopher observes that in Egyptian writing animal tropes were used to increase the sense of

metaphoric repertoire, her eccentric and often ontologically complex “bestiary” deserves a closer scrutiny, the more so because her “animales”²⁹ tend to expose, with a Derridesque twist, “how the supposedly literal level is intensively metaphorical” (Hoy 1985: 44) as well as how metaphoric screens and concealments create new cognitive insights, functioning as the most effective form of display. By examining the poet’s attention to visual detail, her naturalist passion (bolstered by her year at Bryn Mawr as a biology student)³⁰, her use of the conceit which brings together disparate realms of experience, as well as her penchant for descriptive close-up which nevertheless resists common standards of reference, often suggesting juxtaposition instead of correspondence, I hope to approximate the aesthetic truths and the epistemological implications of the modernist *herisson*.

1.2.1. “Everything is battle-dressed”: The (h)edge of the metaphor in “His Shield” and “The Pangolin”

In her poem “His Shield”, published for the first time in her *Collected Poems* of 1951, Moore draws a collective portrait of the “battle-dressed” animals, which sheds some light on the erinaceous nature of metaphorization in her work. The poem seems an appropriate choice also because one of its main protagonists is the hedgehog itself – chosen by Moore along with his cousins, such as the porcupine or the echidna, for reasons similar to those enumerated by Derrida to define the paradoxical nature of poetry. Interestingly, in one of her early prose pieces, Moore reveals her interest in armor and armored animals, describing the phenomenon and its exponents as “impressively poetic”:

mystery within the discussed issue, causing a “supplementary complication”, a “veiling of the veiling” or “encrypting” of meaning. See Derrida WP 63.

²⁹ Responding to a suggestion of T.S. Eliot, concerning the arrangement and selection of her poems to be published by Faber, Moore described Eliot’s choice of her animal pieces as “a congregation of animales”, betraying the special feelings that she had for the selection. For details of the exchange, see Moore quoted in Holley (2009: 78-79).

³⁰ Remembering her years at Bryn Mawr, Moore confessed “I found the biology courses ... exhilarating... Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate – at least have some bearing on imagination, it seems to me”. (“Interview with Donald Hall”, MMR 254-255).

... a suit of armor is impressively poetic. The movable plates suggest the wearer; one is reminded of the armadillo and recalls the beauty of the ancient testudo. The idea of conflict counteracts that of romance, and the subject is abandoned. However, the image lingers. Presently, one encounters the iguana and is startled by the paradox of its docility in conjunction with its horrific aspect. The concept has been revived – of an armor in which beauty outweighs the thought of painful self-protectiveness. The emended theme compels development.

(MMP 643)

The aporetic mixture of beauty and fear, romance and conflict, docility and self-protective aggression are strongly reminiscent of Derrida's definition of the hedgehog-poem. In "His Shield", where Moore pursues her fascination with the poetic aspect of armor, the contradictions linger and grow. The poem is worth quoting in its entirety, as it unfolds cautiously, protecting its own message, not unlike the animals it depicts:

The pin-swin or spine-swine
 (the edgehog miscalled hedgehog) with all his edges out,
 echidna and echinoderm in distressed-
 pin-cushion thorn-fur coats, the spiny pig or porcupine,
 the rhino with horned snout-
 everything is battle-dressed.

Pig-fur won't do, I'll wrap
 myself in salamander-skin like Presbyter John.
 A lizard in the midst of flames, a firebrand
 that is life, asbestos-eyed asbestos-eared, with tattooed nap
 and permanent pig on
 the instep; he can withstand

fire and won't drown. In his
 unconquerable country of unpompous gusto,
 gold was so common none considered it; greed
 and flattery were unknown. Though rubies large as tennis
 balls conjoined in streams so
 that the mountain seemed to bleed,

the inextinguishable
 o salamander styled himself but presbyter. His shield
 was his humility. In Carpasian
 linen coat, flanked by his household lion cubs and sable
 retinue, he revealed
 a formula safer than
 an armorer's: the power of relinquishing

what one would keep; that is freedom. Become dinosaur-
skulled, quilled or salamander-wooled, more ironshod
and javelin-dressed than a hedgehog battalion of steel, but be
dull. Don't be envied or
armed with a measuring-rod.

(MCP 144)

Making “battle-armed” animals its central subject, the poem similarly “arms” itself with descriptive density whose meaning remains unclear until we bring together the separate pieces of Moore’s metaphoric puzzle. The animals gathered in this poem are characterized by various kinds of self-defense strategies securing their survival – visible and aggressive “armor” in the form of prickly needles, thorns, or horns (hedgehogs, porcupines and echidnas, echinoderms, or rhinoceroses), but also less evident camouflage and resistance to the changes of the environment (fire-resistant skin of salamanders). In his article entitled “The Enigma of the Echidna”, Doug Stewart describes the living habits of the almost extinct echidnas, small and spine-covered animals also known as spiny anteaters, native to Australia and New Guinea:

On a continent teeming with weird mammals, the echidna is one of the weirdest. It has a beak like a bird, spines like a hedgehog, eggs like a reptile, the pouch of a marsupial and the life span of an elephant. Elusive and unpredictable, echidnas continue to perplex the scientific world with their oddities. Though normally wary of humans, a number of them reversed course and invaded the suburban streets and yards of Canberra in the fall of 1967—why, no one knows. “They're such an independent, enigmatic animal”, says Rismiller. “Every time you think you know what they're going to do, they do something different. . . . They're hard to find, they're solitary, they make no noise and they travel great distances”. Their wanderlust is one reason they're ill-suited to captivity. Attempts to relocate them inevitably fail; even after a 30-kilometer drive, “the animal is back almost before the humans are”. Echidnas have no routines. They're active day or night, regardless of weather. They lack permanent dens, choosing instead to sleep in whatever burrow or cave is handy. They don't socialize and they haven't been known to fight. They forage in a home territory as large as 250 acres yet don't defend it”.

(Stewart 2003)

The quoted description, which can be easily extended onto the whole of Moore’s zoological catalogue, emphasizes certain aspects of experience

and animal behavior that the poet found particularly appealing. What seems prominent in the life profile of the echidna is not only its skills of adaptability, versatility, and self-protection, but also the mystery and eccentricity of the species. If we consider carefully the other animals included by Moore, we are bound to discover that, like the echidna, most of them are very rare or verging on extinction; the majority are solitary and nocturnal hunters, non-aggressive unless provoked, often misnamed (like the porcupine, a rodent often mistaken for a hedgehog, or the salamander, an amphibian popularly considered a lizard).

The oddity of Moore's animal collection is further enhanced by her own eccentric techniques of representation. The ingenuity of Moore's descriptive detail, cupped with the accuracy of her lexicon (as in the phrases "pin-cushion thorn-fur coats", "asbestos-eyed asbestos-eared" or "Carpasian linen coat") captures the complex nature and versatility of the animal stratagems of survival; however, the aspects of her style "shield" the poem against our predatory efforts to possess the secrets of her design. As noted by Hadas, "it is her style to assign to style a maternally fussy overdressing of her 'child' or her own self and an ingenious scattering of red herrings in the form of ellipses and tropes meant to distract any casual predator from his tender prey" (1977: 36). "His Shield", for instance, guards its entrance with the prickly "edges" and "hedges" of her poetics: heavy alliterations, hidden rhymes, echoes and repetitions, e.g. "pin-swin spine-swine", "ech-" in echidnas and echinoderm; confuses by the swift movement from animal to animal, so that it is almost impossible to grasp one image before it slides into another; and astounds with the bizarre sequences of compound modifiers, such as "asbestos-eyed asbestos-eared", "dinosaur- / skulled, quilled or salamander-wooled, more ironshod / and javelin-dressed" (MCP 134).

What strikes us in Moore's usage of metaphor is the exactness of the immediate and concrete detail whose origin nevertheless turns out to be conceptual and abstract. As argued by Holley, Moore's seeing in this poem is "a kind of seeing-as, whose selection of vehicle grows out of a value judgment rather than out of sense perception" (2009: 37).³¹ Interestingly, however, the evaluative voice plays in the background, and in this poem it can be heard distinctly only in a handful of words, such as 'humility',

³¹ The critic aptly observes that Moore's animal poems, via the detour of a very concrete metaphor, makes abstract ideas appear more tangible.

‘greed’ or ‘flattery’, the forestage being occupied by the sensual attributes of her vehicle. Here the protective cover of an extended metaphor inscribed in the language which never effaces itself deflects our attention from the authoritative position of the lyric voice that first “arms” itself in the spiny characteristics of her porcupines and echidnas, in her “art as exact perception”, and later “wraps” itself in the impermeable salamander skin of another emblem-refuge taking control of the poem – that of John the Presbyter, a legendary Christian ruler in Asia. Moore introduces the figure of the Presbyter skillfully, via his obscure and humble attire – the “Carpasian linen coat” juxtaposed with the luxury of the sable attire of his retinue – in order to preach her philosophy of humility and modesty without being charged with too dogmatic a stance. The switch from the descriptive to the instructive mode in the final stanza of “His Shield” transforms Moore-as-a-naturalist-observer into “a moralist at heart”, for whom “objects are always agents in a universe that is ethical and pedagogical” (Juhasz 1976: 44). However, once we have settled in the confidence of the poem’s didactic judgment, the enigmatic advice to “be dull” that closes the poem puts us on guard again, opening the conceptual complex to the loss of this hard-won certainty, as its tone sounds playfully and suspiciously ironic, considering the poem’s overall visual, aesthetic and figurative sumptuousness. Nevertheless, Moore never dispels this irony nor satisfies our desire to lift the apparent contradiction between her directive and her own execution of it.

Moore’s poem, like Derrida’s hedgehog, seems thus to offer us a secret, while at the same time withholding and guarding it. Pointing out the multiple ironies in the poem and comparing Moore’s stylistic stratagems to those of Emily Dickinson, Susanne Juhasz notes that for Moore the poem is not so much “an encounter with the self”, as is the case with Dickinson, but “the ultimate defense, the strongest protection”, adding that her “polished and perfect structures can form an impenetrable barrier” (1976: 41).³² Randall Jarrell also makes an interesting observation about Moore’s use of metaphors and stratagems of protection, extending it to her entire oeuvre:

A good deal of her poetry is specifically (and changingly) about armour, weapons, protection, places to hide; and she is not only conscious that this is so, but after a while writes poems about the fact that it is so.

³² Similarly, Eliot argues that Moore’s poetry is “‘descriptive’ rather than ‘lyrical’ or ‘dramatic’”. See T.S. Eliot (1953: 182).

As she says, “armour seems extra”, but it isn’t; and when she writes about “another armoured animal”, about another “thing made graceful by adversities, conversities”, she does so with the sight of someone who has come home.

(Jarrell 1986: 119)

The quoted phrase “another armoured animal” originates from Moore’s later poem, “The Pangolin” (1936), which can serve as another instance of “her shield” – the armed and protective space of her poems, furnished with the discomforts and conceptual barriers of her metaphoric equations. This poem poses an even greater interpretational difficulty, as the visual, objective mode clearly dominates here, confronting the reader with the peculiar cognitive effect of one of Moore’s brilliant “observations”. “I am an observer”, confesses Moore in an interview with Hall, “I like to describe things” (Hall 1970: 30, 175); however, her depictions often display things existing in an elaborate nexus of value-laden facts as well as textual and representational relations which cannot be reduced to mere empirical examinations. The pangolin, which “rolls himself into a ball that has / power to defy all effort to unroll it” (MCP 117), first displays its denotative weapons:

Another armored animal –scale
 lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they
 form the uninterrupted central
 tail-row! This near artichoke with head and legs and /
 grit-equipped gizzard.
 (MCP 117)

Incredibly detailed and naturalistic, the description includes the appearance and anatomy of the pangolin, its habitat and living rituals. Reading Moore’s poem, we can learn, for instance, that pangolins are nocturnal and non-aggressive animals with a “contracting nose and eye apertures / impenetrably closable” (MCP 117) as well as “sting-proof scales”. Furthermore, these creatures “move quietly”, “endure exhausting solitary trips through unfamiliar ground at night”, walk curling in their forepaws to protect their claws which serve for burrowing, hang “serpentine about the tree”, and eat ants (“the armored / ant-eater”, MCP 117). The portrait is extremely vivid and its scientific exactitude and complexity rivals, if not exceeds, even the most comprehensive and fastidious animal profiles.³³ This “naturalness” does

³³ In the Notes accompanying her *Complete Poems* of 1967, Moore provides the sources for some of her formulations, which include Robert T. Hatt’s entry on “Pango-

not, however, exhaust the intricacy of Moore's design.³⁴ As Costello pertinently states, in Moore "we have ... three distinct orientations toward the poem – as a vehicle for the clear representation of natural fact, as a vehicle for ideas, and as a separate reality of words" (1981: 68).³⁵ In "The Pangolin" all three orientations are at play, for the description at once brings us closer and removes us from the lived experience, turning into an "observation" – a more complex act of ethically-informed inquiry.³⁶

According to Ricoeur, tropes "give to discourse a quasi-bodily externalization", making it "appear before our eyes" (MEP 142)³⁷ Moore renders her metaphors conspicuously profuse in spatial specifics to achieve the desired visibility and denseness of discourse. Margaret Holley points out this propensity of Moore, arguing that her imagination is closer to the imagist than symbolist sensibility and that her metaphor exhibits a strong spatial flavor (2009: 19).³⁸ This is felt in the poet's delight in shape, texture, and movement, visible in the passages exhibiting the pangolin's graceful motion: "Serpentined about the tree, he draws / away from danger unpugnaciously, / with no sound but a harmless hiss" (MCP 117), or "strongly intailed, neat head for core, on neck not breaking off, with

lins" from *Natural History*, December 1935, and Lyddeker's *Royal Natural History*. See Moore MCP 281.

³⁴ As observed by Borroff (1986: 47), "visual images of so high degree of resolution, for all their authenticity, are far from realistic – they do not correspond to the selective and partially focused picture recorded by the seeing eye". Borroff argues further that Moore's focusing perception, minutiae of detail and clarity of line can paradoxically enhance the disparity between experience and its representation.

³⁵ Guy Rotella (1991: 157) also sees Moore's impulse towards particularity of description as expressive of her "persistent interest in the relationship between fact and value, fact and meaning, and fact and concept".

³⁶ R. P. Blackmur describes Moore's treatment of animals in her poetry as "an intense detached intimacy" which closes and opens the gap between "the immediately accurate" and that "hauntedness that cannot be reached" and which keeps life "just around the corner, not so much taken for granted as obliterated, not allowed to transpire" (1986: 85).

³⁷ Interestingly, further on in the essay the critic asks: "But is not the word 'metaphor' itself a metaphor, the metaphor of a displacement and therefore of a transfer in a kind of space? What is at stake is precisely the necessity of these *spatial* metaphors about metaphor included in our talk about 'figures' of speech" (MEP 143). Similarly Derrida insistently discusses metaphor as a space, field or dwelling. See especially his "White Mythology" (WM).

³⁸ Kenneth Burke (1987: 87) similarly observes that her "objects exist too fully in their own right for us to treat them merely as objective words for subjects".

curled-in feet” (117). Although such accuracy apparently resists the force of metaphorization, the animal’s flexibility is difficult to convey and the poet needs to resort to a series of adequately “graceful” metaphors which broaden the web of natural and spatial analogies as they borrow from the realm of human artifice. The first instance of such disruption appears already in the second stanza, in which Moore compares the pangolin to “the night miniature artist engineer... Leonardo da Vinci’s replica” (117). The quoted word “serpentine” is another example, as it not only captures the elegant curve of the animal wrapped around the tree, but prepares us for the more elaborate comparisons which follow: the “fragile grace of the Thomas-of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron / vine”; the giant-pangolin-tail, which can be “a prop or hand or broom or ax, tipped like / an elephant’s trunk with special skin” (MCP 118), or the compactness of the retreating animal, which – in Moore’s eyes – is like “the furled fringed frill on the hat-brim of Gargallo’s hollow iron head of a / matador” (118). Referencing the exquisite wrought ironwork of the medieval master Thomas of Leighton Buzzard, and Pablo Gargallo’s modernist iron head sculptures with internal hollows, Moore foregrounds even more forcefully the spatial dimension of her metaphor, simultaneously indicating that its outer edges are never closed. Here the poet opens them onto the language of art and human artifice. Hinting in this way at the aesthetic implications of her mimetic mode, the poet paradoxically defines naturalness with the aid of the “curious hand” of an artist, in accordance with her assertion that “[t]o explain grace requires / a curious hand” (MCP 118) (the word in question meaning “careful”, “precisely accurate” here). Flaunting its formal elegance and intensely writerly quality, the poem itself embodies and concretizes the abstract idea of grace, capturing and imitating the natural via the artificial and becoming a “habitat” for an interplay of both.

The language of art and craft breaking into and appropriating the discourse of scientific exactitude paves the way for the development of the pangolin metaphor in the second part of the poem, where the factual gives substance to the existential and ethical:

Beneath sun and moon,
 man slaving
 to make his life more sweet, leaves half the flowers worth
 having,
 needing to choose wisely how to use his strength;

a paper-maker like the wasp; a tractor of foodstuffs,
like the ant; spidering a length
of web from bluffs
above a stream; in fighting, mechanicked
like the pangolin; capsizing in

disheartenment. Bedizened or stark
naked, man, the self, the being we call human, writing-
master to this world, griffons a dark
“like does not like like that is obnoxious”; and writes error
with four

‘rs. Among animals, *one* has a sense of humor.
(MCP 119)

“The self, the being we call human”, further referred to as a mammal or *one* among animals, characterized by “warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few / hairs” (MCP 120), seems to continue the distancing objective tone of the previous stanzas, but this time Moore reverses her perspective and borrows natural metaphors to describe the curious habits of man-as-creature. The coined verbs “spidering” and “griffoning” are perfect instances of such metaphoric appropriations and displacements, as they counterpoint the anthropocentric similes employed in the first part, tightening the web of interrelationships and differences between the two realms. According to Holley, Moore “challenges here the dichotomies between the natural world and man’s..., closing the gap between nature and culture so that the language of the one may carry sense in the context of the other” (2009: 101). Similarly, Elizabeth Bishop observes in “As We Like It” that “[w]ith all its inseparable combinations of the formally fabulous with the factual, and the artificial with the perfectly natural, [Moore’s] animal poetry seduces us to dream of some realm of reciprocity, a true *lingua unicornis*” (1948: 131). In the analyzed poem’s reciprocal exchange we learn that man is “mechanicked like the pangolin”, albeit more vulnerable and unstable, for apparently “bedizened” less efficiently and gracefully (“serge-clad” and “strong-shod”, MCP 120) than the pangolin, and armed only in “a sense of humor”. At once “unemotional, and all emotion”, “prey of fear” and “[n]ot afraid of anything” (MCP 120), capable of erring and more prone to “capsizing” in disheartenment, “thwarted by the dusk” (120), “slaving / to make his life more sweet”, unable to finish his daily

work, man seen through the figure of the pangolin – an epitome of exactness, finitude and perfection – may look feeble indeed. However, Moore’s juxtaposition does not lead to a clear-cut conclusion in favor of the pangolin. Quite on the contrary, the device of perceiving man through the metaphoric screen of the armored pangolin serves the poet to both uphold and blunt the distinctions between the natural and the artificial, at once exposing a collusion between them and pointing to the limits of such equations. Man, although imperfect, unreliable, and restless, “curtailed and extinguished” by darkness, possesses nevertheless the “everlasting vigor, power to grow” (MCP 120), to “griffon” his way through life’s obstacles and fight off the darkness with the inner “blaze” of the soul:

The prey of fear, he, always
 curtailed, extinguished, thwarted by the dusk, work
partly done,
 says to the alternating blaze,
 “Again the sun!
 anew each day, and new and new and new,
 that comes into and steadies my soul”.
 (MCP 120)

Using the figure of the pangolin, Moore manages to kill two birds with one stone: offering us the perfectly chiseled form of her poem, “mechanicked” and accurate like the animal it delineates, closing and opening its verbal and visual apertures, she questions the human-animal distinction and shows man capable of reproducing the natural exactness and grace of the animal; however, she chooses the pangolin also to avoid the traps of metaphysical anthropocentrism and subject-centrism of the romantic discourses of nature, thus allowing her metaphor-traveler to carry a considerable baggage of the metaphysics of subjectivity and her own ethical values. In her poem “The Grave”, Moore is more open in her criticism of the anthropocentric approach to nature, arguing that “it is human nature to stand in the middle of the thing” (MCP 49). In a letter to Bryher she observes that “in a work of art one must get at the individuality of a thing one is describing literally I do not mean of course, that things cannot be distorted for the sake of art for they can so long as you don’t do violence to the essence of a thing” (Moore in Leavell 1996: 120). To avoid this central positioning which threatens the “essence of a thing”,

the subject in “The Pangolin” is almost literally subjected or foreclosed by the protective armor of the zoological metaphor,³⁹ yet without reducing the pangolin to the status of a mere metaphoric equation. Looking at man through an animal lens and foregrounding the richness and complexity of the pangolin’s relations to its environment – which, as the poem insistently shows, exceed man’s own adaptability in many ways – Moore lets the animal retain its unique existence and ethics. At the same time, she stretches the space of her metaphor to the extent that it cautiously opens “an aperture” onto the essential aspects of human existence and becomes a vehicle of her conviction about “the indistinguishability of fact and value in the world” (Holley 2009: 97). Considering the historical context of the poem’s creation, i.e. the mid-thirties, the pangolin “smuggles” – to borrow de Man’s word – the atmosphere of growing unease and tension caused by the build-up of armaments, thus widening the spectrum of human issues implicit in this “armoured” metaphor.⁴⁰ Man’s vulnerability to wounds and suffering, his “extra” armour, “all his vileness”, his “mechanicked” stratagems in fighting gain a new meaning in this light; however, in accordance with Derrida’s notion of metaphor as a vehicle which pulls us towards a certain destination, carrying an impulse of meaning, and simultaneously retreats from the designated track, Moore’s pangolin remains an uncertain carrier of significance, as it refuses to assert any absolute truth or value.

As argued by the author of *Writing and Difference*, who invokes Aristotle’s concept of mimesis and metaphor when discussing the processes and theories of figuration, “resemblance is not an identity” (Derrida WM 249). Thus, the pleasure of knowing and learning through metaphor, especially a

³⁹ Juhasz (1976: 51) points out that Moore’s ‘animiles’ should be treated as objective correlatives which create a refuge and protection for the poet’s self. Holley, in turn, sees Moore’s use of the animal figure as a way of removing the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective aspect, between the inner and the outer, and “throwing the whole weight of the poem onto the other, the objective side, by reporting from impersonal, publicly available sources of knowledge”. Further on, she argues that “in her conversion of subjective material into objective form, Moore has moved the moral dimension of the poem to a source beyond the old poetic speaker and relocated it in the stream of public data, the general body of thought” (2009: 96-97).

⁴⁰ The context of the war is brought up and expanded by Holley, who in her study of Moore points out the political consciousness and military metaphors underlying many of her poems written in the thirties and forties. For details see Holley (2009: 97-116).

poetic one,⁴¹ entails “the energetic absence” of “the resembling double, *mimēma*”, which creates an interval or “the enigmatic division” between the object and its figurative representation, between “the essence, the proper” and “accident”, to employ his own terminology (WM 239, 247). Therefore, the meaning of metaphor emerges in this interval, in the space of language subject to difference and division, vulnerable to accident or slippage, and derives also from that which is missed, dropped, if not altogether lost, in the “transportation”.⁴² Based on the juxtaposition and interplay of man and beast, and at once bridging and widening the gap between them throughout its unfolding, Moore’s poem creates such an interval – a difference which guards the poem’s indeterminacy and inconclusiveness, upholds accidental signification and resists falling back into the unifying anthropocentric framework that would lead to one integrated purview. This “meaning which appears but in which the truth might still be missed” to cite Derrida (ES 241), is felt not only on the level of imagery and in the poem’s descriptive content, but also in the paratactic construction of the whole, grounded in the agglutinative and absorptive clusters of visual and conceptual elements whose relations remain non-hierarchical and syntagmatic. Thus, escaping the limits of dependence, superiority and subordination of either the human or the non-human perspective, Moore opts for a less constraining force of resonance, encounter and contiguity as a source of knowledge of the other and the self, of nature and man, all of which – as

⁴¹ Derrida places the poet between the philosopher and the sophist, the former being “interested in the truth of meaning, beyond even signs and names”, the latter “manipulat[ing] empty signs and drawing the effects from the contingency of signifiers”. The poet borrows from both, as he plays “with the multiple signifieds to return to identity of meaning” (WM 249). The classification ties in well with Moore’s figurative practice.

⁴² In his analysis of Derrida’s “White Mythology”, Bernard Harrison explains this “interval” or loss of meaning using an example from the analytic philosophy of Frege: “Frege’s principle, put at its crudest, requires, as a condition of meaningfulness, that it should be possible to see, at least in principle, how to determine whether *S* is true or false. What most analytic philosophers have in mind when they say that a statement, say, ‘Snow is white’, is literally true or used literally, is that this condition is met. A metaphorical statement, or context, or use of words, say, ‘Time, a maniac scattering dust’, is one in which the Fregean link between meaning and truth appears to be broken. Is it true that time is a maniac scattering dust? The question fails to make sense. And yet it does not seem that Tennyson’s line fails to make sense. Is there, then, a kind of meaning, metaphorical meaning, which cannot be understood in terms of the relationship of propositions to truth-conditions?”. “‘White Mythology’ Revisited: Derrida and His Critics on Reason and Rhetoric” (1999: 510).

Holley points out – increases the impression of “the openness of her inquiry” and creates a “free mutual effect of support and challenge” (2009: 97).⁴³

The traditional movement of metaphorization, which Derrida describes as a “movement of idealization” in which the proper sensual meaning is transformed into and eventually suppressed by a proper spiritual meaning “via the detour of figures” (PdM 226), is disrupted in Moore’s poem, as the poet refuses to choose one over the other. As noted by Rotella:

Moore shrinks *and* expands the gap between creatures and what they are used to signify, allowing us neither the absolute congruence of allegory, where human priority and the gulf between nature and arbitrary or absolute meanings or givens, nor the comfort of metaphor, where discovery or creation guarantees the identification of the signifier and the signified. We are kept between the absolute and the contingent, between abstract and the specific, sight and insight, nature and art.

(Rotella 1991: 166)

Without resolving the gap between the signifier and the signified, the poet often keeps the sensual particular unreduced, using it as the base and foreground of her design and refraining from clear ethical or spiritual identifications. Moore’s “turn of the detour”, to borrow Derrida’s formulation, at once illumines the self-contained singularity of the animal and “opens the wandering of the semantic”, as her pangolin literally and metaphorically “ventures forth alone” (ES 241), driven by the non-linear and non-totalizing force of the parataxis that unloosens it from the obligation to designate one central truth. At the same time, it becomes a more absorptive trope, whose energy derives from the accretion of disparate layers of supplementary meanings engendered in the paratactic, associative chain of language – an energy that radiates, corrupts and confuses the multiple material and spiritual senses initiated by the contiguity and the constant intertwining of the animal and the human.

Due to Moore stratagems, what began as a depiction of the hermetic pangolin-hedgehog, rolled up in a tight ball, perfectly sealed off and armed against the contamination of pseudoscientific discourse, now “sug-

⁴³ Earlier the critic points out that all of Moore’s later poems, beginning from the mid-thirties, gravitate towards extended paratactic presentations which evidences Moore’s “new orientation towards value. The avoidance of hierarchy as a structural principle bespeaks her new preference for a report rather than a verdict” (Holley 2009: 61).

gests, reveals, unconceals . . . the deep structures of reality to which we are related” (Ricoeur MEP 151). Through her metaphor, which transgresses the order of description and helps to build the poet’s “imaginative order”, as noted by Borroff (1987: 57), Moore makes human experience “imaginatively accessible to other human beings”.

1.2.2. “Like an injured fan”: On the opening and shutting of the metaphor in “The Fish”

“Visible, invisible, / a fluctuating charm” (MCP 180) – the opening line of Moore’s “A Jelly-Fish” successfully captures Moore’s preference for the openness and inconclusiveness of metaphor. Itself a “fluctuating charm”, the poem can serve as an invitation to the more dramatic uncovering of aquatic mysteries in “The Fish”:

Visible, invisible,
 a fluctuating charm
 an amber-tinctured amethyst
 inhabits it, your arm
 approaches and it opens
 and it closes; you had meant

to catch it and it quivers;
 you abandon your intent.

(MCP 180)

If we confront this gorgeous little jewel of a poem with Derrida’s definition of the hedgehog-poem in the already quoted “Che cos’è la poesia”, where the philosopher compares it to something that can exist “without external support, without substance”, something that “erases the borders, slips through the hands”, while still insistently “teach[ing] us the heart” (CCP 237), we can easily recognize the affinity between his notions of poetry and Moore’s poetic sensibility. The contraction-pulsation movement of the jelly-fish’s body, recreated by the rhythmic and visual arrangement of Moore’s line and resonating in the verb “quiver”, conveys the poem’s hesitant movement towards meaning, which in her work frequently entails the pulsations and withdrawals of sense; simultaneously, its uncertain, translucent, and almost incorporeal gelatinous substance that also easily “slips through the hands” captures the interplay and tension between the connotative and denotative forces of poetic language, and

prepares us for the difficulties of reaching the poem's meaning without destroying the "amber-tinctured amethyst" at its heart. The jelly-fish metaphor also annuls the division between surface and depth in Moore's poetry, as the transparent surface is at once the creature's depth, encouraging the reader to linger over the visible / invisible surface of her description and form, if only for the very pleasure and adventure of the encounter with this "open cipher". In this way the poem both resists and invites figurative reading, becoming at once a jelly-fish that denies us the right to see *through* it or allegorize it too hastily, and a symbol of the ineffable, the unfathomable mystery of life. To use Costello's words, in the poem "[w]e are left with an awakened sense of something 'beyond' representation, but with no direction by which to account for that experience" (1981: 137). Renouncing the meaningfulness of the question "what is poetry?", Derrida frustrates our desire for the finality of the poem's meaning, just as Moore eventually "abandons her intent" of touching the jelly-fish, keeping her epistemological curiosity unsatisfied. This very gesture, suggestive of her respect for the otherness and vulnerability of the medusa, speaks volumes, bringing to light Moore's need to refrain from a reductionist "grasping" of the natural world as an object. Moreover, it testifies to her love of nature in its separateness and uniqueness, her non-anthropocentric positioning vis-à-vis nature's mysteries, and, finally, her openness to instability of sense and loss of truth.

This openness is revealed even more compellingly in one of her most beautiful and enigmatic sea 'animales', "The Fish", in which the piscine metaphor, haunted by the sensory opulence of its vehicle, becomes another "site" of a difficult, erinaceous disclosure, shutting and opening itself onto the undecidable truths of life. This poem is an invitation to the peculiar (in)visible underwater world of Moore's imagination, in which the contraction-pulsation of sense mirrors Derrida's conviction that "[t]hought stumbles upon metaphor, or metaphor falls to thought at the moment when meaning attempts to emerge from itself in order to be stated, enunciated, brought to the light of language" (WM 233). Since Moore herself admitted that "light is speech, and speech is light" (MCP 277)⁴⁴, anticipating Derrida's argument about the profound metaphoricity

⁴⁴ The quote comes from Moore's poem "The Light is Speech" which contains the following lines: "Yes, light is speech. Free frank / impartial sunlight, moonlight, / starlight, lighthouse light, / are language" (MCP 97).

of all language, it seems worthwhile to look at how “the light” of metaphor illumines and eclipses thought in her sea ‘animiles.’

The image of the light caught up between the window blinds featuring in the subtitle of *A Derrida Reader*, and the recurring figures of the sun as an “invisible source of visibility” in “a kind of insistent eclipse”, used by Derrida in his “White Mythology” to explicate the sensual lacing of metaphysical tropes (WM 242) can serve as a starting point in my own tropological analysis. What binds all Derrida’s heliotropic figures is that their disclosures are always imperfect, as they lie between fissures and cracks that disrupt our expectations of spectatorial wholeness. Metaphor works thus like venetian blinds or a solar eclipse – we can see the sun (which always “turns [itself] and hides [itself]” (WM 250) only indirectly, when it is covered or filtered through semi-translucent lenses, slats or blends. “Metaphor means heliotrope” – Derrida takes his comparison a step further – “both a movement turned toward the sun and the turning movement of the sun” (WM 250).⁴⁵ In Stellardi’s words, from Derrida’s point of view, metaphor thus involves an oversight “inasmuch as it structurally covers and hides, through its own visible splendor, the original gap from which it emerges” (2001: 76). Moore envisions “the light-as-speech” in a similar way, as she weaves her subaquatic landscape out of optical figures that play against the “transparent-eyeball” of Emerson’s famous metaphor, as they involve the travel of light that fractures endlessly against the slats, edges and figurative black holes of the text. Seeking transparency paradoxically in the opacity and the game of seek-and-hide of her metaphorical screen, she turns the word into the “sun / split like spun / glass”, travelling with “spotlight swiftness / into the crevices – in and out” (MCP 32). In this way, according to Rotella, the poet questions “the Emersonian hope that words and things might be reunited so as to restore or to imitate the original Logos of creation” (1991: 145), and foregrounds the language as impenetrable, fallen and suspicious, fuelled by the power of misrecognition and illusion, and the continuous slippage and eclipse of sense.⁴⁶ Her practice also anticipates Luce Irigaray’s criticism directed at the tyranny of the logocentric specularly of discourse:

⁴⁵ Further on the philosopher notes that “[e]ach time that there is a metaphor, there is doubtless a sun somewhere; but each time there is sun, metaphor has begun” (WM 251).

⁴⁶ By foregrounding the elusiveness of her non-transparent metaphors, Moore renders Emerson’s goal of transparency and union of vision impossible. Emerson’s notion that the poet “turns the world to glass and ... through that better perception, he stands

But perhaps through this specular surface which sustains discourse is found not the void of nothingness but the dazzle of multi-faceted speleology. A scintillating and incandescent concavity, of language also, that threatens to set fire to fetish-objects and gilded eyes. The recasting of their truth value is already at hand. We need to press a little further into the depths, into that so-called dark cave which serves as hidden foundation to their speculations. For there where we expect to find the opaque and silent matrix of a logos immutable in the certainty of its light, fires and mirrors are beginning to radiate, sapping the evidence of reason at its base!

(Irigaray 1985: 143-144)

Bent on sounding the depths and undoing the hidden foundations of specular language, Moore offers us the first “blind” in the folded structure of her metaphor. The opening stanza carries us off into a dimmed but scintillating seascape by a swift movement of the title, which, as often happens in Moore’s poems, is embedded within the first line, so that the viewer immediately finds himself in the midst of the unfolding scenery. The unexpected velocity of the turn is next slowed down and suspended for a moment by the heavy rhyme of “wade / jade” which, due to its prolonged diphthongal resonance, not only captures the difficulty of progression, but also arrests us in the poem’s first figurative defamiliarization—the image of water which is suddenly solidified into one of the hardest of stones, i.e. the black jade:

The Fish

wade
through black jade.

(MCP 32)

one step nearer to things” (“The Poet”, [1844]1996: 456) is clearly put to doubt by Moore. For Emerson, glass is a metaphor which binds and makes transparent both the viewer and the viewed, turning the world and language to glass; Moore’s “opaque” glass stresses the perspectival nature of our sight and foregrounds the inadequacies of metaphor as a tool that is to bring us “one step nearer to things”. In “Tell Me, Tell Me”, the poet praises Henry James for using language that “breathed inconsistency and drank / contradiction”, “dazzled / not by the sun but by ‘shadowy possibility” (MCP 231). Rotella captures Moore’s stance in the following words: “Yet while Moore’s poems seek and sometimes seem to find in nature the translucence that is transparency’s trace, they certify that nature’s original transparency is lost to human sight” (1991: 144).

Before we manage to grasp the sublime impermeability of the water thus petrified and darkened, we are forced to stumble over the most disturbing simile in the poem:

Of the crow-blue mussel shells, one keeps
adjusting the ash heaps;
 opening and shutting itself like

an
injured fan.

(MCP 32)

“Complex metaphors”, argue George Lakoff and Mark Turner in their study of poetic metaphor, “grip us partly because they awake in us the experience and knowledge that form the grounding of those metaphors, partly because they make the coherence of that experience and knowledge resonate, and partly because they lead us to form new coherences in what we know and experience” (1989: 5). The metaphor of the injured fan has a similar rousing effect, as it releases the control of the literal and pulls Moore’s text towards a new dimension – the aesthetic and cognitive unease of the *unheimlich* that intrudes between the reader and the idea, not unlike the slats of venetian blinds, hiding the transitive connectives between the disparate elements of this figurative composite and yet letting in some light to enable at least partial recognition. The “interval” between the signifier and the signified in this “broken” metaphor is created and felt here as a result of yoking together the images of beauty and lurking horror; the images that, although picturesque, do not quite cohere but rather cross-fertilize one another, producing an effect of a profoundly disturbing, Gothic-flavored intensity. The “crow-blue” shade of the mussel shells bears the tinge of this Gothic discoloring, preparing us for the subsequent surrealist rapprochements and “cognitive miscegenates” (Kuang-Wu 2001: 175) of disparate phenomena in the poem. Darkened by the inaccessibility of sunlight, the shells defy the symbolic inventory formulated by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*, where the shell, examined as one of the archetypal images, is studied as a symbol of protection and safety – clear and distinct in its perfect geometry and “soft and pearly in its intimacy”, a refuge for the day-dreamer, both giving and sheltering the shut-in life (1964: 107, 115). Moore’s shell, ominous in its Poesque shading, repeats its ghostly opening and shutting movement, revealing and sheltering not life but death, both

through the fragile otherworldliness of “the ash heaps” and the sensory force of the “injured fan”.

The key to the enigma of this peculiar troping might be found in Moore’s earlier sea poem, “A Grave”, in which the sea “speaks” more directly as “a collector, quick to return a rapacious look”, who “has nothing to give but a well excavated grave” (MCP 49). Men “lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave, / and row quickly away – the blades of the oars / moving together like the feet of water spiders as if there were / no such thing as death” (MCP 49). Donald Hall notes that “[t]he sinister images contained in these lines have the quality of nightmare, the emotional supercharge of the dream image”, which forces us “to look for the principle that is hid” (1970: 42). In “The Fish”, the poet intends to lure us beneath the surface of the sea, into “the sea-serpented regions / ‘unlit by the half-lights of more conscious art” (MCP “Novices”, 60) and hold us down through the intricate net of her metaphorization coupled with the wave-like elegance of her prosodic and typographical gimmicks.⁴⁷ Reminiscent of Melville’s warning, in *Moby Dick*, against the sea as deceptive “Descartian vortices” that can lull us into reverie only to “return our identity with horror” (Melville [1851] 1988: 141), the poem becomes “the rapacious look” of the sea, which, in its ebbing movement, uncovers the “sea of bodies” along with their multiple marks of abuse. The source of this violence, however, remains oblique throughout, although the year of the poem’s publication, 1918, suggests the war context underlying the imagery.⁴⁸

The figure of the injured fan, suggestive of the interplay between appearing and disappearing, opens up the sea’s and the word’s internal struggle with mysterious wounds, assaults and mutilations (Hadas 1970: 113). It is visible in the movement, or, to put it more aptly, in the collision of images⁴⁹ which the poet herself defines as “sliding”:

⁴⁷ The typographical design of the poem was thoroughly examined by Hugh Kenner in his essay “The Experience of The Eye”. The critic notes that “The Fish” is “a poem to see with the eye, conceived in a typewriter upon a sheet of paper”(Kenner 1987: 17).

⁴⁸ Slatin reads “The Fish” as an anti-war poem depicting a submerged submarine vessel. For details of this argument see Slatin (1986: 176-79). Rotella also points out that when Moore was writing the poem, her brother, who worked as a navy chaplain, had begun his duty at sea (1991: 171).

⁴⁹ In his analysis of the nature of poetic metaphor, C. Day Lewis acknowledges that “we find poetic truth struck out by the collision rather the collusion of images” (1947: 72).

pink
 rice-grains, ink-
 bespattered jellyfish, crabs like green
 lilies, and submarine
 toadstools, slide each on the other.
 (MCP 32)

In the openings of this metaphorical “fan” we recognize the familiar and comforting elements of the seascape and the submarine fauna: the edge of the cliff, the waves, the light travelling in the cliff’s crevices, the eponymous fish, mussel shells, barnacles, jelly-fish, crabs, submarine toadstools. In the hermeneutic closings, however, the same elements are subjected to Moore’s “ink-bespattering” and cutting that blurs their sensory integrity and concreteness, eclipsing the full significance of her peculiar design. Thus “the barnacles encrust the side / of the wave” which “drives a wedge / of iron through the iron edge of the cliff”, again arresting the fluid movement of water and turning it into a hard substance; the starfish and crabs are pulled out of the sea for a moment through the association of the former with “pink / rice-grains” and the latter with “green lilies”; the sun “split like spun / glass” illumines the surrealist “turquoise sea of bodies”, “dynamite grooves, burns and hatchet strokes” in the “defiant edifice” of the sea (MCP 32-33). This strategy of creating edges, cornices, wedges and hatchet strokes in the liquid and flowing underwater world makes Moore’s metaphor a strange and hostile “dwelling” which “furnishes us with improper knowledge” (WM 253, 250) – to use Derrida’s formulation – with no secure position from which to view it. The landscape of beauty continuously yields to the landscape of terror, vitalized in each subsequent line by an increasing sense of danger. Instead of the natural harmony of its living forms, we face profoundly disquieting “ruins” of the sea, still full of fresh marks and memories of devastation and death. The spatial density of the sequence that counteracts and shuts in the infinite and unbounded energy and life of the sea, strengthened by the logic of the metaphorical fold chosen by Moore, reveals not only the violence and ruin of the outside world riven by the unprecedented cruelty of the Great War, but also the violence and failure of imposing the sign upon the meaning which is increasingly elusive, which, as Derrida puts it, “has no proper sign in language” and thus becomes vulnerable to the “ruination of logos” – “the violent, forced, abusive inscription of a sign” (WM 255). “For in its representation of itself”, Derrida continues his argument in

Writing and Difference, “the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation” (WD 65). The closing sequence of Moore’s poem poignantly displays instances of such “abusive inscription” which produces a ruin of language, which is at once an opening, an abyss:

All
external
marks of abuse are present on this
defiant edifice –
all the physical features of

ac-
cident – lack
of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and
hatchet strokes, these things stand
out on it; the chasm side is

dead.
Repeated
evidence has proved that it can live
on what cannot revive
its youth. The sea grows old in it.
(MCP 32)

The “abuse” is felt also in what Hugh Kenner dubbed as the tight “artificial grid” of the poem’s syllabic organization, with equal number of syllables per stanza, arranged elegantly in five lines and distributed among them according to the following pattern: 1, 3, 9, 6, 8 (1987: 19).⁵⁰ This constricting rigor imposes an almost unbearable discipline on the denotative obliqueness and continuously sliding sense of the text.⁵¹ The syllabic pattern creates, as Hall puts it, “a sense of repeated blockage”, as if the lines were “straining against an obstacle” (1970: 48). Grappling with the unrepresentable mystery of death, Moore also truncates her lines and even individual words with the sharp “axe” of her multiple enjambments, which paradoxically

⁵⁰ I have pointed it out in my comparative analysis of Moore’s “The Fish”, Gertrude Stein’s “Single Fish” and Los Pequeño Glazier’s digital poem “(go)Fish”, where I have also used Kenner’s discoveries related to the poem’s visual and syllabic design. See Ambroży-Lis (2010: 101-118)

⁵¹ The arrangement also invites our sensual response, which, as Costello notes, precedes – if not overwhelms – the intellectual recognition of the design’s portent. See Bonnie Costello (1999: 72).

cally allow the “hurt” language to reassemble itself in new figures of sense. The injured “ac- / cident” in the penultimate stanza could serve as an excellent example, as it contains and displays the weapon (axe) of its own destruction, forcing us to acknowledge language and the processes of metaphorization as a space of “accident”, catastrophe, division, wounding and splitting of sense. This challenges the Aristotelian conviction that “a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars”, for Moore’s collisions of incongruous elements in “The Fish” do not tend toward a sense of unity or aesthetic wholeness. Nor are those realms fused or superimposed, as Costello aptly observes (1981: 73). Rather, they become what Max Black called a site of interaction and transformation that ferries all its components towards novelty and discovery (1962: 25-47), preventing their sedimentation in one established concept of truth. Reading this poem, the reader succumbs to the impression that what is at stake in the mixing of the unmixables here, cannot be expressed literally, for “literal paraphrase inevitably says too much – and with the wrong emphasis, . . . the loss in such cases is a loss in cognitive content; the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit (or deficient in the qualities of style); it fails to be a translation, because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did” (Black 1981: 46). Moore’s strategy leads, in Costello’s perceptive words, to “the emergence of a new semantic congruence or pertinence from the ruins of the literal sense shattered by semantic incompatibility or absurdity” (Ricoeur MEP 152). Those “ruins of the literal sense” open up small crevices turned towards something that transcends human understanding, revealing only indefinite insights into the significance of things, produced by such imagistic collisions. The effect, however, is a strange plentitude of withheld senses and feelings, for the metaphor becomes an agent opening a new space of sense-making, “a theater for the mind to explore and solve questions it cannot confront in a human context”, granting us “the privileged position of seeing what the fish cannot, a kind of displaced vision of our own mortality” (Costello 1981: 74).

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye argues that a poem’s mood is always grounded in its verbal and iconic structure. The critic claims that the poem is a mood and “nothing else behind it” (Frye 2006: 152). For Ricoeur, who builds his own argument on Frye’s assumption, this mood is “the iconic as felt” (MEP 155), the “thought” made ours by our emotional involvement. The philosopher sees the cognitive import

of metaphor with its split reference, or, to use the term Ricoeur borrowed from Husserl, *epoché* – the suspension of ordinary descriptive reference – as coextensive with “the split structure of poetic feeling” that also entails an *epoché* of our emotions. The mood of Moore’s poem derives from such a double split and the resulting semantic shock, as the continuously “sliding” metaphors fold back on themselves and suspending ordinary reference to make the poem’s “injuries” both seen and felt. Acknowledging the difficulty of conveying genuine emotions, Moore writes in her essay “Feeling and Precision” that “[f]eeling at its deepest – as we all have reasons to know – tends to be inarticulate” (“Feeling and Precision”, MMCP 396), and elsewhere she qualifies this claim by stating that “the deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint” (“Silence”, MCP 91). William Carlos Williams sees the fragmentariness of the modernist form as suggestive of the inexpressibility of extreme emotions:

By the brokenness of his composition the poet makes himself master of a certain weapon which he could possess himself of in no other way. The speed of the emotions is sometimes such that in thrashing about in a thin exaltation or despair many matters are touched but not held, more often broken by the contact.

(WSE 14)

With Moore’s “The Fish” we anxiously approach and gaze into the “chasm” of death – the deepest of our emotional anxieties and fears. The language of her metaphor reflects the deconstructionist conviction that the metaphoric triggers “a perpetual drift of the familiar into *différance*, into Otherness” (Harrison 1999: 523). In its movement “against the current”, against the familiar direction and usage of words and into a “*différance*”, or “split reference”, to use Jakobson’s earlier formulation (1962 II: 356), Moore’s metaphor tries to transport us to “this side”, to translate the feelings of mourning and anxiety into a sensually-structured setting and the polished surface of the design.⁵² However, the trope ends up inevitably “injured”, “broken by the contact”, with its enigmatic tenor resisting even the strict regime of the form and the semantic frame of the submarine world. The mystery and the profound interiority of our fear of death can-

⁵² Donald Hall interestingly observes that “the more glittering surface, the greater the underlying emotion. The stronger and more frightening the feeling, the more necessary the protection that complexity of surface can provide” (1970: 13).

not be revealed without betrayal and loss, and Moore seems more than aware of that danger. This loss, however, is not without some profit, as “the *inadequation of the designation* (emphasis original)” (Derrida OM 93), to borrow another term for metaphor used by Derrida, is exactly what brings us closest to the literal expression of intense fear and terror. Perhaps this is why the poet so willingly allows us to be held by the inadequacies of language, by its “ruins”, or “catastrophe”,⁵³ hoping that they might open us to that which can transcend the word and to the incommunicable which the poet is trying to name.

In his essay “White Mythology”, Derrida uses the example of poetry to assert that metaphor is a means of knowledge, a trope in which “*logos*, *mimēsis*, and *alētheia* are one and the same possibility” (WM 239). His notion of the *retrait* of metaphor, informing this chapter, is grounded in this claim, as it entails the Heideggerian idea of the presencing of truth that displays itself in “withdrawal, reserve, shelter, whether it is a question of *Verborgenheit* (being-hidden), of dissimulation or of veiling (*Verhüllung*)” (Derrida RM 116). Moore’s “The Fish” clearly evidences this equivocal movement of sense, as it “drowns” us in the “supplementary folds and bars of metaphor” (RM 117) that possess a world- and truth-constituting as well as explicatory potential but which repeatedly test and undermine their own expressive and representational limits. The metaphor in “The Fish” is a Derridian “risk and chance of *mimēsis*”, a form of *alētheia* or Heideggerian spatio-temporal clearing, which relies on the appearance-as-disappearance of the truth. The metaphor, like the “injured fan” in Moore’s piece, opens us only to “the shafts of light”, to the traces of being-as-the-elusive-fish captured for a moment in the shipwreck of language, simultaneously asking us to let the fish go, to abandon our intent to catch them, “relinquish[ing] what one would like to keep” (MCP, “His Shield”, 112). In “Charity Overcoming Envy”, Moore herself states that “the Gordian knot need not be cut” (MCP 216), thus expressing her preference for the suspension of meaning and safeguarding of the secret. Indeed, the enigmatic “it” in the closing line of “The Fish” (“the sea grows old in it”), the elusiveness of which has been pointed out in many critical readings,⁵⁴ keeps safe the secret of the

⁵³ Derrida uses the term “catastrophe” in his essay “The *Retrait* of Metaphor” (RM).

⁵⁴ For instance, Elizabeth W. Joyce, pondering over the enigma of the poem’s closure, notes: “It could refer to the chasm side of the cliff, to the evidence, to the sea, or to any number of the images that Moore has brought into the body of the poem” (1998: 59).

poem, making it only partly available in “the catastrophe” or “incisions”⁵⁵ of her tropes. In one her early essays, “An Ardent Platonist”, the poet defends her preference for delays and stoppages of truth as follows: “To be no longer mysterious; it is to be no / Longer privileged” (Moore 1918: 22). Similarly, David Lodge argues in his study of metaphor and metonymy in modern literature that “[no] message that is decoded without effort is likely to be valued, and the metaphoric mode has its own way of making interpretation fruitfully difficult: though it offers itself eagerly for interpretation, it bewilders us with a plethora of possible meanings” (1977: 111). “The Fish”, through its traces and disintegrations, obscurities and sudden illuminations, crevices and iron edges of sense, confronts us with a strangely moving presence-absence, the visible as expressive of the ineffable “lurking deep under the surfaces” (Hall 1970: 13), granting us the privilege to partake of (but not possess) the plethora of its possible meanings, emotional dangers and mysteries.

1.2.3. “You have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed”: The border lines of quotation and metaphor in “The Octopus”

In “Living On—Border Lines”, Derrida identifies the increasing problem of establishing the borders of the text:

If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge. The question of the text, as it has been elaborated and transformed in the last dozen or so years, has not merely “touched” “shore” *le bord* (scandalously tampering, changing, as in Mallarmé’s declaration, “*On a touché au vers*”), all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e. the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a “text”, of what I still call a

Martin Taffy (1986: 65) similarly argues that the specificity of Moore’s images gradually dissolves in the “flood of ambiguity”, in the end posing more questions than answers. Rotella, in turn, observes: “In part because Moore suppresses the presence of the poem’s speaker and withholds narrative or other contextual details, it is difficult to tell whether ‘The Fish’ is a representation of reality, an abstract or specific meditation on life and death or the current war, or an autonomous textual artifact” (1991: 170).

⁵⁵ Both terms are employed by Derrida in “The Retrait of *Metaphor*” (RM 124).

“text”, for strategic reasons, in part – a “text” that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.

(LOBL 256-7)

Derrida’s anxieties concerning the dissolving edges of the text can be used to explicate one more issue related to the problematic function of metaphor in Moore’s poetry, namely the role of quotation in the construction of her tropes. Modernism has brought an increased awareness of our culture as “a heap of broken images”, replete with echoes and voices of the past. With the publication of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos*, the use of intertext and fragmentation of discourse became a recognizable element of the new poetics. Derrida’s notion of the text as “a differential network”, “a fabric of traces”, whose margins and borders are difficult to ascertain can be easily applied also to Moore, known for her extensive use of the intertext, especially in the form of quotation. As observed by Holley – who takes her terminology from Levi-Strauss – Moore, like Eliot and Pound, is a poet-bricoleur who

makes things out of ‘odds and ends left over’ ... builds ‘structured sets ... by using the remains and debris of events’ and her poetry is a form of bricolage, a ‘continual reconstruction from the same materials,’ the words, phrases, rhythms, and tones that are on hand in the speech and writing available to us. The romantic conception of the poet as creating an utterance originally out of his vision, soul, or unique sensibility must be tempered here by a conception of the poet as tinkering in textualities, recycling and transposing linguistic materials to make something useful to the present.

(Holley 2009: 38-39)

That propensity of the poet for recycling, borrowing, reconstructing and “tinkering in textualities” has been acknowledged by many critics. William Carlos Williams saw her practice as “a multiplication of impulses, distressingly broken up, crossing at eccentric angles” (I 312); Wallace Stevens used a Bakhtinesque-sounding term “hybridization” (OP 249) to define her method, invented by Moore herself, who in her “Note on the Notes” confessed to being unable to renounce her “hybrid method of composition” (MCP 262)⁵⁶; Geoffrey Hartman wrote of “a crazyquilt of

⁵⁶ The full confession sounds as follows: “A willingness to satisfy contradictory objections to one’s manner of writing might turn one’s work into the donkey that finally

thoughts, quotations and sounds” (1980: 131); Bonnie Costello compared her to a “kleptomaniac” whose work resembles an “overstuffed cupboard[d], full of irrelevancies and distractions” (Costello in Parisi 1990: 97).⁵⁷ Incorporating diverse intertextual materials, discourses and registers, which include catalogues, excerpted phrases, colloquialisms and overheard comments of her family or friends, aphorisms and proverbs, photographs, newspaper clippings, direct and indirect quotations from popular magazines, promotional pamphlets, scientific, religious, philosophical and literary texts – to name just a few of her disparate sources – Moore blurs the borderlines of her poem, as she “represents the represented” (Rotella 1991: 154) and creates a heteroglot construct whose signature breaks up into a “personal-impersonal” and infinitely divisible tissue of visible / invisible inscriptions and differential voices.

As the focus of this subchapter is Moore’s animal poem as an extended metaphor, I have selected for my analysis her famous “quilt-poem” of the early twenties, “An Octopus”. A mosaic of quotations, it exhibits generic impurity as it bursts at the edges and descriptive seams, creating – in Holley’s apt words – “a bricolage which brings together various voices and texts in one poetic construct and thus makes many voices out of one and one voice out of many” (2009: 68). The choice of “An Octopus” from among Moore’s animiles might seem more controversial as the eponymous creature turns out to be “an octopus / of ice”, Moore’s metaphor for Mount Rainier, a composite volcano in the Cascade Range, situated 54 miles southeast of Seattle, which Moore and her brother climbed in 1922. However, the poet’s strategies of description-as-deception, hybridization and metaphorical camouflage, strongly reminiscent of those employed in her other animal pieces, reveal it to be a complex inquiry into the limits,

found itself being carried by its masters, since some readers suggest that quotation-marks are disruptive of pleasant progress; others, that notes to what should be complete are a pedantry or evidence of an insufficiently realized task. But since in anything I have written, there have been lines in which the chief interest is borrowed, and I have not yet been able to outgrow this hybrid method of composition, acknowledgements seem only honest. Perhaps those who are annoyed by provisos, detainments, and postscripts could be persuaded to take probity on faith and disregard the notes” (MCP 262).

⁵⁷ I have discussed the intertextual idiosyncrasy of Moore also in my article “‘A Contrapuntalist – Composer of Chorales’ – Marianne Moore’s Dialogical Imagination”. The article reveals the dialogic positioning of the poet and explains the heteroglot composition of her poems with the aid of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia as well as the centrifugal and centripetal forces of language. See Ambroży-Lis (2007: 74-87).

borders and possibilities of language as a tool of knowledge and inquiry. The poem is remarkable also because it relies on the sustained tension between the accumulative and associative pull of metonymy – the trope which more poignantly problematizes and diffuses the “edges” of a text and broadens its semantic field, showing “respect for the essence of a thing” (Moore MMCP 79) – and metaphor, which, as Rotella notes, “promises what metonymy denies, a perfect union of objective and subjective realms, of fact and truth, of art and the world, and the Word” (1991: 154). In “An Octopus”, the critic argues further, Moore “believes neither and both. She contests each one with the other and writes in the space between” (1991: 85).

“Everything begins, then, in citation, in the creases (*faux plis*) of a certain veil” (D 348), argues Derrida in *Dissemination*, and Moore’s composite octopus-volcano, as we learn from the poet’s Notes accompanying the text, is indeed a fascinating assemblage and “re-representation” (Rotella 1991: 154) of such creases and folds, of found descriptions and quotations. These sources include the pamphlets of the Department of the Interior Rules and Regulations, *The National Parks Portfolio* (featuring a detailed description of Mount Rainer, its wildlife and tourist facilities,) Sir William Bell from the British Institute of Patentees, *London Graphic*, *Illustrated London News*, John Ruskin, Clifton Johnson’s *What to See in America*, W. D. Wilcox’s *The Rockies of Canada*, Richard Baxter’s *The Saint’s Everlasting Rest*, *The Five Great Philosophies* by W. D. Hyde (MCP 274), and even a casual comment overheard at the circus. A closer scrutiny of these intertextual choices and their function in the poem yields interesting observations concerning the poet’s idiosyncratic “quilting” and its implications.

As I have stated elsewhere (see Ambrozy-Lis 2007: 74-87), Moore blurs the edges of her text as she frequently mixes non-authoritative and authoritative sources, changing, cutting, or reversing their intended meaning, sometimes merely by trimming their grammar and style to the casual tone of her stanzas, but often by disfiguring them so radically that it is impossible to trace their original form and source. Alicia Ostriker aptly points out that Moore’s treatment of borrowed material displays “the conflicting energy” (in Parisi 1990: 110) that propels all of her poetry and which entails an oscillation between distinctiveness and indirection, between assertion and implication, between respectful distance towards the otherness of non-literary discourse and its creative appropriations and

transgressions. For Moore, the authoritative voice of the quotation serves as a ventriloquist screen, a shield behind which the poet withdraws, protecting and objectifying her own views, allowing for an absorption of other voices and views. However, it can also function as a ready-made, an *objet trouvé* that either retains its “thingness” in the new aesthetic context – inviting us to look at it rather than through it – or else modifies, contaminates or transcends the meaning of the poet’s own words (Leavell 1996: 116).⁵⁸ In each case, the impulse bears traces of subversion directed against the rigid separation of art from life, poetry from non-poetic discourse, the center of our cultural milieu from its margins. Holley sums up the ontological ambiguity of the quotation in the following words:

The quotation marks are a visible threshold, a boundary dividing poetic discourse from the ordinary discourse which it borrows. Quotation opens a window in the poem onto language from outside it, language now included but demarcated. The quotation marks signal a shift in register from one text or voice to another which is enclosed in it – a voice breaking into the writing, a text recalled by the speaker, a voice ventriloquizing another voice, or one text framing another. Each level or type of language is shown by the quotation marks to be partial, divisible, portable, and dependent on the other modes of language from which it is kept visibly distinct. Thus the quotation both blends and divides the two realms of discourse: it incorporates “nonpoetic” language into the poem, while demarcating that language from the poet’s own words. Quotation appropriates everyday discourse into art yet refuses to naturalize it entirely; it insists on both inclusion and separation.

(Holley 2009: 68-69)

Next to the discursive impurity, high density and variety of the sources from which Moore draws, “An Octopus” includes and foregrounds a whole range of aspects of the poet’s method. As an instance of her skills of bricolage, it creates visible and camouflaged thresholds in discourse, whose boundaries reveal the interplay between inclusion and separation, generating all manner of interactions and intersections between the pirated material. The very first lines of the poem put the reader on guard as they openly acknowledge the deceptive nature of perception and language engaged in its service:

⁵⁸ The critic refers here to the poems “In This Age of Hard Trying” and “The Past is the Present”.

An Octopus

of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies "in grandeur and in mass"
beneath a sea of shifting snow dunes;
dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined
pseudopodia
made of glass that will bend – a much needed invention –
comprising twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hundred
feet thick,
of unimagined delicacy.

(MCP 71)

"Deceptively reserved and flat / it lies 'in grandeur and in mass'" – the line beautifully captures not only the grandeur of Mount Rainer but also the misleading "flatness" and textuality of Moore's own descriptive bent, which gradually exposes the rich and wide-ranging implications of her discursive strategies and displacements. The expression "in grandeur and in mass" is the first visible fissure in the aesthetic unity of the text, as it is derived from *The National Park Portfolio*, thus bringing public discourse of a promotional brochure into the quotational tapestry of the poem. Many more such intrusions occur, to name only the alliterative phrase "picking periwinkles from the cracks", taken from the popular magazine *London Graphic*, or "blue stone forests thrown together with marble and jasper and agate", cited from a tourist guidebook entitled *What to See in America*. Some of the phrases, for example the very opening lines "An octopus of / ice", are borrowed but not acknowledged as citations, whereas others are left undocumented, like "The Goat Mirror", which Elizabeth W. Joyce traces back to W. D. Wilcox's description of Lake Agnes (1998: 83). Still others, such as "an anemone-starred pool" (71), were taken from another source and fused with the one suggested by Moore's Notes (See Costello 1981: 80, 184). As pointed out by Joyce, Moore almost always meddles with her material, even when she keeps it within the boundaries of the quotation marks and quite often modifies the quotation so radically that it is impossible to trace it to its source (Joyce 1998: 81). Furthermore, the list of her references in the Notes betrays the fact that most of them are decontextualized or even totally unrelated and "foreign" to the subject of her poem. This shows Moore's openness and deceptive inconsistency in the treatment and appropriations of her sources. Their incorporation, combined with their ostentatious and at the same time misleading visibility in the text, destabilizes representation,

causes and broadens the gap between language and life, showing the plurality of languages and codes with which we approach nature. It exposes them also to the dangers and benefits of the word's malleability, resulting from their transplantation into a new context. Mount Rainier, advertised from the very beginning as a language-construct, is built "out of odds and ends of description", or – to employ Moore's own apt metaphor – out of "collisions of knowledge with knowledge", which produce an effect of discontinuity and open-endedness – a text as a never ending movement of language without clear contours and edges. Thus, the mountain confronts us with fragments of disparate representations, with the surfaces of language rather than recollected facts and primary experiences. In this way Moore problematizes the tension between the world and poetry, scrutinizing not only our ways of knowing reality, but also into our methods of recording it.

What the quotation mark, Moore's favorite device in the poem, achieves is – as Derrida often points out – that it opens each text up for further remarking, for when it is once taken out of its context, its borders become provisional and enter the space of the proliferation of meanings. The multiple splinters of touristic, scientific and promotional discourse clearly suggest that Moore's text "knows no bounds"⁵⁹ and that its meaning is produced by an interplay between repetition and difference, in which the language often folds back on itself, distancing us from the object that it delineates. The self-reflexive nature of this glacial poem is signaled already through the metaphoric title and Moore's persistent refusal to name the representational object of her consideration. As if indicating the lost proximity between the locus and logos, reinforced additionally by multiple references to the fall and the Garden of Eden, the poet avoids explicit references to Mount Rainier, displacing the identification or using descriptive equivalents such as "Big Snow Mountain" (MCP 73). Driven by the force of displacement both on the level of image and discourse, the poem progresses by a disorienting, highly associative "flux of image and perspective" (Costello 1981: 81). The flux begins with the comparison of the mountain to an octopus whose tentacles move in many unpredictable directions: horizontally "spider fashion" (MCP 71), vertically "winding slowly through the cliffs", concentrically like "the crushing rigor of the python" (71), in "the lanes of ripples" (72) or ava-

⁵⁹ Derrida's formulation "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" – translated as "nothing is extra-textual" or "there is nothing outside text" – can be also rendered as "text knows no bounds". See Leslie Hill (2007: 46).

lanche-like “in a curtain of powdered snow” (76).⁶⁰ This series of spatial metaphors, expressive of movement that is both centrifugal and centripetal, exhibits Moore’s perception of poetic language, which can activate the rippling waves of discourse and their supplementary contexts that escape the fixity of the proper meaning. As the poet herself admits, poetry is “important not because a / high sounding interpretation can be put upon [it] but because [it is] useful” (MCP, “Poetry”, 266-267). “An Octopus” clearly evidences this belief, lending the weight of “usefulness” and rugged beauty to the disparate “readymades” and their “lanes of ripples” within her composition.

Just like in “The Fish”, the rippling and tentacular movement of Moore’s “purloined letters” embraces the title, which is “snatched” into the text by the first line. This gesture ties in well with the subsequent development of the poem, which consistently resists framing, as if the organic complexity and visual immediacy of the glacier could not be contained within the inflexible firmness of the title. Although this octopus is “of ice”, again implying a certain rigidity of its form, Moore locates it on “pseudopodia / made of glass that will bend – a much needed invention” (MCP 71), employing a metaphor which points to the cross-fecundation of the stabilizing and destabilizing mechanisms of language. This complexity cannot apparently be held within the scattered quotations, whose loose relatedness, non-authoritativeness and erratic meandering from one subject to another hardly help one grasp the poem’s subject. The intertextual swerves produce continuous deviations from the unicursal track of mountain climbing and viewing, thus breaking not only the routine of the tourist’s gaze but also demonstrating the extent to which our response to natural landscape is predetermined by linguistic, cultural and conceptual conventions and codes of discourse. For the purpose of tightening the “conspiracy and cooperation”⁶¹ – to use R. P. Blackmur’s expression (1986: 85) – between the patches of purloined language and the poet’s need to open up fresh vistas onto the natural world, Moore arranges the quoted passages so that they also ferry the shifts of perspective that moves from the horizontally and

⁶⁰ Costello correctly observes that the image of the octopus becomes the “interface” of the poet’s concerns about the limits of vision and language, “serving simultaneously as an image for the glacier and an image for the poem” (1981: 92).

⁶¹ Blackmur compares Moore’s method to that of Pound in his *Cantos*, arguing that Moore’s quotations – although inviolate and disjointed like Pound’s, and, like his, “coming from different countries of the mind” – cooperate in creating a unique sense of intimacy and purpose that increases as the poem unfolds (1986: 85).

vertically spreading grandeur of the “twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hundred / feet thick” to the clear contours and rich color and texture of the mountain specimens of fauna and flora:

The fir trees, in “the magnitude of their root systems”,
rise aloof from these maneuvers “creepy to behold”
austere specimens of our American royal families,
“each like the shadow of the one beside it.
The rock seems frail compared with their dark energy of life”,
its vermilion and onyx and manganese-blue interior expensiveness
left at the mercy of the weather;
“stained transversely by iron where the water drips down” (...)
Pre-empted by their ancestors,
This is the property of the exacting porcupine,
and of the rat “slipping along to its burrow in the swamp
or pausing on high ground to smell the heather”;
of thoughtful beavers
making drains which seem the work of careful men with shovels”,
and of the bears inspecting unexpectedly
ant-hills and berry bushes.
Composed of calcium gems and alabaster pillars,
topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz,
their den is somewhere else, concealed in the confusion
of “blue forests thrown together with marble and jasper and agate”
And farther up, in a stag-at-bay position
as scintillating fragment of these terrible stalagmites,
stands the goat
its eyes fixed on the waterfall which never seems to fall
and endless skein swayed by the wind,
immune to force of gravity in the perspective of the peaks”
(MCP 71-72)

A challenge to even the most attentive of her readers, the subject of the description is indeed “concealed in the confusion” of those “scintillating fragments”, broken edges of the borrowed phrases, and frequent swings of Moore’s democratic perspective. In the quoted passages, the controlling, bird-view positioning of the perceiving eye yields to the camera-like close-up on sensual detail. The cross-section of the rock, revealing its gem-like composition and multi-hued interior, serves as a backdrop for the goat, whose vistas extend our own as they embrace the gravity-defying waterfall emerging unexpectedly in the “perspective of the peaks”. The root-system of the firs “rising aloof” is as conspicuous to the viewer as “the polite needles

of the larches / hung to filter, not to intercept the sunlight” or the “tightly wattled spruce twigs” (MCP 71). This zooming in and out, which results in perceptual disorientation, but also the concentration of detail, followed by its diffusion or juxtaposition, determinedly alienate the reader and protect the landscape from being sublimated through prolonged and focused contemplation. The same effect is achieved through the split focus of the narrative, which stumbles over the unpolished thresholds of the quotation marks, as well as through the sheer variety of the phenomena embraced by the poem’s descriptive “tentacles”. In this way Moore seems to play against the unifying, anthropocentric and vertically oriented perspective of the Romantic eye contemplating the mountainous sublime from afar, either at the foot or from the top of the mountain, and seeking correspondences between the natural and human orders. By granting us at once the overview of the scenery and a display of its smallest particulars, the poet resists the traps of Romantic egocentrism and treatment of the landscape as a mirror of the self. “Completing a circle”, Moore warns the ill-equipped traveler-reader of her glacier, “you have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed” (MCP 71). And indeed, her deceptive strategies guide us through her textual glacier so that its displaced object resists our possessive, appropriating gaze, and our desires to polish and tame it. At the same time, they seem to imply that the poem can sometimes grant us more open and inclusive vistas onto a given phenomenon than lived experience.

The visual disorientation resulting from the flux of images is also enhanced by other verbal and syntactical strategies employed by the poet. The quoted brochures and guides form the dense texture of poem but they also display the humanizing, “smoothing” propensity of perception, exemplified for instance by the simile “that lady-finger-like depression in the shape of the left human foot” or the modifier “polite” used to describe larch needles (71). Moore counteracts this aspect by her creative use of the rhetorical subversiveness of the catalogue, which foregrounds natural abundance and diversity, withstanding our anthropocentric designs: “bears, elk, deer, wolves, goats, and ducks”; “larkspur, blue pincushions, blue peas, and lupin”; “the birch trees, ferns, and lily pads, avalanche lilies, Indian paintbrushes, bear’s ears and kittentails, / and miniature cavalcades of chlorophyllless fungi” (74). Being the most anti-hierarchical, non-evaluative, discontinuous and non-linear of textual devices, the catalogue comes close to removing “the smudges” of metaphorization and sublime sentimentality from the depiction, to leaving us in the midst of

nature's alienating otherness. However, the flowers' names, such as Indian paintbrush, kittentail or bear's ears, bring in the next "commotion of discourse" (Stellardi 2006: 51) which subtly betrays the human need for resemblance and absorption of difference in this apparent disarray. The floral catalogue seems to suggest further that there is no access to the immediacy of experience in the post-lapsarian world, in which language has to compensate for the lost plenitude and the broken union with God.

Costello also notices verbal subversiveness in Moore's use of the word "pseudopodia" at the beginning of the poem: "dots of cyclamen and maroon on its clearly defined pseudopodia" (MCP 71). According to the critic, the precision and scientific order of the zoological, Latinate term *pseudopodia* is blunted in the image of the flowers that become the red dots on the octopus's extremities (1981: 82). The flowers covering the glacial slopes are reduced to an abstract pattern, which however is again concretized when tied to the sensual firmness of the octopus. Presented in this way, the glacier diffuses into a series of interconnected resemblances and perceptual illusions. Despite bringing us closer to the complexity and beauty of nature's own designs, this multi-layered defamiliarization and superimposition of metaphors to define an object reinforce the sense of wildness and difference which cannot be entirely controlled by any linguistic rigor, although it repeatedly tries and fails to retain a hold on the rugged landscape. In his study of metaphor's relational aspects, Max Black observes that it "filters and transforms: it not only selects, it brings forward aspects of [the principal subject] that might not be seen at all through another medium", adding further: "This is the pride and pathos of metaphor, for its moment we are not bound by lexical boundaries" (Black 1962: 42, 124). Moore's practice stretches the boundaries of figurative language so that it points simultaneously outward, to the mountain, and inward, to the abstract order of her composition, bringing forward both the wilderness of nature and the abstracting habits of perception and language.

The syntactical arrangement of the poem similarly contributes to our bewilderment. The tourist-reader cannot help but lose himself in the long embedded sentences which bring words in perplexing, association-ridden avalanches that in turn obscure clear perception:

Distinguished by a beauty
of which "the visitor dare never fully speak at home
for fear of being stoned as an impostor",
Big Snow Mountain is the home of a diversity of creatures:

those who “have lived in hotels
 but who now live in camps – who prefer to”;
 the mountain guide evolving from the trapper,
 “in two pairs of trousers, the outer one older,
 wearing slowly away from the feet to the knees”;
 “the nine-striped chipmunk
 running with unmammal-like agility along a log”;
 water ouzel
 with “its passion for rapids and high-pressured falls”,
 building under the arch of some tiny Niagara;
 the white-tailed ptarmigan “in winter solid white,
 feeding on heather-bells and alpine buckwheat”;
 and the eleven eagles of the west,
 “fond of the spring fragrance and the winter colors”,
 used to the unegoistic action of the glaciers
 and “several hours of frost every midsummer night”.
 (MCP 73)

Like the shifting snow dunes evoked in the opening image of the mountain, the subordinate clauses in this passage accumulate and shift, liberating their meaning from the beaten paths and rigor of coherence and logic, thus making the ultimate sense difficult to establish. The embedded structure of this verbal torrent, quilted out of direct and layered quotations and supported only by the weak relational grip of commas and semi-colons, buries the antecedent of the subsequent sentence, postponing the completion of each appositional clause and displacing the subject of the whole, so that we no longer know our whereabouts in this “wilderness of the page” (Costello 1981: 87).⁶²

Although Moore stresses “the relentless accuracy” and “neatness of finish” in her reference to the Greeks, who “liked smoothness / distrusting what was back of what could not be clearly seen” (75) as well as in the closing exclamatory passage of the poem: “Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish! / Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus / with its capacity for fact” (76), we cannot resist the impression that both the poet’s mind and the form of “An Octopus” surrender to and keep alive the ruggedness and diversity of the glacial landscape and the irreducible alterity of phenomena which it represents. Moore’s syntactical, visual and verbal practices in this

⁶² Costello argues further that the effect of such piling up of sentences is that we adjust the limits of our attention and “cease even to anticipate their subjects and simply enjoy the arrangement of words, the parts of speech, in the infinite variety of language it provides” (1981: 87).

poem show, in Costello's words, her need to "declare the nature and limits of her medium without destroying our interest in its descriptive action" (1981: 93). Having indicated the dangers of the "relentless accuracy", the speaker further asks "Is 'tree' the word for these things / 'flat on the ground like vines'?" (MCP 76), as if fearing that the denotative clarity of language and its generalizing tendency can further "flatten" the "grandeur and mass" of the mountain's natural slovenliness. The metaphor of the octopus, underlying the structure and visual content of the poem, does not impose a unifying framework upon it, retaining instead its many-legged truths and its polyvocality, and creating an open space which grants new vantage points from which to view the composite and diverse beauty of Mount Rainier. Thus, the line "[c]reeping slowly as with mediated stealth, / its arms seeming to approach from all directions" (MCP 75) captures the stately, wide-spread movement of the glacier, but it also serves to describe Moore's inconclusive struggle with language's limited "capacity for fact". Therefore, it becomes a parallel metaphor of the untidy, shifting logic of the poem, whose "arms" approach the mountain from many directions, "gathering up 'glacier like' whatever scraps of language come into its path" (Costello 1981: 91). The incisions, the visible and invisible stitches of citations and borrowings that pierce the complex matrix of Moore's "quilt" deepen our understanding of its porous, self-reflexive nature, and of our own responses to it. The closing image of the poem sustains the tension between the descriptive and the self-conscious aspect of Moore's language:

the white volcano with no weather side;
the lightning flashing at its base,
rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak –
the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed,
its claw cut by the avalanche
"with sound like the crack of a rifle,
In a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall".

(MCP 76)

Allowing "the curtain of powdered snow" to fall upon the "glassy octopus symmetrically pointed", Moore resists her own desire for the "neatness of finish" and dissolves her description with the avalanche of inconclusive, self-erasing whiteness. Rotella's sees in it the poet's conscious return to "the beauty, mystery, and terror of a world beyond us. Inexhaustible in urging us to meaning but eluding our conceptions, it is a wordless and

blank surface like an empty page, where there is nothing certain to read, and a room for writing that helps us to survive and is sure to be erased” (1991: 178). However, with this final theatrical fall of whiteness, Moore seems to be left happily with the scriptible and palimpsestuous composite of various discursive truths about the mountain, as she clearly refuses to reach behind the wall of snow for the ultimate truth.

In her essay “Metaphor and Transcendence”, Karsten Harries explains Heidegger’s vision of poetry as that which “reveals the meaning of what is as it establishes a world, where ‘world’ does not mean the totality of facts but a space of meanings that assigns to things and to man their proper places” (Harries 1978: 86). Moore’s animiles function in a similar way, as they gather up various facets of life, experience and discourse, but refuse to totalize them either through the authority of the poet’s distinctive voice or through the unifying aesthetic or the comforts of metaphoric framework. Geoffrey Hartman, in the Preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism*, observes that “[l]iterary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning: it opens as well as closes the disparity between symbol and idea, between written sign and assigned meaning” (Hartman in Bloom 1979: ix). The figures of the shield, injured fan and octopus employed by Moore in the poems discussed in this part signal similar paradoxes of the poet’s practice, as they manifest the rapport between metaphor and truth, but at the same time create a gap between them, effected by the tension between the centripetal and the centrifugal energy of the tropes. As a figure of both protection and weaponry, the shield suggests the vulnerability and fragility of the poem’s significance as well as the need to guard and camouflage the poet’s inner resources and feelings by means of dense metaphorical screens or metonymic displacements. Simultaneously, however, it invites a more attentive examination of the processes of language and catalyzes a large number of questions concerning the limits and creative forces of discourse. Similarly to Heidegger and Derrida, Moore sees the inexpressible as the essential reserve of language; the hedgehog, used as a trope in her poem in the very act of withdrawal, shows itself, opening a possibility of meaning while at the same time keeping it hidden, partially disclosed or suspended.

The injured fan, in turn, implies that the poem is a site of active meaning-making, a dynamic composition, governed by a Derridian logic of the fold or venetian blind, whereby meaning is not a stable nucleus of sense enclosed within an aesthetic form or framed in the light of logos. Rather, it

is realized in the movement of unfolding, folding and refolding, or a “battle between opening (*éclaircie*) and reserve and withdrawal (*Verbergung*)” (Derrida RM 127), which often causes the sense to slip out through the “injured” and thus imperfect folds of metaphoric signification, leaving us only with the flickering referral and deferral of meaning – a *différance*. To illustrate this process, in his “Retrait of Metaphor” Derrida uses yet another concept of neighborliness or vicinity of *Dichten* and *Denken*, of poetry and thinking, claiming – after Heidegger – that they “incise each other and are cut (*geschnitten*) in the incision (*Aufriss*) of their proximity (*avoisinement*) of their neighbouring essence (*nachbarlichen Wesen*)”. The result of this incision is an “opening, differentiability but also divergence, splitting aside, unappearance and effacement” (Derrida RM 124, 125) of life’s essence and sense. Moore’s metaphor of the “injured fan”, necessitated by inarticulate suffering, skillfully performs this incision, making possible – as Moore herself acknowledges – only “the piercing glances into the life of things” (“When I Buy Pictures”, MCP 48). The figure also keeps the poem on the threshold of inarticulate mourning, shows language as suffering beyond representation, pain that “has turned the threshold to stone” (Trakl in Heidegger PLT 195), for it implies that acknowledging loss, including that of the mystery and limits of the word, is the only possibility of reaching beyond the break-up of language.

Finally, the rich metaphoric assemblage of the octopus points to Moore’s conviction that truth inscribed within the poetic language is supported by many feet and that it can pull us simultaneously in many directions, towards the open, mobile poles and absorptive paths, edges and demarcations of the text and discourse, where, like her favorite figure of the chameleon, it can (dis)appear “in fifty shades of mauve and amethyst” (MCP 56). “Camouflage”, Costello argues, “is the perfect emblem of a confusion between metonymy and metaphor, for it creates the illusion of contiguity where there is actually separation” (1981: 144).⁶³ “An Octopus” camouflages its own metaphoric and metonymic import under the chameleonic changes of the multiple discourses which simultaneously blend and separate art and nature, allowing for their variety, crisscrossing and equivocality. Roland Barthes observes that the best kind of writing is “a composite art, looping together several tastes, several languages. Such

⁶³ It is interesting to note that Moore saw herself as “[a]n American chameleon on an American leaf” (MMCP 675).

artists provoke a complete kind of joy, for they afford the image of culture that is at once differential and collective: plural” (RB 54). It is precisely this kind of joy that Moore grants its readers in “An Octopus”.

In Moore’s animiles, metaphor is not a rhetorical device but a tool for destabilizing our habits of cognition and discourse that consequently opens poetic language and our imagination to the unknown. It allows for capturing and sheltering the most elusive thoughts and feelings that slip through the grasp of more determinate concepts. In her poetic practice, the catachrestic fallaciousness of the trope is turned to advantage, transformed into a creative mode of discovery that “quickens” our cognitive powers,⁶⁴ shocking us into a new understanding of the familiar. The secret of metaphor, Ricoeur argues, is that by displacing meaning it simultaneously elevates it, becoming a “privileged instrument in the upward motion of meaning” (ROM 46). Moore seems to have mastered that secret very well. Metaphor in her work is not only a figurative way of speaking, but fulfills the ontological function of making the world appear, as it becomes, in Ricoeur’s apt words, a space in which “every dormant potentiality of existence appears *as* blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action *as* actualized” (ROM 48). It also possesses the epistemological potential of infinitely enlarging our vision and comprehension of ourselves so that the discovery and redescription of our being become possible within the limits of language. As noted by Kuan-Ming Wu, “a good metaphor is a good poem whose wound it inflicted on us we recognize we can never forget” (2001: 77).⁶⁵ Derrida uses a similar metaphor when he asserts in “Che cos’è la poesia?” that there is “no poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding” (CCP 233). In “The Truth that Wounds”, the philosopher likewise reasserts that “the signature of a poem, like that of any text, is a wound” – a wound that “does not heal” but which “opens the mouth of language”, giving it a

⁶⁴ In *The Critique of Judgment* Immanuel Kant argues that an idea expressed poetically, arouse[s] more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words”, and “quickens the mind by opening up for it a view into an immense realm of kindred presentations” (Kant [1790] 2008: 315-316).

⁶⁵ The scholar cites Robert Frost here, who observes in his review of Amy Lowell’s poems: “The proof of a poem is that we have never forgotten it, but that we knew at sight that we never could forget it, [at] the moment it strikes him [the right reader of a good poem] that he has taken an immortal wound – that he will never get over it” (Kuang Ming Wu 2001: 77).

chance to speak (Derrida *SIQ* 166). Moore's "accident" of metaphor, translated into the eternally incurable word- and image-wounds of "The Fish", shows more poignantly and almost tangibly the wounds inflicted by death and war, revealing also the cross-fecundating incisions and "tensional truths [*vérité tensionnelle*]" of poetry and thinking (Ricoeur in Stellardi 2001: 69). The scales of the pangolin's armor and the spiny coats of the whole hedgehog family recreated with meticulousness by Moore's poetics in "His Shield" best problematize the strained relation between the natural and the human in modernism, signaling aporetic withdrawals and revelations of sense characteristic of modernist poetic discourse. The octopus metaphor, in turn, reveals Moore's deconstructionist sensibility, as it exposes the existing conceptual structures and language games caught up in the vortex of her poem, and broken, as in Derrida's philosophical discourse, by "the subtle but inevitable apparition of all sorts of disruptive traces of the outside, of the other" (Stellardi 2001: 73). The octopus proves also the profound metaphoricality of metaphor postulated both by Derrida and Ricoeur, as it activates the tension between the referential limits of the signifier and both the extraordinary power and fragility of metaphoric supplementation. The truth in all of these poems emerges under the same condition which underlies the scintillating and trembling movement of Moore's jelly-fish – we can attain restricted access to it only if we abandon our intent to "catch" it.

1.3. The hedgehog poetics of anti-absorption – Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man" and Marianne Moore's "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing"

In "State of Art", the introductory essay of his *A Poetics*, Charles Bernstein states: "I care most about poetry that disrupts business as usual, including literary business: I care most for poetry as dissent, including formal dissent; poetry that makes sounds possible to be heard that are not otherwise articulated" (AP 3). Considering the degree of disruptions, or of "artifice" in a poem, to use Bernstein's key concept from this study, the poet distinguishes between two kinds of poetics: the absorptive and anti-absorptive one. The division, explained in another essay "The Artifice of Absorption", is based on the assumption that the text is "a spongy substance" (Bernstein AA 22) which absorbs the syntax, vocabulary & reference, forming a unified, transparent and unobtrusive whole. However, as it is often with poetry, it can also refuse to contain some of its impermeable materials, creating a "textural space" (AA 22), pierced by frequent gaps, atonalities, contradic-

tions, obtrusions of artifice. Sensitive to “the quality of the poem’s language that makes it both continuous & discontinuous with the world of experience” (AA 10), the absorptive poem thus foregrounds the content, “threatening to naturalize the artifice” (AA 15) and making the form transparent or invisible to convey a strong sense of connectedness with the world of experience and the reader’s immersion in it, while the anti-absorptive work contains and flaunts all sorts of “destabilizing elements” (AA 16): non-semantic features, blank spaces, deliberate errors, “spillage” or excesses of significance, dense metaphoricity, unconventional punctuation or typography, original prosody, formal play, indirectness, etc. The anti-absorptive qualities have a stronger appellative function, demanding the reader’s activity and self-reflexive revisions of the text. In the poet’s words:

By *absorption* I mean engrossing, engulfing completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie, attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding, mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting, enthralling: belief, conviction, silence.
Impermeability suggests artifice, boredom, exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction, digression, interruptive, transgressive, undecorous, anticonventional, unintegrated, fractured, fragmented, fanciful, ornately stylized, rococo, baroque, structural, mannered, fanciful, ironic, iconic, shtick, camp, diffuse, decorative, repellent, inchoate, programmatic, didactic, theatrical, background muzak, amusing: skepticism, doubt, noise, resistance.

(Bernstein AA 29-30)

Bernstein does not postulate that the absorptive and antiabsorptive qualities are mutually exclusive or necessarily conflicted within a space of a poem; quite on the contrary, very often they co-exist and work together towards the final effect, as the antiabsorptive devices can be used to absorptive ends and vice versa, keeping balance between aesthetic and cognitive goals of the poem.

This concept of the poem as both an absorptive and antiabsorptive texture ties in neatly with Derrida’s metaphor of the hedgehog-poem, for it entails the same oscillatory and chimerical dynamic formulated at the beginning of my study. It situates the poem at the crossroads between the

surplus of meaning and its diffusion and undecidability, with the artifice employed in the service of the presentation and intensification of the subject or / and as the “misting” device, which breaks the transparent surface and communicates the more effectively, the more it alienates, confounds or resists the reader. The necessarily “misted” glass of the poem in Bernstein’s essay (AA 33) corresponds here to the prickly rolled-upness and inaccessibility of Derrida’s hedgehog.

Significantly, Bernstein sees the role of poetry as that of “epistemological inquiry”, as a special way of knowing capable of “reconnecting us with modes of meaning given in language” (AA 18). Quoting Wittgenstein’s observations that “a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language game of giving information” (quoted in Bernstein AA 16), Bernstein points out that poetry does not belong to the mimetic, illusionist orders of representation, being a different type of a language game, governed by a less predictable set of rules and requiring a different kind of response from the reader. “A task of poetry”, argues the critic in an interview, “is to make audible (*tangible* but not necessarily *graspable*) those dimensions of the real that cannot be heard as much as to imagine new reals that have never before existed” (Bernstein AP 184). Communicating often through the opaque and incomprehensible, poetry breathes more freely than prose in the realities and unrealities of our experience, and, as the poet admits further on, it does not “censure the unknown” (Bernstein AP 183), for it sees the epistemological potential also in the risk of not knowing, transgression, loss, or the absence of sense. Thus poetry becomes “the *censer* of the spirits of the unknown, untried, unconsidered – that now, as if they always had, bloom in vividness” (Bernstein AP 183).

Bernstein’s idea resonates strongly with the experimental poetics of the high modernists chosen for this study. As observed by Susanne Juhasz (1976: 35), modernist poets “remain interested in expressing universal truths, but they have found a different methodology for doing so that seem to them at once more effective and more in tune with their twentieth-century emphasis on the technical (in literary art translated into a concern with technique, with form and style)”. Bearing in mind Bernstein’s vision of the poem as “the *censer*” rather than “*sensor*” of the unknown, I will focus on the modes of epistemological inquires and language games as offered by Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore – the two unquestionable masters of the absorptive and antiabsorptive “enchantments” of the mod-

ernist mind. The poets themselves shed light on their mutual propensity for the poetics of anti-absorption as they comment on their own practice. Stevens, for example, describes Moore as “not only a complete disintegrator but equally complete reintegrator” (Stevens in Goodridge 1989: 51), an evaluation corroborated by William Carlos Williams who observes that “If one come with Miss Moore’s work to some wary friend and say, ‘Everything is worthless but the best and this is the best,’ adding, ‘only with difficulty discerned’, arguing further that her poetry is ‘a break *through* all pre-conceptions of poetic form and mood and pace, a flaw, a crack in the bowl.’ It is this that one means when he says destruction and creation are simultaneous” (Williams in Goodridge 1989: 25). Moore, in turn, reviewing Stevens’ *Owl’s Clover* labels its author as an “aristocratic cipher”, “America’s chief conjuror” and his method – “a combination of hints and disguises”, and “eloquent silence” which speaks volumes (Moore in Goodridge 1989: 38). In a letter to William Carlos Williams, she expresses her bewilderment in the following words:

Wallace Stevens is beyond fathoming, he is so strange; it is as if he had a morbid secret he would rather perish than disclose and just as he tells it out in his sleep, he changes into an uncontradictable judiciary with a gown and a gavel and you are embarrassed to have heard anything...”
(Moore in Goodridge 1989: 33)

The strangeness and a penchant for the unfathomable defines the work of both poets. The poems chosen for scrutiny here – Stevens’s seductively enigmatic “The Snow Man” and Moore’s equally baffling “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing”, serve well to demonstrate not only the formal virtuosities of their authors, but above all – the fusion of the contradictory “hints and disguises”, communicative and anti-communicative impulses of the poetic word which frequently probes into the unknown and defies our expectations of clarity of expression and content.

Echoing Victor Shklovsky’s famed assertion that “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky in Rivkin et al. 2004: 16), Bernstein aptly observes that what induces a peculiar aesthetic pleasure in our reading of poetry is “the transgression of the already known in an exchange with the incomprehensible” (AP 183). To experience this pleasure, however, we need a “leap of faith” (183) rather than a

calculated reasoning and full cognitive “grasp” of the poem. Both “The Snow Man” and “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing” grant the reader this kind of pleasure as they take us into the world in which uncertainty, secrets and confusion are the dominant cognitive categories, and the known is at a constant risk of sliding into the unknown. As the poems are resonating with similar ideas and their formal strangeness seems to have a related aesthetic and conceptual ground, the analysis in the subchapter will be based on the parallel juxtaposition of the selected elements of Moore’s and Stevens’ poetic practice, such as the title, the use of light and color, the visual and aural effects in the poems.

The first striking similarity is that in both texts, the “misting” and anti-absorptive proclivities are visible already on the level of the titles. Stevens’s “The Snow Man”, although instantly suggestive of the winter landscape and of a figure made of snow, reveals a deliberate insecurity at the heart of its representational gesturing, as the poet splits the word “snowman” into two separate elements: “snow” and “man”, thus producing (both visually and metaphorically) the first obtrusion that radically subverts our expectations and halts our absorptive desires for comprehension. The familiar elements which here do not quite cohere, seem to indicate not only a rift between the natural and the human but also a profound destabilization of language that fails to bridge the gap between those two realms. As pointed out by Ronald Hoag (1979: 91) in his study of the title pun, if we “listen [carefully enough] in the snow” for the audibly anti-absorptive sound effects of this phrase, we can easily hear the word “no” modifying “man” in this line, which leaves us with a clearly more disquieting “This No-Man” which removes the element of playfulness from the poem and implies the humanist and nihilistic anxieties of the post-romantic era.⁶⁶ Bart Eeckhout (2002: 65) similarly notes that Stevens’s “deliberate splitting of the word helps us question the degree to which the speaker (or is it merely the listener in the snow?) retains his humanity, as traditionally conceived, at the end of the poem”.⁶⁷ The difficulty and the intentional negative capability of Stevens’s title invites the reader to stay

⁶⁶ Jarraway also draws our attention to the “no”, which, as he states, is *buried* within the title snow, creating a first clue manifesting the ambiguity of the whole poem. For details see Jarraway (1996: 30).

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Cook argues in more jocular tone, that the poem asks: “Who am I? A snow man. Am I? No man”. (1988: 150).

vigilant to the subsequent cracks in the language structure and the complications of thought in the whole poem.

Marianne Moore likewise uses the title to catch us up in the acoustic and semantic intricacies of her poem. Unlike Stevens's, however, her title is immediately revealing, for it disarmingly flaunts the mind's impermeability by implying its connection with magic and carrying a promise of what awaits the reader. Characteristically of this poet, it is integrated with the first line which repeats the statement, yet with a difference:

THE MIND IS AN ENCHANTING THING

is an enchanted thing

(MCP 134)

In this way, Moore draws our attention to the mind's creative ability to both enchant and *be* enchanted, and the connection to magic proves a significant lead in our approach to the somewhat mystifying lines that follow. Each magic trick involves showing the audience something ordinary which is next made into something extraordinary and astounding, with the mechanism of this change remaining mysterious and elusive to us. In the lines of Moore's poem, we are constantly exposed to the interplay between the ordinary and extraordinary, between disguise and revelation, the known and the elusive. Change, transformation and surprise govern the entire poem, enhancing the impression of elusiveness and both perceptual and cognitive instability. Moore celebrates here the power of enchantment which lies in the reciprocal exchange and similar activities of the mind and the world, as suggested in the first two stanzas which compare the working of the human mind to a series of natural phenomena, such as "the glaze on a katydid wing / subdivided by the sun / till the nettings are legion", "the apteryx-awl / as a beak, or the / kiwi's rain-shawl / of haired feathers" (MCP 134). When brought together, all these animals turn out to be natural masters of self-transgression, camouflage and disguise⁶⁸. Although the sound of katydid's chirping can be easily heard on a summer evening, the insect itself is impossible to spot as it perfectly melts into its surroundings. The same can be said of kiwi bird and apteryx, both of which are known for their brown inconspicuous hair-like feathers which enable them to turn into a ball and thus

⁶⁸ Moore clearly loved animal strategies of camouflage, as she used to describe herself as "an American chameleon on an American leaf" (Moore quoted in Steinman 1987: 133).

hide from predators or wait unobserved for their own prey. Through those analogies Moore draws our attention to the dialectic movement between revelation and concealment on which the poem is based.

Moore stresses perceptual change also through her references to light, here containing a multiplicity and vibrancy of color. The glaze on the katydid wing, the sun-lit neck of a dove and the iridescent light which infuses the whole poem seem to suggest swiftness, fluctuating instability and elusiveness of the mind. This quality is reinforced by the kaleidoscopic shifts of the animal imagery⁶⁹ broken by an unexpected, anti-absorptive reference to Walter Giesking playing Scarlatti in the last line of the first stanza. Giesking, a virtuoso pianist in Moore's times, was famous for his subtlety, lightness, exquisite tone color and spontaneity of his performances of Scarlatti's sonatas. The evocation of a delicate, nuanced and shimmering beauty of Giesking's interpretations glosses beautifully the idiosyncratic visual and aural effects of Moore's poem. Elaborating on the anti-absorptive forces of a poem, Bernstein writes about prosodic elements which "create a centripetal / (or vortical) energy in the poem that is able to capture & hold attention (not just conscious attention, but the imagination or psyche)" (AA 47). The lightness of the mood effected by a mention of Giesking in Moore can be felt in the anti-absorptive sound composition of her own poem, which opens with quick flitting movements of the high vowels in the internally rhyming "katydid / wing Giesking / playing" in the first stanza, and closes with the staccato playfulness and obtrusiveness of Moore's final stanza, "prickly" with vowel and consonant alliterations and line-clipping masculine rhymes:

It tears off the veil; tears
 the temptation, the
mist the heart wears,
 from its eyes – if the heart
has a face; it takes apart
dejection.

(MCP 134)

⁶⁹ T. S. Eliot, commenting on Moore's use of imagery in her poem "Those Various Scalpels", aptly observed that "[h]ere the rhythm depends partly upon the transformation-changes from one image to another, so that the second image is superposed before the first has quite faded, and upon the dexterity of change of vocabulary from one image to another" (1969: 49). The same strategy seems to govern "The Mind".

The lines of the stanza beautifully capture the impression of swiftness, as it begins with a sequence of quick one-syllable words. The alliterating monosyllables punctuate the syntax, as if impatient to *enact* the very “unveiling” by shedding off the words one by one to reach the unseeing, “misted” eyes of the heart. And yet, the repetitions of the words “tears” and “heart” disrupt this hastiness, arresting the movement while still serving as rhythmic cues in the poem’s design. The right manner of “seeing” for Moore, as both the content and the form reveal, seems to embrace the constant interplay between perceptual blindness and a more focused mono-vision, suggested already in the second stanza in the passage “the mind / feeling its way as though blind, / walks along with its eyes on the ground”, and the multi-perspectival and multi-colored one, here implied by the images of fire and iridescence in the dove’s neck. The veil and mist which Moore promises to tear off, but which she recreates in each and every stanza, appear indispensable to reach a greater certainty and clarity of vision. Goodridge (1989: 133) thus summarizes this quality of Moore’s writing: “the central core of Moore’s epistemology ... is the tension between what she believes she can disclose and what she feels she must veil or merely hint at”, adding further that reality is known in her work through “partial glimpses and fragmented revelations”.

Perhaps this is also why all Moore’s rhymes, and there are plenty of them in the poem, are so intricately “netted”, “misted” and camouflaged as the imagery she uses. In the above quoted stanza we have a perfect rhyme “heart / apart” and imperfect one in “wears / face”, but there are also other examples, such as perfect “awl / shawl”, “mind / blind” in the second stanza, or “thing / wing / playing” in the first one. Since her poem, unlike Stevens’s, is not regulated by iambic metrical scheme, the rhymes, although exact, do not produce an effect of unified and pleasing musicality. For the poet, “every word is a tune”, but the musicality of her poem follows Pound’s dictum to compose in the sequence of musical phrase rather than that of the metronome. Moore herself wrote admiringly in an essay on Pound that his rhythm is based on the “exactitude in variety” (MMCP 450) which echoes her idea of “conscientious inconsistency”, further integrating the aural and visual references in her poem.

This swiftness and staccato lightness of Moore’s sound patterns which so beautifully capture the sun-animated and playful movements of her mind, can be contrasted with a spellbinding effects of Stevens’s wintry “The Snow Man”. The icy crispness of the opening lines “the junipers

shagged with ice / The spruces rough in the distant glitter”, dominated by the hissing sibilants, makes tangible the coldness of the air which seems to pierce through the Snow Man’s and our insulated minds. Macksey aptly observes in his essay “The Climates of Wallace Stevens” that the poet recreates here the “sounds of winter” (1965: 196), and indeed, “one must have a mind of winter” to resist the prolonged and enwrapping coldness and heaviness of Stevens’ long diphthongal vowels in both internally and externally rhyming words such as “snow”, “bough”, “cold”, “long”, “behold”, “blow”, and the mind-freezing repetitiveness of the words “sound” and “same” in the third and fourth stanzas:

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,
Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place
(WSCP 10)

Both Macksey (1965: 196) and Lensing (2001: 134) note that the prosody seems to be repeating the painful physicality of the winter landscape in which one can hear only “the misery in the sound of the wind”. The misery is recreated skillfully through Stevens’ use of liquid *ms* and *ns* in the words “sound”, “wind, same”, “land”, and the varied rhythm of tetrameters, pentameters, and trimeters, suggestive also of the uneven gusts and humming of the wind. Although, as convincingly demonstrated by Lensing (2001: 133), the poem grounds us in its material concreteness through its dense pattern of definite articles modifying the winter particulars, the central image of the Snow Man listening intently for the lost communication with the world has a strong aura of a dreamy spectrality, a presence, or better – a yearning for a presence which curiously enhances a sense of void and lack. The incantatory effect of the iambic pattern contributes to the paralyzing emptiness which resonates in the bare and frost-bound imagery, contaminating the atmosphere of the whole poem. To use Bernstein’s words, Stevens uses antiabsorptive effects to “increase the power of absorptive experience” (AA 51), which, in Harold Bloom’s words, echoes Emerson’s mystical emptying until the mind becomes “nothing”, but while the Romantic philosopher “sees all”, with the Universal Being circulating through him and uniting him with Nature, the Snow Man be-

holds the landscape which is opaque and emptied of meaning as it reveals only “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (WSCP 10). Bloom (1971: 89) sees Stevens as an Emerson stripped of illusions and delusions, facing Nature that cannot become identical with the mind and is indifferent to the Romantic assumption that it should “wear the colors of the spirit”. Guy Rotella (1991: 113), on a somewhat similar note, suggests that “Stevens wants to freeze the pathetic fallacy to death”, acknowledging human inability to form a specular relationship with Nature.

The difficulty of bridging the gap between man and nature, indicated, as I have shown, already in the design of the title, is further enhanced in the negative entanglements and displacements of Stevens’s syntactical structure. The poem consists of one, multiply embedded run-on sentence that cuts through and postpones its own meaning until it reaches an equally uncertain closure, woven out of multiple, self-cancelling negations: “And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”. The effect produced by this extended unfolding of thought is not so much the nihilist exhaustion as that of an intensification and prolongation of a profound existential anxiety, propelled by a desire for a meaningful and reciprocal rapport with the world which must include negativity and lack. Anxiety, argues Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1962: 321, 233), is evoked through *Dasein*’s confrontation with the “nothing” of the world, a process in which “everyday familiarity collapses” and *Dasein* shifts to the mode of being “not-at-home”. Stevens seems to be using anti-absorptive techniques to convey that unhomely quality of the modern existential condition which alienates us also from our own selves.

Revolving around the activities of beholding and listening to the dead traces of nature, the poem becomes a sign of Derridian “mourning” – a yearning for presence unmarked by finitude or death. The Snow Man – a perfect figure of undecidability which, according to Derrida, “is a determinate oscillation between possibilities” (LI 148) – disrupts the comfort of our convictions, locating itself between the dead and alive, human and inhuman, *unheimlich* and homely. The ending of his poem buttresses this undecidability, for it offers us a depiction of nothingness that both frustrates and sustains the Snow Man’s desire, at once repeating and overcoming the negative capability of the previous lines. Helen Vendler argues perceptibly that

the bold stroke of the three “nothing’s” closing *The Snow Man* announces, as with a closing of one door and the opening of another, the discovery of the abolition of one old self by a new one, which necessitates at first the contemplation of an absolute void... [W]e see in *The Snow Man*, through its vertigo of receding planes, the very moment in which Stevens first discovered that the self, pursued to invisibility, makes itself metaphysically visible again, if only in the form of a terrifying blank.

(Vendler 1984: 49)

The achieved visibility of the “terrifying blank” perpetuates the spectral presence that tries to lend “flesh” to the nothingness within and without. As observed by Lensing (2001: 135), who takes the pieces of Stevens’s jigsaw step by step, if we separate the nothings in the line, they “reinforce each other” and each “affirms a presence”, thus making “two equivocal nothings into somethings”. The affirmation is fortified further by the last word of the poem, the copula “is” (Lensing 2001: 137), which counteracts the spectral force of the nothingness. Derrida’s interesting reflection on nothingness which he offers in his discussion of Focillon dovetails well with the affirmative argumentation of Lensing:

The universe articulates only that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language... this excess is the very possibility of writing and of literary *inspiration* in general. Only *pure absence* – not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced – can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, and then make one work ... since nothing is not an object – is the way in which this nothing *itself* is determined by disappearing. The consciousness of having something to say [is] the consciousness of nothing

(Derrida WD 8)

Stevens’s nothing can be thus read as the very “possibility of writing”, the absence which is the ground of all presence and which makes creative work possible. Creating another filter of impermeability with his unhomely and riddle-like ending, Stevens leaves us next to his Snow Man in the middle of the winter-frozen road, with his poem-hedgehog again rolled-up into a prickly ball of its antiabsorptive but quite expressive nothing. Embracing the modernist search for a form of expression that would not be tied to the programmatic of presence, the poet “presents dilemmas; he cannot and soon does not resolve them; he offers his *struggle* with them as the sub-

tive, able to contain, deal with and see through the “mist” of its own inconsistent perceptions and ragged rhythms.

Through its form, “The Mind” also stays curiously resonant with the revolutionary changes in the human understanding of the world and its laws brought by the new century. At the beginning of the century, modernism had to grapple with the consequences of Einstein’s newly formulated relativity principle, followed by Heisenberg’s theory of uncertainty, which have fundamentally disrupted the existing notions of time, space, velocity and gravity; the science of thermodynamics that displayed the world as fragmented, unstable and disordered; the non-Euclidean geometries and quantum mechanics which forever transformed the old geometrical system with its reliable axioms of three dimensions; the new technological developments such as cinema and photography, both of which profoundly affected our sensory apparatus. A similar bewilderment was produced by the psychological discoveries and new concepts of subjectivity of Henri Bergson, William James and Sigmund Freud, but also new developments in visual arts that captured and capitalized on all those transformations, with postimpressionism and cubism in their fore. Since Moore chose to “play” her poem in the mode of Giesking, it is also worth mentioning that the changing aesthetics affected the realm of modernist music, which yielded such phenomena as expressionism, atonality and serialism.⁷⁰ All of these changes have found their way into the incredibly “spongy” imagination of Marianne Moore, herself well known among the poets for her relentless scientific curiosity and life-long interest in natural sciences and avant-garde thought and art.⁷¹

⁷⁰ A comprehensive overview to all these changes can be found in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. See David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, (2006: 1-79, 258-263).

⁷¹ Moore received her undergraduate degree in biology, and her letters, note books and drawings demonstrate her lasting interest in the subject. The very titles of some of her poems also testify to her scientific, technological and naturalist fascinations, as for example “To a Steam Roller”, “The Icosasphere”, “Granite and Steel”, “The Pangolin”, “To a Snail”. There are several critical studies which explore Moore’s broad interests in the context of modernist culture. Linda Leavell shows Moore’s engagement with the avant-garde aesthetic of her age in her study *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts* (2005). The critic traces the poet’s affinities and friendships with the New York experimental artists, such as Marsden Hartley, Charles Sheeler, Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, Gaston Lachaise and many others. Moore’s practice in relation to science and technol-

Her sensibility responded to those experiments and transformations with the formal and conceptual enchantments of her own. The paradox of the motion-in-stasis encapsulating the relativity of the modern conception of movement is captured by the metaphor of the gyroscope, which is a good example of the new time-space framework affecting thinking in the twentieth century. Gyroscope uses the centripetal and centrifugal forces to trigger self-perpetuating and self-steadying motion, simultaneously partaking of and defying the forces of gravity. Moore likewise pulls us in and out of her elaborate design, by alternating references to the outer reality and surface sensory experience and the inner world of the mind. The metaphors of memory's eye and ear that work counter blindness and silence in stanzas three and four build a bridge between the two realms, bringing in the power of memory as a tool of intensifying our understanding. By turning "inside" and evoking memory, Moore is also suggesting that there always remains something unshareable in our sensory experience which cannot be translated into the language of vision. This interplay between sight and in-sight not only expands our consciousness, but it also opens up the space of enchantment in which we are exposed to the magic of life and to the powers of poetry which has the capacity to unconceal this magic.

As Schulman (1986: 96) points out, to enchant means also "the power to transport" – in Moore's poem skillfully realized through the disabsorptive "charm" of her embedded lines, disruptive repetitions, semantic incongruities and the staccato-like and non-linear jumps between the material as different as nature, music, science and religion. Dissonance and nonstandard intervals practiced by modernist composers and musicians of Moore's time are felt in the intertwining of quick and long vowels and the consistent inconsistencies of her rhythmical patterns, enhanced by the strangeness of her typographical scheme. The shimmering colors of her visual metaphors betray the same expressionist boldness and penchant for iridescent and luminous hues which characterized the works of Turner, Monet or Van Gogh. With the magic wand of Moore's craft and brilliance, we are transported into the world in which there is no cognitive or percep-

ogy is the subject of Chapter 5 of Lisa M. Steinman's *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets*, in which the critic quotes Moore's statement that technology "preoccupies [her] ... fundamentally and continuously" (1987: 113); while John Slatin (1987: 139-166) discusses her as a "natural historian" in his essay "Advancing Backward in a Circle: Moore as a (Natural) Historian".

tual comfort, where the abstract and the concrete coexist on the same plane and inform each other, as various sensory and cognitive impressions bombard, enwrap and call for our attention. Confronted with this plenum of impulses, just like the gyroscope that benefits from the contradictory vectors of gravitational and anti-gravitational pull, we are made to sway between visibility and invisibility, familiarity and strangeness, repetition and variation, coherence and inconsistency, until we feel irresistibly enraptured, if not totally “absorbed” by it. It appears that for Moore, the world itself with its various stimuli and infinite possibilities of its large cultural milieu is the greatest poem, and the mind, capable of arresting their movement and shaping this variability into material and controlled designs,⁷² as observed by Schulman (1989: 92) – is the best and the most creative of poets.

In his study of the poetics of absorption, Bernstein argues that poetic language is “*other*, which we make ours without it belonging to us” (AP 188-187). Stevens and Moore’s poems make this aporia the stronghold of

⁷² Heuving interestingly argues that “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing” “celebrates the mind’s capacity for unity and for unified action over its capacity for differentiation and particular behaviours”. Moore’s formal strategies, seen from this perspective, are reflexive of that unifying potential of the mind which sees integrity and analogies in the seemingly unrelated material. I cannot entirely agree with this statement, as my conviction is that this particular poem is closer to Stevens’ observation that “coherence, unity, and meaning are generated through the proliferation of surfaces, not through the discovery of a single principle that underlies them”. Like Stevens, Moore represents an epistemological position which accepts the simultaneous existence of incompatibles, with the mind serving as their capacious and creative receptacle. Moore’s poem is purposefully designed like a perfect magic trick structured so that it contains contradictions and surprises and sways between control and unpredictability. What is more, the closure of the poem is the word “change”, implying the power of infinite transformation and flux on which the whole construction rests. Referencing the same poem, Martin Taffy notes that “the most consistent quality of Moore’s poetry is its instability. Her images promise specificity, but they dissolve as soon as one tries to visualize them. Her epigrammatic endings fly off into abstraction instead of offering resolution that they seem to promise”. See Taffy (1986: 92). Similarly Darlene Erickson describes the poet’s voice as “tended toward refracting (her own word choice in the epigraph above), bending, breaking apart, not toward the usual attempts at synthesizing and ordering the details of human perception” (1992: 2). Nevertheless, Heuving’s observation does justice to the role of the mind as a somewhat stabilizing playground for this flux of disparate and fragmented impressions. The critic also points out the carefulness and formal control over the thematic inconsistencies in Moore’s poem. For details of this argument see Heuving (1992: 145-146).

their poetic practice, for the pleasure their verse promises includes our partial exclusion and alienation from its imperfect articulations, displacements and half-imparted secrets. It is not an accident that, in his heavily annotated copy of Emerson's *Addresses and Lectures*, Stevens marked the following line in the section on language from *Nature*: "There sits Sphinx at the roadside, and from age to age, as each prophet comes by, he tries his fortune at reading her riddle" (Lensing 1986: 26). The image of Sphinx guarding the travelers passage that captured the poet's attention can serve as a metaphor of the reader's experience of both Stevens's and Moore's creations. To enter the space of their imagination, we need, as Williams advised in the already quoted review of Moore, to step outside our interpretational preconceptions, to confront their language structures as fragile and iterable, their meaning as difficult to discern, their messages vulnerable to misreading and dissemination. What is more, our renewed attempts at solving the complex riddles of these two poems foster our realization of the difficulty of the modernist process of acquiring knowledge. Since the answer to Sphinx' riddle is Man himself, the response to the questions posed by the modernist poetics should entail an invitation to a greater realization of our existential condition. If, as another arch-modernist, Virginia Woolf observed in her reflections on the new reality, "[l]ife is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf 1984: 152), then mind and art must respond to it, and find ways to read and represent the letters shining through those non-transparent luminosities. Capturing Stevens's willingness of the poet to embrace life in its complexity, negativity and impenetrability, Denis Donoghue wrote of his poetry that it was "devoted to the human imagination in its marvelous range, its plentitude, its manifold powers" (1965: 228). The same can be said of Moore who makes her poem into "the glaze on a / katydid-wing / subdivided by sun / till the nettings are legion".

Both Moore and Stevens record "mental motion in physical reality" (Steinman 1987: 12), but their depictions clearly undermine any epistemological certitude, representing the mind's reiterative engagements with the fluctuating, multifaceted and oftentimes non-transparent reality. Through their antiabsorptive poetics the poems intimate how the difficult condition of modernity should be approached and understood, forcing us to replace our fixed perceptions with a more multifocused and shifting attention. In Bernstein's words, the readers of "The Snow Man" and

“The Mind” “are whirled / into a powerfully woven fabric / while never losing sight of its constructed quality” (AA 69). The act of reading those poems is an intense aesthetic experience, as each time it turns into a prolonged “act of finding”, to use Stevens’s words, for it requires an extraordinary imaginative openness as we stumble over the non-absorptive uncertainties, contradictions and puzzles of their hedgehog-like poetics. As Stevens himself insists in “The Snow Man”, the only way of approaching the elusive meaning of the world and that of modernist poetry is through *beholding* rather than passive observing or regarding, for *to behold*, reminds Harold Bloom in his study of Stevens, means to look upon but “with a touch of expressed amazement” (Bloom 1977: 57), to watch out for something with a hope for a discovery, to scrutinize actively and closely, to embrace, which is exactly what these two poems invite us to do. On a somewhat similar note, Bernstein speaks in his *A poetics* of “the ambi-opia, multilevel seeing” next to “ambliopia”, which is a medical term for reduction or dimming of vision (AP 184). Both terms capture the specificity of our experience of Moore’s and Stevens’s texts. On the one hand they require that we recognize and behold the various layers, dimensions of meaning and perception underlying the texture of their poems; on the other hand, however, they deliberately dim or mist our vision and comprehension, as if suggesting that only with our eyes half-closed but vigilant and our vistas obstructed will we be able to apprehend their multiple occlusions and ambiguities and confront the increasingly non-representational quality of modern experience.

Chapter Two

How the Hedgehog Teaches Us the Heart: The Erotics of Reading and Writing in the Poetry of Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy

The experience of “deconstruction”, of “deconstructive” questioning, reading, or writing, in no way threatens or casts suspicion on “enjoyment”. I believe rather the opposite. Every time there is “*jouissance*” (but the “there is” of this event is in itself extremely enigmatic), there is “deconstruction”. Effective deconstruction. Deconstruction perhaps has the effect, if not the mission, of liberating forbidden *jouissance*.

– Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 56

The texture of desire, the claims of the body: this, then is the Text, the theory of the Text.

– Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 71

Your heart beats, gives the downbeat, the birth of the rhythm, beyond oppositions, beyond outside and inside, conscious representation and the abandoned archive

– Derrida, «Che cos'è la poesia», 231

Why don't you read the way I write?

– Stein, during her American lecture tour

In the opening pages of his *Blindness and Insight* Paul de Man makes an interesting observation: “prior to theorizing about literary language, one has to become aware of the complexities of reading” (1983: viii). Literary language, and poetry in particular, explains de Man further in his *Allegories of Reading*, poses a difficulty which stems from the “disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion or – which is not quite the same thing – of cognitive and performative language” (1979: ix). This intertwining calls for a form of criticism which would not only be capable of recognizing, stating, identifying and describing but a form which would be ready to become one with the text, to see the poem itself as an “allegory of reading”. A similar preoccupation with the cognitive and performative function of language lies at the heart of Roland Barthes’ critical practice. Jonathan Culler rightly calls Barthes one of the rare “hedonists” among contemporary critics who have revived the right of criticism to deal with the repressed and discredited issues of readerly and writerly pleasures, and whose “whole effort consists in materializing the pleasure of the text, in making the text *an object of pleasure like any other* ... to equalize the field of pleasure, to abolish the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life”, as Barthes himself describes his intention (PT 58-9). Barthes resolves the opposition between theory and practice by creating his own metacritical model – a Text of desire that overruns the boundaries between literature and criticism, a text which is at once the body and the theory of the Text (Barthes RB 71). “The paradigm I am proposing here . . .”, explains Barthes,

is not aimed at putting scientists and researchers on one side, writers and essayists on the other. On the contrary, it suggests that writing is to be found wherever words have flavor (the French words for *flavor* and knowledge have the same Latin root). Curnonski used to say that in cooking “things should have the taste of what they are”. Where knowledge is concerned, things must, if they are to become what they are, what they have been, have that ingredient, the salt of words. It is the taste of words that makes knowledge profound, fecund.

(Barthes 1979: 7)

The best example of this paradigm is *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* in which, as the author himself states, “the description of the lover’s discourse has been replaced by its simulation” (Barthes LD 3). This text is not a dry commentary subservient to the analyzed matter but a work of creative writing which flaunts its literary aspects in order to establish a

different kind of relationship with the reader. “Completely forsaken by surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority” (Barthes LD 1), the lover’s discourse comes to the fore here, enacting the forsaken “script” and becoming “the site of affirmation” (LD 1) in which the writer loses the discursive mastery over the text and becomes its transgressive reader and critic, one of the participants of its complex textual erotics. In his essay “Crossing Over: Literary Commentary as Literature”, Geoffrey Hartman describes this kind of critical practice in the following words:

literary commentary may cross the line and become as demanding as literature: it is an unpredictable or unstable “genre” that cannot be subordinated, a priori, to its referential or commentating function. Commentary certainly remains one of the defining features But the perspectival power of criticism . . . must be such that the critical essay should not be considered a supplement to something else . . . [A] reversal must be possible whereby this “secondary” piece of writing turns out to be “primary”.

(Hartman 1980: 201)

Barthes’ later critical texts, such as *Lover’s Discourse: Fragments The Pleasure of the Text* and *Roland Barthes* become such “primary” texts – playful rather than rigidly academic, celebrating fragmentation, the irrational and subversion rather than neat closure, control and prudent categorization.

There is a special kind of intimacy which a text of this variety induces. It is in the context of such intimacy that the second aspect of the hedgehog metaphor which informs my argument may be discussed: the “taking of the hedgehog to heart”, and “learning it by heart”, which describes the vicissitudes of the relationship between reading and writing. “In a single cipher, the poem (the learning by heart, learn it by heart) seals together the meaning and the letter” (CCP 231), Derrida notes, indicating a tendency of the poetic text towards bridging the distance between composition and explanation, between the text and the reader. To break the seal of the poem’s cipher, implies Derrida via his metaphor of the hedgehog, we need to orchestrate our heartbeat with the rhythm of the letter, and be ready to surrender to that rhythm, even if it requires opening and losing ourselves and yielding our readerly and critical expectations in this act of

surrender. The reader, argues the philosopher, “is not a consumer, a spectator, a visitor, not even a ‘receiver’” (Derrida AL 51), he must be part of the experience of language without objectifying it. In *S/Z*, Barthes sees this orchestration of the reader and text as a condition of a more intense experience of literary work:

The goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*.

(Barthes *S/Z* 6)

Opening the door to “the magic of the signifier”, Barthes employs discourse of love, eroticism and pleasure to define and tighten the reader-text relationship. *The Pleasure of the Text* and “From Work to Text” both contain a distinction between the *readerly* text of pleasure and the text of bliss, or *jouissance*, which he terms a *writerly* or *scriptable* text. The former is associated with “a comfortable practice of reading” (PT 14), with the “plagiarizing edge” of language (PT 6), and produces a feeling of contentment, euphoria and ease, as it meets our expectations concerning narrative coherence, wholeness, referential transparency and stability, as well as formal, generic and thematic consistency. In short, this is what the text should be (PT 14) in the eyes of a conventional reader. The example that Barthes provides is the nineteenth-century realistic novel, containing a clear plot line of the Aristotelian type, round and psychologically convincing characters that develop and change, a stable narrative point and a mimetic link with the world outside the text. The text of bliss, in turn, is a subversive and mercurial entity, armed with “a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles” (PT 27) that make it much less predictable, thus yielding a different and more intense emotional effect. It is, in Barthes’ own words, “a text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts..., unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (PT 14). The response generated by this

kind of text is thus that of “shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss” (PT 19). Interestingly, the author insists that it is the text of *jouissance* rather than the text of pleasure that truly desires, flirts with and seduces the reader, requiring his active involvement, his complicity in – if not his complete surrender to – the violation of conventions, its formal provocations, discontinuities, jolts and break-downs of sense or discourse.

In his *Pleasure of the Text*, we can find an interesting typology of “the pleasures of reading – or of the readers of pleasure” based on the reader’s various approaches to word and text:

[1] The fetishist would be matched with the divided-up text, the singling out of quotations, formulae, turns of phrase, with the pleasure of the word. [2] the obsessive would experience the voluptuous release of the letter, of secondary, disconnected languages, of metalanguages (this class would include all the logophiles, linguists, semioticians, philologists: all those for whom language *returns*. [3] A paranoiac would consume or produce complicated texts, stories developed like arguments, constructions posited like games, like secret constraints. [4] as for the hysteric (so contrary to the obsessive), he would be the one who takes the text *for ready money*, who joins in the bottomless, truthless comedy of language, who is no longer the subject of any critical scrutiny and *throws himself* across the text (which is quite different from projecting himself into it).

(Barthes PT 63)

The typology moves from the tightened control of the philologist and his truth-oriented, logocentric reading that brings disconnectedness into unity, coherence and order, to the quasi-erotic pleasure of hysterical and fetishist reading, in which the reader responds to the claims of textual desire and joins the text, opening himself or herself up to its seductions, temptations, secrets and “the bottomless, truthless comedy of language”. With Barthes, however, whose own texts defy his metacritical divisions and typologies, it is not always obvious which of the reader types prevails. Leitch sees in Barthes a plural reader:

at once he is an erotic lunatic not only like the obsessive soothsayer, who repeatedly disconnects and divides the text so as to return it after careful and correct interpretation; but like the fetishist whose piece of the text stays and extends the satisfaction of forepleasure; and the paranoiac who saturates the text in delirious and deluded, complete read-

ings; and the hysteric who naively and boisterously exalts the text and the disintegrating self in excesses of truth and bliss. No longer a soothsayer, but a Satan-figure, Barthes intimates “I am legion”

(Leitch 1983: 115)

The poems under discussion in this chapter will display a Barthesian openness to the multiple forepleasures and pleasures of the text. As will be shown, they will often require a plural and transgressive reader, who combines the roles of the desiring subject and desired object of textual play, and who, in Barthes’ words, “simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (PT 20); the reader must then be duplicitous and divided, “split twice over, doubly perverse” (PT 14) – at once the writer and reader, the lover and beloved, attentive paranoiac and exalted hysteric. I will also argue that Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy and Marianne Moore create spaces in which “the hedgehog demons of the heart” – which include emotional and aesthetic excess, suppressed desires and silenced voices, erotic pleasures, sexual insecurities and disclosures – are kept safe, awaiting their liberation in a plural reading.

“There is no writing other than the amorous”, as Julia Kristeva perceptively observes; art, and especially poetry, whose nature is transgressive, liberatory, pre-oedipal, allows “a flow of *jouissance* into language” (1984: 79). Gertrude Stein, convinced that the experience of the text should always involve some form of enjoyment and pleasure, reveals her openness to a similar notion of “flow”:

But after all you must enjoy my writing and if you enjoy it you understand it. If you did not enjoy it why do make a fuss about it? There is the real answer. ... Look here, being intelligible is not what it seems, after all these things are a matter of habit. ... After all when you say they don’t understand *Four Saints* what do you mean, of course they understand or they would not listen to it. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have the habit of talking ... putting it in other words ... but I mean by understanding enjoyment.

(Stein in Lundell 1990: 97)

To understand her writing, as I shall also argue in my analysis of Stein, is thus to enjoy it rather than make critical “fuss” about it with a view to rendering its scripts and ciphers perfectly legible and paraphrasable. Some experiences cannot be translated but only felt and lived, Stein re-

sponds to the discomforted and truth-thirsty reader of her writerly texts.¹ Thoroughly convinced that composition is explanation, the writer pulls us into her compositions that best explain themselves. A contemporary poet, Judy Grahn, aptly notes: “For years I thought: ‘She is difficult,’ until one day it occurred to me to say it the other way: ‘She is easy. I am difficult.’ . . . Suppose it is not that she is veiled and obscure but that we, her readers, are. We are veiled by our judgments” (1989: 5). “Difficult for an audience whose expectations are conditioned by standards of representation alien to her intention and standards of reading counter to her own” (Dydo 2003: 7), Stein’s love poems discussed here sensitize her “veiled” and biased readers to a new, judgment-free and pleasure-oriented experience.

Experimental writing, which foregrounds desire and pleasure, is especially amenable to a deconstructive reading. There is no effective deconstruction, as Derrida himself admits, without the feeling of “the greatest possible pleasure” (AL 56). Mina Loy’s highly self-reflexive practice offers the reader such pleasure in the deconstructive *Love Songs*, where she oscillates between the boldness and radicalism of the Futurist discourse and the flowery richness of sentimental verse to expose both the vulnerability and strength of the female self, awakened into the discursive possibilities and ideological strictures of language and form. Loy’s poetry is a rare combination of the sensual and intellectual, personal and impersonal, direct and implicit, and her style suggests inner conflicts at the heart of her vision of sexual and artistic freedom. As Cristanne Miller (2006: 120) notes, “there is a chasm between spirit and skin” in her poetry. Peering into the chasm, as will be shown here, the reader might discover the intensity of modern love and desire as well as its critical and satirical disavowal.

“The text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures; the text of bliss is never the text that recounts the kind of bliss afforded literally by an ejaculation. The pleasure of representation is not attached to its object: pornography is not *sure*” – Barthes observes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (PT 57). If pleasure circulates only within the text and its erotic theme is too obvious, being merely represented and not “leaping out of the

¹ One of such truth-oriented readers, B. F. Reid, wrote: “It seems to me that Miss Stein is a vulgar genius talking to herself, and if she is talking to herself, she is not an artist. It is because she does talk to herself that she offers insuperable difficulties to both reader and critic. I suggest, therefore, that she be defined out of existence as an artist. To be an artist, she must talk to us, not to the dullest or the most tradition-bound or the most unsympathetic of us, but to those of us who are flexible, those willing to be fruitfully led” (1958: 13).

frame”, the experience of bliss is lost (PT 57). Direct references to pleasure, desire, sexuality and love are thus not necessary for the bliss of reading. Such a claim is easily corroborated by an analysis of Marianne Moore’s poetry. Although apparently very intellectual, devoid of flesh, determinedly asexual and emotionally restrained,² Moore’s work offers her readers no less intense a pleasure than the more openly erotic love poems of Loy and Stein. Her tool of bliss is her brains, as she herself states in her poem “Roses Only” (BMM), arguing that women-roses should always back up the beauty of their bodies with the thorniness of their intellect. Sharing with Loy and Stein their preference for *writerly* challenges over the comforts of the *readerly* text, Moore allows her “chaste” representations to “leap out of the frame” in multiple ways, displaying (with abundant humor and wit) “the beautiful element of unreason” (“Black Earth”, BMM 87) under the multilayered “skin” of her texts. “The extravagant language of Moore’s poems”, Cristanne Miller argues, “expresses intense pleasure, not renunciation, repression and lack”, adding further that “the poems celebrate ‘gusto’ in the form of ardent curiosity and intelligence”, while her love for detail suggests “tactile pleasure in language as well as in the physical world” (C. Miller 2006: 110). Miller sums up her observations: “[s]he challenges the reader to enter a poetic and lived realm where the boundaries distinguishing masculine and feminine, sexual and asexual, intellectual and embodied experience are replaced by continuums allowing dynamic interplay of sensuality, intelligence, and art” (110). In her poem “Marriage”, which is the subject of analysis here, Moore demonstrates this “gusto” and “pleasure” by resorting to various elements of the poetics of bliss, such as visual and verbal exoticism, dialogic form, as well as a non-linear, quilt-like method of composition.

All three poets discussed in this chapter reach out to their readers through their strategies of textual bliss, using language as a mode of intimacy and dialogue with the reader. However, resisting *readerly* consumption and often guarding their content with their erinaceous poetics, they also map the difficulties of gender constructions and expose the stereotypical conceptions of womanhood as well as the discursive entrapments of post-Victorian sexual politics and erotics.

² R. P. Blackmur noted that “no poet has ever been so chaste”, while Jarrell sees her work as “entirely divorced from sexuality and power, the bonds of flesh” (quoted in C. Miller 2006: 104).

2.1. The Love of the Medusa: Lover's Discourse and the Poetics of *Jouissance* in the Love Poems of Gertrude Stein

In the introduction to his work, Barthes describes lover's discourse as "a discourse whose occasion is indeed the memory of the sites (books, encounters) where such and such a thing has been read, spoken, heard" (LD 9). Being in love is linked here to the processes of reading and writing, for the language of love is never neutral, never a mere agent of thought or feeling. Rather, it is always already laced with the discursive conventions, voices and echoes. Both Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy consciously use the lover's discourse and are aware of the conventionality and constructedness of our perceptions and experiences of love. In this part it will be shown how both poets embrace and subvert those discursive conventions and how this affects our readerly experience of their texts. Focusing on Stein's poems "Sonnets that Please" and "Lifting Belly", I will look for the Barthesian "language lined with flesh" (PT 63) with a hope of exposing the poetics of bliss in the poet's *writerly* practice. Stein, as will be argued here, "throws [herself] across the text" (not unlike Derrida's *herisson*, who throws himself across our path), writing and sealing it with the traces of the female body and using language as an erinaceous vehicle of desire and love-making. Stein's strategy is contrasted in the subsequent subchapter with that of Mina Loy who, in turn, fashions her love songs into highly self-reflexive and constructed language games in which discursive codes and fragments are foregrounded in the text's cracks, dispersions and obscurities, thus exposing the amorous subject's immersion in the pleasures and dangers of figuration as well as in culturally and ideologically laden reservoirs of images and articulations of love.

In her study of Gertrude Stein's post-modernist sensibility, Ellen E. Berry points to the writer's "effort to decompose nineteenth-century representational aesthetics and to compose new non-mimetic literary modes for the twentieth century, discontinuous forms that radically disrupt traditional notions of how texts should be defined, valued and read" (1992: 1). Further in the essay, Berry also speaks of the critical task of "learning to read Stein's rich and varied output" which "has proven one of the great critical challenges of the twentieth century at least in part because our interpretive frameworks have had to 'catch up' with her remarkable innovations" (1). The most careful student of Stein's manuscripts, Ulla E. Dydo, similarly claims that:

Stein *is* hard work, for she challenges our capacity to read and our expectations of what written word and sentences are, what they do and how they do it. Her writing calls for a radical redefinition of genre, representation, language, reading, and writing... She did not fit an editor's specialty, a magazine's layout, a publisher's categories, a bibliography, a library system – in short, she did not fit.

(Dydo 2003: 12)

Escaping all categorization and admittedly constituting “hard work” for the reader and critic, Stein's textual practices become exemplary of the erinaceous poetics of bliss, for, as Berry argues, they foreground a confrontation between the reader and language as play, posing also the questions of control, mastery and desire for meaning, and challenging readerly expectations through their mobility, impermeability and restlessness (1992: 15-19).

Stein's “Sonnets that Please” may be a good starting point to illustrate the operations of the Barthesian text of bliss:

Sonnets that Please

I see the luck
 And the luck sees me I see the lucky one be lucky.
 I see the love
 And the love sees me
 I see the lovely love be lovely.
 I see the bystander stand by me. I see the bystander stand by inside
 me.
 I see.

(Stein BTV 220)

“I like loving, I like all the ways any one can have of having loving feeling in them. Slowly it has come to be in me that any way of being a loving one is interesting and not unpleasant to me”, Stein confesses in *The Making of Americans* (MOA 344). In “Sonnets that Please” the poet explores one of those ‘ways of loving’, as she enters the heavily codified and readerly form of the love sonnet and turns it into a work of her own, a work of writerly *jouissance*, by giving it “a textural presence that is assertively nonlinear, nonlogical, unconfined to its textual mooring” (Fifer 1992: 27). In this work of bliss, it is the flesh, the sound and not the logic of the word that calls to us and woos us, imbuing the written with the

powerful force of the body and sentiment to create the illusion of the lover's immediate presence in the substance of the poem.³

The traditional love sonnet is a form that foregrounds *persuasio*, the central force of rhetoric, as its task is "to proclaim persuasively the uniqueness and sincerity of his love and to win the desired other by praise" (Pfister 2005: 219). Stein clearly capitalizes on the performative and persuasive strategies of this genre; however, she departs from the conventional *blason*, abandoning "the glib eloquence", "the monotonous inventory of parts" (Pfister 2005: 220), and the hackneyed figures of praise, and turning to the ritualistic intensity of sound and the performative power of repetition which prevents the dispersion of love into the beloved's "anatomical attributes" (S / Z 113). The composition of Stein's sonnets, as noted by Marianne DeKoven (1986a: 169), emulates the simplicity of popular love songs, whose power and charm lies in the rhythm and melos of language that is not bound to reference. The repetitive combinations of words such as "luck", "love" and "see" in the first "sonnet", recreate the intense, child-like delight and blinding happiness experienced in a state of amorous infatuation. Through their chiasmic structure, the lines "I see the luck / and luck sees me" capture the interlocking of parallel desires, along with the solipsistic circularity of our yearning for the other and the wish that the sentiment be reciprocated and felt "all around". Denying the intellectual import of Stein's work, Eliot somewhat derisively observes that although "it is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind, its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before" (quoted after Will 2000: 103). In one of the first serious critical essays on Stein, Mabel Dodge, enchanted with the poet's method, advises the reader to listen to Stein's words, "to let one's reason sleep for an instant", "to forget to try to understand what they mean" and "to submit to their gradual charm" (1986: 27). Seizing on both the signifying and non-signifying qualities of discourse, Stein indeed hypnotizes her reader so that he or she can switch off the intellect and give up the desire for an intelligible text, so as to experience the loving touch of language more fully. "In order to reconnect the book with the body and with pleasure, we must disintellectualize writing", the French

³ Catharine R. Stimpson aptly observes that Stein's work can be read as "a somagram" which is "the liveliest when read and heard; when our own o / aural talents lift her words from the page and animate them in an informal or formal, private or public, theatrical environment" (1985: 67-80).

novelist Chantal Chawaf argues in her essay “Linguistic Flesh” (1981: 177), adding further that such dis-intellectualized language, “will not degenerate and dry up, will not go back to the fleshless academicism, the stereotypical and servile discourses that we reject”. In her playful sonnets, Stein seems to have opted for the fleshly kind of language whose goal is to come close to the rhythm of bodily desire and emotional intimacy of two lovers. In the introduction to his book *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein provides a useful commentary on Stein’s foregrounding of the sonic and tactile qualities of language over disembodied intellectualism and dry, bookish diction:

It is precisely because sound is an arational or nonlogical feature of language that it is so significant for poetry—for sound registers the physicality of language, a physicality that must be the grounding of reason exactly insofar as it eludes rationality. Sound is language’s flesh, its opacity as meaning marks its material embeddedness in the world of things. Sound brings writing back from its metaphysical and symbolic function to where it is at home, in performance.

(Bernstein CL 21)

The exploration of the “arational” and “nonlogical” features of the word liberates Stein’s sonnet from the metaphysical weight of the male sonnetting tradition in which the physical aspects of desire are usually disembodied, aestheticized and sublimated by the hyperbolic tropes of praise and comparison. Stein invites us to experience her poem as a sensory entity, a performing body open to the play of *jouissance* rather than a mere proclamation of love. “Another Sonnet that Pleases” adds another quality to this play, as it turns directly to the lover-reader, reducing the gap between the text and its addressee – the coaxing “please me” and “be pleased with me” calls for the collaborative and active participation of the speaker, the text and the reader in the experience of pleasure:

Another Sonnet That Pleases

Please be pleased with me.

Please be.

Please be all to me please please be.

Please be pleased with me. Please please me. Please please please

With me please please be.

(Stein BTV 220)

The reader is openly invited to assume the role of the lover, or – to use Barthesian nomenclature – that of “the hysterical reader”, which allows him to enjoy the sensual and fragile fecundity of the text of bliss. Elizabeth Fifer correctly notices that Stein’s erotic poems call for a sympathetic reader rather than a disengaged one, for only the former “is whispered to and courted” by those texts, while the latter can at best feel “amused or misled” (1992: 60). In *The Making of Americans*, the writer complains: “I am certain that so very many I am always knowing are not wanting to completely listen to me in my explaining and many are not understanding that they must be hearing completely” (MOA 595). The completeness of hearing Stein is possible only if, approaching her texts, we abandon our suspicions and hermeneutic prejudices. Dydo summarizes the demand of Stein’s work as “a total concentration on the naked text before eye and ear”, adding that “[t]he world of her words opens when [we] listen more to how it speaks than to what it says” (2003: 63). As Stein herself describes her strategy, “[n]ow everything that is happening is once more happening inside, there is no use in the outside” (quoted after Dydo 2003: 26). Thus, pleading “be with me”, “please be all to me”, Stein’s speaker asks the sympathetic and dialogically inclined reader to be *inside* and not *outside* the text, to diminish the aesthetic distance, suspending critical value judgments and rational comprehension of the text. Upon the shortening of this distance and erosion of our customary critical defenses, the reader-lover enters a tender “inside” of Stein’s erinaceous text, a more intimate⁴ and enjoyable space of the text’s erotics that pleases not by the conceptual content but rather by its intense musicality – “the charm-melos”⁵ of the lull-like, seductive repetition of “please”. This

⁴ In her study of Stein’s prose work, Berry quotes Stein openly bidding us “not solve [the text] but be in it . . . to understand a thing means to be in contact with that thing”. Stein’s work, in the critic’s words, “invites a level of intimacy perhaps unprecedented in fiction”. Her texts encourage us to surrender ourselves to the text and “wander where it takes us, submitting ourselves to language as Stein herself did” (1992: 18). This insightful remark can be easily extended to include Stein’s poetry, especially since the poet herself often blurs the distinctions between poetry and prose, calling her *Tender Buttons* “prose-poems.

⁵ The term is used by DeKoven, who examines the use of sound and rhythm in Stein’s poems: “[e]xploring the closed internal rhythms of language – the charm-melos – is concerned with power, in primitive cultures where it originates and in the subsequent uses to which it has been put – the language of the charms is a language of power, and that power comes not from lexical meanings, archaic or colloquial, but from other meanings hidden deep in the sounds and rhythms” (1986a: 168-9).

charm-melos liberates the flow of feeling and language. DeKoven explains the impact of Stein's strategies on the reader as follows:

repetition this intense has the effect of cutting the verbal signifier loose, entirely, from lexical meaning – no longer merely submerging meaning beneath the linguistic surface, but bringing about a radical transformation of the reader's experience of the signifier. Tellingly, children often play the game of repeating a word or a name until it is to reveal the wonder of the signifier, the wonder of language: language is a great power, which normally effaces itself as mere representation, tool, meditation of direct experience.

(DeKoven 1986a: 174)

Stein's sonnet offers us "the wonder of the signifier", reducing our interest in language as a tool of representation and treasure trove of illuminating ideas, but through this reduction paradoxically intensifying the affective and expressive power of the word. As Laura Riding Jackson notes, "the meaning-negating, meaning-resisting process pursued in her word-play is backed by an emotional force of the most serious personal temper" (1986: 247). Explaining her fascination with repetition and rhythm in everyday speech, Stein herself confessed in her notes on *The Making of Americans*:

I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thought they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different.

(Stein LIA 38)

Echoing the sing-song rhythm of the lover's tautological prattle, Stein's sonnets display the circling of thought around the experience of pleasure and joy. As Barthes argues, intense pleasure cannot be expressed, and "whoever experiences bliss causes the letter – and all possible speech – to collapse in the absolute degree of the annihilation he is celebrating" (PT 21). In the process of the annihilation the writer reveals "the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of the consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language" (PT 66-67). Stein's poems veer towards such

a collapse of the letter, for she obsessively repeats “the letters of pleasure” (PT 22) until they become intransitive but at the same time release the articulations of the body and desire, spending their erotic charge in the incantatory tautological movements (“I see the lovely love be lovely”) and the sensual excess of her vowels (e.g. the prolonged cajoling charm of the long [i:]) and consonants (e.g. the mellifluous and lush sweetness and plentitude of the liquid [l] in “luck”, “lovely”, “love”, or “please”).

This “voluptuousness of the letter” is released more powerfully and with a greater gusto in Stein’s longer (running to fifty pages) and more complex poem “Lifting Belly”, written in the years 1915-1917, when Stein and Alice B. Toklas sojourned in Majorca during the Great War. As Galvin reminds us, the sequence can be treated as a poetic record of “‘a honeymoon’ period in their relationship”, for although the women had already been together for seven years, it was soon after Gertrude’s brother Leo had moved out of their Paris home, leaving the lovers to themselves. The poem is thus, in the critic’s words “her fullest linguistic exploration of her relationship with Alice” (1998: 45).⁶

The text of this poem – expressive of Stein’s deepening love for her life partner and of the intense joy and sexual satisfaction that this relationship brought into her life – inscribes itself beautifully within the figuration of Barthes’ amorous metapoetics, as it both fits in and escapes the work of the language which the critic calls “the body’s gesture caught in action”, “the lover at work” (LD 4). The originally phrased love sequences of this work, whose very title suggests the muscular movement of the body rather than the lyrical voice of the poet, encourage the reader to abandon the old interpretive habits along with the readerly need to master, control and ‘consume’ the text.

In “Ada”, a poem-portrait of Alice B. Toklas published earlier, Stein describes her feelings for her lover thus: “[t]rembling was all living, living was all loving, someone was then the other one. Certainly this one was loving this Ada then. And certainly Ada all her living then was happier in living than any one else who ever could, who was, who is, who ever will be living”. The sequence captures wonderfully what Barthes calls “the perverse economy of frenzy”, “amorous exuberance” or the “in-

⁶ In his article “*Lifting Belly* and the Great War”, David Owen examines the poem in its historical context, convincingly arguing that it exhibits not only an intense sexual relationship but also the lovers’ anxiety about the war (1998).

tolerable luxury” of love (LD 85) with which Ada / Alice “inscribes herself within the text” (LD 79) of Stein’s life, sweeping away everything else and turning it into an excited and all-devouring “trembling”. In love, Barthes observes, “language trembles with desire” (LD 71), “enwrap[ing] the other in words ... caress[ing], brush[ing] against, talk[ing] up this contact” (LD 74). “Ada” fulfills this function in the development of Stein’s amorous relation, preparing the ground for an even more “frenzied activity” (LD 68) of language in “Lifting Belly

In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes states:

The pleasure of the sentence is to a high degree cultural. The artifact created by rhetors, grammarians, linguists, teachers, writers, parents – this artifact is mimicked in a more or less ludic manner; we are playing with an exceptional object, whose paradox has been articulated by linguistics: immutably structured and yet infinitely renewable: something like chess.

Unless for some perverts the sentence is a *body*?

(PT 51)

Stein seems to belong to the “perverts” mentioned by Barthes, as she gradually deviates from the culturally structured sentence and drifts towards a form of textual bliss that carries rather than merely represents the presence and movements of the lover’s body. “The text itself, a diagrammatic and not imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites” (PT 56), Barthes continues the profile of the blissful text. Reading Stein’s poem, we cannot resist the impression that her strategies pull us in the same direction, bringing us closer to the text-as-body.

Characteristically for Stein, the piece begins with a somewhat enigmatic and logic-resistant sketching of the subject:

I have been heavy and had much selecting. I saw a star which was low.
It was so low it twinkled. Breath was in it. Little pieces are stupid.
I want to tell about fire. Fire is that which we have when we have olive.
Olive is a wood. We like linen. Linen is ordered. We are going to order
linen.
All belly belly well.
I think this one may be an expression. We can understand heating and
burning composition. Heating with wood.

(Stein LB 411)

Strange as it may seem, the opening reveals the first signs of Stein's deconstructive, erinaceous play with the readerly pleasures and comforts afforded by a sentence. The words "I have been heavy and had much selecting" simultaneously foreground bodily and semantic plentitude, since heaviness can be read as pertaining to the speaker's awareness of her own body – and it is well known that Stein was a rather full-bodied woman⁷ – as well as to the body of the text, "heavy" with creative ideas and figures for this love poem. The necessity of critical selection and ordering implied in the first line and repeated in the expression of her liking for orderly linen is also interrupted by the playful intrusion, closeness and repletion of the body in the pun "All belly belly well". Stein suggests that we can "understand heating and burning composition" of this poem about "the fire", provided that we accept the relaxation of the language's "linen order" and surrender to the pleasurable heaviness, excess, burning, and overload of its belly – the word as the wood that will burn – a tactile reality, a substance, the loved body, "language as skin" that can be "rubbed against the other" (Barthes LD 73). The romantic trope of the star that comes down so low that we can feel its breath further reveals and enhances the tactile, earthly and sensual orientation of the whole poem and Stein's desire for bringing "the belly" of the word as close to the lover's belly as possible.⁸

With this entrance into the realm of the body and the erotics of the word, the poem unfolds into an amorous conversation between unidentified speakers in which the figures of love and sexual play appear and disappear like "Erinyes; they stir, collide, subside, return, vanish" (Barthes LD 7). Stein's practice reflects Barthes' claim that lover's discourse is

⁷ Stein's friend Mabel Dodge remembers the poet as "prodigious": "pounds and pounds piled up on her skeleton – not the billowing kind, but massive, heavy fat". Cited in Carolyn Burke (1997: 129). Carl Van Vechten similarly observes: "She is massive in physique, a Rabelaisian woman with a splendid thoughtful face" (1986: 34). Ernest Hemingway also remembers Stein in his *A Movable Feast* as "very big but not tall and ... heavily built like a peasant woman" (1964: 14).

⁸ Chessman contrasts "Lifting Belly" with Keats's sonnet "Bright Star", arguing that by using the trope of the star Stein evokes and subverts the Romantic tradition, in which the image signifies our yearning for unreachable loftiness and eternal beauty. Stein, argues the critic, breaks with the Romantics and the star-oriented movement of their poems which usually present love in terms of separation and longing of the lover for an absent beloved, and gives us instead the bodies that are present and together, working towards their mutual satisfaction (1989: 102-104).

neither narrative nor integrative, and that its figures can appear in a random, friable and non-contiguous order. Using selected fragments of Barthes' own non-narrative guide, it is possible to see the working of Stein's amorous *dis-cursus* that shows her indulging in the joys of both loving and writing.

One of the first figures discussed by the French theoretician is *atopos*, in which the object of love is recognized as "unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality". Love and *jouissance* have no topos, their affective excesses and indulgent fantasies "resist description, definition, language", make "language indecisive: one cannot speak *of* the other, *about* the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is *unqualifiable*" (LD 35). In another figure, called *adorable*, Barthes speaks even of "the fatigue" of language in confrontation with love and "the Unique" of the loved body which leads to stammering, "fumbling" of language, "a wavering of the name", "impropriety of the utterance" or its downright failure (LD 67). This wavering is beautifully demonstrated in Stein's poem: which meanders between the insistently repeated title phrase "lifting belly", which works towards the orchestration of the whole piece, and the variety of its thematic, verbal and syntactic diffusions, erasures and associative drifts. For instance, Part II begins with the following atopic shifts:

Lifting belly. Are you. Lifting.
 Oh dear I said I was tender, fierce and tender.
 Do it. What a splendid example of carelessness.
 It gives me a great deal of pleasure to say yes.
 Why do I always smile.
 I don't know.
 It pleases me.
 You are easily pleased.
 I am very pleased.
 Thank you I am scarcely sunny.
 I wish the sun would come out.
 Yes.
 Do you lift it.
 High.
 Yes sir I helped to do it.
 Did you
 Yes.
 Do you lift it.
 We cut strangely.

What.
That's it.
Address it say to it that we will never repent.
A great many people come together.
Come together.

(Stein LB 411-12)

It is clear from this passage that, like Barthes, Stein opts for the intractable/untreatable in her own simulation of the lover's discourse. The coherence and sense of the lines are broken, liberating the text from the conditions and indulgences of the "linen order" of the readerly text. The syntactical truncation of the first line ("Lifting belly. Are you. Lifting") reflects the stammering of language whose task is to articulate and recreate the "joy that cannot speak" (LD 55) – the intractable pleasure of love-making, being and coming together. Interestingly, the direct address of "Are you" and the implied presence of two speakers pluralizes the deconstructed subject of Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* and creates a unique space of dialogue, loving exchange and reciprocation, "a space of intimacy and active coming together ... simultaneously inhabited by the writer and the reader, the writer and the words, the reader and the words, and the words with one another" (Chessman 1989: 3).⁹ As argued by Chessman, she "reimagines the act of poetry as a dialogic embrace in which writing exists on a continuum with the body" (80). The broken, suspended phrase also carries the potential of a withheld question or encouragement that extends the tactile grasp of the poem to the reader, who is invited to partake of this shifting dialogue and the erotic connection with the word which Stein is trying to establish here. "A great many people come together / Come together" – the last quoted line openly cajoles the lover-reader, drawing him or her nearer to the rising "fire" of her text. Stein repeats her invitation in the closing lines of the poem – "[i]n the midst of writing there is merriment" (LB 458) – suggesting that "lifting belly" is a figure of a shared desire, of contact, of *lovemaking* through the implied eroticism of language, where each word is a fetish that ignites pleasure and encourages us to enjoy the continuously lifted "belly" and the cumulative, dialogic movement of this text.

⁹ Significantly, Chessman points out in her study that dialogue is not an option in a masculine text of pleasure, which is commonly monologist, for it would break the illusion of intimacy, thus opening the text up for aggression and rivalry. See Chessman (1989), especially pages 8-9.

The choice of the conversational, dialogic mode has yet another function. It allows Stein to conceal the love talk and smuggle the forbidden subject of lesbian eroticism among the trivialities of everyday life – a strategy often used by the poet to speak about her sexuality. Since lesbian proclivities were still frowned upon by society at that time, and Stein, as noted by some of her biographers and critics, deflected her homosexual orientation in fear of becoming a social pariah,¹⁰ she chose a protective mode of a wandering and meandering dialogue between unnamed lovers in which fragments of infantile sweet-talk, such as “My baby is a dumpling I want to tell her something”, are either masked and softened by the erotic implicitness of phrases like “Lifting belly is to jelly” (LB 424) or “Lifting belly makes a sound” (455), or entirely broken by banal remarks and sequences of detached conversations concerning mundane objects and daily activities, such as cooking, dressing, knitting, shopping or eating. A good example of those perforations of daily trivia into the eroticized texture of the lover’s discourse is the line “Wax candles. We have bought a great many wax candles. Some are decorated. They have not been lighted” (LB 425), or the chit-chat sequence “Do you think about apricots. We find them very beautiful. It is not alone their color it is their seeds that charm us. We find it a change. / Lifting belly is so strange” (425). Using this original coding and camouflaging of sexual content, Stein manages to both protect and celebrate the privacy and intimacy of her relationship with Alice B. Toklas. As observed by Dickie, through her experimental method, involving resistance and subversiveness, Stein “lifted the taboo on the subject” and found “a way of saying both what had not been said before and what could not be said” (1996: 17, 5).

¹⁰ See, for example, the critical biography of Stein written by Bettina L. Knapp, in which the following observations can be found: “Restrained about her sexual proclivities, she controlled her natural outpouring on this forbidden subject in the puritanical world that was the Radcliffe and the Johns Hopkins of her day”; “[W]riting, for her, served as a kind of hiding place where she could secrete her innermost thoughts and feelings.” (Knapp 1990: 75, 177). Similarly, Elizabeth Fifer (1992) points out in her study of Stein that her reactions to her sexuality were often defensive and disguised by the indirectness of her language. Stimpson, in turn, notes that Stein “disguised her own lesbian experiences by projecting them onto others or by devising what William Gass, one of her most scrupulous and sensitive critics, has called her “protective language”: ... a kind of neutralizing middle tongue, one that is neither abstractly and impersonally scientific nor directly confronting and dramatic, but one that lies in that gray limbo in between” (1985: 72). Neil Schmitz traced the elements of humor in the lesbian linguistic code of Stein’s experimental work in two chapters of his *Of Huck and Alice: Humorous Writing in American Literature* (1983).

To convey the inexpressibility of love – as Barthes explains his figure *écrire/to write* – the lover has two options, either to say nothing or to say too much, as “the expressive needs oscillate between the mild little haiku... and a great flood of banalities” (LD 86). Stein, doubly cautious and secretive about her relationship, chooses to partake of both options, adjusting her style so that the verbal pleasure of its minimalist simplicity and banality “chokes and reels” (Barthes PT 8) into uneven rhythms, astonishments and turbulences of textual bliss:

Kiss my lips. She did.
Kiss my lips again she did.
Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did.
I have feathers.
Gentle fishes.
Do you think about apricots. We find them very beautiful.
It is not alone their color it is their seeds that charm us. We find it a change.
Lifting belly is so strange.
I do not mention roses.
Exactly.
Actually.
Question and butter
I find the butter very good.
Lifting belly is so kind
Lifting belly fattily.
Doesn't that astonish you.
You did want me.
Say it again.
Strawberry.
Lifting beside belly.
Sing to me I say.

(Stein LB 425)

The source of writerly rather than readerly pleasure in this passage lies not in the richness or rhetorical sophistication of Stein's declarations of love, which are purposefully flattened and simple, but rather in the performative pulse of the lines, visible in the anaphoric structure of the three “kiss” sentences, whose sequence performs the very kinetics and addictive dynamics of the kiss, while the beat as well as the rising and falling movement of the line sustained throughout the poem recreates the cumulative experience of sexual play leading to an orgasm. As noted by Knapp, “the repetitions and rhythmic techniques in “Lifting Belly” are cumulative and analogical – designed to

swell until a climax is reached, then subside, their intensity diminishing as contentment sets in” (1990: 92). The bizarre appearances of feathers, fishes, apricots, flowers, and strawberries, which retain their strong sexual allusiveness, build the impression of a verbal “striptease”, as the discontinuity and confusion which they produce create gaps, edges and seams that captivate and seduce, carrying us deeper into this pleasurable love game, and opening the “doors of language” through which our fantasies “come flowing in” (PT 14). “In this way we play” (LB 448), Stein confesses at some point in the poem, suggesting that the verbal games, “open-private structures”¹¹, to borrow from Fifer (1992: 77), and melodies of “Lifting Belly” are meant to enact rather than simply describe the playful communications, exercises, ruptures and disclosures of love.

The nature of Stein’s verbal strip-teasing can be easily explained in the light of the following passage from Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes?* In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no “erogenous zones” (a foolish expression, besides); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.

(PT 10)

Stein’s text is lifting its belly in a similar way, revealing its sensual secrets and intimacies protectively, like the hedgehog-poems discussed in the previous chapters, offering her readers only “the flashes of appearance”. As Susan Holbrook notes, “[w]hile Stein has an interest in representing lesbian eroticism, she repeatedly overturns moments of clear referentiality, thus complicating the very notion of representation” (1999: 757). As a result, we are given a perfectly erinaceous poem that is “at once insistent and evasive, offering a portrait of a lesbian relationship while concomitantly tracking the thresholds, dangers and possibilities of such a representation” (Holbrook 1999: 766). The poet herself suggests the need to keep her subject veiled, partially unrecognized and uncertain: “Need you wish me to say lifting

¹¹ Fifer defines Stein’s method as “open-private structuring of discourse, in which the truths are revealed intermittently” (1992: 77). This strategy, argues Fifer, protects Stein from the condemnations of the censorious reader (79).

belly is recognized. ... can you recognize it. In a flash” (LB 440). The delight with the lover’s presence and the particular pleasures of lesbian sexuality are thus disclosed indirectly, shining through the playful flashes of her rhyme schemes (“Bright eyes I make you ties”, 443), baby talk and babble (“Here is little bun for my bunny. / Every little bun is of honey / On the little bun is my oney”, 445), code and pet names of the lovers (e.g. Mount Fatty, or “the Levelheaded fattusky” for Stein; Pussy, Baby, My Wifey, Little Jew for Alice), puns (e.g. the word “Caesar” which conceals “seize or see her” in “I say lifting belly gently and Caesars gently”, 106), as well as repetitions and echoes of shared daily activities that screen the moments of sexual excitement and often provide fresh resources for the poet’s erotic image-repertoire. The following passages illustrate this strip-teasing poetics / erotics of Stein’s poeMCP

I hear her snore
On through the door
I can say that it is my delight (444),

Dear Daisy.
She is a dish.
Perfect.
Pleasure,
In the way of dishes. (457)
Lifting belly has wishes.
And then we please her.

Lifting belly has a dress.
Lifting belly in a mess.
Lifting belly in order. (436).

Lifting belly says it there.
Thank you for the cream.
Lifting belly tenderly. (450)

Because lifting belly is about baby
Three eggs in lifting belly.
Eclair. (453)Lifting belly is in bed
And the bed has been made comfortable.
Lifting belly knows this. (455-6)

Can you sing about a cow
Yes.
And about sings.
Yes. (458)

In “Beyond the *Jouissance* Principle”, Jane Gallop observes that “female desire we feel sparks of pleasure ignited by contact at any moment along the line, not waiting for closure but enjoying the touching”. As a result of such contact, “the impatient [Oedipal] economy aimed at finished meaning, products, theses, conclusions, might just go up in smoke” (1984: 113). Similarly, Hélène Cixous, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” in which she encourages women to reclaim their bodily empires and write “female-sexed” texts (or “sexts”, as she calls them), speaks of the “fantastic tumult” of female drives, of the “infinite and mobile complexity” of a woman’s body, “its thousand and one thresholds of ardor” that let women “articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction” (Cixous LM 341-342). Cixous argues further:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence”, the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end”.

(LM 342)

Meeting the conditions of *l’écriture féminine*,¹² Stein’s text is an attempt at “writing through her body”, its result being “an eroticized linguistic space” (Berry 1992: 59), a “sext” with multiple points of entrance, ardor and pleasure, in which almost every word is carnal, near and capable of “doing the touching”, as the boundaries between the erotic and non-erotic spheres become fluid and tentative. The eponymous phrase itself, repeated in various configurations and contexts throughout the poem, is an index to such an overflowing of boundaries and to Stein’s “staging of appearance-as-disappearance”. Concealing the full meaning of her taboo subject and yet trying to give it a name, the title still carries an incredible erotic and signifying power. As it is positioned insecurely between a noun

¹² Margaret Dickie observes that Stein’s experimental works can be read as early examples of *l’écriture féminine*, although she stresses that the poet’s writing through body displayed “a witty play of words” rather than the desire for the pre-verbal language belonging to the realm of *jouissance* (1996: 4). In my view, Stein’s experiments work towards a full fusion of poetics and erotics and her verbal games in her love poems cannot be separated from the erotic intensity and semiotic significations of *jouissance*.

and a verb,¹³ it yields a whole variety of definitions: it can be at once a person (“Lifting belly is courteous”, 416, “Lifting belly is so impatient”, 418), body part (“Lifting belly and a hand”, 433), a substance (“Lifting belly is sugar”) a pleasurable occupation (“Lifting belly can please me because it is an occupation I enjoy”, 439), an observed gesture (“Lifting belly tenderly, 450, “Lifting belly is a way of sitting”, 421), an intention (“Lifting belly is an intention”, 439), sexual activity (“Lifting belly a permanent caress”, 442). Rather unexpectedly, it can also change to “filling petunia” (451), “a miracle” (451), “performing aquatics” (451), a linguistic experiment (“Lifting belly is such an experiment”, 450), or simply “a language” (422).

The miraculous and liquid permeability and iterability of this signifier – which, as Holbrook writes, both insists on and resists sexual allusiveness (1999: 762), drawing its erotic energy from the destabilization of categories – spills over onto the surrounding words, contaminating them and depriving them of their “direct appellation”, thus fostering their absorption into “the sexual” fabric of the poem. Hence, nouns such as “éclair” or “cream”, or the aforementioned “strawberries” and “apricots”, all belonging to the “reserve-discourse” of food preparations and daily menus, here assume additional erotic resonance when placed between the repetitions of the sexually charged phrase “lifting belly” or when decontextualized in other astounding juxtapositions.¹⁴ Other foods and domestic objects woven into the fabric of the poem, such as olive (“Fire is that which we have when we have olive”, 434), honey (“Every little bun is of honey”, 445), butter (“And is there any likelihood of butter”, 458), eggs (“Three eggs in lifting belly”, 453), preserves (“Can you wonder that they don’t make preserves”, 452), jelly (“Jelly my jelly”, 427), water (“Now we know about water”, 451), can also be easily read as having an alternative, erotic referent that implies body fluids, sexual intimacy or sexual hunger. Similarly, as shown by Fifer, verbal expressions related to house-

¹³ Explaining the interpretative difficulties posed by the phrase as suggestive of the performative identities of abjected sexualities, Holbrook notes that “lifting belly signifies queerly through its liminal position between noun and verb” (1999: 759).

¹⁴ Fifer observes further that “Stein borrows from Toklas’ sphere of influence, the domestic, for her private metaphors for the body. The domestic was as near to Gertrude Stein as the literary, and she always surrounded herself with the movements of an orderly household, so both cooking and sewing offered particularly available sources for sexual imagery” (Fifer 1992: 54).

hold arrangements, cooking and various domestic chores become indirect vehicles of sexual passion. In “Lifting Belly”, we can find instances of mixing, drinking, slicing, making fire, cooking, collecting pearls, wetting and whetting knives, door opening, all of which may function as a “protective language” (Gass 1970: 74) for lovemaking and sexual stimulation. One of the bolder instances is the punning sequence “I cannot pass a door / You mean odor / I smell sweetly” (LB 435), in which the door bars access to the sensual openness of the female body. In Fifer’s words, Stein’s domestic discourse “fuses the oral and genital imagery and provides the clearest introduction to her intermingling of all natural functions” (1992: 54). As a result, “body, house, and food are joined and harmonized” (Fifer 1992: 58); the social is mixed with the intimate and private, the semantic fields of the words used in this play are kept impure, indeterminate and contaminated by romantic and domestic rituals, and thus stretched and enlarged. The meaning of those amorous somagrams derives from the associative and performative import of their inventive “mixing” rather than their rational and logical grasp and representational clarity.

The loved body, because of its absolute uniqueness, “cannot be inventoried without being diminished”, Barthes argues in *A Lover’s Discourse*. The attempt at its description frequently leads to its “portioning” and the reduction of its “folds” into a fetish (LD 19-20). Thus, what attracts the lover can be, as the author proposes,

the subtle, evanescent trivialities which swiftly pass over the other’s body: a brief (but excessive) way of parting the fingers, of spreading the legs, of moving the fleshy part of the lips in eating, of going about some very prosaic occupation, of making one’s body utterly idiotic for an instant The feature that touches me refers to a fragment of behavior, to the fugitive moment of an attitude, a posture.

(LD 191)

Chessman interestingly notes that Stein never displays the full bodies of her speakers in the poem, manipulating her perspective and reducing it to a close-up on a belly or lips so that the reader remains too near (“Lifting belly is so near”, 419) to see the lovers, and receives only glimpses and fragments of their movements and actions. Treating the body of her text as the continuum of the loved body that needs to be concealed even when it is being celebrated, Stein also portions it into bits and pieces “full of love and echoes” (436) as well as fragments and “subtle trivialities” of

syntax and lexicon that fumble their way into the secret folds, dispersed climaxes and pluralized pleasures of the lover's / reader's body. To be privy to those pleasures the reader should take to heart the advice inscribed in the lines "Lifting belly is so seen / You mean here. / Not with spy glasses" (421). To see it properly, we do not need "spy glasses", for the key to the poem's writerly bliss does not lie in the "paranoiac" attentiveness, with its methodical and scrupulous hunting for completeness, nakedness and symbolic coherence. Rather, it consists in the acceptance of the rule "Feel me / I feel you" (441), which pulls us towards the non-signifying aspects of Stein's language and the subversive undoing of the distance in the reciprocity of contact between the lovers and the text as well as between the text and its readers.¹⁵ As noted by Albert Mobilio, Stein rejected "the hierarchical roles of author as master locksmith and reader as forger of keys", presenting the reader with "an open-ended game in which interpretations were presumed to be private and always in flux. In the absence of fixed symbols writ large, she devised truly free-form texts that *converted readers into writers*" (Mobilio 1988: 7).

In her analysis of "Lifting Belly", which focuses on the specificity of lesbian textuality, Penelope J. Engelbrecht sees this bidirectional, non-hierarchical and non-linear movement of desire as a condition of lesbian sexuality and subjectivity. "By Desire", the critic explicates, "I mean an act of yearning, of emotional and intellectual 'movement,' of be / coming, all of which are realistic elements of lesbian interaction" (1990: 85). Galvin similarly notes that Stein's "is a writing of intersubjectivity – and the psychosexual aspect of her own subjectivity was decidedly lesbian" (Galvin 1998: 42). The renouncement of the submission-dominance relationship typical of heterosexual behavior produces, in her words, "a ten-

¹⁵ It is interesting to contrast this idea with T.S. Eliot's notions of the roles of the reader and critic, as formulated in his essay "The Function of Criticism": "The exhaustive critic, armed with a powerful glass, will be able to sweep the distance and gain an acquaintance with minute objects in the landscape with which to compare minute objects close at hand; he will be able to gauge nicely the position and proportion of the objects surrounding us, in the whole of the vast panorama" (Eliot 1975: 87). Stein's text clearly resists this kind of distancing, totalizing and objectifying reading, and encourages the reader to put away his powerful glass and enter the text as its intimate and playmate rather than its authoritarian evaluator and meticulous inspector. Linda S. Watts perceptively argues that "[i]t is not enough to perform an audit on [Stein's] text, carefully assessing what is present and reckoning an account. One cannot appropriate or report her texts; they are stubbornly resistant to paraphrase" (1996: 3).

sion which sparks in all directions, rather than the power that subjects vertically” (Engelbrecht 1990: 85). In a lesbian relationship, Simone de Beauvoir observes, “separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality” (1953: 416). The text propelled by this kind of Desire also fuses the “I” (the Subject) and “you” (the Object), or entirely questions the distinction between them, for both can switch their roles freely and be at once one and the other. Stein’s text, which articulates this non-hierarchical relationship and attempts to translate lesbian desire, rejects a unifying voice that “would speak throughout the poem from a position of authority, able to describe the figures who speak and make love” (Chessman 1989: 101), and in consequence becomes more fluid, non-linear, more tactile than visual, “relying on a point of contact, not on a distancing point of view” (Engelbrecht 1990: 98). Treating the subject as performative and transgressive rather than fixed and determinate, and offering her readers a “partial and negotiable script to be activated” (Watts 1996: 3), Stein switches between “I”, “you”, “we”, “she”, “he”, and “it”, assaulting the unified subject and dissolving the boundaries between sexual identities involved in this “be / coming”. The following passages illustrate this process:

Why do I say bench.
 ...
 We have met to-day with every kind of consideration.
 Not very good. Of course it is very good.
 Lifting belly is so kind
 Why do you say that.
 ...
 Listen to him sing.
 She is so sweet and thrilling.
 Listen to me as yet I have no color. Red white and blue all out but you.
 (Stein LB 422-423)

Stein creates here an intersubjective space of talking and listening, where the reader is invited to join the poem’s other subjectivities and where pleasure and joy emerge, circulating in mutual exchange. Galvin notes correctly:

In devising techniques that are decidedly unlike traditional ‘patriarchal poetry,’ Stein does not set out to describe her relationship with Alice for us; a descriptive voice would automatically cast the reader as an outsider to the relationship. Rather, she wants to draw us into the play of

her lesbian consciousness. She does this by bringing us into the poem as active participants in the wordplay of the language. For, above all, “Lifting Belly” is playful.

(Galvin 1998: 47)

In female sexual desire, as Jessica Benjamin observes, “the totality of space ... inside, outside, and within our bodies becomes the site of pleasure” (1988: 230). Irigaray similarly claims that “*woman has sex organs just about everywhere*. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere”, and her language, responsive to the multiple sites of pleasure “goes off in all directions” (Irigaray 1985a: 103). “A feminine textual body”, Cixous similarly notes, is “always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop” – the writing continues even when the text comes to its end (CD 53). The plural and shifting subject as well as the dialogic form belong to the poetic strategies that point to such totality, endlessness and multidirectionality of female pleasure, releasing the intense sexual energy of the text and enhancing a sense of “movement” that liberates the ambiguity of the signifier and its multiple colors, and activates its erotic play. At the same time, however, it escapes the traps of the heterosexual economy of desire, governed by control and subordination which suppress and override the plurality of the points and ways of contact.

“Whenever she loves”, Cixous observes as she defines the nature of feminine writing, “all the old concepts of management are left behind”; whenever the female lover writes, “everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love” (LM 348). Stein’s closing lines – “Can you sing at your work / Yes. / In the meantime listen to Miss Cheetham. / In the midst of writing / In the midst of writing there is merriment” (LB 458) – carry a similar call for a writing that leads to *jouissance*, a text that is plural, fresh and polymorphously erotic, unspeakable and impossible within the familiar and narrative logic of readerly texts. The merriment inscribed within and performed by the lines of her love songs is the laugh of the Medusa in love, who is trying to reclaim her body and the body of the word from the existing structures of representation by “plunging into a vortex of words, burning words, cleansing words, liberating words, feeling words”, words that can be “held in our hands to play with them”, for “whatever you can play with is yours” (Stein in Hoffmann 1965: 45). Again, Barthes captures the tantalizing feeling, the orgasmic absorption and wallowing in the pleasure of language which Stein’s text produces:

a heterology of plentitude: all signifiers are here and each scores a bull's-eye; the author (the reader) seems to say to the MCP *I love you all* (words, phrases, sentences, adjectives, discontinuities: pell-mell: signs and mirages of objects which they represent); a kind of Franciscanism invites all words to perch, to flock, to fly off again: a marbled, iridescent text; we are gorged with language, like children who are never refused anything or scolded for anything or, even worse, "permitted" anything".

(PT 8)

Bringing together language and love, Barthes thus describes their function in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*:

the very task of love and language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new, thereby creating an unheard-of speech in which the sign's form is repeated but never is signified; in which the speaker and the lover finally triumph over the dreadful reduction which language (and psychoanalytic science) transmit to all our effects.

(RB 118)

Stein manages to "lift" the reductionist constraints of language in the "unheard-of speech" of her "Sonnets that Please" and "Lifting Belly", as she renews and refreshes love's familiar and conventional inflections by bringing it close to the female body. As Adrienne Rich states in *Of Woman Born*, "[i]n order to live a fully human life... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (1976: 62): Stein's poetic practice evidences the creative potential which lies in the exploration and continuous affirmation of this corporeal ground. Those impossible texts / sexts of female and lesbian *jouissance* speak with letters of desire and love, a word "made flesh" (1970: 92), granted its belly, and doing the very lifting. In Goody's apt words, Stein's text "breathes a radically en-fleshed erotic" (Goody 2007: 82). The word under the pen of this "hearty logophiliac" (Stimpson 1984: 315) is not after the unreachable idealized otherness; rather, it teases, seduces, embraces, caresses, laughs and pleases. "If you love a name", the poet confesses in "Poetry and Grammar", "then saying that name a number of times only makes you love it more, more violently more persistently more tormentedly. Anybody knows how anybody calls out the name of anybody one loves. And so that is poetry really loving the name of anything and that is not prose" (Stein LA 231). "Lifting belly" – an absorptive, polysemous and passionately repeated phrase adorned with a

variety of telling adverbs (“tenderly”, “quietly”, “carefully”, “sublimely”), destroying any fixities and embracing at once the lover, beloved and the dynamics of love-making – points to poetry as “a state of knowing and feeling a name” (Stein LIA 233), that intriguing fusion of understanding and enjoyment that Stein offers to her reader. The name of love, which in the Barthesian version comes from the realm of “the *inconnaissable* / unknowable”, and remains “impenetrable, intractable, not to be found” (Barthes LD 134), in Stein’s work is curiously “always already here”, yielding its sensual essence and belly-to-belly intimacy as it is lovingly and tenderly invoked, caressed and brought into presence as well as into the reader’s heart. Stein’s poem, whose goal is to invite us to “live and love in names” is thus, in Derrida’s words, “that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart, *that which*, finally, the word *heart* seems to mean” (CCP 231).

2.2. “Pleasure in pieces; language in pieces; culture in pieces:”¹⁶ The Hedgehog Demons of the Heart in Mina Loy’s *Love Songs*

“Her poems are born of the desire to enter into a terrain where physicality embodies the spirit, where the body is animated by the mind” – these words by Carolyn Burke (1980: 141) can serve as an introduction to Mina Loy’s intriguing dissections of sexual discourse and the romantic love lyric in her *Love Songs*. The erinaceous sensibility of Loy stems from her ambiguous, and often contradictory, treatment of love and its rhetoric, which exposes both the limitations of the love song which for the poet is hostile to women’s voices and sexual desire, and its simultaneous capacity to become a vehicle of repressed female sexuality and a venue for constructing alternative perceptions of gender roles. The choice of Loy, who was British by birth, is justified further by her closeness to the American avant-garde circles and the American reception of her work, which allies her both with the New York avant-garde and, through her appreciation of and affinity with Stein’s work, to the most experimental edge of the modernist practice.

Loy’s version of the text of *jouissance* shares with Stein’s the boldness and radicalism of linguistic experiment and the need to find new and more open ways of articulating sexual desire to suit early twentieth century femininity. Like Stein, Loy – or Mina Gertrude Löwy, which was her

¹⁶ Roland Barthes (PT 51).

full family name – was an expatriate of Jewish descent. She was born and raised in pre-war London, but, as has been mentioned above, her career was tightly linked to the American avant-garde of the period. After three years of artistic education in Munich, Loy began her expatriate and cosmopolitan life in Florence, Paris, Berlin, and New York. It was to that city that she moved in 1916, hoping to begin a new life following her failed marriage to fellow artist Stephen Haweis, and her disillusionment with the leaders of Italian Futurism, Marinetti and Papini, whom she had befriended in Florence. Like Stein, she was a playwright, a poet and a novelist, interested in visual and applied arts. As a painter, sculptor, fashion and interior designer, a model and an actress, she partook of the variety of artistic and social life available at the beginning of the century and moved in the most influential circles of the modernist avant-garde. Although, as pointed out by Perloff (1998: 131), Loy spent only over a year of her early artistic life in America and did not settle there until she was 54, her connection with the country remained very strong. This was due both to her conviction that the country was the Promised Land for the transnational avant-garde, more open to the new, and thanks to her life-long association with American expatriates in Europe, including Stein, Djuna Barnes, Mabel Dodge and Carl Van Vechten; the latter, in turn, introduced her to the Arensberg circle, who were determined to turn America into “the playground of modernism” (C. Burke 1996: 389). The little magazines of poetry and art founded and sponsored by the members and satellites of that circle did indeed prove eager to publish Loy’s work, commencing with the scandalous *Love Songs*, brought out by Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others* in 1915.¹⁷ Interestingly, Ezra Pound, writing of Moore and Loy, recognized Loy’s affinity with American art and called her poetry “a distinctly national product” that “would not have come out of any other country” (1968: 424). One of Loy’s best critics, Virginia M. Kouidis, to whom my own study owes many an insight, similarly claimed that Loy was more American than British; this is clearly seen in the title of her extensive study of the poet, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet*. What is

¹⁷ Roger L. Conover (1998: 246) describes the position of the magazine thus: “But *Others* was not just a magazine. It was a cause and a community, an attempt to create a new literary environment for the rebel poets fighting to modernize poetry. Alfred Kreymborg’s two-room shack in Grantwood, New Jersey, was its first storm camp, the site of Sunday assemblies where the Poetry Underground exchanged manuscripts, sandwiches and contacts”.

more, as noted further by Perloff, “like her friend Gertrude Stein, [she was] so curiously ‘American’”. She was similar to Stein also through “her invention of an intricately polyglot language – a language that challenged the more conventional national idiom of her British (as well as her French or Italian, or, paradoxically, even her American) contemporaries” (1998: 132). Regarded as “the emblematic avant-gardist, the bohemian’s bohemian, the nervy ‘impuritan’” (Conover 1997: xii), “It-Girl” for Futurism and Dada” (C. Miller 2006: 110), and a Feminist and Surrealist to boot, Loy, like Stein and her American contemporaries, wholly belonged to this artistically bold and eventful age and perfectly embodied its restless and creative spirit.

Like Stein, aware of the limited freedom granted to women by the Victorian models of femininity, Loy also used her poetry to “kill the nineteenth century”¹⁸ and to awaken a new female consciousness that would allow new women to transform the inherited cultural and social patterns and participate more boldly and confidently in modern life. In her intrepid “Feminist Manifesto”, bearing a heavy influence of Italian Futurism, Loy points out the artificiality of the strict division of women “into two classes the mistress & the mother every well-balanced & developed woman knows that is not true, Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions” (LLB 154). In search for a language capable of bearing and contradicting the pressures of social prescriptiveness as well as of expressing the woman’s psychic tensions, Loy, like Stein, assaulted the conventions of the lover’s discourse and invented her own version of the text of bliss that would be less hostile to women’s multiple creative functions. However, while Stein in her love poems deconstructed the sublime aura of romantic love by reducing the conceptuality and diminishing the intellectual and symbolic import of language, as she tried to reclaim the pleasures of its “body”, Loy, in Conover’s words, created a “Trojan verse”, as she “hijack[ed] Victorian vocabulary and conceptual posturing” (Conover 1998: xv), and used them to “unmask our pet illusions”¹⁹ (Loy LLB 153), to attack the cultural con-

¹⁸ Stein defined her artistic goal in the following words: “Between birth and fourteen, I was there to begin to kill what was not dead, the nineteenth century which was so sure of evolution and prayers and esperanto and their ideas”. Quoted in John Malcolm Brinnin (1959: 16).

¹⁹ The words come from Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto”, which begins with the following question: “Women if you want to realize yourselves—you are on the eve of a devas-

ventions, devalue the romantic myth and expose the oppressive patriarchal grip which lay at the heart of conventional love songs. While Stein used the pulse of the repeated line and word, the playful rhyme and eroticism of individual sounds as her allies in expanding the site of her “sexual” pleasures, Loy opted for the naked and unsentimental frankness of free verse and the “various weapons and scalpels”²⁰ at work in her idiosyncratic fusion of highly cerebral, sordidly biological and visceral language, laced with irony and cynicism, to announce her growing dissatisfaction with the available Image-repertoire of the lover’s discourse.

In “One O’clock at Night”, the first poem in the sequence titled *Three Moments in Paris*, the speaker confesses:

Though you have never possessed me
I had belonged to you since the beginning of time
And sleepily I sat on your chair beside you
Leaning against your shoulder
And your careless arm across my back gesticulated
As your indisputable male voice roared
Through my brain and my body
Arguing dynamic decomposition
Of which I was understanding nothing
(Loy LLB 15)

The image of the woman sitting sleepily and silently on the chair of her male companion captures well the uneven nature of their relationship. The woman functions here only as a decorative, voiceless and passive appendage, a sleeping beauty entirely dependent on the man, “leaning against [his] shoulder” and allowing the “indisputable male voice” and its “cerebral gymnastics” (LLB 15) to possess and suppress her own. “Being a mere woman” – the speaker ironically continues – means losing one’s “personal mental attitude” and becoming a marionette who, “know[ing] the Wire-Puller intimately” (LLB 94) submits to the man’s physical and intellectual mastery in exchange for “the security of imparted physical heat”:

tating psychological upheaval—all your pet illusions must be unmasked—the lies of centuries have got to go—are you prepared for the Wrench—?” (LLB 153).

²⁰ The metaphor was used by Marianne Moore in her poem “Those Various Scalpels” inspired by the poetics of Mina Loy.

Beautiful half-hour of being a mere woman
The animal woman
Understanding nothing of man
But mastery and the security of imparted physical heat
Indifferent to cerebral gymnastics
Or regarding them as the self-indulgent play of children
Or the thunder of alien gods
But you woke me up
Anyhow who am I that I should criticize your theories of plastic velocity

“Let us go home she is tired and wants to go to bed”.
(LLB 16-17)

As noted by Carolyn Burke, the reader cannot miss the heavy irony in the suppressed voice of the female speaker (1987: 147). Arguing in her “Feminist Manifesto” that “[w]omen must destroy in themselves the desire to be loved” (LLB 155), for love enslaves and debases them, Loy uses irony to articulate the dangers of women’s passivity, which prevents them from becoming man’s equals both in terms of sexuality and intellect. Irony, having both a critical and an affective edge,²¹ reveals the feelings of frustration and contempt underneath her apparent indifference to the man’s “cerebral gymnastics” which she regards as “self-indulgent play of children” or “thunder of alien gods”. Thus, irony becomes Loy’s ideological armor that effectively conveys and masks her emotional involvement, but which simultaneously leads to a greater self-knowledge, creating sufficient distance and ambiguity to “define her experience in her own terms” (C. Burke 1987: 148). The line “But you woke me up”, carrying similar ironic overtones, simultaneously shows the woman’s unresponsiveness to the aggressive masculine debates in which she cannot participate, her awareness of that exclusion and the growing anger at her own complicity. In the next poem of the sequence, “Café du Néant” (inspired by the café paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas), the lovers reveal “the eyes that are full of love / And eyes that are full of kohl” (LLB 16), indicative of the presence of a grim shadow as well as a tone of mourning and darkness in the poet’s vision of love.

²¹ Linda Hutcheon (1994: 15) discusses irony as a political tool with affective charge. She argues that although irony is very often perceived as an intellectual weapon that forces “a withdrawal of affect”, its affective import in fact can be very strong and should not be ignored.

The irony, bitterness and doubleness of the poet's stance also surfaces in her *Love Songs* – a four-poem collage that subsequently expanded into a sequence of thirty-four poems (Kouidis 1980: 14), and which Loy then renamed *Songs to Joannes*²². Here, the poet explored various dimensions of “sex and so called love”, as she herself somewhat cynically describes her thematic preoccupation. The early reception of the volume testifies to the radicalism and subversiveness in Loy's perception and treatment of amorous discourse. The shock had to do both with the content and the form of the poet's “love songs”. Her biographer Carolyn Burke cites the early reviews of the poems:

Readers of Victorian poetry were unprepared for such visceral evocations of love. A letter to the editor denounced *Love Songs* as “swill poetry”, or more succinctly, “hoggerel”. What Kreymborg called Mina's “utter nonchalance in revealing the secrets of sex”, some saw as lewd and lascivious writing – in the same class as Margaret Sanger's birth-control pamphlets and Emma Goldman's talks of free love. Most agreed that “to reduce eroticism to the sty was an outrage, and to do so without verbs, sentence structure, punctuation, even more offensive”.

(C. Burke 1989: 6)

Alfred Kreymborg's pertinent summary of the early reception of Loy's *Love Songs* offers a fuller overview:

Detractors shuddered at Mina Loy's subject matter and derided her elimination of punctuation marks and the audacious spacing of her lines. Such sophistry, clinical frankness, sardonic conclusions, wedded to a madly elliptical style scornful of the regulation grammar, syntax and punctuation ... horrified our gentry and drove our critics into furious despair.

(quoted in C. Burke 1996: 196)

Those initial responses to the text reveal that what offended the Victorian reader was clearly a *writerly* text of bliss, whose role is to destroy readerly complacency and “unsettle the consistency of his tastes” (Barthes PT 14).

²² The name *Johannes* is a veiled reference to Giovanni Papini, Loy's lover, ‘Giovanni’ being an Italian equivalent for the German ‘Johannes’ and the English ‘John’. As suggested by Miller, in this poem Loy gave vent to her anger, disappointment and sorrow after the failed love affair with the Italian Futurist. See C. Miller (2006: 119)

“Love – – – – – the preeminent litterateur” (LLB 68) – the closing line of the sequence, perforated with a curious series of dashes – can serve as an entrance to Loy’s writerly poetics and erinaceous politics of love. “To try to write love is to confront the *muck* of language”, Barthes argues in *A Lover’s Discourse* (LD 99), as he tries to articulate the lover’s experience of the *déjà vu* of amorous discourse and its operation within the recognizable “scene of language” (LD 99), composed out of numerous “matrices of figures” that can be used, adjusted and filled with more personal content (LD 7). From the very first stanzas of Loy’s *Love Songs* the reader confronts this “muck of language”, or – to use Loy’s own expressions – the “erotic garbage” shining through “the coloured glass of / Experience”, full of kaleidoscopic shifts, splinters of conventional figuration, broken amorous episodes, erotic tropes and literature-filtered echoes of love:

I.
Spawn of Fantasies
Silting the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
“Once upon a time”
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane

I would an eye in a Bengal light
Eternity in a sky-rocket
Constellations in an ocean
Whose rivers run no fresher
Than a trickle of saliva

These are suspect places

I must live in my lantern
Trimming subliminal flicker
Virginal to the bellows
Of Experience
Coloured glass.

(LLB 53)

Loy sharpens the double-edged sword of her irony in the quoted passage, as her goal is to sing songs of a failed and demystified love rather than celebratory and affirmative “sonnets that please”. As noted by Galvin, Loy

“seeks to rewrite the ‘book of love’ in order to heighten consciousness and liberate it from the narrow strictures of conventional morality” (1999: 72). Using the structure of collage, in which the movements of the body are intertwined with those of the mind, she exposes the entrapment of her female speaker in the “silt” of romantic plots, failed fictions and worn-out tropings of love designed and sustained by the patriarchal culture. The fragmentation and original spacing of her line enhances the impression of the disintegration of cultural myths and values which prevents a universal vision of love. In the poem’s first deconstructive thrust, the figure of the Cupid – the Roman god of erotic love and courtship, whose name derives from the Latin *cupido*, i.e. “desire” – is deprived of his wings and delicate boyish beauty, and desentimentalized in his depiction as a pig, “a greedy, lurid, Id-filled muse” (DuPlessis 1996: 91), “a displaced and comic phallus” (Selinger 1998a: 27) with “a rosy snout” to “root the erotic garbage”. This gesture is at once intensely erotic and openly anti-romantic, mocking female illusions and fantasies about ideal and spiritual love. Her dreams of love grant “eternity in a sky-rocket” by stripping its traditional messenger of his arrows and down to the “rosy” nakedness and animal crudeness of sexual penetration. When juxtaposed with the aggressive rooting of male desire implied in the first stanza, the lines “I must live in my lantern / Trimming subliminal flicker / Virginal to the bellows / Of Experience” reveal the patriarchal myth of virginity curbing and repressing the woman’s sexual passion and barring her own erotic self-discovery, which consequently fades into an uncertain, half-conscious flicker and suppressed guilt.²³

²³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1996: 187-188) interestingly observes that Loy’s feminist views were “in dialogue both with general ideology and with a specific kind of Victorian and modern reforming feminism called the Social Purity movement, which combines claims for the moral superiority of women with a denial of female sexuality. Social Purity was hegemonic in the suffrage movement (1908-14), but not unchallenged. Libertarians and utopian socialists, as well as feminist sex radicals, rejected the ‘purity’ argument; these would find chosen sexual unions a moral and ethical kind of sexual behavior and would urge the end of sexual repressions. Most dramatic was the claim that women had a right to and capacity for (hetero)sexual pleasure, that women’s sexual drive was equal to men’s, and that no need existed for the double standard. In contrast, social purity feminists made urgent allegories of gender division in sexual matters: men were lustful, women were spiritual; men needed their sexual (and the synonyms were bestial, animal) instincts curbed by women as asexual guardians of an evolutionary superiority, glossed as a minimal need for the ‘sexual embrace’”.

The fragmentation and the kaleidoscopic shifts of images and scenery from one song to the next, as well as within individual songs – features which in Stein’s “Lifting Belly” camouflaged lesbian sexual pleasures and caressed multiple names of the lover’s presence – in Loy’s text point to the crisis of romantic values and the difficulty of modern love, threatened by ultimate failure. Her imagery, marked by decay, violence, destruction, wounding, death and chaos, uncovers “the waste land” of love in which “the white star-topped” bliss, the “eye in a Bengal light”, suggestive of orgasm, is deflated, broken and pulled down by the unsentimental images of “sowing / wild oats” and earthly weeds. Reminiscent of Eliot’s desert-like “Waste Land”, this wrecked landscape of love that used to display “the constellations in an ocean”, now yields only “the rivers ... no fresher / than the trickle of saliva” (53).²⁴ The excitement also fades in the subsequent sections. The intimacy and harmony of the lovers’ union is reduced to “the impact of lighted bodies / Knocking sparks of each other / in Chaos” (59) and love-making becomes “a casual vulgarity / more of a clock-work mechanism” (53-54). The Homeric rosy fingers become “a little rosy / Tongue of Dawn” – “we twiddle to it / Round and round / Faster / And turn into machines”, the speaker adds further in the poem (LLB 63). The repetitive anaphoric movement of phrases so beautifully used by Stein in her poem’s orgasmic pulse, here loses its intensity and displays the grotesqueness of sexual routine. The phrase “Once upon a time”, quoted in the first stanza, further reinforces the impression of the loss of the romantic ideal, for it exposes love as a Fantasy belonging to the impossible realm of a fairy tale and the idealistic scripts of romance plots.

²⁴ Loy’s *Love Songs* were written and published in 1917, a few years before Eliot’s *Waste Land*, and the same year as his *Prufrock*. Although Loy could not have been influenced by Eliot’s work, their love songs exhibit a similar aesthetic sensibility. Both Eliot and Loy use the technique of collage in their compositions and the imagery of both betrays the influences of French symbolism and its decadent aesthetic. Eliot similarly de-romanticizes love, exposing its empty decorations and stripping it down to automatic, meaningless vapidness. For details of the comparison see Kouidis (1980: 60). Eric Murphy Selinger also stresses this resemblance, but he sees important differences in their treatment of the topic of love: “Of the major modern poets, only Eliot shares both Loy’s unease with Victorian ‘erotic faith’ and her despair at the Pig Cupidity of modern love. But his reasons could not be more different. Where Loy refuses to universalize her speaker’s sad case, Eliot embraces an older Christian and Platonic lesson that ‘no human relations are adequate to human desires’” (Selinger 1998: 86).

In the third poem the separation of the dream from reality becomes even more poignant, for here Loy uses more explicit religious imagery and symbolism to show the disillusionment with love:

We might have coupled
 In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment
 Or broken flesh with one another
 At the profane communion table
 Where wine is spill'd on promiscuous lips
 We might have given birth to a butterfly
 With the daily news
 Printed in blood on its wings
 (LLB 54)

When “[t]he only point at which the interests of the sexes merge is the sexual embrace”, (“Feminist Manifesto”, LLB 154), the lover’s communion loses its aura of sanctity, and love becomes only “coupling / In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment”, a profane sharing of flesh and “promiscuous lips” devoid of spiritual anchoring. Loy’s use of the modal “might” in both stanzas, which, as Lucia Pietrouisti observes, “work[s] to blur possibility, desire, and reality” (2008: 29), additionally signals the impossibility of fulfillment in this blasphemous love whose fruit is neither transcendence nor redemption but “bird-like abortions” (LLB 54) or a fragile, blood-stained and short-lived butterfly. As pointed out by Kouidis, the images of winged creatures in the poem originate in the myth of Cupid and Psyche (1980: 76-77). Psyche, whose Greek name meant “spirit, breath, life or animating force”, was so beautiful that Venus became jealous of her and asked her son, Cupid, to make her fall in love with the “vilest of men”. Instead, Cupid and Psyche fell in love, which rendered Venus’s son unable to fulfill his mission. This enraged Venus, who punished Psyche, separating her from Cupid and cursing her so that she could not find love or happiness, but had to continually seek her lost beloved. To break the curse from which the whole earth suffered – as Cupid fell sick and refused to perform his duties, turning the earth into a loveless desert – the girl was forced by Venus to perform a series of impossible tasks, including a venture into the Underworld. However, even that did not help the lovers to reunite and finally, due to Jove’s intervention, Psyche was granted immortality and married Cupid, giving birth to Voluptas, or Delight, known as the goddess of sensual pleasure.

The matrix of the legend underlies Loy's poem, with Cupid and Psyche appearing in the text through multiple allusions. However, to adjust the myth to the crisis of modern love, Loy distorts its elements by turning her lovers into grotesque caricatures of their mythical predecessors. As shown by Kouidis, the "loved one is not Cupid but Pig Cupid, and no Jove intervenes to provide a happy ending" (1980: 77). The lovers' union is always ephemeral, abortive, and inevitably disappointing, reduced to an animal "coupling", meaningless and frantic "tumbling together", "red hot agony of passion", "archetypal pantomime" (LLB 66) or "crucifixion of a busy-body" (LLB 67). Instead of Delight, it yields the strikingly demystified and biological "spermatozoa / At the core of Nothing / In the milk of the Moon", or a "terrific Nirvana":

Or we might tumble together
Depersonalized
Identical
Into the terrific Nirvana
Me you – you – me.

(LLB 58)

The word "terrific" sounds quite ominous in this context, as apart from clearly connoting the pleasure of disappearing in sameness and union, it also evokes the terror of the annihilation or disintegration of the lovers' individual selves, suggested further by the two dashes separating "me" and "you" in the last line. The same deflation of love's romantic mystique can be seen in song XVII, where "[t]he contents / Of our ephemeral conjunction / In aloofness from Much / Flowed to approachment of – – – – / NOTHING" (LLB 64). In Loy's text the butterfly, traditionally symbolizing Psyche, cannot fly too high because its wings are stained with the blood of sensationalist news; its spirit and glow have faded ("You too / Had something / At that time / Of a green-lit glow worm / – – – – / Yet slowly drenched / To raylessness / In rain"), while Cupid's "little-pink love" with "strewn feathers" has turned into "[a] colorless onion" emitting "disheartening odor" (LLB 56-57). The naturalist frankness and straightforward syntax, which constantly suppress the mock-religious and sublime discourse of romantic love, bring us close to the body. However, due to their violence and negativity, these qualities do not produce the sense of plenitude, exhilaration, sexual arousal and erotic fulfillment that shines through Stein's continuously repeated "Lifting belly is good", "Lifting belly is kind", or her

playful “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”. Stein’s speaker is “heavy with selecting” the verbal “wood” to tend the rising and falling fire of love and its physical and poetic consummation, while Loy’s lover is struggling against her nocturnal mood, “heavy with shut-flower’s nightmares”:

I store up nights against you
heavy with shut-flower’s nightmares
(LLB61)

Laughter and playfulness, so frequently used by Stein to break the defenses and reach both her lover and reader, cannot suffice for Loy’s disenchanted speaker, as they fail to protect her from disillusionment and the feeling of pain and anger at the over-wrought and “rotten” sentimentality of amorous discourse. Section XIII indicates this disenchantment:

Laughter in solution
stars in a stare
irredeemable pledges
of pubescent consummations
rot
to the recurrent moon
bleach
to the pure white
wickedness of pain
(LLB 62)

The stock components of romance – the moon, stars in the lover’s stare, and the loving pledges – cave in, losing their fragile force and beauty under the scathing bluntness of the monosyllabic “rot” and “bleach”. These strong and “irate” words, reminiscent of futurist poetics, become part of Loy’s counter-narrative of desentimentalized sexual desire and of the modern woman’s painful struggle for a liberated and more embodied self.

Seeing the ideological potential of language, Marianne DeKoven notes: “If patriarchy is to be transformed at all it must be transformed not only at its most visible levels (political, social, economic, cultural) but also at the fundamental or radical level of the structures of language which enable meaning” (1981: 23). Loy is undoubtedly sensitive to the consciousness-shaping power of the individual word. Her homage to Stein’s experimental method points to the significance of the poet’s own work with the “radium of word”:

Curie
of the laboratory
of vocabulary
 she crushed
the tonnage
of consciousness
congealed to phrases
 to extract
a radium of the word

(LLB 157)

Both Stein and Loy realized the radiating force of each linguistic unit and foregrounded the material and sensorial qualities of language. “Poetry is prose bewitched / a music made of thoughts / the sound of an idea” (LLB 157), Loy herself admits, recognizing the sonic value of her poetic practice. As argued by Galvin (1999: 56), the comparison of Stein with Marie Skłodowska-Curie, whose discoveries were groundbreaking for the contemporaneous scientific world, further implies that experiments in the poetic and the scientific field “have equal social significance, in an age that would rather have focused on practical science than modernist creativity”. The critic argues further that Loy shared with Stein a “linguistic playfulness, her sheer love of language as tactile, itself a sensual element of the world”, as well as “her skillful use of repetition, internal rhyme, punning, and other forms of wordplay” (1999: 65). However, when contrasted with Stein’s experiments, which reveal the poet’s penchant for the effect described by Pound as *melopoeia* (an intense musicality of the word and poetic phrase), Loy preferred *logopoeia* – in Pound’s words, “a dance of the intellect among words”²⁵. This quality is visible in her complex, scientifically precise and intellectually sophisticated diction that frequently disrupts the mellifluous flow of syllables, startles the reader with its anti-absorptive foreignness and irony, revealing the discursive aspects of language and the “scalpel-like” sharpness of her poetic intelligence. Barthes observed in his *Pleasure of the Text* that “[t]he word can be erotic on two opposing conditions, both excessive: if it is extravagantly repeated, or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness” (PT 42). In her “Sonnets” and “Lifting Belly” Stein relies more heavily on the first effect, using repetition as well as charm-melos of individual syllables and sounds

²⁵ Pound cited Jules Laforgue as an early example of this practice, and Marianne Moore, Mina Loy and T.S. Eliot as his modernist followers.

as a tool of sexual seduction; Loy, in turn, simultaneously eroticizes her language and diminishes its erotic quality by mixing the familiar fragments of the lover's discourse with "cerebral" and coldly scientific words, which are "succulent in their newness" in the context of a highly conventionalized love song. In poem XXVII, for instance, "[l]ittle lusts and lucidities / And prayerful lies" are "muddled with the heinous acerbity" of the lover's "street-corner smile" (LLB 62), where the "heinous acerbity" breaks the liquid alliterative flow of "l"s in the sequence, emphasizing the fragility and falsehood of a relationship based on "prayerful lies". In song XXVIII, the mounting movement of sexual passion, suggested by the image of the steps "that go up for ever" and leading to the woman's sense of "being burnt quite white" in the "Whiteness / Of [her] / Emergence", is interrupted by coolly abstract words such as "synthetic" to modify whiteness, or "climacteric" to describe the withdrawal of the male lover's sun-like presence. "Negotiating sexual and analytic passions", DuPlessis perceptively observes, Loy often uses "impacted and intellectualized languages of wit graphically describing sexual moments and apparatuses" (1996: 194). In the second stanza of the quoted song, one encounters such intellectualized representations of the lover's body in the clusters "the cymophanous sweat" and "etiolate body" (LLB 64-65), in which the Latinate modifiers similarly contaminate and defamiliarize the reductively naturalist sensuality with their scientific flavor:

White where there is nothing to see
 But a white towel
 Wipes the cymophanous sweat
 –Mist rise of living –
 From your
 Etiolate body
 And the white dawn
 Of your New Day
 Shuts down on me

(LLB 65)

In Barthes' concept of *jouissance* the ultimate pleasure lies in the disintegration of culture which releases the "voluptuousness of the letter", relaxing the discipline of language, which in turn breaks into pieces and "reels into bliss" (PT 8). With Loy, the reader cannot resist the impression that this relaxation is never complete and that it is always checked by the "choking tatters of tradition" ("O Hell", LLB 71) as well as by the discursive

constructedness of language and the self. The “cerebral chill” (Kouidis 1980a: 172) of the adjectives “cymophanous” and “etiolate” distance both the speaker and the reader from the boldly corporeal appellation of the poem and thwart the possibility of a shared orgasmic transcendence, thus proving the suppression and erasure of the female body and sexual agency under the blinding, God-like power of man’s presence that “shuts down on [her]”. The unexpectedness and “the sexual-scientific” (Kouidis 1980a: 173) character of the cited modifiers attempts to break the transcendental and hypnotic “mist” surrounding the male lover and functions as a defensive strategy against man’s complete deification and the romantic ideology of love.²⁶ At the same time, it displays the insecurity of the female body, constructed or “whitened” by social norms which try to keep this body pure, submissive and virginal, like a white page that can be covered only with the patriarchal script. This script prevents the woman from seeing her body as a site of independent and liberated pleasure, thus subjecting her sexual identity to the man’s touch and gaze.²⁷ “We have been taught / Love is a god / White with soft wings”, the poet writes in her poem “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots” (LLB), revealing the sentimental, disembodied, and culture-shaped perception of female erotic power.

The poet’s way out of the tight undergirding of culture and its myths seems to lie in an original interlacing of the sensual and the intellectual. In poem XXIX, scientifically abstract language is employed to show the speaker’s dissatisfaction with the distortion of sexual identities, mediated and obscured by the increasing artificiality and aesthetic sophistication of the lover’s discourse. The evolution of language in the direction of “unnatural selection” and “uninterpretable cryptonyms / under the moon” deprives the lovers of the immediacy, joy and frankness of the sexual act:

²⁶ In her autobiographical poem “The Effectual Marriage”, Loy uses similar imagery to describe her failed relationship with the aforementioned Giovanni Papini, one of the leaders of Italian Futurism: “While Giovanni thought alone in the dark / Gina supposed that peeping she might see / A round light shining where his mind was / She never opened the door / Fearing that this might blind her / Or even / That she should see Nothing at all” (LLB 38).

²⁷ In her “Feminist Manifesto” (1914), where she treats virginity as a symbol of the patriarchal rule sustaining male fictions about the nature of the woman’s sexuality, Loy boldly calls for “the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity, throughout the female population at puberty—” (LLB 155).

Evolution fall foul of
Sexual equality
Prettily miscalculate
Similitude

Unnatural selection
Breed such sons and daughters
As shall jibber at each other
Uninterpretable cryptonyms
Under the moon
Give them some way of braying brassily
For caressive calling
Or to homophonous hiccoughs
Transpose the laugh
Let them suppose that tears
Are snowdrops or molasses
Or anything
Than human insufficiencies
Begging dorsal vertebrae

Let meeting be the turning
To the antipodean
And Form a blur
Anything
Than seduce them
To the one
As simple satisfaction
For the other

Let them clash together
From their incognitos
In seismic orgasm

For far further
differentiation
Rather than watch
Own-self distortion
Wince in the alien ego.

(LLB 65-66)

The verbal flourish of Loy's poem contrasts with the childish simplicity, reductionism and colloquial diction of Stein's amorous lexicon and syntax. The author of "Lifting Belly" locates herself closer to what Barthes names as "the extreme limit of language" that cannot be grasped rationally.

ally and where each word works “without backing or guarantee, without the safety net” (LD 154), plunging happily into tautologies, colloquialisms, banalities, babble and even nonsense, and through its dialogic form making itself more vulnerable to exposure, but at the same time more open to the “writerly” contact and play. Loy’s goal, in turn, is to show love’s and the female ego’s entanglement in the dense “safety nets” of aesthetic and discursive appearances, so as to point to the mediation of sexual force through various “detours of speech” (Barthes LD 154), conventional posturing, and “image-repertoires” which turn tears into sentimental “snowdrops and molasses” and natural, multi-tonal laughter into restrained “homophonous hiccoughs”. “It is Apollo, *ultimately*, who writes every love story”, argues Barthes (LD 154), and we can feel the grip of an Apollonian control in the elegant austerity and calculated form of such words as “miscalculate”, “cryptonym”, “dorsal vertebrae”, “incognitos” or “antipodean”. Unlike the enticing positivity, homeliness and intimacy of Stein’s version of “caressive calling”, these words estrange, mislead and separate, creating spaces of negativity, silence and division, causing a growing alienation between the lovers and the reader. The speaker’s desire for Form that could become “a blur” and for language ready to erupt in the Dionysian “seismic orgasm”, dissimulating the idealizing discourse and social taboos related to sex, remains caught up in the imperative but still wishful “let’s” and the ironic tone of the whole song.

The poet’s choice of double-edged irony flavored with the powerful “radium” of her cerebral lexicon points to her subversive use of scientific discourse to confront the taboos and cultural myths of sentimental love and Victorian sexuality. This self-reflexive, double consciousness is visible also in Loy’s use of the lyrical voice throughout the poem. Like Stein, who diffuses her voice by breaking it into multiple subjectivities or hiding it behind the indeterminate “lifting belly”, Loy uses jarring shifts of perspective in her poem. She employs the plural “we” (“We sidle up / To Nature – – – / that irate pornographer” [63]) which includes both lovers or universalizes her observations, and elsewhere uses an impersonal image (“Out of the severing / Of hill from hill / the interim from star to star / The nascent / Static / of night”, LLB 60). Mythical personae and a biblical allegory are invoked (Cupid and Psyche, the Biblical wise virgins awaiting the Bridegroom,) but the poet also utilizes the confrontational and performative mould of the direct “you” (“I store up nights against you”, LLB 61), creating an impression of the lover’s immediate presence. However,

Loy never strays too far from the solitary “I” which serves to show the entrenchment of her speaker in the rich tradition of love poetry, shaped predominantly by masculine desires. At the same time, in accordance with the poet’s own advice – “[l]eave off looking to men to find out what you are *not*. Seek within yourselves to find out what you are” (LLB 169) – this lyric subject points to the poet’s need to defend and define the female self against the confines of romantic love. The female speaker, whose kaleidoscopic, disjunctive shifts of the poem’s “coloured glass” destabilize her identity, is at once concealed and revealed through language and the various postures that she adopts in her striving for the liberation of her sexual self. The deictic markers of personal voice – the pronouns “I” and “you”, or “we” – point to the poet’s search for psychological, spiritual and sexual identity within the conventional lover’s discourse which erases and objectifies the female self. DuPlessis argues that Loy’s heavy reliance on the intersubjective and dialogic “I-you” in the poem “calls the reader’s attention to the intricacy of the narrator’s desire for ‘you.’” The reader functions as a “textual substitute for the man addressed”, which makes his position “peculiarly intimate, but complex” (DuPlessis 1996: 194). He is invited at once to become privy to the eroticized confession and remain suspicious of it, for its frankness is frequently confronted with “the latent truths of male-female relations” (DuPlessis 1996: 194), hidden in the ideologically overloaded discourse of love. In song XII, “[v]oices break on the confines of passion / Desire Suspicion Man Woman / Solve in the humid carnage ...”. (LLB 95). As demonstrated by the critic, the apparently democratic contiguity of “Desire Suspicion Man Woman” renders both sides of the relation at once desirous and suspicious, aware of the “confines of passion”; and yet it seems that through its place in the sequence Desire is paired with Man, whereas Suspicion replaces Woman (DuPlessis 1996: 195). The reader is thus required to approach the broken voices with particular caution, recognizing the dangers of the masculine Desire and the reasons for female distrust. Although gender and sexual differences dissolve in “the humid carnage” and the “inseparable delight” of the encounter (LLB 57), the word “carnage” should put us back on guard, as it is situated far from the grand metaphysical claims of the lovers’ absolute and harmonious oneness, and since it “reaches etymologically for ‘flesh’ and connotively for ‘carnal,’ with a historical pun, ‘dying,’ but denotively for ‘mass slaughter’” (DuPlessis 1996: 196). The inseparability and dissolution of the lovers’ distinctive voices and bodies in

the moment of sexual bliss do not result in an idealistic and sublime merging of souls but a clash of bodies, carrying the threat of death and violent nullification of the lovers' selves.

Readerly caution proves beneficial also in the impersonal imagist fragments which interrupt and supplement the confessional mode of *Love Songs*. The image communicates indirectly and more ambiguously, building an erinaceous screen to veil the 'true' character of modern love, but it also contains and releases the force and boldness of female creativity, unlocked from her sentimental inhibitions. This power of indirectness and the creative transgression of the amorous ideal transpires in the opening song, which features the aforementioned mythic Pig Cupid and his grotesquely phallic snout, fleshing out the carnivalesque lust hidden behind the sentimental veneer of love. Similarly, section X, which consists of three simple, erotically charged lines – "Shuttle-cock and battle-door / A little pink-love / And feathers are strewn" (LLB 56) – may be read as a veiled description of the modern malaise of love that reduces *ars amorica* to "ephemeral conjunctions" of the lovers and their power games, here implied by the props of the badminton play. The previously mentioned sequence ("Out of the severing / Of hill from hill / The interim / Of star from star / The nascent / Static / of night", 91) deepens the sense of separation and the emptiness of the intercourse which gives birth to nothing, "a round vacuum" (LLB 99), suggestive of abortion, images of which recur throughout the poem.²⁸ Poem XXI features the ambiguous "[s]tack noons / Curled to the solitaire / Core of the / Sun" (LLB 61), indicative of the idolatrous desire of the woman "curled" to the powerful but inaccessible selfhood of the male lover, represented by the Sun-God figure. The subjective "I" more explicitly glosses this addictive asymmetrical dependence in poem XV:

But you alone
Superhuman apparently
I had to be caught in the weak eddy

²⁸ Maera Shreiber interprets *Love Songs* as "an abortion poem", a subset of "the motherhood poem", seeing the loss of a child and the lovers' sterile, non-reproductive relationships as the key to the whole cycle. In the critic's words, Loy's "abortion poem is a polemic against a culture which seems to treat writing as a means of preserving the 'involute ego,' even if only in absentia, at the cost of reproductive intimacy" Shreiber (1998: 103-14).

Of your drivelling humanity
To love you most
(LLB 59)

In poem XXXI, skillfully combing the personal and the impersonal mode, Loy employs religious imagery to convey the uneven position of the woman in the relationship:

Crucifixion
Of a busy-body
Longing to interfere so
With the intimacies
Of your insolent isolation

Crucifixion
Of an illegal ego's
Eclosion
On your equilibrium
Caryatid of an idea

Crucifixion
Wracked arms
Index extremities
In vacuum
To the unbroken fall
(LLB 67)

Judeo-Christian symbolism, with its powerful narrative of crucifixion and resurrection, is daringly applied here to describe the fall of romantic love, which cannot sustain the overly inflated myth of its own spirituality and pulls the lovers away from the spiritual reward into the "vacuum", darkness, alienation and chaos of the modern wasteland. In Pig Cupid's all-too earthly garden, the "wracked arms" will not be healed, the fall cannot be prevented nor redeemed, "the salvific"²⁹ discourse will not suffice to "disorb" the lovers' isolated, "inviolate egos" (LLB 58). The woman, crucified as a disembodied "caryatid of an idea", loses her "illegal ego" which has begun emerging out of the wreckage of the deflated ideal and

²⁹ In his insightful study of American love poetry, Selinger argues that "Victorian American lovers commonly felt that their affection for one another was somehow 'salvific': a sentimental and erotic faith that competed with the older economy of salvation" (1998: 64).

out of despair and anger at man's "insolent isolation", threatening the vibrating and carnal energy of her "busy-body".

"Come to me There is something / I have got to tell you and I can't tell / Something taking shape / Something that has a new name / A new dimension / A new use / A new illusion" (LLB 57), the poet pleads with her lover in song XIII, inviting both Joannes and her readers to search for a new name of the woman's self among the broken voices, split egos, devalued or aborted myths, and condensed images of the poem. The line-internal white spaces and dashes that suspend the "telling" convey a sense of struggle and exertion in the painful "eclosion" of the sexually repressed and still undefined self. As observed by Miller, Loy "appears to see hope as well as loss in the disconnection of language" (C. Miller 2006: 120); hence, the white spaces and withheld words in the quoted lines evidence the double impulse of her linguistic consciousness, for while they make room for that unnamed "something", that inarticulate dimension of the woman's being and a new narrative of feminine sexuality, they also hint at the poet's distrust towards the inadequacy of the patriarchally entrenched language, repeatedly and awkwardly fitted to express the woman's experience of love. As noted astutely by Selinger (1998a: 23), the failure of language may also signal that Loy "refuses to be comforted by signs" or "rescued by language when she has not been rescued by love". Likewise, Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas argues that the perforated form of the poem can be read as "an effort to open out toward new possibilities of consciousness and feeling" and a way of "pointing toward an 'evolution' beyond entrapment in the speaker's sense of disillusionment and skepticism, indeed, beyond entrapment in the voice of the romantic lyric" (1998: 115). The line "I have got to tell you and I can't tell" exhibits the urgency to communicate and an erinaceous withdrawal from telling; the blank space between the sentences iconically mirrors this hesitation and the broken connection between desire for self-expression and its suspended or failed fulfillment. In Quartermain's words, "[t]he non-verbal, the physical, tells what cannot be told" (1998: 85). That extended space could also be Loy's typographic gesturing towards the resistant reader / lover who should accept the gaps or "suspect places" (LLB 53) in this self-erasing, fragmentary anti-narrative of love to find the missing name and a more accurate form for the amorous condition of the New Woman.

In her essay "Modern Poetry", Loy notes that "the silent sound of poetry requires our voluntary attention to obliterate the cold barrier of print

with the whole ‘intelligence of our senses’” (LLB 157). Such heightened attention and the engagement of all senses is necessary if one wishes to hear the emerging voice of the female self in the silences and erasures of the white page as well as from within the densely printed scripts, the ideologically colored and aesthetically constructed fragments of the existing amorous discourse.

Selinger’s study of the American love poem proves helpful in summarizing the difference between the use of lover’s discourse in Stein’s *Lifting Belly*, and Loy’s *Songs to Joannes*. The critic sees Stein’s poem as an amorous utopia in which the lover’s voices “interweave and overlap in an easy, intimate, mutually gratifying exchange – one that builds on baby talk, not ‘procreative truth’” (Selinger 1998: 91). Welcoming especially to her sympathetic and tender readers, this utopia liberates laughter and sexual joy, establishes connections, turning writing and reading into love-making that culminates in a mutual, both verbal and carnal *jouissance*. By contrast, Loy’s disillusioned lovers inhabit a dystopia in which the advocated desedimentation of the lover’s discourse leaves bitter, rather than liberating, prospects (Selinger 1998: 84). What fuels Loy’s poem is separation and the resulting profound sense of loss and melancholia, “a hollowness at her deep heart’s core” (Selinger 1998: 38), the fruit of which is this peculiar “Lunar Baedeker” – a palimpsestuous, torn and self-erasing map to the female self and body, often separated from each other, and hidden beneath the “cerebral forage” (LLB 100), romantic smudges and mourned corpses of language-mediated love. The bold appeal of her “Feminist Manifesto” – “[y]ou must destroy in yourselves the desire to be loved”, followed by the sardonic question “[a]re you prepared for the *WRENCH?*” (LLB 154) – shows that the shift from romantic decorations to the disjunctive flickering of the modern sexual temper and the liberated female self will only happen at a certain cost. “Looking for love with all its catastrophes is a less risky experience than finding it”, Loy confesses retrospectively, as she ponders her own failed relationships (Loy in Burke 1996: 251). In *Love Songs*, she offers her readers this post-catastrophic, lunar landscape of anguished love as a form of “an irritant” (Twitchel-Waas 1998: 113) and a warning. The capitalized and italicized “*WRENCH?*” in her manifesto patently specifies the nature of the price to be paid both by modern lovers and readers, lured by the “rubbish heaps of tradition” (LLB 152), patriarchal plots and the clichéd promises of amorous discourse; Loy’s love songs are clearly designed to do the *writerly* “wrenching” rather than the delicate “scratching on the

surface” (LLB 152). According to the dictionary definition, wrenching entails “moving with a violent twist”, “pulling or straining at something”, “injuring or disabling by a violent twisting”, but also “changing”, “distorting”, “perverting”, and “causing mental anguish” (OED). Whereas in Stein’s poem the reader is left in “the midst of merriment”, for writing equals and performs here the intense pleasure and joy of love and sexual fulfillment, in Loy’s poem, by contrast, he faces the angry straining and pulling of language and emotion that fails to satisfy and deliver, resulting in a disturbingly bitter and broken salute: “Love — — — — — the preeminent littérateur” (LLB 68).

2.3. On how the hedgehog teaches the Heart: Composition as Gender-Sensitive Explanation in the Poems of Gertrude Stein and Marianne Moore³⁰

Discussing the ideological potential of language in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes notes that to keep ideological systems “from disturbing or embarrassing us, there is no other solution than to inhabit one of them” (PT 29). Further on, he observes: “[t]here are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the ‘dominant ideology’; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text. ... The text needs its shadows; this shadow is a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject” (PT 32). The present section is intended to reveal the fecundity of ideological shadows in Stein’s and Moore’s poetry. Although rarely credited with an open political or ideological stance, both poets imply their gender awareness and their ideological positioning via the subversive erinaceous structuring of their poems. As Barthes would have it, they demonstrate the possibilities of resisting the “implacable stickiness, a *doxa*” (PT 29) of various ideological pressures and languages by “inhabiting” them and speaking from within their strictures and confines.

In the already quoted essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Hélène Cixous writes about a need to disrupt the male domination over language and literary tradition: “If woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, ... it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it,

³⁰ This subchapter is a revised and expanded version of my article “Your Thorns Are the Best Part of You: The Female Poet and the Question of Non-conformity in the Poetry of Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein”, published in *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 44 (2008): 509-530.

turn it around, and seize it, to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (Cixous LM 257). Long before *écriture féminine* became the subject of critical interest, women poets had begun to claim power through their voices, working towards the disruption and dislocation of the dominant patriarchal tradition and the limiting conventions of the Victorian feminine writing. As observed by Ostriker (1989: 49), "[a] set of women with the advent of modernism, strove to escape the ghetto of feminine poetry by the leaps and bounds of undisguised intelligence. Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein are the shock troops here, followed by Mina Loy, H.D., and Marianne Moore".

About her work as the editor of *The Dial*, Moore (quoted in Molesworth 1976: 208) wrote: "I think that individuality was the great thing. We were not conforming to anything. We certainly didn't have a policy, except I remember hearing the word 'intensity' very often. A thing must have an 'intensity.' That seemed to be the criterion". The criterion of "intensity" defines the poetic practice of Moore and Stein. As will be shown in this subchapter, these leading members of Ostriker's modernist "shock troops" – perhaps more than any other women poets of that period – shared confidence in their abilities as independent poets working beyond gender limitations. As innovative participants in the modernist movement and as women, they defied tradition so as to bend language and their poetic imagination to a more intense and meaningful relationship with reality. Aware of the existing gender constructions and stereotypes, they consciously departed from the authoritarian voice and masculine self-centeredness of the dominant poetic models. Although their challenge to the traditional authority eventually took them in different directions and towards a variety of articulations, their commitment to redefining gender expectations and the relationship of the woman artist to the predominantly masculine world of writing brings Stein and Moore into a close artistic relationship.

Moore's life-long interest in feminist issues has been amply documented by her biographers and critics. As Sandra M. Gilbert (1990: 41-42) notes, Moore's famous public costume – a bizarre combination of a skirt, a tricorne hat and a cloak a la "Washington crossing the Delaware" – was chosen deliberately "to dramatize the artifice of female poetic identity" and to gloss her self-conscious questioning of the stereotyped heterosexual ideal of femininity. Miller (1995: 105) and Molesworth (1990:

45-48) point out that the poet's committed feminism can be traced back to her college years at Bryn Mawr, where feminist concerns and activities were commonplace and where her fellow students frequently chose professional careers and financial independence over marriage and family life. The ideological discussions at the college deepened the young women's awareness of the limitations imposed by late-Victorian ideals of femininity. Moore herself became a committed member of the Woman Suffrage Party of Pennsylvania, eagerly engaged in the networks of female friendships and benefited from professional support offered by her fellow graduates, attended lectures on feminist topics, wrote suffrage articles for the Carlisle newspaper (Molesworth 1990: 106) and frequently expressed in letters and conversations her concern about women's rights (Miller 1995: 100-105).

Interestingly, however, Miller (1995: 105) observes that although Moore's biography testifies to her deep and conscious engagement in feminist and suffragist movements, her poetry poses certain problems for critics who try to situate it within the discourse of feminist ideology.³¹ Examining Moore's ambiguous focus on gender in her poetic practice, Miller (1995: 104) quotes feminist critics such as Gilbert, who points out Moore's "parodically spinsterish asexuality"; Susanne Juhasz, who similarly asserts that Moore, seeking critical recognition, "had to play by the boys' rules" and "opted for nonsexuality"; and Jeanne Heuving, who argues against treating Moore as neuter and sexless, at the same time claiming that the poet "did not make gender an important part of her public identity as a writer ... she engendered difference primarily through the subtleness of the poetic medium itself". Also, Moore's male peers and critics disclosed a certain degree of uneasiness over the question of her femininity. Randall Jarrell placed the poet outside the concerns of sexuality, arguing that she was entirely divorced of it (Tomlinson 1969: 122); T. S. Eliot, who contributed to her fetishization as a woman poet (Gilbert

³¹ Miller (1995: 104-105) correctly observes that the critical difficulties with establishing Moore's stance on gender issues stem from the use of the wrong categories in the feminist interpretations of her works. The critic argues that neither the nineteenth-century notions of separate spheres nor late twentieth century feminist theories can do full justice to the specificity of Moore's gender-conscious aesthetic practice. What Moore opts for is "a poetic position of idiosyncratic and fluid rather than conventional and fixed gender boundaries", with "the speaker not gendered, while the poetry indirectly comments on the limitations of gender stereotypes" (Miller 1995: 114).

1990: 31), somewhat clumsily claimed that her poetry was “as ‘feminine’ as Christina’s Rossetti’s” – “one never forgets that it is written by a woman; but with both one never thinks of this as anything but a positive virtue” (Tomlinson 1969: 32); while John Crowe Ransom praised Moore for being less “deficient in masculinity” and “intellectual interest” than other writing women, again denying the relevance of gender to her poetic achievement (Tomlinson 1969: 86).

Gertrude Stein’s case is equally problematic, although with her the problem lies elsewhere. As Taylor (2001: 87) points out, she “explicitly distanced herself from her female contemporaries; most of her close relationships and friendships were with men, and she perceived herself as an isolated genius rather than part of a network through which ideas could be generated”. Max Eastman (1931: 64) also claims that the poet “emptied words of social elements”. Her fame as an oversexed scandalist, her “monumental personality” (Gould 1980: 83) and the continuous habit of associating her name with such giants of literary and artistic life as Matisse, Picasso, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Anderson, have weighed heavily on the critical reception of her works. Hoffmann (1976: 16) aptly notes that “it hardly mattered whether readers read her or not, for she was an almost mythical literary force whose magnitude surpassed anything she ever wrote”. The writer herself complained that “the American public were more interested in [herself] than in [her] work”, a complaint undoubtedly grounded also in the extreme popularity of her two gossipy accounts, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *The Autobiography of Everybody*, which Stein categorized as “outside” or “audience” writing, as opposed to her “inside”, experimental, and much more obscure writing, which ranges from *Tender Buttons*, through *Stanzas in Meditation*, to *The Making of Americans* and *Mrs. Reynolds*.³² The critics’ prevailing interest in the autobiographical and erotic context of her texts, the belated publication of her works, and the notorious difficulty of her experimental writing had initially prevented full appreciation of her stylistic strategies and experiments. Although the development of feminist theories and scholarship resulted in an increased concern with the relationship between Stein’s gender consciousness and her formal innovations, it simultaneously re-

³² Perloff (1988: 96, 108) distinguishes six basic variations of Stein’s style: “straight” reportage, autobiographical narrative, narrative-as-permutation of phrasal repetitions, abstract repetition of words and phonemes, the synecdochic riddling poetry of *Tender Buttons*, and sound poetry.

vealed the complexity of this relationship. As observed by Stimpson, “[f]eminist critics agree about the importance of Stein’s lesbianism in understanding her familial, social, and literary habits. Nevertheless, they disagree about the relationship of her ‘femaleness’ to language, the third form that the feminist interrogation of Stein has taken. The question haunts, not simply the picture of Stein, but feminist theory in general” (1984: 309). The first problem that the critics needed to face was the fact that Stein herself strongly resisted the feminist label; as she explained to her college friend Marion Walker, “not ... that she at all minds the cause of women or any other cause but it does not happen to be her business” (Stein in Blankley 1986: 196). Following Stein’s own reluctance to be openly involved with the feminist struggle of her day, Secor (1982: 32), for example, saw the writer’s experimental style as entirely escaping “the net of gender”; Blankley further observed that she “had to erase the New Woman image because it still functioned within the intellectual paradigms established by men” (1986: 193); Stimpson (1977) wrote of the ambivalence of her sexual identification obfuscating her style; Fifer (1992: 17-19) emphasized the unstable and multidimensional nature of Stein’s texts and her desire to both conceal and reveal her sexual identity and the inner conflicts of her emotions, as well as to censor and enjoy lesbian erotic experience through her coded and duplicitous style. Even DeKoven (whose insightful interpretations of Stein’s work, influenced by poststructuralist theories of Kristeva and other French critics, disclosed the writer’s feminist concerns,) when faced with the interpretative uncertainty of her “Patriarchal Poetry”, argued that the poem is unreadable and that it contains “no interpretable feminist thematic content” (1983: 128). Dydo (2003: 17) saw the connection between Stein’s innovative poetics and the politics of her texts, noting that “[h]er rejection of the rigid conventions of language led her gradually to dissociate herself from all inflexible forms, including hierarchical thinking, authoritarian organization, prescriptive grammar, and chronological narrative – aspects of the patriarchy”. However, as Hoffmann observed, despite the rise of critical interest in Stein’s work, its recognition by feminist criticism came unusually late (1986: 3).

Facing the problem of theorizing *l’écriture féminine*, Cixous (1981: 24) wrote: “[i]t is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist”. Aware of these difficulties, in this subchapter I will attempt a comparison

of *l'écriture féminine* in selected poems by Moore and Stein. For the purposes of this analysis, I have chosen works which specifically deal with the relationship between gender and forms of representation and thought. Moore's "Marriage" (1923) and Stein's prose poem "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927), for these are the works under scrutiny in this part, are openly revisionist, directed at the dominant male poetic tradition and its master narratives, myths and conventions, and are both playfully duplicitous. The poems lend themselves to a parallel reading also because they beautifully succeed in revealing the subversiveness of their authors' minds, showing both analogies in their non-conformist approach to form and gender categorization, and the peculiarities of their individual styles and techniques. Their compositions best explain their creators' respective attitudes towards the modernist "war of the sexes".

Reviewing the poetry of her friend H.D., Moore (1987: 82) wrote: "[w]omen are regarded as belonging necessarily to either of two classes – that of intellectual freelance or that of the eternally sleeping beauty, effortless yet effective in the indestructible limestone keep of domesticity". The woman who rejects these alternatives is forced to exist outside the world of female experience. In "Roses Only" (1924), one of her earlier poems, Moore questions this narrow view by employing the image of the rose, associated traditionally with delicate feminine beauty and submissiveness: "You do not seem to realize that beauty is a liability rather than / An asset" (BMM 83). The poem's rose is a woman pressed into the masculine ideal, in which she is reduced to the object of male desire, deprived of thorns and sublimated, and idly waiting to be "plucked" by the man's "predatory hand". Exploring the duplicitous nature of the word "brilliant" – which, as Slatin (1986: 65) observes, signifies both the outer form and the inner resources of the mind – Moore reminds us that it is "the spirit that creates form" and that the rose's surface beauty "must have brains" (BMM 83). "Thorns are the best part of you", for they manifest and guard "the infinitesimal pieces" and the subversive potential of the woman's beautiful mind. They are the visible marks of the rose's self-dependence, preventing us from thinking of the flower as just "a delightful happen so" that can be easily dismissed or appropriated (BMM 83).³³

³³ As shown by Slatin (1986: 66) the very form and argument of Moore's poem testifies to the poet's reluctance to appropriate or succumb to the rose's beauty and its surface brilliance. The word identifying the rose is mentioned only once in the poem as if the poet were afraid of locking the spiritual force of beauty within the material form of language

Stein also turned the rose into one of her artistic signatures and a subversive symbol of her *écriture féminine*. However, Stein's is not the discursive rose introduced by Moore, openly challenging the reductionist objectification of women into a thing of beauty with no brains. As her famous sentence "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" suggests, it is a performative play whose agents are nouns and verbs "caressed" to negotiate a more corporeal and playful treatment of sexuality and love. While the sentence similarly assaults the conventions and stereotypes and "x-rays the ideological mechanisms" (DuPlessis 1994: 76), it does so – characteristically for Stein – by foregrounding language and its physical and phonic surface qualities. Asked about the "rose" phrase by her audience during her American tour of 1934, Stein explained: "I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years" (Stein in Brinnin 1959 337-338). In this way, Stein escapes the trap of rose-as-worn-out-metaphor and the object-subject opposition, and refreshes the flower's somewhat withered charm by 'arousing' the reader to enjoy the plasticity of words, turning nouns into her love object and "I" into a poem (DuPlessis 1994: 76).

The intention of this analysis is thus to expose the thorns and brilliance of Moore's and Stein's poems-as-roses and to encounter the authors' "infinitesimal minds" in their non-conformist approaches to language and literary tradition. It will be shown that their concerns and experiments with form raise questions concerning a poetics of gender and investigate the issue of the woman's selfhood, sexuality and her participation in the process of modernizing poetry. Since it is impossible to exhaust the richness of the ingenuity and the prickliness of the poets' aesthetics, the array of the discussed problems has been narrowed down to the role of dialogue, the notions of intensity and insistence, and the split of the subject.

2.3.1. Dialogue, exchange and the perilous chasms of the female multiple consciousness

Moore's "Marriage" and Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry" can be seen as duplicitous in that they subversively encode female identities through a playful use and abuse of the masculine ideology of language. Referring to

and its conventionality. Moore's ideal is an imaginary possession, composition-as-observation liberated from a masculine desire to 'pluck' and own the rose.

women's entrapment within the "phallographic" tradition, Irigaray argues in *This sex which is not one* (1977: 122) that it is impossible to "simply leap outside that discourse". A possible solution is "to situate [oneself] at its borders and to move continuously from the inside to the outside" (Irigaray 1977: 122). To meditate on the institution of marriage, Moore's poem moves skillfully within two prevailingly masculine discourses: the powerful biblical master-narrative of the Fall, and the ordering, narrowing and prescriptive form of a dictionary. From the first lines of "Marriage", Moore foregrounds the figure of Eve, the first woman, by presenting her as a writer and the main agent in the mythical narrative. Debased, submissive, objectified and powerless in the book of *Genesis*, Moore's Eve becomes the dominant and empowering force, capable of embracing and growing in the poem's multiplicity of language, including the masculine discourse, while the Adamic myth dwindles and loses its supremacy. It is not Adam but Eve who utters the first sentence in the dialogic exchange of the poem: "*I* should like to be alone" (MCP 62). The sentence serves to empower the speaker and further frustrates our expectations concerning the unifying content of the title, as it expresses a woman's wish for separation and independence. This is reinforced further, as noted by Durham (1989: 239), by Moore's use of the italicized pronoun *I* to indicate Eve's difference and her refusal to be swallowed up by masculine desire and by Adam's crude, presumptuous offer "why not be alone together?" (MCP 62).

Eve undoubtedly brings difference, complexity and obscurity into the clear and uncomplicated vision represented by Adam. The poem shows how Eve's creative approach to the available linguistic material grants her access to the diverse possibilities of communication. Eve, as Hadas (1977: 145) observes, is a busy and modern writer, whom Moore advertises as "able to write simultaneously / in three languages – / English, German and French – / and talk in the meantime; / equally positive in demanding a commotion / and in stipulating quiet" (MCP 62). Her openness and "threatening potential of multiple consciousness" (Hadas 1977: 145), including silence, dispersal and polyglossia, is reinforced through Moore's own method of collage. The whole text is woven out of various quotations which simultaneously retain and lose their identities as a result of the poet's controlled manipulations. In the first note about the poem, Moore admitted that it was an assembly of "statements that took [her] fancy which [she] tried to arrange plausibly" (MMR 271). The lines describing Eve's mental agility take their energy from fragments of an authentic *Scientific American* article

on the mind's multiple abilities that Moore trimmed for her own purposes. Notably, all the quoted fragments in the poem come from male authors, including such disparate names as Francis Bacon, Richard Baxter, Edward Thomas, Anthony Trollope, Ezra Pound, Edmund Burke and Daniel Webster. However, as shown by Bonnie Costello and Alicia Ostriker (Parisi 1990: 121), Moore's peculiar method of appropriation and decontextualization dissolves the boundaries between linguistic identities, often modifying and reversing their intended meaning. Although partaking of the very rhetoric and ideology which she wishes to reject, through her intricate collages the poet in fact obscures the sources of authority and restores the original meaning of the very word 'discourse,' which after all signifies exchange and dialogue, and invites difference of opinion.

Cixous (V 56) identifies the idea of exchange as a characteristic feature of feminine writing:

And then, there is exchange. As soon as you simply touch the other, you alter the other and you are altered by the other, an alteration that may be positive or negative. It is negative if there is compromise, if you are incorporated by the other, etc. Yet there are modalities of exchange that are respectful modalities, where you let yourself be sufficiently altered to feel the other of the other – not too much, because then you destroy yourself.

According to Cixous, the masculine type of exchange involves incorporation, appropriation, ownership and transformation, while the feminine type is shown to respect the other's freedom, separateness and difference. That Moore is interested in the politics and poetics of exchange rather than in monolithic linear argumentation becomes evident in her playful adoption of the discourse of economics in the poem's first part. On the one hand, the rhetoric of the male-dominated field of business exhibits the lack of equilibrium between men's and women's position in marriage, as it privileges men (Heuving 1992: 124). On the other hand, it serves to disclose the post-Edenic marriage as "([t]his) institution, / perhaps one should say enterprise" (MCP 62), and as part of the social order in which women are products of economic, sexual and cultural exchange. Moore skillfully shows, however, that a familiarity with the manipulative nature of the language of mediation and power can support women in entering into these exchanges not only as objects of transactions, but as subjects capable of negotiating their own independence. According to Heuving

(1992: 122), replacing the notion of marriage as institution with that of enterprise fulfills a similar duplicitous function, as it employs discourse that gives words a negotiable value and simultaneously connotes the uncertainty, risk and unpredictability that the word ‘enterprise’ implies.

Moore negotiates the female poet’s freedom by drawing the reader into a play with language and form. Her emphasis on dialogue and exchange manifests itself in the rejection of the linearity of the dominant representational orders. Exposing the peculiar nature of feminine economy, which in Cixous’ words will “tolerate all kinds of freedom” (V 57), “Marriage” prevents a centered reading. It disperses meaning and unsettles the logical development of ideas on several levels. As a text of feminine exchange that will not “delimit itself” with a goal of becoming a “text of territory with neat borders, with chapters, with beginnings, and endings” (V 57), it displays to the reader its “cycloid inclusiveness” (the footnotes to the poem provide the sources for no fewer than 28 citations), and its intricate quotational tapestries³⁴, described by Moore herself as “a hybrid method of composition” (quoted in Parisi 1990: 121). As noted by Hollander and Pinsky (Parisi 1990: 121), the poem refuses to adopt a unifying perspective and authoritative position toward marriage as these would suppress the proliferation of viewpoints necessary for dialogue. The result is necessarily “a little disquieting” since the reader feels lost in a text that “do[es] not feel the arrest, the edge” (Cixous LM 57). The reader must wade through the logical and quotational meanderings, complicated further by the convoluted sentences, their meaning diluted in their countless enjambments, as in the opening lines of the poem:

This institution,
perhaps one should say enterprise
out of respect for which
one says one need not change one’s mind
about a thing one has believed in,
requiring public promises
of one’s intention
to fulfill a private obligation
(MCP 62)

³⁴ Moore herself used this expression in reference to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos*. However, speaking of Pound, Moore (MMR 149) saw his poem as “epic farings of the mind” and Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” appeared to her as an expression of the poet’s preference for “stillness, intellectual beauty and the wholeness of personality” (MMR 146).

Such sentence structure keeps this bizarre definition of marriage inconclusive and open; through the multiplicity of voices and views, it undermines “circular traditions and impostures”(MCP 62) and the non-dialogic imperatives of matrimony. Moore’s hybridization forces the reader to abandon the logical and linear hold on the text and enjoy instead proliferation of ideas and the verse’s non-conclusive flow.

In “Patriarchal Poetry”, just like in her “Lifting Belly”, Gertrude Stein attempts to undo the logic of patriarchal discourse through employing the poetics of dialogue, and she pulls the reader into a space of exchange and collaboration. One of Stein’s critics argues that the “poetics of dialogue” opens the text for participation in its reading as a “coming together” that unravels the “patriarchal authority implicit in monologue” (Chessman 1989: 3). The demand of participation and reciprocity posed by Stein’s text not only unsettles the masculine logic of hierarchies and the anti-collaborative argumentation of the monologue, but it also creates a meeting plane for the writer, the text and the reader, where exchange is the key to understanding and to the readerly pleasure. The apparent unreadability of her poem further suggests that when approaching her poetry we should “relinquish a position of mastery ... and give ourselves to language” (Berry quoted after Neel 1999: 90).

For Stein, it is the anti-collaborative character of narrative linearity as well as the hierarchic, binary logic of patriarchal poetry that annihilates difference and limits the poet’s possibilities. Consequently, poetry should embrace the non-representational and the nonsensical. In her poem – which, just like Moore’s “Marriage”, is an extended meditation and an attempt at formulating a definition – Stein tries to characterize patriarchal poetry. Furthermore, she uses several strategies to subvert and disclose the boundaries and flaws of the linear structures of thought. One such strategy is borrowing the very structure of patriarchal logic and turning it against itself, as in the following fragment:

How can patriarchal poetry be often praised often praised.
To get away from me.
She came in.
Wishes.
She went in
Fishes.
She sat in the room.
Yes she did.

Patriarchal poetry.
 She was where they had it be nearly as nicely in arrangement.
 In arrangement.
 To be sure

(Stein PP 579)

For Stein, patriarchal poetry equals ‘getting away from me’, renouncing the woman’s own identity, also through adopting a sequential order of presentation. In the quoted lines, the poet entrenches herself in the masculine narrative order and steals into the male objectifying gaze, where the personal ‘me’ is abandoned for the absent ‘she’. The ‘she’ is easily ordered about the space of patriarchal poetry – this “territory with neat borders” (Cixous V 57) – which means that her movements and their sequence are controlled and predictable. The actions (she “came in / went in / she sat in the room”) enclose the woman, delimit her within a neat narrative arrangement, fix and immobilize her inside a controllable spatial and temporal frame. The order of events reflects the male notion of temporality, which Kristeva, in her essay “Women’s time” (1981: 17), describes as “project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: time as departure, progression, and arrival”. Stein ruptures and undoes the security and predictability of the patriarchal pattern, its “which when where” (PP 567), by inserting into the narrative flow apparent illogicalities, such as the slightly chit-chatty “wishes” and “fishes”, the uncertain grammatical status of which ensures that they can function both as verbs and substantives. Bearing an unspecified and fluid relation to other structural elements, their presence within the coherent temporal paradigm defies our understanding, asking us to reach beyond the boundaries of linear logic, to unveil the locus of women’s displacement in the scheme and revise our complacent habits of reading. Stein’s strategies in “Patriarchal Poetry” exhibit a strong desire for an alternative temporality, with room for disruption, persistence, immobility, repetition and circularity. As the poet herself asserted, the poem was meant “to deal with everything that was not movement in space” (Stein W II: 243).

To undermine the representational conventions, Stein often constructs her sentences so that they seem grammatical and create an illusion of intended meaning, but the randomized words and their scattering between passages of greater or lesser clarity prevents their disambiguation. This can be observed in the following excerpt from the poem: “Patriarchal Poetry surplus if rather admittedly in repercussion instance and glance sepa-

rating letting dwindling be in knife to be which is not wound wound entirely white wool white will white change white see” (PP 576). Through explanation which does not explain, the lack of punctuation which could otherwise aid us in making connections between individual parts of the sentence or larger structures of meaning, and free-associational relationships between words, the poet mocks and destroys the traditional organization of a literary work and draws our attention to the fluid nature of language and human consciousness – that ‘white see / sea’ (PP 576) of sensations, perceptions and thoughts the abundance and simultaneity of which is reduced and curbed by the separating and arresting edge of words and sentences.

Stein’s strategies of “surplus”, “pleasurable overload” or “the just-one-more” of sound and sense (Neel 1999: 93) are also designed to counteract the tyranny of binary thinking, as can be seen in the following dense and repetitive fragment: “Once threes letting two sees letting two three threes letting it be after these two these three can be to near threes in threes twos letting to in two twos slower twos choose twos threes never came twos two twos relieve threes twos threes” (PP 568). Here, twos are both ‘relieved’ and ‘embraced’ by the more inclusive and non-binary “threes”; while the “twos”, as noted by Neel (1999: 93), “hold open the possibility that identity is something more, something other than, an oscillation between ‘one’(s) who are isolated and therefore unproductive”, number three signals the surplus and overabundance of feminine thinking as it fractures the dichotomous and reductive structure of communication between two selves and makes room for a more productive multiple identity. The kind of poetry which “is putting three together all the time” (PP 569) resists the trap of comfortable definitiveness, of easy ‘oneness’ and appropriative ‘twoness,’ and calls for a collaborative exchange between the writer, the text and the reader. In order to expose the reductionist patriarchal thinking, Stein also employs a mock list of apparent opposites, capitalized into solemn-looking categories: “Best and Most / Long and Short / Left and Right / There and More / Near and Far / Gone and Come / Light and Fair / Here and There” (PP 600). Binary logic, as the poet states playfully, serves the mind to “be shelled from almond” (PP 600), as its narrowly oppositional categories remove us from the vital essence of life and language, from the almond part of experience which escapes symmetrical patterns as well as the overwhelming squareness, coherence and rigidity of frames. The poet

wittily shatters this stifling design by knitting into it nonsensical or asymmetrical combinations, often bound only by the requirement of rhyme and meter: “This and Now / Felt and How; Which and Felt / By and Well” (PP 600). In this case, rather than bind words and lines, the rhyme severs the bond of binary opposition and allows the mind to move forward, across and beyond its constraints.

In the Henry James part of Stein’s *Four in America*, the poet concludes:

Clarity is of no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean no matter what you mean, nor how clearly you mean what you mean. But if you have vitality enough of knowing enough of what you mean, somebody and sometime and sometimes a great many will have to realize that you know what you mean and so they will agree that you mean what you know, what you know you mean, which is as near as anybody can come to understanding any one

(FIA 127)

Her “Patriarchal Poetry” draws the reader in precisely by means of such vitality, leaving an imprint on his mind through the diffusions of subjectivity, vague referents, syntactical tautologies and eccentricities, narrative and logical non sequiturs. Clearly more radically playful in her experiments than Moore, through her poetics of asymmetrical listing, verbal surplus, phonic fluidity, syntactic strangeness and fragmentation, Stein nonetheless postulates a similar kind of artistic freedom. Both poets avail themselves of the dialogic discursiveness and irresolution of language, leading to the celebration of complex and inclusive identities and the rejection (disappearance) of ideological boundaries limiting the female poet.

2.3.2. Stein’s poetics of insistence and Moore’s aesthetic of intensity

Foregrounding rhyme and rhythm at the cost of meaning and comprehensibility is not without significance in Stein’s anti-patriarchal strategies. By drawing our attention to the phonic potential of language, she renders her poetry not only conspicuously physical but, as with her persistent preference for asymmetry, she demands a new type of reader and a different manner of reading. As the poet herself argues, “[t]he essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they

should use exactly the same emphasis” (Stein W II: 167). In *Tender Buttons*, Stein also postulates the emotional value of repetition, arguing that “in recurrence there is feeling” (Stein TB 327). As observed by Neel (1999: 91), the creative potential of insistence becomes evident in the following fragment of “Patriarchal Poetry”: “As to as to not to as to and such a pretty bird and to as such a pretty bird and to not to as such a pretty bird and to as to not to and to not to as such a pretty bird” (PP 570). The passage, built almost entirely of non-referential prepositions and particles in slightly varying combinations, interrupted now and then by a more substantial but decontextualized phrase “such a pretty bird”, can be read in a practically infinite number of ways. Lack of other denominators anchoring the reader’s attention, absence of punctuation and the dissolution of sense all discourage us from reading deeply into the text. Instead, we are faced with verbal figurations that “generate a field of sound” (Neel 1999: 91). To enter this field and enjoy the dizzying sequence (and Stein wants us to enjoy it, to feel rather than understand)³⁵, the reader must let go of “such a pretty bird”, which phrase signals our desire for comprehension and progress. As Neel argues further (1991: 91), the choice of a dense, non-descriptive, and staccato-pulsating prepositional sequence clearly privileges the ear and releases the vocative music of the printed word, allowing language to play its incantatory rhythm, in which words become objects in themselves, quite apart from their function as instruments of communication.³⁶ Stein’s chant-like poetics is propelled by a desire to detach words from their clichéd functions in the sentence form, so as “to express the rhythm of the visible world” (Stein GP 111-112). According to the poet herself, “[t]hat is not a disclosure. That is not the way for all of

³⁵ Stein’s interest in the relational elements of speech can be traced back to her Radcliffe years, when she was a devoted student and admirer of William James and his psychological theories of language. In his *Principles of Psychology*, the philosopher draws our attention to the creative and emotive potential of prepositions in the following words: “We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use” (James [1890] 1981: 241).

³⁶ As observed by Dydo, the design of her page enhances the sonic effects, since the repeated phrases “arrest the eye” and “make an insistent visual design before they make sentences and sense... From the repetitions and permutations the eye gains a sense of design while the mind reading a phrase over and over again loses the sense of meaning” (2003: 109-10).

them who are looking to refuse to see” (Stein GP 161). This is offering poetry to an unbiased reader who is capable of entering the text without conventional expectations of resolution, lucidity or closure, who is prepared to yield to the ostensibly phonic insistence and “maddeningly polysemic” variability of the sentence (Hoffmann 1976: 65).³⁷ In “Patriarchal Poetry”, Stein explains her method of repetition with change: “These words containing as they do neither reproaches nor satisfaction may be finally very nearly rearranged and why, because they mean to be partly left alone” (PP 578). This method, as Neel states, is her way of “questioning of a mode of history, of identity, and of language” (1999: 98) as well as her rejection of the patriarchal ‘script,’ which attempts to reproduce the real, rather than create a new reality. The words, liberated from their usual arrangements and usage in this script, begin “to move freely in a landscape of verbal possibilities” (Dydo 2003: 141). “Patriarchal poetry might be withstood”, Stein offers, as she dismantles its paradigms in a playful anaphoric sequence: “Patriarchal Poetry at peace. / Patriarchal Poetry a piece. / Patriarchal Poetry in peace. / Patriarchal Poetry in pieces” (PP 594). This passage projects an alternative mode of using language, a mode that foregrounds performance, physicality, excessive resonance and the acoustic qualities of words; it draws our attention to hearing and sight, appealing primarily to our senses and emotions. The meaning-making potential of this method becomes apparent when one looks at Stein’s use of prepositions combined with the semantic plentitude of the homophones of the word “peace”. The playfulness also embraces the anaphoric structure of the quoted sequence, echoing Whitman’s expansive and multiple catalogues – here employed both to expose and to shake the stabilizing and unifying meaning of repetition. Stein’s witty phonic manipulations and her prepositional variations dismantle the solid and static noun “peace”, foregrounding the relational elements of language and their dynamic and horizontal interconnectedness.

The phonic sensuality of Stein’s poetics of insistence finds its equivalent in the visual intensity of Moore’s designs. Like Stein, who admitted

³⁷ In one of the poem’s efforts at defining and subverting the patriarchal mode of writing, Stein uses her method of insistence to disclose the desire for meaning, coherence and closure: “Patriarchal means suppose patriarchal means and close patriarchal means and chose chose Monday Patriarchal means in close some day patriarchal means and chose chose Sunday patriarchal means and chose chose one day patriarchal means and close close Tuesday” (PP 571).

in *The Making of Americans* that lists were a natural way of conveying that “everything being alike it was simply different” (MOA 27), Moore delights in lists and catalogues which celebrate difference, but also force the reader out of his complacency through their baroque excess, and unexpected combinations of bizarre and extremely sensual elements and subjects. The catalogue, as has been shown in the analysis of “An Octopus”, enables the poet to include and simultaneously to separate items, arranging them non-hierarchically. The method involves combining apparently unrelated elements, similarly to the following passage from Stein’s *Tender Buttons*: “A damp cloth, an oyster, a single mirror, a manikin, a student, a silent star, a single spark, a little movement and the bed is made” (Stein TB 501). The poet “revises the meaning of the center”, as she asserts that it is this free-associational play that “shows more likeness than anything else, it shows the single mind that directs an apple” (Dickie 1997: 25). Thus, disorder leads to a different method of selection and positioning, and destabilizes the idea of the authoritarian center, replacing it with the singularity of the mind. In “Marriage”, Moore uses this decentralized perspective to expose the emptiness and false glitter of marital rituals even as she lavishes the reader with all their gorgeousness: “the ritual of marriage, / augmenting all its lavishness; / its fiddle-head ferns, / lotus flowers, opuntias, white dromedaries, / its hippopotamus– / nose and mouth combined / in one magnificent hopper– / its snake and the potent apple” (MCP 65-66). Subsequently, the poet uses the catalogue to reveal masculine possessiveness and love of glittering symbols by disclosing men as “monopolists of ‘stars, garters, buttons / and other shining baubles’– / unfit to be the guardians / of another person’s happiness” (MCP 67). Adam’s power and sexual attractiveness is diminished even further when Moore envisions him as “a crouching mythological monster / in that Persian miniature of emerald mines, / raw silk–ivory white, snow white / oyster white, and six others – / that paddock full of leopards and giraffes– / long lemon-yellow bodies / sown with trapezoids of blue” (MCP 63-64). The miniaturization fulfills a protective function against the seductive beauty of Adam and his appropriative discourse, but the great perceptual intensity and the anti-mimetic nature of the ensuing catalogue of materials, shades of color and creatures, confronts male attractiveness with the gorgeousness and swiftness of the feminine mind; this “inner paradise of the woman’s imagination” (Hadas 1991: 153) is capable of enriching and surpassing the beauty of experience through attention to heterogeneous

and tactile detail as well as to shades and nuances of meaning. Just like the student in “The Steeple-Jack”, we feel that “it is a privilege to see so / much confusion” (MCP 5), for Moore’s delight in texture, shape, color and unusual combinations of vegetal and animal creatures is no less seductive than the “shining baubles” attributed to Adam.

Such non-categorizable catalogues can also be counted among Moore’s methods of defamiliarization, which draw our attention to the gap between reductionist concepts of femininity and woman’s rich mental qualities. Her bizarre catalogues discourage her readers from adopting an authoritative stance in their interpretation. Needing both similarity and difference, the poet loosens the symbolic strictures of language and keeps us suspended between metaphoric and literal levels of her unusual and opaque combinations, opening up a space for new relationships between words and images. The surreal and the fantastic in the Persian miniature portraying Adam trigger the “fresh waves of consciousness” that “poison” (MCP 63) the integrity of the male’s imposing vision, adding a degree of uncertainty and delightful confusion to the straightforwardness of the Edenic myth. A few lines further, the poet directly juxtaposes the flexibility of the female mind with the homogenic and unicursal thinking of the man:

“Treading chasms
on the uncertain footing of a spear”,
forgetting that there is in woman
a quality of mind
which as an instinctive manifestation
is unsafe,
he goes on speaking
in a formal customary strain,
of “past states, the present state,
seals, promises,
the evil one suffered,
the good one enjoys,
hell, heaven,
everything convenient
to promote one’s joy”.

(MCP 64)

Adam ignores the chasmal perils and cross-currents of female mental flexibility and “goes on speaking / in a formal customary strain” (MCP 64), thus ceasing to communicate with Eve. Moore exposes his mind as moving in the secure space of binary thinking, attempting to seal the past

and the present, heaven and hell, good and evil under a comfortable notion of convenience. Like a steamroller from one of her poems, the masculine rhetoric smoothes the rough edges of experience, gliding through the multiple, chasmal levels of women's consciousness, and eases the strain of communication by reducing everything to the images of the man's own desire and the stasis of definite assertions. The female mind, in turn, refuses to rest in simple oppositions, remains impervious to the desire of the man's seductive binary discourse, thus sustaining the world's physical and conceptual variety, its dynamic tensions and diverse forms. This is how Cixous defines the task of feminine writing: "[t]o respect strangeness, otherness ... to catch the most of what is going to remain preciously incomprehensible ... that I like, that I can admit, that I can tolerate, because really there is always a mystery of the other" (V 63). Out of respect for mystery and in an attempt at "preserving an enigmatic kernel of the other" (Cixous V 62), Moore writes herself away from the overconceptual order as well as the strongly mimetic and symbolic drive of masculine writing through her intensely sensual and surreal imagery.

2.3.3. The broken mirror and the shattered self

With both poets, the integrity of the male's self-image, consciousness and desires and "the narcissistic specularity" (Irigaray 1985: 56) of masculine discourse are confronted with the woman's non-conformist and anti-specular poetics. The fluidity and opacity of the female consciousness becomes evident especially in Moore's and Stein's assault on the notion of subjectivity. The self is continuously split and disjointed in both poems: the assembly of pronouns moves the reader between uncertain identities, revealing the speaker's multiple guises and frustrating both the notion of definite denomination and the idea of the self as a universal and rigidified subject.

In "Marriage", the masculine narcissist subject is exposed at the very beginning of the poem – "Eve: beautiful woman – / I have seen her / when she was so handsome / she gave me a start" (MCP 62) – where the speaker defines himself through objectifying Eve. Seeking a "refuge from egocentricity / and its propensity to bisect, / mis-state, misunderstand" (Moore 1967b: 231), the poet breaks the mirroring gaze by destabilizing the speaker's identity in frequent pronoun shifts. The shifts serve a double function: to weaken the conformity and stability of the marital bond or

any other structure that absorbs the separate selves in the idea of submission or union, and to include the multivalent, contradictory and unrepresentable perspective of the woman desiring to escape the trap of self-mirroring as well as the narrow masculine projections of her self. The phrase “[s]he cannot see herself enough” (MCP 66) implies both Eve’s attempt to represent herself and her failure to establish a unified identity in Adam’s egotistical order, which can contain neither her otherness nor her multiple and hybrid selves. To expose and escape this narrow, self-referential frame and narcissistic gratification, Moore deliberately undercuts the specular possibilities of representation as her speaker moves between the impersonal “one” (“One must not call him ruffian”), the curious “I” of the poet (“I wonder what Adam and Eve / think of it by this time”), the emphatically slanted “I” of Eve (“*I* would like to be alone”) and the weakened voice of Adam (“I should like to be alone why not be alone together?”). All of these are subsequently relegated to the position of absent and anonymous speakers marked with the pronoun “she” and “he” (“She loves herself so much, she cannot see herself enough / he loves himself so much, he can permit himself / no rival in that love”), and the more democratic “we”, (“We Occidentals are so unemotional”) which, however, does not refer to the wedded couple, but introduces another perspective, inviting the communal experience into the poem’s heteroglot network.³⁸ Moore deliberately refuses to blend the poem’s “I” and “you”, opting rather for a fluid trans-categorical and destabilized self that goes beyond the oppositional and egocentric perspective. According to Heuving, her speakers “are not concerned with constructing an identity through others, but rather encountering otherness of others” (1992: 31). “Encounter” seems indeed a perfect term to describe Moore’s poetic practice in “Marriage”. There are no smooth transitions between the poem’s diverse identities; the shifts are as abrupt as the jagged edges of the quoted material and the changes in the adopted views. However, as Heuving (1992: 42-43) argues, the shattered subjectivity is not a reason for despair, unlike in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Pound’s *Cantos*, where the ‘I’ also suffers from dispersal and fragmentation into masks and personas. Not haunted by the ghosts of center and wholeness, Moore’s identity shifts indicate “fresh waves of consciousness” (MCP 64). They continuously reintroduce and

³⁸ See Heuving (1992: 124) for more observations on the shifting pronouns and Moore’s rejection of specularly.

shuffle the separate voices of the difficult dialogue, exposing the confrontational nature of the heterosexual relationship in the ever-renewed efforts of communication.

“Patriarchal poetry is the same”, argues Stein in her poem, and this provocative statement persistently recurs in her reflections on the literary tradition. Like Moore’s, Stein’s sensibility – challenging both the notion of sameness and the structure of opposition between the feminine and the masculine – crosses gender and its fixed universals in frequent pronoun shifts and through a diluted subjectivity that dislocates patriarchal rules of naming and signification. In Stein’s poem, as observed by Dydo, “nothing is absolute, hierarchies are not respected, roles and identities change, and the only authority is in the wide democratic freedom of the word that can move, make and remake itself” (2003: 18-19). One of her methods of liberating the word from the fixed rules of naming is to use the gender-neutral and ambiguous ‘it’, as in “*It* made that be alike and with *it* and indefinable reconciliation with roads and better not to be not as much as felt to be as well very well as the looking like not only little pieces there” (PP 570, emphasis mine). In the quoted fragment, the pronoun not only replaces a more concrete noun, but, as we are never given its nominal antecedent, it renders Stein’s subject matter vague and non-referential. In her essay “Poetry and Grammar”, Stein explains: “Now that was a thing that I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known its name anything’s name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new” (Stein [1935] 1999a: 236-37); thus, the poet points to the revitalizing and creative potential of a text cleansed of nominal specifics and explicit referentiality. To intensify her non-mimetic method, Stein also employs abrupt swings from one pronoun to another, as, for example, in the following fragment, where we can come across virtually all available pronouns:

She might be let it be let it be here as soon. ...
They might be by by they might by by which might by which they
might by, ...
Let it be which is it it be which is it ...
If he is not used to he is not used to it ...
Next to vast which is which I be behind the chair ...
We to be. Once. We to be. Once.
(PP 574 -575)

Through the anonymity and diversity of the pronouns, Stein is able to flout our expectations of discovering the subject's identity, keeping the mystery of the pronouns intact and the subject in a state of mutability and transformation. The final verse ("We to be. Once") signals further that the poet writes with a multiplicity of selves, which also includes the reader – a multiplicity that traverses the limitations and enclosures of the single self; removes the rigidity of the interior-exterior division; and enables the woman poet to break the frame of individual control over language and to make apparent the drifting and interchangeable nature of subjectivity.

Another method of resisting the powerful grasp of masculine subjectivity is the removal of all pronominal or nominal indicators, thus depriving the textual fabric of authority, as in the following example: "Made a mark remarkable made a remarkable interpretation made a remarkable interpretation made a remarkable interpretation now" (PP 597). The subject, contained and limited in the conventional notion of textual authority, in Stein's text is unnamed and unspecified, demanding that we re-read the text and allow for a liberation of the mark from demarcating, limiting and fixing constraints.

If, nevertheless, Stein decides to use a personal noun in the poem, it is to suggest the arbitrariness, provisionality and rigidity of conventional naming, its detachment from the variety and fluidity of experience, as in the following excerpt: "Never have named Helen Jenny never have named Agnes Helen never have named Helen Jenny" (PP 578). Patriarchal poetry's 'rage for order' and its need for unmistakability, which Stein also points out, prevents it from a more flexible approach to naming, which would allow Helen and Jenny to switch identities freely and thrive in the plentitude and interchangeability of names. "The proper name", Derrida argues in *Signsponge*, "in its aleatoriness, should have no meaning and should spend itself in immediate reference. But the chance or the misery of its arbitrary character (always other in each case) is that its inscription on language always affects it with a potential for meaning, and for no longer being proper once it has a meaning" (SP 118). As if illustrating the paradoxes of "proper" naming, defined by Derrida in "The Battle of Proper Names", Stein's strategies seem to prove that "the proper name has never been, as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being, . . . it is because the proper name was never possible except through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences, within a writing retaining the traces of difference" (Derrida WP 75). Stressing the play of differences and chance inscribed in language, Stein

uses poetry to desubliminate the idea of absolute identification through naming, especially since, in the case of women, naming marks them as properties of their fathers and husbands, fixing their identities as dependent on the patriarchal frame. In "Poetry and Grammar", Stein observes: "[n]ouns are the names of anything and anything is named, that is what Adam and Eve did and if you like it is what anybody does, but do they go on just using the name until perhaps they do not know what the name is or if they do know what the name is they do not care what the name is. ... And what has that to do with poetry. A great deal I think" (W II 325). Poetry's task is to liberate names, to revitalize language so that each name seems new, self-dependent and possessed of aleatory meanings. In Weinstein's words, she "insists upon using words as if they never had a history, in combinations never before realized in literature" (1970: 57). Poetry should thus be concerned not with fixing meaning, but with its unfixing, or – as Stein herself would have it – "with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun" ([1914] 1998a: 325). Stein aims to open the poem beyond the limits of any denomination and the patriarchally framed self that detaches women from their relation to themselves and to other women. Whereas patriarchal poetry "makes no mistake" (Stein PP 598), Stein sees freedom precisely in the mistaken, interchangeable and blurred identities of her anti-patriarchal mode. By submerging the self, dissolving the distinction between the subject and object, and employing a multiplicity of decontextualized subjects, the writer signals the female poet's discomfort with the convention of using one fixed and dominant speaker. A woman who is conscious of the self-absorptive tendency of dominant discourse will have to resort to anti-absorptive and anti-specular language to counteract this tendency (Irigaray 1985: 30, 68-80). Stein's strategy of dispersal, nominal unbinding, excess and splitting, is one of the possible options, as it turns the poem into a fluid realm in which identities and selves are – in Ostriker's words (1992: 64) – "enmeshed in and defined through their relationships with other selves". Irigaray (1985: 133) argues that in the patriarchal culture "women are inevitably exiled from themselves". Continuously facing "the dread of non-existence" (Ostriker 1992: 60)³⁹ the woman poet asserts her identity by acknowledging its origin in si-

³⁹ Heuving (1992: 34) exposes this threat quoting Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme" where the speaker, addressing a woman, exclaims "No! There is nothing! In the whole and all, / Nothing that's quite your own. Yet this is you".

lence, discontinuity, marginalization and self-effacement.⁴⁰ At one point in the poem, Stein notes how patriarchal poetry “nettles nettles her” (PP 597), which expresses her annoyance and discomfort with patriarchal conventions. In a page-long appeal, consisting in an incantatory oscillation between the lines “let her be”, “let her try” and “let her be shy” (PP 580-582), the poet attempts to break out of this stinging realm and carve out a space for the suppressed feminine voice. The use of the pronoun “her” fulfills a complex function here: it signals the poet’s perspective as that of an outsider speaking from the position of a detached observer who refuses to identify with the subject, thus trying to escape the irritating nettle.

As noted by Marianne DeKoven, all experimental writing is to some extent anti-patriarchal. The critic cites Kristeva’s claim that “[a]ll of the modifications of the linguistic fabric are the sign of force that has not been grasped by the linguistic or ideological system” (1981: 22). Stein’s “Patriarchal Poetry” overflows with such signs, vividly demonstrating that the poetics of excess, split, diversity and playful confusion can “revitalize a calcified literature, create space in an overcrowded literary history, disrupt literary tradition, and restore the excluded feminine to language and literature” (Ford 1997: 114). To see language “reclaimed renamed replaced and gathered together” (PP 603) is to be sure of one’s own independence and singularity as a poet, and to open poetic language up to a greater mutability.

Marianne Moore, through her hybrid method of composition and her non-authoritative approach to the cited texts, makes a similar imprint on the modernist technique of textual appropriations. It is a stance of “an imaginary possessor”, ready to “relinquish what one would like to keep” (MCP 144). As I have stated earlier, Pound (1968: 25) coined the term *logopoeia* in reference to Moore’s and Loy’s poetry, defining it as “a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters”. The dance, acknowledged by Moore’s contemporaries, readers and critics as a real and unique contribution to the modern-

⁴⁰ Employing Lacan’s concept of identity construed out of the self’s progress from the non-specular, multiple and non-representational Imaginary to the self-mirroring and integrated Symbolic, Luce Irigaray observes that the dominant masculine tradition excludes a female imaginary, which “puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject to reflect himself, to copy himself’” (1985: 30).

ist movement, also celebrates the flexibility of the erinaceous mind, with its creative and surprising twists and turns, its affectionate but simultaneously critical relationship to the world and literary tradition.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf ([1929] 2005: 24) discusses two forms of the female artist's exile: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in". Stein and Moore seem to escape Woolf's exclusion-entrapment dilemma. By inviting both exchange and fusion, sense and nonsense, plurality and unity, transgression and bonding, familiarity and difference, they create an open poetic space with fluid contours and boundaries, with amorphous, overabundant and shifting identities. Establishing the connection between sexuality and textuality, they resist the phallogocentric discourse.

Like Derrida's hedgehog, the poems by Stein, Loy and Moore discussed in this chapter thrive in the space of difference that resists our usual interpretive operations and encourages us to approach the text's body along with its secret codes, apertures, and "tender buttons". For the philosopher, the work of literature is "an institution forming its own readers, giving them a competence which they did not possess before: a university, a seminar, a colloquium, a curriculum, a *course*" (Derrida AL 74). The love poems analyzed in this part indeed offer their readers various courses, competences and curricula. All of these, however, are delivered in the difficult scripts of the *writerly jouissance*, which implies, in DeKoven's apt words, "the unassimilable excess of meaning, or of repetition, or of sound play, or of surprise" (1981: 16). In Stein's case, the reader is asked not so much to decipher the multiple indeterminacies of her eccentric love poems but – as Derrida encourages in his remarks on poetry – to suspend his reservations and take the poem to heart, to feel it, by yielding to its sensual and emotional touch, its pull of sound and lulling and playful rhythms, its polymorphous tenderness, its fetishist flashes of nonsense and sense. The pleasure of reading Stein's songs of love derives also from the unbound eroticism of the female body, both protected and released via "linguistic flesh". Chantal Chawaf argues that although "linguistic flesh has been puritanically repressed, words have a sensorial quality" (1980: 177). Stein's poems set themselves a task of restoring this quality and fashioning words into a form of contact. Just like the entire surface of the female body is the instrument of touch and erotic pleasure, so are Stein's "sexts", which touch us through their rising but non-teleological movement, various tactile and aural pressures and qualities that articulate the need for contact and enable a more re-

ciprocal experience of the text. Writing of Stein and Joyce, Ronald Sukenick perceptively raised the question of “whether it is really the pragmatic, discursive, rationally intelligible side of language that best puts us in touch with our experience of the world and of ourselves” (1972: 585). Indeed, Stein’s textual erotics can be read as a radical form of empiricism that puts us in touch with the elusive experience and body of love and which is an interesting way of reclaiming the pleasures of an unrestrained “merri-ment in the midst of writing”.

“A mind cry” more than “a heart cry”, to borrow Pound’s words (1968: 424), Loy’s text of pleasure is less affective than Stein’s, requiring more cognitive reception to accommodate its intellectual and learned diction. Her use of the body and the body of language are psychologically provocative, ambiguous and contradictory – at once the center of liberated desire and the locus of discursive sedimentations; the scalpel-sharp edge of her pen can unexpectedly open a gaping wound, produce a deep incision in the flesh or turn the latter into a corpse. Dissecting the delicate tissue of love – its “hue, hint, and hurt”, to borrow from Ammons (SP 81) – with the highly specialized instruments of her acerbic wit and clinical, biological frankness,⁴¹ her *chansons d’amour* frequently assault our affective fallacy, forcing us to struggle with their ambiguities, ironies, eloquences, suspended or veiled revelations and overly intimate confessions. This “cerebral forage” – with Pig Cupids, blood-stained butterflies, bird-like abortions, “little lusts and lucidities”, and the abject biology of the lovers’ bodies – produces a curious compulsion to remain at a safe distance from its radiating disquietude and “irate pornography”. The pressure that we feel here is directed both towards and against ourselves, for Loy invites us to join her dangerous and provocative play with love-as-fire which threatens the poet’s self and relentlessly exposes the failure of language and the trappings of the romantic convention. The intersubjective shifts by means of which Stein created a space of reciprocity and union, account in Loy’s poems for insecure thresholds between inner and private feelings and the codified discourse of sentiment. The function of the sexually charged metaphor, such as the notorious Pig Cupid, is not to beautify feeling, but rather to sever the connection between the physical

⁴¹ The observation paraphrases Marianne Moore’s question from “Those Various Scalpels”: “But / why dissect destiny with instruments which / are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny itself?” (MCP 56)

and metaphysical (Quatermain 1998: 80). Also, the variety of the tones employed (which, as Quatermain writes, embraces the “parodic, comic, angry, scornful, contemptuous, sharp-tongue, occasionally wistful, haughty, ironic”, [1998: 76]) produces a sense of bewilderment and ambiguity, which, along with the heavily constructed and learned diction as well as the “wanton duality” of naturalist imagery, further prevents the *readerly* “consummations” of her love songs.

For Moore, as noted by Grace Schulman (1986: 28), love is a mystery, as it entails “that striking grasp of opposites / opposed to each other, not to unity” (MCP 69). In Moore’s “Marriage”, this mystery is carefully protected, for, as in Loy’s poems, it is covered by discursive transactions, patriarchal myths, symbols, stereotypes and ideals related to marriage. Her compositional method, which retains dichotomies and contradictions, proves that the poet refuses to be co-opted by the existing tradition of representing sexual passion and gender roles, and works towards a different “economy” of the heterosexual relationship, one which sustains non-hierarchical interrelatedness and creative tension between the sexes. However, despite their evident discursiveness, Moore’s “quilted” observations on marriage are capable of stimulating an intense cognitive and aesthetically plural joy, since in her poem the ideological “shadow” – defended by Barthes as one of the *writerly* fecundities or “extras” of blissful texts (PT 32) – is simultaneously foregrounded and undone in the double tongue of her citational strategies, anecdotal tone, dialogic form, as well as the visual opulence and eccentricity of her own inventions. Faithful to her claim that “[t]he deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint” (“Silence”, MCP 91), Moore offers in “Marriage” no final answers to the troubling nature of the man-woman relationship; furthermore, this lack of resolution and the non-categorical stance is an integral part of the poem’s unsettling force. Its reading is difficult and adventurous, as the variety of quotations, Moore’s peculiar prosody, and the idiosyncratic patterning of imagery work towards our estrangement and confusion. A brilliant “anthology of transit”, “a passage through”, to borrow William Carlos Williams’s terms (I 313),⁴² the poem nevertheless

⁴² Williams describes the pleasure of reading Moore’s “Marriage” as follows: “It is a pleasure that can be held firm only by moving rapidly from one thing to the next. It gives the impression of a passage through. There is a distaste for lingering, as in Emily Dickinson. ... There is a swiftness of impaling beauty, but no impatience as in so much pre-

pleases the *jouissance*-inclined reader through its polyphonic composition, its ventriloquized truths and ways of knowing, engaging both our critical and sensual intelligence. As noted by Erickson (who borrows Doris Lessing's words), the poet addresses her work to the reader who is not "hungry for answers" but "for ways of thinking toward problems", the reader "willing to search for truths in the interstices, in the intersections of loci" (1992: 103) of Moore's intriguing *writerly* assemblage.

In the closing paragraphs of his "Che cos'è la poesia", Derrida asserts: "[t]his 'demon of the heart' never gathers itself together, rather it loses itself and gets off the track (delirium or mania), it exposes itself to chance, it would rather be torn to pieces by what bears down upon it" (CCP 235). In the poems discussed above, the hedgehog 'demons of the heart' refuse to "gather themselves together", pull us "off the track" of our familiar *readerly* routes and comforts, and run the risk of being lost, rejected or "torn to pieces" in the hands of an unsympathetic reader. They offer us something which Derrida calls "the gift of the poem", "a certain passion of a singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the *logos*" (CCP 235). This gift in each case triggers off "the dream of *learning by heart*", (CCP 231) of responding, even if inadequately, to the poem's loving but always fragile and vulnerable appellation.

sent-day trouble with verse. It is a rapidity too swift for touch, a seraphic quality, one might have said yesterday" (I 313).

Chapter Three

The Hedgehog at the End of Metaphysics: (Un)concealedness of the Divine in the Poetry of Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens

- Of him there is nothing said that might hold
- Save his name (*Sauf son nom*)
- Save the name (*Sauf le nom*) which names nothing that holds, not even a *Gottheit*, nothing whose withdrawal (*derobement*) does not carry away every phrase that tries to measure itself against him
- Derrida, *On the Name* 56

- ... but spiritual poise, it has its centre where?
- Marianne Moore, (“Black Earth”, BMM 98)

- The thinking of god is smoky dew.
- Wallace Stevens (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”, WSCP 167)

Deconstruction may seem, as Jonathan Culler observes, “a resolutely anti-theological enterprise, a critique of the theological motifs and structures that continue to undergird our thinking” (2008: viii). The popular critical belief among Derrida’s commentators is that “deconstruction has been sent into the world to proclaim the End of Man, to deconstruct the subject and all metaphysical humanisms, and hence finally to scatter the ashes of the old deity to the four winds of *différance*” (Caputo 1997: 158). However, Derrida’s writing contains many religious motifs and traces of spiritual, messianic and eschatological thinking; in fact, it continuously engages religious discourse and concepts of Western metaphysics.¹ The most explicit

¹ For the messianic analysis of Derrida see John D. Caputo’s *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (1997); and his *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religious Without*

and sustained argument related to faith and religion is his essay “Faith and Knowledge”, in which the philosopher addresses and intertwines such questions as negative theology or the Levinasian distinction between the holy and the sacred, as well as explaining terms such as “the spectral”, “the Abrahamic”, and “the messianic”. Issues of faith and theological discourse appear also in his most renowned essays and books, such as “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan”, “Ellipses”, “How to Avoid Speaking”, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy”, *Glas*, *The Gift of Death*, *On the Name*, *Of Grammatology*, *Aporias*, *Jean-Luc Nancy*, to name only a few. As the philosopher himself admits in *Circumfession*, “the constancy of God in my life is called by other names” (C 154-155), and can be traced in an “absolved, absolutely private language” (C 155-156). For him, religion should not be reduced to an orthodox system or an institution, but remain a vital discourse, full of “tensions, heterogeneity, disruptive volcanoes” that can be “reinvented” (1997: 21). In Culler’s apt words, deconstruction “gives us not the impossibility of religion but a religion with deniability, religion without the flaws of actual religions” (2008: viii). John D. Caputo phrases this non-dogmatic role of deconstruction in the following words:

Deconstruction is a blessing for religion, its positive salvation, keeping it open to constant reinvention, encouraging religion to reread ancient texts in new ways, to reinvent ancient traditions in new contexts. Deconstruction discourages religion from its own worst instincts by holding the feet of religion to the fire of faith, insisting on seeing things through a glass (glas?) darkly, that is, on believing them not thinking that they are seeing them. Deconstruction saves religion from seeing things, from fanaticism and triumphalism. Deconstruction is not the destruction of religion but its reinvention.

(Caputo 1997: 159)

The spirit of reinvention and questioning of dogmas goes well with the spiritual concerns, doubts and anxieties of modernist humanism, faced with a profound crisis of old religious axioms and universal structures, and in need of reinventing itself vis-à-vis the lost “fire of faith”. Being a “passion for transgression, for trespassing the horizons of possibility”, “a movement of transcendence” (Caputo 1997b: xix), deconstruction can be allied with

Religion (1997). A collection of Derrida’s essays related to the problems of faith and theology can be found in the volume *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Religion* (2002), edited by Gil Anidjar.

the transgressive aspirations of the modernist period and its own recognition of the impossibility of talking dogmatically about God.

Caputo sees deconstruction as a religion that opens itself up to the unrepresentable, since for Jacques Derrida, God is “the name of the structural secret or limit, the secret without truth” (1997b: xix). God’s name signifies the “unpronounceable name of God as other” (GD 77), the Absolute Other, absolute *différance*, Being beyond and more than Being, “the impossible possibility, the name for a desired and unforeseeable future ... the name that disseminates truth” (Derrida in Kronick 1996: 12-13). In “How to Avoid Speaking”, Derrida ponders the problem of speaking about God without objectifying Him, for it is God who makes speech possible, being the other “that always preceded the speech to which it can never be present” (HAS 167). The philosopher finds a solution to this dilemma in literature: “There is in literature, in the *exemplary* secret of literature, a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret” (ON 28). Poetry, particularly receptive to the lure of otherness and the “impossible possibilities” of naming, creates the condition and a shelter for the encounter with the unnamable and untranslatable secret of God’s name, which promises at once full presence and absence, reality and fantasy, being and non-being, life and non-life. This name belongs to Derrida’s “schema of the ghost”, in which the clear distinction between being and non-being, between the possible and impossible is blurred. Defining literature as spectral, Derrida foregrounds the problematic relationship between body and spirit, the presence and its trace. In *Shibboleth*, the philosopher writes: “[w]hat one calls poetry or literature, art itself (let us not distinguish them for the moment), in other words a certain experience of language, of the mark or of the trait *as such*, is nothing perhaps but an intense familiarity with the ineluctable originarity of the specter” (SPC 58). The philosopher offers the following explanation of the latter term in *The Specters of Marx*:

The specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes rather some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed.

(Derrida SM 4-5)

Compared to the specter, literature locates itself on the edge of metaphysics, between the visible and the invisible, on the threshold of the presentable and the unrepresentable, embracing the undulation between the body and the spirit, between presence and absence, and becoming thus the right space – or the right “body” – for the haunting traces, apparitions, and reappearitions of modernity’s disappearing gods. Evoking Shakespeare’s ghost scene at the opening of *Hamlet*, in which Horatio and Marcellus look for the appropriate way of apostrophizing the ghost of the king, Derrida suggests that the language of literature, which welcomes both the real and the unreal and loosens up the boundary between what is and what is not, is the right idiom to address the spiritual and to “stabilize the specter” (SM 11). The spectral spirit of literature, which for Derrida is best exemplified by Hamlet’s hesitation between “to be and not to be”, welcomes “the messianic opening to what is coming”, signals “the yes to the *arrivant(e)*, the ‘come’ to the future that cannot be anticipated”, to that unpredictable return of the ghost, creating a space for “the experience of the impossible” (Derrida SM, 168, 65), for an end, or perhaps an Amen, that reaches beyond “the end of metaphysics” and which adds hope to the spiritual despair of our age.

The title “end of metaphysics”, invoked by Derrida in “Che cos’è la poesia” and his other works, comes from Martin Heidegger’s reflections on the crisis of the metaphysical discourse, the crisis itself forming the basis and inspiration for Derrida’s own theories. As convincingly argued by Jean-Luc Marion, Heidegger does not prophesy the actual end or disappearance of metaphysics, as many scholars have come to believe, but rather points out that we are now obliged to “dwell within the overcoming of metaphysics as if within an epoch of thinking, an epoch that will continue” (2003: 166), and, as Heidegger himself observes, might last longer than the history of metaphysics itself. The task of contemporary philosophy and art is thus to learn how to confront and dwell in this historical moment, how to approach this “end of philosophy”, in which, as the German philosopher notes, there is “no privileged standpoint” from which to watch the impossibility of grasping Being as absolute presence. Heidegger uses the terms *clearing* and *concealing* to capture the moment of transition between the exhaustion of the possibilities of metaphysics and the metaphysical uncertainty of the coming age. In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, the philosopher explains that truth “is the opposition of clearing and concealing, there belongs to it what is here to be called establishing” (OWA 61). Thus, truth does not exist beyond this site of conflict, it does not precede Being.

Marion, following Heidegger's tropes of light and space, compares clearing to the twilight, as he tries to elucidate this aporetic concept: "[t]he clearing does not bring fully to light, but at least it no longer preserves the shadow. Like twilight, the clearing already dissipates shadow, which recedes precisely as shadow, because clarity, without causing it to disappear, forces it to withdraw and encircles it as such" (Marion 2003: 175). Shadow is thus a necessary condition of the clearing, and their interdependence lies at the heart of *alētheia*, the unconcealedness of Being and Truth. Significantly, Heidegger sees art, and especially poetry, as the idiom best suited for the articulations of this moment of transition and the exhaustion of metaphysical possibilities. For the philosopher, poetic language, whose domain is "twilight" words,² allows us to embrace the darkness and the spiritual insecurity of Western culture, as it enables us to "stand in the presence of gods" and obliges us stay "involved in the proximity of the essence of things" (Heidegger EB 282). Poetry is a special language that teaches us how to "dwell" in those precarious times, the philosopher asserts in his essay "...Poetically Man Dwells...", devoted to Hölderlin's poem "In Lovely Blue" (PMD 217-218). Dwelling is here understood as a heightened attentiveness to and engaged reverence for the things of the earth as well as an openness to what is lost and withheld from a more immediate understanding. The poet, particularly receptive to the revelatory aspect of language, situates himself in the space of mediation and transition, as he "stands ... between the gods and the people. He is one who has been cast out into the Between, between gods and human beings" (EB 288). Thus, for Heidegger, the poet's task is to use this proximity of people and gods to "fashion truth for his people" (OWA 98), to venture into the abyss haunted by doubt and make possible the occurrence of truth in the poetic word, which the philosopher defines as the "event of the holy" (Heidegger EHD 76).³ Hence, poetry appears as a guiding and saving force, hospitable also – as Heidegger frequently insists – to the structural twofoldedness of truth and its disclosive nature, which entails the movement between concealing and revelation, absence and presence, progression and regression, remembering and

² Heidegger uses Hölderlin as his example of the poet who embodies the "twilight" spirit of the transition. In the latter's *Empedocles*, nature is voiced "in a twilight word", ("im finstern Wort"), a word that "passes into darkness" (Heidegger OWL 79).

³ Heidegger states that "Das Heilige verschenkt das Wort und kommt selbst in dieses Wort". [The holy gives the word and itself comes in this word. The word is the event of the holy] (EHD 76).

forgetting. The poetic word, while undertaking the risk of metaphysical forgetting, simultaneously ferries the appearance and remembrance of the lost gods, staying “on the track of the fugitive gods” (WAPF 93) and promising a restorative glimpse into what is withheld and unattainable.

Derrida reinterprets and modifies the Heideggerian clearing and *alētheia* in his concept of *messianicity* evoked above, in which he sees the condition or “structure of our experience” (SM 168) driven by a continuous disruption of the horizon and an ever-renewed promise, desire and expectation. “The messianic”, Caputo explains, means for the French philosopher “the very structure of experience itself where experience means running up against the other, encountering something we could not anticipate, expect, fore-have, or fore-see, something that knocks our socks off, that brings us up short and takes our breath away” (Caputo 1995: 163). Just like the clearing that exists only in relation to the shadow out of which it emerges, and which causes the simultaneous concealment and revelation of the truth, the Derridian messianic “has the structure of what Blanchot punningly calls *le pas au delà*: the step (*pas*) / not (*pas*) beyond, the beyond that is never reached but always pursued” (Caputo 1995: 163). In his essay “The Ends of Man”, Derrida pushes further Heidegger’s twilight tropes, as he ponders: “[p]erhaps we are between these two eves [i.e., the truth of Being and that which lies ‘beyond’ metaphysics], which are also two ends of man. But who, we?” (MP 136). The characteristic undecidability of Derridian discourse, conveyed by the metaphor of our suspension between two eves and reinforced by the equivocal “perhaps” as well as the question mark directed at the subject, discloses the workings of the *différance* in any claims of truth. If we assume with Derrida that God is the *effect of the trace* (WD 208), then literature – structured by the movement engendered by the referral and deferral of truth – becomes part of the *viens*, part of the messianic coming, the exemplary medium for the unconcealedness of God’s trace. Building a bridge between Derrida’s major concept and religious sensitivity, Caputo calls *différance* a quasi-transcendental condition which “describes the possibility and the impossibility of a language that addresses God”:

The quasi-transcendental work of *différance* is to establish the conditions which make possible our beliefs and our practices, our traditions and our institutions, *and* no less to make them impossible, which means to see to it that they do not effect closure, to keep them open so that something new or different may happen.

A transcendental condition is a sufficient and enabling condition; a quasi-transcendental condition is insufficient and equi-disabling, seeing that the effect that it makes possible is also made unstable. *Différance* supplies a condition under which something is constituted or constructible. *Différance* is a groundless ground that founds and unfounds languages, vocabularies, institutions, systems, theories, laws, artworks, theologies, religions, practices – whatever you need – showing how they are both possible and impossible, useful up to a point but chastened by a sense of their insufficiency.

(Caputo 1997b: 12-13)

“The quasi-transcendental”, explains the critic, conditions do not fix things “within rigorously demarcated horizons”, but allow them to “slip loose, to twist free from their surrounding horizons, to leak and run off, to exceed or overflow their margins” (Caputo 1997b: 13). This instability, “equi-disabling”, this hesitation between belief and unbelief, the loss of absolute closure – all of these are integral to the religious sensibility of modernism.

With a view to exploring the secret and the limits of God’s name, its quasi-transcendental *différance* as seen by the poets of this period, in this part I intend to examine the spiritual dimension in the poetry of Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens. The choice of the poets is not accidental, as religious sensibility strongly fuels both the aesthetics and the thematics of their work, thus constituting an important aspect of their poetic imagination. Both poets consciously incorporate scriptural phrasing, biblical allusion and metaphysical symbolism, the rhetoric and language of religious ritual. “I do not see how it is possible for one to live without religious faith, or shall I say without capacity for it”, Moore states in one of her letters (MML 34), and in her important essay “Feeling and Precision”, she adds that “belief is stronger even than the struggle to survive” (MMCP 402). It is not difficult to imagine that Stevens would have embraced this view, as for him “the major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God” (WSL 378), while his poetry was to become a necessary form of compensation for the questions and doubts of the “age of disbelief” (Stevens NA 170-171). Furthermore, the choice of the two poets is dictated by the elements of “quasi-transcendental” sensibility that shines through their poetical disclosures of the “traces of fugitive Gods.”⁴

⁴ The phrase originates in Martin Heidegger’s essay on Hölderlin’s poetry, titled “What Are Poets For?” in which the philosopher states: “[t]o be a poet of destitute times means: to attend, singing, to the trace of fugitive gods” (Heidegger WAPF 94).

Both poets refrained from dogmatism and explicit identification with one system of belief while still acknowledging the existence of the sacred and the need to confront it in the language of poetry. Poetry became for them “paradisaic parlance new” (Stevens, “Ordinary Evening”, WSCP 475) whose power can expose the spiritual reality of our existence and our longing for *deus absconditus*.

Unlike her contemporaries, Moore, as observed by Holley, “did not enter the modernist stream through its challenge to the old spiritual order” (Holley 2003: 78). Quoting Howard Nemerov, the poet herself wrote: “[l]anguage is a special extension of the power of seeing, inasmuch as it can make visible not only the already visible world, but through it the invisible world of relations and affinities” (Moore 1966: 11). The belief in the power of seeing the invisible relations underneath the visible derived largely from Moore’s religious background. She was brought up in a Presbyterian home respectful of traditional Protestant piety. The family regularly attended the Presbyterian church, a habit which Moore maintained “every Sunday of her life” (Hall 1970: 164). Her maternal grandfather, John Riddle Warner, who took care of the family after Moore’s father had abandoned it, was a Presbyterian minister in Kirkwood, Missouri, and Moore’s brother, Warner, “especially devoted to the image of his grandfather” (Molesworth 1990: 2), followed in his footsteps, and became a minister himself. Moore’s mother, Mary Warner Moore, was also known for her piety and a strong moral code. Moore’s friends, as noted by her biographer, “found her puritanical to a fault” (Molesworth 1990: xv), but her self-discipline and moral authority sustained and kept the family together through the most difficult times. Mrs. Moore and Marianne moved in with Warner when he was sent to his own parsonage in Chatham, and when they separated, with Moore moving to New York, they corresponded and often exchanged ideas about Warner’s sermons. Since the family was very close, and theological discussions, family prayers and religious reflections were part of their everyday life, Moore learned to rely on the bonds of faith and absorbed the spiritual atmosphere and religious beliefs of her family home.⁵ John Merrin notes that “the family thought of itself as engaged in a common endeavor ‘to explain grace’ (“The Pangolin”), and Moore conceived of her poetry as complementary to her brother’s vocation” (1990: 23). The poet’s early spiritual training also explains her life-

⁵ For details of Moore’s background see Molesworth (1990: xv-21).

long affection for metaphysical poets, especially George Herbert, John Donne and Fulke Greville, as well as Puritan authors such as John Bunyan and Richard Baxter. And yet, in spite of this early immersion in the questions of faith, Moore's own spiritual convictions were never narrowly dogmatic. As observed by Donald Hall, her "interest in the spirit was two-fold" (1970: 164). She admired some aspects of the Christian ethic, such as humility, self-discipline, honesty, moral integrity, but her spiritual concern could not be unhesitatingly called Christian, or Presbyterian. Rather, the critic observes, it was "explicitly made indefinite" and the spiritual mystery which infuses her poems was never openly identified with Divinity (Hall 1970: 165). Rotella similarly notes that the poet avoided explicit statements about metaphysical issues and never used orthodox religious language, preferring "undogmatic decisiveness" and "tenacious incredulity" (1991: 142).

The question of faith was equally important to Wallace Stevens, although the poet, strongly influenced by the non-Christian and post-Christian secularism of his Harvard education, declared himself an unbeliever until his alleged deathbed conversion to Catholicism. Despite the controversies surrounding the fact of his conversion⁶ and the continuous, palpable affirmation of the secular present in his poems, Lensing correctly asserts that Stevens' temperament "was naturally religious" (2001: 37), while Wagner similarly argues that "Christianity is the key to the deepest layer of Stevens' mind, for it carried with it all the vital emotional ties to his childhood" (1988: 84).⁷ Guy Rotella, in turn, observes that the poet's "entire career can

⁶ According to Philip Brazeau, Stevens' daughter, Holly Stevens "vigorously denies that her father was converted to Catholicism during his last illness. While at St. Francis Hospital, she recalls, Stevens complained of visits by clergy but he said he was too weak to protest". However, the chaplain who visited the poet and talked to him about the idea of God remembers that a few days before his death Stevens called for him and said: "I'd better get in the fold now. And then I baptized him, and the next day I brought him Communion... He seemed very much at peace and he would say: 'Now I am in the fold'" (Brazeau 1983: 291, 295).

⁷ As Lombardi reminds us, the controversy about Stevens' conversion was a result of his daughter's "vigorous" denial that it ever occurred. Lombardi cites the poet's letter which testifies to Stevens' longing for the religious certainty forfeited during his youth: "At my age it would be nice to be able to ... make up my mind about God, say, before it is too late" (WSL 763). For details about Stevens' conversion, see Thomas Francis Lombardi, *Wallace Stevens and the Pennsylvania Keystone: The Influence of Origins on his Life and Poetry* (1998: 245).

be seen as an attempt to face the loss of absolutes, and to do so while still exercising the will to believe” (1991: 104). Helen Vendler adds: “[n]ever was there a more devoted believer – in love, in the transcendent, in truth, in poetry – than Stevens. And never was there a more corrosive disbeliever – disillusioned in love, deprived of religious belief, and rejecting in disgust at their credulousness, the ‘trash’ of previous poems” (1984: 29). In one of his letters, Stevens admits:

It is the habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. I don't necessarily mean some substitute for the church, because no one believes in the church as an institution more than I do. My trouble, the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe.

(WSL 348)

The habit of religious thinking, despite the acknowledged loss of belief in God in Stevens' case, comes from a similar religious background to that of Moore. Like Moore, the poet was brought up in the Protestant tradition. His paternal grandfather, Benjamin Stevens, was “a pillar in the Dutch Reformed Church” (Lombardi 1998: 37), and young Stevens, continuing family traditions, attended Sunday school at the First Presbyterian Church of Reading. The poet's letters show that his mother frequently read chapters from the Bible to her five children (WSL 173). His spiritual heritage came largely from his mother's side, in the form of the religious devotion of the Zellers, his ancestors on the maternal side, who “were completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force” (WSL 32). John Zeller, his maternal great-grandfather was a religious refugee who arrived in America in 1709 and settled in Susquehanna Valley. The poet, tracing his spiritual lineage later in his life, described the Zeller family house as follows:

Over the door there is an architectural cartouche of the cross with palm-branches below, placed there, no doubt, to indicate that the house and those that lived in it were consecrated to the glory of God. From this doorway they faced the hills that were part of the frame of their valley, the familiar shelter in which they spent their laborious lives, happy in the faith and worship in which they rejoiced. Their reality consisted of both the visible and the invisible.

(NA 100)

For the Zellers, the visible reality was a symbol of the invisible, and their family home was at once a shelter and a place of worship, for religion gave meaning to their everyday existence. “These people”, Stevens notes in a letter, “whatever else they were, were fanatics” (WSL 534). Fascinated with the spiritual integrity of their lives, Stevens considered his maternal ancestors an important part of his origin and, as noted by Lombardi, he devoted quite a few poems to the significance of this heritage. John Zeller, with his “structure of ideas” and “ghostly sequences” (WSCP 327) reappears in “The Bed of Old John Zeller”, “Two Versions of the Same Poem”, “Burghers of Petty Death”, and “The Good Man Has No Shape”. However, immersed in the secular atmosphere of modernist humanism, Stevens remained uneasy about the spiritual order and convictions upheld by his predecessors, recognizing, not without a certain nostalgia, the loss of the past’s structure and the inability “to experience the consolations John Zeller enjoyed: heaven and its rewards” (Lombardi 1998: 142). The spiritual restlessness found its way into his poems, which registered both his longing for the solace of religious sentiment and ritual, and a profound suspicion towards the “old structure of ideas”. As a consequence of the poet’s doubts – Lensing notes – Stevens’ faith gradually progressed from a “conventional Presbyterian belief in God to a transcendental recognition of God in nature, to nature as a kind of this-worldly ‘temple’” (Lensing 2001: 57). Seeking spiritual meaning in the world devoid of the controlling center of the old belief, the poet wrote in a 1906 letter: “I wish that groves still were sacred – or, at least, that something was” (WSL 87). Despite the reserved tone of this wish, in his later essay “A Collect of Philosophy”, he cited Paul Weiss’ transcendentalism-infused convictions that “all beings have at least a trace of God in them”, “all existence is owed to God”, and “all things are in God” (OP 188), seeing them as vital concerns for the modernist poet.

Their sound religious background notwithstanding, Moore and Stevens, along with their contemporaries, became witnesses to the crisis of institutional religion and Western metaphysics, as well as the rising agnosticism, nihilism and atheism of the period. Vassily Kandinsky, for instance, expressed his anxiety about the waning spirituality of his age in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in the following manner:

Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the

awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness. This feeble light is but a presentiment, and the soul, when it sees it, trembles in doubt whether the light is not a dream, and the gulf of darkness reality.

([1911]2004: 12)

The “nightmare of materialism” and “the despair of unbelief” had permeated all humanities and found its immediate reflection in modernist philosophy and art. Pointing to the collapsing foundations of the absolute in his *Gay Science*, Nietzsche proclaimed even more boldly: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” ([1882]:2001: 120). Echoing Nietzsche, whom the poet read very avidly, Wallace Stevens wrote in “Two or Three Ideas”:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; not as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing.

(OP 260)

On receiving the National Book Award for poetry, Stevens further observed that “we live in the world of Darwin and not of Plato” (OP 289), and in a letter he added: “[o]ne of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from God” (WSL 378). In an improvisation from *Kora in Hell*, William Carlos Williams described gods as “giants in the dirt . . . smothered in filth and ignorance” (I 60). Deeply troubled with the corruption of modern culture and literature by secularism, T.S. Eliot voiced a similar conviction in his play *The Rock* (1934):

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or where.
Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before
That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,
And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.

(Eliot 1952: 108)

There seemed to be no immediate solution to the loss of faith and the prophesied dominance of Reason, Money, and Power; hence, the attitudes

towards the questions of spiritual truth and religious experience, as manifested in the literary works and religious discourse of this period, were complicated, contradictory and most frequently undogmatic. As demonstrated by Lewis, some writers turned to theological liberalism, advocated among others by Matthew Arnold, who redefined religion as “morality touched by emotion” and encouraged the critics to reread the Bible as a literary text. Others were less optimistic, following Nietzsche’s bold announcement of the “death of God” and the need to “vanquish his shadow”; this skepticism also manifested itself in Freud’s critique of religion as a collective neurosis, Marx’s rejection of transcendence, and Darwin’s anti-creationist theories of evolution (Lewis 2006: 19). The ideas of scientific progress, the drives of the unconscious, and the notion of the survival of the fittest, bolstered by the new historical studies which questioned the literal truth of the Bible, contributed to moral relativism and growing religious doubt, which was oftentimes mixed with a nostalgia for “the shadow” of God’s presence. A death-blow to all humanist values, the Great War further deepened the sense of crisis, leaving profound and incurable wounds in the spiritual tissue of the nations and cultures involved. Confused and disillusioned, with the robust, Darwinian “worms at Heaven’s gate”,⁸ modernists sought various remedies for the articulated or felt absence of God. Lewis mentions the appeal of Hinduism and Buddhism, occult spiritualism, various millenarian and evangelical movements, the popularity of Christian Science, and the revival of Catholicism in the late 20s and 30s. Echoing Wallace Stevens’ words, the critic notes further that “[t]he search for ‘substitute[s] for religion’ played a crucial role in the development of literary modernism because the most important substitute for religion that the modernists found was literature itself” (Lewis 2006: 19-20). And indeed, for many writers, literature became a form of solace, if not a substitute, for the theological predicament and conflicting spiritual views of the age. In his essay “The Study of Poetry” (1880), Matthew Arnold announced boldly that “more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes for us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” ([1880] 2009: 161-162). Eliot, before his conversion to Catholicism, shored the fragments of his *The*

⁸ “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate” is a title of Wallace Stevens’ poem from his first volume *Harmonium* (WSCP 49).

Waste Land against the post-war ruins of Christian civilization, offering its implicit and explicit religious symbolism, as well as biblical and prophetic language, as a healer to the world that had turned into “a heap of broken images, where the sun beats / And the dead tree gives no shelter” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* [1922] 1952: 38). Robert Frost’s polished form was “a momentary stay against confusion” (1995: 777); the rich mythologies of Faulkner’s novels counterbalanced the spiritual bareness of the post-war South; Pound turned to Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit and Provençal cultures in his poems, with a hope of finding new spiritual insights; e.e. cummings used his performative poetics to revive the spirit of a transcendental love; H. D. believed poetry to be part of the occult truth and regarded poets as “bearers of the secret wisdom” (1983: 517); and Hart Crane, who insisted that “new conditions of life germinate new forms of spiritual articulations” (1966: 222), offered a modernist version of pantheism in his epic venture *The Bridge*, in which he tried to “lend a myth to God” (Crane 1966: 44).

Beginning their literary careers in the midst of this religious turbulence of the century, Moore and Stevens also engaged questions of spirituality and responded to the loss of absolute meaning, turning their poetry into both a reflection of metaphysical uncertainty and a shield against its negative impact. “I write poetry”, Stevens confessed in one of his letters, “because it is part of my piety” (WSL 473), and Moore’s “curious hand” was used with equal vehemence to “explain grace” (“Pangolin”, MCP 118). In his poem “Crude Foyer”, Stevens expresses his anxiety about the accessibility of the spiritual for the modern man, suggesting that “an innocence of an absolute” as well as the idea “[t]hat there lies at the end of thought / A foyer of the spirit in landscape / Of the mind” are a “false happiness” (WSCP 305), for we “wear humanity’s bleak crown” and “sit and breathe” in the “critique of paradise” (WSCP 305). The metaphor of the foyer points to the restlessness of faith and the inability to penetrate the barrier which separates “ignorant men” from the old “fire” (the word *foyer* stems from the Old French word for fire) of spiritual truth, which flickers uncertainly “at the end of thought” (WSCP 305). In his essay entitled “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”, the poet declares more boldly: “[i]n an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are in their measure a compensation for what has been lost” (NA 170-171). For Stevens, the challenge is thus to create a compensatory aesthetics, a new space and style for articulating the spiritual

longing of his epoch, “a supreme fiction” that would stave off indifference, nihilism and ideologically motivated disbelief, as well as combine being and believing, yet without the trappings of new dogmatism. Helen Vendler expounds this goal in the following way: “if [Stevens] has a dogma, it is the dogma of the shadowy, the ephemeral, the barely perceived, the iridescent” (1969: 35).⁹

Marianne Moore shares with Stevens this penchant for the “dogma of the shadowy and iridescent”. As she herself confesses, “[a] reverence for mystery is not a vague, invertebrate thing” (MMCP 74). And yet, she does not hesitate to employ the “neatness of finish”, or the sharpness of her signature precision and sensual detail to tackle the difficult questions of faith. As observed by Leavell, “her beliefs are pluralist, but not relativist. Rather than lamenting the loss of traditional values in an increasingly diverse world, Moore witnesses truth in the diversity itself” (1993: 252). Responding to the questions about religion and culture in the February 17, 1950 issue of *Partisan Review*, Moore expresses doubt as to the possible separation of the two, arguing however that any absolutist belief can be “a form of tyranny” and that modern belief should “partake of varied cultural elements” (MMCP 677). Much less eager than Stevens to recognize the “domination of black” and submit to the Nietzschean pronouncement of God’s death, Moore argues that “if everything literary were deleted, in which there is some thought of deity, ‘literature’ would be a puny residue; one could almost say that each striking literary work is some phase of the desire to resist or affirm ‘religion’” (MMCP 678). In her poem “To a Giraffe”, the poet develops the argument as she states that “consolations of

⁹ It must be observed, after David Jarraway, that Stevens’ entire oeuvre testifies to a relentless quest for either some kind of substitute of God or God himself and that the poet’s dogma of the iridescent has been shaped by the development of his poetry. In *Harmonium*, Stevens “foregrounds the elimination of God” (1923), using satire, irony and parodies of Christian symbolism, while in *Ideas of Order* (1935), he offers his own idea of order as he tries to find the substitution of God (Jarraway 1993: 22). In *The Man with the Blue Guitar* of 1936, he offers a dialogical argument, with belief “constantly deforming and reforming itself within the play between imagination and reality” (Jarraway 1993: 86). In *Parts of the World*, published in 1942, Stevens upholds his project of abandoning totalizing schemes as he looks for access to the pure Being outside any religious sanctions (Jarraway 1993: 98). However, in his later collections of late 40s and early 50s, *Transport to Summer*, *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*, Stevens makes the implications of belief central to his vision, but this time he probes life as the “violent abyss” in which we seek refuge from the fear of metaphysical absence.

the metaphysical can be profound” (MCP 215), adding, however – in a cryptic coda which entails a quotation from a critic of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ennis Rees – that “[i]n Homer, existence // is flawed; transcendence, conditional; / ‘the journey from sin to redemption, perpetual’” (MCP 215). The borrowing seems to carry the weight of Moore’s own belief, derived largely from her Protestant system of values, which allows her to see man’s failures, imperfections and his fall from grace as positive and inescapable conditions of spiritual growth. The journey from sin to redemption suggests the traditional economy of salvation, which requires loss to affirm itself and become possible. Indeed, although less marked by the skepticism of her age, Moore’s poetry, like that of Stevens, frequently acknowledges and embraces loss, doubt, and hesitation. For Moore, however, the spiritual forces that underlie the flawed existence are always plural and varied, and the task of art and poetry is to capture this plurality and diversity. Rather than grounding her vision in the certitude of a stable system of belief or in the tripartite schema devised by Stevens, who demanded that his “supreme fiction” be abstract, change, and give pleasure (“Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”, WSCP 380), Moore sees only one obligation that art must fulfill:

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,
it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”;
it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.
(“When I Buy Pictures” MCP 48)

Moore’s urge to bring out the dispersed spiritual forces gleaming through the particulars of the visible world will be compared here to Stevens’ spiritual searching in the air, which is at once “bare board”, emptied of meaning, and a “Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro”, carrying uncertain and aporetic truths (WSCP 384). The comparison will commence with a closer look at metaphors of light in Moore’s “In the Days of Prismatic Color”, which conveys the shift from the metaphysical certainty of the past to the misted spiritual truths of the present, and Stevens’ late poem, “Auroras of Autumn”, in which the central metaphor of aurora borealis and the constant interplay between light and darkness embody the poet’s “quasi-transcendental”, erinaceous, and thus reluctant “farewell to an idea” of the Absolute Truth. The following part of this chapter will deal with the subversive treatment of “the rage” for the Puritan order in Stevens’ and Moore’s work, as exemplified by the former’s lesser known poems “The Doctor of Geneva” and “The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air”, and the

latter's trilogy "Part of a Novel, Part of a Play, Part of a Poem", consisting of "The Steeple-Jack", "The Student", and "The Hero". The last part of this chapter will be devoted to the ghostly and spectral qualities of Stevens' and Moore's imagery and language, which I shall try to relate to the Derridian concept of literature as a specter. The poems investigated in this section will be Moore's animiles "The Plumet Basilisk", "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" and "To a Chameleon", and Stevens' ghost-haunted and haunting poems "The Curtains in the House of a Metaphysician", "O, Spirit, Less and Less Human", "Domination of Black", "The Reader", "The Red Large Man Reading", and "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside."

3.1. From Primordial Incandescence to Frigid Brilliances of Boreal Nights: The Quasi-Transcendental in Marianne Moore's "In the Days of Prismatic Color" and Wallace Stevens' "Auroras of Autumn"

Moore's poem "In the Days of Prismatic Color" was inspired by the work of Marguerite and William Zorach, the artists whom the poet had befriended through their mutual acquaintances, the Lachaises and Marsden Hartley. Discussing this influence, Linda Leavell cites Moore's notes, written after the discovery of their work at the Daniel Gallery: "The Zorachs. Their fineness of early civilization art. I have never seen such primeval color. It is color of the sort that existed when Adam was there alone and there was no smoke when there was nothing to modify it but mist that went up. May there be a veil before our eyes that we may not see but which would harrow up our souls and may that veil be love not insensibility" (Leavell 1993: 259). In Moore's eyes, the primeval intensity and indivisibility of color employed by the Zorachs embodies the original unity, purity and clarity of the pre-lapsarian world, in which the refracted primary hues stemmed from one central source – the white transcendental light of the divine presence. In the poem, Moore translates her notes into a more elaborate argument:

In the Days of Prismatic Color
not in the days of Adam and Eve, but when Adam
was alone; when there was no smoke and color was
fine, not with the refinement
of early civilization art, but because
of its originality; with nothing to modify it but the

mist that went up, obliqueness was a variation
of the perpendicular, plain to see and
to account for

(MCP 41)

The plainness of vision in those pre-lapsarian days was undisturbed, the colors “unrefined” by the demands and spoils of civilization. Only the mist both concealed and revealed “the initial great truths” (MCP 41), being the necessary condition of the prismatic refraction of color. As observed by Leavell, Moore contrasts here the mist and smoke, both of which create obliqueness. However, mist – a sign of love, as her notebook gloss reveals – “forms the prism that lets us see”, bringing out “the blue-red-yellow band” of spiritual incandescence, the mythical full presence, the One-ness of God’s powerful Logos. The veil of smoke, on the other hand – symbolizing the fall, the knowledge of evil, and separation from the original unity and spiritual truth – obscures that vision, contributing to the murky complexity of life and the Babel-like proliferation of languages. “The tree of knowledge, sin, fall or *Verfallen*, therefore the veil”, Derrida observes in “A Silkworm of One’s Own” (Silk 325), doubting further on whether we can ever understand that separation and get past the veil that keeps us on the threshold of “the holy of holies”: “will it ever be comprehended, will it ever be comprehensive in the veiled folds of a Greek *alētheia*?” (Silk 316). “The Fall marks the birth of the *human word*”, Walter Benjamin similarly notes, “in which name no longer lives intact, and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we might call its immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic” (1978: 327). The smoke is Moore’s metaphor for “the external magic” which disseminates God’s single truth by separating the name from its object, masking also the absence of the transcendental signified and the loss of the originary presence (Leavell 1990: 260). Art, which has emerged in the wake of that loss and the split One-ness, is part of the smoke screen that prevents a direct relation to both the visible and the invisible, and, when “committed to darkness” (MCP 41), contributes further to the growing obliqueness of truth and man’s alienation from his spiritual resources and faith. “When one cannot read the original language, one rapidly loses oneself in translations”, Derrida argues as he ponders over the lost bond with God’s Word (Silk 326). Literature is a form of such translation, whose task is to recall us to the memory of the original language along with the memory of its loss.

In one of his finest poems, “The Auroras of Autumn”,¹⁰ Stevens similarly uses light and color to indicate his own “farewell to an idea” (WSCP 412) – the shift of scenery from a “time of innocence” (WSCP 418), the transcendental “white / That was different, something else, last year / Or before” to “the white of an aging afternoon”, which “grows less vivid on the wall”, and above which, like Moore’s smoky murkiness, “[a] darkness gathers though it does not fall” (WSCP 412). The poem leads us through accounts of a failed transcendence, a gradual dissolution of the familiar and the human, represented here by the images of the house and the mother’s face, into unsettlingly alien, dispersed and disordered leaps of the light and darkness, and “the postponed denouement” (WSCP 412) of the modern apocalypse.

While Moore returns to the world of Edenic purity and distilled color untouched by the deviation, darkness and difference that give birth to language and art, Stevens opens his poem with an image of a serpent which moves from the bodiless world of ideas to the world of tangible reality:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,
Another image at the end of the cave,
Another bodiless for the body’s slough

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
And the pines above and along and beside the sea
(WSCP 411)

The phrase “[a]nother image at the end of the cave” refers us to the very beginning of Western metaphysics – Plato’s *The Republic* and his metaphor of the cave that separates the permanence of the ideal from the shifting sensible – thus opening up the poem’s continuous interplay between ideas and their shadows, light and darkness, presence and absence. Metaphysics, Stevens reminds his reader, was set up as a gap, a rupture between truth and

¹⁰ Stevens’s most perceptive critics, Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, both agree that “Auroras of Autumn” belongs to the poet’s best work, containing a culmination and refinement of his poetic vision. See Bloom’s *The Poems of Our Climate* (1977: 253), and Vendler’s *On Extended Wings* (1969: 1-11).

appearance, sameness and difference, containing the seed of its own failure and decline. The “solid” whiteness that swallows up the color of the cabin, the beach, the flowers in Canto II is a ghostly and disquieting remnant of the lost absolute, “an accomplishment / of an extremist in an exercise”:

Farewell to an idea . . . A cabin stands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence
Of an infinite course. The flowers against the wall
Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark
(WSCP 412)

“Here, being visible is being white” (WSCP 412), the poet notes further in the canto, indicating the totality of the disturbingly all-white vision. The solidity and dry ghostliness of this color, however, contrasts sharply with the semi-transparency and shimmer of Moore’s mist, for it is a whiteness emptied of meaning and sealed off from the possibility of transcendence, whiteness turned into “a universal blank” (Vendler 1969: 254). The serpent, the powerful figure of discord and fall chosen by Stevens for the opening stanzas, counteracts this white finality, as it brings in the images of separation, complication and difference, and initiates the exile from the original Oneness.¹¹ This exile triggers dissolution, instability, darkness, and chaos that haunt the whole of “The Auroras”: the serpent sheds its slough and leaves its nest, the fire-lit room is replaced by the ghostly and deserted white cabin, the house is “evening / half dissolved” (413) and later it “will crumble / the books will burn” (413). Even the mother’s face that “fills the room” dissolves, and her “soft hands” become “a motion not a touch” (413). The original idea of the house and maternal presence that, as Jarraway suggests, may be interpreted here as the house of Being and the totality of belief (1993: 241), just like Moore’s primordial incandescence, “committed to darkness” by Adam’s fall, dissolves in the “smoke” of the encroaching

¹¹ Interestingly, Harold Bloom identifies a close relation between the metaphoric serpent and the actual auroras, as he remembers his own encounter with the boreal phenomenon on Block Island during an August night: “[r]ather like the auroras Stevens described, these flashed on and off at a high altitude, multicoloured lights in the northern sky, and their coilings from the horizon to the zenith’s height unmistakably resembled a giant, many-folded serpent, with its head at the zenith” (1970: 255).

night, suspended only by the disturbing “frigid brilliances” and “blue-red sweeps” of the boreal “great enkindlings” (413). Stevens’ choice of autumn, which counterpoints his earlier poem “The Credences of Summer”,¹² further deepens the sense of loss and crisis, the more so that the spiritually laden word “credence” gives way to the elusive and spectral “auroras.”

Similarly to Stevens’ volatile auroral serpent, the images of light in Moore’s “Days...” are replaced by the figure of multiple feet, albeit belonging to an unspecified mythical creature, one of the poet’s imaginary beings. Moore introduces it through a quotation from Nestor’s *Greek Anthology*:

“Part of it was crawling, part of it
was about to crawl, the rest
was torpid in its lair”. In the short-legged, fit-
ful advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae – we have the
classic
multitude of feet. To what purpose! Truth is no Apollo
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.
Know that it will be there when it says,
“I shall be there when the wave has gone by.”
(MCP 41-42)

The Apollo Belvedere, as pinpointed by Leavell, is “a Roman copy in marble of a now-lost Greek bronze”, which “came to epitomize the perfection of Greek sculpture” (1996: 261). Moore confronts its polished excellence and smug completeness with the crudity of the multi-legged beast, allying each with a different idea of truth. The copy of the Greek sculpture (the name points to its location in the Belvedere gallery of the Vatican palace) symbolizes art’s failed attempt at recreating the lost fullness and oneness of Being, denoting a truth that values the superficial “neatness of finish” over the “mist” and depth of mystery, thus suppressing the spiritual and mystical element and leaving us with a beautiful but empty and demystified form. The mysterious, unnamed beast, in turn – part of which is “crawling”, part is “about to crawl”, and part “rests torpid in its lair” – does not aspire to the ideal of originary perception. Rather, it represents the proliferation of truth, the truth that is divided, elusive, partially hidden, manifold and which needs to be “unconcealed” – to borrow Heidegger’s apt term, which lies at

¹² Helen Vendler believes that “The Auroras of Autumn” should be read as a companion poem to “The Credences of Summer”, as it deconstructs and supplements the ideas presented therein. See her *On Extended Wings* (1969: 245).

the root of the title of this book – the truth as a quasi-transcendental, open-ended revelation, a secret whose meaning can be grasped only as a momentary and continuously deferred insight, a “piercing glance into the life of things” of which the poet writes in the already quoted “When I Buy Pictures”. The metaphor of the wave used in the poem’s closure hints at the movement and countermovement of advancement and retreat, coming and going that veils and unveils the surface, again signaling Moore’s preference for partial disclosures and truths that cannot be stilled or rigidified into an absolute. As noted by Costello, “the concealment is part of the allure” in her poems, since Moore shares George Santayana’s conviction that “[n]othing absorbs the consciousness so much as that which is not quite given” (Santayana in Costello 1981: 134). Interestingly, however, the movement of waves does not in the least diminish the poet’s certainty that the spiritual truth “should be there when the wave has gone by”, for, in Moore’s enchanted world, the spiritual forces underlie all things, including poetic language, even if the truths which they unconceal do not promise the correctness and stability of pre-lapsarian naming, but are inevitably plural, elusive and “multi-legged”.

This unwavering spiritual certainty of Moore can be juxtaposed with Stevens’ autumnal hesitations in “The Auroras of Autumn”, where “the cancellings, / The negations are never final” (414) and each line pulls us closer towards an elusive but never realized disclosure. In one of the poem’s most beautiful passages – Canto VI – the poet also uses the image of waves and mist; however, the effect is slightly different:

It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change
As light changes yellow into gold and gold
To its opal elements and fire’s delight,

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence
And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space.
The cloud drifts idly through half-thought-of forms.

(WSCP 416-417)

The passage is a full display of the boreal sublime and its non-teleological magnificence. Nonetheless, while Moore's prismatic incandescence was anchored in the primordial whiteness and the refracted colors wrapped in the curtain-like mist or trace of divine presence, Stevens presents us with a "floating theatre" of "half-thought-of forms" liberated from the ordinary center or idea, which is replaced by the infinitely split forms "lavishing themselves in change". Change turns the textual space of the canto into "a veritable drama of alterity" (Jarraway 1991: 81) that cannot be contained within a unified form. As La Guardia observantly notes, "The Auroras" is a "poem of tentativeness and imbalance" in which "the structures are falling" and imagery is "relentlessly flickering" (LaGuardia 1983: 129). Indeed, there is nothing solid or stable here: the house and the rooms filled with a loving maternal presence in Canto III and V, and the God-like father¹³ who "measures the velocities of change" and creates "pageants out of air" in Canto IV (414) vanish, dissolved in this festival of formlessness, "the wished-for disappearances" (411). Even the rock, the biblical symbol of firmness and permanence, is liquidized and turned into a manifestation of change. With the renounced anchor of an idea, discarded three times (at the beginning of Cantos II, III, and IV), reality is set adrift, the season "changes color to no end", even the mountains are "running like water". What is left is "a shivering residue", a liquid opalescence of formlessness (417), curbing our expectations of home-coming, of a comforting closure, frame or ultimate revelation, that "saying out of a cloud" (418) which would lend meaning and focus to this magnificent but idle spectacle. What this directionless drifting of images and these endless transformations of forms unconceal, however, is Stevens' desire for "the innocence of the earth", the tangible, earthly Eden without a "false sign" (419), coupled with the need to create an adequate idiom free of "the enigma of the guilty dream" (419). This dream of innocence seems vaguely reminiscent of Moore's days of prismatic color unspoiled by the shadow of guilt and loss. And yet, unlike Moore, who withdraws behind the

¹³ Helen Vendler perceptively describes the father figure as a mixture of Prospero and Caliban, fetching at once "tellers of tales / And musicians" and "unherded herds of barbarous tongue, slavered and panting halves of breath" (WSCP 415). The shift from the human to the barbarous and animal, as the critic points out, "turns the puppet theatre into a happening with no script", a festival of "loud, disordered mooch" (WSCP 415), in accord with the dissolving and chaos-driven motion of the whole composition (1969: 251). Bloom similarly notes that the father in this canto is "a failed Prospero, a fetcher of pageants but one who then cannot dissolve his own airy fictions at will" (1977: 268).

inarticulate “gurgling” and multi-legged minutiae of her imaginary beast, Stevens introduces a human figure, “the scholar of one candle” – to counterbalance the elusive, “flashing serpent” – who is next sent to confront the Otherness of the fiery transformations of the borreal night. Equipped with the feeble flame of the candle, symbolizing the imagination, this Metaphysician in the Dark cautiously opens the door to this “Arctic effulgence” of an unanchored uncanny (416-417) in the final stanza of the canto. He stops as he faces the nameless and infinite other, the Derridian *tout autre*, “flaring on the frame / Of everything he is”. The significance of that encounter must remain secret and cannot be fully revealed, as the conflagration, which presses against the “windows” of the House of Being without penetrating into its rooms, shatters the familiar frames of existence, keeping the frightened scholar at the threshold of Otherness:

He opens the door of his house
On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.

(WSCP 419)

Heidegger argues that for the modern man, “the infinite, like the spirit of the states and of the world, cannot be grasped other than from an askew perspective” (ELT 116). This “askew” access to the ungraspable works throughout the whole poem, but it is more poignantly felt in the quoted stanza due to its hesitant flow. The fear of the confrontation with the infinite and sublime, as well as the scholar’s effort to “reject the temptation to be drawn into the undertow of these waves” (Vendler 1969: 262), is inscribed in the stanza’s guarded syntax, broken by the embedded structure of each subsequent line, which, in a hedgehog-like manner, simultaneously protects and discloses the poem’s ultimate secret, sheltering the scholar from total absorption, if not destruction, of the self by the unnamable and purposeless “gusts of great enkindlings”. The cosmic, alienating power of the flaring light, which does not pierce through the inner darkness of the mind, estranges humans from their own selves – leaving them, as Stevens admits elsewhere, “feeling disposed and alone in solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness” (OP 207) – is captured by the following lines:

It leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps,
Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where
We knew each other and of each other thought,
A shivering residue, chilled and forgone.
Except for the crown and mystical cabala.

(WSCP 417)

Vendler sees the crown as suggestive of the “hard brilliance” of the impersonal universe, which “surmounts everything else in these lines, as it dwarfs with its energy and regality the pathos of the disinherited spectators” (1969: 265). Realizing his entirely estranged humanness, Stevens’ scholar does not however seek transcendence or metaphysically grounded truth behind the waves and velocities of light and their “mystical cabala”, accepting the untranslatable innocence and unchannelled energy of this spectacle, as well as its elusive, unrestrained unfolding outside metaphysical measures.

The subsequent cantos reveal that it is the imagination as the “successor of the invisible” (WSCP 376) that can at once withstand and partake of the metamorphosis and match the sublime glory of the boreal night, “this contrivance of the spectre of the spheres” (WSCP 420). It opens the subject to nature in a way that frees it from the spell of the sublime and transcendental bonding, as it has the power to imagine “a whole / The full of fortune and the full of fate” in the landscape of “bare limbs, bare trees and wind as sharp as salt” (419), to change “an unhappy people in an unhappy world” to “A happy people in a happy world” (420). While it “sits enthroned” (417) to measure up to the spectacular drama of nature, the imagination does not allow Stevens to “rest in the sublime” (Vendler 1969: 265) and to capitulate to its overwhelming power, its task, as seen by the poet, being also that of “making sure of the sun” (411), of connecting us to the “flippant communications” (418) of the real. In Canto VIII, the poet asserts the necessity of seeing our existence as valuable in itself:

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.

(WSCP 418)

After the gods have vanished, being for Stevens is “like a thing of ether that exists” and “it is visible”, and this certainty can be of great comfort to the solitary man overcome by metaphysical doubt. As J. Hillis Miller asserts, Stevens discovers being “within things as they are, here and now, revealed ... in the presentness of things present” (Miller 1965: 159). The flickering spectacle of light and its perpetual enlargement in which the imagination cannot find a home is thus necessarily counterbalanced in the poem by this unadorned presentness and bareness of being. The “innocence of the earth” might thus impart both the obscuring darkness that “extinguishes the planets” and the flamboyances of light liberated from the aura of the absolute. Poetry, Stevens seems to suggest, must be committed to both, to the mist of the imagination’s yearnings and to the hard rock of the innocent earth, which allows it to rest in the solidity of “the the”, in Perloff’s observant words, “the here and now, within things as they are” (1981: 20).

Both poets recognize and protect the inherent mystery of the world. For Moore, poetry is a venture into and beyond the obliqueness and “smoke” of the post-lapsarian world. Costello correctly argues that “in Moore we find translucence, a veiled luminosity, so that the urgent ‘presence’ is never entirely revealed... We are left with an awakened sense of something ‘beyond’ the representation, but with no direction by which to account for that experience” (1981: 137). The spiritually secure days of prismatic color which she recalls and revives in her poem, make more poignant the human craving for the lost intelligibility, purity and beauty of their incandescent mystique. Moore recognizes that there is no returning to that unified, unmediated experience of divine unity, for Eve introduces change, difference, an ontological rift and an exile from that original innocence, and with it – errancy, bewilderment and a more complex and non-totalizable understanding of life that needs to be mediated through language and art. Thus, the fall initiates our estrangement from Being and our rootedness in language. Poetry – which also emerges from that rift and fall, as suggested by Heidegger, locating itself in the interstices between the pre-linguistic prismatic unity and the post-lapsarian multiplicity, between remembering and forgetting of the holy – should search for an idiom capable of avoiding the unnecessary and crude obliqueness that enlarges that gap and adds to our sense of estrangement and anguish. At the same time, it should remain committed to and expressive of the plural iridescence and the multi-legged minutiae of modernity’s dimmed and un-

sheltered color. Such a language needs to try to unveil, preserve and reinscribe the spiritual resources that have made it, showing the operations of the spirit also in the visible phenomena. In “Black Earth”, Moore observes: “Will / depth be depth, thick skin be thick, to one who can / see no / beautiful element of unreason under it” (BMM 238). Although the post-lapsarian language and art in “Days...” are presented as a shadow, a smoke, a limitation to consciousness, which often prevents us from seeing through the thick skin of the surface, they can still bring the intangible, indefinite and beautiful element of unreason to light.

Stevens’ “Auroras of Autumn” shows that when directed “homeward”, towards “the innocence of earth”, poetry – the new and imperfect dwelling for the vanishing gods – can offer a different appreciation of nature and life than that granted by metaphysics. The auroras, a potent symbol of metamorphosis and the poet’s response to the God-emptied sky, make possible not only the appearance and effacement of Being without the buttress of the metaphysical, but also the recognition of the alluring and irreducible otherness of Nature. As noted by Jarraway (1991: 87), Stevens’ preference is “for de-scription of auroras which is readable and unreadable *together*: Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue, / Like a book on rising beautiful and true” (WSCP 418). It is the poetically and aesthetically understood coming and vanishing of light in the “holy event” of language that unveils what metaphysical thought has obscured – the secret of Being that cannot be reduced to the absolute presence or to transcendently grounded unity and certainty. In Michael T. Beehler’s words, “the trope of the sourceless auroral lights, of a light that has no central origin of radiation but which is always already diffused and radiated, undoes the classical trope of the sun as source and divine center of light and truth” (1978: 632). The revelation granted by Stevens’ auroral poem, to borrow Morris’s words, is “a vision achieved rather than a grace received” (1974: 167). Stevens himself notes in a letter: “[a]n old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. What incessant murmurs fill that ever-laboring, tireless church!” (WSL 58-59). The murmurs of the boreal night bring neither comfort nor peace, as their meaning is withheld and does not rest throughout the poem. However, the velocities of change, and the elusive, suspended beauty of “the darkness that gathers though it does not fall”, unconcealed in each line, create a sense that we are touching something vital and spiritually-rewarding in the flashes and clearings of Stevens’ word.

Moore's multi-legged being and Stevens' auroral, at once bodied and bodiless serpent, can both be interpreted as skilful deconstructors of "the white mythology" of the ultimate Truth. They are uncertain signs of modernism's refracted and changing reality. As noted by Bakhtin,

[i]f we imagine the intention of ... a word, that is, its *directionality towards the object*, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself but rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle.

(Bakhtin 1981: 277)

Modern reality – composed of increasingly plural voices, shifting directions, alien languages and relative values – requires this "spectral dispersion" of the "ray-word" to catch up with the smoke and sparkle of its multiple truths. As the master-users of "the ray-word", comfortable with its multiple dispersions and disappearances in the "veiled folds of *alētheia*" (Derrida, Silk 316), Stevens and Moore guarantee the "unrepeatable play of light and color."

3.2. "It is a privilege to see so much confusion": Moore's "Part of a Novel, Part of a Play, Part of a Poem" versus Stevens' "Doctor of Geneva", "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air"

"The Steeple-Jack" – the first poem in Moore's 1932 tripartite sequence titled "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play", and comprising additionally "The Student" and "The Hero" – was chosen by the poet herself to open the 1967 edition of her *Complete Poems*. Its placement in the volume, the language of the travel guide and the numerous traveler figures populating the poem all signal the importance of the piece for Moore, and suggest that it might serve as a map and guide to the whole volume, a Baedeker to the poet's aesthetic as well as existential vision. Indeed, a closer look at the content and form of the poem and at the progression of its themes in the remaining parts of the sequence ("The Student" and "The Hero") reveals not only essential aspects of her poetic sensibility, but also displays her moral imagination at work. Leavell argues correctly that the

trilogy “progresses from surface observations to spiritual vision. This progression is evident in the descriptions of the settings of each poem – from a specific New England seaside town in ‘The Steeple-Jack,’ to America in ‘The Student,’ to an unspecified ‘where one does not wish / to go’ in ‘The Hero’” (1996: 212). With this trilogy, the poet not only subtly acknowledges the “spiritual sources that have made [her]” (“When I Buy Pictures”, MCP 48), but also engages in an erinaceous dialogue with the Puritan and Emersonian heritage underlying her religious outlook as well as with the modernist crisis of faith.

Similarly to “In the Days of Prismatic Color”, in “The Steeple-Jack” Moore also found her inspiration in visual arts; this time, however, she chose one of the Old Masters of painting, Albrecht Dürer, whose etchings and paintings she saw and reviewed for *The Dial* when they were exhibited in The New York Public Library in 1928. The review demonstrates that what attracted Moore to the German Renaissance painter was not so much the religious subject of his etchings as his original technique – a peculiar “conjunction of calculation and fantasy” (MMCP 203) used to express a spiritual ideal and moral devotion. For Moore, Dürer’s “perfect media”, his technical precision and mathematical studiosness revealed not only the artist’s formal genius, but relentlessly testified to his search for an absolute, for a spiritual truth behind the surface of things. Closing her review, the poet observed:

Appreciation which is truly votive and not gapingly inquisitive, commits one to enlightenment if not to emulation, and recognition of the capacity for newness inclusive of oldness which seems in Dürer an apparitional yet normal miraculousness like a heraldic flame or separate fire in the air, could have its part in persuading us to think – with him – not too ill of “subtility”, “*igenia*”, and “artwork which is altogether new in its shape”.

(MMCP 204)

Moore’s admiration for “a capacity for newness inclusive of oldness” and “an apparitional and yet normal miraculousness” betrays the poet’s own penchant for the miraculous in the normal and for a sustained connection between the old truths and sensibilities and the new forms of their articulation. Expressions such as “votive appreciation”, “enlightenment” that encourages “emulation”, manifest a moral attitude behind Moore’s reception of the paintings, indicating furthermore that the aspects of Dürer’s art pinpointed by the poet can be used as a possible key to her own method and viewpoint.

The attentiveness to detail that Moore admired in Dürer encourages us to investigate her poem with an equally devoted appreciation and to treat it, as suggested by Leavell, as an instance of the poet's "art of *seeing*", or – more accurately – as her exploration of "the various ways a writer must *see*" (1996: 9). However, as will be shown, the Düreresque way of seeing – which stresses refinement, pictorial virtuosity and, as noted by Denny, "hallucinatory" (2003: 27) meticulousness – is not the only one proposed by Moore, whose openness to the plurality of perspectives and "equi-disabling" of both formal and conceptual closure has been emphasized on many occasions in the previous parts of my study. I shall argue here that Moore's stance, although rooted in her inherited Puritan sensibility which seeks spiritual integrity in the clarity of expression and allegorical certainty of message, bears the traces of a quasi-transcendental vision – an undogmatic way of finding and sustaining spiritual truths and moral insights in the non-conclusive interplay between confusion and order, blindness and informed vision, appearance and reality.

The opening lines of the poem unconceal the major tensions informing the whole piece:

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
 in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
 to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
 on a fine day, from water etched
 with waves as formal as the scales
 on a fish.

(MCP 4)

The "town like this" might have indeed appealed to the German painter, for it embodies a Düreresque perfection and attention to detail – Moore deliberately chooses the elements of painterly discourse, with words such as "fine", "etched", "formal" and the visual regularity of the syllabic line, to create and advertise this pictorial idyll, binding it also to the chiseled forms of Dürer's etchings. In the following stanzas, we encounter a lighthouse, a town-clock, a whitewashed church portico, a schoolhouse, a post-office, fish-houses, hen-houses, and a picturesque "three-masted schooner on / the stocks" (MCP 6-7). The pastoral "sweetness" of the seascape, with the waves regular as the "scales on a fish", is ruptured, however, by the bizarre appearance of "eight stranded whales;" despite the casual tone of their introduction, concealing their unnatural presence in

the scene, the cetaceans clearly stand out in this postcard picture, bringing the first sign of discord and friction into its formal and scenic unity. The *Dial* review of Dürer's engravings written by the poet herself indicates that what she evokes here is the painter's failed journey to the Dutch coast to see a stranded whale (MMCP 202),¹⁴ but the strangeness of Dürer's solitary whale is magnified, as there are eight specimens of that regal mammal stranded on Moore's beach to "be looked at". The number is "the calculated fantasy" of Moore, who in this way pays homage to Dürer's controlling mind, at the same time profoundly disrupting the polished decorum of the beautiful setting and opening it up for further invasions and excesses of the uncanny. As noted by Slatin, the whales are the first warning sign which the reader tends to miss as he fails to realize that what is being revealed is an image of death, "on a truly massive scale" (1986: 184). It should be added, however, that by using the whale – a symbol charged with so many contradictory and elusive senses in American literature since *Moby-Dick* – Moore determinedly inserts the inexplicable, the "beautiful element of unreason", into the careful symmetry of her design, signaling again that "the truth is no Apollo Belvedere" but an impenetrable and dangerous mystery, often "stranded" and unnoticed by the inattentive mind.

Another element which further infuses the poem with an aura of apocalyptic danger and mystery, and which introduces the next Romantic intertext into its tissue, is the eponymous steeple-jack, markedly dressed in scarlet, whose task is to repair the storm-damaged town-clock and whose positioning high on the tower grants him the full view of the town. As pointed out by Slatin, the steeple-jack comes straight from Hawthorne's Puritan imagination, invoking *The Scarlet Letter* and, more directly, the story "Sights from a Steeple", in which the narrator is also found occupying that part of the church tower, from which he freely observes the whole town (1986: 186). The poem's garden stanzas with their lush floral disarray also subtly reference Hawthorne's story "Rappaccini's Daughter", in which beauty is intertwined with moral danger and the threat of death. What is more, just like Moore's poem, which ensnares her

¹⁴ John Slatin remarks that the opening stanza of "The Steeple-Jack" "makes up for Dürer's failure to see that beached whale by offering us the verbal equivalent of a Dürer etching – of such an etching, that is, as Dürer might have made had he reached Zierikzee in time. For in giving us not one but 'eight stranded whales / to look at' – a 'reason for living' indeed – Moore seizes upon and magnifies Dürer's lost opportunity" (1986: 183).

readers into its multiple visual and formal traps, the plot of the story involves an elaborate trap set up for the protagonist, who is lured into Rappaccini's spectacular and seemingly innocent garden only to learn its poisonous and deadly influence. The subtle connection and interplay between the post-Melvillian stranded, dead whales and Hawthorne's God-like steeple-jack and Rappaccini-haunted garden carries the main spiritual tensions of the poem. In their context, the poem emerges as an inquiry into the role of perception as a guide to spiritual knowledge and truth. The symbols and allusions convey the poet's own uncertain, undogmatic positioning vis-à-vis truth and the treatment of the visible world as its unequivocal manifestation. Like Melville and Hawthorne, Moore sees the world around her in terms of ambiguities and contradictions. The whales, whose disturbing presence on a "fine day" in the coastal paradise almost goes unnoticed among the town's regular enchantments, seem to both retain and lose the dark supernaturalism of the sea: dead and incorporated into the tourist paradise of the coastal town, they become only ghostly and grotesque echoes of that uncontrollable, infinitely vital and unfathomable force, chased vainly by Melville's Ahab and considered so intriguing by Ishmael. Whereas for Melville the singularity of the white whale symbolized the inaccessibility of the Absolute and the "dread powers" of a Deity whose "face shall not be seen" ([1851] 1965: 2450),¹⁵ in Moore's poem, the eight whales fail to excite anybody except for the evoked Dürer, and may suggest either the absence of divine truth or the modern man's estrangement from it. The vigilant steeple-jack is a God-like figure in which are fused Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale. Due to his elevation and the resulting privileged view, his role is to warn the townspeople against a potential peril by "placing danger signs" by the damaged church; however, he himself poses danger as he "lets down a rope as a spider spins a thread" (MCP 6), which suggests his direct involvement in the entrapment, and masks the fragility and superficiality of the town's

¹⁵ Ishmael describes the terrifying indefinability of the whale as follows: "I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over" (1965: 9) "This archaic and eternal future bears a face that is not merely prehistoric and that is, in fact, hardly a face at all: for you see no one point precisely; no one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none proper; nothing but one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships and men" (66).

belief, as he “gilds the solid-pointed star, which on a steeple / stands for hope” (7). Thus, instead of being clarified, the ambiguous indecisiveness of the stranded whales is deepened by the Hawthornian allusions, whereas the steeple-jack’s shifting and equally portentous movements point to the existence of discordant planes of spiritual experience rather than to a unified moral vision.

Relentlessly teaching us how to see behind the “gilt” of the town’s picturesque composition, Moore carefully plants the signs of warning in every single stanza. The second one is embodied in the disquieting, rhythmical movement of the sea-gulls over “the town clock” and “the lighthouse”, as if trying to draw our attention to the broken flow of time and the oncoming darkness.¹⁶ The third stanza flaunts the sea’s painterly hues, thus calling the reader’s attention to the complete absence of color in the previous two stanzas:

One by one in two’s and three’s, the seagulls keep
flying back and forth over the town clock,
or sailing around the lighthouse without moving their wings –
rising steadily with a slight
quiver of the body – or flock
mewing where

a sea the purple of the peacock’s neck is
paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea
gray. You can see a twenty-five-
pound lobster; and fish nets arranged
to dry. (...)

(MCP 6)

¹⁶ The ambiguous movements of the birds are reminiscent of Stevens’ “causal flocks of pigeons” which “make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings” (“Sunday Morning”, WSCP 70), and “A blue pigeon... that circles the blue sky / On sidelong wing, around and round and round / A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground / Grown tired of flight” (“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” WSCP 17). It is interesting, however, that while Moore keeps the movement suspended, Stevens forces some of his birds downward – the white pigeon, “tired of flight”, might, through its religious connotations, symbolize the crisis of metaphysics and the finality of death; the blue one, in turn, is the symbol of the imagination, whose circular movements are endless and adorn the spirit-emptied sky.

In stanza four, we discover that the scenic paling and intensification of color that moves from intense purple to “a greenish azure”, and – via Dürer – to “peacock blue and guinea gray”, is yet another portent, this time of a storm, which emerges from a sudden, yet orchestrated “fife-and-drum” rhythm, darkening the fine sky and tousling the etched elegance of the seaside flora:

(...) The

whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm bends the salt
 marsh grass, disturbs stars in the sky and the
 star on the steeple; it is a privilege to see so
 much confusion. (...)

(MCP 5)

The storm ends as soon as it began, and the next part sees the fog raised to display the backyard Eden, a Rappaccini-like floral haven, spreading densely over two stanzas composed in their entirety out of the overwhelmingly seductive catalogue of flowers and grass:

trees are favored by the fog so that you have
 the tropics first hand: the trumpet-vine,
 fox-glove, giant snap-dragon, a salpiglossis that has
 spots and stripes; morning-glories, gourds,
 or moon-vines trained on fishing-twine
 at the back door;

cat-tails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort,
 striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies –
 yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts – toad-plant,
 petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue
 ones, tigers; poppies; black sweet-peas.

(MCP 6)

The catalogue may bewilder us with its colorful gorgeousness and the piling up of strange names, and thus put us off guard again, but here Moore also smuggles in odd elements which indicate danger, withheld violence and discord. As Slatin points out, all of the flowers enumerated here are foreign to North America, and come from tropical or subtropical regions. Some, such as foxglove and salpiglossis, are poisonous; others, like spiderwort, are known for aggressive growth, threatening other plants in

the garden. “Trained on fishing-twine”, they conceal their own wilderness and unrestrained vitality, but the threat of their exuberant expansion haunts the stanzas, for the accretive catalogue chosen by the poet as a mode of their arrangement cannot quite contain and curb their lush heterogeneity and slovenly disarray. What is more, the poet also mentions more exotic plants (e.g. banyan, frangipani or jack-fruit) which do not grow “in a town like this” but are often used in representations of Paradise (Slatin 1986: 186). Considering the fact that for Moore “omissions are not accidents”, their absence here may imply that the scaled-down exoticism of the back-yard garden belongs to a bogus rather than genuine paradise. The animals inhabiting Moore’s exotic garden likewise work towards increasing our sense of confusion. Apart from the rather inoffensive and domesticated “cats ... to keep down the rats” and “[t]he diffident / little newt” (6) that replace the more threatening exotic serpents, lizards and cobras, the poet cunningly conceals an ample variety of savage creatures, including tigers, foxes, toads, crabs, spiders, dragons in the names of the catalogued flowers.

Those ingenuously hidden indicators of the shadowy presence of discord and evil beneath the surface lead us to another ambiguous figure in the poem, the student named Ambrose, who “sits on the hillside / with his not-native books and hat” (6) and, like the steeple-jack, observes the “elegance” of the summerhouses and the regular progress of boats “white and rigid as if in / a groove” (6). Although foreign to this place, as suggested by his books, he “knows [it] by heart” (6), and “is at home” here (7). Moore hints at the meaning of the figure in the second part of the trilogy, where she defines the eponymous student as someone who “gives his opinion / firmly and rests on it – in the manner of the poet,” adding further that he is “reclusive”, and reserved; and has such ways, “not because he / has no feeling but because he has so much” (MCP 102). By equating the student with the poet, Moore offers us another significant key to her own positioning towards this elegant confusion, and indicates the proper way of reading it. As noted by Slatin (1986: 192), the poems that complete “The Steeple-Jack”, “The Student” and “The Hero” are laced with another Romantic intertext, namely Emerson’s “The American Scholar”, whom Moore quotes directly in “The Student”: “Emerson said / One fitted / to be a scholar must have the heroic mind” (MCP 101). The ideal of the American Scholar proposed by the philosopher is the Man Thinking, who knows how to read, so that each page “becomes luminous with mani-

fold allusion” and “every sentence is doubly significant and the sense of the author is as broad as the world” ([1836] 1996: 59). He does not limit his inspiration and reading to books, but is equally well-versed in reading Nature and life – that “shadow of the soul” and the richest retinue of spiritual facts. What is more, the scholar is “of all men whom this spectacle [of Nature] most engages”, capable of “guiding men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (Emerson 1996: 63). In “The Poet”, Emerson repeats his argument from “Nature” that “everything in Nature answers to a moral power” ([1844] 1996: 453). Moore’s Ambrose, the poet-scholar, seems to embody the visionary and interpretative capacities of the Emersonian Man Thinking. Choosing a solitary location on the hill, he retains a sufficient, meditation-conducive distance from the reality of the town; he buttresses his vision with his “not-native” books; however, when Moore introduces him, he is occupied more with the observation of the sea. Like the Man Thinking, he is not “an externalist” (“The American Scholar”) but trusts his “memory’s eye” (“The Mind is an Enchanting Thing”, MCP 134), the “inward” memory of the townscape. Moreover, his name binds him to St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan known as a devoted defender of Christian faith against paganism: thus, it should come as no surprise that he is especially sensitive to the false pitch of the church spire.

Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether Ambrose really represents and exhausts Moore’s own stance towards the moral power of this modern *locus amoenus* and its dubiously pastoral vistas. The scholar, despite his perceptual self-confidence and strong transcendentalist backing, sees “as if” (MCP 6) and withdraws from a more engaged seeing and immediate touch with reality, for he too fails to spot the fantastic whales and “a man in scarlet” (6) whose ambiguous machinations on the church spire are not actually meant to warn the unwary, but, as noted by Slatin, to distract their attention from the fact that the steeple-jack imperceptibly “spins his web for us” (1986: 195). A more reliable hint at Moore’s perspective, one embraces all signs and figures of danger in the poem, might be contained in the following line in the penultimate stanza: “The hero, the student, / the steeple-jack, each in his way, / is at home” (7), for it identifies and brings together various positions assumed by Moore’s symbolic messengers. The hero is the one who “has reverence for mystery” (“The Hero”, MCP 9), for that volatile meaning which “flies out on muffled wings” (MCP 8). Even when tired, he is “hopeful – hope not being hope / until all ground for hope has / vanished” (8-9). In the town, where hope is the gilded star

and paradise is a venomous backyard garden where “love won’t grow” (MCP 8), the hero is desperately needed to work towards their restoration. The steeple-jack, the scarlet symbol and memory of the town’s moral transgression and the figure that moves swiftly between the spire and the ground, adds a Hawthornesque ambivalence and depth to the initial Dürer-inspired black-and-white perfection. As the master of danger signs, whose own name – C. J. Poole – contains a pun that urges us to “see”, the steeple-jack both masks and exposes sin, degradation and falsehood behind the town’s gilding and white-washing. “What is our innocence, / what is our guilt? All are / naked, none is safe”, Moore asks in “What Are Years?” (MCP 95), suggestively placing innocence and guilt side by side, as two complementary terms that cannot exist without each other. The steeple-jack incarnates this alliance and moral confusion, signaling that the poet’s questions will remain unanswered. The reclusive student, in turn, with his transcendentalist origin, ferries into the scene an Emersonian optimism and faith in the unmistakable truths of the heart and the transparently moral power of Nature. When fused, the three figures unconceal the trappings of narrowed perception, allowing Moore’s poem to abide and thrive in doubt and mystery, swaying continuously between deception and revelation. Paradoxically, the most assertive statement in the poem is the one found in the fourth stanza: “It is a privilege to see so / much confusion” (MCP 5). Undeniably, the poem exhibits a powerful resistance to absolute transparency of meaning, as if Moore wanted her words to linger on the boundary between the true and the false, danger and safety, encircling truth as do the seagulls flying over the lighthouse in the opening stanzas. The lighthouse is there to disrupt darkness and guarantee safe anchoring in a seaport, the idealist arrival of truth, but Moore’s boats never arrive home “progress[ing] white and rigid as if in / a groove” (MCP 6). Something at once ominous and pleasing resides in the fixity of this movement, especially since it appears immediately after the lawless sprawl of nature in the garden stanzas. The same applies to her language, which struggles towards heightened control and aesthetic order, towards the etched perfection of Dürer and the post-Renaissance certainty of the visible form; at the same time, however, it skillfully plants signals-providences of peril, hiding visual and spiritual distress behind the images of death, storm, fog, and lush vegetation. In this way, Moore seems to be demonstrating the danger of presuming a direct, one-dimensional and unquestionable grasp of Nature’s significance. Hence, “The Steeple-Jack”

and its companion poems, “The Student” and “The Hero”, expand the web of relations and affinities between the visible and the invisible world. The danger sign put up by the man in scarlet, evoking Hawthorne’s novel and its rich symbolism, is the sign that like the scarlet letter has no static referent, opening itself to the alterity of its meaning, to the deep-seated ambiguity of its moral message. It marks the modernist skepticism towards the possibility of transcendence and the “gilded”, i.e. imposed and false piety. Given the lack of clear spiritual grounding of the sign, coupled with the confident picturesqueness of the whole poem, continuously lingering over the surface of description and verging on a surrealist fantasy, one ought not to expect any interpretative or moral satisfactions. The ironic tone of the voice, asserting in the last stanza that “[i]t could not be dangerous to be living / in a town like this” (MCP 7), further increases our interpretational confusion, for it appears exactly at the point where we have gathered enough data to confirm our suspicion that Moore’s pastoral utopia with its suspended apocalypse is a perilous trap for the order- and pleasure-seeking eye and mind. Donna Haraway aptly notes that “[i]rony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (1983: 71). Moore’s use of irony clearly signals her need to keep beauty and danger in an unresolved tension and sanctions the ambiguity of her moral posture. Donald Hall sums up the ironic ending and the nature of the trap as follows: “[t]he means taken to protect against danger become, themselves, the final danger. They are fictions and cannot be trusted to protect” (1970: 197). Thus, if Moore’s “calculated fantasy” is a lesson, its moral has a quasi-transcendental flavor to it; as Molesworth rightly observes, the poet’s technique of “self-dramatization” sustains a sense of morality that “is existential rather than absolutist”, “keep[ing] it from being merely preachy” (1990: 313).

A similar resistance to the Puritan mind’s allegorical vision and doctrinal certitude can be found in Stevens’ companion poems “A Doctor of Geneva” and “The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air”, two works unjustly neglected by Stevens’ critics. In both pieces, Stevens directs his attention to the dogmatic rejection of doubt and the Puritan fear of the physical, which aspect the poet considers a necessary condition and the only available source of the modern belief. The poems can be juxtaposed with Moore’s “The Steeple-Jack”, for Stevens analogously uses his descriptive powers

and ambiguous symbolism to portray the limitations of the unicursal thinking of the eponymous doctor of Geneva, a figure embodying Calvinist religious sensibility. As John Calvin died in Geneva, Stevens may be alluding to one of the Founding Fathers of the European Reformation; however, as noted by Watkins, the implications of the figure are rich and cannot be reduced to this association. The critic argues convincingly that the figure might just as well be connected to Stevens' pious ancestor, John Zeller, thus linking the work to the poet's ambiguous attitude to his Protestant upbringing (2008: 77). The American connection is further justified, as in "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air" Calvin is replaced by his renowned American follower, Cotton Mather. Although more compressed and minimalist than Moore's poem, "Doctor of Geneva" and "The Blue Buildings" betray a strong visual and conceptual affinity with "The Steeple-Jack". As in Moore's work, the visual backdrop is constructed out of the contrast between the seashore, with its beach-stranded mysteries, and the city's civilized predictability and security; additionally, the contrast similarly serves to indicate the Doctor's and Mather's over-confidence in the "stamp" of their belief, as well as their blindness to the forces of chaos and disorder that irrupt in their dogma-controlled vision:

The doctor of Geneva stamped the sand
That lay impounding the Pacific swell,
Patted his stove-pipe hat and tugged his shawl

Lacustrine man had never been assailed
By such long-rolling opulent cataracts,
Unless Racine or Bossuet held the like.

(WSCP 24)

Stevens presents here the man of faith confronted with the immensity and savagery of nature, embodied by the Pacific shoreline and its "long-rolling opulent cataracts". The doctor, a "lacustrine" man, has regarded the shores of his vision as well-defined until this encounter with the unreadable "swell" of the ocean (WSCP 24). Like the inhabitants of Moore's "town like this", who defended the rigid structures and grooves of their being, ignorant of the frictions and disturbances in their polished surface, the smug doctor also holds on to the familiar and the secure, adjusting his hat and shawl and confidently "stamping" the sand. The aural firmness of the verb "to stamp" beautifully checks the softness, brittleness and pliability

ity of the sand whose largeness and disorderliness in the second line of the stanza are organized by another “firm” and controlling verb “to impound”. This sequence of verbs suggests, in Watkins’ observant words, that “the Pacific, held within its bounds, presents no threat” (2008: 80). However, Stevens undoubtedly wants us to hear “the pounding” in the gerundive form of “impound”, indicating the disruptive and unpredictable forces in the movement of the waves that belong to “the dialectic of containment and threatened eruption that operates throughout the poem” (Watkins 2008: 80). Stamping away his fear of such an eruption and insulating himself against it with the comforts and warmth of his apparel, the doctor regains his composure and seems unmoved by the spectacle:

He did not quail. A man so used to plumb
The multifarious heavens felt no awe
Before these visible, voluble deluging

Which yet found means to set his simmering mind
Spinning and hissing with oracular
Notations of the wild, the ruinous waste
(WSCP 24)

The man is not a scholar with one candle, fearfully and silently appraising the mysterious, “more than rational” distortion of the auroras. As noted by Watkins, the monosyllabic compactness and solidity of the lines “He did not quail” and “felt no awe” signals the doctor’s self-control, but it also implies that he is indifferent to the mystery of the sublime (2008: 84). Well-versed in “multifarious heavens” and thoroughly trained in explaining the invisible, he cannot translate the visible “notations of the wild”, their liquid and unstable “voluble deluging” without resorting to the safety of his rhetoric, suggested already in the second stanza by the oracular authority of the French master rhetoricians, Racine and Bossuet, and enhanced by Stevens’ use of Latin cognates such as “lacustrine”, “notations” and “oracle”. And yet, the usual idiom, the fluid and opulent “cata-racts” of words which he uses to “plumb” the heavens “stamped” by the Puritan doctrine, clearly fails him, as he hears in the undulating ocean only “hissing oracles” of “the ruinous waste” (WSCP 24). Stevens resolves the doctor’s expressive inadequacy and intimidation through the comic relief of the last stanza – “the unburgherly apocalypse” of his sneeze, caused by the humidity of the sea air:

The steeples of his city clanked and sprang
In an unburgherly apocalypse
The doctor used his handkerchief and sighed.
(WSCP 24)

As in Moore's poem, this grotesque and unexpected resolution hides the deceptively accumulated signs / words of warning with strong biblical connotations, such as "deluging", "cataracts", "rolling" or "ruinous", which point to the menace of a violent flood, the apocalyptic breaking of waters that, as Watkins suggest, threatens the "unrighteous", spiritually impoverished or over-confident cities with God's punishment (2008: 86). Like Moore's Ambrose and other inhabitants of the "town like this", the doctor is too blind to discern and read those signs, feeling too secure in the "grooves" of his oratorical "opulence" and the righteousness of his vision to see how Stevens' language assails and subverts this self-assurance and threatens to drown the Latinate orderliness of his "notations" in the apocalypse-contaminated flow of words. Although, as the critic puts it, "the plangent and unruly ocean does not break its bound; the steeples of Geneva are not shaken except in metaphor; and the doctor requires only a handkerchief to help him cope" (Watkins 2008: 89), the poem anticipates the much more terrifying and overwhelming "effulgence" of the apocalyptic sublime in Stevens' later poems, opening his language to the working of the spectral, which will be discussed in the next subchapter.

In "The Blue Building in the Summer Air", Cotton Mather – Calvin's most devoted American disciple – faces a similar problem; however, rather than confronting the theologian with the powerful sublime, Stevens has him face a comic, yet equally unsettling presence of "a mouse in the wall". The mouse – a grotesque modernist descendant of Whitman's mouse from *Song of Myself*, which was "a miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels" (Whitman quoted after Hertz 1993: 69) – becomes a metaphor of doubt, disruption and chaos, "grinding in the arches of the church" of "wooden Boston" (WSCP 216). Like Moore's stranded whales and rats in the garden, it gnaws into the certitude and order of Puritan doctrine, threatening "to swallow the steeple" (WSCP 217), and forcing Mather to "preach louder" to cover up its disturbing company:

There was always the doubt
That made him preach louder, long for a church

In which his voice would roll its cadences
 After the sermon, to quiet that mouse in the wall.
 (WSCP 216)

As in “The Doctor of Geneva”, where the wild nature failed to impress the theologian, the poet juxtaposes here the smooth and rationalized sermon inspired by the books which Mather “read all day, all night and all the nights”, but which “had got him nowhere” (WSCP 216) with “the shore, the sea, the sun / Their brilliance through the lattices” (217), which resist the “rolling cadences” of a Puritan jeremiad. The confrontation leads to the following question:

Look down now, Cotton Mather, from the blank.
 Was heaven where you thought? It must be there.
 It must be where you think it is, in the light
 On bed-clothes, in an apple on a plate.
 It is the honey-comb of the seeing man.
 It is the leaf the bird brings back to the boat.
 (WSCP 219)

As Morris observes, Stevens sees dogmatic religion and its systematic division between heaven and earth as a rejection of change and mortality, both of which condition life. “Both heaven and hell are one, and here, O terra infidel”, the poet exclaims in “Esthétique du Mal” (WSCP 315). For Stevens, heaven “is where the system is not: in time, change, and the cycle of fruition and decay” (Morris 1974: 60). Interestingly, just before his death, the poet wrote in a letter: “[t]he last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system” (WSL 710). The mouse, the apple on a plate, the honey-comb and the fallen leaf borne by the bird embody the forces of separation and change which cannot be resisted effectively by the “wooden” or stone rigidity of the church structures and systems. The light “on bed-clothes” comes from “the blue building” of the sky rather than the protective, chandeliered dome of the church. As we could see in “Auroras”, the sky’s uncertain and continuously changing architecture does not grant a revelation of absolute truth; rather, it “cripples / The chandeliers / Their morning glazes spread in opal blobs along the walls and floor” (WSCP 217). The artificial, doctrine-buttressed light of institutionalized faith represented by the chandeliers is enlivened, taken over and beautified by natural light, suggesting that spiritual experience must absorb the physical and that without the necessary recognition of

doubt, imperfection and change, the dome of the church will remain dead, rigidly inhuman, cold and alienating, its “plaster dropping, even dripping, down” (WSCP 217). The vision granted by this light is not the full transcendence, as the uncertain and flickering “opal blobs” of radiance are all that we can count on under the damaged and dropping steeples of the modernist church; and yet, becoming part of “the honey-comb of the seeing man” (WSCP 217) – part of the poetic “seeing and unseeing in the eye”, as Stevens argues in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (WSCP 385) – they nevertheless make us aware of the uniqueness, fecundity and spirituality of the indefinite forms of our “fluent mundo” (WSCP 406). In “the seeming [of the sun] all things are”, the poet glosses the revelatory and sustaining power of this imperfect illumination in “A Description without Place” (WSCP 339). Borrowing the biblical figure of honey and the honey-comb, which in Luke 24:42 becomes a metaphor of fulfillment, and in many psalms serves as the symbol of the nourishing word of God, Stevens implies that the poetic word can revive that forgotten promise and become a new form of spiritual sustenance, the new idiom of the sun. This is so because poetry allies itself with the small, limited but consolingly real satisfactions of life, embodied by the living mouse in search of the honey-comb, rather than with the dead or blank truths of rationalized Puritan belief, which the modernists deemed a fiction unable to protect man against doubt and death. “If we are to eliminate systems we go along (and it is obvious that everyone is fairly busy doing that) we have got to replace them”, the poet adds in a letter (WSL 344), offering the honey-comb of the poetic word as one of the possible replacements.

In Moore’s “Steeple-Jack” and Stevens’ “Doctor of Geneva”, “Blue Buildings in the Summer Air”, the rage for a spiritual and moral order – “the imperishable bliss” of which Stevens dreams in “Sunday Morning” – is checked and undone by the equivocal and disordered minutiae of reality or the unreadable swells of the sublime. The church steeples and walls, symbolizing the rigid structures of the old belief, are deceptively white-washed, damaged, abandoned or on the verge of collapsing. Moore’s steeple-jack, an uncertain figure that might be either God or the Devil, in vain plants his scarlet signs of warning in the picturesque and not-so-innocent modern paradise. In Stevens’ “Doctor of Geneva”, “the unburgherly apocalypse” that makes the city clank and tremble turns out to be the result of the doctor’s dry catarrh and fails to bring the spirit of a new promise. The poem ends not with the reassertion of Absolute Logos but with a resigned and

helpless sigh – the adequate symbol of the Puritan mind’s helplessness in confrontation with the modern world, whose spiritual scripts are no longer underwritten by the almighty God. Nevertheless, facing the corruption and bankruptcy of the old religious ideals, both poets offer the aesthetic order of poetry to buttress the search for life’s meaning and to assuage the modern suspension of belief. “Poetry // Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns”, Stevens formulates his obligation in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (WSCP 167). In one of his essays, the poet expresses his trust in the power of language as a new source of finality and perfection as follows:

The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to the words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only in the power of the acutest poet to give them.

(Stevens NA 37)

One of the “acutest poets”, Moore joins Stevens in his search by showing a heightened, Düreresque care for the perfection of the word as an indicator of moral and spiritual energy behind things and human desires. Although the poet’s words promise no permanent truth as they welcome also the forces of change, contradiction and death, they nevertheless give life a significant shape and gracefully carry its secrets and impermanent truths. The poem, in Stevens’ words, “refreshes life”, becoming “an elixir, an excitation, a pure power” which “through candor, brings back a power again / That gives a candid kind to everything” (“Notes”, WSCP 382).

3.3. Ghostly Demarcations, Chameleonic Secrets, and Basilisk-Guarded Truths: The secretive and the spectral in the poems of Stevens and Moore

In the Book of Exodus (33: 18-20), frequently evoked by Derrida, Moses pleads with God to show himself, to which God answers: “You cannot see My face, for man cannot see Me and live”. The erinaceous nature and eccentric logic of poetic language, which acknowledges its own limits of revealing and avoids straightforward signification, seems especially adequate to convey that impossibility of facing and naming divinity and its other-

ness, because what it makes present is often partial, indirect, equivocal and insecure. The closer the poetic word gets to the ungraspable and the holy of Being and God, the more vulnerable it becomes. Courting mystery and threatened by the unpredictability and impossibility of its revelation, it undertakes a risk of loss and self-dissolution, often becoming inadequate, veiled or circumspect. As will be shown in the poems discussed in this subchapter, the disclosive character of Stevens' and Moore's language and form mirrors the elusive nature of the Divine, and enables the recollection and reinscription of that which is lost or longed for.

Poetry is the adequate idiom to give expression to the ineffability and secrecy of the divine. Derrida argues in his *Gift of Death* and *Cinders* that secret and non-knowing precipitate writing (GD 92, CIN 75) and sustain our desire for what is to come. "We must *tell* the secret, not reveal it", the philosopher continues his argument in *On the Name* (ON 7), convinced that literature should offer us "an experience of the secret" (*Points* 201) rather than its ultimate revelation. This idea of literature as an "exemplary" bearer and reserve of secrets, a form of expression which shows that something is hidden, is best conveyed in the following passage:

There is in literature, in the *exemplary* secret of literature, a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret. When all hypotheses are permitted, groundless and *ad infinitum*, about the meaning of a text, or the final intention of an author whose person is no more represented than non-represented by a character or by a narrator, by a poetic or fictional sentence, when these are detached from their presumed source and thus remain in secret (*au secret*), when there is no longer any sense in making decisions about some secret beneath the surface of a textual manifestation (and it is this situation which I would call text or trace), when it is the call (*appel*) of this secret, however, which points back to the other or to something else, when it is this itself which keeps our passion aroused, and holds to the other, then the secret impassions us. Even if there is none, even if it does not exist, hidden behind anything whatever. Even if the secret is no secret, even if there has never been a secret, a single secret. Not one.

(Derrida ON 29-30)

It is this capacity of literature to suggest and keep the secret, including the Absolute Secret of the Divine, that impassions writing, reading and interpretation of literary texts-traces. Driven by this passion, writers are compelled to push language to the limits of expression. Responding to the

“call” of *tout autre*, the impossible name of God, they need to find adequate names / traces to safeguard that secret and to let it slip away. “To call God’s name, to pray and weep and have a passion for God”, Caputo explains, “is to call for the *tout autre*, for something that breaks up the ho-hum homogeneity of the same and all but knocks us dead. The name of God is a name that calls for the other, that calls from the other, the name that the other calls, ... that calls for something new” (1997b: 113).

One of the most impassioned keepers of the ever-elusive secrets and traces of the divine is Wallace Stevens, whose poetry, although strongly expressive of religious doubt and disbelief, and bent on dissipating the phantoms of religious dogmas, is nevertheless haunted by their returns and re-apparitions, and driven by the messianic logic of a suspended revelation. Gods, the poet observes in his essay “Two or Three Ideas”, “are assumed to be full of the secret of things” (OP 206), and this capacity for secrecy is a strong aspect fuelling his own concept of poetry as a substitute of God. In Derrida’s words, “[t]hey are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet” (SM 176). Stevens’ poetry produces a similar impression, as if the poet could not quite exorcise those ghosts and their secrets from the House of his Supreme Fictions. In Canto II of “The Sail of Ulysses”, the poet thus articulates his belief in “a life beyond this present knowing”:

Yet always there is another life,
 A life beyond this present knowing,
 A life lighter than this present splendor,
 Brighter, perfected and distant away,
 Not to be reached but to be known,
 Not an attainment of the will
 But something illogically received,
 A divination, a letting down
 From loftiness, misgivings dazzlingly
 Resolved in dazzling discovery
 (OP 100)

Characteristically, the poet does not name one clear source of “another life”, but he nevertheless acknowledges the human need to sustain the belief in that inarticulate “otherness”, which might step down from the loftiness and dazzle us with its inconceivable splendor. What is more, the poet frequently uses the figure of the specter, shadow or trace, often in relation to the activity of reading and writing, thus creating a fertile ground for a

Derridian study of the spiritual and spectral in his work. In the poems “Domination of Black”, “In Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit”, “The Large Red Man Reading” and “The Reader”, the relationship between the ghostly and the poetic seems especially “intimate” and hence these works will be scrutinized in this subchapter for the signs of the spectral.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the poems enumerated above, I would like to invite the reader to a brief glimpse behind the curtains of Stevens’ short poem “The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician”, in which the poet opens his language up to the spectral and sets the proper mood for the encounter with the ghostly in his other poems:

It comes about that the drifting of these curtains
Is full of long motions; as the ponderous
Deflations of distance or as clouds
Inseparable from their afternoons;
Or the changing of light, the dropping
Of the silence, wide sleep and solitude
Of night, in which all motion
Is beyond us, as the firmament,
Up-rising and down-falling, bares
The last largeness, bold to see.

(WSCP 62)

To explain the working of the spectral and its “hauntology” (SM 11), Derrida borrows Marx’s phrase *es spukt*, which can be translated as “it ghosts”. Like Heidegger’s *es gibt*, which removes agency from the appearance of Being, it does not reveal the nature of the ghost or the source of its apparition, but suggests that something uncanny and indefinite is happening, something that eludes comprehension and language. This “ghosting”, Caputo observes, “slams against our thought and language, shatters our horizons of expectations, as a being that leaves us groping for words and puts whatever we mean to say to rout” (1997b: 146). Stevens’ poem seems to be leaning towards such a “ghosting”, as the language opens up “a scene of spectral apparitioning, the appearing without quite appearing” (Caputo 1997b: 145), in which we touch upon a secret without becoming privy to it. There is no doubt that “*es spukt*” in the House of Stevens’ metaphysician, for with the prolonged motions brought by the disappearing light and the silence that “drops” upon the nocturnal world, the trembling folds of the word-curtains mark the horizon, if not our fear,

of the unrepresentable. The eponymous metaphysician points to the transcendentalist script underlying the poem, the script that begs for the cosmic seeing power of Emerson's transparent eyeball, but Stevens subverts our expectations of the curtain's final opening and the ultimate dispersion of darkness, replacing them by the indefinite "folding" and "drifting": the "long motions", "deflations of distance", the motion of the afternoon clouds and "changes of light" that simultaneously affirm and drive off the impression of something "beyond" the limits of our vision. The undulating movement of the firmament has a strong apocalyptic aura, and these intangible, alternating shifts "bare / The last largeness", an unnamed presence on the verge of vanishing, too "bold to see", which cannot be faced directly nor pursued too closely, but whose presence can be felt in the obscure "entanglements" of natural imagery in the drifting thoughts of the metaphysician. In "A Collect of Philosophy", Stevens argues that poetry is to "make us realize that we are creatures, not of a part, which is our everyday limitation, but of a whole for which, for the most part we have as yet no language" (OP 189). As noted by Carroll, the last largeness, "a stark term of physical magnitude, must be regarded as a metaphor for the substratum or essence of things beyond any physical 'accidents' or qualities" (1987: 37). Too "bold to see", it also resists language and meaning; it is featureless, immeasurable and indefinable. It might be, as Carroll has it, "some shadowy absolute" (1987: 37), the last vestige of *mysterium tremendum*, or one of Stevens' versions of Derrida's "apocalypse[s] without apocalypse" (Derrida, AT 34), "a change not quite completed" (WSCP 456). The words which try to anchor and embrace this mystery simultaneously mark the boundary of the secret, beyond which language and our "curtained" vision cannot venture.

The floating motions of "The Curtains" are translated into something more spectral and secretive in Stevens' "Domination of Black" and "The Snow Man" – poems-enigmas in which the self is exposed to the totality of the non-transcendent metaphor – the eponymous blackness in the former and mind-freezing whiteness in the latter. When read together, they become two versions of a similar anxiety: a fear that there are no ghosts behind the bareness of the visible, no secrets but the finality of death behind the terrifying monolith or the obliteration of color. Although they do so in different ways, both poems raise the question whether we can survive and cope with the suspicion that we live in "island solitude, unsponsored, free" (WSCP 70).

If, as Caputo suggests, the ghostly “slams against our language and thought”, “Domination of Black” is a good instance of such “slamming”. In this poem, Stevens also places the Metaphysician safely inside the house, “at night / by the fire” (WSCP 8), and fills his fire-lit room with the long shadows of the autumnal twilight. Despite the initial sense of comfort and tranquility, the ghostly gradually creeps into this peaceful scene through the markedly “heavy” color of the hemlocks, the strange cry of the peacocks, the mysterious and apocalyptic gathering of the planets outside the window. Like the scholar in “Auroras”, the speaker “feels afraid”, having only the inadequate “turning” of words to withstand the night, which symbolizes death that “comes striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks” (WSCP 9):

I heard them cry – the peacocks.
Was it a cry against twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

The night is the symbol of the ultimate reality which is not validated by the spirit, that “cold vacancy / When the phantoms are gone”, of which Stevens writes in “An Evening Without Angels” (WSCP 137) and which is the subject of his “beholding” in “The Snow Man”. The darkness is, in Vendler’s words, “an absolute order” of death which “dominates despotically over every other magnitude, including nature, utterance, and mind itself” (Vendler 1984: 66). As noted by Bruce Ross, the two natural symbols – the peacocks and hemlocks¹⁷ – show the oscillation of the mind between the color and motion of the living forms and the blackness and stasis of death. The unsettling cry of the peacocks, which haunts all the stanzas, end-punctuating the first and the last one, is interpreted in traditional bestiaries

¹⁷ It is interesting to note, that in Keats’ “The Ode to the Nightingale” drinking hemlock is used as an imagined way of entering a state of changed consciousness that would enable the speaker to go beyond the material limitations of his being and to fly on the “viewless wings of Poesy”.

as either the voice of a demon, the call of a religious man to God for solace and forgiveness, or as “a soul that cries out in the ‘night of this world’ because it fears that it has lost its God-given grace” (Ross 1982: 41). The repeated cry might also symbolize the modernist mind’s grappling with the acceptance of mortality and chaos as necessary conditions of our humanity. Stevens’ own refusal to answer the question about the ultimate meaning of this cry leaves the reader with all those implications unresolved. The obsessive “turning” or “dance” of tropes, used defensively against the assault of blackness upon consciousness, further defers this resolution, exposing the gap between desire and figuration. The dance is meant to both mask and intensify the poet’s fear, which, in Harold Bloom’s words, “comes from a particular kind of seeing”, which “hears, because it hears a remembered cry”, with the disjunctive tropes pointing at once towards and against death (1977: 405). “[D]eath is always the name of a secret, since it signs the irreplaceable singularity”, Derrida argues in *Aporias* (AP 74). Realizing the limitations of rhetoric, Stevens repeats the name of death without divulging its ultimate secret. In a letter, he strongly discourages us from reading the poem too closely: “[a] mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it” (WSL 251).

The fear of the domination of black leads Stevens to imagine a god’s specter in the house in his 1944 poem “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit”:

If there must be a god in the house, must be,
Saying things in the rooms and on the stair,

Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor,
Or moonlight, silently, as Plato’s ghost

Or Aristotle’s skeleton. Let him hang out
His stars on the wall. He must dwell quietly.

He must be incapable of speaking, closed,
As those are: as light, for all its motion,

....

If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness

A vermillioned nothingness, any stick of the mass
Of which we are too distantly a part.

(WSCP 228)

“As soon as there is some specter”, Derrida notes, “hospitality and exclusion go together” (SM 177). In this poem the specter is an imagined god in the house of the metaphysician, but he too must “dwell quietly” and “move silently”, like a ghost, at once connected and disconnected from us, “a stick of the mass / Of which we are too distantly *a part*”. This “a-partness”, unobtrusive obtrusion, captures the aporetic nature of the spectral presence, its otherness which, as Derrida asserts, oscillates between participation and departure, distance and closeness, being and non-being, formlessness and form. “What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams?”, the poet asks in “Sunday Morning” (WSCP 67). Wishing it to partake also of “the comforts of the sun” (WSCP 67) and to step “barefoot into reality” (“Large Red Man...”, WSCP 228), Stevens makes his god sway between, on the one hand, the bodily and human, and, on the other, the alien, inhuman and remote. As a result, this strange deity is allowed to “say things on the stair”, “hang out his stars on the wall”, but at the same time it is reduced to “a coolness / A vermillioned nothingness”, “less and less human”, “closed” – an incommunicable mass, indifferent to the human voice and order of representation. The suspended communication indicates that Stevens’ god should remain secret and unreadable; and that his homecoming is simultaneously a withdrawal, an interrupted relation. As a secret, Derrida claims, “it doesn’t belong, it can never be at home or in its place” (GD 92).

When the poet invites the ghosts again in “The Large Red Man Reading”, it is to the non-place of literature, to the shelter / secret of poetry – “the great blue tabulae”:

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among
them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality.

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,
 The outlines of being and its expressing, the syllables of its law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,
 Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
 Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
 And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.
 (WSCP 423)

Here, the secret to be shared is the singularity of the poem of life and the poet's passion for it. To love life is to accept and love it as final and imperfect, without the absolute foundation, to feel the frozen ground with your bare feet, run your hand over the shriveled leaves and thorns, and to face mortality and the secret of death. The ghosts must return in literature, which for Derrida exists "*in place of the secret [au lieu du secret]*" (Derrida ON 28), but they need to announce themselves and leave traces in what they can no longer be to create the vantage point from which the experience of life, with all the marks of its fragility and finitude – "the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them" – takes on color and shape. "For there is no ghost", the French philosopher states, "there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of an invisible visibility" (Derrida SM 157). The other "cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality (mine and its)", and it becomes finite "as soon as it comes into language" (Derrida WD 114-115). Stevens brings the infinite spirit back to the finite form of his poem, with an intention of rendering it visible again in "outlines of being and its expressing". "[T]o keep alive is also to welcome mortality, the dead, the specters", Derrida argues in an interview, adding further that "exposing oneself to death and keeping the memory of the mortal and of the dead is a manifestation of life" (SQ 103). So are Stevens' ghosts and gods – committed to "the memory of the mortal", they emerge as the traces of the transcendental signified, lingering "within the difference between Life and Death..., and at bottom as Difference itself" (WD 115-116), remaining at the same time more bound to the actual reality. Hence, the poem becomes a doorway for the ghosts' return and resuscitation of their "sponsored hearts" in what Derrida calls the "*a-physical*" body of language" (SM 159). The change of color from the initial blue to purple in the penultimate stanza is significant here, for it suggests that under the red pulsations of Stevens' earthly poem there lies the tabula of memory filled with the "blue" spirit of the past's heaven.

The poet desires to reconnect the two tabulae and ground the ghosts in bare reality, to “stamp down their phosphorescent toes, tear off / The spitting tissues tight across the bones”, as he urges in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” (WSCP 155).

In “The Reader”, the relationship between the world, the book and the spirit is even more intimate and elusive, and here also Stevens creates the impression that if we chase the poem’s meaning too ardently, we might lose its inchoate secret:

All night I sat reading a book,
Sat reading as if in a book
Of somber pages.

It was autumn and falling stars
Covered the shriveled forms
Crouched in the moonlight.

No lamp was burning as I read,
A voice was mumbling, “Everything
Falls back to coldness,

Even the musky muscadines,
The melons, the vermilion pears
Of the leafless garden.”

The somber pages bore no print
Except the trace of burning stars
In the frosty heaven.

(WSCP 146-47)

Although there are no ghosts in the poem, the faint “rustle” of their presence is felt throughout, and one cannot resist the impression that the lines are haunted by some unspeakable secret, the “unsayable” that lies beneath the armed “skin” of this hedgehog-poem. This secrecy creates a peculiar bond between the writer and the reader, a bond of not-knowing confirmed by the poet’s identification with the figure of the reader. The quietude and frosty stillness of the natural imagery beckon us and the “I” of the poem to “read” the nocturnal sky and its uncertain content as a “book of somber pages”, a rebus-text which speaks to us in secret, communicating its elusive void, its “as if”. This text aims not at positing or fixing a transcendental signified but at a spectral “haunting” that en-

ables a momentary transcendence within the poetic. The deciphering of this rebus might not be possible, for the spectral pages of Nature “bear no print”, nor is there a lamp to illuminate the darkness and aid the eponymous poet-reader in upholding the connection with the lost Logos. The erasure of letters from the Book of Nature asks for a different kind of engagement – the reader is faced with the task of interpreting the illegible world and dealing with the shadow of truth, with “the trace of burning stars” whose underside might be only darkness, coldness and death. If “a poem is a meteor”, as Stevens asserts in one of the *Adagia* (OP 158), the act of reading and writing poetry thus becomes here an act of sustained faith, a flickering of light in darkness, a belief in the pursuit of truth despite its uncertain and fading trail. Thus, a poem is a shield against the apocalyptic voice portending the world’s “falling back to coldness”. It preserves the traces or echoes of something that escapes reason and conceptualization, a fragile mystery encrypted and revealed in the words and imagery that pass into and out of the poem’s darkness and negativity. The word “somber”, which appears in the first and the last stanza, and derives from the Latin cluster of ‘sub’ (under) and ‘umbra’ (shadow), and which in Spanish means also a ghost, creates a spectral frame of shadow and gloom, implying that words cannot restore the original transparency or revive and illumine the “shriveled forms / Crouched in the moonlight”. However, their power lies in the ability to “shadow” and “ghost”, to enact the work of mourning, hence to contain coldness, silence, death and nothingness, and yet protect the warm memory of life – the credences of summer lingering in “the musky muscadines / The melons, the vermilion pears”. In the frozen, decreed landscape of the poem, the words gather apocalyptic shadows, but at the same time they follow the traces of fading light.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida states that all writing is phantom-driven, for “everyone reads, acts, writes with *his* or *her* ghosts” (SM 139). As I have attempted to show, Stevens’ ghosts stay close to the living flesh of language and haunt “the vatic lines” and emptied heavens of his poems, corroborating Derrida’s claim that “the life of language is also the life of specters” (SQ 103). Stevens’ specters originate in the poetics of the romantic sublime, which claimed a direct link between Nature, the Spirit and Logos, but in the post-transcendental world they need to seek refuge in the fragile demarcations of the poetic word.

In one of his last poems, “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside”, the poet significantly returns to the image of the church: here it is an old building, “once an immense success / It rose loftily and stood massively” (WSCP 529), but somewhat decrepit now, with “the closed-in smell of hay”, the altar overgrown by a sumac, and “reverberations leak[ing] and lack[ing] among holes”(529). And yet, characteristically for the poet, although left to ruin and waste, this once sacred space is haunted from within by the specters of belief, intelligible symbols and rituals of faith; and we catch the speaker relentlessly looking for “a sign of meaning in the meaningless”, for “an ember yes among its cindery noes”. There is no hope for “radiance of dead blaze” in this God-abandoned edifice falling out of use in the civilization “made of outward blank”, and yet, accompanying the poet in his nostalgic walk around the ruins, we cannot but listen carefully for the “sacred syllable rising from sacked speech.” Just like in the earlier “Blue Buildings” and “Doctor of Geneva”, the poet finds spiritual vitality elsewhere – in “the time’s [im]perfections”, the chapel of human breath that is “no sign of life but life, / itself” (529). This affirmation of life and becoming – the “vivid element” of the present, when the poet himself was confronting his own death, testifies to his unwavering trust in the satisfactions of the non-transcendental reality, of the “actual as it is” (529). And yet, “the cindery noes” and the “dead blaze” shine through the poet’s affirmation, cutting through the patched up “leaks and lacks” of modernist belief. “There is something that remains without remaining, which is neither present nor absent, which destroys itself, which is totally consumed, which is a remainder without remainder”, Derrida writes of ashes and cinders (*Points* 208), and Stevens’ backward glance at the ruined church seems to carry a similar meaning. An act of memory, this rummaging among the “cinders of noes” in this poem becomes an act of mourning; affirmation of life rises out of the experience of the irretrievable loss and awareness of death. Although the speaker remains outside the church, as the title of the poem reveals, and allies himself with the “dizzle-dazzle” of the actual, the work of mourning keeps the ghosts of the past beliefs alive, and the poet remains always caught in the spiritual tradition of his culture.¹⁸

¹⁸ Stevens was haunted by his Protestant heritage and the questions of belief to the very end of his life. His very last poems, such as “A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror,” “The Old Lutheran Bells at Home”, or “Reply to Papini”, directly echo the spiritual doubts and anxieties thematized in the earlier „Doctor of Geneva”, showing, however, an

Moore's poetry also creates a welcoming space for the secretive, unrepresentable and mysterious, but, as Costello rightly notes, her romanticism "is not appareled in celestial light", nor does it rely on "monumental gestures, vistas, and emotions". Her specters, the critic adds further on, belong to a more "ambiguous genus" than those of Stevens, as they derive from "the shimmering minutiae of nature", and "slide freely between the natural and supernatural, overlapping with the mythical strangeness of unicorns, dragons, and fairies" (1981: 134, 136). To introduce some of Moore's most intriguing "specters", I suggest another glimpse at her animal poems – in this case "The Plumet Basilisk", "To a Chameleon" and "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns". In all three poems

attempt at refurbishing his old ideas of belief. In a letter to his Irish correspondent Thomas McGreevey, written in 1951, the poet confesses that he needs time "to make up [his] mind about God, say, before it is too late" (WSL 763). T can be treated thus as an account of the poet's struggle to redefine his relationship to God and faith in the face of death (Stevens died in 1955). In "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home", the eponymous bells evoke the poet's memories of the German Lutheran Church on Walnut Street in his hometown Reading. Their tolling not only summons the past and his religious ancestry, but it is persistently calling the poet back to faith and to the promise of "the smooth Paradise": "the voices of the pastors calling / In the names of St. Paul and of the halo-John / And of other holy and learned men". The summons, however, seem to have lost their impact due to the sectarian divisions within the Christian Church – "And the bells belong to the sextons, after all, / As they jangle and dangle and kick their feet" (462). As a result, faith, institutionalized and claimed by various denominations and creeds, is no longer a vital experience; rather it is heard only as "the long echoes in long sleep" (461-462). The bells, though resonant with voices that try to break the spiritual sleep and revive genuine faith, fail to produce a more lasting song. However, their sound keeps haunting Stevens' memory and returns in another poem "A Golden Woman in the Silver Mirror", where it "rattles with fear in unreflecting leaves" (WSCP 460). In "Reply to Papini", Stevens addresses the Italian poet and philosopher, Giovanni Papini, who converted from atheism to Catholicism, and is known for a series of letters, via the persona of Pope Celestin VI, to poets, women, scientists, historians, in which he exhorts them to return to Christian belief and undertake their spiritual vocation. Stevens evokes Papini's summons in the epigraph opening the poem which pleads with the poets that they "cease ... from being the astute calligraphers of congealed daydreams, the hungers of cerebral phosphorescences" (WSCP 446). Stevens seems critical of this exhortation, as he asserts that "[t]he way through the world / Is more difficult to find than the way beyond it" (WSCP 446). With the world growing more complex and profound, the poet sees his task not as one who "makes orotund consolations" in the midst of spiritual ruin, but rather as someone who "shares the confusions of intelligence" and recognizes "the heroic effort to live expressed / As victory" (WSCP 446-7).

Moore employs actual and mythical creatures as the figures of unknowability, uniqueness and elusiveness. The basilisk, chameleon and unicorn share important features – they are ontologically ambiguous, almost magical; they move between concealment and unconcealment, and possess an uncanny allure beyond representation. What is more, they cannot be seen, captured, or hunted, and as such they are perfect vehicles for Moore's spiritual pursuits.

The Basilisk is known in bestiaries and mythologies as the king of serpents, whose mere look can kill a man (White 1954: 168).¹⁹ It symbolizes an untouchable, unfathomable power that cannot be represented, since any attempt at faithful representation means death either to the onlooker or the beast. Moore is clearly interested in this aspect of the symbol, as the problem of seeing, representation and camouflage is central to her poem entitled "The Plumet Basilisk". A devotee of "the imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (MCP 267), she mixes the fantastic and the real in the poem, moving swiftly between the two realms and revealing the interdependence of the natural and divine qualities embodied by the basilisk. Respectful of the myth, she nevertheless adjusts it to the spiritual needs of her times by choosing for her examination the ancient Basilisk's contemporary cousins – the plumet basilisk, and other related lizards whose geographical habitat embraces South America, China, New Zealand and even Copenhagen. From the beginning, however, the basilisk, although scaled down to a less threatening and more realistic dimension, presides over the poem as its absolute king, emerging as a quasi-fantastic creature endowed with almost supernatural agility, swiftness and opalescent charm – "the Ruler of Rivers, Lakes, and Seas / invisible or visible" (MCP 20), amphibious king, "one of the quickest lizards in the world" (22), "the living firework" (20), "inhabiting // fire eating into air" (24), and distinguished by "quicksilver ferocity" (24). Significantly, the poet shields us from a direct and deadly confrontation with the creature by a series of dense descriptive screens that grant us only evanescent and imperfect glimpses of the animal. Throughout the poem, the basilisk is seen on the run, disappearing, metamorphosing or

¹⁹ The whole entry on the Basilisk runs as follows: "The BASILISK is translated in Greek and Latin as 'Regulus' (a prince) because it is the king of serpents--so much so, that people who see it run for their lives, because it can kill them merely by its smell. Even if it looks at a man, it destroys him. At the mere sight of a Basilisk, any bird which is flying past cannot get across unhurt, but, although it may be far from the creature's mouth, it gets frizzled up and is devoured" (White 1954: 168).

hidden: leaping into the stream, running, flying, floating, swimming, “traveling rapidly upward” (23), “hiding as the chieftain with gold body / hid in / / Guatavita Lake” (20), as if its existence depended on its ultimate unknowability and its constant motion. The chieftain, as Moore comments in the notes to the poem, belongs to the legend of El Dorado, according to which the king, who was gilded every year to symbolize the sun – the supreme deity – and subsequently plunged into water to wash off the gilt as an offering to the goddess of the Guatavita Lake (MCP 264). The association of the basilisk with this mythic ritual and the solar king enhances the aura of mystery, suggesting that beneath its phosphorescent skin, its visual opulence, lies the true secret / spirit of its divinity. As Hadas aptly notes, “[t]he hidden body of the king ... is the central metaphor of the whole poem; this magical golden body that is ritually renewed by plunging to the depths of mystery and lost treasure, and that brings a power back with it” (1977: 136).

In *The Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that the spirit assumes a body and incarnates itself in the specter (SM 4). In Moore’s poem, this spirit is also “gilded” and camouflaged by the specters of complex sensual imagery, as the following lines demonstrate:

As by a Chinese brush, eight green
bands are painted on
 the tail – as piano keys are barred
by five black stripes across the white. This octave of faulty
decorum hides the extraordinary lizard
till night-fall

(MCP 22)

(...)

 This is our Tower-of-London
jewel that the Spaniards failed to see, among the feather capes

and hawk’s-head moths and black-chinned
 hummingbirds; the innocent, rare, gold-
defending dragon

(MCP 23-24)

(...)

Thinking himself hid among the yet unfound jade ax-heads,
 silver jaguars and bats, and amethysts and
polished iron, gold in a ten-ton chain, and pearls the size of pigeon-
eggs

(MCP 24)

The visual precision of the first example subtly yields to the less definite world of sounds and music – an association on which the poet builds in the second part of the basilisk’s portrait. Moore expresses her trust in the revelatory potential of listening in the following words: “Is it not true that ‘God is messageless’ unless one listens?”, adding that “[o]ne should above all, learn to be silent . . . ; to make possible promptings from on high” (MMCP 371). Thus, in the course of the basilisk “chase”, as the poet follows the creature into the night’s “welcome dark” (MCP 22), the animal-king becomes less visible and more difficult to observe. Diminishing the perceptible that dominates the first two sections, in the next two sections Moore invites us to listen as she foregrounds the aural, assaulting her readers with the uncanny sounds of the tropical forest: “the ground bass of the military drum”, “the squeak of bagpipes”, the castanets, the sound of the bow, kettledrums, “the hollow whistled monkey notes”, the bass strings of the harp, “the rattle” of rain, the nightingale’s song, and other “minute noises” of the “wood’s acoustic shell” (MCP 22-23). This “faulty decorum”, this bizarre cacophony of the night, so ingenuously orchestrated by Moore to imply the “promptings from on high”, ultimately distracts our attention from the basilisk and serves to “hide the extraordinary lizard”, suggesting also that the sound, like the secret of the lizard king, will escape every cage.

Due to the descriptive overload, created by the thick web of Moore’s favorite hyphenated modifiers and complex visual and aural promptings, and fuelled further by references to a specific locale and by dynamic verbs which delineate the lizard’s movements, the symbol is continuously destabilized and diffused. Costello argues that “the more details are compounded, the more the creature seems to recede, until his empirical reality is altogether in doubt” (1981: 136). As noted also by Jennifer Leader, “the lizard resists our steady inspection, metamorphosing as the poem progresses from animal to divinity to object of art and back again through metonymic transmogrification” (2005: 331). Clearly enjoying the basilisk’s “faulty decorum”, which allows it to elude our predatory curiosity, Moore seems to ally her readers with the Spaniards who “failed to see” the jewel-like beauty of the creature while busying themselves with the conquest of more spectacular and immediately graspable riches of the American land. Her description, which continuously oscillates between sight and oversight, the natural and the supernatural, the abstract and the concrete, seems to imply that the basilisk, like Melville’s *Moby Dick*, cannot be captured, be-

cause with each line it is less and less material, at once present and absent, real and mythic, an amphibious master of two oppositional and unpredictable forces – water and fire. Visible only as a “blazing driftwood” (MCP 20), “a faint shadow fixed on silk” (22) or an opalescent fluctuation of color – “the fire opal shows blue and green” (20), “black opal emerald opal emerald” (23) – and the ontologically dubious mixture of “man and fish” (23), the basilisk can thus be treated as Moore’s version of modernity’s “fugitive god”, a spiritual force that has survived the materialist conquest of America and which has now found its new habitat in the secretive space of Moore’s beautiful poem. Reminiscent of Melville’s classifications of whales, from which the white whale emerges as the most powerful and mysterious, Moore also compares the basilisk to its two cousins – the Malay dragon, “the true divinity of Malay”, “a serpent-dove peculiar / to the East”, “conferring wings on what it grasps” (21), and the tuatera, “the frilled lizard” (21) native to New Zealand – endowing each of them with a different quality of the spirit. The Malay dragon is, in Costello’s insightful formulation, “an aerial idealist of dragons”, an elusive and timeless ideal, a godlike being defined through its absence, while the alligator-like tuatera stands for earthly sturdiness, “the condition of density, firmness, complacency, dormancy, tradition, time” (Costello 1981: 141). When juxtaposed with the two, the basilisk seems a truly Mooresque (and to some extent Melvillian) creature: atopic (non-localizable), flexible, changeful and capable of assuming various colors and forms, and able to skillfully “cop[y] each / digression of the shape” (MCP 24). Donald Hall interestingly observes that while the parts devoted to the Malay dragon and the tuatera sound more like encyclopedia entries, those presenting the basilisk possess “the mystery of a witch’s incantation” (1974: 86). Chameleonic and diffused in the plurality of its forms, this “gold-defending dragon” that can be “interchangeably man and fish”, remains intangible, “more a spirit than a thing”, as Hadas asserts, moving like “noiseless music” (23), “recoiling from the hand” (24), and receding phantomlike out of sight, and beyond our sensual and cognitive grasp. In the poet’s own words, it “can stand in a receding flattened / S – small, long and vertically serpentine, or sagging, / span the bushes in a fox’s bridge” (22). When “beset”, captured or confronted, however, it entirely loses its agility and elusive aura, turning “stiff and somewhat heavy like fresh putty” (22). The basilisk can perform his “ghosting” only when allowed to remain indefinite and secretive, watched from a distance and chased only with the imagination.

To protect the basilisk's secret, in the final lines of the poem Moore wraps it in a careful "cocoon" of spectral images and sibilant sounds, and watches him disappear like a ghost in water:

he is alive there
in his basilisk cocoon beneath
the one of living green; his quicksilver ferocity
quenched in the rustle of his fall into the sheath
which is the shattering sudden splash that marks his temporary
loss.

(MCP 24)

In "A Silkworm of One's Own", Derrida defines the poem as "a sentence in suspense which flaps its wings at birth, like the silk-worm butterfly above the cocoon" (Silk 321). For Moore, as suggested in the above-quoted passage, the cocoon is another metaphor of armor protecting the poem's fragile message, which is kept alive and stirring beneath this shielding cover. The ghostly sequence of trace-words "rustle"- "fall"- "shattering"- "splash"- "loss" is a Derridian "sentence in suspense", which once again displaces the basilisk truth and strikes the ultimate blow to the surface of the mimetic mirror with which the poet tried to capture and arrest the sublimity of the animal. As a mark of this break, the densely visual recedes again in the ultimate lines, yielding to the aural – the "spectral rumor" (Derrida SM 169), or "rustle" of sounds which mark the animal-king's power of disappearance. Accepting his "temporary" plunge into his own destabilized reflection, the poet lets the basilisk go, leaving her readers with the phosphorescent shimmer and the "noiseless music" of her poem, whose lines are nevertheless haunted by that splash and the rustle of the golden king's ineffable presence. Pursuing the basilisk to his invisibility, Moore closes her poem with the words "temporary / loss", which paradoxically protect the supernatural as they articulate, in Derrida's terms, "this furtive, ungraspable visibility of the invisible", "this being-there of an absent or departed one" (SM 5), the "sensuous-non-sensuous" (SM 125). The body of the basilisk in this final gesture becomes the specter – "the shattering sudden splash" which, as Hadas observes, is a metaphor of the poem that touches the reader with its quicksilver magic, revealing "a kind of loss" that nevertheless brings peace, because it is at once a promise of return (1977: 141).

Moore's interest in the spiritual and the power of its (dis)appearance takes on a different but no less elusive shape in her "Sea Unicorns and

Land Unicorns”. Here the poet also resorts to an animal symbol, the unicorn – another creature of mythical provenance, “a puzzle to the hunters”, “the haughtiest of the beasts” (MCP 78), whose existence is even more hypothetical than that of the basilisk. As noted by Odell Shepard in *The Lore of the Unicorn*, an in-depth study of the myth, the creature’s mysterious origin, “leaving a wide field of speculation and surrounding even the facts of which we are certain with the bands of twilight, is one of the legend’s evident charms” (2008: 15). What transpires out of various versions of the legend, is that the unicorn, like the basilisk, is a unique and unfathomable creature, impossible to sedate and capture with the powers of man, even with the aid of the most sophisticated weapons and quarries. The legend has it that the only way of approaching this beautiful creature is a stratagem involving a virgin, whose scent lures the animal, enchanting it and causing it to lose its ferocity and thus become easier to slay. An incarnation of purity, endurance, sacrifice and innocence, it has been adopted by the Church as an allegorical representation of the divinity of Jesus Christ, whereas the virgin-capture story has been incorporated into the cult of the Virgin Mary. *The Physiologus*, a Greek bestiary dated to the second century AD, “a curious work of Christianized natural history” (Jeffrey 1992: 794) which gathers descriptions of animals and fantastic creatures along with their symbolic meanings, presents the unicorn as an animal “totally set apart” in the medieval tradition. Its horn mirrors the unity of God and Christ, whereas its exceptional beauty, shrewdness and incorruptibility further validate the association with the Son of God, for “neither principalities, powers, thrones, nor dominations can comprehend him, nor can hold him” (Jeffrey 1992: 51). In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis explains the source of the theological connection with the figure of Christ:

[T]he unicorn is a beast too strong for any hunter to take; but if you set a virgin before him he loses all his ferocity, lays down his head in her lap, and sleeps. Then we can kill him. It is hard to believe that any Christian can think for long about this exquisite myth without seeing in it an allegory of the Incarnation and Crucifixion.

(Lewis quoted in Wriglesworth 2006: 28-29)

The Book of Beasts provides a more comprehensive understanding of this allegorical link:

Our Lord Jesus Christ is also a Unicorn spiritually, about whom it is said: "And he was beloved like the Son of the Unicorns". And in another psalm: "He hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his son David". The fact that it has just one horn on its head means what he himself said: "I and the Father are One". Also, according to the Apostle: "The head of Christ is the Lord". It says that he is very swift because neither Principalities, nor Powers, nor Thrones, nor Dominations could keep up with him, nor could Hell contain him, nor could the most subtle Devil prevail to catch or comprehend him; but, by the sole will of the Father, he came down into the virgin womb for our salvation. It is described as a tiny animal on account of the lowliness of his incarnation, as he said himself: "Learn from me, because I am mild and lowly of heart". It is like a kid or scapegoat because the Saviour himself was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and from sin he condemned sin. The Unicorn often fights with elephants, and conquers them by wounding them in the belly.

(White 1954: 21)

Moore explores all the allegorical resonances of the legend, foregrounding however the "miraculous elusiveness", unconquerability and non-representational strangeness of the creature:

So wary as to disappear for centuries and reappear,
yet never to be caught,
the unicorn has been preserved
by an unmatched device
wrought like the work of expert blacksmiths –
this animal of that one horn
throwing itself upon which head foremost from a cliff,
it walks away unharmed;
proficient in this feat which, like Herodotus,
I have not seen except in pictures.
Thus this strange animal with its miraculous elusiveness,
has come to be unique,
"impossible to take alive",
tamed only by a lady inoffensive like itself –
as curiously wild and gentle;
"as straight and slender as the crest,
or antlet of the one-beam'd beast".

(MCP 78-79)

The poet admits that the unicorn can be known only in imperfect pictures and descriptions, and her own representation testifies to the impossibility of

taking and seeing it “alive”. “Upon the printed page, / also by word of mouth, / we have a record of it all”, the poet observes further (MCP 79), implying that our knowledge of this marvelous beast is the stuff of dreams, and that this knowledge remains unreliable and flawed. In the first stanza, Moore’s unicorn is seen with the eyes of “the cartographers of 1539”, who recorded their meeting with the “mighty monoceroses” “defiantly revolving / in such a way that / the long keel of white exhibited in tumbling, / disperses giant weeds” (MCP 77); in the second part, the creature emerges “upon embroideries / enwrought with ‘polished garlands’ of agreeing difference – / thorns, ‘myrtle rods, and shafts of bay,’ / ‘cobwebs, and knotts, and mulberries’ / of lapis-lazuli and pomegranate and malachite” (MCP 77); in the last one, it is “etched like an equine monster of an old celestial map / beside a cloud or dress of Virgin Mary blue, / improved ‘all over slightly with snakes of Venice gold, / and silver, and some O’s” (MCP 79).²⁰

The painted maps, embroideries and quotations out of which the poem is woven – and which include such sources as Pliny, Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Olaus Magnus’ *History of the Goths and Swedes*, Violet A. Wilson’s *Queen Elizabeth’s Maids of Honor*, Herodotus, anonymous poem from *Punch* magazine, Leigh Hunt’s *Autobiography* (Notes, MCP 274) – create a rich and confusing tapestry which mixes fact and fantasy, evoking at the same time the old artworks as well as historical and geographical records which popularized the legend.²¹ In this way Moore also tries to hide and preserve the unicorn from the ferocious hunters and their dogs, “persistent in pursuit of it as if it could be caught” (MCP 78). The disparate

²⁰ In *The Dictionary of Biblical Tradition* we can find a mention of the most important depictions of the unicorn, including etchings, Byzantine manuscripts, altar pieces, frescoes, stained glass, and tapestries. Among the latter are the tapestry in the Gerona Cathedral, a Flemish tapestry in the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, tapestries at the Cluny Monastery in Paris, and the most spectacular and famous series of seven tapestries illustrating the Holy Hunt, now in the Cloisters, in New York. (see Jeffrey 1992: 795).

²¹ As Roger Caillois states, “[a]t the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century, and then during the Renaissance and up to the dawning of the nineteenth century, the unicorn was a favorite theme for sculpture and tapestry in the Christian world” (1982: 2). It is also noteworthy that William Carlos Williams uses the unicorn tapestries from the Cloisters in the last book of his epic *Paterson*. The poet, who rarely uses foreign symbols and allusions in his work, employs the French tapestries as the symbol of the imagination and memory which weaves together the past and the present, the mythical and the local, the New and the Old World. For a detailed study of the symbol in Williams’ work, see Louis L. Martz “The Unicorn in *Paterson*” (1986: 11-27).

“threads” of the fabric serve to emphasize the otherness of the unicorn and contribute to a sense of wonder and endless discovery which propels Moore’s interest in the natural as well as the supernatural. As Hadas notes, the poet employs those references “in order to get across the sort of message that leaves her speechless” (1977: 48). The references are also meant to display literature’s complicity in perpetuating this wonder and misleading its over-insistent followers, allowing the unicorn to “disappear for centuries and reappear, / yet never to be caught” (MCP 78). The quotational composition of the poem dissimulates mystery and thus reveals the power of literature as a secret without truth, offering us a rare experience of the phenomenon that can never be known. In the ultimate stanza, Moore juxtaposes the relentless pursuers of the unicorn’s secret with the tender and non-possessive curiosity of the virgin, who is – as already suggested – “in-offensive like itself – as curiously wild and gentle” (MCP 78). In the imagined encounter of these two innocuous and incorruptible creatures, equally curious and respectful of each other, neither the mystery nor the unique sublimity of the unicorn seem to be threatened.

Among Moore’s ontologically indefinite beings with a strong “spectral” propensity, the chameleon – the absolute master of disguise – holds a special position. The poet returns to it in several poems and frequently employs metaphors of chameleonic change and camouflage. Various references to the animal can be found in “The Plumet Basilisk”, “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing”, “To Disraeli on Conservatism”, and “Saint Nicholas”.²² The latter poem is a letter to Santa Claus, in which the speaker expresses his / her wish to be given a chameleon:

Saint Nicholas,

 might I, if you can find it, be given
a chameleon with tail
that curls like a watch spring; and vertical
on the body – including the face – pale

²² Moore also reveals her interest in the literary potential of all serpents and lizards in her essays. The following passage from an August 1927 *Dial* article manifests this fascination: “A certain ritual of awe-animistic and animalistic need not, however, be effaced from our literary consciousness. The serpent as a motive in art, as an idea, as beauty, is surely not beneath us, as we see it in the stone and the gold hamadryads of Egypt; in the turtle zoomorphs, feathered serpent columns, and coiled rattlesnakes of Yucatan; in the silver-white snakes, ‘chameleon lizards,’ and stone dragons of Northern Siam” (MMCP 187).

tiger-stripes, about seven;
 (the melanin in the skin
 having been shaded from the sun by thin
 bars; the spinal dome
 beaded along the ridge
 as if it were platinum)?
 (MCP 196)

The wish testifies to the poet's fondness for the creatures that challenge visibility and dissolve the boundaries between the perceptible and the imperceptible. However, the exactness of her description is wittily undone by the defiant "if you can find it", suggesting that the privilege of possessing the chameleon is an impossible wish. The next stanza reinforces the impression that Moore's desire is on the order of an "imaginary possession", for, doubting Saint Nicholas' searching abilities, the poet asks for an equally bizarre substitute:

If you can find no striped chameleon,
 might I have a dress or suit –
 I guess you have heard of it – of *qiviut*
 (MCP 196)

Qiviut is a luxurious variety of wool, produced of the inner fur layer of the muskox, a rare Arctic mammal, considered one of the few survivors of the ice age, who "has escaped extinction by some quirk of fate and maintains a tenuous foothold in the modern world" (Lent 1999: 6). By adding the moon to her wish list in the next stanza, Moore betrays the true nature of her desire: "[t]he moon should come here. Let him / make the trip down, spread on my dark floor some dim / marvel" (MCP 196). That "dim marvel" is the spectral key to the poet's animal "hauntology", for what she seeks in the chameleon and its imperfect substitutes is the intangible presence of something unknown, the aura of the divine and the marvelous released through their imaginary rather than real possession. Writing of Wallace Stevens, Moore observes that "a poet may be a wall of incorruptibleness against violating the essential aura of contributory vagueness" (MMCP 348). Like Stevens, "America's chief conjurer" (MMCP 348), Moore protects that aura, appointing the chameleon its metaphoric guardian.

Yet, in "To a Chameleon", initially titled "You Are Like the Realistic Product of an Idealistic Search for Gold at the Foot of the Rainbow", Moore grants us the privilege of the chameleon's momentary appearance,

turning the poem into her tribute to the animal which best captures the qualities most valuable for the poet:

Hid by the august foliage and fruit
of the grape-vine
twine
your anatomy
round the pruned and polished stem,
Chameleon.
Fire laid upon
an emerald as long as
the Dark King's massy
one,
could not snap the spectrum up for food as you have done.
(MCP 179)

The basilisk was seen mainly in motion, a strategy used to reinforce its elusiveness; the unicorn, in turn, was available only as an imperfect representation and emphasized the delightful absurdity of hunting it; however, the chameleon's mystery lies elsewhere. As can be gleaned from a dictionary of animal symbolism, the chameleon "seems to have supernatural capabilities of transformation, and it is one of those creatures whose seemingly primordial appearance gives it the reputation for wisdom and spiritual knowledge" (Werness 2003: 82). In some cultures, it is even believed that the chameleon is an intermediary between man and gods (Werness 2003: 82). Moore is clearly fascinated with the chameleon's liminal position between being and non-being, along with its power of becoming invisible at a change of his surroundings and assuming different hues by "snapping the spectrum up for food". It is its ability to transform and transcend itself by subverting or entirely collapsing the boundaries between itself and its environment that makes this creature exceptional in the poet's eyes. Equipped with chromatophore cells, which can easily relocate the pigment in the lizard's skin and recreate the color of its surroundings, the chameleon is magically displaced by remaining exactly in the same place. This unique alliance with light, which led the ancient observers to conclude that the animal actually fed on it, enables its concurrent translucence and disappearance, binding it at once to the empirical and the spectral.

In "To a Chameleon", Moore foregrounds the chameleon's gift for perfect camouflage and its capacity to blend in with the background to the

point of disappearance. “[W]e value in style”, confesses the poet in “To a Snail”, “the principle that is hid” (MCP 85), betraying the source of her fascination. The chameleon, a golden treasure from “the foot of the rainbow”, as the first title reveals, is skillfully “hid” in the center of the poem’s meandering type. Additionally, the graphic and syllabic form recreates the creature’s flexible spiral shape, “twining round the pruned and polished stem”. In the first part of the poem, the words “spiral” down as if clinging to the vanishing lizard, absorbed or “snapped” finally by the unexpected “flash” of the chameleon’s (dis)appearance. The effect of this imperfect “clinging” to the receding animal is enhanced by the perfect rhyme of “vine” and “twine”, which attracts our attention to the coiled shape of the creature. The unrhymed interim in lines three and four breaks this alliance, hinting at the impossible description of the chameleon, which fades away among the “august foliage” and “the fruit / of the grapevine”, stealing their identity and color (the latter is significantly not mentioned) to avoid detection. In the second part, the chameleon “untwines” itself back into vision, showing for a brief moment its fiery colors in a rhymed dimeter couplet “Chameleon / Fire laid upon”, whose opalescent emerald-like play is checked first by the enjambments following “laid upon” and, in the penultimate line, by the mysterious light-swallowing figure of the “Dark King”, pulling us deeper into the poem’s space of “dim marvel”. The emerald, even the most “massy” one – Moore’s poem seems to suggest – cannot equal the spiritual firelight absorbed and reflected by the chameleon. Moore does not gloss the “Dark King”, leaving its shadow hovering over the poem’s ultimate significance.

The basilisk, the unicorn and the chameleon join the hedgehog family as Moore’s perfect incarnations of the poetic ideal, which is the spectral interplay between the visible and the invisible, resulting in the “aura of contributory vagueness” evident in Stevens’ style, which Moore praises. The bizarre creatures intimate the presence of something beyond our cognition, of a spiritual value whose source is not necessarily Christian, although, as her ethical stance as well as her metaphors and references subtly indicate, the poet’s work remains within the gravitational pull of Christian culture and Puritan sensibility, which recognizes spiritual meaning in the outer appearance of things.²³ David Hall explains the matter as follows:

²³ Geoffrey Hartman sees Moore as a poet whose work bears “the clear identifying mark of the Puritan”. The essence of that mark is her “extreme reverence for created

This is not the Christianity of churches and should not be spoken of in the language of orthodoxy. It is perhaps the spirit of mystery that informs all religions in their unorganized stages, and remains a minor unorthodox – even heretic – strain within some religious orders. It is a recognition of spirit, a celebration of what cannot be directly perceived. A great deal of Miss Moore's most deeply felt poetry can be seen as a coming to terms with this mystery.

(Hall 1974: 164)

Moore's poetry treats of mysteries and the spiritual without clarifying their source. Her chameleonic poems ask us not to renounce the belief in the misted enchantments of the world, even though we must persist in the post-romantic reality, in which the spiritual center "cannot hold" and the church steeples are "gilded" with false beliefs. All the animal poems discussed here imply that nature, in its ungraspable capacity for metamorphosis and surprise, preserves the traces of a divine event and reveals, in momentary clearings, "the (divine) principle that is hid". The strange measures of retreat and camouflage mastered by all of Moore's mystery-bearers testify to the (un)concealedness of divine being, which can be seen from an askew perspective, or – in St. Paul's words – "through a mirror in enigma" (Cor 13: 32).

In his "Sketch of the Ultimate Politician", Stevens writes:

There is a total building and there is
A total dream. There are words of this
Words, in a storm, that beat around the shapes.
...
There is a building stands in a ruinous storm,
A dream interrupted out of the past,
From beside us, from where we have yet to live.
(WSCP 335-336)

"A total building" and "a total dream" represent the old structure of ideas and faith. The structure had been broken by the ruinous storm of change and disbelief that left the earth deserted and spiritually incomplete, rendering the words which supported it inadequate and useless, capable only of futile "beating around the shapes". The modern man has

things coupled with extreme distrust of the self". Nature for the Puritans is God's text which man is obliged to read, but the fallen condition of humanity makes this reading imperfect and unreliable (1980: 67).

to learn how to live in this “interrupted dream” and adjust his “failing speech” (WSCP 336) to its discontinuities, shadings and imperfections. The answer to this loss is poetry, but a poetry which remembers and preserves the ruins and ghosts of the past, which allows the past spirits, “the dreamers buried in our sleep” (“Comedian”, WSCP 39) to “picnic in the ruins that we leave” (“Dutch Graves”, WSCP 293) and to occupy the “somber pages” of our books (“The Reader” WSCP 146). “[T]he paradox”, according to Perloff, “is that Stevens’ denial of the past as not only dead but deadly goes hand in hand with an inability to escape it” (1985: 19). The observation can be easily applied to Stevens’ denial of the consolations of the divine – the more he renounces the credences of the past, the more poignant their absence seems.

In a review of Stevens’ *Owl’s Clover*, Moore perceptively notes that “[d]espite the awareness of the world of sense, one notices the frequent recurrence of the word ‘heaven.’ In each clime the author visits, and under each disguise, the dilemma of tested hope confronts him” (MMCP 249). “In a world without heaven to follow” – Stevens himself worries in “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” – “the stops / Would be endings, more poignant than partings, profounder / And that would be saying farewell, repeating farewell / Just to be there and just to behold” (WSCP 127). Stevens’ poetry is a form of “waving adieu” to the heaven and ghosts of his ancestors, but his “stops” are part of “ghostlier demarcations”, which bear the traces of renounced myths, leaving a strong afterglow of their spiritual magnificence.

Speaking of the role of the poet in an interview, Derrida notes:

The poetic act therefore constitutes a sort of resurrection: the poet is someone permanently engaged with a dying language that he resuscitates, not by giving back to it a triumphant line, but by sometimes bringing it back, like a revenant or phantom. He wakes up language, and in order to experience the awakening, the return to life of language, truly in the quick, the living flesh, he must be very close to its corpse. He needs to be as close as possible to its remnants, its remains.

(Derrida SQ 106)

Stevens’ poems clearly become just such acts of resurrection, staying close to “the corpse” of the language of metaphysics and the post-transcendental “remains” of religious truths. Charles Murphy correctly notes that “a desire for God never left [Stevens]” and “what he discovered was that God be-

came an even greater Reality than he ever imagined, more elusive and mysterious, but at the same time all the more central” (1997: 7). “If ever the search for a tranquil belief should end”, the poet warns in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery”, “[t]he future might stop emerging out of the past” (WSCP 151). As noted by Stern, the poet “sees religious myths as the products of timeless human needs which must be satisfied in a post-religious era no less than in the earlier ages of faith” (1996: 96). Stevens himself states: “I think everyone admits [the idea of God] in one form or other – The thought makes the world sweeter – even if God be no more than a Mystery of Life” (SouvP 215). His readers can easily note how the spectral qualities of his poetry perfectly attend to that mystery.

Like Stevens, Moore exhibits a deep spiritual concern, but she chooses to write with her own specters – the basilisk being perhaps the most adequate symbol of the way her poetry “ghosts”. As Hall puts it, this king of the visible invisible stands for an indefinite “spiritual substance infusing things”, “the unnamed mystery” – the secret that cannot be touched or represented, for its exact naming “narrows the possibility for understanding” (1974: 165). The secret remains at the core of things and “its likelihood ... is kept open in her poems by her refusal to insist derivatively upon one” (1991: 149). The incandescent space of her poems, which resembles a hall of spectral mirrors multiplying elusiveness, allows for the sustained implication of insecurity and unknowability, in which the sacred and the mysterious thrives and grows. In yet another poem, Moore exclaims: “O to be a dragon / A symbol of the power of Heaven – of silkworm / size or immense; at times invisible” (MCP 177). The plumed basilisk becomes Moore’s favorite among the lizard dragons, because, as Hall notes, “small but powerful, [it] can dive to the bottom of mystery” (1974: 180). Through this identification with the dragons and other imaginary beings so generously “apparitioning” in her works, the poet expresses her wish to “dive” with them into the “dim marvels” of their worlds and to make her own poetry a hospitable dwelling for the elusive and the mysterious which they bring and embody.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida observes that one chases the specters away in order to chase after them and “keep them close at hand” (SM 175), thus making them meta-physically visible again. The exiled ghosts of the sacred return eagerly in the split identity of the word, which contains at once the body and the spirit. For the French philosopher, haunting is thus inextricably bound to hunting, the flight and disappearance of the

receding spiritual makes its lure stronger, its chasing more justified, and the promise of its return more eagerly awaited. Consequently, the language of poetry seems a perfect venue for both the haunting and the hunting of the sacred, since, as Geoffrey Hartman insightfully notes in *Criticism in Wilderness*, “[t]he sacred has so inscribed itself in language that while it must be interpreted, it cannot be removed” (1980: 248). Wallace Stevens, the author of modernism’s most beautiful and anguished requiems for the transcendentalist “tranquil belief”, and Marianne Moore, the imaginary and thus inoffensive huntress of the unicorns, basilisks and chameleons the hunting of which will never satisfy our interpretive needs, become the unquestionable and spiritually most acute masters of this spectral chase.

Chapter Four

“Detour after Detour”, or Where and How Contemporary Hedgehogs Dwell

and what you took for granted
rises from the wrong end
of a sentence and from then on
it's detour
after detour
through the slum of possibles

— Rosmarie Waldrop *The Road is Everywhere or Stop This Body* (unpag.)

When complex life on earth begins for you,
then you need a poethics which foregrounds all
of the arts *as*, rather than *about*, forms of engaged
living in *medias mess*.

— Joan Retallack, *Onward: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, 296

Jean-François Lyotard sees in postmodernism “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, ... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (1984: 81). Such a definition demonstrates that the difference between the modern and the postmodern is not radical and that it lies more in emphasis and attitude than in thematic or formal concerns. As has been shown in the previous chapters, the search for new presentations, new ways in which language can dramatize both the complex experience of modernity and the century's new existential commitments characterized the aesthetic practice of many poets representing American

high modernism. Using Derrida's metaphor of the hedgehog, which centers on the idea of an impossible translation, I also endeavored to capture the increased "sense of the unrepresentable" and indeterminacy governing the works of William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy. The difference between modern and postmodern literary practice, as suggested by Lyotard, is the shared, typically modernist "nostalgia for the unattainable" (1984: 81) coupled with longing for the "solace of good forms" (81) and the trust in the form-giving imagination. Such an imagination – many writers of that period believed – could render the broken matrix of life coherent again; thus, poetry became a refuge and a means of defense (even if hardly stable or indeed absolute) against the flux of experience and the post-war crisis of values. Modernists, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "have usually been seen as profoundly humanistic in their paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realization of the inevitable absence of such universals" (1984: 5). Postmodernism, in turn, does not seek nor grant that kind of solace, nor does it share modernism's penchant for the "elegiac backward glance" (Fulton 1999: 66); quite on the contrary, it "activates difference" (Lyotard 1984: 81) and rejoices in the dispersion and excess of contradictory narratives, turning the lack of consolatory universals into one of the strongholds and satisfactions of its aesthetic and ideological program. The postmodern poem, inflected with this change of mood, "is an architecture of excess; it spends itself by reveling in the plethora of what-is. Its exhaustion is celebratory – or hedonistic, grasping" (Fulton 1999: 67). Free of what Altieri termed "the anxiety-ridden quest for the perfect word and the transcendent form" (1979: 47) and flaunting "the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard 1984: 81), postmodern poetry shows, in Susan Howe's apt words, that "we are language Lost / in language" ("Defenestration of Prague", ET 99), and, what is more, that this language, due to the density and variety of underlying cultural and social codes, might not be equally legible to all.

Alienated from a more immediate contact with his environment through the growing autonomy of the signifier and its discursive nature, the postmodern man needs to learn to move in the reality of language games which produce meaning and which enable his participation in the increasingly unmanageable experience. Poetry tries to tap into the linguistic and discursive turn of the postmodern condition by emphasizing its own medium, but also by calling it into question. Writing, as McGann as-

serts, after Bruce Andrews, becomes "an event, a praxis", and poetry means "making a path rather than 'designing a garden'" (1987: 636). "Learning a language", according to Charles Bernstein,

is not learning the names of things outside language, as if it were simply a matter of matching up "signifiers and signifieds", as if signifieds already existed and we were just learning new names for them... Rather we are initiated by language into a (the) world, and we see and understand the world through the terms and meanings that come into play in this acculturation.

(Bernstein OM 60)

Poetic language is a vital form of such "acculturation" and initiation. Its task is to sensitize the reader to the reality which is mediated, polyvalent and decentered rather than to offer an escapist refuge from it or to mourn the lost unity of being, both of which constitute charges often directed against modernism. The postmodernist poetic ideal is, as Altieri puts it, an art "which can cure and not displace man's most basic alienations" (1979: 47). The cure is often an unabashedly "radical" artifice of poetry, as Perloff terms it, i.e. "the recognition that a poem ... is a *made thing* – contrived, constructed, chosen – and that its reading is also a construction on the part of its audience" (1991: 27-28). It can manifest itself in many ways, for example as "a polymorphous lettrism, a movement into *script, grapheme, syllable, cipher, glyph, gloss, corpus*" (Andrews TC 28), which is a result of a deconstructive assault on logocentrism as well as the presentness and naturalness of speech. It can be a "text-sound", defined by Steve McCaffery as that which "deforms linguistic form at the level of the signifier", "returning language to its own matter" (1984: 88); or a meta-poem, in the manner of Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption"; or John Cage's mesostics and his verbal-visual-musical compositions in which the poet uses modern technology to provoke and shock his audience. Under this term Perloff also includes the parodic lyric of John Ashbery, the systematic artifice of the *Oulipo* experiments, the collage-text and performance (1991: 45). Bernstein notes that postmodern experimental writing is "a move from purely descriptive, outward directive, writing toward writing centered on its wordness, its physicality, its haecceity (thisness) [which] is, in its impulse, an investigation of human self-sameness, of the place of our connection: in the world, in the word, in ourselves" (CD 31-32). Thus, on the one hand, artifice foregrounds the material side of the

word, turning it into a signified that engages us outside its referential function. In Bernstein's words, language does not "call us back to an already constituted experience", but "itself constitutes experience at every moment (in reading and otherwise)" (CD 34). On the other hand, however, it also ties the postmodernist poem to the concept of culture as an assemblage, a hybrid and heterogeneous construct, a system of language games, codes, dictions, idioms and gestures that commodify language, structure our experience and knowledge, delimiting as well as enforcing the limits of our communication. In her *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Perloff observes that poetry in the post-romantic age is characterized by a shift of emphasis from self-expression and the extraordinariness of poetic language to a "sensitivity to the language pool on which the poet draws in recreating and redefining the world as he or she has found it" (Perloff 1996: 1870). This heightened sensitivity to the various articulations, techniques and forms of language is an important characteristic defining postmodern poetic practice.

Understanding the new role of literary language and the theoretical concerns that inform the work of postmodern poets also requires a fresh readerly and critical response. The rejection of conventional grammar, versification as well as both referential and narrative clarity results in writing which is less bent on describing the world than on engaging it. Speaking of Charles Bernstein's diffused forms, Jerome McGann remarks that

relationships and forms of order can only be had if they are actively made by the reader. We will also discover that such relationships and forms of order are multiple, and that they will shift from reader to reader and from reading to reading. Continuities do not lie in wait for us, and the idea that we should expect continuities is specifically rejected.

(McGann 1987: 638)

Examining the role of the reader in Language poetry, Rod Mengham states that the poem is "a *trial of wits* with the reader for whom experience of reading a poem is usually a preparation to solve its difficulties, to formulate its meaning and thus to translate it into other words" (my emphasis) (Mengham 1989: 116). In her analysis of Lyn Hejinian's autobiographical poem *My Life*, Stephanie Fritz similarly argues that the poet "invites her readers to leave behind false notions of completeness and to make reading an adventure in which the gaps, the white spots on our mental maps are not pasted over with closed stories but left open for experimentation" (2007:

217). Reading becomes, in Bruce Andrews' words, "an enactment, a co-Production", which renders the reader and writer simultaneous co-scriptors (TC 35). This observation is true of many postmodern authors. "A trial of wits" and "an adventure", contemporary poetry often determinedly resists careful exegesis and comprehensive deciphering of its plural codes. For the most radically experimental group of Language poets, the boldness of whose strategies equals that of the modernist avant-garde, "unreadability is a goal in itself, intimately linked to a high and largely unexamined value placed upon the 'new': 'Unreadability' – that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings" (TC 31). The title of Charles Bernstein's book of essays, *Close Listening* (1998) suggests such a fresh critical paradigm which is to replace the New Critical approach of "close reading" applied frequently to modernist poems. "Close listening" demands that the reader renounce his desire to decode the text and to identify all its inner tensions, tropes and veiled meanings, and instead become more attentive to the materiality and performative function of the word. Often deliberately obscure, anti-narrative, non-causal, gestural and performative, the postmodern poem "deranges" (Mayer 1984: 80) language, mixes genres and disparate discourses, rejects the notions of unity and organicity in art, inviting an attitude of play and openness.

My intention in this part is to discuss the cures and ways of knowing, engaging, "close listening" and reading offered by selected works of the postmodernist poetic avant-garde; furthermore, I wish to prove that Derrida's hedgehog metaphor is valid in the poetic practice of today and may allow us to conceive of the postmodern poem as the modernist hedgehog's more emancipated, self-confident and defiant younger brother¹. As will be shown on the basis of selected examples, the paradoxes of the hedgehog logic – which finds pleasure in withdrawal, secrecy, anti-absorption, unreadability and resistance – can help us meet, examine and comprehend the highway ventures, detours and prickly defenses of postmodernist poetic discourse.

For this study I have chosen contemporary poets whose work, in my view, exhibits a close thematic and formal affinity with the modernists discussed in the preceding chapters. The poets under scrutiny here consti-

¹ Discussing the future of poetry in the Computer Age, Jerome Rothenberg states in an interview: "I came to believe that modernism & postmodernism were like some kind of twins – closely related & ready, always, to call each other's birthright into question" (2007: 27).

tute the new avant-garde that nevertheless cultivates, intensifies and builds on the experimental possibilities of the modernist movement. Modernism, as noted by Hutcheon, “literally and physically haunts post-modernism” (1984: 49), albeit, as the Canadian critic often asserts, not without an ironic twist: this chapter is designed to scrutinize some poetic fruits of this “haunting” and of an ironic rethinking of modernist tenets. Since my goal in this case is only to identify certain continuities of practice, tendencies and developments in the erinaceous poetics of the postwar American poem rather than offer a comprehensive overview of the contemporary poetic scene, the structure of this chapter will follow broadly the chapter division of the modernist part of the book but the choice of material as well as the scope of the analysis will be much narrower. The first subchapter will deal with postmodern road poems, as exemplified by A.R. Ammons’ neoromantic “Corsons Inlet”, and Rosmarie Waldrop’s intriguing “traffic” poem “The Road is Everywhere or Stop this Body”. In the second part, I intend to examine fragments of amorous discourse and textual pleasures in Charles Bernstein’s poem “For Love Has Such a Spirit That When It Is Portrayed It Dies”, and Bruce Andrews’ *Love Songs*, whose poetics exhibits strong writerly and deconstructive leanings. The last chapter will deal with the postmodern absence of metaphysics, spectral haunting and the problem of the unlanguageable God in the poems of Susan Howe and Ellen Hinsey.

4.1. “The Road is Everywhere”: The Erinaceous Pleasures of Sauntering and Detouring in the Poems of A. R. Ammons and Rosmarie Waldrop

Rosmarie Waldrop’s 1978 volume of poetry *The Road is Everywhere or Stop This Body*, which lends its title to this part of my study, begins with the following peculiar motto:

traffic:
 the business of bartering or buying and selling
 the movement (as of vehicles or pedestrians)
 through an area or along a route
 the information or signals – transmitted over a
 communication system: messages
 circulation:
 flow
 orderly movement through a circuit, esp. the

movement of blood through the vessels
of the body
passage from person to person or from place to
place, esp. the interchange of currency
(RW np)

These dictionary definitions of the words "traffic" and "circulation", arranged neatly into a poem, identify vital concerns and challenges of the postmodern hedgehog-poem. Both entries emphasize movement, exchange, circulation, and flow – elements of modern experience intensified dramatically by the technological revolution and global capitalism, which have radically broadened the postwar world's "routes" and geographies of exchange, simultaneously altering the available systems, vehicles and possibilities of communication. In her essay "The Rejection of Closure", Lyn Hejinian describes the postmodern condition in the following way: "I perceive the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete" (1994: 656). With mobility, flow and information exchange jointly becoming a mark of the postmodern quotidian, the road, as Rosmarie Waldrop suggests in the title of her poem, "is everywhere" indeed, and literature inevitably becomes part of the "traffic". Before I address Waldrop's dizzyingly dense circuits of words and signs in her highway poem, I propose a brief glimpse into two works that can serve as a bridge between Williams' and Stevens' peripatetic pieces and the postmodern poems of sauntering. In A. R. Ammons' essay "A Poem is a Walk" and his poem "Corsons Inlet", for these are the texts in question, the poet compares poetry to walking, proving that so much still depends on the connection between the local and the perceptual; these ideas will prepare us for the less predictable joyride with Waldrop along the inter-related routes and signal-systems of language and body.

Ammons offers four justifications for his comparison of a poem to a walk. The first and foremost is that both require "a total involvement" of both the mind and body. The poet speaks here of the "physiology of the poem", stating that "as with a walk, a poem is not simply a mental activity: it has body, rhythm, feeling, sound, and mind, conscious and subconscious" (PW 114). The second resemblance lies in the uniqueness of both phenomena: there are no two identical poems, just like there are no two identical walks, each being an irreproducible act of discovery. The next reason is that "each turns, one or more times, and eventually returns".

Thus, the turns and returns constitute the structure of both a poem and a walk, giving the poet and the reader a chance to get off the intended route and explore an unexpected opening of the road. The shape of the poem, like that of a walk, “occurs, unfolds”, mimicking the pattern of our existence and thought. The fourth resemblance proposed by Ammons is “the motion common to poems and walks. The motion may be lumbering, clipped, wavering, tripping, mechanical, dance-like, awkward, staggering, slow, etc” (Ammons PW 114).

By connecting the inner and the outer experience in the activity of a walk and comparing it to a poem, Ammons evokes Thoreau’s meditative essay “Walking”, in which the writer also elaborates on the value of sauntering, linking it to the literary spirit of adventure, creativity and enterprise. In that essay, Thoreau observes that very few people understand “the art of Walking” or *sauntering*, for this is the word he prefers to use; the philosopher traces its etymology to “idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *à la sainte terre* – to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, ‘There goes a *sainte-terror*’, a saunterer – a holy-lander” ([1862] 2007: 7) Thoreau explains further that some “would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere” (2007: 7). For the Romantic writer, the art of sauntering fuses both meanings – it should at once lead us away from the familiar, the domestic, into “the holy land”, which implies a spiritual direction and a transcendence of the known, and create a sense of imaginary homelessness, which means being at home everywhere, openness to the world, and an inclination to follow the road not yet taken.

Modernist poets (including Stevens and Williams, discussed in the first chapter) practice the “art of sauntering” in their hedgehog poems, though with slightly different results. The staggering but obstinately narrative movement of language in Williams’ “The Road to a Contagious Hospital”, and the wavering and meditative flow in Stevens’ “Ordinary Evening in New Haven” recreate the experiential movement of the eye along the road (Williams) and the discursive, undulating work of the mind (Stevens). For Stevens, the streets of New Haven turn into “a state of mind, a place of and in the mind” (Gilbert 1991: 78), at once engaged and disengaged from experience, whereas for Williams, the road, “densely mimetic” and journalistic in its thrust towards clarity (Gilbert 1991: 107), characteristically leads

to a more specific locale – the contagious hospital in which language can be cleansed, “treated with acid” (Williams 1971: 318) and cured of the veneer of ideas which disconnect it from the world of things. Williams’ sauntering culminates in the rejuvenation of both the world and the word; Stevens, in turn, wallows in the interplay and discontinuity between the dust of the modernist world and the elusive shade of the word.

Postmodernist poets – frequent practitioners of the road poem, as evidenced persuasively by Ammons’ essay on the analogies of walking and poetry – follow and combine both modes. John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Gary Snyder and Ammons himself often use walking as a theme and compositional principle in their writing, while their styles oscillate between a Stevensian discursiveness and a power of directness that recalls Williams. John Hollander describes Ammons’ poetic practice thus: “As a poet of nature he walks in the country accompanied by the moving shadow cast by the light of his own consciousness” (1986: 258). The remark places Ammons squarely within the romantic tradition of the poem-as-walk-as-meditation. Harold Bloom calls Ammons “the most Emersonian poet we have had since Whitman’s petering out after 1860” (1976: 160), a poet who still seeks the Unity of Being in the Sublime of Nature. “My subject’s / still the wind” (ACP 214), the poet confesses, adding elsewhere that his poetic quest is to convey “nature’s message . . . for / the special reader” (ACP 241). His most famous walk poem, “Corsons Inlet”, can serve as an illustration of the fusion of form and the peripatetic subject:

I went for a walk over the dunes this morning
to the sea,
then turned right along
the surf

 rounded a naked headland
 and returned
along the inlet shore:

 it was muggy sunny, the wind from the sea steady and high,
 crisp in the running sand,
 some breakthroughs of sun
but after a bit

continuous overcast:

(ACP 147)

While the opening lines reveal the concrete topographical and meteorological details of the walk in the densely mimetic manner of Williams, subsequent stanzas move away from the experiential towards a Stevensian subjectivity of perception and liberated stream of thought:

The walk liberating, I was released from forms,
 from the perpendiculars,
 straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
 of thought
 into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
 Of sight

I allow myself eddies of meaning:
 yield to a direction of significance
 running
 like a stream through the geography of my work:
 you can find
 in my sayings
 swerves of action
 like the inlet's cutting edge:
 there are dunes of motion,
 organizations of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance
 in the overall wandering of mirroring mind:

but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events
 I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting
 beyond the account:

(ACP 148)

In this passage, the rigid “perpendiculars, straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds of thought” yield first to the freer “bends and blends of sight”, which next give rise to a more fluid and impalpable “geography” of a poem, with its hedgehog-like “eddies of meaning”, riverine “directions of significance”, “white sandy paths of remembrance” and “swerves of action”. Although the first part shows the ordering thrust of imagination which tries to master and portion reality, to capture the “Overall” of empirical experience, Ammons ultimately announces his failure in “keeping the ledger” of his volatile perceptions and refuses to totalize his vision, allowing for less reductionist and rigid demarcations. “I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries / shutting out and shutting in, separating inside / / from outside: I have drawn no lines”, the poet asserts further on in the poem. Such relaxation of mental boundaries and yielding

to non-conclusiveness of thought and form paradoxically leads to a tighter correspondence between nature and the poet's way of seeing and representing the world, for "in nature there are few sharp lines: there are areas of primrose / more or less dispersed; disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rose of dunes, irregular swamps of reeds / though not reeds alone". Gilbert observes that once Ammons reaches this equilibrium between the "occasion and composition", the poem

is no longer alternating, as in its opening passages, between two extremes of discourse, one a detached, flat reportage of external phenomena, the other a rather strident assertion of the poet's own nominalism. Now exactly rendered perceptions are blended with a flexible meditation that always maintains contact with the world through which the poet walks.
(Gilbert 1991: 218-219)

Upon entering into the uncertain "swamps" and "shifting dunes" of the discursive, tied to the dynamics of the walk, we are exposed to the forces of irregularity, disorder and dispersion, which grant us a better grasp of the "manifold events of sand" and the unstable particulars of this "congregation / rich with entropy", consisting of "black shoals of mussels exposed to the risk / of air", "thousands of tree swallows / gathering for flight", or "the small / white blacklegged egret" which "quietly stalks and spears the shallows / darts to shore / to stab – what?" The landscape and thought, as the poet observes, are "caught always in the event of change", exposed to a risk of destruction, "rulelessness" and entropy. Since Ammons' "Overall" is not Emerson's "Over-Soul", as Harold Bloom observantly notes (2005: 68), the poem does not reach a moment of transcendental epiphany but becomes "the 'field' of action / with moving, incalculable center" in which this "rulelessness" emerges as "an order held / in constant change". Here, as in the hedgehog-poem defined by Derrida, "all possibilities / of escape open: no route shut, except in / the sudden loss of all routes". In the last lines of the poem, this openness and transience of order is sustained and reasserted:

I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will
not run to that easy victory:
still around the looser, wider forces work:
I will try
to fasten to order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening
scope, but enjoying the freedom that

Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,
 that I have perceived nothing completely,
 that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.
 (ACP 151)

The passage echoes Stevens' "Ideas of Order at Key West", where the "blessed rage for order" and the Emersonian sauntering after the spirit ("It was the spirit that we sought"), which urges the speaker to "master the night" and "portion out the sea" (WSCP 130), surrenders to the elusiveness of the "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (WSCP 130). In Ammons' poem, the speaker liberates himself from this rage as he moves away from the need to delimit, fasten and grasp the enlarging chaos in a unifying Scope, which erases reality's minutiae and stamps their indeterminate beauty; he heads instead towards the enjoyment of the experience of freedom, defined by Thoreau as "homelessness", being *sans terre*, which in Ammons' poem is translated into the non-finality and ungraspability of nature's and poetry's "variable geography" ("Saliences", ASP 47). The denial of closure and the "pulsations of order" in "Corsons Inlet" encourage further sauntering and further "incompletions" of order, for – as the poet states in the final line of the poem – "[t]omorrow a new walk is a new walk".

Through its meandering form and slow leisurely pace, imitative of the rhythm of walking and meditation, Ammons' poem sustains contact between outer and inner experience, anchoring the wavering consciousness in the phenomenal. However, such non-conclusive sauntering in the postmodern landscape can lead into the labyrinths of discourse and circuits of verbal detours, which seem to offer no easy exits. Even "Corsons Inlet" is infused with anguish, as the poet confesses in the final lines that in the absence of the universalizing Scope and Emersonian vatic vision, "terror pervades but is not arranged" (ACP 150).

"Hell is the meaninglessness of stringing out / events in unrelated, undirected sequences", Ammons observes in "Hibernaculum" (ACP 361), betraying his anxiety about the disordered nature and pressures of postmodern experience. It is into precisely such hell that Rosmarie Waldrop's road poem "The Road is Everywhere or Stop this Body" takes us, exposing a highway landscape in which "the always dangerous next / dawn bleeds its sequence / of ready signs" ("The Road", RW 1)². The visual close-up and

² Because Waldrop's poem is not paginated, the numbers used in the citations point to the poem's sections.

the movement of the body that still controls and grounds Ammons' meditative poem in the particular and the local, yields in Waldrop's piece to the shifting and rapid movement of "ready signs", which flattens or entirely obliterates external reality, including the speaker's own body, "denied its liquid depth", as it repeatedly emerges and disappears within the "sequence of ready signs". Unlike Ammons' open road that invites endless and contemplative sauntering and brings hope for an ever fresh walk of tomorrow, Waldrop's road, as stated by Freitag, is "itself not free but sign-controlled and threatened by congestion" (2005: 112).

The poem's second section offers a sample of Waldrop's dizzying, non-linear "traffic", broken by half-realized sensations, memories and suspended dialogues, and prone to the congestions and abrupt renouncements of meaning:

a question of
no
just a cigarette frays
analogies out of
too frequent a departure
leaves only an ash
of memory itches for words
in my mouth won't be born into
transparency no longer open
before me
accelerates
into solid illusion
so I try to shift or at least
talk
the road comes back to the surface
(RW 2)

We enter the passage through a broken and unarticulated question, which is further negated or interrupted by the second line's abrupt and strayed "no". This negation both completes the question and erases it, suggesting that the questions posed here will not receive an immediate answer. With "[t]ransparency no longer open / before [her]", the speaker is left with a sense of "accelerat[ing] into solid illusion". Incapable of tying her words firmly to unstable and shifting experience, perforated by "too frequent a departure" and "explosions / not talked about", she struggles to give some form to "an ash of memory" and to comprehend "the life [she] thought [hers]" which now "passes by an inch".

“Ordinary language is not always clear” – argues Maurice Blanchot in his essay “Literature and the Right to Death” – “it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths. This is inevitable. Every time we speak we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence” (quoted in Perloff 1985: 226). Waldrop seems acutely aware of this double-faced nature of the contemporary word, especially that the notion of the “ordinariness” or “naturalness” of language has become increasingly suspicious. The poet embraces Wittgenstein’s claim that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” ([1953] 1968: 42), and that what is ordinary in one context will be unreadable in another. Woven out of “ordinary” idiom, her poem is extremely difficult to read because it illustrates the process of language as an infinite and complex system of misunderstandings, redundancies, loops, traces, false leads and detours of meaning. The familiar and ordinary is made strange in each line, simultaneously demonstrating the inherent opacity of words and the brief flashes of clarification in the changing contexts of their flow. Significantly, Waldrop foregrounds the syntax rather than the image as the embodiment of this “monstrous” system. “What interests me most in poetry now”, the poet argues elsewhere, “is the shift of emphasis from the image (i.e. relation of similarity) to contiguity: problems of combination, syntax, sequence, structure” (quoted in Freitag 2005: 107). In “The Road is Everywhere”, this interest manifests itself in the poet’s artful use of the pivotal line, which results not only in an unstoppable velocity and volatility of signifiers that refuse to be anchored, pointing to the adopted vantage point of a fast-moving car, but also infinite interruptions, decontextualizations, redirections and deferrals of sense, indicative of the poet’s preference for a “writing [that] has to do with uncovering possibilities rather than with codification” (Waldrop AE 46). The possibilities increase as the pivotal line activates the fluid and provisional relationship between the subject and the object, pointing to the poet’s discomfort with fixed categorizations.³

³ This interchangeability of the subject and object becomes part of Waldrop’s feminist argument: “However, it all comes down to my feminist preoccupation, the woman in our culture has been traced as the object par excellence – to be looked at rather than looking, to be loved and have things done rather than being the one who does. So I propose a pattern in which subject and object functions are not fixed but

The ultimate result of the poet's use of the pivotal line is "the heightened textual flow" and "an immense overdetermination" (Freitag 2005: 112-113) implied already by the eponymous metaphor of the "everywhere" of the road. The elements of the landscape, such as villages, fields and rivers, which in Ammons' poem inspired liberating insights, here "knot into repetition" (RW 3) or enter the labyrinth of linguistic detours, wrong ways, relays, and junctions which give us only "the illusion of deep space" (RW 69) and "the hollow / vision diluted at the center" (RW 72). The fluid meaning of words cannot be reduced, for the fractured body of language which enters the circuits of exchange cannot be stopped, producing a bewildering overload of implications. "I veer toward the endless / distractions of the foreground / even while clamoring / for wholeness", the speaker confesses in section 67. The distractions are indeed the ruling principle of the poem, as Waldrop ensures that "what you took for granted / rises from the wrong end / of a sentence" (RW 5), "the consonants cut in on vowels / before they can fade in" (6), "explosions fracture the present" (7), "words germinate on their own obstructions" (14), "all words knot together" (21) as the speaker's "consciousness dissolves / wheel after wheel / in motion" (10). Section 14 illustrates this process:

still
this vehicle responds
to the key
words
germinate on their own obstructions
anywhere it doesn't
matter
continues
your doubts about it
are still words
taste of acid gears edge into slots
determine
the melt into the margin
dwindling illusion
of going places
on this page

(RW 14)

temporary, reversible roles, where there is no hierarchy of main and subordinate clauses, but a fluid and constant alternation (AE 61).

In Ammons' poem, the title "Corsons Inlet" specifies a real geographical locale around which the poet walks, and deictic phrases serve to orient the position of his body ("I went for a walk over the dunes this morning / to the sea / then turned right"); however, with Waldrop we definitely go "no places / on this page", because her "vehicle" is ignited and fuelled only by words, as if to show that materiality cannot be signified outside language. Words become "gears" with which the poet tries to "edge" semantic opulence and sensual excess into the right slots, but they repeatedly flee the speaker's designs, "melt(ing) into the margin", creating "the onrush of clutter cross-purposes / the tangled motion the web" (RW 67), and "roll[ing] through the pages toward / void suddenly of our language" (RW 67). Frequent references to the body and consciousness are so intricately fused with the artificial language of technology and integrated with the icons of traffic signs which perforate the text that we cannot resist the impression that the speaker "can only 'translate' (her / himself) from one sign system to another" (Freitag 2005: 115) and that there is no exit from this closed circuit of postmodernist traffic in which "roads connect all tongues".

This persistent merging of "all tongues" is visible in Waldrop's peculiar use of ordinary words: "curve" describes both bodily curvature and road windings; "to bleed", suggests the flow of images outside the car window; "lanes" and "windshields" are combined with eyes ("along the lanes of my eyes", "explodes eyeballs windshields onto a distance"). Such blending is also visible in the pivotal lines of the following passage:

all words knot together and the

JUNCTIONS

smooth up on my habit
to praise metals
spark in a tightening mesh of
thick and fast machines
gather my space
around my lungs ride down
the beat
the so brittle beat of
the air diffuses
my one-dot appearance
swerves across the screen

(RW 21)

By tightening the relationship between the "thick and fast" machines, the "brittle beat" of the air and the human body, as well as by drawing parallels between the mesh of vehicles at the road junctions and verbal "knots", Waldrop exposes the impossibility of the natural / artificial divide. The seasons, which lend a temporal frame to poem's four parts, enhance this "knotting" of nature and culture, of the bodily and the textual, for they too belong to the circular inexhaustibility of the poem's ceaseless flow, activated and sustained by the pivotal line. Phrases such as "the metal lining of / my skin", "200 miles of nerve per hour (RW 66), "balance / never happens without words / spill down into the levels in between / my sex", (63) "dreams skid into a speed no muscle / could control"; (73) "the violence of / ordinary traffic fissures / my sense of / no direction" (58) further testify to the (con)fusion of technological and organic orders of experience, and destabilize the subject-object division. Driving, breathing, thinking and writing are nowhere so close and interdependent as in Waldrop's verbal vortices, which try to capture the multi-layered nature of postmodernist experience and the operating principles that bind machines and human bodies with nervous and communication systems. All those systems and activities are energized in the poem and yet they are never projected on a single semantic or symbolic axis, including the axis of the thinking self, which organizes Ammons' post-Emersonian poem. Here the self too is "lost in language", and, to use Derrida again, "depen[ing] on the system of differences and the movement of *différance* ..., constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral" (Pos 29). The self is manipulated and displaced further by the syntactical strategy chosen by Waldrop, becoming not so much a voice outside the text, but – in Michael Greer's words – "a constructed moment or effect within various intersecting discourses" (1989: 343). Similarly to Ammons' poem, in which closure is replaced by anticipation of another poem-walk, Waldrop's work offers, in lieu of closure, yet another pivot, which shows the self and the world as always caught up in an infinite web of horizontal displacements, relationships and systems of signification. As noted by Freitag, the poet's "I and her 'picture of the world' are relational, sensual, and chaotic in a way that cannot be fully rationalized" (2000: 286).

The last section culminates in a reassertion of the speaker's ultimate imprisonment in the "traffic" of language and her conviction that she "can't explain the teeming clutter" (RW 57):

the signs
of course I want this sequence



won't get me out I
participate in spite of me
if I look back
there's no trace
of my passage
no improbable footprint
or tire mark
sitting in my own obstacle
eyes open on
the constant disappearing
translating
one measurement
into another

(RW 80)

With its eyes “open on / the constant disappearing”, Waldrop’s hedgehog acknowledges the failure to fix meaning outside measures offered by language, as it vainly seeks the Exit sign from the highway of postmodern language-mediated experience. For Waldrop – Perloff notes – “the Keatsian life of sensations is always already mediated by language, the language pool becoming, so to speak, the poet’s new *Spiritus Mundi*” (1996: 210). Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose influence on Waldrop is discussed in detail by Perloff and Freitag in their insightful studies of the poet,⁴ offers a succinct commentary on the obstacles posed by the not-so-open “road” of the contemporary world and the frequent communicational cul-de-sacs caused by the multiplicity of its games: “... we go make detours, we go by sideroads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it because it is permanently closed” (1968: 127). Since, as Waldrop asserts, the “road is everywhere”, and the signs of control and danger are placed at every junction, the poetic is permanently threatened by the absorption into this overdetermined and highly commodified system. “One transcendence that is available to us, that we can enter into, is language”, the poet states in an interview, adding that it is “like the sea”

⁴ Freitag (2005: 122-156), see esp. the subchapter “Poetry as a Language Game”.

(Waldrop in Foster 1991: 29). With "the straight highway" between the signified and signifier closed, Waldrop's hedgehog-poem "rolls through the pages toward / void suddenly of our language" (RW 10) and we need to roll with it to navigate through its mysteries and capture the volatile light of its message, borne by the liquid, marine body of its form, which – as the poet herself puts it – "flows like ink" (RW 10) but leaves no traces of its passage.⁵

In Ammons' neo-romantic poem we are invited to walk on the "shifting dunes of motion" and accompany the poet's thought in its rulelessness, as it responds to the particulars of experience on the way to Corsons Inlet. As the use of the past tense and the presence of the observing "I" suggest, Ammons' poem begins as a subjective recollection of a walk for which the poet seeks adequate words and form. In the second part of the poem, however, "Corsons Inlet" veers away from the notion of ideal representation and turns into a performance: the walk and the poem merge and unfold together, liberated from the poet's need to "receive everything completely". On Waldrop's dematerialized poetic highway, the motion is much swifter and we do not know where the word will take us, as it slips and swerves from our grasp, forcing us to stay attentive to the happening of language and its various symbolic structures, in which we "participate in spite of [us]" (RW 80). While Ammons, following in the footsteps of Emerson, Thoreau or Stevens, prefers solitary sauntering and searching for the unknown sources of our existence among nature's rugged forms, Waldrop admits that she is interested in "an interaction with language and other writing. Relation rather than substance" (Dis 17). Replacing Ammons' stream of sauntering consciousness with a stream of *écriture*, the poet boldly enters the road and the word traffic, in which movement is controlled by signs and discursive practices of language that do not guarantee a stable connection with the material world. Instead, they continuously change the poem's trajectory and deroute the reader through multiple strategies of interruption and relation, impediments of reference and fusion of discourses.

For both poets the erinaceous tentativeness of meaning and slipperiness of words is useful, for it saves them from a vision of reality which is too

⁵ Steve McCaffrey interestingly observes that "[t]o see the letter not as phoneme but as ink, and to further insist on that materiality, inevitably contests the status of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meaning" (1986: 105).

certain and, consequently, impossible to sustain in the increasingly heterogeneous and mobile tissue of contemporary reality. The contours of words and form are not rigid in their poems, and disorder is not a reason for despair, for both acknowledge, after Blanchot, that misunderstanding is one of the “paths” always open in our use of language. Not so much a well-delineated, one-way road to the Overall of meaning as a “dune in motion”, an unfolding, non-final occurrence of life in language (Ammons) or a busy highway with multiple entries and exits (Waldrop), the poetic becomes integrated with the world and language as process. While it recognizes the inherent limitations of language, poetry’s task is not to alienate us from this process, but to turn discursive boundaries into passable thresholds, or, in John Cage’s words, “to preserve us from all the logical minimizations that we are at each instant tempted to apply to the flux of events. To draw us nearer to the process which is the world we live in” (1981: 80-81).

4.2. “For Love I Would – Deft Equator”: Amorous Discourse and Linguistic Flesh in the Poems of Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews

Is there a place for poems of feeling in the discursive practices of post-modernists? Language poet, Lyn Hejinian notes in her essay “Variations: A Return of Words”: “Probably all feelings are clichés . . . stunning only to the person feeling them at the time, and foolish (or boring) to everyone else” (1986: 507). Feelings as clichés and as part of the lover’s discourse become central to Bernstein’s poem “For Love Has Such a Spirit That If It Is Portrayed It Dies”, appearing in his 1980 volume *Controlling Interests*. The elaborate, self-reflexive title of the poem betrays the adopted strategy. Bernstein avoids a direct portrayal of love: before we encounter its first mention, we need to negotiate a series of confounding displacements of the topic, aimed to demonstrate that love poetry is, as the poet asserts, a “sheer monument of culture’s merry meal of itself” (CI 49):

Mass of van contemplation to intercede crush of
plaster. Lots of loom: “smoke out”, merely
complicated by the first time something and don’t.
Long last, occurrence of bell, altitude, attitude of.
The first, at this moment, aimless, *aims*. To the
point of inordinate asphalt – lecture, entail.
These hoops regard me suspiciously.
... The more adjoins, sparklet and parquet

Reflection, burned out (up). Regarding the willing,
whose movement be only remonstrations, ails
this blue bound boat. The numerical tears.
Edged out where tunnels reconnect, just below
the track. Aims departing after one another
& you just steps away, listening,
listless.

(CI 48)

Like Stein's or Loy's love poems, this one is also more of a writerly than a readerly text, the chief difference being that it is even less accessible or readable than the modernist lover's discourse. With Stein, the pleasure of the sound and repetition pacified the most adamant sense-hunters among her readers, while the familiar cultural intertexts guided us through Loy's deconstructive love songs and Moore's marriage "quilt". Here, however, none of these are forthcoming: the reader is provided with "lots of loom" and broken syntax but no clear thread of sense or argument that can be disentangled and followed to its closure or ultimate significance. Is the language of love "the crush of plaster" not worthy of the "mass of van contemplation?" Does it seem complicated only "the first time", but once you have learnt the pattern and comprehended the right use of amorous discourse, you will see through its "smoke" and "phantasmagorias out of white"? (CI 48) The answers to these questions are uncertain, for the speaker's feelings emerge only in such decontextualized, uprooted and incomplete promptings. As in Barthes' writerly text, the poem and the emotions which it ferries cannot be "consumed"; they resist our reading habits and their "movement" induces "remonstration" (Bernstein CI 48) rather than gratification. Thus, Bernstein's poem both enacts and renounces the affective disjunctions and extremities of the lover's idiom, without offering the ultimate description of the experience of love. To enjoy the poem, we need to take the advice offered by Bruce Andrews in his essay "Code Words": "Read through the system / culture rather than stare through language to wind up trapped in system / culture, in semantic artifice. ... Take nothing for granted (...)" (CW 56).

If we take the advice of "[r]eading through the system" instead of looking for the meaning of individual lines and phrases, we can recognize some "code words" of amorous discourse dispersed among the more abstract and "aimless" words. As suggested by the subtle metaphor "ails this blue bound boat", or expressions such as "occurrence of the bell",

“burned out (up)”, “numerical tears”, “that uncomplicated promise”, “you only steps away”, “aims departing after one another”, the poem treats of an end or an exhaustion of love. However, the lack of a determined speaker in the first part does not anchor the despair and want felt between the lines in a concrete speech act, as if indicating that love and the self are also “trapped in a system” of language and culture. Later, the poet makes the web of the lover’s discourse more dense and its clichés and “used-upness” more vivid:

Lyrical mysticism – harbor, departing
 windows. For love I would – deft equator.
 Nonchalant attribution of all the, & filled with
 such, meddles with & steals my constancy, sharpening
 desire for that, in passing, there, be favorite
 in ordinary, but no sooner thought than gone.
 My heart seems wax, that like tapers burns at light.
 Fabulous ephemera a constant force for giddy flight.
 (CI 48)

Through its uneven, truncated syntax and inconstancy of thought, the poem creates and deconstructs the notion of “lyrical mysticism”. The line “For love I would – deft equator” is a direct allusion to Robert Creeley’s poem “The Warning”, which opens with the following lines:

For love I would
 split open your head
 and put
 a candle in
 behind your eyes.

Love is dead in us
 If we forget
 The virtues of an amulet
 And quick surprise.

(Creeley 1982: 140)

By using just a fragment of Creeley’s line, Bernstein does not so much announce the death of love that the speaker in “The Warning” wants to revive from without, either through artificial light or an amulet, as he shows the exhaustion of the “quick surprise” of its language: nothing can be said of love that would not sound repetitive, inauthentic or ordinary. The metaphor

"My heart seems wax" – playfully resonating with the image of the candle from Creeley's work, but also evoking the light imagery found in all love poems – captures this disenchantment. Bernstein wittily employs the clichéd comparative pattern "my heart is ...", while at the same time implying that the "wax" is of the poet's own doing, and that it melts also from the blaze of his own inadequate articulations and constant repetitions of desire in too "deft equations", which try to sustain our fantasies about love and our desire for its "lyrical mysticism", but which fail to build a landscape of intimacy. "These / are the saccharine days, the noiseless / chirps of the sublimated depths", the speaker argues further on in the poem, revealing his dependence on the "saccharine" language and its feeble "chirps", along with his growing disillusionment with the superficiality of the worn-out rhetorical talk which fails to reach love's "sublimated depths". "I want but all recedes", "how could it hope to mean it us", we also hear him say, but we never touch the exact nature of this desire, since we share the speaker's sense of entrapment in the imperfect system of language.

As Marjorie Perloff puts it in *The Dance of the Intellect*, "the articulation of an individual language is all but prevented by the official discourses that bombard the consciousness from all sides" (1985: 231). Bernstein's love poem reflects a postmodern claim, formulated also by Roland Barthes, that a text is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" and that "[t]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (DA 142, 145). Thus, the author becomes "the sriptor [who] no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred" (Barthes DA 146-147). Unable to find his own language to articulate private passions and feelings, Bernstein's lover is left with "the further theorizing of a final surrender" (BCI 49). "The idea of a private language is illusory", Bernstein explains in *Contents Dream*, "because language itself is a communality, a public domain. Its forms and contents are in no sense private – they are the very essence of the social. One's 'private' writing is partly the result of a traditional and contemporary practice of such works, always mediated by a larger social production" (CD 81). Expressive of this estrangement from individual language, the confession in "For Love I Would ..." is woven out of splinters of the lover's discourse, "fabulous ephemera", with the words abandoned before they assume shape or direc-

tion, suspended at the point of articulation, as if withdrawn at the limit of their own emptiness. The abrupt enjambments, dividing not only the subject and object but also the nouns from their modifiers, contribute to the impression of the syntax's complicity in the lovers' estrangement from their own feelings. As the verbs such as "filled with" or "meddle with" suggest, the missing elements and syntactic suspensions can be easily filled by the readers themselves from the vast repertoire of "lyrical mysticism" and "culture's merry meal", perpetuated by the commodified literature and its "immense dictionary" of amorous expressions.

"We deceive / ourselves in this matter because we are in / the habit of thinking ... that there are few ways of breaking the circuit", the speaker states at some point in the poem. It is not only the circuit of a relationship gone wrong, but even more so a circuit of language in which love is "scrutinized to the point of a gazeless graph" and becomes "a projection" that makes lovers into "characters" "so much sturdier and valorous / than [themselves]" (CI 50). This immersion in language and cultural conventions not only prevents the poet from constructing a coherent lyrical voice, but it also questions the uniqueness of love as an intimate and personal experience. In his introduction to an issue of *Paris Review*, Bernstein observes: "The trouble with the conduit theory of communication (me – you) is that it presupposes individuals to exist as separate entities outside language and to be communicated *at* by language" (78). Bernstein's lovers exist *within* language and their love is played out as a language game whose rhetorical "deftness" cuts them off from a more intimate contact. "A language", the poet asserts, "even if only seemingly, wrested from us, is a world taken from us" (CD 26). "These hoops regard me with suspicion" (CI 48), the speaker notes in the poem's opening lines, and we cannot but feel that these "hoops" are formed by the circuits and grooves of discourse, which are not quite his own and which "wrest" the world of feeling from the self. Bernstein implies in this way that the crisis of signification, which permeates all levels of postmodern discourse, inevitably also affects the subjective experience, which becomes part of the detritus of language. The possession in the line "[r]ays of a sky no longer our / but all the more possessed" suggests that the sky and sunshine, so frequently used in amorous literature, have been claimed and exhausted in the clichéd language of feeling, to the point where they no longer appear accessible as an unmediated reality and personal experience to the postmodern man.

And yet it seems that although the poet surrenders to the fragments of the lover's discourse in his portrayal of love, he uses them with the skill and awareness which make room for the subtle "movement" of the lost labors and communications of love. Phrases such as "A hush that skirts the subtler moment", "Depressed eyes / clutter the morning and we drown in a sea of / helping hands", or "This darkness, how richer than a moat it lies", "To sustain such blows and / and undermine the lash is memory's cure" (CI 49), though haunted by the romantic hyperboles of drowning in suffering and wounding memories, possess the rare power of a genuine emotion that "burns through all the vests that seem to hide it from us" (CI 48) and gulps for breath beneath the clichéd inundations. Hence, the exhausted language serves to show that the spirit of love dies in the imperfect, second-hand discourse, but it also points to the benefits of its resuscitation through a deconstructive recycling, defamiliarizing and flaunting of amorous discourse. The final lines of the poem "Destruction? – the wind blows anyway, any where / and the window frame adorns the spectacle" illustrate the tension between the deconstructive pull of the work and the poet's desire to rekindle and sustain the fire and the narrative of love despite its "giddy flight" into language and convention.

Jerome McGann aptly writes that Bernstein's is "a deconstructive' poetry, fully postmodern in style, but in its nervous erosions it moves the "Spirit" of a love that, settled in what is 'ordinary' and given, will not settle for anything" (1987: 646). The final images – the window and the blowing wind – imply that our emotions are always already framed, devoid of "deep" structure, part of "the grammar of shared conventions" (Bernstein CD 181). In his book *How to Read a Poem*, Terry Eagleton argues that most of us see the world "through the clear window-pane of language; while the poets are those strange, socially dysfunctional creatures who never cease to be fascinated by the minute warpings and convexities of the glass itself, its coolness to the forehead and slithery feel to the fingerpads" (2007: 69). Thus, the window of the word in Bernstein's poem is likewise opaque and rough on the surface, forever separating us from "the wind" of love. Moreover, the poet makes us realize that what we see through the glass and frame of the word-window is not outside the frame but is in fact part of it and created by it (Eagleton 2007: 69).⁶ By

⁶ The critic's subsequent argument about the window metaphor can serve as an apt gloss on Bernstein's practice: "Actually, language is nothing like the window – for one

his deconstructive strategies, Bernstein suggests, however, that that “wind” of the word-mediated feeling, revived by the passionate self-consciousness of the poet’s work, can still be heard among the deft equations and exhausted metaphors of the lover’s discourse.

Another intriguing insight into the postmodern vision of the lover’s discourse can be found in Bruce Andrews’ *Love Songs* (1982), a collection of visual and performance pieces. “Song No. 24”, glossed by the poet as “tape or live performance for 2 voices”, consists of two parts, each arranged further into three left-justified columns. All the columns contain neatly ordered lists of words and expressions related to love:

1.

| | | |
|------------|---------------|---------------|
| lovable | loveless | apple of love |
| lovely | lovenest | lovepot |
| loving cup | love-begotten | love |
| lover | love-potion | lovingness |
| love tree | lovely | lovesick |
| lovage | love-dovey | lovelock |
| love-bird | lovely | love-token |

2.

| | | |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| smitten | stuck on | nuts about |
| mad about | am sweet on | fondness |
| suppressed desire | wish | wanting |
| relish | longing | apple of one’s eye |
| passion | want | darling |
| desirability | raven for | sweet patootie |
| fancy | lovesickness | two hearts that beat as one |

(Andrews LS n.p.)

thing the window clearly separates an inside from an outside, which is the last thing language does. On the contrary, being on the ‘inside’ of language is a way of being ‘outside’ it as well. It is a way of being among things in the world. The whole misleadingly spatial image thus breaks down. Poetry is an image of the truth that language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us deepest access to it” (69).

Just like Gertrude Stein's "Sonnets that Please", the quoted fragment flaunts the conventional and clichéd language of sentiment. Nevertheless, while in Stein's work the caressing of words in the playful and rhythmic sequences such as "I see the lovely love be lovely" (Stein BTV 220), created the space of intimacy and skillfully captured the nature of the love lyric and the unlanguageable experience of love, Andrews's fearfully symmetrical columns, smacking strongly of a thesaurus, take lexical play to its extreme end. Unlike Stein, who had engaged in a dialogue with the lyric tradition, Andrews obliterates subjectivity, removes all connectives between words, and places the reader within the generative body of language. The poet, interested not so much in meaning "but conditions of meaning", works towards "the systematic grasp of the mechanisms of sense-making – i.e. of a language as a kind of agenda or system of capabilities and uses" (Andrews PM 52, 47). His love song – built from a disconnected and decontextualized collection of words which are nonetheless bound by the shared semantic field – attempts to show the extent to which our experience is rooted in the existing order of language.

"Grammar is a huge conciliatory machine assimilating elements into a ready structure", Steve McCaffrey observes (1984a: 159). The syntactic and narrative order draws our attention away from the constructedness of representation. Through its form, which foregrounds the purity of the signifier, Andrews' text simultaneously reveals and tries to escape that rigid and predetermined structure. "Not destroying the code but playing off it, *deferring*, showing the limits" (Andrews CW 55), is the goal of writing, as defined by the poet himself. To reveal "the code" and to make us see the very medium of writing, the poet entirely renounces what Steve McCaffrey (1984a: 157) calls the "media model", the model of "linguistic transparency" and "grammatical rule", reducing his poem to a raw list of words.

Working against the model of "linguistic transparency", the poet takes advantage of two opposing forces governing language: repetition and difference. The first column contains various permutations and configurations of the word "love". Acknowledging both the inescapability and the handiness of the existing lexical paradigm, Andrews collects the words belonging to the conventional amorous lexicon, drawing our attention to the inexhaustible generative and creative potential inscribed in the word. The interplay between the pattern and its creative potential allows the poet to sustain the tension between the meaningful and the meaningless dimension of the

lover's discourse. The repetition of the word "love", reminiscent of Stein's poetics of insistence, creates a pleasurable, rhythmical effect, encouraging us to experience the poem not only cognitively but also physically. The second part expands the semantic field of "love" by adding the vocabulary of longing, want, desire and passion.

By incorporating the lexical list in his poem, Andrews implies that poets cannot help but build their works out of the stock language and the shared repertoire of the amorous vocabulary. However, his linguistic focus, the bipartite structure of the poem, and the suggested method of reading create a space of linguistic becoming and collaboration, offering the love lexicon as an incomplete project, a range of possibilities, or a score waiting to be realized and activated in a live performance. Andrews' peculiar love song is thus brought to life only when it is produced, when the listed words are read out and co-composed in a duet of cooperating voices. The poet expresses his conviction about reading as a form of creative production and composition in the following words:

[W]riting is clearly produced by the central activity of READING, capturing both the code-like aspects (with the investment of value) but also the yearning singularity of the phonemes bursting off page, tape, or lips. Reading becomes the first *production*, rather than consumption – not a relay of an author's vain transcriptions of a representational content. Reading *operates* the text, is a rewriting, a new inscription.

(Andrews CW 55)

Live performance, suggested as the best mode of reading and operation for this love song, brings in the unstable and singular elements of each performer's voice, such as timbre, volume, tone, pitch, rhythm, accent and duration, which cannot be transcribed and become a unique form of sensual "inscription". The performative character of Andrews' work disrupts the rigidity and dryness of the dictionary listings and binds the written word to the energies of the body, releasing the somatic qualities of words and calling for the Bernsteinian "close listening" rather than close reading. It also opens the poem up for improvisation and variance. Pondering over the question of the difference between the text of a poem and its performance, Charles Bernstein finds such an acoustic inscription "aesthetically significant – partly because doing so returns voice from sometimes idealized projections of self in the style of a poem to its social materiality, to voicing and voices". Performance is for him "an exemplary interpreta-

tion, that is one that imagines itself as rehearsal rather than finalization" (2009: 144). The raw "score" of Andrews' love song which offers amorous expressions in the form of a catalogue to be chosen from, manifests the poet's preference for the more unpredictable and indeterminate variant of a rehearsal, which allows for introducing changes and creative improvements to the original script.

Both Bernstein and Andrews present the postmodern condition of love as marked by contemporary uses and abuses of language. They see the language of private feeling as part of the social system, enmeshed in the 'public domain' of shared discourse. As such, it can be retrieved only through discursive relocations, rereading, fragmentations and recontextualizations of the amorous idiom. While the modernist poets discussed in Chapter Two used linguistic artifice to conflate language and love, bringing the reader closer to genuine emotion as well as creating fresh and participatory access to the experience of love, Bernstein and Andrews, as the former himself argues in "Artifice of Absorption", deliberately "destroy the reader's absorption by theatricalizing / or conceptualizing the text, / removing it from the / realm of experience engendered / to that of a technique / exhibited" (AP 38).

Both poets discussed in this part see poetry as an erinaceous project, "a counter-communication system", capable of withstanding, "reading through" and subverting "the ideal communication system" that keeps us entrapped in the rigid and commodified forms of thinking, writing and cultural practice (Andrews CW 56). "Take nothing for granted, leave nothing intact, move outside, heterogenize, wake up the patient from stupefaction", urges Andrews in his essay "Code Words" (CW 56), and this urge clearly informs the two love poems presented here. Both "For Love I Would..." and "Love Song No. 24" are among writerly pieces which provoke the reader to explore the creative possibilities of the clichéd language.

4.3. The Spectral in the Desert: Deus absconditus and Sacred Truths in the Postmodern Poem

"I want no paradise only to be / drenched in the downpour of words, fecund / with tropicality" (AWH 144) – thus Charles Bernstein translates the spiritual crisis into the postmodern poetic idiom in his poem "The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree". The rejection of paradise, which is to be replaced with the fecundity and tropicality of language, echoes faintly the desire of the

woman from Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning", who wanted to free herself from the "need of some imperishable bliss" by choosing the "pungent oranges" and "green freedom of a cockatoo" over the "holy hush of ancient sacrifice" (WSCP 66, 67).⁷ And yet, although like modernism, postmodern culture suffers from a sense of spiritual deprivation and disenchantment with dogmas and absolute truths, it nevertheless more openly embraces, reclaims and rewrites "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice", offering a fresh perspective on the questions of belief.

Thus, for example, in his *Briefings on Existence* (1998, English translation 2006), Alain Badiou evokes Nietzsche when he asserts that "God is truly dead" and that there is no true faith or religion in our world, but only a semblance, "a downpour" of empty religious discourse, a theatrical pretense of religion and faith (Badiou 1998: 21). God has become an empty name, like that of a great-great-grandfather, which means nothing to us (Badiou 1998: 21). However, many critical and philosophical studies devoted to the modern *homo religiosus* show an increased need to reinvent spiritual discourse and to find new ways of utilizing the theological tradition in order to coping with the postmodern end of metaphysics. "In dialectical fashion," as some scholars argue, "it would seem that the turn to secularization has produced its own opposing force" (Boeve and Brabant 2010: 1). In his monumental study of the spiritual condition of our age, Charles Taylor argues that "there is an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age" (2007: 29). Somewhat similarly, Mircea Eliade claims that although man has lost the ability to experience religion consciously, he still retains a memory of his broken bond with God (1983: 74). Various critics and scholars write of the "religious turn" in contemporary philosophy, or the post-secular sensibility of the age, which can be explained as "a renewed openness to the spiritual" (King 2006: 8)⁸.

⁷ As noted by Sabine Sielke, the eponymous kiwi bird and the line "Only / the imaginary is real" (Bernstein AWH 144) evoke Moore's animiles and her vision of poetry as "imaginary gardens with real toads in them". Bernstein's poem "remembers" its modernist subtexts, but it also moves beyond them, as it questions Moore's belief in the existence of the genuine "beyond all that fiddle" ("Poetry", MCP 266). For Bernstein, the genuine is to be found exactly *within* "all that fiddle", within the tropical (and trope-full) downpour of language (2008: 82).

⁸ King argues further that "postmodernism, in rejecting the shibboleths of modernism, also permits a skepticism towards the assumptions of atheism, while retaining a deep Continental hostility towards metaphysics (read 'religion')" (2005: 9).

The loss of faith is accompanied by a search for new forms of belief and new ways of communicating spiritual values in their relation to culture, politics and philosophy. Seeking traces of the spiritual in contemporary literature and culture, Anna Sobolewska demonstrates that the fatalistic “end of God” is now yielding to a more positive and fashionable rule of a polyphonic God, who speaks to the contemporary man in multiple languages, rituals and symbols (2009: 12). Polish theoretician and philosopher Agata Bielik-Robson likewise argues in her *Na pustyni: Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności* [*In the Desert: Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity*] (2008) that the secularization of late modernity is not as comprehensive as it seems: religious reflection cannot be discarded as long as man acknowledges his mortality and, confronted with the ultimate unknowability of death, realizes that he “can never fully participate in the surrounding spectacle of being” (2008: 10). This realization leads to anguish and a sense of being “out of joint” with the world, which can be assuaged either by acceptance and affirmation of man’s negative fate or by theological thinking, which promises immanence of the sacred or else transcendence of and escape from the world, and thus removes the aura of negativity and finality from human experience (Bielik-Robson 2008: 10-12).⁹ To explain the theological condition of postmodern man, Bielik-Robson borrows the Biblical metaphor of the desert, used also by Derrida in his essays “Faith and Knowledge”, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book”, and “Sauf le nom”. Being in the desert, or *bemidbar*, is a symbol of crisis and suspension between various existential and theological options. For some the desert is a form of trial, which intensifies their desire to reach Canaan and see the fulfillment of the messianic promise; for others it brings doubt and results in a nomadic, nervous and directionless wandering in limitless space; for yet others it triggers a need to return to Egypt – the tangible and secure prison of earthly life (Bielik-Robson 2008: 13-14). Postmodern man remains closest to the second option: he adjusts himself to living in the desert, suspended in undecidability, oscillating between a desire for *sacrum*

⁹ The whole argument proposed by the critic is as follows: “The reason behind man’s inability to relinquish thinking in eschatological terms is an ineradicable negativity lying at the heart of his relation with the world, or, to put it simply, his awareness of death. Because of death, man can never fully participate in the surrounding spectacle of being. (...) At the very beginning an alternative appears: this negativity can be deepened or leveled, the trauma can be sustained or perhaps allayed”. (Bielik-Robson 2008: 12, translation mine).

and an anxiety about its growing inaccessibility, as well as its uncertain promise of transcendence. Derrida himself sees in the desert metaphor the aporetic condition of man:

No [*pas de*] marked out [*tracé*] or assured passage, no route in any case, at the very most trails that are not reliable ways, the paths are not yet cleared [*frayés*], unless the sand has already re-covered them. But isn't the uncleared way also the condition of *decision* or *event*, which consists in opening the way, in (*sur*)*passing*, thus in going beyond?

(ON 53-54)

As Charles Taylor suggests, man “has not yet conquered the nostalgia for the transcendence”. Striving to give his life a moral or spiritual shape – the critic adds – he “lives his faith in a condition of doubt and uncertainty” (2007: 5,11). Vulnerable to error and deviation, and often turning away from the sustenance of religious practice, he saunters without the certitude of the *Sainte Terre*, to paraphrase Thoreau's words again. Adopting the quasi-transcendentalist sensibility of the Derridian kind, which does not rest in the comforts of the absolute but allows for doubt, difference, tension, and peregrination, man wanders at once towards and away from the sacred and the *dii absconditi*, remaining open to their traces on the pliable sands, the parched and cracked surfaces of the contemporary *bemidbar*.

Apart from Jacques Derrida, whose writings inform this book, among the most interesting representatives of the revival of religious discourse are supremely influential turn-of-the-century philosophers and scholars, such as Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou or Jacob Taubes. Their works venture to rearticulate relationships between theology, literature and philosophy from a non-dogmatic and anti-theological point of view. Despite their disparate approaches to the questions of religion and spirituality, these thinkers share a penchant for challenging the conventional understanding of faith and sacredness so as to create new contexts for the religious heritage of previous centuries. What makes them particularly interesting in the discussion of the post-secular turn is their shared interest in and a nuanced relationship to Pauline theology, in which they have found both a rich source of inspiration and material to illustrate their own philosophical theories. Taubes' 1993 study *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus* (English translation 2004) resonates in Badiou's 1997 *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (English translation 2003). Strands of both studies are picked up, in turn, by Agamben in his *Il tempo che resta: Un commento*

alla Lettera ai Romani (2000, English translation 2005). Žižek’s voice in the discussion is heard in his Lacanian analysis of modern Christianity: *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (2000), *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (2003), and his more recent essay “From Job to Christ: A Paulinian Reading of Chesterton” (2009). Remarkably, contrary to the conservative stance ascribed to the apostle by the Christian doctrine, all four philosophers discover a revolutionary and deeply subversive potential in the writings of Saint Paul, who represents Christianity as a collective break from the dominant order. Taubes, a Jewish-German scholar for whom Paul’s ethnicity is crucial, reinterprets his letters as part of the Jewish history of mysticism and apostasy, seeing Paul’s letters as antinomian and politically disruptive; namely, for Taubes, Saint Paul is preaching a negative political theology against the powers of imperialism. Agamben examines the apostle’s concept of messianic time and its aporias in a close philological reading of the *Letter to the Romans*, pointing also to the original prosody and rhetoric as Paul’s messianic heritage for literature, culture and politics.¹⁰ The messianic event, which in the Jewish paradigm does not bring any visible apocalyptic change but retains messianic tension, becomes for Agamben evidence that, paradoxically, divinity manifests itself in the condition of the irreparability of the world and the suspension of God’s revelation. Badiou, in turn, severs Paul from religion and the concerns of Christianity, seeing in him “our contemporary,” “a new militant figure,” an apos-

¹⁰ Agamben’s interesting argument, linking messianic time and prosody, is worth quoting verbatim: “[T]he rhyme, which appears in Christian poetry as a metrical-linguistic transformation of messianic time, organized according to the Pauline model of typological relationships and recapitulation, is more an epistemological paradigm than a historical hypothesis. But since I have shown that the history and the destiny of rhyme coincides with the history and the destiny of messianic announcement, when this is coupled with the fact that the very text of Paul’s letter is articulated by an incredible series of internal rhymes and alliterations, it should be clear that the rhyme is the messianic inheritance that Paul leaves to modern poetry. That this theme is meant to be understood literally—that is to say, that the formal structure of the poem is linked to a kind of theological legacy—a single example will show beyond any doubt. When Hölderlin, on the threshold of modernity, conceives his theory of the god’s leave-taking—and particularly of the last god, the Christ—there, at the very moment in which he announces this new atheology, the metrical form of his lyric breaks and loses any recognizable identity. If God’s leave-taking coincides with the exploding of the closed metrical form, then atheology is immediately a-prosody [aprosodia]. (Agamben 2005:87).

tle of the new life, “a poet-thinker of the event” (Badiou 1997: 2) and “the founder of the universal subject” (40), whose “unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class” (5). Paul’s exemplary “truth procedure”, which derives from recognizing Christ’s resurrection as the universal Truth-Event that escapes particular laws and creedal dogmas, consists of “declaring it and being truthful to it” and acknowledging its “evental” rather than singular character. Such recognition liberates man from the rule of the dead law, setting an example also for today’s subject, trapped in the false truths and dead laws of market economy, capitalism, history, science and culture. For Badiou, Paul re-emerges as a figure of a subjective commitment to faith and symbol of universal militancy in an age of slackening moral values and declining spiritual belief. Žižek, in turn, who calls himself a “Paulinist” Marxist, uses Pauline teachings alongside Lacan’s concept of the Real, the Symbolic and the Other, to examine the Pauline Agape in relation to the Law/Sin, arguing that the event of Christ’s sacrifice is not a transgression of the Law of the Father (which would reinforce the rule of the Father) but rather its suspension, an act of liberation from its “masculine” grip, which in turn leads to a new order.

“An epoch that has lost its gestures is, by the same token, obsessed by them”, Agamben (1999a: 83) aptly notes, referring also to the lost spiritual gestures of his age and the renewed efforts to raise questions of faith and the religious tradition. The Pauline revival and “the religious turn” in philosophy illustrates beautifully both this loss and the obsession. However, the spiritual concerns of Modernity also haunt the writings which are not directly linked to the religious heritage of Saint Paul. Agamben, for example, posits that humanity establishes itself “through, with and in” the *logos*, and that the necessity to communicate lies at the heart of the original sin. In *The End of the Poem* (1996, English edition 1999), the Italian philosopher invokes the story of the biblical Babel, via Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in which the hunt for language becomes the hunt for God, or more precisely, for God’s Logos. The word of God, Agamben suggests in *Potentialities* (1999), is the *logos* without content, “a place of pure signification, without anything yet being signified” (Agamben 1999a: 42). Thus, our search for the Divine does not lead us beyond worldly reality, but only perpetuates the desire to transcend language and representation – those elements which alienate us from the mystery of God’s Word.

Critical of the post-structuralist concern with an endless deferral of meaning and multiplicity of language games that invalidate the notions of the subject and truth, Alain Badiou – whose pronouncement of the true death of God (or gods, as the philosopher distinguishes three different gods – the living god of religion, the conceptual god of metaphysics, and the nostalgia-driven god of poets) opened this subchapter – rejects the belief in language as the ultimate measure of human existence and seeks to re-establish the link between the subject and ontology.¹¹ What the French philosopher offers in his seminal *Being and Event* (1988, English edition 2005), whose title clearly echoes Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, is a mathematical understanding of ontology, and (more precisely) set theory, formulated by Cantor and Zermello-Fraenkel, as a new and universal “truth procedure” which can protect us from the fallacies and dangers of the Platonic-Christian tradition that assumes the existence of the One. Seeking a less limiting formula for the concept of the infinite, Badiou questions the “count-as-one” method of establishing universal truths, origins and elucidations,¹² including that of the presence of a transcendent God. Set theory, which is “a foundational discipline of contemporary mathematics” (Feltham and Clemens in Badiou 2004: 13), allows the philosopher to avoid imposing any totalizing limit or categorization on being as it denies the possibility of one overarching set, a Whole or Totality, positing being as a pure multiplicity, or sets of situations, as Badiou prefers to call “multiple

¹¹ In *Infinite Thought*, Badiou explains his stance: “To accept the universe of language as the absolute horizon of philosophical thought in fact amounts to accepting the fragmentation and the illusion of communication – for the truth of our world is that there are as many languages as there are communities, activities or kinds of knowledge. This, however, forces philosophy if it wants to preserve the desire for universality – to establish itself elsewhere than within this multiplicity, so as not to be exclusively subordinated to it. If not, philosophy will become what in one way it mostly is, an infinite description of the multiplicity of language games” (Badiou [2003] 2004: 47).

¹² For Badiou, “count-as-one” is a basic way in which the infinite multiplicity of being presents itself to us. The pure multiplicity is structured into “situations”, which then become “*presented* multiplicities,” to use Badiou’s own term. This structuring occurs through the operation of “count-as-one,” which simply entails “counting various elements as the elements of the situation”. However, even if this operation imposes a unity on multiple elements of being, creating “a consistent multiplicity”, there is no totality which contains the structured multiples whose elements always already partake of other multiples and situations (Feltham and Clemens in Badiou 2004: 11-12). For the most comprehensive explication of Badiou’s theories, see his *Being and Event*.

multiplicities” which in his view form being. In his philosophical scheme, faith is an event that comes as a rupture in the established situation and changes its structure, provided that one acts in fidelity to the event. The fidelity is a continuous effort, a relentless declaration and renewal of faith through the works of love rather than submission to the Law. (St. Paul’s fidelity to the event of Christ’s resurrection, which suspended the operations of the existing law and annulled the dialectic of life and death, is for Badiou such an exemplary and life-transforming act of faith).

This intriguing reclaiming of Pauline theology and religious discourse against doctrinal interpretations in the writings of major contemporary philosophers (who are, *nota bene*, sworn materialists and committed atheists themselves), reveals postmodern culture’s dissatisfaction with the traditional narrations and categories of religion and faith, and a need to revive the Christian legacy beyond the secular and religious divides.

Considering the above “religious turn”, which remains persistently anti-theological even when indebted to the Christian heritage, a few questions arise: how does poetry tap into the renewed interest in the problems of belief? What is the role of poetry for the contemporary man, lost in this spiritual desert and trapped in the uncertain hunt for God’s lost Logos? Does God appear in the post-modern poem only as an uncertain mirage or a “downpour” of empty words? Can we find an oasis of the Sacred Word in the cacophonous discourse of the present? How does the postmodern “desert music” differ from its modernist predecessor? Or, to borrow Keith Waldrop’s apposite formulation from his *A Shipwreck in Haven*, “How far, how far into the desert have we come?” (2009: 247). As noted by Norman Finkelstein, “the notion that the poem can still become a holy site, or a space wherein the sacred and the secular may be contested, haunts contemporary poetry, making poets and readers alike susceptible to a return of the repressed in regard to poetic subject matter” (Finkelstein 2010: 3). In *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, Harold Bloom similarly argues that “[p]oetry and belief wanders about, together and apart, in a cosmological emptiness marked by the limits of truth and meaning” (1991: 4). Bloom’s “cosmological emptiness” ties in well with Derrida’s metaphor of the desert – the word “cosmological” connotes an order larger than our being, within which our lives unfold and which is nevertheless immediately undermined by the adherent negativity of the word “emptiness”. Although it is swallowed up by emptiness, the cosmos is still haunted by this memory.

In his essay "*Sauf le nom*", Derrida asks: "God himself, if He wants to live for you, must die: How do you think, without (*ohne, sans*) death, to inherit His life?" (ON 82). Poetry is the most appropriate language in which this paradox of God's absent presence can be reaffirmed. The language of the poem responds to the hesitant spiritual condition of late modernity, as it can both become part of religious belief, "a holy site", and remain apart, becoming a "site of contest" between the secular and the sacred. Bloom's metaphor of "wandering about" signals a non-linear path to the sacred as well as its increased inaccessibility. The sacred nevertheless contaminates language, it "ghosts" in it, and it is protected by the word's continuous (even if often arrested or failed) movement towards transcendence. In "The Eyes of Language", Derrida quotes Gershom Scholem, who avers that "we truly speak a ghostly language" where "the power of the sacred speaks out", and that "in language where he is invoked back a thousandfold into our life, God will not stay silent" (qta. Derrida AR 227). Similarly, Edmond Jabès – next to Paul Celan, the most intriguing religious poet of the postwar era – states in an interview that "[t]he name of God is the juxtaposition of all the words in the language. Each word is but a detached fragment of that name" (Jabès 1996: 127). In her study of Jabès, Rosmarie Waldrop notes:

Faced with an undecipherable world, we set to create language, a place where human discourse can arise, and we can come to exist as human beings; where, at the same time, we can maintain a relation to what transcends us, the undecipherable, the ultimate otherness, and speak of it under the name of God.

(Waldrop 2002: 1)

As will be shown in this subchapter, the language of poetry has an incredible capacity to sustain this relation, to retrieve and render the name of God in the fragments and polyphonic voices of the postmodern spiritual Babel. Paraphrasing Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom, Finkelstein observes that "if we know the sacred only through the mediating power of poetic form, then, conversely, the poem will always and unavoidably remind us of its religious heritage and associations, even if it seeks to deny them" (2010: 2). Hence, this section will deal with selected instances of such denials and reminders of the sacred in contemporary poetic work.

I intend to present to the reader two different poetic relations to transcendence. The first one, represented by Susan Howe's poetic practice, is

described by the poet herself as the work of “intervening absence” (B 27). It certainly “ghosts” in Howe’s poetry, and her ghosts and ideas of transcendence derive from the tradition of religious antinomianism in America. The poet’s attention is drawn to various figures condemned by authorities and exiled from or marginalized by history. Howe – a New England poet, essayist and artist associated with the Language Group – explores the archives of the American past, searching its grand narratives and episodes for suppressed stories and wild articulations, hoping to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate” (Howe ET 14). Her *bemidbar* is the American wilderness, which includes the desolate and unexamined pages of American history, and her spiritual quest is passionate and revisionist. The ghosts that she invokes shed a rather grim light on the whole American culture, as the stories which they tell are often those of violence, scapegoating, repression, struggle, exclusion, and suffering. Commenting on Howe’s obsession with the past, Finkelstein aptly notes that for the poet history is a “séance” and the poem a form of “communication with the spirit world” (2010: 114). She herself envisions her role as “the blank page / writing ghost writing” (NM 68), a sort of medium through which ghosts of the past can articulate their own stories. Explaining her method, the poet states: “I like to think I write for the dead, I also take my life as a poet from their lips, their vocalism, their breath” (Howe 2009: 202). “A latter-day version of spiritualism” (Finkelstein 2010: 115), Howe’s “poethics” combines radical experiment and mysticism, and often pushes the boundaries of language to their outer limit so as to accommodate silence, absence and difference, creating the right conditions for the safe return of the dead as well as for the haunting of the absent or stranded spirits and history’s “other voices”¹³. The goal of this brief analysis will be to define those conditions and to examine the effect and meaning of Howe’s peculiar “ghost writing”.

Ellen Hinsey, the other poet whose longing for the sacred will be scrutinized in this part, is closer to the European metaphysical tradition, whose goal was to bring the sublime and the spiritual within human reach through the fusion of the spirit, passion and reason. Hinsey’s work employs many ingredients of the metaphysical poem to communicate spiritual tensions

¹³ “If history is a record of survivors”, Howe observes, “poetry shelters other voices” (B 47).

and the difficulty of naming and approaching the divine. As will be shown, the poet attempts to retrieve the body, including the sensual substance of language, as the vehicle for holiness and transcendence. By touching upon the questions of the human desire for spirituality, Hinsey restores the horizon of ultimate value to man lost in the contemporary *bemidbar*, encouraging her readers to think of and see God with fresh eyes. Her poems about God in *The White Fire of Time* belong to the apophatic discourse, in which God appears beyond the grasp of reason and language.

Susan Howe argues in her Hawthorne-haunted "poessay"¹⁴ *The Birthmark* (1993) that "[a] poem can prevent onrushing light going out" (B 47). Densely laced with references to the most influential Puritan and Romantic writers, her own work gathers up the dispersed light and stray ghosts of the past belief, becoming a haunted house where "other voices", muffled or marginalized by history, can be sheltered and heard. "My writing has been haunted and inspired by a series of texts, woven in shrouds and cordage of classic American nineteenth-century works; they are the buried ones, they body them forth", Howe herself admits in *The Birthmark* (B 45). She explains further that what attracted her to those texts is their shared contribution to the arch-American notion of the wilderness and wildness, which – apart from categories of nature and space – includes every antinomian impulse in American history. This rebellious drive lies at the heart of "the primordial struggle of North American literary expression" (Howe B 4). In *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Howe's original exploration of her literary forerunner's work, the poet sees the notions of rebellion and freedom as inherent in poetic thinking: "a lyric poet hunts after some still unmutated musical wild of the Mind's world" (MED 98). Acknowledging her New England literary and spiritual ancestry – with Dickinson, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville and Thoreau in the lead – Howe sees the antinomian spirit not only in the thematic concerns of their work, but above all in the form of their writing. Of Dickinson and Melville the poet says that they "lead [her] in nomad places" (B 51). Choosing Dickinson as her "strength and shelter" (B 2), the poet takes over both her predecessor's poetic sensibility, her "most profound self in the multiple multilayered scripts, sets, notes, and scrapes she left us" (B

¹⁴ The term is coined by Marjorie Perloff, who uses it in her review of *The Birthmark*, cited on the back cover of Howe's book. Howe herself describes her practice as an oscillation between history, mystic speech, and poetry (B 45).

20) as well as her formal eccentricity – the latter being an important vehicle of Dickinson’s antinomian stance. Howe displays a similar penchant for defying tradition, although – like Dickinson – she is steeped in it and clearly recognizes the influence of her cultural heritage on her worldview and aesthetic practice.¹⁵

In *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, Howe argues that “[t]he shadow of history / is the ground of faith” (NM 29). This statement can be used as the key to her poetics: faith is not part of the substance of history, but resides and originates in its dark immaterial double – its shadow. In *The Birth-mark*, Howe develops this notion, reminding us that “[r]evelation approaches as a mystery” (B 66), and that truth often emerges from the space of darkness and silence. “[I]n silence hidden by darkness / there must be a Ghost” (NM 30), the poet asserts further, believing that by creating a form which operates at the border between silence and utterance, between the sayable and the unsayable, substance and immateriality, darkness and visibility, she can make this Ghost “apparition” and speak its muted story. As shown by her entire oeuvre, which deals mostly with unstable and shadowy grounds of history, the poet eagerly and repeatedly steps into this darker space of the past, searching its archives and marginalia for the signs of the holy, the forgotten, the excluded and the mysterious. “Her writing is essentially religious”, Peter Quartermain observes, “devoted to a lively apprehension of the sacramental nature of our experience of the world, and of the sacramental nature of the world” (1992: 194). “Hinge Picture”, the opening poem from the collection *Frame Structures* (1996), can serve as a good introduction to Susan Howe’s intriguing method:

¹⁵ In her poetic ventures into the American wilderness, Howe rewrites the seventeenth-century captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson (*The Birth-mark*); examines the mysteries of Melville’s *Marginalia* (*The Non-conformist Memorial*).

invisible angel confined
to a point simpler than
a soul a lunar sphere a
demon darkened intelle
ct mirror clear receiv
ing the mute vocables
of God that rained
a demon daring down in h
ieroglyph and stuttering

(Howe FS 33)

The “radical artifice” of the poem strikes the reader first through its visual plane: the box-like, rectangular shape into which Howe presses and arranges her words has an unsettling effect of a forced spatialization, creating a sense of enclosure, fixity and control. This is Howe’s form of a “a séance table”, a “frame structure” created to hold and host the elusive Spirit, the “invisible angel” of the poem, whose central position in the first line is threatened by its subsequent reduction to a vanishing point. In spite of its tightness and regularity, the frame – due to the rigid right-hand and left-hand justification – leaves white spaces and discontinuities between and around words. These can be read as ghostly erasures of language, deliberate silencing of words and sounds to bring out and make audible the aforementioned “other voices”, including “the mute vocables of God”. However, the gaps and the broken words, such as “intelle / ct”, “receiv / ing” and “h / ieroglyph” – which, as Freitag notes, render the divided clusters almost unpronounceable (2005: 269) – also signal an obstacle, a distortion of the flow of language, which breaks down and fails to communicate when confronted with the inexpressible. Commenting on Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts, Susan Howe observes: “Words are only frames. No comfortable conclusions. Letters are scrawls, turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, masks” (B 141). Her “frame structures” evidence this assertion, for the words which she uses offer no teleological comfort, often functioning as hieroglyphic scrawls which emerge from the white space of the page, to the reader’s

bewilderment. The failure of the “frame words” in “Hinge Picture” causes the angelic trace to darken and yield to demonic forces that “dare down in h / ieroglyph and stuttering”. The composition, with the sequence “ct mirror clear receiv” at its heart, undermines the possibility of “a clear mirror[ing]”, renouncing mimetic representation as a way of conveying the mystery that assaults our intellect. The central line also serves as a form of a compositional and metaphoric “hinge”, implying a deconstructive reversibility of the angelic and the demonic – a possibility explored by the poet in other textual “boxes” of this volume. Arresting the teleological development of the poem, the fragmentations, silences, stutterings and erasures enact the discontinuity of thought and language and introduce noise, non-sense and incoherence into the visual symmetry of the picture (Freitag 2005: 269).

The opening figure of the vanishing angel introduces the subject of history – Howe’s central preoccupation – as it invokes Walter Benjamin’s discussion of Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus”, which the German philosopher reads as a representation of the “angel of history”, whose face is “turned towards the past”. For the angel, as envisaged by the author of *The Arcades Project*, the past is

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.

(Benjamin quoted in Freitag 2005: 277)

Benjamin’s figure may serve as a starting point for Howe’s own vision of the past. The disappearing angel – who symbolizes human connectedness to the sacred, our longing for the lost wholeness of vision, the coherence of historical narratives and transcendence – haunts her entire work, all of which is filled with “the debris” of history. The poet, as noted by Freitag, “shares Benjamin’s suspicion of hidden historical catastrophes, his urge to acknowledge the victims, and his metaphorical insight that the images of history as progress and as catastrophe are non-simultaneous” (2005: 278). There is, however, a difference in Howe’s approach which betrays her postmodernist sensibility. Embracing the vision of history as a catastro-

phe, Howe does not lament its condition, nor does she try to "make whole" the broken pieces, as Benjamin's melancholic Angelus Novus would. Instead, she exhibits "a passionate commitment to forms of unintelligibility and disruption" (Nicholls 1996: 588), believing that they are at once "points of contact and displacement" (Howe B 139) and that the ghostly blanks, interrupted narratives, erasures, stutterings, silences and stray letters can communicate more, and with a much greater force, than history seen as a continuum or progress.

Howe uses the force of "unintelligibility and disruption" in her poem "Hope Atherton's Wanderings" from the volume *Singularities*. The volume consists of a series of poems in which, as the poet herself confesses in an interview, she is "trying to understand what went wrong when the first Europeans stepped on shore here" (B 164). In this poem Howe calls back the ghost of Hope Atherton, the Puritan minister who accompanied American troops during one of the military raids on Native settlements near Deerfield in 1676. The man was lost during the raid and forced to wander in the wilderness before he came across an Indian camp and tried to surrender himself. Rejected by the Indians, the minister eventually found his way home, but the experience and his sojourn in the forest affected him so profoundly that he lost mind and died within a year after the encounter, estranged from his own community and apparently alienated also from his former self. In *Singularities*, the story of Atherton is introduced first through an existing document, an extract from an authentic letter of Stephen Williams, which the poet uses as a basis for her rewriting of the story:

In looking over my papers I found a copy of a paper left by the Rev. Hope Atherton, the first minister of Hatfield, who was ordained May 10th, 520 | 1670. This Mr. Atherton went out with the forces (commanded by Capt. Turner, captain of the garrison soldiers, and Capt. Holyoke of the county militia) against the Indians at the falls above Deerfield, in May, 1676. In the fight, upon their retreat, Mr. Atherton was unhorsed and separated from the company, wandered in the woods some days and then got into Hadley, which is on the east side of the Connecticut River. But the fight was on the west side. Mr. Atherton gave account that he had offered to surrender himself to the enemy, but they would not receive him. Many people were not willing to give credit to this account, suggesting he was beside himself. This occasioned him to publish to his congregation and leave in writing the account I enclose to you. I had the paper from which this is copied, from his only son Jonathan Wells, Esq., who was in the fight and lived after-

ward at Deerfield and was intimately acquainted with the Indians after the war, did himself inform me that the Indians told him that after the fall fight, a little man with a black coat and without any hat, came toward them, but they were afraid and ran from him, thinking it was the Englishman's God, etc., etc.

(Howe *Sing* 5)

Hope Atherton's wanderings and experiences are given an intriguing shape by Howe. She uses letters, citations, broken narrative, collusions and fusions of decontextualized words, and her idiosyncratic "frame structures". A sample of her rereading and retracing of Atherton's steps is given below:

Posit gaze level diminish lamp and asleep(selv)cannot see

is notion most open apparition past Halo view border redden
possess remote so abstract life are lost spatio-temporal hum
Maoris empirical Kantian a little lesson concatenation up
tree fifty shower see step shot Immanence force to Mohegan
(*Sing* 15)

The opening line contains a Derridian suggestion that to see through the unintelligibility of this frame structure we need to step with Howe into the story's shadow, its mystery, and accept the limits of our perception. The lamp – the symbol of the eighteenth-century trust in man's rational faculties, but also of the light of faith that sustains the Puritan priest on his errand into the wilderness – is here "diminished", and will not suffice to illumine our way through the poem-forest, thus forcing us to adjust our gaze to its darkness, and prepare for the nocturnal apparitions and forces which inhabit it. The phrase "asleep(selv)cannot see" situates the bracketed and broken "selv" in the realm of the unconscious and the irrational, suggesting not only Atherton's diminished reason and indeterminacy of his vision, but also the dormant yet haunting presence of the Savage Other in the unconscious depths of the Puritan mind. The darkening of perception and the penetration of language by the uncanny is felt also in the reversed and condensed version of the passage, placed on the neighboring page:

Posit gaze level diminish lamp and asleep(selv)cannot see
MoheganToForceImmanenceShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree
UpConcatenationLessonLittleAKantianEmpiricalMaoris

HumTemporal-spatioLostAreLifeAbstractSoRemotePossess
ReddenBorderViewHaloPastApparitionOpenMostNotion is
(Sing 16)

The passage indeed signals not only Atherton's escalating madness but also the destruction and further deconstruction of the dominant narrative, as the cumulative effect of the fused words is that each amalgamated line is increasingly unintelligible and resonant with ambiguity. The immanence and transcendence thus appear even more problematic and dubious here than in the previous part. Commenting on the fragment, Linda Reinfeld states that perception in this version is replaced by the "*is* of invisibility, an impotent language in which only language is reflected, reversed, displaced, condensed, dismissed – and then, in a gesture of restitution escaping sentimentality by no more than a hairbreadth, reborn" (1992: 142). The reversal also suggests that "OpenMostNotion *is*", and that the boundaries which we establish – be it territorial, racial, geopolitical or conceptual – remain porous, relative, questionable and passable, replete with potential, multiple, and unresolved meanings. The ultimate reduction of blank space in this darker counterpart of the quoted stanza may further signal the suffocating and reductionist grip of the artificially imposed divisions and inflexible concepts, implying that their psychological oppression ultimately also affects the oppressors.

As in "Hinge Picture", Atherton's wandering through the American wilderness and his exposure to the outer limits of civilization and reason are conveyed by a stutter and slur of speech. The blanks between words create an uneven, hesitant rhythm, performing the minister's hindered and uncertain movement and preventing a linear reading of the poem, while the condensations move us into a thicket of language so dense and suffocating that salvation of sense becomes all but impossible. Both the white spaces and the blended words also take us towards linguistic borders: surrounded by signifiers, the reader is unable to anchor them in any stable context and thus confirm their reference; this keeps him trapped in perplexity, "on the border" of knowing, "just below the level at which language might appear to make sense" (Reinfeld 1992: 144). In lieu of a coherent narrative, Howe offers the "spatio-temporal hum", a "concatenation" of isolated words whose displacement, followed by reversal and compression, generates new points of contact and new, often astonishing senses. The second line ("*is* notion most open apparition past Halo view

border redden”), in Freitag’s words “opens the badly covered gaps in unifying discourses” (2005: 333) of American history and invites us to take a fresh look at the concept of the border, including the border between the Puritan civilization and the Native American wilderness.

Seriously dedicated to dismantling boundaries and thresholds, Derrida himself finds problematic the very idea of the border, seeing it both as a figure of passage and nonpassage. “No border is guaranteed, inside or out”, the philosopher insists, inviting us to “try it” (LOBL 78). The provocation suggests that the border is an abstract idea and that, far from being absolute, it is in fact permeable, fluid and questionable. The philosopher captures the ambiguity of the border in the French phrase *Il y va d’un certain pas*, which can be translated into “It involves a certain step / not”, for *pas* means both “step” and “not”. A step towards or across the border both sustains and threatens its identity, implying an aporetic tension at its very heart (Derrida AP 11-12). Herself interested in frames and boundaries, Howe seems to share Derrida’s aporetic thinking, as she employs the full power of her ambiguous reference to explore the notion of the border in “Hope Atherton’s Wandering”. If we follow the advice given in the second line and look “past Halo” – beyond the religious righteousness of the Puritan civilizing and enlightening mission – we will be able to see how the abstract idea of the border “redden[s]”: in Howe’s view, settling and civilizing cannot be separated from invading, with each step of the religious missionaries and armies being accompanied and reinforced by a shot, as the staccato sequence “see step shot” succinctly conveys. “To inhabit a wilderness is to destroy it. An eternal contradiction”, the poet observes in an interview, suggesting the inherent corruptibility of our notions and dreams of the wilderness (Howe 1989: 21). “There are traces of blood in a fairy tale”, Howe states in *Thorow* (Sing 44), reminding her readers that each pastoral myth, each fairy tale created by the history of colonization and our idealist notions of the wild is inscribed with the blood of the colonized. Hence, in Howe’s poem, the violent possession of the land – legitimized by religious mission and the Western “fairy tale” of a new beginning and progress – is counterbalanced by the colonizers’ unconscious being possessed by the demonic and blood-stained trace of the destroyed people. In this way Howe questions the dream cherished by the colonizers, i.e. that they might, in Perry Miller’s apt words, “possess the land without ever being possessed by it” (1956: 6).

The notion of possession leads us towards yet another border – the edge of knowable experience – as Atherton moves away from the famil-

iar, ordered and graspable towards the unknown. His lonely and ghostly "apparitioning" on the edge of wilderness exposes him to the ghost or trace of the Other and makes him vulnerable to the unpredictable forces of the amoral Nature. The word "apparition" placed in the center of the quoted second line points to the unknowable and the spectral: it draws our attention to the uncanny presence of something that at once *is* and *is not* there, to the truth that exists but is not revealed in the language available to Atherton. Rather, it lingers in the white interstices of the page and cannot be exorcised from Howe's account of the minister's "border experience". The meaning of Atherton's wanderings also slips away in the following slur of language:

rest chondriacal lunacy

velc cello viable toil

quench conch uncannunc

drum amonoosuck ythian

(*Sing* 10)

As Howe has the minister himself confess in a poem-letter which follows the quoted fragments, Atherton "has lost the beaten track" and what he lived through is "more than language can express" (*Sing* 16). Both Atherton's self and his language "break down at the borders, refuse the customary definition" (Reinfeld 1992: 139), moving into silence and unintelligibility. The alliterative line "quench conch uncannunc" hides the broken words "uncanny", and "annunciation", suggesting lack of adequate words to express the uncanny impact of the Savage Other. The isolated and incomplete words suggest lacunae in Atherton's strange story, failing to impart a coherent vision. Elizabeth Ann Frost argues that those fragments, composed of a mixture of Latin, Native American and English words, originating from "different cognitive worlds", indicate the failure of the symbolic order and point to the lost "transparency of God's divine word" (2003: 122). Indeed, it seems that Howe's Atherton trespasses the frontiers of consciousness and self-knowledge also to discover his profound alienation from the consolations of faith and of the Absolute.

In the penultimate line, Howe extends her indictment of colonization beyond the American border. The word "Maoris" that "apparitions" strangely at the edge of the line, refers to the Polynesian people whose existence, like

that of the Native Americans, was threatened by the European colonization of New Zealand. In Howe's enigmatic line, the Maoris becomes "the empirical Kantian", whose Immanence is asserted as a force impossible to eradicate from the very idea of the wilderness. Once muted and colonized, the Other now seems to have invaded and possessed not only Atherton's feverish mind, but also the poet's "frame structure". By closing this structure with the name "Mohegan", Howe leaves the verbal trace of the displaced and exterminated tribe to "apparition" in her "séance poem".

Commenting on Howe's *Frame Structures*, Marjorie Perloff states that the poet's typographical experiments, including justification and perforation of the line, suggest that "language is always in danger of becoming an enclosed space but that the poet refuses to let forms play their accepted role" (1999: 429). Undeniably, Howe's "frame structures" create a peculiar, erinaceous tension between enclosure and openness, border and its deconstructive undoing, voice and silence, sign and its erasure. The poet has mastered the discourse described by Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* as being "full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and overnourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intention" (1968: 48-49). "You must go on", Howe encourages and provokes her readers, "as if I was an open door. Go right on through me I can't answer all your questions" (FS 25). With the poet assuming the role of a medium, her work creates open doors, passages and airy spaces which allow for the movement and "ghosting" of various spirits. Those spirits often emerge from "the wilderness" of American history, from the margins and "confusions" of the American past (Nicholls 1996: 588), becoming the counter-presence which disrupts the official discourses of historiography and haunts them, frequently assuming unpredictable forms.

Among the works of contemporary poets – spiritually rather cautious, if not frugal – Ellen Hinsey's volume *The White Fire of Time* (2002) stands out, as it directly addresses questions of belief and deals with the relationship between poetic language and the divine in the "wild cacophony of the present" (Hinsey WFT 4). Hinsey listens for the Word of God and probes its mysteries among the particulars of everyday experience, using poetry as a space of the reaffirmation of God's often "unlanguageable" (WFT 48) presence. Choosing a detail from Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* for the cover of the volume, the poet also implies the nature of our spiritual condition, at the heart of which lies a fundamental insecurity of attitude. In an interview, the poet observes:

I'm not convinced that the terrifying events of the last century—or this new one—prove the death of the Spirit. Rather, to my mind, they only underscore the fact that the human animal has a murderous potential, beyond our previous imaginings. In fact, this issue may be one of the most urgent legacies that poets of my generation face. The challenge of how we can, despite everything, contemplate the possibility of affirmation—while at the same time knowing that genocide has happened and can happen at any time. That poetry is not only possible after Auschwitz, but imperative, an integral part of our survival.

(Hinsey in Wheatley 2009)

Aware of the ethical and spiritual challenges of her century, Hinsey questions the negativity of Adorno's claim that after Auschwitz writing poetry seems atrocious, and offers her own work as a mode of spiritual survival and affirmation. The poet self-consciously employs religious intertexts, tropes, symbols and allusions permeating our language and literature. Heinz Ickstadt correctly situates the poet in the modernist metaphysical tradition, arguing that she belongs to the poets "much concerned with the creation of form ('the hard frame of the mind') and with the metaphoric density of meaning" (2008: 62). Indeed, Hinsey's poetry demonstrates something that T.S. Eliot named "the intellect... immediately at the tips of the senses" (Eliot [1932] 1999: 185), a mental subtlety and passion, both spiritual and intellectual, akin to that shared by the metaphysically inclined poets of the modern period. This intellectuality and formal ingenuity in organizing sensual particulars also binds Hinsey to Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, in whose poems a sense of mystery and spiritual wonder is frequently ferried by densely sensual texture, tightly knit images and paradoxical metaphors which fuse thought and feeling, conflating religious and material dimensions of language.

The fusion of the aesthetic and the spiritual, as well as the tension between the sensual and the "hard frame of mind" characteristic of the metaphysical poem are visible in the very structure of Hinsey's book, which – following the spiritual exercises of Baroque art – leads us through the tight symmetry of its three constitutive parts: "The World", "The Temple", and "The Celestial Ladder", suggesting the metaphysical thrust of the whole.¹⁶

¹⁶ The titles directly evokes George Herbert's volume *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633) in which the English poet pictures "the many spirituals conflicts that have passed betwixt God and [his] soul". See Herbert in Preface to the second edition of the volume ([1633] 1838: vi). In one of the opening poems in this volume,

The symbolic verticality of the composition is reinforced by several elements: from the initial images, related to spring, birth, earth, flesh, gravity and growth, through the acts of Adamic naming and acquiring knowledge in the middle part, to the autumnal and melancholic brooding of the final part, with the closing meditations on the dissolution of the body, and the coming of the dead. The poet has taken pains to provide her metaphysical preoccupations with a rigorous and neat form: each part contains a poem called a meditation or fragment, followed by a commentary or reading. Each piece is laden with religious allusion and symbolism, and contains dramatic tensions and rifts; each ventures to seek the ineffable only to be pulled back by a sensuous detail a moment later, as the poet tries to reconcile the body of the contemporary world and word with the idea of Divinity and the soul's longing for transcendence.

The first poem in the collection, titled "On the Uncountable Nature of Things" thematizes a struggle between "hungering flesh" and "this realm of exacting, but unpredictable, time" (WFT 4), which sets up the main tension of the whole volume and binds Hinsey to the tradition of Baroque metaphysical poetry. The central preoccupation of that tradition, as argued by Warnke, was the contradiction "between man as a creature of sense and man as immortal spirit, between the aimless flux of time and the changeless moment of eternity" (1961: 23). As Raiziss points out, Donne, "obsessed by death and the precarious future of the soul, contemplated the body in its relation to the history of the spirit" (1952: 47). Hinsey inherits and revives that tension, as she connects incongruities: the remote and the near, the concrete and the abstract, stasis and motion: the "mighty nebulas" of planets are juxtaposed with the body "*tired of its limits*" (WFT 13), minutes flow in rivers, silence reaches a point of "green stasis", the mind's logic is compared to "a bridge in the air that no step follows", and "memory rises like carp from a muddied pool" ("On the Weight of Dailiness", WFT 16-17). Like the poets of metaphysical tradition, Hinsey attempts to give the elusiveness of thought and inarticulateness of desire a concrete form. Her spatial and dynamic metaphors shock us out of our complacency; her strong line

titled "An Epitaph Upon the Honorable George Herbert", the following lines can be found in which the author offers the light of the poetic word for the darker times of spiritual doubt: "Go, thaw your hearts at his celestial fire, and what you cannot comprehend, admire. / / Go, you dark poems, dark even as the skies, / Make the scales fall from our dark dazzling eyes" (Hebert 1838: xvii).

and rigid couplets offer us an illusion that her argument is well kept, and yet, at a closer look, the words spill over into the next stanza or section, straining to flee the compositional bounds.

Seeking an objective correlative for the spiritual anxieties of her own age, in the opening meditation Hinsey focuses on an image of a fruit tree, inevitably triggering off associations with the biblical Garden of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge, the Forbidden Fruit and the Tree of Life – symbols which fuse lore and the spirit, but which are at the same time signs of man's expulsion from knowledge and his fall from the timelessness of divine grace into the "white of flame of time". The biblical intertext is also evoked through references to the trunk of a tree lit by morning light (WFT 4) which in popular iconography symbolizes Adam, and subsequently, in section IV, by the mention of "the new bronze figs" (4). The fig is the first fruit tree mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 3:7), frequently considered to harbor the very branch from which Eve plucked the forbidden fruit, on the evidence that its leaves served to clothe Adam and Eve's naked bodies after their transgression. Marked thus by sin, the fig was also a tree later cursed by Jesus, who found no fruit in it but leaves (Mark 11: 12-14, 20) and promised to cut all its fruitless branches. The connection between the tree and man is glossed and tightened further in Hinsey's poem "On a Miniature from the Sacred Ark", subtitled "Adam in the Garden", where Adam is directly addressed as a "rough tree" with "knotted, slender body" "whose first, curved flank / / Energy brought to Being" (WFT 36).¹⁷ "On the Uncountable Nature of Things" inherits the biblical overload of the symbol, but it is less explicit, laced with allusions to the figure of the tree, as it speaks of "the fruit tree with its scars", "the knuckle-web of ancient knots" (3), "the dry, tender arc of fruitless branch" (3) and of a fig branch "only once laden with perfect / Fruit" (4). Haunted by those scriptural references, Hinsey's work evokes the lost order which they embody, while their appearance as traces and fragments sustains an element of doubt and questions this spiritual heritage, conveying a sense of divine power as an ab-

¹⁷ The symbolic link between man and the tree appears throughout the Bible. In Psalm 1, for instance, man "shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf shall not wither" (1.3); whereas Jude compares a false Christian to "trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots" (1.12). Job similarly contrasts a man to a tree, which might grow again after being cut down (Job 14.7-10). See entry on "Tree" in Ferber (1991: 219).

sent presence, inviting the mind to recover their symbolic reference and to seek the presence of God also through the rhetoric of his absence. With this opening poem, Hinsey signals man's insecurity in the postlapsarian world, his precarious position between knowing and unknowing,

Through its biblical references, the first meditation also indirectly echoes Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*, and perhaps more patently "Sunday Morning", by "recounting faithfully / *The thing as it is* – transient, provisional, changing" (WFT 4), and by presenting man as a "refugee" in time, living with passion under the dome of the "variable sky" and in the "roar and plough of daylight" (4). Like Stevens' woman, Hinsey celebrates the transient moment and grounds her poem in life's particulars – in the touch of flesh that "too is earth" (5), in "Desire that dilates eye", and the pulse of things as they are:

The perfect, wild cacophony of the present –
Each breath measured and distinct in a universe ruled

V.

By particulars – each moment a universe:

As when under night heat, passion sparks – unique,
New in time, and hands, obedient, divine,
As Desire dilates eye – pulse the blue-veined breast,
Touch driving, forging the hungering flesh:
To the far edge of each moment's uncharted edge –
(WFT 4)

Like Stevens, Hinsey considers the danger of losing touch with human reality and tries to build a bridge between "the hungering flesh" and the time-driven universe of particulars, carefully "measured" and "ruled" by man, and "the far edge of each moment's uncharted edge", with "the unknown still dropping outside of the bright, clear realms" (WFT 21). Gathering desire into this intellectual blend of space and time, Hinsey indicates a possibility of flight from human time into an uncharted space of mystery, into reality beyond human measurements. However, tapping into the narrative of Doubting Thomas, evoked by the book's cover, she also insists that spiritual belief needs to be anchored in the singularity and directness of sensual experience, in "the stubborn boundaries / Of flesh", "the universe of heat: where sweat and spine / Bind in the unity of knowledge", as she puts it in "On the Unique Cosmology of Passion" (WFT

13). We are "engulfed in that dark where mysteries once lay", she argues (WFT 13) further on in the same poem, asking us to grope towards light and belief, to feel the pressure and limits of the body, to touch in order to be touched, to move, "lift, climb, try mindlessly to rise" (15) in order to be moved. Knowledge, mystery and faith thus begin with a doubt to be dispelled with touch, epitomized best by Thomas' examination of Christ's wounds and bruises. The first part of Hinsey's volume offers us a haptic journey up the spiritual ladder, a journey whose pace is dictated by the grips and releases of the body, the pulse of the "blue-veined breast", "the desire of another's hand", "the joyful rage of the heart", the entwined limbs of the lovers (WFT 14-15). The opening allusions to the forbidden fruit corroborate this connection – the fruit, substantiating the knowledge of good, must be touched and tasted to disconnect man from the realm of the supernatural and make him realize his fallen nature. However, being essential to our humanity, touch is subsequently used to reassert Doubting Thomas's faith in Christ's resurrection, reinforcing the mutual dependence of the flesh and the spirit. In Caravaggio's painting, it is Christ himself who guides Thomas' hand into his gaping wounds, offering his scarred body as proof of life and the source of salvation. In Hinsey's poem we can see an oscillation between contradictory desires, whereby the body "demands to be led into the universe of heat", wishing to advance "toward that which holds all matter in / Its grip" (WFT 14) and at the same time desires to "remain still amidst motion, to never / Be touched" (14), for fear that the "stubborn boundaries of flesh" and the bruised and scarred language left upon God's withdrawal may not yield the final mystery of the spirit.

Hinsey turns her poetry into a probing ground for the frail presence of the spiritual, trying to grant her word the power which can preserve the imprint of God's divine touch. In the second part of the volume, "The Temple" – whose title echoes Emerson's conviction from "The Poet" that the world is a temple filled with emblems and inscriptions of God's presence – the poet considers more explicitly the question of the origin of language and the relation between the word and divinity. In the first meditation of this part she addresses the theme of Adamic naming, asking, after Adam, if it is possible to name all the Wonder around him and capture the essence of "each entity ... that glowed / Under the particularity of its nature" (WFT 33). The poet gives us a sample of Adam's mimetic capacity, suggesting, however, that Wonder requires a poetic sensibility to convey its elusive nature:

Doe – legs of quick draw and drum-colored
 Breast – all *Cervidae*, blessed with springing
 And spirit colonized by humble ruminating –
 (WFT 33)

This instance of naming shows Adam as an Emersonian poet, “the namer, the sayer”, who “represents beauty”, and “following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature” (Emerson, “The Poet” [1844] 1996: 449). Emerson states in “The Poet”:

By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another’s, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary. The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.
 (Emerson 1996: 457)

Hinsey tries to recreate the flow of nature as well as the brilliant images and impressions which lie at the heart of words. Suggestive of the primordial unity of the thing and its name, the alliterations of “doe / draw / drum”, internal rhymes (“doe / draw”, and “breast / blessed”), and the quick springing pace of the line all capture the swift ruminant movement of the animal, also revealing the precognitive immediacy of knowing and the poetic source of all language. The loss of this unity due to the original sin resulted in the lost capacity for absolute disclosure of the divine essence of things. The originator of human language, the Namer of natural order, the postlapsarian Adam has lost his poetic faculty along with his referential certitude, and fell silent when faced with God, recognizing his own “swift / Tongue” as “flawed and approximative” (WFT 35), unfit to express the ineffable because that Tongue “lacked the precise, assured syntax of flight” (35). Before the fall, each thing appeared to Adam in its absolute singular nature, “[e]ach name [was] pulled from the surest source like / The plume-tail of smoke from a volcanic heart” (34), but now man is severed from

"this surest source" and deprived of the foundation for his knowledge, which in turn results in the deficiencies, decentering and scarring of language. The word loses its purity and becomes indeterminate, unstable, frail; the poet compares it to a "small tent" which can no longer protect man from "*dolor mortalis*" (34).

Himself created as an imperfect image of God, the postlapsarian Adam symbolizes the primordial difference between the human and the godly, and, despite his mimetic effort, he cannot bridge this difference between material language and the immaterial God, nor find the adequate name for the experience of divinity, the essence of that Ultimate Other which is known only in its flight. Naming, as Adam realizes, is "man's / / Unique tautology" (WFT 35).

The same epistemological anxiety about the inadequacy of naming and man's limited capacity to know God is developed by Hinsey in meditation XVI, "On the Unlanguageable Name of God". In his essay "*Sauf le nom*", a commentary on the poetry of the German poet Angelus Silesius, Derrida ponders over the untranslatable name of God, the *tout autre* which can be invoked but remains hidden and intractable: it exists beyond the horizon of appearance, beyond the human capacity of perception, comprehension and representation. Hinsey acknowledges this limitation of language:

In the presence of the Word which is nameless,
Word which is speechless, enigma, yet gathers all unknowing

In its midst – Center of utterance, but unreachable
With Voice – compass and goal – Shore towards which all

Telling rows, Word which is Vowelless – brutal,
Singular portal of being – but barbed flesh of the tongue –

At time's intersection, in a state of unknowing,
When that which is unlanguageable nears to enter the body

Something swift – frightful – comes once under
The breastbone, caught in the eye's beam – something from

Without, which becomes briefly Within: Essence
Of attention, which drives the spine and arrests all breathing
(WFT 57-58)

The paradox of the “Word which is speechless”, the “Center of utterance, but unreachable / With Voice” is the focus of Derrida’s own argument, best expressed by the French phrase “*sauf le nom de Dieu*” – save the name of God, with *sauf* indicating also “except”, “beyond” or “above” the name.¹⁸ This means that we can name everything but God, for in its naming God’s absolute heterogeneity would be destroyed and he “would slip away beyond being” (ON 57). God cannot be defined otherwise than through apophatic discourse, i.e. language which negates the sayability of the Absolute and uncovers “the state of unknowing”. Derrida notes:

- [Of] him there is nothing said that might hold
- Save his name (*Sauf son nom*)
- Save the name (*Sauf le nom*) which names nothing that holds, not even a *Gottheit*, nothing whose withdrawal (*dérobement*) does not carry away every phase that tries to measure itself against him. “God” “is” the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language

(ON 56)

Hinsey’s poem signals this “desertification of language”, as God’s fleeting presence cannot be held within the symmetrical wave-like neatness of her lines nor contained in the “frailty of [verbal] vessel”, “the timbered structure of a word’s small shape” or “the thin structure of sounds” (WFT 58). To keep “safe” the secret of God’s unlanguageable name, the poet resorts to Derrida’s favorite apophatic mode, with a dense web of paradoxes and oxymorons, because they destroy the certitude of cognition and locution, rendering each statement free of dangerous absolutism. Thus, God’s intractable presence emerges in a series of contradictions and apophatic evasions: “the thunderous silence” (WFT 57), the terror which becomes indifference (57), the interplay between “Within” and “Without” (57), the presence “brutally followed by absence”, the “perfect fullness” which engenders hunger and desire, “the great constant” which “is always becoming” (57). As the poet confesses in the final lines of the poem, the tongue, faced with the ultimate incomprehensibility of the divine, “must seek to build / In its wanting” (58),

¹⁸ As observed by Derrida’s translator, Thomas Dutoit, *sauf le nom* does not have an adequate English equivalent. The closest translation would be “except the name”, but ‘except’ fails to render another meaning of the word, which is an adjective “safe”, signaling that God’s name is safe when left unarticulated. (ON vx)

acknowledging nevertheless the force which calls for expression. In apophatic discourse, want, thirst and hunger are "paradoxically indicative of an infinite presence quite beyond human sensibility; that is, the definitiveness of the divine presence is indicated precisely by the extremity of the thirst" (McIntosh 2005: 221). Hinsey cherishes the hope that poetry's "meager house" (WFT 58) will become a shelter, if not for the untranslatable Word itself then at least for our "extreme thirst" and passion for it. For Hinsey, the temper of desire – which the poet also addresses in "On the Cosmology of Passion" – equals the temper of want in both its senses, i.e. as need and lack. In "*Sauf le nom*", Derrida asks: "But isn't it proper to desire to carry with it its own proper suspension, the death or the phantom of desire? To go toward the absolute other, isn't that the extreme tension of a desire that tries thereby to renounce its own proper momentum, its own movement of appropriation?" (ON 37). In her poems, Hinsey carries us towards the Absolute Other, identifying it as the "Shore towards which all / Telling rows", but she renounces its name on the way, withdraws the curious hand from the final-sounding touch, acknowledging the inadequacy of reference to name and thus appropriate something which, as Derrida claims, cannot even be said to exist (ON 56). For Hinsey, the ineffable does not cross "the barbed flesh of the tongue", but it lingers in the "thirst for repetition" (WFT 58), or – to use Derrida's words – in the "extreme tension of a desire", always "at the edge of language" (ON 60), remaining nevertheless the "[e]ssence / Of attention" (WFT 58), locked in the double movement of the words' withdrawal and overflowing (Derrida ON 60).

In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", Wallace Stevens calls the poem "a meditation ... in which there seems / / To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well" (WSCP 396). Hinsey's poems fit this description perfectly, since the sacred that informs them is always given to the reader in the form of an evasion, a "fleeting presence" anchored briefly at the tip of senses and words, but resisting our cognitive and expressive faculties. With "hunger" being the poem's last word on the "unlanguageable name of God", the poet leaves us with a sense of deficiency, yearning and want, "a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well", directing us back to the surer sensations of the mortal body, from which she never strays too far throughout the whole volume. However, the word 'hunger' implies here also the hunger of the soul – man's undying desire for metaphysical experience and the lost sense of Wonder, cou-

pled with the hope that this hunger could be articulated and assuaged by means of the frail vessel of the poetic word.

In “The Music of Poetry”, T. S. Eliot argues that poetry is capable of travelling towards “the frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meaning still exists” (1957: 30). Therefore, the poetic word can be a sustenance to the modern man, who still hungers for that unreachable meaning. As noted by Mark S. Burrows, Hinsey’s poetry offers such a sustenance and “moves us towards the margins of longing inherent in language itself, reminding us that the attraction is the ‘place’ of our creativity. Desire is our home” (2005: 350). The apophatic discourse speaks of the desire for God as insatiable and spiritually enriching: “Desiring God more and more, the soul grows without ceasing, going beyond herself; and in the measure in which she unites herself more and more to God, her love becomes more ardent and insatiable” (Daniélou 1979: 33). The poetic word in Hinsey’s work is a vehicle of precisely such spiritual desire and growth. “*Desert* is the other name, if not the proper place, of desire”, Derrida claims in the already quoted “*Sauf le nom*” (ON 80). In Hinsey’s poems, man is lost in that desert, suffering from spiritual aridity, desiring the impossible, but making this desire his home. In these works, the passion for the impossible, for the *tout autre* – the unreachable, unsayable and indeterminable Other – is the passion of faith.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida states that “they are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet” (SM 279). Both Howe and Hinsey betray a passion for something beyond the limits of presence and knowable experience. They possess a similar religious sensibility, which urges them to save God’s name in the erinaceous form and the specter-haunted language of their poems. Conscious of man’s estrangement in the spiritual *bemidbar*, they attempt to uncover the traces of the sacred and retrieve the “muted vocables of God” from the Babel-like noise, the pliable quicksand and confusion of postmodern discourses and texts. Both poets attempt to erect “a fragile tent of words in the desert” (Derrida WD 69), offering a poetic dwelling to the contemporary nomad. Howe sensitizes her readers to the blank pages, traces, palimpsestuous layers and omissions of history, communicating with its lost or forgotten spirits through the erinaceous stutter and stammer of disconnected words and signs, broken narratives, hieroglyphs and erasures. In George Butterick’s words, “[s]he has kept the mystery *in* language, kept is as a vow” (1983: 149). She sees her role as that of the medium and conceives of

her poems as a form of mediumistic séance, which opens an alternative channel of communication between the past and the present. Her frame structures, which turn absence and silence into a possibility rather than lack, become hospitable spaces of haunting in which both the past and the present end up transformed by mutual contact. Her poetic séances are frequently revisionist: they are not intended to exorcise the ghosts of the past but rather to conjure them, to let them return with a greater force and communicate with us. Howe's poems give voice to the figures, stories and memories muted by official records, thus disturbing our historical self-complacency and opening unbridgeable rifts in the seemingly continuous fabric of our historical narratives. They urge us to see that, as Rosmarie Waldrop asserts, "we always write on top of a palimpsest" (1996: 75).

A poet of metaphysical sensibility, Hinsey addresses the problem of the failure of corporeal language in confrontation with God's elusive name. In her *White Fire of Time*, she resorts to familiar biblical metaphors and parables in search of the unifying Logos that could withstand the "wild cacophony of the present", only to discover that God's presence remains ultimately unlanguageable. Expressive of the paradox that every knowing of God as the Word requires acknowledging his unknowability, her poems nevertheless teach us how to preserve and rekindle the thirst and hunger for the spiritual in the corporeal language of sensation and love. Just like the poets of the metaphysical tradition, Hinsey tries to fuse feeling and knowing. The metaphor of hunger which closes her poem on the "unlanguageable name of God" bridges the gaps between the spiritual and the physical, as it belongs to the structure of desire, which insists on corporeality. Hunger also implies the human need for sustenance and connection, which, as Hinsey suggests, can be fulfilled through the sacred, inscribed and preserved in the poetic word.

According to Derrida language is "a weave of differences" (MP 12), "a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (LOBL 257). The texts discussed in this part are woven of such traces, flaunting their unstable meaning, differentiability and discursive nature. Like the modernist hedgehog-poems of the previous chapters, they refuse to satisfy our hermeneutic desires, denying the comfortable answers to our questions. The reality which they address and engage emerges from the postmodern experience of language, which appears to be the only access to the world, "[f]or we are language Lost / in language" (Waldrop ET 99). Following Ludwig

Wittgenstein's statement that "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (1968: par. 19), the poets presented here imagine "forms of life" which can be metaphorically likened to the road from Rosmarie Waldrop's poem "The Road is Everywhere" – it is not a unicursal path, with clear and predictable boundaries, secure exits, reachable and mapped destinations, but a labyrinthine autoroute, with heavy traffic, marked by infinite detours, cul-de-sacs, construction sites, and continuously expanding and dissolving routes. The congestion of signs, intertexts and discourses woven into the texture of those poems uncovers man's embeddedness in language, which no longer merely reflects the world, but is a complex multilayered and multireferential construct, encoded with various social, aesthetic and ideological values. The erinaceous obscurity and untranslatability of the poems under scrutiny, which exceeds the uncertainties and ambivalences of the modernist hedgehog-poem, also exposes the materiality of the word, forcing us to see language not only as an instrument of expression and communication, but as an independent entity which often escapes our agency and refuses to yield a clear and comprehensive reflection of our condition.

Just like the modernist texts in the three preceding chapters, the poems discussed in this part thrive in a continuous tension between the word and the world, keeping the reader in a state of heightened attentiveness, epistemological doubt and bewilderment. The works pose a genuine challenge to the reader who expects *readerly* rather than *writerly* pleasures, to borrow Barthes' nomenclature again, as their antiabsorptive forms and violent assaults on the principles of transparency and readability jealously guard the ultimate mysteries of those texts. Like the modernist poems shown in the first part, its postmodernist successors contain and flaunt their own theory, teaching the reader how to approach and read their "prickly" forms along with their complex codes of signification. Rosmarie Waldrop's road poem instructs us about the perils and joys of the linguistic "traffic" in which it is easy to lose our bearing on account of the increased density and opacity of signs, but in which the experience of getting lost and not arriving at an intended destination may at times prove quite refreshing, if not indeed liberating. Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, in turn, offer the postmodern variant of the love song, which shows that contemporary love is implicated in the rule of language games and conventions, and that to see through and loosen up this rule, the poet has to co-opt it and work from within its limitations. The fragments of the

lover's discourse used in their poems do not send us outside the realm of language, but attract our attention to the very event of writing and the existing structures of communication. As the poets themselves state, they disclose "the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized – revealed – produced in writing" (Bernstein and Andrews 1984: ix). Continuing the metaphysical anxieties of their modernist forerunners, Susan Howe and Ellen Hinsey seek an adequate form in which to address the issue of God and the spiritual value of life in an age often viewed as secular, anti-theological and devoid of metaphysical grounds and longings. Both reveal that the poetic word is still haunted by the traces of spiritual presence and that it can preserve the memory of the sacred and the sublime. The impetus behind Hinsey's metaphysical explorations is the unlanguageable name of God as well as poetry's capacity for enkindling and perpetuating our desire for naming and comprehending the unnamable. Howe's poetic practice, on the other hand, exploits the spectral qualities of writing, allowing the ineffable, the unreadable and the ghostly to haunt the margins and blank spaces of her mediumistic "fringe pictures".

The poems presented in this part demonstrate that no clear line of demarcation exists between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic practice. The postmodernist poets of avant-garde provenance share with their modernist predecessors the erinaceous sensibility which urges them to employ the antiabsorptive properties of language to communicate the difficulties and concerns of the postmodern condition. The difference between the modernists and their continuators lies in the postmodernist acceptance of the irreducible plurality of conceptions, discourses, texts and voices which constitute our experience and underlie our writing and artistic practices. Without "the solace of good forms", and without the modernist nostalgia for the lost and total order of the world, the postmodern poet teaches us how to enjoy the multiple meanings and senses of language and find satisfaction in imperfect articulations, ruptures, silences, purloined letters, language games and unreadable hieroglyphs of contemporary life.

Conclusion

It is difficult
to get news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there
W.C. Williams, "Asphodel"

In an interview with Derek Attridge, Derrida confesses that he "do[esn't] feel at ease with a rigorous distinction between 'literature' and 'literary criticism'", as he sees no point in "the rigorous limit between them" (AL 52). While examining the problem of the division between literary theory and practice in his study *Criticism in the Wilderness*, Geoffrey Hartman poses a similar question: "Is there hope for unservile, an enlarged and mature, criticism, neither afraid of theory nor overestimating it?" (1980: 4). To a certain extent, the goal of this book was to revive that hope through an engagement with poetry via Derrida's non-rigid and limitless discourse. Echoing Derrida and Hartman, Marjorie Perloff (1990: 5) argues that theory and poetry today "are part of the same larger discourse, that there is no hard and fast division between them, that, on the contrary, some of the most interesting poetry today theorizes its particular positions even as theory now frequently comes to us in an intensely poetic forms". Following her argument, I have explored the increasingly diminishing distance between theory and poetry, as well as their ability to intrude upon each other and co-exist in a symbiotic and creative relationship. For my test of permeability, cross-fertilization and creative dependence of those seemingly disparate idioms, I have chosen poststructuralist theories, which are notorious for their tendency to destabilize generic boundaries between literary, philosophical and critical discourses, and whose interdisciplinary and transgeneric character guarantees the desired openness of interpretational horizons. Instead of creating a reliable critical grid which could then be conveniently

applied to the literary form, those “poe(t)heories”, to use Perloff’s fitting term (2005: 5), work towards upsetting various orders, be it aesthetical, interpretational or ideological, within which literature has been contained and studied. “Unservile” is indeed a good term with which to describe their liaison with literature and other contemporary discourses. The enthusiasm and imaginativeness of the “poe(t)heories” in question corresponds well to the complexity, innovativeness and inexhaustible interpretive potential of modernist and postmodernist avant-garde poetry. Another binding element is that both the theories and the poetic practice under scrutiny exhibit a particular closeness to thinking which probes the limits and possibilities of language, perception, thought and form. They provoke a similar critical and readerly response, which challenges unitary and coherent interpretations and denies overconfident answers to the existential and epistemological questions which, over the last two centuries, have troubled writers and thinkers alike. Furthermore, the theories often match the analyzed poems in that they tend to poetically perform their own theoretical assumptions, instead of merely presenting and explicating them in a disciplined academic discourse.

How such a “poe(t)theory” operates vis-à-vis poetic discourse is best epitomized by Derrida’s essay “Che cos’è la poesia?”, in which the central metaphor of the poem-as-hedgehog is used to describe the peculiarity and undefinability of poetry. This essay, along with Derrida’s aporetic argument, inspired the title of my book and provided me with the suitable thematic and structural focus for the explorations of the modernist and postmodernist poetic forms via selected poststructuralist theories. The title of the essay, coupled with the erinaceous metaphor which informs it, reveals the inherent contradictions and irresolvable aporias of poetic discourse. Poetry, just like the hedgehog on the autoroute, “exposes itself to death and protects itself” (Derrida CCP 229), as it tries to communicate by deliberately making communication difficult, “always interrupt[ing] and derail[ing] absolute knowledge” (Derrida CCP 235), and offering indeterminate, irreducible multiplicity of meanings. Poetry, in Celan’s words, “takes its position at the edge of itself” (2005: 181), and – as both Derrida and the poets discussed here demonstrate – any attempt to answer the question “what is poetry?” will inexorably lead to the loss of poetry’s very essence, for the poetic is exactly that which cannot be defined and which slips away if approached with too rigid a critical bias.

Derrida captures this contradictory impulse of poetic discourse by juxtaposing the work of the translator and that of the reader of poetry. “Translation ... presupposes a text which would be there, immobile ... the serene presence of a statue, or of a written stone or archive whose signified content might be harmlessly transported into the milieu of a different language”, the philosopher explains (WD 211), arguing that the language of poetry questions such immobility, becoming an “ever-denied translation”, a “thing beyond languages” (CCP 225). Inspired by Paul Celan’s work, Derrida observes:

The poem is not only the best example of untranslatability. It also gives to the test of translation its most proper, its least improper, place. The poem no doubt is the only place propitious to the experience of language, that is to say, of an idiom that forever defies translation and therefore demands a translation that will do the impossible, make the impossible possible in an unheard-of event.

(Derrida SQ 137)

The notion that the poem “demands a translation”, while simultaneously flaunting its “untranslatability”, is best evidenced in the works of modernist poets discussed in this book. The masters of erinaceous poetics – William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein – are fully aware of poetry’s aporetic constraints, as they deliberately pose endless challenges to the reader-translator of their poems. The power of their poetics lies precisely in that which eludes translation and our full comprehension. Their postmodernist followers, with Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Susan Howe and Ellen Hinsey at the forefront, similarly engage formal and linguistic strategies of the erinaceous kind to both alienate and intrigue their readers and interpreters. Their works frequently defy interpretation so as to convey the ill and uncertain truths of the modern and postmodern experience, urging us to explore new ways of thinking about language and the limits of our knowledge. Reading their work, we must negotiate prickly forms, anti-absorptive imagery, self-erasing traces and guarded, secretive idioms, which anticipate their own misunderstanding and whose translation leaves us always with a sense of the inevitable “retreat of the *herisson*” (CCP 229), of readerly failure and loss. Yet without this feeling of dissatisfaction, the erinaceous experience of the “impossible possible in an unheard-of event” of the poem would not be complete; both the theoretic

ticians and the poets discussed here teach us how to acknowledge this paradox and embrace its consequences.

In line with Derrida's metaphor of the hedgehog – employed in my book as a springboard and the over-arching trope for discussing epistemological, ontological, pragmatic and metaphysical concerns of modernist and postmodernist poetry – I have examined “the retreat of the *herisson*” and its unconcealedness in various poetic forms, including peripatetic and animal poems, experimental love songs, and religious poems. Each of those forms exposes the defensive faculties of the poetic word, rendering unintelligibility an important part and principle of its message. The truths which they unconceal are frequently protean and incomplete, inviting revisions and renewed quests for meaning. Each of the examined texts calls for a reader who is willing to surrender his readerly expectations and dare into the new territory in the spirit of openness and adventure.

As has been demonstrated, the modernist practice of the road poem exhibits a rupture in the organic concept of the poetic form inherited from the Romantics, demonstrating that language is always already a *via rupta*, a broken path which can no longer lead directly to experience, despite the poets' continuous efforts to reduce the distance between the word and the world. William Carlos Williams' “By the Road to the Contagious Hospital” and Wallace Stevens' “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” approach this rupture of totality and transparency of form differently, advocating two distinct versions of the erinaceous poetics. Williams' form vehemently resists dispersion and retains the Adamic hope that poetic language can restore the clarity of outline, thus creating organic and material totalities out of fragmented reality and perceptual confusion, whereas Stevens deals in dust and shadow less flinchingly, asking his readers to abandon their desire to anchor and stabilize the meaning in the obscure and misted space of his poem. Williams' hedgehog-poem is of a sturdier kind: rather than slip from our grasp entirely, it struggles to assert its linguistic presence, despite the rift caused by the modernist crisis of belief and the uncertain sources of transcendence. Stevens' form, in turn, signals the poet's erinaceous suspension on the threshold between absence and presence, between the revelation and the concealment of meaning, between the final word and its flickering trace. Spatial metaphors in their poems clearly testify to this difference – the gripping, earth-bound movement of Williams' imagery, with its clear direction away from obscurity, undecidability and smudginess to the naked purity of the final “new world” runs counter to Stevens' incurable *Wander-*

lust which takes us through shifting and spectral structures, “solid but ... moveable”, at once “held tenaciously in common earth” and in “moonlit extensions of the mind” (WSCP 471).

Ricoeur observes that “[t]he difference between trivial metaphor and poetic metaphor is not that one can be paraphrased and the other not, but that the paraphrase of the latter is without end. It is endless precisely because it can always spring back to life” (RM 188). The study of Moore’s animal poems reveals the infinite life of the poetic metaphor, exemplifying another form of erinaceous retreat. An ideal poet for a Derridian reading, Moore is known for her fascination with spiny, armored and camouflaged animals, which often serve as metaphoric bearers of her poetic vision. The examination of those tropes with the aid of Derrida’s concept of the “*re-trait*” of metaphor yields interesting discoveries: when viewed against the deconstructive notion of the unconcealedness of truth and infinite splitting of sense, Moore’s animal metaphors prove a powerful tool of epistemological and metacritical inquiry. “Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor”, Stevens states in one of his adages (OP 179). His remark can be said to gloss Moore’s work, even if her escape is never final, for her poems seem to be firmly grounded at once in the mimetic and the metaphoric. Her poems, such as “The Pangolin”, “His Shield”, “The Fish” or “An Octopus”, demonstrate that she frequently opts for the risk of non-truth as well as the disadvantages and benefits of a guarded or partial revelation. Oscillating continuously between the descriptive, the ironic and the instructive mode, Moore prevents the reader from taking a secure hermeneutical position and establishing conclusive truths. The catachrestic fallacy and the idiosyncratic charm of her tropes derives from the gap between, on the one hand, the naturalist precision and scientific objectivity of her imagery, and, on the other, the ineffable emotional moods and spiritual realities that it (un)conceals. Her poem “The Fish” may serve as an excellent example, as the metaphoric “wounding” uncovers the submarine world whose elements, as we discover, do not quite cohere, although their visual beauty suggests the poet’s preference for the aesthetic of the sublime. As the metaphor unfolds, multiplying incongruous and surprising collusions of beautiful and uncanny imagery, we sense that we are pulled into the landscape of the mind affected, if not scarred, by some unspecified darkness and violence. In Moore’s longer animiles, such as “The Octopus”, the organic wholeness of the represented creatures is often destabilized by Moore’s quotational strategies, which question the boundaries between the natural and the artifi-

cial, revealing the imaginative power and spaciousness of the heteroglot vision constructed by the poet. Moore's intertextual ruses, which often include contradictory and even non-literary material, also probe the edges of the poetic text, turning her poems into "a differential network" of plural traces, voices, riddles, and discourses that refuse to form a univocal and smooth aesthetic surface, sending us outside the structure of her compositions. Through its ceaseless opening and shutting, whereby representational accuracy is frequently employed as a form of veiling, Moore's metaphor points to the instability of the signifier as a vehicle of truth, convincing us that "one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying" (Moore MMCP 937).

The poem entitled "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing" – a tour de force of Moore's aesthetic sensibility – is another example of her stretching the resources of language and cognition. My decision to juxtapose this work with Stevens' "The Snow Man" was motivated by the fact that both poems are concerned with the condition of the modernist consciousness and perception, affected and shaped by the transformations of the post-Romantic era. Both works intrigue and baffle the reader with their ultimate unfathomability, pointing to the intractable quality of the modernist mind. The inspiration for and the theoretical intertext behind this comparative study was Charles Bernstein's erinaceous "poem-cum-essay" entitled "Artifice of Absorption". Consistent with Derrida's notion of poetry, Bernstein emphasizes the interplay between communicative and anti-communicative properties of poetic discourse, designing his own argument so that it looks and reads like a poem. The form of this "essay-poem" obstructs our reading and performs the very impermeability and non-transparency of language which it describes.

Stevens' and Moore's poems offer ideal exemplification and fulfillment of Bernstein's "poe[t]heory": as befitting avant-garde poets, Moore and Stevens tip the scale in favor of anti-absorptive devices, which seem more suitable for confronting the challenges of the new century. Their frequent use of such interpretational obstacles as the double negative, paradox, defamiliarization, multiple enjambments, internal rhyme, repetition, unusual sound and rhythmical patterns, irregular typographical design, as well as obscure references and complex metaphors which often fracture without facilitating recognition, clearly evidences their need to create "a textural space" (Bernstein AA 22) in which the artifice of the poem is flaunted rather than hidden or subordinated to the message – a

space which both reflects and demands more active intellectual commitment to the existential and perceptual complexities of modern experience. The confrontation of Stevens' and Moore's anti-absorptive poetics also reveals their modernist "fondness for the signs of psychic division" (I. Howe 1967: 13), which is visible on the level of language and metaphor. Neither man nor snowman, Stevens' *Snow Man* is not only alienated from the surrounding landscape but also from his own self, while Moore's mind wallows in endless subdivisions "whose nettings are legion". The extreme reduction of imagery and language in Stevens' work summons both nothingness and plentitude of sense; the iridescent, illusionist and unexpected shifts of Moore's observations and her verbal wizardry testify to the mind's capacity for and pleasure in centrifugal pursuits.

Taking up the second thread of Derrida's reflections on poetic discourse – centering on the reader-text relationship – in the second chapter of my book I focused on the erotics of reading and writing, or, to use Roland Barthes' pertinent formulation, the theory of the text bound to "the texture of desire, the claims of the body" (RB 71). In this part I assumed, after Derrida and Barthes, that each text desires and attempts to seduce the reader in its own way, and each invites a different kind of relationship with the reader. According to Derrida, the hedgehog-poem, despite its prickly aspect, wants to be taken to heart and learned by heart, which suggests a connection with the reader which is at once cognitive, bodily and emotional. Like Derrida, Barthes compares the relationship between the text and the reader to the intimate bond and erotic game between two lovers, arguing that the involvement required of the lover and the reader turns loving and reading into comparable and interrelated activities which can be viewed against similar phenomena of pleasure and fulfillment. Relying on Barthes' famous and related distinctions between, on the one hand, the text of pleasure and the text of bliss, and, on the other, the *readerly* and the *writerly* text, I have investigated fragments of the lover's discourse and the text-reader relationship in the works of Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy. The choice of those particular poets for the study of textual erotics seemed natural, as all three practice a form of *écriture féminine*, which claims bodily discourse, sustaining the flow of desire and pleasure in language. All three poets can be read as deconstructionists, for their works attempt to bend existing sexual norms and reveal the subversive potential within the traditional forms, conventional sentiment and clichéd themes which they bring into play.

As I have discovered, the most exemplary writer of the Barthesian text of bliss is Gertrude Stein. In her skilful hands, the love sonnet is liberated from the chains of convention and tradition, becoming a form of sensual caress which creates a sense of intimacy and calls for the reader's intense involvement and reciprocation. Thus, the sonnet genuinely 'pleases' the reader-lover with its seductive prattle, the hypnotic potential of insistent and chant-like repetitions, mellow sounds, fragments of intimate conversations, as well as the simplified lexical repertoire which emphasizes the charm-melos of language. Her "Lifting Belly", a love poem written in wartime, works in a similar way, as it pulls the reader into the space of textual bliss in which the sounds and memories of war are muffled through the intensity of Stein's verbal "love-making", and the grimness of the era is compensated for by the inexhaustible *joie de vivre* and the pleasures of sexual body which inform the whole piece. Unlike Eliot, whose decadent love songs prove emptied of love or show its degeneration, as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or *The Waste Land*, Stein offers the excesses of feeling and sensuality to offset the horrors of war and to build an intimate space in which the wounds of the war-infected psyche can be healed in a vitalistic act of "coming together". In line with Barthes' and Derrida's suggestions that the enjoyment of the text of bliss requires succumbing to the physicality, irrationality, and opacity of the word, Stein encourages her readers to relinquish their epistemological anxieties and yield to the erotics and vitality of sound and grammar, appreciating the performative powers as well as the materiality of the poetic word.

In a similar vein, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy exhibit a strong penchant for *writerly* rather than *readerly* gratifications, as they both excel in the obscure, the paradoxical and the subversive. Tapping into the outburst of the discourse of sex and sexuality in the first decades of the twentieth century, the poets teach us how to think outside literary and social conventions, co-opting their erinaceous poems for revisionist thinking about sexual and gender roles. Chantal Chawaf claims that "[f]eminine language must, by its very nature, work on life passionately, scientifically, poetically, politically in order to make it invulnerable" (1981: 177-178). The "prickly" poetics of Loy and Moore fulfill all of the above conditions because they mediate gender conflicts and offer a woman-centered critique of patriarchal culture in scientifically accurate phrasing, yet without losing their passion for life and the poetic. In contrast to Stein's "Lifting

Belly” and “Sonnets that Please”, which entice us primarily through our senses and non-rational features of language, Moore’s “Marriage” and Loy’s *Love Songs* seduce their readers’ in more abstract and cerebral games which intertwine the sensual and the intellectual. In their works, the amorous discourse is always armed with the “thorns” of their *writerly* strategies which prevent us from resting in the comfort of the consumerist, *readerly* approach. Moore and Loy shock us out of our cognitive complacency, sharpening their ‘needles’ and pens as they use their wits in unison with their aesthetic sensibility against narrow perceptions of femininity and patriarchal modes of representation. Both poets stress the differential capacity of woman’s consciousness, which embraces opposite impulses of the heart and head. Both work towards redefining the role of women in the modernist lover’s discourse, seeking their power in their dispersed and divided subjectivity, their masterful use of the double tongue and irony to expose the clash between the social and the sexual, and in their emphasis on the materiality of the word as a way of structuring meaning. Through her explicit, at times even naturalist images and daring violations of sentimental decorum, Loy claims the power of the female body and the woman’s right to express herself without renouncing her sexual desires. Owing to her ascetic language of great accuracy and directness, which mixes plain and Latinate idiom, combined with her ironic use of amorous clichés and intensely private diction, she creates an idiosyncratic form which allows her to uncover deep and previously neglected concerns of the feminine consciousness with a rare psychological and emotional truth. In similar terms, Moore undoes crude gender divisions with strokes of wit, irony and skepticism. In her erinaceous poem about the marital bonds, she insistently celebrates discontinuity, negation and difference. As shown in the analysis, hers is a non-specular idiom, which undoes the egocentric perspective to capture the multiple identities and open boundaries of the female self. In the “Foreword” to the *Marianne Moore Reader*, the poet quotes William James, who celebrates “the exuberant excess of [man’s] subjective propensities”, arguing that if we “prune” this “extravagance”, we will “undo” our humanity (MMR xviii). In love with this “exuberant excess”, Moore clearly refuses to “prune” the “extravagances” of the female mind, allowing them to multiply and grow in the idiosyncratic operations of her language, her dialogic form, conversational tone and eccentric intertextual quilting.

Stein joins Loy and Moore in their ideological *writerly* practice with her “Patriarchal Poetry”, a peculiar epic poem, strongly resisting our intelligence, in which the poet attacks almost all readerly expectations reinforced by the patriarchal tradition, such as representation, narrative and syntactic order, naming, time, causality, coherence and verbal transparency. Susan Sontag encourages us to “recover our senses” in the experience of a work of art, adding that “we must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” and “to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (Sontag 1984: 104). Stein seems to work exactly towards that goal, as she unravels and deconstructs binary oppositions of patriarchal thinking through her poetics of creative insistence, in which repetition serves both to exhaust language to the point of its non-referentiality and to revitalize it so that it proves more hospitable to the demands of the senses, mind, body and emotion, unconstrained by the patriarchal logic with its orderly processes of sense-making, conceptual transparency and fixed gender scripts. Through her assault on the logocentric tradition, conventional usage of grammar and the universal notions of subjectivity, Stein undoubtedly enriches our experience of the poem, which for her is not only an act of communication but above all an experience of pleasure and surprise. She confronts our desire for sense and mimetic effectiveness of language with the nonsensical but intensely musical rhythmicity of her lines, suggesting that the pleasure of reading and the process of knowledge do not always require the movement from ignorance to the revelation of truth. Rather, such pleasure should be derived from a renewed connection between the body and mind, built through rhythm and the physicality of sound as well as through her method of composition-as-explanation, all of which encourage our spontaneous participation in the experience of poetic *jouissance*.

The third relation inscribed in Derrida’s hedgehog metaphor is the connection between the poem and metaphysics. With the aid of the philosopher’s quasi-transcendentalist tools, which include the notions of literature as a specter and a secret, in the third chapter I delved into the peculiar condition of the hedgehog “at the end of metaphysics”. According to Derrida, the messianic nature of God’s arrival, whose impossible possibility sustains our hope and desire for transcendence, also propels the spectral nature of contemporary writing, deprived of a stable spiritual core. Yet again, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens have proven excellent practitioners of the spectral poetics, as their ambivalent approach to the modernist crisis

of faith and the dissolution of gods corroborates Derrida's argument that poetic language carries and preserves the traces of the sacred (Derrida ON 56) without betraying its secrets. Both Stevens and Moore downplay traditional doctrinal theology and acknowledge the centerless position of the Absolute in modernist reality. They also seem to pave the way for Derrida's belief in the inevitable dissemination and occlusion of truth as a way of holding and representing the fading specter of divinity. Brought up in the Protestant belief and frequently acknowledging their want of spiritual solace, both poets are curiously undogmatic and restrained about their religious loyalties, which also – from Derrida's point of view – makes them exemplary specter chasers. The conducted analysis of their poems reveals, however, the poets' profound need of the sacred and the consolations of the metaphysical, coupled with an attempt at turning poetry into a vessel through which this need can be, if only partially, satisfied. For Stevens, it is the poem that becomes the new cathedral, the new "foyer of the spirit", more numerous for the spirit-haunted windows and superior for the angel-guarded doors. Even when his disillusioned metaphysician laments the disappearance of gods and examines in vain the drifting and silent shadows of his dwelling for some surer signs of divinity and transcendence, the poet imbues his language and form with memories, whispers and delicate footprints of the latter's presence. Stevens' erinaceous poem at the end of metaphysics rejects the rigid stamp of doctrinal religion, exemplified by the Doctor of Geneva, and repeatedly unconceals the figure of the necessary angel, standing in the doorway between our uncertainty and longing for the revelation of God's presence. Despite the darkness and doubt in which he is enveloped and his conviction that he might be guarding a door to which no one comes (Stevens, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans"), this angel insistently points toward poetry as an inexhaustible source of light, even if it is no more than "the opal blobs" of "crippled chandeliers" ("The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air") or the diffused and blinding enkindlings of auras ("Auroras of Autumn").

A like-minded lover of dispersed and heavily camouflaged luminescence, Moore also offers us a poetry of the spectral and the mysterious in which, by recourse to sensual metaphors, she attempts to captivate and revive the somewhat dimmed flame of the spirit and faith. Her chameleons, basilisks and unicorns, themselves perfect emblems of nature's unconcealedness, illusionist powers and "ghosting", in a Derridian manner "tell the secret, not reveal it" (ON 7). Their transcendental power mani-

fest itself in their spectral appearance-as-disappearance, pointing to their ontologically uncertain being, which, as Moore hints in her erinaceous flashes of truth, may be suggestive of the supernatural origin. The mythical animals flaunt Derrida's favorite paradox of representing the unknowable by defying or questioning the very possibility of representation. Elusive as they might seem, their poetic portraits nevertheless articulate man's desire to chase the unknown and seek the glimpses of the divine in phenomenological reality. The aesthetic form, into which the poet presses the visible and invisible dimensions of the real, fuses Moore's love of symmetry, sublime beauty and precision with her equal penchant for dissonance, confusion, excessive mimetic detail and sudden shift of focus. In her "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play", Moore's Presbyterian sensibility produces not so much necessary angels, as is the case with Stevens, as a more dubious steeple-jack, at once godlike and devilish. As a God-figure, he is armed with danger signs for the unvigilant and corrupted; as the Devil, he is ready to snare people into his fatal web and into the false garden of an earthly paradise. The moral ambivalence of this Hawthornesque figure, buttressed by his flexible spatial and symbolic positioning, ably captures the modernist struggle with the crisis of absolutes, spiritual disenchantments and the resulting moral relativism.

The final chapter of my book re-orchestrates the themes and elements of erinaceous poetics studied in the three preceding parts; however, this time they are examined on the basis of a sample of postmodernist experimental poetry. Importantly, the chapter is not intended as a wide-ranging overview of contemporary poetic practice, nor does it aspire to exhaust the infinitely plural concerns posited by it. Rather, given the limited scope of the chapter, I have undertaken to follow some developments and modifications in the hedgehog-poetics as manifested in the work of poets whose sensibility has been largely shaped by modernist avant-garde aesthetics. Such a project itself is certainly worth expanding into what would inevitably constitute a separate volume; yet, what I have demonstrated in my cursory investigations is that the postmodern hedgehog-poem shares numerous aesthetic propensities and concerns with its modernist older brother, as both recognize the central role of language in discussing truth and knowledge. Both the modernist and the postmodernist idioms reflect the impenetrability of the logocentric world and the troubled state of the present knowing and communication. However, the postmodern hedgehog travels a road more heavily congested with signs and unanchored signifi-

ers, and hence often finds itself in cul-de-sacs of representation or else is derailed by detours of sense. The form offers no “stay against confusion” or “a clarification of life”, to borrow Robert Frost’s oft-cited formulations from his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes” (1995: 777); rather, it pushes the reader towards greater disorientation and perplexity, as it opens itself to new kinds of interactions with various modes of discourse. Embedded in the multiplicity of language games and social codes, the poem needs to draw on its radical artifice to cross over and communicate its message. It both exploits and works against cultural, literary and social conventions of postmodernity.

In the road poem, this radical artifice serves to show man’s disconnect-
edness from the phenomenological reality, which is always already medi-
ated and accessible through linguistic detour; in the love poem, it demon-
strates the used-upness of the amorous discourse as well as the degree to
which the feeling subject is inscribed in language. As exemplified by An-
drews and Bernstein, the new love song creates interactive games with the
reader-lover, who is engaged in decoding the palimpsestuously layered in-
tertexts and completing or performing the script of love left for him by the
poet. In the poems which address the postmodern metaphysical concerns,
the spectral haunting and movement towards a reclamation of spirituality in
the alienating reality is even more pervasive than it was in their modernist
counterparts. Susan Howe’s hieroglyphic “frame pictures” offer heavily
perforated spaces, wild zones and porous boundaries for the discarded gods
and ghosts of the past that can haunt the present and “apparition” quite
freely on the margins, in the interstices and silences created by the poet’s
erasures and stutters. Thus, she turns gaps and discontinuities into liminal
spaces open to difference and subversion, encouraging a simultaneous con-
struction and deconstruction of meanings. Howe reifies spirituality in her
mediumistic quests in the archives of American colonial history, but the
ghosts that she summons often tell tales of exclusion, resistance, marginali-
zation and imposed silence, offering revisionist counter-narratives to the
dominant historiographical representations, marked by discursive repres-
sions and violence. Often, those ghosts speak and write through fragments
of the dominant discourse – official documents, authentic letters, biogra-
phies – to leave traces, imprints or echoes of their presence; however, they
can also “apparition” as the disembodied and dispossessed Other, a pain-
fully felt absence that claims, for a brief moment, the fragmented body of
Howe’s poem. Ellen Hinsey, in turn, taps into the metaphysical tradition

and the Biblical narratives, so as to render her poem a “celestial ladder”, which can help us climb towards the unnamable and unreachable God. The poet addresses the theme of human desire for the sacred and absolute, showing that the lack of the Absolute Other can be compensated for only through continuous rehearsal of the language of that desire. Just like in the English Metaphysical poems, the elusive sacred is followed in her poems through intensely sensual imagery which reveals the interdependence of the physical and metaphysical hunger. To speak about the unlanguageable name of God, Hinsey often chooses tropes and symbols which convey at once the poignantly felt disconnection from the Mystic Logos and the lingering imprint of God’s presence in the fabric of our lives. The poet’s multiple metaphors of touch, coupled with somatic and erotic symbolism, signal the power of language to create a sensation of both physical and spiritual nature, a sensation which calls for reciprocity, even if the Other’s response cannot be fully grasped or articulated. Touch, itself being the most difficult sense to represent in language and traditionally considered a threat to spiritual concerns, for Hinsey proves the most adequate trope by means of which to talk about the non-locatable and non-measurable divine. In this way, Hinsey demonstrates that the postlapsarian language, even if linked to what is not, nevertheless perpetuates the desire for metaphysical touching and being touched, and remains a form of a dynamic engagement with God.

As observed by Sontag in her essay “Against Interpretation”, “[i]n most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art” (1982: 99). Resisting the temptation to crown my book with some universalizing conclusion and thus ultimately, despite sustained effort, to run over or tame the vulnerable poem-*harrison*, in the final sentences of my study I would like to return to the less conclusive notion of the poem as a form of greeting, translated by Harold Bloom into an apt and tactile metaphor of a handshake. This metaphor captures the essential qualities of poetic discourse as well as the desired features required of its ideal reader: these include a combination of distance and attraction, caution and encouragement, reserve and openness upon encountering the otherness of thought and experience. In his series of lectures on the nature of thinking, Martin Heidegger offers an interesting reflection on the “work of the hand”, a reflection that might gloss both Derrida’s and Bloom’s ideas:

But the work of the hand (*das Werk der Hand*) is richer than we commonly imagine. The hand does not only grasp and catch (*greift and fängt nicht nur*), or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes – and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hand of the other. The hand holds (*hält*). The hand carries (*trägt*).

(Heidegger WCT 17)

The hedgehog-poems discussed here, as I have attempted to show, are set on performing similar work – they grasp and catch, push and pull, but also reach and extend their uncertain and prickly “hand” towards the Other – the reader, hoping to be welcomed, carried, held and sheltered in his hand and heart. “The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs a vis á vis”, Paul Celan (2005: 181) claims in “The Meridian”. Just like the hand which “holds”, “extends itself” and “carries”, the erinaceous poems presented here hold us in their fascinating grip, beckon to us through their aesthetic armor, urging us past their barred forms and fractional articulations into the wonder-world of their non-disclosable and untranslatable secrets.

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O (nie)skrytości jeża: Modernistyczna i postmodernistyczna poezja amerykańska a współczesne teorie krytyczne

Streszczenie

Książka *Unconcealing the Hedgehog: Modernist and Postmodernist American Poetry and Contemporary Critical Theories* [O (nie)skrytości jeża: Modernistyczna i postmodernistyczna poezja amerykańska a współczesne teorie krytyczne] jest próbą połączenia wybranych dyskursów poetyckich, krytycznych, filozoficznych oraz teoretycznych w studium poezji amerykańskiego „wysokiego” modernizmu, reprezentowanego przez poetów takich jak William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, czy Marianne Moore, a także poetów współczesnych, takich jak Susan Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Bernstein, A. R. Ammons. Celem pracy jest ukazanie styków, zależności i podobieństw pomiędzy dekonstrukcyjnymi teoriami Jacquesa Derridy, Rolanda Barthesa, Martina Heideggera, Hélène Cixous czy Luce Irigaray i eksperymentami czołowych modernistów oraz postmodernistów amerykańskich. Zasadzając się na koncepcji poezji Derridy z eseju „Che cos'è la poesia” [Czym jest poezja?], według której wiersz jest podobny do jeża próbującego przekroczyć ruchliwą drogę, rozprawa odsłania złożoność relacji poezja-rzeczywistość oraz poezja-czytelnik w czasach głębokiego kryzysu wartości humanistycznych i w świecie pozbawionym metafizycznych pewników. Konteksty krytyczne, jak próbuję dowieść w rozprawie, nie służą tu tylko jako narzędzia do „otwierania” bogactwa znaczeniowego wiersza, ale, poprzez swoją formę i „poetyckość”, stają się integralną częścią literackiego dyskursu, zgodnie z zasadą „kompozycji jako wyjaśnienia” [*composition as explanation*], sformułowaną przez Gertrude Stein.

Cała struktura książki wywodzi się ze wspomnianego już wyżej eseju Jacquesa Derridy i odzwierciedla wielowarstwowość znaczeniową użytej przez niego metafory. Derridiański „wiersz-jeż” jest bowiem zorientowany zarówno ku światu jak i przeciwko niemu; defensywnie broni swojego kruchego wnętrza, równocześnie próbując odsłonić swoje

tajemnice i pozwolić się wziąć „do serca”. Jak wskazuje francuski filozof za Martinem Heideggerem, wiersz-jeź rozpaczliwie próbuje komunikować, ale też równocześnie obronić swoją „skrytość”. Jak odbywa, realizuje, a często załamuje się ta komunikacja, pokazują kolejne rozdziały rozprawy: pierwszy przygląda się epistemologicznym niepokojom modernizmu w analizie poematów drogi i metafor przestrzeni; drugi rozdział zajmuje się relacją wiersz-czytelnik w oparciu o koncepcje tekstu i przyjemności czytania autorstwa Rolanda Barthesa; trzeci, z kolei, przy pomocy derridiańskiej idei literatury jako ducha i zjawy szuka odpowiedzi na pytanie, co dzieje się z „jeżem” na końcu metafizyki. Rozdział czwarty jest próbą pokazania wpływów i modyfikacji derridiańskiej „poetyki jeża” w wybranych wierszach poetów współczesnych.

W rozdziale pierwszym, zatytułowanym „Modernistyczny jeź na drodze”. wprowadzam źródła filozoficzne, z których wywodzi się derridiańska metafora wiersza-jeża, za Derridą podkreślając różnice między francuskim jeżem (*herisson*) a niemieckim *der Igel* pochodzącym z pism Schlegla oraz Heideggera. W części tej posługuję się krytyczno-filozoficznymi esejami Jacquesa Derridy, takimi jak „Che cos’è la poesia”, „*Retrait of metaphor*”, „*The Origin of Metaphor*”; esejami Charlesa Bernsteina „*Absorption and Anti-Absorption*”, a także wybranymi zagadnieniami filozoficznymi Martina Heideggera, które pozwalają lepiej zrozumieć koncepcje „jeżowej” poezji i poetyki samego Derridy. Na przykładzie wierszy Williama Carlosa Williamsa, Marianne Moore oraz Wallace’a Stevensa badam tu język w stanie epistemologicznego kryzysu i niemożności poznania.

W rozdziale drugim, pt. „O tym jak jeź uczy nas serca: O erotyce czytania i pisania w wierszach” Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore i Miny Loy”. posługując się poetyckimi teoriami Roland Barthesa, takimi jak koncepcja tekstu przyjemności i dyskursu miłosnego sformułowanymi w *Przyjemności tekstu*, *S/Z*, oraz *Fragmentach dyskursu miłosnego*, a także współczesnymi teoriami feministycznymi, analizuję wiersz modernistyczny jako akt „trudnej” lub niemożliwej komunikacji. Analizie poddane są tutaj elementy dyskursu miłosnego, genderowo świadoma forma wierszy, a także problem budowania relacji z czytelnikiem i zagadnienia przyjemności czytania i interpretacji.

Rozdział trzeci, zatytułowany „Jeź na końcu metafizyki: (Nie)skrytość boskości w poezji Marianne Moore i Wallace’a Stevensa”, ma na celu

konfrontację poezji z kryzysem myśli religijnej i metafizyki w dobie modernizmu. Analiza wierszy o tematyce religijnej Marianne Moore oraz Wallace'a Stevensa koncentruje się tutaj na problemie języka jako niedoskonałego narzędzia metafizycznych tęsknot i spotkań z Niewyraźnym. Konteksty filozoficzne użyte w tym rozdziale to głównie religijne koncepcje quasi-transcendentalizmu Jacquesa Derridy, sformułowane, między innymi, w dziełach *Specters of Marx*, *Cirumfessions*, *On the Name*, "Faith and Knowledge".

Rozdział czwarty „Objazd za objazdem. O tym gdzie i jak mieszkają współczesne jeże”, zamyka rozprawę, ukazując kontynuację i kierunki rozwoju „jeżowej” poetyki w awangardowej poezji współczesnej. Rozdział ten zbiera wykorzystane konteksty krytyczne i filozoficzne, dowodząc zwiększonej mocy oddziaływania i przenikania się różnorodnych dyskursów w twórczości amerykańskich postmodernistów. Materiałem badań jest mniej w Polsce znana powojenna poezja eksperymentalna (Susan Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop, Ellen Hinsey, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews) wywodząca się jednakże z tradycji modernistycznych. Kolejne podrozdziały tej części podejmują zagadnienia omówione obszernie w trzech poprzednich częściach, a więc relację wiersz-świat, wiersz-czytelnik, a także problem metafizyki we współczesnej poezji.

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Wydanie I. Ark. wyd. 21,12. Ark. druk. 24,25

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