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Feeling With Imagination: Sympathy and Postwar American Poetry

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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FEELING WITH IMAGINATION: SYMPATHY AND POSTWAR AMERICAN POETRY

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

by

Timothy A. DeJong

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how sympathy, defined as the act of “feeling with” another, develops within American poetics from 1950-1965 both as aesthetic strategy and as political response to Cold War culture. Re-examining the social aims of postwar poets typically either thought of as apolitical or yoked to political positions not in fact evidenced by their poems, I argue that these poets, by developing forms of sympathy that negotiate the middle space between the aesthetic conventions of late modernist poetry and the social concerns of postwar American culture, instantiate a self-questioning, often implicit form of “soft politics” that both prefigures and creates the conditions for the more openly political aesthetic of the 1960s.

The dissertation is divided into three parts, each of which examines two poets. The first section focuses on Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, analyzing their work in light of the affect theory first developed by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins to show how their poems invite and deconstruct the sharing of various forms of feeling between reader, speaker, and subject. I then examine the work of John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, who use sympathy to fashion a radically unfinished model of selfhood that both anticipates and interrogates poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity. The final section of my dissertation reads the work of the late modernist African American poets Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson in the context of theorists including Frantz Fanon and Mikhail Bakhtin, demonstrating that their poems embody, by their global and sympathetic perspective, the attempt to forge of ties of sympathy between individuals separated by distance, race, gender, and history.

Using an interdisciplinary methodology that combines affect theory with historicist and formalist critique, I provide an original and important reading of mid-century U.S. poetics as defined by a radical ethics rooted in forms of shared feeling. Illuminating the soft politics of late modernist poetry, this thesis complicates the current picture of the postwar arts by arguing that it is attuned not only to the psychology of the solitary or alienated self, but to the ways in which bonds of sympathy between disparate persons can transform conceptual models of individual, community, and nation.

Key Words

Sympathy; poetry; postwar; United States; affect; 1950s; Lowell; Bishop; O'Hara; Ashbery; Hayden; Tolson.

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PART ONE

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Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

– *Ecclesiastes* 4:9-12

Introduction

Narrating Fellow-Feeling: Postwar American Poetics and the Politics of Identification

“. . . whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral dressed in his shroud.”

– Whitman, “Song of Myself”

I. Theorizing the “Intimate Community”

Frank O’Hara’s early poem “Song,” written while he was completing a Master’s degree in English at the University of Michigan, celebrates his imminent departure to New York, where most of O’Hara’s social circle lived and wrote or painted: “I’m going to New York! / (what a lark! what a song!)” (O’Hara, *Selected Poems* 19). The poem’s exuberance is unstinted throughout its three short stanzas; the three exclamation marks that occur in its first couplet are joined by another thirteen in the lines that follow. The middle stanza of “Song” sheds light on some of the specific reasons for O’Hara’s joy:

I’m going to New York!
 (quel voyage! jamais plus!)
 far from Ypsilanti and Flint!
 where Goodman rules the Empire
 and the sunlight’s eschato-
 logy upon the wizard’s bridges
 and the galleries of print!

I’m going to New York!
 (to my friends! mes sembables!) . . . (19)

In part because it lacks the unerring instinct for uniting broad appeal with the idiosyncratic flourishes that O’Hara manifested so assuredly and off-handedly in many of his later poems, “Song” is not one of O’Hara’s finest creations. But it does evince, in its brief way, nearly all of

the characteristics for which O'Hara's work has become so widely appreciated: unapologetic emotion, often taking the form of joy; clever verbal formulations and unexpected line breaks ("eschato- / logy" and "wizard's bridges"); a powerful affection for his friends that is clear even to the casual reader; and a willingness to emplace the biographical self within the text.

Regarding this last point, the circumstances of O'Hara's personal life not only precipitate the poem's very being (he writes it out of elation at the prospect of moving to New York), they also appear in the details scattered across the poem's surface. Flint is a well-known city in Michigan, and Ypsilanti is a lesser-known town some few miles southeast of Ann Arbor. As for the initially perplexing description of New York as a place where "Goodman rules the Empire," it can be explained via a letter O'Hara wrote to his friend Jane Freilicher in the summer of 1951, near the time "Song" was written. In the letter O'Hara reports in typically excited fashion a literary discovery he has made:

The only pleasant thing that's happened to me since you left gal is that I read Paul Goodman's current manifesto in *Kenyon Review* and if you haven't devoured its delicious message, rush to your newsstand! It is really lucid about what's bothering us both besides sex, and it is so heartening to know that someone understands these things. . . . just knowing that he is in the same city may give me the power to hurt myself into poetry. (quoted in Gooch 187)

In the essay to which O'Hara refers, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," the sociologist and anarchist poet Paul Goodman attempts to identify the major trends in American literature from the beginning of the twentieth century to its midpoint. Goodman focuses on what he calls "advance-guard" writing in midcentury America (an Anglicization of the French "avant-garde"). According to Goodman, advance-guard writing develops as a response to a culture defined by division, one in which

1) society is "alienated" from itself, from its own creative development, and its persons are estranged from one another; but most of the members of society do not feel their estrangement; (2) the artists, however, feel it, regard themselves as estranged; and (3) society responds to them not with snobbery and incomprehension, as to foreigners, speaking a foreign tongue, but with outrage,

embarrassment, and ridicule, as to an inner threat. (“Advance-Guard Writing” 361)

This situation of alienation exists, Goodman argues, inasmuch as artists in the advance-guard have consciously rejected the “extraordinarily senseless and unnatural” societal norms according to which they were expected to pattern their lives (369). Artists in the advance-guard protest these norms, which serve to reinforce “a standard of living measured by commodities, a commercial art, a moral freedom without personal contact” (369-70). The solution for advance-guard artists, Goodman suggests,

is to find a level of subject-matter so elementary that he can know that he and the audience really share it in common, meaning by it the same thing. There must be such common subject-matter, for all of us walk on the ground, breathe, and so forth; this is common and not subject to the corruption of self-alienation. Somewhere between this level and the level of shell-shock and commercialized sentiment there must be a border-line of subject-matter felt by the artist and not quite devitalized in the audience; it is here that the advance-guard must operate. (375)

In devoting themselves to everyday and elementary subject matter, advance-guard artists work to establish a connection between themselves and their audience, to dissolve the distance that has accrued between the two groups in the postwar era. The goal of the advance-guard writer can also be framed in constructive terms; the elimination of the divide between artist and reader implies, as Goodman puts it, “the physical reestablishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way: the persons are estranged from themselves, from one another, and from their artist; he takes the initiative precisely by putting his arms around them and drawing them together” (375). In this manner the artist helps to engender what Goodman calls the “intimate community” – an aesthetic space defined by the development of solidarity and identification with the other (376).

Because Goodman’s essay centers on physical manifestations of writerly and readerly connection, he uses an emphatically corporeal metaphor, suggesting that the advance-guard artist “puts his arms around” his audience to usher them into community. For Goodman, initiating the intimate community begins with writing about one’s friends and thereby using

writing to strengthen already existing sympathetic bonds: this is partly why his article so appealed to O'Hara, a poet already predisposed to (and later to become famous for) writing about his friends, as his early poem "Song" attests. It was likely because O'Hara was so taken by Goodman's notion of writing for an intimate community – and so excited to again be an active part of that community – that he dubbed Goodman the ruler of a small "Empire" of alienated artists seeking integration. However, sympathy in language can go beyond the confines of Goodman's program for it. In this dissertation, I explore in detail the several ways in which poets of the postwar period (O'Hara among them) consider the possible forms and limits of an "intimate community" and the implications of these forms both for poetry and in a culture at large. More specifically, I investigate the possibility that the sympathy that fosters social community can be not only intimate but incisive, not only palliative but painful, and that the social ethic it instantiates serves to shed light on the complex ways in which politics intertwines with art.

Goodman's article reflects a trend that was on the rise in the years following World War II – the formation, among artists, of small social groups or coteries for the purposes of correspondence, collaboration, and socialization. Such collectives are likely nearly as old as poetry itself, but the "tranquillized Fifties" (to use Robert Lowell's well-known summation of the decade) were a notably fertile time period in the U.S. history of this phenomenon. Several interconnected but distinct poet communities established themselves almost simultaneously in separate parts of the nation, among them the Black Mountain poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Middle Generation poets (some of whom are also grouped together as the Confessional poets), the New York School, and the Beat Movement. With some important exceptions – such as Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg – all of these groups tend to move from the public to the private sphere and from a grandiose impersonal aesthetic to more restrained and often lyric forms of expression. The desire to retreat from, or to refuse to speak for, society at large may be hypothesized as one reason that so many poets felt the need to be part of a coterie: feeling ostracized from American culture as a whole, they practiced separate and smaller forms of belonging.

And yet the tension between the poetics and practice of dissent and the desire for belonging cannot be so straightforwardly negotiated. For one thing, while these poets were all

critical of aspects of their society, their distaste for American culture and politics was rarely absolute or unmitigated. Further, they recognized – even when outside the United States – the impossibility of completely severing themselves from their ties to place and nation. The only outlier in this regard were the Beat poets, whose lifestyles in the postwar period amounted to a theatrical dissociation from mainstream American culture and (what they considered) the banality of existence within it. At the same time, this decision also arguably limited their ability to speak to and across the cultural divide imposed by their movement.¹

The poets I examine in this dissertation – Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Robert Hayden, and Melvin Tolson – articulated their dissatisfaction with the consumerist apathy² of their time period in less dramatic ways. They attached themselves to their various groups with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and did not regard these groups as conscious attempts to form a separate counterculture within the dominant one. Many of their poems seem wilfully apolitical, and they tended (with the possible exception of Tolson, and of Lowell in his later work) to eschew politics in their poetry altogether. One of the central goals of this dissertation is to trace out the sense in which their poetry *does* establish a political vision, against all appearances. These writers are united by what I call a “soft politics,” which is

¹ In this regard, David Halberstam’s comment about the Beat poets is telling, if debatable: “Writers they might have been, but in the end their lives tended to be more important than their books” (299). At the very least, this seems to have been how the Beat writers appeared to the public eye in their own time. Elizabeth Bishop puts the criticism somewhat differently in a 1961 letter to Robert Lowell in which she ponders how to best write political poetry: “The Beats have just fallen back on an old corpse-strewn or monument-strewn battle-field – the real protest I suspect is something quite different” (Bishop, *Words in Air* 364).

² By the phrase “consumerist apathy” I mean to designate two concurrent trends in postwar American culture. One was the economic boom and all that attended it: the rapid growth of the suburbs, and the general sense of the attainability of the good life, as measured in personal income, material possessions, and a stable (heterosexual) home and family unit. As Oakley notes, in the financial sense it was (for a large number of the population) a good time to be American: “Not since the 1920s had so many worshipped at the altar of prosperity and felt that they lived in God’s country. In spite of the tensions of the Cold War and the growing threat of nuclear annihilation, the prevailing climate of Eisenhower’s America was one of confidence, optimism, and complacency” (314).

By the second term in the phrase, apathy, I mean to echo Alan Nadel’s suggestion that during the Cold War period “‘conformity’ became a positive value in and of itself” (4). Helped along by a variety of factors – including the harshness with which activism was viewed during the Cold War, the old left’s shift toward conservatism, and a growing sense of nationalism nurtured by economic vitality – this conformity manifested itself as a widespread lack of political fervour. In *Growing Up Absurd*, his influential 1956 study of the problems besetting American youth and society, Goodman reflects on the preceding ten years as “a decade in which the students in our colleges showed a political apathy probably unexampled in student history” (102).

visible in their poetry as a tenuous and self-questioning stance, typically implicit rather than overt. It frames its content within distinct aesthetic parameters, questions not only repression and homogeneity but overly pat or reductive responses to such conditions, and combines its critique of the postwar moment in the United States with a strong awareness of its own imbrication in that moment.

Sympathy, I argue, is the key feature through which poetics and soft politics are linked in the postwar period. Throughout this study, I posit that sympathy is the trope through which American poets in the 1950s and early 1960s express, in a mode suited to their era, a countercultural and ultimately optimistic politics that both reimagines and remains invested in American society. In so doing, their work overcomes the resistance to politics that defines the formalist and New Critical traditions in which their poetics takes shape. This study of six postwar American poets revolves around sympathy partly because their deployment of affect in their poems marks one of the most profound manners through which the diverse writers of this time period can be thematically connected, but more importantly, because traceable within that connection is a political strategy that operates as an aesthetic paradigm. This strategy affirms the various goals that can be achieved through the shared expression of affect. Besides the basic imperative to collectively confront and manage negative affects, these include a reconsideration of how we collectively define and construct subjectivity and an insistence on sympathy's status as a transnational force capable of disrupting the corrosive ideologies codified in Cold War nationalism. As such, the poetic representations of affect I explore in detail in this study constitute a link between the confessional and late modernist modes of 1950s poetry and the more openly political aesthetic of the late 1960s and 1970s.

II. The Roots of Sympathy

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest recorded appearance of the word “sympathy” dates from 1578. In its earliest stages, the word designated an exact consonance between two separate things, an affinity so powerful as to almost be a fusing of identities; the implication seemed to be that sympathy contained a power that verged on the magical, causing objects to “affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other” (*OED*). This is the meaning of the word toward which Michel Foucault gestures in

The Order of Things when he describes sympathy as “an instance of the *Same* so strong and so insistent that it will not rest content to be merely one of the forms of likeness; it has the dangerous power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them, of causing their individuality to disappear” (26). It was not until the 1590s that “sympathy” began to be used largely in reference to feelings rather than to objects; by the 1660s it had come to mean “fellow-feeling,”³ which is the definition of the word operative in this study and which reflects its dominant usage until at least the late nineteenth century, when its chief meaning arguably began to be displaced by the word “empathy.”

The increasing attention given to empathy within academia⁴ necessitates a brief explanation of why I have chosen to focus instead on the usage and effect of sympathy in postwar American poetry. Empathy is a much younger word than sympathy and originates in the scholarly fields of aesthetics and psychology. In 1909 the British structuralist psychologist Edward Titchener coined the word as a translation of the German “*Einfühlung*” (literally “in-feeling”), a word that had itself been recently invented by the German philosopher Rudolf Lotze in 1858 (Wispé 18). While its history is thus shorter and less rich than that of sympathy, empathy represents an advancement into terrain from which the definition of sympathy has gradually backed away; the *OED* defines it as “the power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation” (*OED*).

Strictly speaking, then, it seems to me that the level of connectivity described by the term “empathy” is unachievable in human interaction, and the word is more suited to theoretical or hypothetical pursuits than to a study that means to represent the ways in which fellow-feeling connects humans. Since its earliest usages, after all, when its very utterance bespoke a kind of

³ Milton uses the word in this sense in the famous section of *Paradise Lost* that describes Eve captivated by her own reflection, which responds to her attentions “with answering looks / Of sympathy and love” (iv.464-5).

⁴ Empathy studies is a divided but rapidly growing field of critical inquiry. In philosophy, biology, sociology, and economics, recent studies demonstrate the centrality of empathy to human civilization and development: see here Nussbaum, de Waal, and Rifkin. For analyses considering the role of empathy in literature, see Keen and Lundeen. In contemporary affect theory, empathy tends to be interrogated with more suspicion, and is sometimes viewed as a sentimental vehicle through which the true causes of global injustice are elided or ignored; here see Berlant’s edited volume, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, and Ahmed. For a summarizing critique that weighs both sides of the debate over empathy, see Jurecic.

magic, sympathy's limit as an act of moral imagination has gradually seeped into the term's definition. Its closest synonyms in contemporary parlance are "pity" and "compassion," though neither of these words carries sympathy's sense of shared emotional connection. However, "compassion" is in fact an older word than "sympathy," dating from the 1300s, and from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries the two terms were nearly synonymous with one another (in fact, they share the Latin root *pati*, which means "to suffer") (Garber 20). As Marjorie Garber notes, when the meanings began to diverge, it was because the definition of compassion began to change, "tipp[ing] in the direction of inequality, charity, or patronage," while sympathy "remained historically a condition of equality or affinity, whether between the body and the soul, between two bodily organs, or, increasingly, between persons with similar feelings, inclinations, and temperaments" (23).

This difference between the meanings of "compassion" and "sympathy" is an important one: left absent in sympathy, as I define it in this study, is the implied distinction between the one who feels compassion and the one for whom compassion is felt, or between the one who pities and the one who is pitied. The political dimensions of this distinction render compassion a slippery concept; what constantly needs to be weighed in the compassionate exchange, it seems, is the extent to which compassion serves as a too-easy moral feeling whose true purpose is to ease the conscience of the privileged compassionate subject rather than to alleviate the suffering of the one for whom compassion is felt. In the complex conflation of politics and the arts that defines the media-saturated contemporary moment, compassion and pity can sometimes be wielded as stopgap measures that only reify the gaps and hurts they purport to overcome.⁵ Thinking about sympathy as a sharing of affect not weighed down at the outset by the cultural

⁵ This idea is more fully explored in an essay collection edited by Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), whose contributors analyze the ethical and political implications of various rhetorical usages of compassion. In her introduction to the volume, Berlant remarks that public compassion often manifests itself today – however counter-intuitively – as the "desire not to connect, sympathize, or recognize an obligation to the sufferer; to refuse engagement with the scene or to minimize its effects; to misread it conveniently . . . to feel bad for the sufferers, but only so that they will go away quickly" (Berlant, "Introduction" 9). Indeed, she argues, "[t]he modern social logic of compassion can as easily provide an alibi for an ethical or political betrayal as it can initiate a circuit of practical relief" (11). At some point, it must be said, what Berlant defines here as compassion might no longer be worthy of the name: but this very fact might bring our collective social responsibility into sharper focus, since the meaning of the word may well depend on how we deploy it, and on the kinds of actions we use it to designate.

hierarchies of class or ethnicity, or by the depersonalizing impact of distance, allows us (as it did the poets in this study) to imagine how it might contribute to a political model of optimism and possibility.

That sympathy's limits are embedded in the definition of the word is one reason I track sympathy in this study rather than the more projective term "empathy." Like compassion, sympathy can serve as an emotional "quick fix" that stands in for the action it is meant to propel us to. Further, the connectivity it engenders, besides being temporally and spatially limited, is strictly affective and offers no guarantee of effective change. Despite allowing us to feel with and for the other, sympathy proscribes its own border: no matter the strength of our feeling, we remain distinct from one another in the most basic ways. In absolute terms, I can never feel exactly what the other feels, because I am not the other.⁶ At least as it is used in this study, then, sympathy does not (contra Foucault) contain the power to "rende[r] things identical to one another" (*The Order of Things* 26); whatever magical properties were originally attributed to it have dissipated in the wake of modernity. The identifications it proliferates are affective and even visceral, but do not necessarily provoke any further alteration of physical reality. Unless augmented by action, sympathy offers no lasting solution to the problems posed by alterity. But its political potential is real and powerful; sympathy takes the ethical from the personal to the social. Even where it does not spur the subjects who experience it to immediate action, it nevertheless integrates them more fully into the world of which they are a part.

In the Romantic era and beyond, the pre-eminence of sympathy as a moral concept owes significantly to the work of the philosopher Adam Smith, who expounds on the concept at length in his treatise *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the final version of which was published in 1790. Smith defines sympathy as the act of experiencing "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever": "Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned," he writes, "an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the

⁶ Adam Smith stresses this point in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "Even our sympathy with the joy or grief of another, before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect. . . . Mankind, though naturally sympathetic, never conceive, for what has befallen another, that degree of passion which naturally animates the person principally concerned" (14, 26-7).

breast of every attentive spectator” (13). For Smith, the instinct to sympathize with the other in this way must be cultivated because it stands as the basic principle of all human ethical relation. Lyric poetry, a dominant literary genre of the Romantic era, is an art form inherently germane to any discussion of identification between self and other. Its creation usually entails the separate identities both of a persona or speaker and his subject(s), and, on a slightly more direct or meta-literary level, of a poet and his reader. In the late Romantic era, the philosopher John Stuart Mill establishes the beginnings of a link between poetry and sympathy when he asserts in his 1833 essay “What is Poetry?” that “[t]he object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions” (103-4). For Mill, however, while poetry appears to be designed for the production and sharing of feeling, the poet’s discourse is ultimately solitary rather than relational: “All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy” (109). That the poet hopes to publish his work and have it be read by others should never be visible in the fully realized poem. “Poetry,” in Mill’s definition, “is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude”; it is an act of conversation with the self not so much heard, in Mill’s famous phrase, as overheard (109). The reader only comes in afterward and plays no role in the creative process.

Mill’s assessment of poetry as “feeling confessing itself to itself” does seem to describe a good deal of Romantic lyric poetry, cohering with the Shelleyan notion of the poet as a lonely and misunderstood genius. A long poem such as Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* is certainly more focused on the drama of the private self than on sympathy with the other. But Wordsworth’s later work makes evident his belief that poetry is, and should be, a public rather than a private art. Especially in his *Lyrical Ballads*, sympathy takes effect as an aesthetic device that links the speaker to the subjects he describes, and in so doing, implicitly encourages the reader to share in the sentiment generated by the poem. Discussing the role of sympathy in poetry in his “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,” Wordsworth avers that “it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes . . . and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs” (“Preface” 78). For Wordsworth, sympathy in poetry is achieved through specific stylistic and formal choices. Its moral components notwithstanding, the function of sympathy is chiefly *aesthetic*, since “[w]e have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure” (79). Wordsworthian sympathy appears in the form of a poetic language “arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings . . . a more permanent, and a

far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets,” whom Wordsworth accuses of “separat[ing] themselves from the sympathies of men” (71). In contrast, Wordsworth’s ambition was “to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men” (74). In its simultaneous distancing and idealizing, this ambition – achieved through the adoption of a particular and recognizable aesthetic – takes on manifestly political overtones.⁷ Wordsworth’s sympathy for his subjects, while not unproblematic, merges politics and aesthetics in a manner that proved important and influential in the literary history of sympathy not only for British poets but for those in the emerging American tradition.

One of the key figures in that tradition is Walt Whitman, within whose work sympathy constitutes a central trope, and whose avowal of sympathy’s necessity serves as the epigraph to this introduction. For Whitman, sympathy is a bidirectional force that moves both from poet to reader and from reader to poet; Whitman’s desire is not merely to understand the other but to be understood himself. The opening lines of *Song of Myself* affirm this connection: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume” (Whitman 1). The swiftness with which the speaker moves from self to other and the assuredness with which he narrates an equivalence between them suggests that Whitmanian sympathy is the kind described by Foucault – an assertive and projective gesture that, not content merely to identify with others, seeks the complete merging of identities. This merging is possible even where the speaker in Whitman’s poetry operates from a place of privilege relative to the one with whom he sympathizes. “I am the hounded slave,” he asserts in “Song of Myself”; “I wince at the bite of the dogs” (27). As Kristin Boudreau remarks, sympathy in Whitman is an act of “omnivorous imagination” in which the poet aims “to dissolve the subjective and bodily barriers between himself and others” (85). That sympathy for Whitman resides nearer assimilation than approximation is an idea the poet himself takes pains to clarify: “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels....I myself become the wounded person” (27). By inserting his poetic self

⁷ Jerome McGann has offered a particularly influential critical account of the displacement involved in Wordsworthian sympathy in *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983). The Wordsworth poem, McGann argues, effectively “annihilates its history, biographical and socio-historical alike, and replaces these particulars with a record of pure consciousness” (90). See McGann 81-92.

into others' lives and identities, Whitman may well mean to initiate the sympathetic embrace that Paul Goodman describes as essential to the formation of the intimate community. But the gesture also bespeaks a certain artistic hubris: Whitman's sympathy is about the capacious enlargement of the self as much as it is about identification with the other. D. H. Lawrence found the ambition of Whitman's sympathy off-putting, believing that it overreached the boundaries that irrevocably divide writer and reader or writer and subject (Boudreau 86). Lawrence's more understated vision of sympathy is echoed by Caleb Crain's reminder that "sympathy itself is always an inadequate substitute, a fictional third term interposed between two people who are never fully present to each other" (*American Sympathy* 10). Through its very brashness, the sympathy displayed in Whitman's poetry distinguishes it from its antecedents in British literature, assuming qualities that would prove instrumental in shaping a national ideology that envisioned the American individual as embodying self-confidence, independence, and generosity.

By the Cold War era, this narrative remained unchanged in some respects, but (as Goodman's article suggests) the gap between poet and society had widened appreciably, and the grand synthesis of American character achieved in Whitman's poems no longer seemed possible. For this reason, in the 1950s and early 1960s, sympathy takes shape within more limited aesthetic boundaries and works towards more diffuse political ends. This study defines and outlines the next step in the chronology of sympathy as a trope in American poetry. Choosing neither the reductive and idealizing politics of Wordsworthian sympathy, nor the brazen, affirming politics of Whitmanian sympathy, poets of the American postwar moment introduce what I call the soft politics of sympathy. In this mode, poets recognize not only the limitations of sympathy as a connective force, but also their own limitedness as writers observing the world from specific and constrained subject positions. Sympathy takes effect in their poems in multifaceted ways: in the sharing of negative affect, in the subverting of racial and ethnic categories, and even as part of the poet's performance of his or her own subjectivity. The politics produced by these uses of sympathy is self-assessing and pragmatic, and cannot be reduced to any single platform or agenda. Reluctant to make grand moral claims, it remains consistently attuned to the crucial role of affective identification in the development of self and polis.

III. Contemporary Critical Interventions

To this point, the nature of sympathy in 1950s American poetics has received little critical attention. Studies of American sympathy tend to cover more broad historical and literary contexts; these include Caleb Crain's *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* and Kristin Boudreau's *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses*, published in 2001 and 2002 respectively. These books examine sympathy's wide-ranging function in the history of American letters, whether as a moral ideal, a connective force, a vehicle for literary inspiration, or some combination of the three. Boudreau addresses the fiction of writers such as Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Dean Howells in the context of various social issues to argue that their work catalogues a vacillation between communal sympathy and individual autonomy, framing a tension that remains crucial to the nation's understanding of itself. Sympathy, Boudreau writes, is a double-edged sword: "it destroys the strangeness that separates individuals, allowing for human commerce, but in doing so it also . . . reduc[es] all relations to sameness and mak[es] a 'criminal contiguity' of the world of human relations" (xiv). Boudreau traces a historical progression in which the obvious benefits of sympathy gradually come to be overshadowed by its attendant dangers. Crain's approach, meanwhile, focuses on real-world occurrences of sympathy more than on the term's philosophical implications for the project of nation-building. Using biographical research of the male friendships of literary figures including Charles Brockden Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville, Crain considers how these sympathetic relationships are represented in (or reshaped by) the written work of the authors they involve. For Crain, sympathy affords early American writers a needed balance between individuality and unity: "the special task of American literature . . . was the representation of bonds between men that kept men free – the provocation of sympathy, without any tethering of it" (*American Sympathy* 2).

Andrew Epstein performs a similar critical investigation in his book *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*, discussing the poems of the postwar poets John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Amiri Baraka in light of the friendships these writers maintained (and in some cases, strained) outside of poetry. For Epstein, these poets' friendships bespeak their commitment to a sense of both self and community as radically unfinished and haphazard

– a notion itself indebted to Emersonian pragmatism. Epstein’s central aim in *Beautiful Enemies* is to locate a paradox between postwar poets’ commitment to friendship and collaboration and their avant-garde desire for non-conformism. His book (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four of this study) provides a useful complement to my own investigation, but covers different terrain, largely because it focuses on friendship rather than the arguably more conflicted concept of sympathy.

The lack of overlap between Epstein’s book and this dissertation also stems from methodological differences. Where Epstein contextualizes his readings of Ashbery, O’Hara, and Baraka by working in the pragmatist tradition, I frame my intervention into the field largely through affect theory. The experience of sympathy can in fact be defined as the sharing of affect: it is a process in which a person’s expression of affect triggers an experience of that same affect in another or in others. In the hands of different theorists, the concept of affect has taken on various and conflicting meanings in recent years. Throughout this dissertation, I follow the theory of the affects offered by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins, which he developed during the 1960s and 1970s. For Tomkins, there are nine basic discrete affects, which are all differentiable and specific precognitive responses to outside stimuli. Despite the emphatically biological understanding of the human that constrains Tomkins’ ideas, his work on affect is useful to me because it provides an entry point into a discussion of how the various, often heightened states of emotion that feature in so much of lyric postwar poetry can function not simply as illustrations of a given subject’s state of mind (as the most straightforward readings of “confessional” poetry would suggest), but as articulations of a socially conscious, morally engaged reflection on the problems besetting Cold War culture.

Tomkins’ conception of the affects can also be productively applied to literature because Tomkins emphasizes that while affects are produced at the level of the individual organism, they are also the building blocks of relational interaction between individuals. Analogously, following André Green, Lauren Berlant describes affects as “a metapsychological category spanning what’s internal and external to subjectivity” (*Cruel Optimism* 16). Affect is thus both outside and inside the subject. Applying Tomkins’ framework to this notion, we can isolate

sympathy as the mapping of a subjective and ethically motivated heuristic onto a locally specific, pre-subjective, affective response to an outside stimulus.⁸ This process involves and requires an impossible-to-pinpoint transition from instinctive response to conscious awareness – a transition we should be cautious not to reductively designate as that from affect to emotion.⁹ Such a reading would oversimplify the occurrence of sympathy; after all, emotion itself may be a category that (as Rei Terada has argued¹⁰) is extrinsic to and a shaping influence on personhood rather than a property of it. Further, we all too commonly experience emotions over which we have little or no control. At the same time, if affects condition, rather than proceed from, subjectivity, the moment of sympathy remains one in which affect, in being shared and internalized, encounters an ethical apparatus that generates the response of commiseration with the other. Sympathy thus invites us to think about what can happen when affect and agency converge, and whether such moments of shared emotion can create opportunities for local instances of political resistance to dominant culture.

The word “local” here is significant. Contemporary readings of affect tend to envision it as a network of feeling or influence that is disseminated at the level of national discourses or global economic forces. These fields of affect not only delegitimize agency, they group humans into two broad categories – the individual and the masses. This same heuristic is often used in criticism of the work of poets such as Robert Lowell and John Ashbery, writers who, it is argued, are invested in dramatizing in language the American private self writ large, the Emersonian individual attentive to the workings of his own psychosocial development. This

⁸ Over time, the subject consistently applies the same reactive principles to a given experience of affect, and learns to associate this reaction with the experience. In Tomkins’ vocabulary, this process is the formation of a “script,” or “an individual’s rules for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling a magnified set of scenes” (320).

⁹ Adam Smith likewise describes sympathy as a two-part process, the first sensory (and therefore affective), the second moral and imaginative:

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. . . . His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have adopted them and made them our own, begin at last to affect us . . . (11-12)

¹⁰ See Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001).

conception of the American Cold War aesthetic is a common one that goes well beyond poetics into other forms of art, literature, and film, and it is not without merit. But my analyses of these poets, affiliated with the Middle Generation, the New York School, and the black modernist aesthetic respectively, demonstrates that this picture of the postwar arts as singularly attuned to the psychology of the solitary self underestimates the extent to which sociality, especially in its local and domestic forms, forms an essential focus of 1950s and 1960s art. To conceive of society in terms of the masses or of the private self is to overlook the numerous smaller groups within which selfhood and community are constructed in postwar America: the family, the coterie, the far-reaching networks of friends and acquaintances maintained by a poet such as Frank O'Hara. Reading sympathy in postwar poetics with these social groups in mind provides the framework for developing an alternative discourse surrounding the self in postwar America: one that focuses less on private alienation and psychological turmoil than on the ways in which bonds of sympathy between separate persons can change conceptual models of individual, community, and nation.

It might be clear by now that my dissertation does not read sympathy in the work of Cold War poets through a hermeneutic of suspicion. My goal is not to identify moments or scenes in their poems in which sympathy seems forced, deflates into sentimentalism, or is premised on a belief in identification with the other that has been too hastily assumed. Such moments certainly exist in poetry as a whole, and postwar writers in the United States cannot be exempted from these criticisms. But to rely on the sense of objective critical distance we often seem to take for granted in contemporary literary studies in order to belittle postwar poetic sympathy as a problematic product and reflection of its era would be to pursue a path that is itself liable to be flawed and overdetermined. This kind of critical examination would, for example, have to overlook the many respects in which poetry of the 1950s and 1960s *did* succeed in using sympathy to express a resistant and fertile politics that is still conceptually relevant today. Instead, my dissertation opts for a strategy of "reading with" these poets rather than "reading against" them, working to demonstrate that sympathy as it appears in these poets' work is much more complex and multifaceted than has hitherto been assumed. In undertaking this strategy, my dissertation offers a threefold intervention that combines the field of late modernist and early postmodernist American poetics with that of affect theory. Firstly, I draw

on Tomkins' affect theory to read the work of six postwar American poets as expressing, through various forms of sympathy, political claims that have heretofore gone largely unremarked in their poems. In making this politics visible, I demonstrate that the rise of the New Left and the social investment of the arts in the late 1960s did not reject the 1950s aesthetic so much as make its social content explicit. Secondly, my study questions popular critical narratives that continue to be imposed on American Cold War culture. Reading these poets against the argument that this culture was one of "containment" reveals how these writers consistently and insistently think outside the confines of the nation-state, in order to envision a transnational framework of sympathy that defies the ethos of containment upon which the Cold War depended. Reading their work as invested in sociality and interconnection allows us to problematize the reductive conception of Cold War aesthetics as wholly concerned with the ethos of the private individual. Thirdly, my dissertation offers new insight within the field of affect theory. Most of the work in this critical area has focused on negative affects such as shame and fear, together with the trauma these affects can provoke. By exploring how the communal expression and experiencing of even negative affects opens up avenues toward understanding and managing them, I offer an alternate perspective through which affect theory can be connected to a politics of optimism rather than one of conformism or repression.¹¹

IV. *Feeling With Imagination: An Overview*

¹¹ The possibility of a progressive affective politics has been theorized from a different perspective by Brian Massumi, whose work on affect stems from the writings of Deleuze and Spinoza. Like Laurent Berlant, Massumi believes that the shaping force of affect is powerfully present in contemporary political systems: in an interview with Mary Zournazi, he refers to then-president of the United States George W. Bush as "the face of mass affect." In the same interview, however, Massumi hypothesizes a transformative politics of resistance organized around affect which he calls an "aesthetic politics":

The crucial political question for me is whether there are ways of practising a politics that takes stock of the affective way power operates now, but doesn't rely on violence and the hardening of divisions along identity lines that it usually brings. I'm not exactly sure what that kind of politics would look like, but it would still be performative. In some basic way it would be an aesthetic politics, because its aim would be to expand the range of affective potential – which is what aesthetic practice has always been about.

My dissertation divides into three parts; each part is itself subdivided into three chapters. Part One argues for the significance of sympathy as an aesthetic trope in the context of Cold War American society and poetics, showing how Tomkins' affect theory illuminates the political aspects of the poems of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. In Chapter One, I begin by situating Middle Generation poets within American postwar culture before demonstrating that Lowell and Bishop use sympathy in their work to articulate political commitment within a formalist aesthetic. I then provide an overview of recent affect theory and explain the relation of Silvan Tomkins' theories to my own work; lastly, I argue that the affective identification present in much Middle Generation poetry constitutes a reaction to what Lauren Berlant has called a culture of "national sentimentalism." In Chapter Two, I explore Robert Lowell's mission in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*: to shape memories and events from his own life into poetry, not to raise himself above the crowd but to search out the defining ingredients of the "generic life" he believed he was living (Lowell, *Day by Day* 27). Examining the poems "Skunk Hour," "Waking in the Blue," and "Night Sweat," I show how Lowell depicts both the starkly painful affective relations that characterize American life and the scenes of domestic and unsung sympathy through which they can be overcome. Chapter Three concerns the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, in which sympathy is produced in the perceptiveness and generous tone of her writing. Imbricated in this tone, I argue, is a quietly subversive queer aesthetic through which Bishop promotes a soft politics in which negative affects are faced and mitigated by their sharing.

Part Two remains rooted in affect theory, but shifts in focus slightly; where Part One considers troubled and troubling scenes of shared feeling, Part Two investigates how poetic sympathy might contribute to a philosophical exploration of subjectivity. In Chapter Four I consider the two poets whose work I analyze – Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery – in the context of their positions as members of the New York School, an avant-garde collective with little stated interest in political matters. The soft politics of O'Hara and Ashbery, I claim, hinges on their poems' use of sympathy to connect poet and reader. O'Hara and Ashbery use sympathy with the other to perform a radically unfinished model of selfhood that both anticipates and interrogates poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity. I term this model of the self "post-Romantic" because it deconstructs the archetypal Romantic self, of which Jean-Jacques

Rousseau was one of the most important literary progenitors. Reading the poems of O'Hara and Ashbery against the background of the Rousseauian self puts into contrast two significant uses of sympathy. Where Rousseau covets the reader's sympathy in order to maintain a fixed, Romantic sense of his own identity, O'Hara and Ashbery extend sympathy toward the reader in order to establish an ethic that sees subjectivity as an inherently unstable category whose growth depends on relationships outside the self.

In Chapters Five and Six I analyze the poetry of O'Hara and Ashbery, respectively, in light of these arguments. Chapter Five demonstrates that O'Hara's poems constitute a social performance of selfhood in which the reader is implicitly included in the speaker's circle of friends. O'Hara's poetry evinces a queer optimism that affirms inextricable links between self and other manifested both in the poem's content and its reading. O'Hara's queer aesthetic is characterized by a soft politics that values identification with the other, is open to change, and refuses to be imprisoned by limiting binaries or systems. In Chapter Six, my readings of several Ashbery poems, including "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers," "The Ecclesiast," and "Soonest Mended," show that Ashbery also embraces this politics. In Ashbery's poetry, I argue, a tension obtains between memory – which can be used to support an essentially Romantic sense of self – and sympathy, through which selfhood is bound up in the lives of others. By developing this tension in his poetry, Ashbery promulgates a conception of personhood that resists both the poststructuralist erasure of the subject and the Romantic avowal of its self-sufficient independence. Ashbery's poems are themselves communiques – aesthetic performances of identity that link writer to reader through ties of sympathy and thereby subtend a politics of interdependence.

In Part Three, I read the work of the late modernist African American poets Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson in the context of theorists including Frantz Fanon and Mikhail Bakhtin, demonstrating that their poems embody, by their global and sympathetic perspective, the attempt to forge ties of sympathy between individuals separated by distance, race, gender, and even history. Polyphonic and transnational in character, their poems force us to encounter the exclusionary tactics through which the modern nation-state defines itself. In Chapter Seven, I situate Hayden and Tolson in their historical context by untangling their complex and differing views on the relation of race to poetry and of the poet to his race. Although Tolson affiliated

himself with the Black Arts movement while Hayden emphatically rejected it, these poets in fact deal with race in their poetry in strikingly similar ways. Refusing to ignore the material and historical effects of racism, Hayden and Tolson construct a politics of sympathy that is optimistic about human agency in the face of socially sanctioned injustice. Acknowledging the melancholic cultural effects of racial grief, this politics involves imagining a level of affective identification with the displaced other that can begin to counter these effects.

In Chapter Eight I examine scenes in Hayden's poems in which a subject (and by extension, the reader) must confront the excluded other restricted from sympathy by race, class, or status. These scenes invoke moments of the Hegelian recognition that makes sympathy possible. The unconventional and powerful sympathy sought out in these poems resists being subsumed by nationalist or racializing ideologies. Hayden's vision of sympathy demands a violence that is not literal but conceptual – an upheaval of the categories of thought through which we identify, and identify with, others. Finally, Chapter Nine shows how Melvin Tolson synthesizes modernist form with signifiers drawn from black culture in his long poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, blending together disparate aesthetic categories in order to attempt to “speak across both race and class boundaries” (Gold 243). In the latter half of the poem, Tolson's Marxist conception of civilization comes to the fore: racism, colonialism, and other systemic forms of injustice are ultimately seen as symptoms of an economic divide that can be overcome through affective identification. Tolson's optimism in this regard situates him within a tradition of modernist utopian poetics in which the imagination is consciously freed from the yoke of historical inevitability – an act that opens up a new space within which literature and political futurity can intersect.

As the above outline demonstrates, this dissertation follows a basic narrative logic that moves, in a not quite linear fashion, from domestic and lyric idioms to more transnational and finally quasi-epic poetic landscapes. I begin by showing how the poems of Lowell and Bishop illuminate the contours of individual emotional states, and how their sharing opens up an avenue to think productively about the relation between affect and politics. In examining O'Hara and Ashbery, I situate this question within a particular theoretical context: the contested site of selfhood, both in literary history and in the contemporary moment. And my reading of Hayden and Tolson expands the politics of affect beyond the self, probing our collective

definitions of race and nation and how sympathy might be used to deconstruct them. In Part One, then, I establish the area of affect theory within which my discussion will develop; in Part Two I expand the discussion outside the function of affective identification between individuals to consider its role in the social and literary production of the self; and in Part Three I widen the field further to explore the role of affect in theorizing a transnational and transracial politics.

V. Sympathy's Ethical Injunction

The title of this dissertation, *Feeling With Imagination*, is a paraphrase of the first line of the John Ashbery poem "The Recent Past," which was published in Ashbery's 1962 collection *Rivers and Mountains*. The poem begins as follows:

Perhaps we ought to feel with more imagination.
As today the sky 70 degrees above zero with lines falling
The way September moves a lace curtain to be near a pear,
The oddest device can't be usual. (*Rivers and Mountains* 23)

The disorienting and disconnected words in the lines that follow it make the anchoring first statement, with its tone of cautious practical suggestion, stand out all the more starkly. As the poem continues, the constellation of terms from which it draws becomes an increasingly negative:

The pejorative sense of fear moves axles. In the stars
There is no longer any peace, emptied like a cup of coffee
Between the blinding rain that interviews. (23)

While the sense of confusion instilled by the poem remains, its mood has darkened noticeably, thanks to words such as "pejorative," "fear," and "blinding" and the ominous phrase "no longer any peace." The poem's opening line, which remains its clearest one, can be considered a possible the antidote to the threat that gathers as the poem continues.

The invitation to "feel with more imagination" can be recast as an invitation to sympathize; to feel imaginatively is to adjust one's pattern of feelings outside the confines of direct personal experience, allowing oneself to be affected by a wider set of circumstances that includes the feelings and possible experiences of the other. But the most significant word in the poem's first line may well be the word "ought," the presence of which intimates that the

practice of feeling has an ethical dimension. Feeling, on this account, is a personal experience that involves a moral obligation. The poet whose work enacts or describes sympathy is therefore a poet concerned with social responsibility – with the question of what can be demanded in a given individual’s relation to the community. That sympathy contains a moral dimension is hardly a revelatory insight, but what I want to stress here, and what I hope to demonstrate in the pages that follow, is that in the inherent sociality of sympathy we can discern a calculus that is not only moral but political. It is for this reason that the link between poetry and sympathy in postwar culture can ultimately also be read as a link between aesthetics and politics.¹² To trace out, in the work of these poets, the call to feel with more imagination is to discern the outline of a nascent soft politics in which feeling plays a central role.

The attendant danger here – and one of which we can hardly be too conscious – is that what I am calling the politics of feeling degenerates into a sentimental politics in which feelings are manufactured and manipulated precisely in order to divert us from action rather than to compel us to it. But this possibility (and the fact that it has so often been, and continues to be, realized in both local and national contexts) should not deter us from an evaluation of how an ethic of shared feeling can contribute to a progressive politics. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues, “understanding the relationship between emotions and various conceptions of the human good will inform our deliberations as we ask how politics might support human flourishing” (3). At stake here is the way we have chosen, particularly in Western culture, to read emotion as a category entirely distinct from – and even an impediment to – rational judgment. In contemporary political and literary theory, scenes of publicly or privately expressed affect are typically read using a hermeneutic of distancing suspicion, as though to equate dispassion with good sense. But this attitude is misleading in its denigration of the role affect plays in the life of the mind. In Nussbaum’s recent book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, she defends the idea that emotions are intentional and object-directed, that they ultimately advertise a subject’s “neediness and lack of self-sufficiency” (and with it the necessity of a social order), and that they are therefore, in the last analysis, significant

¹² For his part, Goodman sees the two spheres as inextricably linked: “It is impossible for any artist to ignore the problem of social renovation” (“Advance-Guard Writing” 379).

“forms of judgment” (22). This claim turns on its head a commonly held view of emotion in which it has been understood as, in Sarah Ahmed’s words, “‘beneath’ the faculties of thought and reason” (3). On this model, Ahmed writes, “[t]o be emotional is to have one’s judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (3). This conception of emotion was the norm during the postwar era, in which males who did not adhere to a norm that demanded absolute control of the more “feminine” emotions such as fear and sadness were typecast as weak or emasculated, and it is a mindset that remains prevalent today throughout North American culture.¹³ Theorizing a politics emphatically inclusive of feeling counters this trend, and more generally, circumvents the reductive dichotomy by which emotion and reason are conceived of as opposed and contrasting concepts rather than interdependent ones. In this study, I trace a collective response to this claim in the work of several American poets of the 1950s and 1960s, who, by mapping out an ethics of feeling, offer new ways to think about the role of sympathy in the making of self and society.

¹³ In this context, I should qualify the fact that my dissertation features five male poets and only one female. The typecasting of particular emotions, or ways of sharing emotion, as characteristic of one gender or another is an oversimplification that this study – since it features mostly male poets engaged in what has often historically been conceived of as a feminine affective posture – will hopefully help, in some small way, to correct. At the same time, the fact that this study is concerns mostly male poets is entirely coincidental; I do not purport to make any claims about male sympathy in the postwar era, only about sympathy more generally. An examination of how sympathy is, or might be, gendered – whether in or outside of poetry – remains a critical exercise worth pursuing. It also bears mentioning that while Elizabeth Bishop is the only female poet whose work I examine in detail, other female poets were certainly important in shaping, articulating, and /or responding to the rhetoric of sympathy I call attention to in *Feeling With Imagination*. Chief among them are Marianne Moore, Bishop’s mentor and guide, and Gwendolyn Brooks, a modernist poet associated with both Hayden and Tolson.

PART ONE

Sympathy and Affect in Lowell and Bishop

“To most of us society shows not its face and eye, but its side and back. To stand in true relations with men in a false age is worth a fit of insanity . . .”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Friendship”

Chapter One

The Politics of Affect: Lowell, Bishop, Tomkins

I. Mass Culture and the “Middle Generation” Poets

In a late poem, Robert Lowell addresses his deceased friend and fellow poet John Berryman with lines that are among the most quoted in all his poetry: “really we had the same life / the generic life / our generation offered” (Lowell, *Day by Day* 27). While the phrase may be more famous for the pathos it evokes than for any specific content it expresses, it is also compelling if considered as a means, for Lowell, of remarking on the vexed relationship between the Middle Generation poets and the society around them. The postwar years in America were marked equally by Cold War rhetoric, the rise of suburbia, and the ascendancy of a consumerist middle class. Miller and Nowak’s summary of the 1950s as “prosperous, stable, bland, religious, moral, patriotic, conservative, domestic, buttoned-down,” while an oversimplification, is a description that does the decade at least partial justice (15). This conformist ethos in American society during the 1950s was one from which many of its most famous and successful poets felt excluded. Remarkings on what he sees as many Middle Generation poets’ “profound sense of alienation from [their] own national culture” – an alienation that could only have been exacerbated by the gulf between the idealized version of American tranquility and the turbulent

lives of these poets – Bruce Bawer concludes that Middle Generation¹⁴ poetry is defined, in part, by the “desperate sense of being an outsider” (20, 22).

Critics disagree on the extent to which the 1950s did, in fact, comprise a cultural moment of social and political uniformity, but have generally agreed that social homogeneity was codified into a cultural narrative in during the decade. In his influential study *Containment Culture*, Alan Nadel argues that the Cold War became a means by which the American populace was encouraged to accept the fact that the ongoing history of their nation was being shaped by forces outside their control: the Cold War was able to “unify, codify, and contain – perhaps *intimidate* is the best word – the personal narratives of its population” (4). Elaine Tyler May has further documented how postwar suburban Americans, encouraged by the dominant social and cultural narratives of their time, accepted the disappearance of their role in the shaping of the state to seek fulfilment in the home and not in the public sphere (28). Most Middle Generation poets figure as outsiders partly because they refused such roles. Lowell’s poem paints himself and Berryman as having led lives representative of their time, but these lives certainly did not accord with the notion of the ideal American existence. In a culture in which traditional social mores were extolled, Lowell and Berryman each married three times. And though they lived their most prolific years as poets in a decade that would long be

¹⁴ Bruce Bawer coins the term “Middle Generation” in his book *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell*, citing various similarities between these four men, including their closeness in age, their self-destructive tendencies and troubled personal lives, and most of all, their shared “obsess[ion] with their art,” as reasons for their inclusion in this carefully defined group (4). Bishop is mentioned twice in the book – the first time by way of being described as “a confirmed lesbian” (33). Shortly afterward, Bawer reintroduces her seemingly for the purpose of dismissing her altogether (she is not mentioned again) by offering the reason for her failure to qualify as a “Middle Generation” poet: in his estimation she was not sufficiently devoted to the art of poetry. In support of this claim Bawer cites Bishop’s famous 1972 letter to Lowell in which she attempts to dissuade him from publishing *The Dolphin* because it contained overly personal material about his ex-wife, arguing that “*art just isn’t worth that much*” (Bishop, *Words in Air* 708, emphasis Bishop’s). Bawer does not mention Bishop’s later qualification that “[i]t was . . . the mixture of truth & fiction” that bothered her most about *The Dolphin* (716). Nor does he observe that this constituted the only sharp disagreement that Lowell and Bishop ever had; and that Bishop shared, to a great extent, the political and aesthetic values of Jarrell and Lowell. In any case, let me simply note here that in this chapter (and in this study) I use the term “Middle Generation” to refer loosely to a group of poets of the 1950s who were all, to one degree or another, mutual friends and correspondents who shared roughly similar aesthetic and political principles. These poets include, but are not necessarily strictly confined to, Schwartz, Jarrell, Lowell, Bishop, and Berryman. I should emphasize that I consider Bishop a Middle Generation poet less for political reasons than practical ones – the signifier has become a convenient shorthand way of denoting these poets as a collective.

remembered as a golden age in American history, neither shared in the buoyant national mood. Lowell had repeatedly to be hospitalized for episodes of manic depression, and Berryman, who also suffered from depression, took his own life in 1972. Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell's close friend and the poet who shares with Lowell the focus of this chapter, also experienced a lonely and difficult upbringing.¹⁵ Bishop was an infant when her father died, and for much of her childhood lived with her grandparents. The obstacles between her and the "conventionally American" way of life were many: "she suffered . . . as a severe asthmatic, as an alcoholic, as an orphan, as a lesbian" (Chiasson 45).

But if these poets felt excluded from the society of which they were nominally a part, Lowell's lines are particularly puzzling, for they constitute a gesture that *links* Berryman and Lowell to their generation where given the biographical facts one might expect just the opposite. Dan Chiasson makes sense of this difficulty by positing that Lowell's words deny the notion – one affirmed by many other great poets before him – that a life (and in particular a poet's life) can be in any true sense "unique" or set apart from other lives. More than merely reflecting on the vocation of the poet, Chiasson argues, Lowell's lines to Berryman stake out its limits, "turn[ing] on their head the notions of both Rousseauian uniqueness (my life is mine and unlike anyone else's) and of Emersonian representativeness (my life is exemplary, and therefore universally pertinent) that underlie autobiography" (66). At this late stage of his career, then ("For John Berryman" appears in *Day by Day*, Lowell's final book of poems), Lowell

¹⁵ The effects of these poets' difficult childhoods often persisted well into their adult years. Elizabeth Bishop's loneliness remained with her all her life, if we take her letters to Lowell at face value. And beyond the example provided by any single life, many poets of the 1950s seemed to have difficulty establishing relationships of solidarity and friendship outside the small artistic and poetic circles in which they traveled (Frank O'Hara being an obvious exception). The voluminous correspondence between Lowell and Bishop alone attests to the fact that the relationships that poets maintained with one another – even, and in some cases especially, if these relationships were mostly textual and mostly carried on at a distance – were fundamental in shaping the way these poets thought of themselves and their world. What Anne Dewey writes of the Black Mountain poets – that their "identities remained grounded in . . . local, if shifting, subcultures" – is true for most poets of the period, almost all of whom found themselves, willingly or not, associated with one or another artistic movement or group (8). One likely explanation for the sudden increase in the number of such groups in the 1950s is the solidarity and fellow-feeling generated by the forming of collectives. Poetry movements in the 1950s, however haphazard they might have remained, arose as a method by which to develop and maintain a sense of community. To do so was important to poets like Bishop and Lowell precisely because of their alienation from middle-class American society.

emphasizes his inseparability from his generation, no matter the apparent differences between his own life and what was supposed, at the time, to be the quintessential American existence. “For John Berryman” explicitly limits the poetic self to a socially and historically constrained self, constituting a reminder that poetry is only effective inasmuch as it speaks to a reader, and that a poet’s audience is necessarily a function of his or her time and place. However, if Lowell’s lines level the playing field, perhaps they do less by denigrating the poet’s life than by venerating the unsung and prosaic existence of the average American. To have “the generic life,” in this reading, is neither a curse nor a blessing, but only the fact of having been born at a certain time and in a certain nation. To the extent, then, that Lowell “makes each life . . . simply interchangeable with every other life, rendering the question of uniqueness and individuality moot,” he does so not in order to belittle the life of the poet so much as to champion the life of the common citizen, and in so doing to effect a vision of solidarity between the poet and mass society that the modernist tradition, in many of its forms, had attempted to dispel (67).¹⁶

The conviction Lowell expresses in “For John Berryman” is one that his own poetry seems to work against early in his career, during which he seemed devoted to creating poems that would stand as objects of beauty, untouched by the vicissitudes of history. In contrast, his elegy to Berryman recognizes that the poem is always historically situated, and that the poet is responsible not only to, in Eliot’s phrase, the “existing monuments” of art – the past achievements which form its “ideal order” – but to his or her own time (“Tradition” 38). The

¹⁶ While sympathy in Bishop and Lowell springs, in part, from a desired sense of connection to socially ostracized or politically impotent groups, they themselves belonged to neither of these, since their careers as successful poets granted them (Lowell in particular) positions of some literary and cultural influence. Lowell and Bishop each spent a year working at the Library in Congress as Consultant in Poetry (Lowell in 1947-1948, Bishop in 1949-1950), a position later designated as the United States Poet Laureateship. As members of high academic culture, they remained at a relative remove from some of the most intransigent political issues of their time, most notably that of race, which is rarely broached in Lowell’s work and receives occasional – and occasionally perplexing – attention in Bishop’s Brazil poems. The distance between Lowell and Bishop and the subjects with whom they sought to identify is certainly symptomized in their poems: think of the stark isolation depicted in Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” or the affected horror at working-class living conditions in Bishop’s “Filling Station” (both of which will be examined at length in the following chapters). But such distance, I want to suggest, might also have an ironically positive effect: because it represents the kinds of political distinction and disconnection Lowell and Bishop seek to overcome, it creates a tension between the real and ideal that provides both the impetus and the space for sympathy to become an important component in their poetry.

challenge of balancing these demands fell not only to Berryman, but to Randall Jarrell,¹⁷ Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Lowell, all of whom were among the most respected poets of the 1950s, and all of whom worked to manage the roles of both poet and citizen without sacrificing one realm for the sake of advancing in the other. Over the following chapters, I will argue that the poems of Lowell and Bishop innovate through their use of sympathy, which operates in their work as an aesthetic device drawing the reader in, and at the same time – by invoking the necessity of collective recognition and feeling – provides an ethical framework for informed political praxis. This chapter will frame my further discussion of the political aspects of sympathy in Lowell and Bishop. After summarizing Bishop and Lowell’s approaches to politics in life and poetry, I will suggest that sympathy provides them an aesthetic mode in which to express socio-political concerns. Reading their work in light of the affect theory developed by Silvan Tomkins helps us to see that in their poems, identification with the other proceeds from scenes of shared affect. Lastly, I will consider how their poems both recognize and resist what Lauren Berlant terms the national sentimentalism of a political corpus governed by mass affect.

II. Lowell, Bishop, and the Politics of Poetry

The poets of the Middle Generation expressed interest in American politics to varying degrees and in varying ways. Self-effacing and generous in tone, Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry is not easily linked to a politicizing hermeneutics. But as a student at Vassar College in the 1930s, Elizabeth Bishop was swept up by the radical politics of those around her (Erkkila 285). Later in her

¹⁷ While Randall Jarrell’s poems may well be the most conspicuously and consciously sympathetic of any Middle Generation poet, I will not undertake to read Jarrell’s poetry this chapter, both for reasons of space and because complex representations of affect – and the moments of sympathy they create in a text – are, I think, better exemplified in the poems of Bishop and Lowell than in those of Jarrell. Jarrell was nonetheless a very important figure in the lives of both Bishop and Lowell, in part because his critical opinion mattered so much to them. Perhaps Bishop and Lowell instinctively felt the truth of what Helen Vendler has since rendered in an astute summation: that Jarrell “put his genius into his criticism and his talent into his poetry” (*Part of Nature* 111). The sympathy visible in Jarrell’s poems is mainly of a straightforward kind, felt by the poet for his subjects, and I think Ian Hamilton is correct to note that Jarrell’s approach, while admirable, is flawed because the “people [in his poems], though meant as individual cases, are too dampened by their ordinariness, their function as instructive symptoms (symptoms, mostly, of society’s impersonal, abstracting deadliness), ever to fire more than a merely dutiful kind of sympathy” (201).

career, she wrote of the difficulty in finding the right tone in which to express political conviction within poetry. She was convinced, she confided to Lowell in a letter, that the Beat poets' method of resistance was unsatisfactory, and that "the real real protest I suspect is something quite different" – but she never outlined in any detail just what that "something" might entail (*Words in Air* 364). It may be her lingering uncertainty over the dilemma of how the civic can overlap with the aesthetic that accounts for her own poetry being apolitical in the traditional sense of the term. However, Bishop's life was one of greater political engagement than is often assumed (Longenbach, "Social Conscience" 469), even if she never arrived at a satisfactory answer to the question she asked in an unpublished review of Denise Levertov's collection *Relearning the Alphabet*: "When have politics ever made for good poems?" (quoted in Rosenbaum, "Bishop's Theater of War" 55).

The life of Robert Lowell, and to a lesser degree his poetry, fits more readily into the context of American politics. Lowell had a penchant for the grandiose statement, and unlike Bishop, he was comfortable with public attention. Steven Axelrod even argues that Lowell sought out the spotlight, more than once using political candour in order to advance his literary reputation: "Expressing his defiance of presidents in the most public forums he could find, he used his conscientious objection and his antiwar poems in the 1940s to help establish his career as a poet, and he used his antiwar activities and poems in the 1960s to make himself famous" ("Lowell and the Cold War" 340). Attributing particular motives to historical figures can be a too-speculative exercise, but it's certainly clear that Lowell was willing to make public statements that could (and often did) have serious consequences. Most famously, he spent a year in prison for protesting America's involvement in World War II, an experience he recalls in the *Life Studies* poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke": "I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O., / and made my manic statement, / telling off the state and president . . ." (*Life Studies* 85). While his political beliefs vacillated throughout his life,¹⁸ his poems rarely discuss politics overtly, though this restraint does not appear to have been based strictly on aesthetic principle. In a speech he made during Senator Eugene McCarthy's unsuccessful 1968 campaign to win the

¹⁸ For a summary of Lowell's varying political affiliations, see Axelrod, "Lowell and the Cold War" 353.

Democratic nomination for the presidency, Lowell touches somewhat melodramatically on the vexed relationship between poetry and politics: “always I am asked now if poetry should engage in the controversies – not love and ambition – but politics and war. I answer that poetry is free to be either engaged or disengaged, pure or impure, or an adulterous mixture of the two. All courses are perilous” (quoted in McCarthy 118).

All courses may have been perilous, but Lowell seemed to find political poetry more perilous than lyric poetry. Despite his political activism, his poetry mostly adheres to the adage offered by Yeats in “On Being Asked for a War Poem”: “I think it better that in times like these / A poet keep his mouth shut, for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right” (155-6). One of the few poems in which Lowell explicitly addresses American politics is “Inauguration Day: January 1953,” which he wrote after learning of Dwight Eisenhower’s victory in the 1952 election. Eisenhower’s success left Lowell feeling “too hurt to laugh” (Bawer 25), and the poem’s last lines evoke, accordingly, a sense of national doom: “the Republic summons Ike, / the mausoleum in her heart” (*Life Studies* 7). However, while most of Lowell’s poetry references concrete historical markers of time and place, it does so less to champion individual politicians or causes than to capture the moods and feelings pervading America in the Cold War era. Later in his career, Lowell’s most politically fraught poems – “For the Union Dead,” for example – take on a tone of exhausted irony, as though aware simultaneously of the moral bankruptcy of American political culture and of the ineffectuality, practically speaking, of poetry’s response to it.

Middle Generation poets’ aversion to combining poetry and politics must be understood in light of the dominant conception of poetry in the postwar era. Lowell and Bishop were inheritors of a New Critical tradition in which “to believe in poetry [was] not necessarily to have faith in its capacity to do anything” on either a social or a moral level (Johnson 43). Wallace Stevens puts it succinctly in a 1942 essay: “I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say the sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none” (27). If the impetus for this point of view has its origin in the aesthetics of the New Criticism, the occasion of World War II did nothing to dispel it. The Black Mountain poet Robert Creeley recalls that in the years following the war the “arts especially were shaken and the *picture of the world* that might previously have served them had to be reformed” (62). In such a climate, in which poets

were encouraged to write, paid to teach, but not expected to have any influence in the affairs of the nation, most writers thought it inadvisable to mix poetry and politics. To further complicate matters, the decade was one in which science was favoured over the arts and the intellect over the emotions. Poetry was often thought to be a feminine, because overly sentimental, art form.¹⁹ The rampant consumerism that many felt to be impinging on the quality of American life also led to the devaluation of poetry, while hindering the cultivation of the attention span required to read it. “The poet,” Randall Jarrell writes in a 1953 essay, “lives in a world whose newspapers and magazines and books and motion pictures and radio stations and television stations have destroyed, in a great many people, even the capacity for understanding real poetry, real art of any kind” (18). The poems of Bishop and Lowell, written in accessible language about moments combed from everyday life, present a hopeful counterargument to Jarrell’s suggestion, testifying to the possibility that art can transform its culture not only through disparagement and critique but through identification.

The possibilities of identification depend greatly, of course, on the poet’s vision of and relation to her audience (an oft-recurring theme in this study), and in this manner Lowell and Bishop swerve from the high modernist aesthetic, composing poems smaller in scale and more accommodating of the reader than the impersonal and erudite work of Pound, Eliot, and Stevens. But to turn away from grand political gestures is itself, in its way, a political gesture; to reject grandeur in favour of lyric intimacy is to make a significant statement about the goal of poetry, and also about the social climate in which it is being written. One way their poetry assumes a political quality, then, is precisely by not seeming to, inasmuch as it rejects the standard language and decorum of the poem that speaks truth to power. In this sense, the work of Lowell and Bishop exemplifies Randall Jarrell’s belief (as demonstrated in a perceptive recent essay by Zechariah Pickard) that any poem is *ipso facto* “an action in the world, with real political consequences” (Pickard 409). Similarly, though such poems as Lowell’s in *Life Studies*

¹⁹ Given the widespread characterization of poetry in the 1950s as feminine and sentimental (a misconception that still exists today), James Penner reads the New Critical project as an attempt to masculinize poetry by recasting literature and its criticism as a kind of science (Penner 132). This interpretation might not be sufficient to explain the whole of New Criticism, but it strikes me as a plausible way to begin considering its origins.

might appear to be “operating from a position of professionalized detachment,” as Edward Brunner has put it, they in fact work to “promot[e] a redistribution of power” simply by being directed toward an audience unaccustomed to being invited to read them (13). That they are so directed is reflected in their poems’ language, which speaks less to any ostensible literary or critical establishment than to the educated mainstream populace, many of whom might have sought something that might shake them out of the confines of the very generic middle-class existence with which Lowell identifies in “For John Berryman.”

III. Merging Politics and Aesthetics: The Function of Sympathy

The last line of Lowell’s poem “Eye and Tooth” sounds a note of despondency: “I am tired. Everyone’s tired of my turmoil” (*For the Union Dead* 19). In his analysis of these lines, Chiasson suggests that “‘everyone’ means not only Lowell’s intimate circle but, allegorically, the ‘everyone’ that constitutes the nation. How might poets, ‘turmoil’-ridden necessarily, also be citizens? How might citizens, as citizens, also be poets?” (28). The question captures two basic and competing tensions: the wish to retreat from the world into art and the wish to effect change in the world through art. Affected by both these desires to varying degrees, Bishop and Lowell sought to discover a unified, self-consistent approach to the competing obligations they found in the distinct spheres of politics and of poetry. While reaching out to an audience and establishing a tone are key components of this approach, striving to achieve a certain tone in their poems in order to attract readers would potentially expose Middle Generation poets to the kinds of artistic compromises they hoped to guard against.²⁰ Instead, the tenuous path these

²⁰ It would be misrepresenting the role of sympathy in these poets’ work to surmise that its only purpose is to express solidarity with the marginalized and powerless in society, for, as Michael Davidson observes in examining homosocial bonds in American poetics, to understand art’s primary aim as socially pragmatic is to cede much of its potential. One danger of such an approach to poetry is that it might “vitate questions of literary value and lead to a valorization of writing based solely on its claims to group solidarity” (Davidson 17). Not only their poems but the letters between Lowell, Jarrell and Bishop consistently suggest that these poets worked toward aesthetic rather than concretely socio-political ends. The establishment and maintenance of group solidarity could at best be a tangential benefit correlative to the main task of writing great poetry; further, such a goal was virtually unrealizable on a broad level, this because poetry itself was a marginalized force in the 1950s. As Jarrell complained to this effect (and not for the only time): “some of our poets are the most difficult that any age has known; but why doesn’t everybody admit what anybody must know? – that here and now most people can’t and don’t read poetry . . . Today poetry, like virtue, is its own reward” (236).

poets managed to follow is one analogically prescribed in Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession" (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 201). Rescinding the scene of the political and attending to the keenly felt struggles of the everyday, Bishop and Lowell ground their work in a viable and uncompromising aesthetic. But the true political effect of their poetry stems from its scenes of sympathetic identification, which transcend simplistic sentimentalism by critiquing the cultural ideology that makes such sentimentalism prevalent in the first place.

That sympathy is one of the most significant shared attributes of the work of Middle Generation poets has not gone unnoticed. Edward Hirsch finds in their poems

a deep sympathy, an attentive regard, an overwhelming and overwhelmed reverence for all living things, but especially for whatever is wounded or broken, flawed, vulnerable, lost. This sympathy runs like an electric current through their work, and connects them like an invisible cord. They are seduced, enabled, and traumatized by sympathy. . . . They are its broken masters. (Hirsch, "Middle Generation" 10)

Hirsch's reading of the sympathy of Middle Generation poetry points out its implicit politics in its attention to "whatever is wounded or broken, flawed, vulnerable, lost." The forgotten, the ignored, and the misunderstood loom large in many poems of the 1950s, and in so doing they occasion both sympathy and the political values that tend to coincide with it. But while this political vision makes itself felt in these poets' sympathy for those marginalized by society, its more potent expression derives from its recognition of polarizing, potentially divisive kinds of affect, including fear, anger, shame, and self-pity. In identifying with these negative feelings, so often sublimated in 1950s culture, Lowell and Bishop express sympathy in its most basic form, feeling *with* others (and not so much feeling *for* them) as a means of identifying the deep-rooted sources of pain and isolation in post-war culture. In his essay "Friendship," Ralph Waldo Emerson describes the true mark of a good friend as the ability "to match my mood with thine" (226). The tableau of a Bishop or a Lowell poem is often founded on the inculcation of just such matching moods between separate individuals. In establishing a sympathetic bond with the subjects of their poems or compelling a sympathetic response from their readers, and in focusing their attention on affective states too easily elided in American culture, these writers

construct a space in American culture in which sympathy becomes a fulcrum for the reshaping of community.

IV. Sympathy and Affect Theory

In the contemporary idiom the term “sympathy” is often equated with words such as “pity” or “compassion,” both of which connote a certain tenderness felt for the other. “Compassion” originates in the Latin verb *compatior* (“to suffer with”), the root term of which, *pati*, is also present in “sympathy.”²¹ Sympathy therefore denotes not only a feeling in its own right but the *sharing* of feeling – that is, the feeling of any emotion in common with another being. As I noted in my introduction, defining sympathy as fellow-feeling rather than simply as pity or compassion allows us to avoid a problem that plagues those terms: the implied inequality that inheres in the relationship between the pitying subject and the pitied object. Here and throughout this study, I want to stress the absence of any structuring hierarchy – economic, ethnic, religious, or otherwise – in my definition of sympathy, which accords with the longest-standing usage of the word. This implies that to sympathize with someone who is fearful means not, in the first instance, to feel compassion for that individual, but rather to be moved, through witnessing the other, to feel within yourself the same fear that grips that other. This primary affective state acts in turn as a catalyst directing the subject toward the emotional reaction appropriate to the situation that has led him or her to sympathize. Sympathy with someone who is happy results in a corresponding increase in happiness; sympathy with someone who is afraid leads to a feeling of fear admixed with hope that the fear might be assuaged; sympathy with someone who is angry produces a feeling of indignation on their behalf; and so on.

In this model, sympathy is a two-part process that can be divided into *affective* (prior) and *emotional* (secondary) moments respectively. In using this terminology to describe the process by which a subject comes to experience sympathy, I follow a commonly accepted differentiation between affect and emotion that reads affect as a precognitive physiological response to the external environment, and emotion as the social and consciously felt state that

²¹ The uniformity of meaning here can be traced back to an etymological borrowing between languages: in many early religious texts the Latin term *compassio* is used to translate the Greek *sympatheia*.

results from the affective response.²² Positioning sympathy as the interface within which affective and emotive states intersect allows us to pinpoint the moment at which a given subject shapes an inchoate affective response into a self-directed ethical injunction. This means that the moment of sympathy can be a moment of affective *agency*: a moment during which the subject shapes his or her own subjectivity, as it were, remapping immediate affects onto an ethical grid which – however much it might be culturally constituted – is also influenced and informed by individual intention.

Just how affect and agency intersect remains a debated question in part because there is still no single consensus definition of affect despite the robustness of affect theory as a critical discipline. In recent years, affect theory has developed across several disciplines (literary theory, cultural theory, psychoanalysis, and others) and in several countries (Australia, Canada, France, and the United States). To offer an exhaustive summary of these developments would take us too far afield; instead, I want briefly to situate my own argument by enumerating two of the main ways in which affect is currently theorized. One way of thinking about affect is as a kind of mapping of the potential to influence or be influenced; here affect is less a feature of organisms than a governing force in the way they relate to one another. This definition of affect has been advanced by the cultural theorist Brian Massumi, who, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, conceives of affect as intractably asubjective – a nebulous field or network of actions and reactions ontologically prior to, and pushing past the confines of, our tendency to think of subjectivity or selfhood as finite and distinct. This influential understanding of affect is in many ways at odds with the theory of the affects proposed by the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins in a series of texts published in the 1960s. For Tomkins, the affects are specific, separable, and invariably biological. Where Massumi and others draw on Deleuze and Guattari to consider affect, Tomkins sees himself as working in the tradition of Darwin.

²² The danger in distinguishing between affect and emotion in this way is that it can too easily be made to reify a mind/body dualism in which emotion represents mind and affect body. Instead, I read the interaction between affect and emotion as much more fluid and interchangeable: while emotion often derives from affect, it does not have to, and both terms can inhere simultaneously within the identificatory processes of sympathy. For more on the distinction between affect and emotion see Probyn 11 and Watkins 269.

The first major reassessment of Tomkins' ideas in a 1995 article by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank caused a shift in work on Tomkins away from his psychological framework and resolutely biological rendering of affect and toward poststructuralist literary theory, in which the status of affect and its precise relation to the subject often remain tantalizingly unfixed. Sedgwick and Frank themselves grapple with his writing using a very different set of theoretical premises than those Tomkins laboured under, and they occasionally write about him in tones approaching a kind of loving reproach, seeing him, for instance, "like Freud, as a disciplinarily excessive figure in psychology, a writer of heterogeneous energies whose most extraordinary insights had to be interlined with self-ignorance, involved in contradiction, and inextricably interleaved with the speculative science of his time" (521-2). I want to echo this caveat in incorporating Tomkins' ideas into a reading of affect in the poems of Lowell and Bishop; it's undeniable that applying Tomkins' understanding of affect to literary theory has an obvious drawback, since it requires navigating around his propensity to essentialize patterns of human behaviour (as well as his oversimplifying, binary-ridden politicization of human society). But as Sedgwick and Frank insist in their analysis of shame in Tomkins, there is also much to be valued in his work: his "formulations startle," they write, "because of their sharpness and daring, their amplitude, and a descriptive levelheadedness that . . . sounds almost surreal" (500). My own critical interest in Tomkins owes less to his unusual and forthright writing style – refreshing though it is in a sea of academic jargon – than to the way his work provides a means of thinking about affects as specific, differentiated forms of interaction that occur at the level of the subject rather than as an avenue toward the erasure or elision of subjectivity. Tomkins' writing has the virtue of leaving very little vague or indistinct; as Anna Gibbs writes, his work "enables the specification of the energetic dimension of affect in very precise ways" (188). The precision of his thinking also provides a helpful space in which to think critically and creatively about the point at which sympathy and politics intersect.

V. The Socialization of Affect in Tomkins

Tomkins' theory is structured around the hypothesis that each human being is biologically equipped with a set of innate affects inherited through evolutionary processes. These affects are instinctive physiological responses to outside stimuli, and are designed to ensure the survival

and, optimally, the well-being of the human organism. The benefits affects provide are indispensable to the human person on both an individual and social level; in Tomkins' words, they

bias him to want to remain alive and to resist death, to want sexual experiences, to want to experience novelty and to resist boredom, to want to communicate, to be close to and in context with others of his species and to resist the experience of head and face lowered in shame. (67)

In *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* Tomkins argues for the existence of eight specific affects. These are interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, and anger-rage. (Note that for each of the previous terms, the latter word in the unit is the amplified or heightened version of the former.) Tomkins later introduces *dissmell* into the group of affects, a term he formulates as designating an "innate defensive response" similar to disgust, but prior to it in that it is related to the sense of smell rather than of taste (399).

Of the affects listed above, Tomkins designates the first two as "positive," the surprise-startle response as a "neutral" affect, "ancillary to every other affect" and therefore "frequently confused with the affect that immediately follows it," and the rest as "negative" (69). Tomkins also posits that affects are primarily recognizable through facial response, and that they occur prior to, and indeed *cause*, the feelings and emotions with which these facial responses are associated. Over time and within a society, the production of these affects generates what Tomkins calls *scripts*, "some [of which] are innate, but most are innate and learned" (313). A script is the habitual, socially constituted reproduction of an affect in a form that typically amplifies it by "connect[ing] stimuli and responses" (313). It gradually encodes particular scenes in which the display of affect is generated in the mind of the individual that produces it.

What Tomkins calls the "socialization of affect" refers to how various affective postures are encoded and mediated within a given social framework.²³ For Tomkins, the political

²³ Tomkins discusses the socialization of affect largely, though not entirely, in the context of childrearing, because he finds in it an apt and fertile area of life in which affects are readily expressed and responded to, and because the forms these parental responses take often play a central role in a child's social and psychological development.

disposition of a society can be discerned by how affect is exchanged and expressed under its governing mythology. Tomkins examines the socialization of affect in order to consider the various cultural and domestic means through which negative affects (distress/fear, anger, contempt, disgust/dissmell, and shame) are controlled or minimized while positive affects (joy and interest) are encouraged. Especially among children, but among adults as well, negative affect surfaces easily and often. The healthy society, Tomkins argues, is one in which recognition of the display of negative affect produces sympathy, in the form of feeling that same affect in attenuated form, along with the wish to eliminate both the affective response and the reason for its expression. Thus, while the “socialization of distress,” for example, “may be either predominantly rewarding or punitive [r]ewarding distress socialization includes not only the minimizing of the experience of distress through sympathy but also help in teaching the individual to cope with the source of his distress” (179). In relation to Middle Generation poetics, a key tenet of Tomkins’ argument is that the overt display of negative affects, and even the fact that these affects sometimes themselves produce further negative affects, is often precisely what is required in order for their ultimate mitigation.

My argument in this section is that the poems of Bishop and Lowell call for a societal shift toward “psychological affluence,” a quality Tomkins uses to describe a culture in which citizens are “the recipients of rewarding socialization of both positive and negative affects, [and] which is tolerant rather than intolerant of consciousness of affect” (340, 342). This tolerance is the most visible symptom of a political vision articulated, as I have suggested, through the sympathy these poets exhibit in their work and invite from their readers. Sympathy can be read in Middle Generation poetry not only as compassion for a perceived other but as the

Taking the concept of the socialization of affect out of the domestic realm and the parent-child relationship and applying it to poetry is in some ways a drastic change, since in poetry affect can only be expressed through written language and not through gesture or facial expression. However, I believe the move is warranted, because there is no reason to believe that the principles of affect’s socialization do not remain consistent in a wide variety of contexts; while Tomkins focuses on the realm of child development, he does so because he finds it a conveniently rich domain within which affect is expressed and acknowledged, but not in order to limit application of his principles outside that paradigm.

expression of forms of communal feeling, many with negative associations.²⁴ Some of these feelings, such as anger and fear, are part of Tomkins' formulation of the nine basic affects fundamental to the human experience. Others, such as loneliness, angst, and self-doubt, are less easily defined, which is one reason that their public disclosure signifies a potentially remedial act.

In examining the poems of Lowell and Bishop I am also interested in how the twofold process of sympathy – in which the reader or speaker is taken from the (often negative) shock of an instinctive affective response to the secondary, connective emotion generated by that response – is rendered in their poems, and what that process suggests about the possibility of a local and decentered politics of resistance to forms of enforced cultural hegemony. An analogue of this kind of process can be found in Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings*, in which Ngai relates how a reader's lack of engagement with a text can force a confrontation with that lack of engagement and the possible reasons for it. Discussing the Melville novel *The Confidence-Man*, Ngai seizes on instances in the novel that short-circuit or counter what she calls "the imaginary circuit of sympathy," in which the reader is coaxed to "feel with" a fictional character (83). In this "negative model of aesthetic engagement," the dissonance of the text produces a disconnect or unconcern in the reader – but that very lack of connection produces a new, backhanded form

²⁴ The sympathy that emerges in a Middle Generation poem never does so at the expense of any of the other aesthetic elements that make the poem what it is. While it is perhaps too easy, and too tempting as a critic, to overemphasize the contrast between the impersonal aesthetic of the late modernists and the "open, fragmentary, personal" poetics inaugurated by Lowell and the Middle Generation, it should hardly need saying that the Middle Generation poem is as aesthetically concerned, as painstakingly constructed, and as intellectual a document as any modernist poem (Longenbach, "Ashbery" 107). I began this chapter by citing what may be the most-quoted excerpt from his poetry, but Lowell's most-quoted line in any context is likely his remark that *Life Studies* represents a "breakthrough back into life" in American poetics (Lowell, "An Interview" 244). Lowell's phrase appears to hint at a normative opposition in poetry between difficult, carefully metered verse and looser, less structured forms – "as if," writes Longenbach, "free verse were not one kind of form among many but a movement beyond the merely literary" ("Ashbery" 108). This is certainly not the case, and I do not want to be understood as claiming that Lowell or Bishop tried to remake the very idea of a poem by emphasizing poetry's palliative properties over its linguistic ones. In his introduction to *Words in Air*, the collected letters between Bishop and Lowell, Thomas Travisano remarks on the matter-of-fact sensibility the two poets shared: "What concerned them most . . . were the practical problems of making poems and of living one's life" (Bishop, *Words in Air* xxi). The complex evocations of sympathy in their poems, then, are necessarily primarily aesthetic functions as well as social and reader-oriented ones.

of affective relation, since the reader is meant to become concerned about his or her own detachment from the novel (83). As Ngai puts it,

There are obviously things we do not care about – end of story. But then there are things we do not care about in which the very absence of care subsequently becomes disturbing. Put simply, the novel conscripts its own affective ambiguity to ensure that which we cannot *not* care about it *without feeling*, well, *bad*. (83-4)

In this reading, the reader's feelings about the text are motivated not by conventional versions of literary sympathy but by the noticed *absence* of that sympathy; in this way the novel produces a response that “becomes, in spite of its negative status as an affective deficit or lack, something that generates an ugly feeling and can no longer be ignored” (84). The poems of Lowell and Bishop operate in a similar fashion, although the moral concern of sympathy remains their endpoint rather than, as in Ngai's example, an aesthetic concern wrought by a lack of interest. The incitement of negative affect in Lowell and Bishop is inextricably linked to the development of sympathy: feelings of anger, distress, or shame occur in their poems in a communal context and so invite the sympathetic engagement necessary for individual and cultural restoration, the continued possibility of which their poems mean to reaffirm.

VI. “National Sentimentalism” and the Poetics of Sympathy

In an article examining the role of affect in politics, Lauren Berlant questions a moral calculus common on both sides of the political spectrum (and also in a good deal of recent trauma theory) that focuses on presumed states of “bad feeling” it is the duty of the citizen and the state to eradicate. The values attached to individuals caught up in crises, as well as to our responses to such crises, are all measured in terms of the type, and intensity, of the emotions they induce – variables whose indefinability and melodrama render them prone to political exploitation.

Berlant seeks, for this reason,

to challenge a powerful popular belief in the positive workings of something I call national sentimentality, a rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy. Sentimental politics generally promotes and maintains the hegemony

of the national identity form, no mean feat in the face of continued widespread intercultural antagonism and economic cleavage. (“Subject” 309)

An important difference obtains between Berlant’s argument and my own, since she is critiquing contemporary American political culture while my own work focuses on the postwar decades. Nonetheless, the “powerful popular belief” Berlant names and critiques here is one which Lowell and Bishop also seem to endorse, if my reading of the work sympathy performs in their poetry is correct. After all, to the extent that their poetry is about “affective identification,” it is also about a politics of unity that reimagines America as a nation in which difference – inasmuch as it is culturally produced rather than absolute – can be an accepted part of the social fabric rather than its conflict-ridden outlier. However, the sympathy in Middle Generation poetics, so far from registering as one more dimension of a political culture inundated by sentimentalism, is in fact an affective response to the toxicity and forced normativity of that very sentimentalism. For Berlant, the nationalist rhetoric of affective identification is pitched to a notional ideal subject, “the traumatized virtuous private citizen around whom history ought to be organized, for whom there is not a good-enough world” (313). But as my readings of Bishop and Lowell demonstrate, it is just this rhetoric that affective socialization can also mobilize to protest *against*.

For while I agree that what Berlant calls “national sentimentalism” undoubtedly forms a pervasive and problematic element of American political culture, the stakes of her argument here, at least, underestimate the extent to which affect plays a bidirectional, self-contesting, and confrontational role in American society. Where Berlant focuses on affect as a means of disseminating and enforcing a national hegemonizing myth, the poems of Bishop and Lowell articulate a rejoinder to and revision of that myth by imagining a politics that accrues from affective connection between distanced or disparate individuals. Berlant’s description of “sentimental politics” locates affect in the public sphere and reads it as a cultural commodity that interpellates its subjects, demanding from them conformity or exile. As my earlier summary of American postwar culture will have intimated, this nationwide impetus for a kind of implicit conscription into “Americanness” was certainly in effect in the United States in the 1950s. However, in contrast, the affect discernible in the poems of Bishop and Lowell materializes on a much more individual and local level, often in scenes of private or domestic life. This shifts the

locus of affect dramatically: instead of a broad hegemonic landscape on which affect appears in relatively undifferentiated, publicly available and publicly consumed forms, the affects in Lowell and Bishop can be read (through Tomkins) as differentiable, and as providing visceral, immediate moments in which individual agency is both depicted and expressed. Sympathy might well inhere, as Berlant argues, in a nationalist and sentimentalist narrative of communal feeling, but it also inheres – in more diffuse, complex, and specific ways – in political assessments of that very narrative, which appear feelingly and urgently in poems of dissent forged within and against the Cold War culture they describe. Lowell’s famous poem “For the Union Dead” testifies to just the sentimental, politicized forms of identification Berlant critiques: “When I crouch to my television set / the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons” (*For the Union Dead* 72). No spur to action, the children can be read here as almost dehumanized by the very pliancy with which their images are disseminated; they “rise like balloons,” a bathetic montage empty of any promise of real change. “Everywhere,” Lowell reports at the conclusion of the poem,

giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease. (72)

How to counter that “savage servility” is one of the questions insistently asked in Lowell’s work, and no less Bishop’s – and it is answered in the construction of an alternative discourse of identification. That sympathy is not only promulgated within populist mainstream politics, but also forms an important component of the aesthetic reaction to it, should perhaps be unsurprising. Any political ideology that still believes in the polis depends on solidarity, after all, no matter its end goal. Fellow-feeling, the emotional identification with the other I am calling sympathy, is one of simplest and most essential means of fomenting solidarity, both for the liberal nation-state and for those whose visions diverge from and deconstruct it.

Chapter Two

A Heart Grown Tense: Robert Lowell's Affective Identifications

I. Lowell, Life, and Art

The critical consensus on Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* posits that in it Lowell uses the techniques and rhetoric of autobiographical poetry to present himself to the reader as, in Marjorie Perloff's phrase, an "exemplar of his time and place" ("Robert Lowell" 218). That Lowell had the necessary artistic hubris to assume such a role for himself is confirmed by Ian Hamilton, whose exhaustive 1982 biography of Lowell remains the most complete study of Lowell's life and person to date. In a summarizing sketch of his subject, Hamilton states that Lowell "invested his life and work with an unflagging sense of the momentous. Nothing insignificant happened to this author, or so he believed" (238). On the face of it, *Life Studies* – a thoroughly self-devoted and self-regarding book of poems, and one that inaugurated a turn in poetics designated what is called (however imprecisely) the "confessional" movement – seems to support this claim. Lowell made a conscious decision to turn to his own personal history to find the subject matter for what became his most influential book.

But in writing poems that flow out of, and narrate scenes from, his own life story, Lowell is not merely monumentalizing himself or attempting to portray himself as the leading figure of the decade. If the persona of Lowell that stands at the centre of *Life Studies* serves as a representative of his time, he does so by evoking the kinds of synecdochic images that American culture might prefer to ignore or forget. The Lowell of *Life Studies* is enmeshed in tumultuous relationships ("your old-fashioned tirade – / loving, rapid, merciless – / breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head"); psychologically unstable ("My mind's not right"); and, even when healthy, unprepossessing ("Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small") (87, 90, 84). Contra Hamilton's assertion, in *Life Studies* Lowell paints of himself no grand or impressive portrait, and does not write autobiographical poetry from the conviction that every moment of his life is weighted with significance. Rather than seeing his poetry as the window through which to observe a life deserving of close attention, Lowell displaces himself and his life experience into poetry exactly in order to assess the possible significance of any individual existence in the collectivist dynamic of postwar America. If, as many critics have observed, one of the basic

tensions coursing through Lowell's oeuvre is that between art and life,²⁵ it is critical to understand *Life Studies* as embodying the conviction that art does not simply record life, but enervates it.

Lowell's interest in the tension between art and life relates analogically to the Middle Generation dilemma of weighing the allegiance owed to one's art against that owed to one's society. Lowell's method of balancing these concerns depended on what he called the reconciling of "the day-to-day with the history" (Lowell, "A Conversation with Ian Hamilton" 270-1). In *Life Studies* and in his later work Lowell faces the task of using the piecemeal moments of everyday life in 1950s America to construct poetry that will both capture and outlast its time. The poems of *Life Studies* embrace a politics (and the immediate cultural resonance a politics connotes) through the particular registers and moods of contemporary American life it chooses to seize on. The emotional texture of *Life Studies* is dark: the poems are mostly melancholic, sometimes deeply sad, sometimes disturbingly bitter and alienated, and these feelings are only occasionally leavened by brief spurts of contentment or hope. This thread of hope rests less in the alleviation of painful emotion than in identification with others, with the world outside the speaker's mind – with the belief, in short, that the speaker's experience is not doomed to be wholly private. If Lowell's persona in this collection microcosmically expresses the American cultural psyche, exposing the apathy and alienation behind the decade's veneer of self-satisfied goodwill, its implicit political mandate is not only that these problems are recognized but that such recognition is itself palliative, a communal balm against the self-centeredness of despair.

²⁵ This is the framing tension in *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, Steven Gould Axelrod's book-length study of the poet's work. See also Matterson, who suggests, intriguingly, that art alienates the artist from the surrounding world, but is also the means through which this alienation can be overcome. Recognizing that his earlier poetry asserted too strongly the divide that inheres between art and life, in *Life Studies* Lowell moves "towards an openness of form" in which "[w]riting becomes a way of temporarily creating order from the chaos of experience" (Matterson 64), but one that rejects "the idea that art is unchanging, that it offers 'concrete' knowledge, and that it can be situated beyond time" (67). While cogent and interesting, Matterson's reading does not develop any potential relation between Lowell and his culture, restricting itself to more general observations about art and temporality. I think, however, that we can read *Life Studies* not only as a poetic investigation of art's potential to provide a coherent dimension to experience, but as an aesthetically and politically conscious response to the problems of American society in Lowell's own time.

Despite general critics' general agreement that this microcosmic narrative is a valid way to assess *Life Studies* – that in this book, “private man reflects public chaos” – Lowell was hesitant to characterize *Life Studies* in so straightforward a manner (Cosgrave 113). Feeling keenly his own separation from American mass culture, Lowell did not want his poems merely to be a garish snapshot of postwar American life, seen through the disaffected eyes of one of its old establishment sons. His poetry is fully attuned to and aware of its time and place, yet simultaneously resistant to the simple caricatures and platitudes that being of such a time and place might offer a poet. In this sense, Lowell's poetry exemplifies what Hannah Arendt calls art's “uselessness”:²⁶ it self-consciously distances itself from the very cultural paradigm it inhabits, resisting any easy application of social utility. In a 1957 letter to Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop expresses her envious amazement at the pitch-perfect “Americanness” of the *Life Studies* poems:

. . . here I must confess . . . that I am green with envy of your kind of assurance. I feel that I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say – but what would be the significance? Nothing at all. . . . Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc., gives you, I think, the confidence you display about tackling any idea or theme, *seriously*, in both writing and conversation. In some ways you are the luckiest poet I know! – in some ways not so lucky, either, of course. (Bishop, *Words in Air* 247)

Bishop means the words as praise, but the last clause of the paragraph betrays her recognition of the need to qualify her admiration. Significantly, Lowell never replied to these comments. The danger with any poetry that fits too neatly into its own historical context is that it fails to speak to those outside that context, and equally that it emblemizes the very conformism it seeks to attack. A useful observation through which to read *Life Studies*, then, might be Alan Nadel's insight that “personal narration oscillates, situationally, between identification with and

²⁶ See Arendt's 1958 essay “Culture and Politics,” in Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 179-202.

alienation from a historical order” (4). Lowell’s identification is not only, however, with an imagined historical order, but with a particular idea of American life and its subjects in which identification with the other – and escape from entrapment in the isolated self – might become a sustaining cultural virtue. Sympathy is the linchpin here, providing *Life Studies* with its political impetus by emerging in the poems as the potential solution to the anguish felt by the speaker and, by extension, to the ills that trouble the society he represents. In this chapter I will define the ways in which sympathy functions in *Life Studies*, and will then examine three poems from the volume more closely. I will read “Skunk Hour” as the poet’s private meditation on isolation and on the weight of excess affect only dissolved by moments of identification with those outside the borders of the self. I will then consider “Waking in the Blue,” a gently self-mocking poem that critiques the human tendency to dissociate from those we choose to perceive as different. Lastly, I will consider the structuring of affect in “Night Sweat,” a poem from Lowell’s book *For the Union Dead* in which the speaker’s sense of dread and desire for death is alleviated through the presence of his wife, who, by sharing in the speaker’s affect, gradually restores him to himself and to the world around him.

II. *Life Studies* and Sympathy

Sympathy resonates in *Life Studies* at the level of both form and content. Lowell’s changing formal approach in the years leading up to the publication of *Life Studies*, described here by Bruce Bawer, reflects his renewed belief in poetry’s social possibilities:

Aware of the expectations and limitations of these audiences and eager to communicate with them, Lowell found himself changing the language of his early poems as he read them aloud, making his style simpler, more direct, less allusive. He added syllables to make the poems clearer and more colloquial and translated Latin quotations and the like into English. “I’d make little changes just impromptu,” Lowell said later. “I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms. If you could make it easier by just adding syllables, then why not?” (126)

Early in his career, Lowell never wished for his poems to be “easier”: they were designed to exist as convoluted, precise examples of a clear mastery of poetic forms. But by the time he was composing the *Life Studies* poems, he saw in his earlier work the restrictions caused by a style

that now “seemed distant, symbol-ridden and willfully difficult” (Lowell, “On ‘Skunk Hour’” 132). “I began,” Lowell explains, “to paraphrase my Latin quotations, and to add extra syllables to a line to make it clearer and more colloquial” (132). These changes were not simply reflective of a desire to make things easier on the writer and the reader. In an interview first published in *The Paris Review*, Lowell describes the difference between his earlier and later poetry, using Robert Frost as an example of a fellow New England poet whose unaffected style Lowell may have considered a kind of parallel exemplar for his own work:

I don't quite know how to describe this business of direct experience. . . . In Frost you feel that's just what the farmers and so on were like. It has the virtue of a photograph but all the finish of art. That's an extraordinary thing It's some kind of sympathy and observation of people. . . . and getting into his lines language that is very much like the language he speaks – which is also a work of art, much better than other people's ordinary speech and yet natural to him; he has that continuity with his ordinary self and his poetic self . . . (Lowell, “An Interview” 264).

Lowell's admiration of Frost's poetry for its plain speech, its evocation of “direct experience,” lends credence to the possibility that he sought to achieve something of the same prosaic candour in *Life Studies*, albeit in his own voice. And the sympathetic understanding Lowell discovers in Frost's poetry does animate *Life Studies*, if on a strikingly different (because more urbane, more interiorized, and more pained) register. The changed tone of Lowell's poetry reflects his increasing interest in his audience – and more particularly, perhaps, his desire to appeal to a wider audience. To write poems in a colloquial tone is to invite the appreciation of middle-class readers and not merely cultured ones, even to express sympathy with their vision of the world. The removal of Latin phrases and the simplifying of his poetic language was also, for Lowell, a means of making the tone of his poems consonant with their setting: the idiosyncratic moments of daily life in an unremarkable contemporary existence. Through their diction and setting, his poems establish similarities and connections between the speaker and the audience; further, they spark sympathy through their very existence, which affirms the idea that such lives, mostly unacknowledged, and such moments and feelings within them, have a place in poetry. More generally, they reflect the notion that art must be responsible not only to the

grand narratives of its time, but to the seemingly insignificant lives and moments that equally reflect the complexities of an era – in this case, the anxiety and uncertainty present within an ostensibly placid and confident decade in American history.

The second, more immediately visible avenue through which sympathy comes to the fore in *Life Studies* has to do with its content. Sympathy is the conduit through which the narrator of *Life Studies* is able to face and to ameliorate the various affects generated by and within the poems. Two competing tensions struggle to outlast each other in *Life Studies*: the survival of the self, and its possible eradication. Because the survival of the self depends on its connection to others around it, the poems often enact the search for such a connection. In Charles Altieri's words, "the dominant quest in the first three sections of the volume is for some form of communication, some external source of consolation" (Altieri, "Robert Lowell" 88). The quest is often established by the imposition of negative affect into the text of a poem, which demands a response from the reader. Within many of the poems of *Life Studies* the speaker (and sometimes the reader) is beset by displays of affect that force a response either of sympathy or of the disgust signalling an absolute refusal to engage. The underlying political strength of *Life Studies*, apparent even though its poems refrain from directly ethical questions or assertions, derives from its willingness to force such uncompromising moments on its speaker, and by extension, its reader.

III. "My mind's not right": "Skunk Hour"

The emotional urgency that courses through *Life Studies* features centrally in "Skunk Hour," the last and best-known poem of the book. It is a worthwhile poem with which to begin an examination of sympathy in Lowell's poetry precisely because it appears, on first reading, entirely bereft of sympathy: the speaker's deep loneliness meets no external response, and there is little space provided in the poem for the socialization of affect. Discovering how sympathy nevertheless lurks at the borders of "Skunk Hour" provides an avenue through which to consider other poems by Lowell in which the sharing of affect is more easily discernible. The fact that "Skunk Hour" ends *Life Studies* speaks to its prominence; according to Lowell, the poem is "not entirely independent, but the anchor poem in its sequence" ("On 'Skunk Hour'" 132). Given its vivid starkness and symbolic resonance, "Skunk Hour" cannot but reverberate

back through the pages of *Life Studies*, and as closing poem it constitutes a startlingly bleak summation of the speaker's mental and emotional state. The poem begins as a landscape portrait whose speaker casts a weary eye over the outer world with which he has been trying, in previous poems, to connect and commune:

Nautilus Island's hermit
 heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
 her sheep still graze above the sea.
 Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
 is first selectman in our village;
 she's in her dotage. (*Life Studies* 89)

To Deborah Nelson's remark that here Lowell "displays his careful reckoning of social status and the privacy it conferred," we might add that in these lines, social status and its attendant wealth and privacy all figure as symptoms of a deep societal dysfunction (46). Though enjambed, perhaps to reinforce this dysfunction, the words "hermit / heiress" combine unimaginable wealth with unreasonable seclusion; the consonance and assonance in the words unites them, further stressing the idea that wealth ultimately breeds only isolation and class resentment. Lowell's renunciation of Catholicism is momentarily visible in the short sentence "Her son's a bishop" (*Life Studies* 89). The seemingly out-of-place observation reinforces the lack of comfort to be found in traditional religious structures, which are inextricably connected to figures of wealth and power and even (as the filial relationship here intimates) subservient to them. The selfishness of the heiress in buying unused land and letting it go to waste is linked to nostalgia for a past that cannot be restored: she "thirst[s] for / the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century" (89). These lines embody a concomitant rejection of all that such a longing for the past stands for: its corroded class structures, its love of money and of privacy, its outmoded religious values. Romantic love also offers no hope, since it has become another pawn to be traded for wealth and status; the poem reiterates the complaint of a common tradesman that since "there is no money in his work, / he'd rather marry" (89). The unstated question that lingers in the poem's first stanzas concerns the problem of where the individual self might turn for fulfilment absent the belief in these rejected entities.

The external landscape described at the beginning of the poem grounds the painfully interiorized mental anguish we encounter in its final stanzas. These last stanzas are indispensable to the poem – they are, Lowell writes, “the dark night” where “all comes alive” – and Lowell has revealed in an interview that he wrote “Skunk Hour” backwards, two stanzas at a time (“On ‘Skunk Hour’” 131, 133). The existential dread of its final lines provides the poem with its motivation and force. The movement of the poem, however, is from the outer world to the inner: the speaker turns from a description of a bleak night in a coastal town to the inescapable fact of his own aloneness, as if having given up the attempt to find solace in the world around him. His interaction with other humans in the poem is beyond skewed, a scene emblematic of loneliness and lust, in which he spies on the “love-cars” parked together at the town’s edge:

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . . (*Life Studies* 90)

The speaker has no pity in his tone for the actions of the couples in the cars; the phrase “hull to hull” echoes the “nine-knot yawl” of the “lost” millionaire introduced in the third stanza, suggesting that the paired lovers in this incongruous setting are merely enacting a crude replica of the diversions of the upper class. And the spectre of death looms over both the speaker and the love-cars on which he spies. They are surrounded not only figuratively but also in a textual sense: the scene is ensconced, in the narrative of the poem, between the “skull” of the hill and the “graveyard” with its bones. The speaker’s desolation is complete, the absence of sympathy available to him having been unerringly established.

With its next line – “My mind’s not right” – the poem begins its climactic movement (90). The speaker’s self-awareness, his recognition of his own instability, seems to invite a reading of this line as a plea for recognition and assistance. He can only defeat his self-doubt and paranoia momentarily, and, paradoxically, only by admitting to it. But no response comes from within the landscape of the poem, and this fact takes the speaker to the darkest moment, perhaps, in the whole of *Life Studies*: the Marlovian exclamation that “I myself am hell; /

nobody's here" (90). This final negative affirmation of his solitude is an indication of the sympathy that the speaker longs for and cannot find. Of course, whenever the poem is read, the speaker's words do find an audience, one whose identification with his depth of feeling might forge a means to counteract it. But even within the world of the poem, the speaker does find sympathy in some oblique fashion, for he is not entirely alone after all; his narcissistic reverie is interrupted by small night-time foragers, "only skunks, that search / in the moonlight for a bite to eat" (90).

The skunks assume the focal point of almost every critical interpretation of the poem, and rightly so, for it is with their image that the poem (and thus the book) ends:

A mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare. (90)

In Edward Brunner's reading of these lines, the skunk's animal indifference is the catalyst for the speaker's return to the outside world: "When the skunk turns her back on him, she breaks the chain of self-absorption that has been building through the final poems of the sequence" (251). Such indifference, though, is of a piece with the disregard the speaker has felt himself to be the object of throughout the poem, and it is hard to see why the skunk's continuation of this trend should change anything. Stephen Matterson, positing that the skunks provide the poem with a note of "ambiguous affirmation," cautions that they do so not through any connection between them and the speaker, but only through the opportunity they provide him to locate in the skunks "a meaning which in reality they do not possess" (68). On this account, the speaker never does break out of his self-absorption, since his experience of the skunks is thoroughly individual and psychological: his "survival . . . is achieved because of his restored capacity to give meaning to the world's objects and to derive comfort from that capacity" (68). But it's not altogether clear that this capacity is, in fact, a newfound one, or that it bestows any comfort. If the speaker remains trapped within his own psyche, unable to overcome his alienation from the world, the poem's pessimistic tone remains unrelieved.

It appears, then, that upholding the consensus reading of the poem's final lines, which sees them as offering a glimpse of hope, requires granting the existence of a level of connection

between the skunks and the speaker that goes beyond either indifference or projection. One way to do so is by reading the affect expressed by the skunk as existing apart from the speaker's anthropomorphizing interpretation of it. The mother skunk is defined by her refusal to be intimidated, which is a function of her desire to find food for herself and her kittens. The instincts that register here are primal – as Charles Altieri puts it, the mother skunk “embod[ies] the determination and self-concern of all living beings” – but also domestic and familial (“Robert Lowell” 89). The skunk feels nothing for the speaker except, perhaps, a mild indignation; but because of the self-preservation and maternal care it represents, that indignation is the source of the flickering sympathy that enters the poem's final lines – a sympathy felt *by* the speaker and *with* the skunk. The skunk's responsibility is to herself and to the kittens trailing behind her, and in her resolve Lowell finds a means of “restoring a context of value within secular and biological necessity” (89). The commonality between the skunk and the speaker becomes a “resolve to endure” that the speaker feels by proxy, since it can “only be known sympathetically” (90). Despite the world's refusal to respond to his plight, the speaker here finds a reason to sympathize with the world, which – human and animal – is in much the same straits he is. The skunk is willing to forage in the garbage if it means her own survival; the speaker must inhabit his own ruined culture with the same sense of urgency and determination.

IV. Isolation and Identification in “Waking in the Blue”

“Skunk Hour” features little of the accommodation of one self to another or the recognition of one self by another; it does not so much exhibit sympathy as it makes manifest the crucial need for it. The sharing of affect it details occurs in a context of domestic pathos: thus two dominant themes of *Life Studies* reappear, briefly and faintly, in the closing section of its final poem. These themes are displayed with more force in many of the earlier poems in the volume. One such example is “Waking in the Blue,” which appears in the final section of *Life Studies*. Lowell drafted the poem while recuperating at the McLean Hospital, an asylum for the mentally ill where he had taken up residence after a severe manic episode. This makes the poem revolutionary on its face; by confronting the reader with the fact and effects of mental breakdowns, Lowell instigates the socialization of the kinds of affect with which mainstream American culture was so uncomfortable.

These affects make their presence felt almost immediately in the poem, but the subtlety with which they do so reflects Lowell's cognizance of the radical ground his poem breaks:

Azure day
 makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
 Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.
 Absence! My heart grows tense (Lowell, *Life Studies* 81)

The alert reader can discover in these lines evidence of a good deal of barely-contained emotion, carefully displaced into the surrounding environment: the window is "agonized," the fairway "petrified" (a word that carries the double sense of fossilization and fear). These instances of pathetic fallacy designate the speaker's attempt to distance himself from his emotions – an attempt that fails in the face of the "absence" of anyone who might sympathize with his plight. (In the word "absence," set aside as a singular exclamation, it is possible to discern both the negation of presence and, in a more literal rendering, the lack of sense – this last valence an apposite one in a "house for the 'mentally ill' " [81].) "My heart grows tense," the speaker concedes, admitting his inability to isolate his sense of self from his emotional state (81).

The structuring conceit of the poem is that the hospital patients – the speaker (to a lesser extent) included – participate in a basic disconnect between self-perception and reality. Even the night-attendant, with whose sleeping image the poem begins, exemplifies the pretentiousness and vanity of those in the hospital, having dozed off over a copy of I. A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*. Much of the poem's humour proceeds from these incongruities, but as the poem immediately reminds us, laughter provides only the palest form of satisfaction. "What use is my sense of humor?" the speaker asks (81). His "grin at Stanley" clearly lacks conviction, an attempt at conviviality undone by the pathos of its object. Ludicrous and benign, Stanley is

now sunk in his sixties,
 once a Harvard all-American fullback,
 (if such were possible!)
 still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties . . . (81)

In the figure of Stanley, Lowell depicts the embodiment of a singularly American fall from grace. "Hoarding" a shrunken version of his former self, Stanley inhabits in his very body his

refusal to accept the transition he has made from an Ivy League football star to a senile man old before his time. As such, he incarnates a possibility mainstream 1950s culture refused to consider: the loosening of the knot linking hard work and success, so tightly yoked in the American cultural imaginary; and more simply, that not everyone “destined for greatness” in America actually achieves it.

The comic pathos generated by Stanley’s combined self-importance and patent idiocy is reinforced throughout the poem. His “kingly granite profile” and “crimson golf-cap” connote wealth and power (even royal power), but Stanley “thinks only of his figure,” owing both to his childish vanity and a limited mental capacity reflected in his inability to express himself: he is “more cut off from words than a seal” (81). The poem’s dispassionate analysis of Stanley and the other patients in the ward interjects a sense of distance between the speaker and the characters he mentions, one exacerbated by the absence of language and meaning. As William Doreski notes in his analysis of the poem, “[t]he primary symptom of mental illness . . . is a communication disorder” (85). The condition of admission to the McLean hospital is not only detachment from reality, but imprisonment within one’s own psyche. Mental illness thus forms, in this poem, an inexact exemplar of the inability to identify with others. The hardening of the patients’ features – the poem describes them as “victorious figures of bravado ossified young” – is the outward expression of their limited affective range (Lowell, *Life Studies* 82). Lack of identification with others is operative here not only on a linguistic but a psychological level; as Doreski argues, the poem locates “a problem in affect as well, the mock clarity of language that fails to accommodate the mock clarity of madness” (86). Stanley and his fellow patients are necessarily deprived of the socialization of affect on which sympathy depends. The mental hospital functions as an ironic microcosm of American culture, in which difficult or troublesome individuals were segregated precisely so that their affective postures (and the sympathy these demanded) would not need to be faced.

Despite the thoroughly middle-class idiom in which this poem is written, a sense of isolation pervades the poem’s beginning stages, in which the speaker observes those around him with a mixture of resigned amusement and scientific detachment. The impositions on sympathetic feeling in this poem find their source in the speaker’s unwritten but thoroughly underlying conviction: *I am not like these others*. That sentiment lasts until the poem’s final

section, in which the speaker at last subjects himself to the same dispassionate scrutiny he has so far reserved for others:

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh two hundred pounds
this morning. Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors . . . (Lowell, *Life Studies* 82)

Initially, the warning signs offered by this passage are mostly associative. The speaker notes his exact weight – two hundred pounds: perhaps it's not only poor Stanley who “thinks only of his figure” (81). Stanley is also not the only patient overly proud of his appearance; the speaker himself “struts” in front of the mirrors in the sort of outfit in which a mother might dress her little boy. These mirrors provide the poem with its belated turn. The pained self-awareness that suddenly floods the speaker is brought on by the sudden ability, thanks to the mirrors, to see himself as others see him. The scene of self-recognition is a common enough *topos* in literature; its added weight in “Waking in the Blue” derives from the speaker's abrupt identification with the patients he has been ridiculing, as he

see[s] the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight. (82)

The connection at last established between the speaker and those around him is an unsettling one not only because they represent his future self but because his belated willingness to identify with them represents an ideological transformation. In seeing the “future grow familiar” in the faces of those unfit for a place in regular society, the speaker revises the basis through which he confronts and evaluates the other, valuing the immediate affective connection he achieves with the hospital patients over the implied external standards he initially used to assess them. This shift is implicitly an ethical one, and details the moment at which the two-part process of sympathy occurs – at which, that is, the initial affective shock of sympathy coalesces into a conscious emotional connection to the other. In the poem's last section the speaker assumes a level of personal moral responsibility he has avoided to this point in the poem,

revising his ideological framework toward, as Tomkins puts it, “immediate empathy and identification with the humiliated one . . . rather than an externally imposed set of norms” (Tomkins 184).

The poem’s final lines further extend this new vision of social relation: “We are all old-timers, / Each of us holds a locked razor” (Lowell, *Life Studies* 82). The poem’s first use of the first-person plural occurs at its very end, enacting a mode of solidarity that has only just been established. The pronoun “we” refers explicitly, of course, to the patients assembled at the McLean’s hospital – ageing social misfits whose exclusion from society might well lead, as the poem’s final line hints, to self-inflicted violence. (Indeed, this is why the shaving mirrors are constructed of metal rather than glass.) But in a deeper sense, this final “we” also implicates the reader of the poem, and by extension, the American culture Lowell observed so keenly. The locked razor is suggestive of impending but restrained violence, and thereby conjures, on the broadest applicable level, the Cold War and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. But even absent such a terrifying event (the shadowy threat of which lingered in the United States throughout Lowell’s adulthood), Lowell’s criticism of contemporary culture in these last lines remains sharply effective. The abdication of shared feeling, the refusal to respond honestly and sympathetically to those considered “different” – a refusal that the poem itself performs until its last lines – is also a potential instrument of violence and self-mutilation. On a more existential level, the poem’s last lines function as a reminder that perceived differences in life are ultimately superseded in death.

The same sense of morbidity is prevalent in “Home After Three Months Away,” the poem in *Life Studies* that follows “Waking in the Blue” (the two poems were in fact first drafted as a single work that Lowell eventually split into two during the revision process) (Witek 96-7). Having returned home from the hospital, the speaker watches as “a choreman tends our coffin’s length of soil” (Lowell, *Life Studies* 84). The image of the razor also unites the two poems, but in “Home After Three Months Away” the razor, far from being “locked,” is merely a domestic tool that plays a small part in a loving back-and-forth between father and daughter: “After thirteen weeks / my child still dabs her cheeks / to start me shaving” (83). If the future was familiar in “Waking in the Blue,” here it has become familial, in a poem given its sense of life and hope by the shared affection between a father and his child. “Dearest, I cannot loiter here /

in lather like a polar bear,” the speaker scolds, with more tenderness than sternness (83).

Domestic sympathy emerges in this poem as a potential remedy for the alienating pressures of modern life, though in earlier sections of *Life Studies* Lowell repeatedly reminds the reader of the ease with which pain and isolation can also infiltrate the family setting.

V. Clearing the Surface: “Night Sweat”

The theme of domestic tension surfaces often in Lowell’s work, not only in *Life Studies* but in his next major collection, *For the Union Dead*. Less explicitly autobiographical and more openly political than *Life Studies*, *For the Union Dead* marks an interesting shift in Lowell’s constant balancing act between aesthetic freedom and public responsibility; while the latter begins to take on a more prominent role, Lowell takes care to fit poems about his daughter “Child’s Song”, his father (“Middle Age”), his wife (“The Old Flame”), and his struggles with mental illness (“Eye and Tooth”) around and between poems that examine events of a national significance, such as “Fall 1961” and “For the Union Dead.” Implicitly, the content and ordering of these poems seem to insist on a necessary connection between the private and public spheres, between the life of the family and the life of the nation. The interpersonal managing of affect finds an unsteady analogue in the way emotion is manifested and controlled in the public sphere, and in both instances, Lowell insists that our political hope and ethical possibility depend on the sharing and amelioration of our most volatile passions: the fear, rage, and alienation that continue to trouble American society and that must be confronted rather than ignored or shunted aside.²⁷

The penultimate poem in *For the Union Dead* is “Night Sweat,” a very personal lyric poem that Lowell likely wrote with his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, in mind. The poem takes the form of two sonnets, the first roughly Shakespearian in style, the second more Petrarchan. In a poem about the overflow, release, and eventual control of extreme emotion, the

²⁷ As in “Skunk Hour,” Lowell often embodies these affects using animals, who are presumably less constrained than their human counterparts from displaying their true feelings. In the poem “Those Before Us,” for example, Lowell’s speaker points to a muskrat trapped on the porch, reading its states of emotion in the damage it has inflicted on its environment: “the slats it mashed in terror, / . . . and the packing crate / it furiously slashed to matchwood to escape” (*For the Union Dead* 16).

aesthetic qualities of “Night Sweat” – especially the way its lines almost, but never quite, match the exacting standards of the sonnet form – are suggestive of restrained emotion, of tumultuous affect barely held in check. The poet’s ability to make words submit to his will contrasts his helplessness in the face of the spate of manic feelings that beset him. The poem begins at night, and the effect is as though the speaker has just awoken with a start to discover himself covered in perspiration: “Sweet salt embalms me and my head is wet” (*For the Union Dead* 68). Night sweating is a fairly common and mild affliction, referred to in medical terms as sleep hyperhidrosis, but in this poem it symbolizes the mental instability from which Lowell suffered throughout his life, together with the intense emotional states it produced. The stanza depicts the speaker’s sense of entrapment within his own consciousness. The exclamation “one life, one writing!” – eventually co-opted as a credo of the confessional poets – can also be read as an emphatic assertion of singularity indicating the speaker’s sense of isolation and his need for sympathy (68).

Beneath the feelings of anxiety and loneliness that can be read in these lines is a more deep-rooted malaise. The poem’s next lines suggest that emotional exhaustion is an unavoidable effect of life in modernity:

the downward glide
and bias of existing wrings us dry –
always inside me is the child who died,
always inside me is his will to die – (68)

Freud’s notion of the death drive resonates strongly in these lines. Buffeted by outside forces beyond its control, the human body’s deepest wish is to be at rest. Existence is suffused with affect and necessarily tends towards death, and the speaker is caught between a desire for repose and the illogical longing for a lost childhood. All that is bodily – including affect – is tainted by its association with mortality, and inextricably linked to toxic despair but also to powerful and dark forms of energy: “in this urn / the animal night sweats of the spirit burn” (68). The body is here described as an urn, a carrier of death, and the impulses it harbours are, by implication, ultimately no less debilitating.

The poem’s shift towards an affirmation of relationality, community, and shared affect begins in its second stanza, as the speaker locates, as if in near darkness, his wife, in whose

presence he is able to quell the dark emotions his night sweats symptomize. “Behind me! You!” he exclaims, and the effect of encountering another person is immediate and visceral: “I feel the light / lighten my leaded eyelids” (69). The repetition of the “l” and “d” sounds in these lines accumulate like the drowsy beginnings of wakefulness, leavening the poem with a hint of comedy. The alleviation of the speaker’s depression is reflected in the way day brightens his physical environs, his “flesh and bedding washed with light” (69). His long dark night of the soul ended, the speaker “dabble[s] in the dapple of the day”; the vernacular used here conveys not only relief but a kind of foolish whimsy (69). The affective register of the poem is drastically different at this point than it was at its beginning; tracking this change is necessary in order to understand the function of affect in Lowell. As the speaker explicitly states, his wife is the source of his restored emotional calm, and her presence banishes his Freudian longing for death. “[M]y wife . . . your lightness alters everything,” he admits, “and tears the black web from the spider’s sack / as your heart hops and flutters like a hare” (69). These lines reveal the nature of the wife’s response to the speaker’s anxiety as one of unapologetic violence: she “tears” at “the black web” of his cloud of negative affect. Further, the poem’s reference to spiders and hares make the wife’s affective reaction appear akin to the very “animal night sweats of the spirit” she seeks to defuse (68-9). As evidenced by the fact that her heart “hops and flutters,” she is not immune to the fear the speaker feels. But the socialization of these affects provides a context within which they can be faced jointly. For while in “Night Sweat,” sympathy is extended *to*, rather than from, the speaker, who remains uncertain whether he can “clear / the surface of these troubled waters,” this moment of sympathy provides the speaker with a sense of self that allows him to control his affects rather than being controlled by them (69). In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker’s position is passive; “sweet salt embalms” him, “existing wrings [him] dry” (68). In the poem’s last half, he seizes some measure of control: even his uncertainty as to whether he can reach “the surface of these troubled waters” is mitigated by his willingness and ability to make the attempt. A soft politics of domestic agency thus builds from Lowell’s depictions of affective socialization. Neither docile acceptance nor wild revolt, the Lowellian response to the conformist demands of postwar American life takes the shape, in “Night Sweat,” of an intimate resolve itself founded on a penetrating, if unprepossessing, current of sympathy.

The final lines of Lowell's poem "Home After Three Months Away" depict a man chastened by life but not yet defeated by it: "I keep no rank nor station. / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (*Life Studies* 84). The first line carries a note of social and political abdication – a striking and arguably contradictory statement for a self-historicizing poet. But the mood of deprecating pathos established here, one that resonates throughout *Life Studies*, represents Lowell's attempt, as Elisa New puts it, to "cultivat[e] a model of selfhood not mythic but quotidian, not representative but historical" (15). Even in poems and prose pieces defined not by sympathy but by its lack, the persona that consistently emerges in these poems is of a man who wishes to be unassuming, and who seeks more than anything the sympathy of others. As we have seen, Lowell achieves the creation of this persona partly through his advances in formal technique, the "breaking of his characteristically dense line" that, as Nelson argues, forms "a gesture of invitation that transform[s] the reader's relationship to the poem" (45). In a fashion arguably more radical still, Lowell invites and engenders sympathy in the content of his poems by sketching out scenes in which shared affect becomes the truest measure of a personal and collective response to what Lowell termed the "savage servility" of the Cold War era (*For the Union Dead* 72).

Chapter Three

“Untidy Feelings”: Elizabeth Bishop’s Soft Politics of Sympathy

All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.

– Elizabeth Bishop, “The Bight”

I. Bishop’s Sympathetic Tone

Elizabeth Bishop’s famed reticence has had the interesting effect of increasing, rather than decreasing, critical attention to her private life. Her notably difficult childhood, her occasional bouts of depression and struggles with alcoholism, and especially her lesbianism (a secret she guarded quite fiercely in her own lifetime) have all become points of fixation in the burgeoning field of Bishop scholarship.²⁸ This attention to biography is made more tenuous by the fact that Bishop herself, while she certainly includes details and events from her own life in her poems, tends to keep her views and tendencies in the background of her work.²⁹ Unlike Lowell, she does not develop an overt persona in her poetry. Michael Davidson goes so far as to argue that “Bishop strove to efface her personality from her poems and lived for the better part of her literary life far from the centers of literary life” (170).

While correct to a degree, this view fails to take into account the extent to which Bishop’s “personality” might be recognized in her poems’ carefully achieved tone, if not their content. For as Zechariah Pickard has observed, her poems are unified by a verbal style that, more so than her content, “invites the reader to enter” (400). Dan Chiasson, who argues (like Davidson) that even in her most candid poems Bishop’s identity remains hidden, nonetheless

²⁸ For more on the resurgence in critical attention to Bishop see especially Thomas Travisano, “The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon,” *New Literary History* 26.4 (1995): 903-930. While somewhat dated, the essay remains a useful survey of the field in Bishop studies to that point in time and offers several convincing reasons for her relatively recent climb in popularity.

²⁹ Bishop’s reticence in this respect is also reflected in her theories about literary criticism. As Richard Flynn notes, her review of a 1951 book about Emily Dickinson condemns it for what she considered its overly biographical thesis (namely, that Dickinson’s love poems were written to a woman with whom she had a brief relationship); Bishop goes on to denigrate “literary detective-work” as “finally just unpleasant” (quoted in Flynn 204).

prefaces his discussion by stressing the singularity of voice and vision that invariably typifies a Bishop poem:

The sense of an individuated person, so strong in Bishop, arises from her scrupulous detail, her fierce and luminous accuracy, her unusual angles and points of view The angles are no less oblique when the subject matter is explicitly “autobiographical” hers is an art of relation, of perceptual nuance, of points of view, rather than an art of factual substantiation. (46)

Hers is an art, too, of generous sympathy. While a Bishop poem rarely brims with unabashed feeling, it exhibits a profound sense of the importance of emotional connection. Alan Williamson’s remark that Bishop “characteristically distanced emotion” (96) in her poetry should be understood in light of the fact that for Bishop, overly emotional poetry usually meant bad poetry, and that merely because affect remains implicit in her poems does not mean it is not proffered or sought. Richard Wilbur’s insight in this regard is an accurate one: “her poems, for all their objectivity, are much involved in what they see: though she seldom protests, or specifies her emotions, her work is full of an implicit compassion” (265). This involvement is simultaneously an emotional and an intellectual investment, an attempt to make negative affect legible and therefore, in some way, conquerable. As Cheryl Walker astutely puts it, Bishop’s poetry is

compelling because it makes compassion not simply a matter of feeling but also of thought From one point of view, her work fosters the notion that we are in many ways divided one from another as we experience meaning as suffering. She was, after all, an outsider However, from another point of view . . . we must keep in mind that for Bishop we are also ‘all just one,’ suffering, as we do suffer, in concert. (101-2)

In other words, the poems insistently recognize the fact that “shared human interaction is a deeply satisfying experience” – a conviction consonant with a socio-political framework amenable to the healthy socialization of affect (Tomkins 169). Bishop’s poetry registers as politically viable, then, precisely to the extent to which the exchange of affect becomes an organizing locus in her work. If we all “suffer in concert,” the articulation of that shared pain might begin to shape the discourse of its alleviation.

This approach to the politics of Bishop's poetry diverges somewhat from much recent critical work on Bishop that argues for a forceful, if nuanced, undercurrent of feminism and lesbianism in her aesthetic. Studying Bishop's work from these perspectives is unquestionably viable; poems such as "The Shampoo" and "In the Waiting Room" attest to Bishop's willingness to consider sexuality within her poems. At the same time, for both aesthetic and practical reasons, Bishop tended to shy away from inserting her biographical self into her poetry, and thus reading her poetry solely to affirm its queerness is an exercise as likely to reflect critical bias as to represent Bishop's own sensibility. That Bishop's lesbianism is not easily discernible in her poems is unsurprising. Bishop guarded the secret of her sexual orientation carefully while living in the United States because not to do so would clearly be detrimental both to her career and her finances. Henry Abelove writes that by the time of Bishop's appointment to the Library of Congress in 1949, those in charge at the Library had quietly but determinedly terminated the positions of any employees suspected of homosexual behaviour; this meant that "Bishop could work at the Library as poetry consultant in 1949, earning \$5000, a big sum then, only because she concealed her lesbianism assiduously" (76). The challenges of life as a gay poet in the fifties likely influenced Bishop's abrupt decision to relocate to Brazil in 1951, where she lived for the next decade and a half.

Some combination of her own career-minded cautiousness, her desire to connect with a wide readership, and her adherence to a relatively apolitical formalist aesthetic thus led Bishop to keep sexuality at the margins of her poetry, and to leave references to lesbianism (such as in "The Shampoo") vague even where present. Instead of framing Bishop's project in explicitly and radically political terms, then, in this chapter I will read Bishop's aesthetic as quietly queer, narrating a soft politics intent less on evoking instances of homosexual desire than on theorizing, often through sympathy, a space in which such desires can be expressed without fear. I will consider the pattern of sympathy within this aesthetic through the reading of four works by Bishop: her early poem "Roosters," in which the display of aggressive, stereotypically "masculine" affects provides an avenue toward their dissolution and toward a meditation on the construction of social roles; "Filling Station," in which the speaker's confrontation with an unfamiliar environment provokes a shift from disgust to identification; "At the Fishhouses," in which the limitations of human knowledge necessitate the imaginative work of sympathy; and,

lastly, “Crusoe in England,” in which sympathy is figured as the antidote to loneliness in a poem that affirms sociality over the pursuit of material possessions.

II. Gendered Affect and Sympathy in “Roosters”

The social display of affect is strongly featured in Bishop’s early poem “Roosters,” published in her first book, *North & South*. Robert Lowell thought the poem one of Bishop’s very best, suggesting, in unfortunately gendered terms, that it and “The Fish” were “large and perfect, and outside of Marianne Moore, the best poems that I know of written by a woman in this century” (“*North & South*” 78). He was not alone in this assessment; Randall Jarrell called “The Fish” and “Roosters” “two of the most calmly beautiful, deeply sympathetic poems of our time” (234).³⁰

The political overtones of “Roosters” become more visible when we consider that it is “well-known as Bishop’s war poem” (Longenbach, “Bishop’s Social Conscience” 473).³¹ While it is not as explicitly concerned with the subject as are, say, the war poems of Jarrell, “Roosters” is about war because it is about the affects with which wartime is most associated: contempt, anger, and fear. In an article summarizing his view of script theory, Tomkins elaborates on the relation between affect and military aggression:

When one man could kill another man, or have him at his mercy, the ultimate bifurcation of primary affects into feminine and masculine affects occurred. The masculine affects were anger, excitement, and dissmell, which the victor showed the defeated other The slave’s affects were defined as the feminine ones. He was to tremble in fear Furthermore, he had to be humble and ashamed, just as the victor was proud and arrogant and contemptuous. (356-7)

³⁰ I will not pay close attention to “The Fish” in this chapter, partly because it has already been examined at great length by many other critics, and partly because while – as Colwell remarks – the poem “attempts empathy, internalizing the other,” it ultimately has little to do with the forms of sympathy with which my study is concerned (68).

³¹ In a letter to Marianne Moore rejecting Moore’s corrections to the poem, Bishop makes plainer the link between “Roosters” and warfare: “I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. In the first part I was thinking of Key West, and also of those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland and Norway, when the Germans took over” (*One Art* 96).

Whether or not Tomkins' contentions are historically accurate, they provide a useful picture of the manner in which various affects can become gendered and politicized. "Roosters" explores the same problem, bringing to the fore the antagonistic presuppositions behind much of American foreign policy in order to expose their arbitrariness. Bishop's aim in this poem is anti-normative and anti-essentialist; she wishes to remind the reader that our own chosen conventions often underlie what we assume to be fixed realities.³² To choose differently – to reconsider the codes upon which societal interaction is based – might set a course toward political and cultural renewal.

The environment established at the outset of the poem is characterized by the presence of negative affect. Both the window and the darkness around it are "gun-metal blue," inviting associations of violence and death (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 35). The poem presents a scene of pastoral stillness harshly interrupted by the "horrible insistence" of crowing roosters (35). The references in the poem's first lines to gun-metal, to spreading fires, and to cacophonous cries come to fruition in the poem's sixth and seventh stanzas, in which the reader is introduced to the progenitors of this noise and misery:

the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare

with stupid eyes
while from their beaks there rise
the uncontrolled, traditional cries. (35)

This description introduces the problem with which the rest of the poem will wrestle, namely, that affective postures such as anger, hysteria, and contempt for the other have become engrained within the American cultural psyche.³³ But to say that the poem simply critiques

³² In its broad strokes, this reading of "Roosters" has already been offered by Longenbach, who argues that for Bishop "the roosters' cries . . . are not emblematic of masculine aggression; rather, she suggests that this association is far from essential or unchangeable," and that the final goal of the poem is to "emphasiz[e] the multiple significance of anything to which we grant emblematic meaning" ("Bishop's Social Conscience," 474-5).

³³ Richard Hofstadter's famous essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" provides a useful analysis of the impact of this trend on American political life. The essay outlines and defends the view that "[a]lthough American political life has rarely been touched by the most acute varieties of class conflict, it has served again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds," and that, at least at the time of Hofstadter's writing, "this fact is most

these affects (which include, in Tomkins' schema, anger, excitement, contempt, and dissmell) is not precise enough: it rather seeks to question the ideological assumptions behind the stereotyped associations between particular affects and particular genders, as well as between particular affects and entirely separate concepts such as heroism, courage, and honor. That is, the target of the poem is less the American male or the American military complex *per se* than it is the process by which masculinity, militarism, and the like have gradually come to be signified by the inane aggression the roosters embody. In terms of the argument Bishop is building in the poem, the word "traditional" in the above lines may be the most crucial. The poem seeks to disturb the cultural apathy that allows for an unquestioned acceptance of traditions that may well need to be toppled.

By and large, these traditions are embedded in patriarchal codes that encourage the amplification, rather than the reduction, of certain types of negative affect. It is through its depiction of the roosters that the poem captures the masculinity and self-satisfied idiocy of these affective scripts: "deep from raw throats / a senseless order floats / all over town" (36). The paradox these lines elicit is that the illogic on display here is not chaotic but structured. Order has been imposed, but it constricts rather than liberates. The poem draws on the ironic fact that this representation of patriarchal irrationality has become, in the form of the weathervane, an established cultural symbol. The weathervane, the signifier for a fierce and domineering bird, has made inroads everywhere into the world of this small village. It has been placed

over our churches
 where the tin rooster perches,
 over our little wooden northern houses,

 making sallies
 from all the muddy alleys,
 marking out maps like Rand McNally's (36)

evident on the extreme right wing" (Hofstadter 3). These observations dovetail neatly with Tomkins' suggestion that certain affects, anger among them, tend to be categorized not only as masculine but as ideologically conservative (Tomkins 356-7).

These lines suggest that not only the image of the rooster but (implicitly) its attendant affects have permeated the civic and religious institutions of society. Furthermore, as the reference to a mapmaker implies, in a figurative sense the roosters tell you where to go and how to get there – not least if you happen to be one of the “courted and despised” females (35).

The roosters’ aggressiveness and unreflective rage – their phallic heads are “charged with . . . fighting blood” – inevitably leads to their own undoing. The poem vividly describes how the presence of affects such as anger and excitement can corrode an ideology from within until all sight of reality is lost. “[W]ith raging heroism defying / even the sensation of dying,” the roosters illustrate the cognitive dissonance that can accompany over-enthusiastic military pursuits. Caught up in his quest for glory, the fighting rooster is unaware he is dying until it is too late and he “lies in dung / with his dead wives / with open, bloody eyes” (37).

The problematic state of affairs outlined by the poem is one to which it seeks to respond in its latter section. The last part of the poem comprises a meditation on the famous Biblical narrative in which a rooster plays a crucial role: the denial of Christ by the apostle Peter. The relation between the first section of the poem (local, immediate, and graphic) and the last (historical and philosophical) has proved to be a source of division for critics. The traditional interpretation is that the poem’s ending revises its beginning in some way, pointing to the forgiveness of Peter by Christ as a symbol for the potential resolution to the conflict and strife the roosters symbolize.³⁴ More recently, critics have read the last part of the poem as consistent with the earlier part. For Victoria Harrison, “Roosters” maintains its sarcastic tone throughout; thus, while “Christ may stand amazed that his friend and apostle would have betrayed him . . . Bishop’s bemused tone, which makes the scene seem precious, shows she is not” (92). Given that Christ himself predicted Peter’s denial, his amazement needs to be read in more nuanced terms than these: as more reflective, I think, of sorrow than of shock. It’s difficult to see any evidence that Bishop’s tone in these last lines is at all bemused. Bishop almost certainly thought

³⁴ Lloyd Frankenberg provides what has become the conventional interpretation of the relationship between the poem’s ending and its beginning: “its three-line form constantly suggesting the rooster’s triple blast, the poem moves from a country morning to the morning of Christianity. The symbolic triple rebuke of Peter becomes the sign of his forgiveness” (337).

the story of Peter's denial a profound and moving one; defending her inclusion in the poem of the phrase "to see the end," (which comes from Matthew 26.58),³⁵ Bishop wrote to Marianne Moore, "I have always felt that expression used of Peter in the Bible, to be extremely poignant" (*One Art* 96).

The sudden shift to the story of Peter does not, however, simply resolve the poem's basic tension. Initially, in fact, this tension increases. "St. Peter's sin / was worse than that of Magdalen / whose sin was of the flesh alone": fresh from the scene of the dead rooster, the speaker points to still another ill-advised male decision (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 37). Peter's denial was motivated not by the sort of ignorance or cruelty the roosters demonstrate, but by a more relatable form of affect: fear (in this case, the fear of death). If the rooster "def[ies] / even the sensation of dying," Peter is only too willing not to (37). In other words, the figure of the rooster can be associated with types of negative affect across the spectrum, from rage to fear – emotions with which the reader is forced to identify at least to some degree. In building to a resolution, Bishop subtly shifts her focus from transgressive displays of affect toward the kinds of emotions with which we *respond*, individually and socially, to such displays:

Christ stands amazed,
Peter, two fingers raised
to surprised lips, both as if dazed. (38)

In this climactic scene, Bishop's typically reserved lines display the shock of recognition, the sorrow of the betrayed Christ, and the self-immolating grief of the betrayer coming to grips with the terrible finality of his action. Bishop would certainly have been aware of the accounts of this story in the gospels; the writers of both Matthew and Luke recount not only that Peter wept afterwards, but that he did so bitterly.³⁶ None of the gospels except Luke record Jesus' reaction

³⁵ "But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end." In this and all other quotations from the Bible, I use the King James Version.

³⁶ It is striking how opposed Peter's display of affect is to that of the roosters in the poem's early section. The roosters embody rage and excitement, which Tomkins classifies as masculine, aggressive affects. In sharp contrast, Peter is motivated by fear, and when he realizes what he has done, responds with shame and grief – all examples of passive, feminine affect. If the feminist stance of the poem lingers in its last section, it perhaps does so here, in the speaker's implicit avowal that the expression of stereotypically feminine emotions is more likely to lead to the sympathy and forgiveness with which the story of Peter's denial eventually concludes. Robert Dale

to the situation. In Luke it is detailed with a writerly restraint to rival Bishop's; we are told only that "the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter" – we are left to imagine the precise nature of the look (Luke 22.61). Likely aware of this evocative verse, Bishop uses the same tactic in her poem, laying the groundwork for a complex range of feelings and implicitly trusting her reader to discern their subtle overlap within the poem.

"Roosters" stresses the surprise of both parties in the moment that the cock crows, but in its complete arc, of course, the narrative moves beyond shock and grief to restoration: this is why "inescapable hope, the pivot" remains, unvanquished despite the pain of betrayal (38). While Bishop professed no specific religious faith, she uses the narrative of Peter's denial of Christ because it provides an example of a moment in which confronting painful and potentially destructive emotions leads to eventual reconciliation. Even if on a merely historical rather than a transcendental level, the power of the narrative is such that, as the poem's speaker admits, Peter's "dreadful rooster" has "come to mean forgiveness" (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 38). The rooster is still militaristic, angry, and impulsive, but he is now also symbolic of the ingredients that might defuse these characteristics, which in turn presents the possibility that the transformative effects of sympathy with the other might forge a similar path in 1950s America. "Roosters" thus denotes the process by which sympathy enables a transition from the shock of shared bad feelings to an individual ethical response to those feelings that seeks not only to confront and alleviate them but to examine the structures of power in which they originate. The agency this movement inscribes is foundational to a politics of resistance in which affective identification becomes a vehicle for imagining and articulating new models of civic community.

The double symbolism captured in the figure of the rooster is the rhetorical hinge on which the poem turns. Bishop establishes it in order to reinforce the poem's central theme, which is that our deepest cultural and categorical associations – not only about roosters, but about power, gender, fear, and war – depend less on the things themselves than on how we

Parker goes much further in this direction, suggesting that Bishop "vaguely, by little more than a process of elimination, implies her preference for a gentler, presumably lesbian love" (88). This analysis seems to me to overreach in its desire to discover hints of Bishop's lesbianism in her poetry, but it is certainly true, at least, that the poem affirms the kinds of emotions traditionally conceived to be feminine over against those stereotypically associated with masculinity.

decide to frame them in our social imagination. However confidently we make them, our definitions do not inhere in the things we define; they are conditioned by our shared assumptions and ideals. In this sense our knowledge is historical and limited. Thus the poem closes with a scene of relative peace. The roosters have been quieted, if only by the onset of day:

The cocks are now almost inaudible.

The sun climbs in,
following “to see the end,”
faithful as enemy, or friend. (39)

The poem’s concluding lines compare the sun to Peter, who also followed Christ after denying him to see what would happen, and who was to Christ both enemy and friend. Significantly, the poem refuses to choose sides. The implied choice cannot be made by the poet; it must be made by the reader. Captured in the last line of the poem are two methods of reading the external world, the universe apart from the self: as alien and therefore threatening, or as beneficent and therefore deserving of welcome. Whether negative affects are ameliorated, as in the poem’s final section, or exacerbated, as in its first half, depends entirely on this choice. “Roosters” therefore posits the efficacy of sympathy – feeling *with* and *for* others rather than merely against them – as a primary means through which to move away from radicalism, militarism, and structures of patriarchal power, and towards a social contract based on an implicit understanding of the worth of the other and the essential validity of “weaker” affects such as grief and fear.

III. Identifying with the Other: “Filling Station”

It is striking, and worth observing, that Bishop’s poetry is so often peopled by outsiders, rejects, or otherwise unprepossessing individuals, all of whom the speaker typically subjects to unflinching scrutiny, exhorting meanwhile the reader to consider their significance anew (Kornhisser 233). In its painstaking description of minute and overlooked details of the external world, Bishop’s poetry often seeks an intellectual foothold on the process by which sympathy might be exchanged with those unlikely to receive it, or even to realize they need it. Her poem “The Monument,” for example, though it does not explicitly urge the reader’s sympathy,

attempts, in its detailed portrait of a humble and curious object, to coax the reader into a state of attention in which such shared feeling might be possible. The poem takes the form of a debate between two interlocutors, and the monument around which their argument circles does not seem, at first glance, worth concerning oneself about. Whatever the precise form of the structure, it is at least, as Longenbach notes, “flawed, a little ridiculous, and undeniably human-made” (“Bishop’s Social Conscience” 473). The speaker acknowledges that it is somewhat unsightly, and has in fact become, by dint of wind and rain, “homelier than it was” (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 24). But she insists on its value as a human artefact:

those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;
wanting to be a monument, to cherish something. (24)

The monument’s unprepossessing appearance should not deter us from recognizing its potential value as an instantiation of the human will to remember. The precise content or meaning of the monument itself is of secondary importance in the poem. Bishop uses the poem to establish a sympathetic poetic temperament defined by a willingness to appreciate and even nurture that which seems derelict or unremarkable, and above all one that advocates what Chiasson describes as “a kind of attention, a state of watching, of being enthralled and expectant” (51).

The political dimension of this attentive state inheres in its capacity to forge bonds and bridge gaps between the self and the (however distant) other. Sympathetic attention to what might at first be, like the monument, disconcerting, can form the basis of the solidarity required for political change. In “The Monument” this notion only extends so far, because of the impossibility of sympathizing with an inanimate structure. But in “Filling Station,” a poem that appears in Bishop’s second collection, this sympathetic vision comes into play in a more social context. The poem is about being confronted with a way of life very different from one’s own. Having stopped for fuel at a filling station, the speaker is shocked by the grimy living conditions of the family that owns and operates it. The poem begins with an exclamation – “Oh, but it is dirty!” – and the word “dirty” recurs three more times in a relatively short space (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 127-8). The speaker struggles to understand the choices that underpin this way of life, and not only its ethical or economic ones, for even the prevailing aesthetic of

the filling station seems awry: “Why, oh why, the doily?” she laments hyperbolically (127). Given the unhappiness of Bishop’s own domestic situation as a child, some critics have turned to biographical circumstance to find a foothold on this poem – a strategy that might seem especially tempting when faced with a line like this one. But the solution may be simpler and more elegant. As Cheryl Walker surmises, this line depicts a moment in which the speaker surrenders to “a moment of private hilarity” at the family’s “homely attempts at decorating”: after all, “[w]hy *would* you put a white doily in such an oily environment?” (68).

The answer to this question comes at the beginning of the final stanza. “Someone embroidered the doily,” the speaker observes, as though realizing the fact for the first time (128). The doily thus becomes, in its own way, another monument, a human-made thing worth valuing if only for the sake of the diligence and care that attended its creation. The speaker’s sense of humour has not disappeared – “Somebody waters the plant, / or oils it, maybe,” she adds, tongue-in-cheek – but the poem now bursts with a sense of the authenticity and validity of these lives, so foreign to her own. On its own, the poem’s final line – “Somebody loves us all” – might sound bathetic, but the lines that precede it rescue it from sentimentalism. It intends to provide a reason to extend sympathy to those we do not know and even to those whose lives we cannot, at least initially, comprehend. The first time he read the poem, the critic Robert Dale Parker recalls “laugh[ing] out loud” at the final line, finding it “trivial and charming”: the point of the line, in this reading, being something to the effect that we all have mothers who love us, even those of us who are greasy dirty mechanics (24). Where Parker sees, upon further readings, more ambivalence and doubt in the poem’s last line, I read a recognition on the part of the speaker of the potential of positive emotion and connection (in this case, love) to dislocate and possibly ameliorate the negative affect so often present in moments of interaction between persons of vastly different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds.

As many critics have noted, the “somebody” of the last line could also refer to God. For Luke Carson, this reading makes the line an accusatory one, reflecting appalled disgust at the fact that “God loves these greasy people as well as herself – that God loves without making the distinctions that occur so strongly and suddenly to the speaker” (182). But if disgust at the lives of others is precisely the affect this poem works *against* (though disgust is certainly present in the poem, especially at its beginning), such a reading of the poem allows for little movement or

closure. Carson suggests that “Filling Station” “concludes with the petulance of a confident and spoiled child who is startled by how ‘thoroughly dirty’ the station is” (182). This seems to me to better describe the beginning of “Filling Station,” the ending of which hesitantly affirms the validity of other, separate lives. The last line reflects the speaker’s belated success in “imaginatively (if briefly) entering a world where she could not linger” (Walker 71). In psychological terms, the lurking contempt with which the poem begins is gradually deflated by moments of comedy and pathos, and finally corrected through the speaker’s sympathy with this oil-covered family and its simple “faith in life” (Walker 68). “Filling Station” thus exemplifies Bishop’s willingness to reconsider her own perceptions, even mid-poem, and to weigh the implications of such considerations.

IV. “At the Fishhouses” and the Limits of Knowledge

In her poem “At the Fishhouses” Bishop wades more deeply into the philosophical issues surrounding subjectivity and perception. Ultimately, “At the Fishhouses” is more directly concerned with knowledge than with sympathy, but its demonstration of the transience of even our most time-worn certainties forces the reader to confront the necessity of human kinship and solidarity. As if assessing the extent of these certainties, the poem begins by emphasizing sensory details, describing the kind of engagement with the physical world accessible to almost anyone. It is, the first line tells us, a “cold evening,” and nearly dark: the old fisherman’s net is “in the gloaming almost invisible” (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 64). Bishop allows the reader, sense by sense, to experience the scene at the fishhouses alongside her: “The air smells so strong of codfish / it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water” (64). The chill in the air, the near darkness, and the sharp acrid smell are united by their inhospitality to the speaker’s presence. The landscape of the poem is perceptibly uninviting – even, as the speaker casts her gaze about her, forbidding: the “steeply peaked” roofs, the “narrow, cleated” gangplanks, and the “wild jagged” rocks all instil a sense of unease. The whole scene appears drenched in the colour silver, which is either “opaque,” in the case of the sea, or “translucen[t]” (a favourite word of Bishop’s), in the case of the manmade objects scattered about, as if to reflect the varying degrees of indecipherability of the external world. After describing her immediate surroundings, the speaker talks with the old man, with whom she has only a distant connection:

He was a friend of my grandfather.
 We talk of the decline in population
 and of codfish and herring
 while he waits for a herring boat to come in. (64-5)

The conversation reflects the fact that this is a world in decline. The people and the fish are all leaving, and those left are ageing rapidly, with little to do but wait for returning boats. They talk of his interests and his domain, not hers; their discussion thus also functions as a reminder that the speaker is a visitor to a world in which she no longer belongs.

To this point, the emotional palette of the poem is mostly dark; to the sensory discomfort encountered in its first lines has been added a strong sense of unfamiliarity and a note of nostalgia. Now the speaker begins to move her gaze outward, from land to sea. The short section in which the speaker considers the ramp leading into the water acts as the poem's hinge, allowing the focus to gradually shift, as it so often does in Bishop's poems, from the physical landscape to the crucial questions it provokes. The speaker turns her thoughts from the ramp to the sea itself. But the sea, unlike the rest of the landscape, refuses to acquiesce to the speaker's attempt to fit it into the realm of the understandable. Its immensity precludes any rational discussion of it:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
 element bearable to no mortal,
 to fish and to seals . . . (65)

The meditation trails off abruptly; the speaker's repeated failure to capture the sea's essence suggests that conceptually, the sea locates itself within the sublime – a realm entirely beyond the reach of human reason and human language. The speaker shifts her focus from the sea to an inquisitive seal, which provides a moment of comic levity, then back to the sea, but again, her words are stymied. After turning to look at the “dignified tall firs” behind her, she makes a last attempt:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
 slightly, indifferently, swinging above the stones,
 icily free above the stones,
 above the stones and then the world. (65)

The repeated words in these lines, especially “stones,” convey a rhythmic endlessness, a form of movement that began well before the poem began and will continue long after it is ended. On the phonetic level, the repeated “s” and “l” sounds mimic the ceaseless rising and falling of the tide against the shore. Faced with such immensity, the poem takes refuge in the same sort of sensory description that features so heavily in its first lines. As a means of last resort, the speaker imagines the sea in relation to an individual human body. To touch and taste seawater is not to comprehend the sea, but it makes a beginning. The lines form a kind of warning in which the speaker cautions the reader that if

you should dip your hand in,
 your wrist would ache immediately,
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark grey flame.
 If you tasted it, it would taste bitter,
 then briny, then surely burn your tongue. (65-6)

The sensations described here are still more uncomfortable than those encountered earlier in the poem: both the powerful cold and the bitter taste are intense enough to induce burning. The poem again invokes our senses as the primary means of interaction with the external world. Ultimately, the poem suggests, the world is only comprehensible through such momentary, fragmented individual perceptions.³⁷ Consider the cautiousness of the simile in the poem’s next line: “It is like what we imagine knowledge to be.” Not quite like knowledge itself, the sea is best described as similar to our idea of knowledge, the accuracy of which remains very much in question. The final description of the sea (and, on a secondary level, of our picture of knowledge) is an exemplar of rhetorical power, its repeated words and soft consonants conjuring a sense of the ceaseless and measureless finality of its object. The water is

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,

³⁷ Here my reading of the poem differs from that of Parker, who characterizes “At the Fishhouses” as bursting with “philosophical assertiveness and programmatic confidence” (76). In my view, the poem calls just such rash epistemological certainty into question .

drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (66)

We know neither what the sea is nor what knowledge is, and our best approximation might be a comparison of the two. In effect, the poem's final lines are Socratic, less concerned with the precise character of knowledge than with our lack of it. In its immensity and incomprehensibility, the sea makes clear the smallness, relative to itself, of human existence and ambition.

Although the poem offers no obvious or neat solution to the dilemmas it considers, an underlying clue to its pragmatic and political dimensions can be discerned in its grammatical structure. The majority of the poem takes the form of a first-person narrative, but in her final attempt to describe the water, the speaker suddenly addresses the reader directly: "If you should dip your hand in . . ." (65). Robert Pinsky diagnoses this shift to the second-person as the establishing of "a mannerly but unyielding truce with the reader" (58). For Colwell, the final section of the poem narrates a climactic series of connections: the speaker "finally connects with the sea by taking it into herself, connects with the reader by taking him or her to the sea" (122). While the possible actions the speaker envisions for the reader hardly seem wise or pleasant, it is noteworthy that a poem that has restricted itself so thoroughly and carefully to first-person physical experience now allows itself to imagine the sensory experience of another. Here the poem braces itself against the very picture of knowledge it will soon provide for the reader. Our knowledge is "historical, flowing, and flown" not only because of the irreducible temporality of cultures, but because of the final separateness of our individual selves. Strictly speaking, the fact that speaker can imagine a sensation experienced by the reader is a function not of knowledge but of *sympathy* – the capacity to feel with another. Where knowledge reaches its endpoint, sympathy must take over. In the final six lines of the poem, this injunction to fellow-feeling is emphasized by the use, for the first time in the poem, of the first-person plural. That we exist socially and collectively is fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and the world. Precisely because our knowledge is historically contingent, precisely because the external environment so often resists our best attempts to interpret it, what is required for social

progress is a willingness to envision other perspectives and to assume, however provisionally, other points of view.

That the final line of “At the Fishhouses” posits the ephemerality of human knowledge does not indicate a lack of awareness that throughout history, cultural advancement has occurred by means of the accumulation of knowledge. The kind of knowledge to which Bishop may be referring in this poem is not merely scientific or technological. It is art itself that promotes the sympathy that allows us to build on what we know, and thus provides a form of knowledge that scientific progress cannot access. The closing lines of “At the Fishhouses” also function, then, as a reminder that forms of technical and scientific knowledge only have value if they inhere in a more fundamental understanding of why and how knowledge matters at all. In this contention can be glimpsed the political dimension of “At the Fishhouses,” which, as in many of Bishop’s best poems, is not immediately transparent and requires some critical excavation. But her carefully chosen words, which register so little of her own person, are marked everywhere by the social concerns that constitute perhaps the overarching theme of her poetry: the deep need for community in a world fractured by separateness and self-interest. The gradually increasing sense of connection that registers in “At the Fishhouses” by the changing use of pronouns – from “I” to “you” to “we” – makes the poem, in part, a rejoinder to the very problem it diagnoses, mitigating the oppressive feelings of isolation and discouragement that shape the mood of the poem’s first lines.

V. Loneliness and Shared Affect in “Crusoe in England”

“At the Fishhouses” is hardly the only Bishop poem to contrast isolation with community, and it is arguable that these concepts constitute basic themes in her work in part because of her own life experiences. Given Bishop’s own distaste for that kind of criticism, I hesitate to dwell too heavily on apparent links between biography and poetry. But to the extent that it is possible to locate a biographical source for the sympathy that features so prominently in Bishop’s poems, it might be surmised to have been effected by her persistent loneliness. Loneliness, after all, is effected by a dearth of human companionship, which is to say that it flourishes in the *absence* of the socialization of affect. Loneliness is the effect of sympathy’s non-existence: and if Bishop could not fully conquer in her own life the condition of being lonely and (at times) without

access to sympathy, it is unsurprising that she carefully examines loneliness, and the basic means of countering it, in her deeply sympathetic and connective poems.

Though it was alleviated somewhat by her sojourn to Brazil, where she enjoyed the companionship of Lota de Macedo Soares, loneliness remained a nearly constant condition for Bishop. In late August of 1948 she wrote to Robert Lowell: “I’m quite looking forward to September – unless it gets too lonesome” (Bishop, *Words in Air* 54). A letter she sent to Lowell dated from a little more than a week later reveals the accuracy of her earlier premonition:

I think you said a while ago that I’d “laugh you to scorn” over some conversation you & I had about how to protect oneself against solitude & ennui – but indeed I wouldn’t. That’s just the kind of “suffering” I’m most at home with & helpless about, I’m afraid, and what with 2 days of fog and alarmingly low tides I’ve really got it bad (59)

Early in the following year, Bishop again admits to feelings of loneliness in a letter to Lowell, though in an admirable effort to remain positive, she stresses the brevity of these spells rather than their severity: “My ‘loneliness’ comes in attacks – rather brief – sometimes 2 or 3 a day, and then I don’t have any for a week” (77). This strained optimism wears thin, and in a letter written later that summer to her friend Loren MacIver she confides that “[t]he last six months have been a total loss and I don’t feel as if I could ever write anything again and I don’t want to go on living. I can’t work on any of the old things any more and I’m so bloody lonely I think I’ll die just of that” (Bishop, *One Art* 188). In a letter Bishop wrote to her doctor a few years later we find the same theme reiterated: “It is extremely lonely here [New York] and one has a great deal of time to oneself, probably too much for me. . .” (216).

Though it seems to have been at its peak in the years immediately after the war, the sense of isolation Bishop expresses in these letters was not limited to a particular time in her life. Likely the best-known reference to her loneliness is not made by Bishop herself but by Lowell. Earlier in the same letter in which he lays his heart bare to her, telling her that the marriage proposal he never made to her is “*the* might have been for me, the one towering change, the other life that might have been had,” Lowell reminisces about their time together in New England: “you said rather humorously yet it was truly meant, ‘When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived’ ” (*Words in Air* 225-6). The much less-

quoted next line of the letter is surely Lowell's attempt to soften this memory: "Probably you forget, and anyway all that is mercifully changed and all has come right since you found Lota" (225). Lota was without a doubt a tremendously important part of Bishop's Brazil years, which she looked back on as the happiest of her life. The mere thought of living in Brazil without her companion seemed too daunting for Bishop to consider; Brazil, she once wrote – speaking, perhaps, from experience – is "really *not* a place to spend any time in alone" (218). However, while Lota was a positive influence in Bishop's life, her presence did not entirely negate Bishop's loneliness. The sensation of being alone, of being a stranger, was a familiar one to Bishop even among Lota's South American social circle. In a 1960 letter written to Lowell from Brazil, she confides that "I've always had a day dream of being a light-house keeper, absolutely alone, with no one to interrupt my reading or just sitting, and although such dreams are sternly dismissed at 16 or so they always haunt one, I suppose" (335). Upon Lota's untimely death in 1967, Bishop's loneliness seems to have returned in full force (no doubt exacerbated by grief). She confesses as much in a letter written the following summer: "I'm pretty gloomy, however . . . I don't think I could bear NY alone. . . . I don't have many real friends in Brazil, much as I love the country" (647).

"Crusoe in England," drafted in 1965 and finally published in *The New Yorker* in 1971, is one of Bishop's most well-regarded poems; it also stands as one of her most significant attempts to grapple with the problem of loneliness in her art. In "Crusoe in England" loneliness is portrayed as the cyclical entrapment of affect within a single consciousness. It is therefore a function of the absence of sympathy. Because there is no viable means of feeling *with* in the poem, the isolated speaker's logic becomes dangerously self-referential. Reflecting on the several "miserable, small volcanoes" that littered the island, Crusoe recalls their disorienting effect on him:

I'd think that if they were the size
 I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
 become a giant;
 and if I had become a giant,
 I couldn't bear to think what size
 the goats and turtles were . . . (Bishop, *Complete Poems* 162)

Crusoe's perspective of the island is grotesquely altered, his sense of self skewed by the lack of a stabilizing outside frame of reference. His loneliness serves to distort his relationship to physical reality, rendering his image of himself that of some kind of Lilliputian giant. Despite its moments of beauty, the surrounding landscape does little to alleviate Crusoe's fog of loneliness (the objective correlative of which is the "cloud-dump" that hangs over the island) (162). Recalling the "glass chimneys" the whales created as they spouted water near the shore, Crusoe reflects how he "watched / the water spiral up in them like smoke. / Beautiful, yes, but not much company" (163). His lack of companionship is even emphasized by what he forgets. "The bliss of what?" Crusoe asks himself, trying to recall the end of a line in a Wordsworth poem. The word that escapes him is, ironically, "solitude" – a state that of course affords him no bliss at all. In the first line of "Daffodils," the Wordsworth poem from which Crusoe quotes, the speaker celebrates the experience of "wander[ing] lonely as a cloud" – a sentiment from which Crusoe is far enough removed to render his inability to remember the poem only too fitting.

His isolation gradually leads Crusoe to self-pity, which he struggles to justify to himself:

I often gave way to self-pity.
 "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must. . . .
 I wouldn't be here otherwise. . . ."
 What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?
 With my legs dangling down familiarly
 over a crater's edge, I told myself
 "Pity should begin at home." So the more
 pity I felt, the more I felt at home. (163)

Crusoe recalls being caught within a kind of vicious circle of affect: imprisoned in an environment of solitude, all his feelings can only ultimately be self-directed and thus only breed still uglier forms of feeling. Self-pity is a kind of vexed sympathy for the self, but since to feel for (or with) oneself smacks of narcissistic behaviour, self-pity easily leads to further shame and guilt. Crusoe's reconciliation to his self-pity appears to provide him with a sense of being at home on his island, but the solution is a hollow one, since the problem Crusoe faces can only be solved by human companionship. His attempts to foment some form of rapport with one of the goats roaming the island makes this fact all the more clear: "I'd grab his beard and look at him. /

His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up / and expressed nothing, or a little malice” (165). Empty of significant affect, the goat offers Crusoe no object of recognition or moment of identification, only a blank, slightly baleful stare. The lack of sympathy in Crusoe’s immediate environment is only finally alleviated by the arrival of his companion Friday. The poem thus reiterates a central theme in Bishop, the necessity of connection to others in order to arrive at a manageable sense of self.

The political element of this affective connection becomes especially apparent towards the end of “Crusoe in England,” when Crusoe recalls the dreams he experienced while alone on his island:

I’d have
 nightmares of other islands
 stretching away from mine, infinities
 of islands, islands spawning islands,
 like frogs’ eggs turning into polliwogs
 of islands, knowing that I had to live
 on each and every one, eventually (165)

Given that this island contained, in Crusoe’s description, “one kind of everything,” the vision of an endless multiplicity of islands is a nightmare because it reproduces singularity – and the lack of dialogue it implies – endlessly, without alteration. These “nightmares of other islands” are nightmares of complete and unmitigated similitude: of the solitary self forced to live, *ad nauseum*, the solitary life. To paraphrase Sartre, for Crusoe hell is the *lack* of other people. This vision of stultifying sameness can also be applied to the scene of American culture during the Cold War, in which adherence to a principle of homogeneity and decorum in public and private life was the assumed standard. In describing this limiting principle as a “nightmare,” “Crusoe in England” celebrates its inverse – difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity – and the political and social values associated with freedom from such closure and repetition.

The last sections of the poem make its socio-political import more evident, since we can infer from them that the problem of loneliness – of affect as a closed loop – is not unique to deserted islands. “Now I live here,” Crusoe explains, bringing the reader into the poem’s present, “another island / that doesn’t seem like one, but who decides?” (166). Besides putting

into question the very terms we use to define ourselves and our culture (much like “Roosters” does), these lines implicitly suggest that the difficulties Crusoe faced on the island do not simply remain behind when he leaves. The issue is one of perspective rather than of place: even in England, Crusoe appears to spend most of his time alone, “bored, drinking my real tea, / surrounded by uninteresting lumber” (166). The relationships over which he obsesses involve objects from his time on the island, which he imbued with import during his time there as a result of a dearth of suitable recipients of his attempts to engage in fellow-feeling. Whatever semantic content objects can accrue, the poem reminds us, they are no substitute for the reciprocal bonds produced by shared affect between individuals:

The knife there on the shelf –
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
It lived. How many years did I
beg it, implore it, not to break? . . .
Now it won’t look at me at all.
The living soul has dribbled away. (166)

The unreliability of the poem’s narrator is made evident in these lines; Bishop’s point, I think, is that the knife never had a “living soul” to lose. If any soul is “dribbl[ing] away” in the present instance, it is that of Crusoe himself. Just as in her poem “The Monument,” Bishop’s emphasis here is not on the aura of the work of art, *pace* Walter Benjamin, so much as it is on the modes of human interrelation – or the lack thereof – that inanimate objects can come to manifest or represent. The poem’s abrupt final lines render this contrast startlingly clear:

How can anyone want such things?
– And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
seventeen years ago come March. (166)

Memorabilia such as Crusoe’s knife and parasol are physical reminders of a time during which, due to the absence of any real sociality in Crusoe’s life, such things served a greater purpose for him than they do now. As such, they in fact tell the story of the necessity of sociality. For this reason, the poem’s last lines lament the loss – even seventeen years after the fact – of Friday, Crusoe’s sole human companion on the island. For Crusoe, Friday’s arrival meant the banishment of loneliness, just as his death in the intervening years has augured its return. The

feelings of isolation and hopelessness that sympathy's absence invites cannot be alleviated by objects (or, by extension, the wealth they symbolize³⁸). The central contrast in "Crusoe in England" is between community and materiality; the poem keys on the qualitative, and crucial, difference between the fetishization of physical objects and relationships with other human beings – two categories of affective connection that can easily impede upon one another.

The political injunction of "Crusoe in England," then, inheres largely in its quiet but insistent rejection of the contemporaneous (and still prevalent) American fantasy of the "good life" that equates the realization of complete happiness with the attainment of material wealth, as well as – more obliquely and yet more powerfully – the Emersonian principle of self-reliance and independence that is arguably its antecedent and foundation. Bishop often expressed her distaste for these aspects of American culture in her letters, but she also worked to articulate it, however implicitly, in her poems. In these she sought out an avenue of expression that refrains both from the self-dramatization favoured by the Beat poets and from the Confessional poets' tendency to "enforce intimacy with the reader" (to borrow Gillian White's excellent phrase) (263). Instead, what emerges in her poems is a soft politics of dissent founded on an implicit avowal of the centrality of shared feeling and human connection to a viable model of community. In dissociating herself – both physically and in her poems – from the individualist, consumerist ethos that was the dominant mindset in the postwar United States, Bishop developed and enacted the difficult strategy that Lauren Berlant has described as "detaching [oneself] from a waning fantasy of the good life," often with the attendant goal of "produc[ing] some better ways of mediating the sense of a historical moment that is affectively felt but undefined in the social world that is supposed to provide some comforts of belonging" (*Cruel Optimism* 263). For both Bishop and Lowell, this production required a curious, resistant optimism – a faith that sympathy with the other, expressed in poetry, constitutes an aesthetic

³⁸ Not coincidentally, Bishop found the material pursuits of American culture off-putting, and was particularly perturbed by the trappings of wealth, which were, to her, equal parts frivolous and ostentatious. The topic surfaces repeatedly in her correspondence with Lowell, as in a 1957 letter in which she exclaims that she "really can't bear much of American life these days," adding that "surely no country has ever been so filthy rich and so hideously uncomfortable at the same time" (*Words in Air* 229, emphasis Bishop's). See also White 255-261.

practice that can both critique a national moment and set out a means of improving it. As Berlant writes, there is a trace of the utopian and renunciatory in this optimism:

the energy that generates this sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one requires fantasy to motor programs of action, to distort the present on behalf of what the present can become. It requires a surrealistic affectsphere to counter the one that already exists, enabling a confrontation with the fact that any action of making a claim on the present involves bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world, along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it. (263)

The “surrealistic affectsphere” Bishop and Lowell produce in their work is one that reclaims affects from a moralistic culture of national sentimentalism and restores them to the individuals upon whose will and agency real political change depends. In doing so, they iterate a social comment and demonstrate a social commitment that fixes them within an American tradition of literary self-diagnosis as generative and restless as the nation itself.

PART TWO

Sympathy and Selfhood in O'Hara and Ashbery

“I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different.”

– Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*

Chapter Four

O'Hara, Ashbery, and the Post-Romantic Self

I. Avant-Garde Politics and the New York School

In his acceptance speech after winning the National Book Award for *Life Studies*, Robert Lowell distinguished between two types of poetry, “raw” and “cooked” – proposing that poets such as he and Elizabeth Bishop wrote “cooked” verse, while Ginsberg and the other Beat poets and the New York School favoured a more “raw” (that is to say, a more radical and less formal) style. This distinction might seem to run counter to the argument made in the previous section, which I contended that despite their reputation as establishment poets, working out of a New Critical paradigm inaugurated by Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, Lowell and Bishop wrote poetry that is in fact more politically daring and aesthetically innovative than it may at first appear. But the opposition introduced by Lowell (which has since become something of a critical axiom³⁹) is not an inaccurate one. Both Lowell and Bishop began their careers writing

³⁹ The notion that poets of the New York School wanted to overturn the established, “traditionalist” aesthetic of high modernists like Stevens and Lowell has become thoroughly engrained in critical readings of the period; see for example Silverberg 139, Brunner ix, Epstein 63-4, and Molesworth 93, among many others. In noting this received version of events, which pits different poetic schools against each other, Charles Altieri laments that all he can do “is agree with these stories [and] pity so accurately summarized an age” (“Contingency as Compositional Principle” 382). Much of the energy feeding the narrative of this opposition derives from an oft-retold anecdote about a reading O'Hara and Lowell did together at Wagner College on Staten Island in 1962. O'Hara read his now-celebrated poem about Lana Turner's collapse, mentioning casually that – in pointed but unspoken contrast to Lowell's laborious attention to craft – he had written the poem on the way to the reading. “The audience loved it; Lowell looked put out,” David Lehman reports (349). When it was Lowell's turn to read, James Breslin adds, he “sardonically apologized for *not* reading a poem he had written on the ferry” (258). Because it captures the vast difference in the compositional principles and poetic style of these two writers, this

under the auspices of poets whose methodologies adhered closely to high modernist assumptions about what constitutes good poetry (Tate, in Lowell's case, and Marianne Moore, in Bishop's), and the formal qualities of their poems make it evident that neither Lowell nor Bishop sought to overthrow completely the New Critical tradition. At most, they sought to revitalize it from within, rather than to reject it out of hand. The strategies Bishop and Lowell employed in writing their poems – composing with painstaking care, revising endlessly – and their shared emphases on concrete, detailed settings and clear diction, invite a contrast between their work and John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara's more disjunctive, surrealist poems, on which I will focus in the chapters that follow.

Despite this apparent contrast, this chapter will argue for the presence of a thematic continuity that bridges the work of O'Hara and Ashbery and also places them within the same tradition of soft politics in which I have located Lowell and Bishop. I will begin by outlining the apolitical aesthetic of the avant-garde movement to which the New York School belonged. The influence of this movement notwithstanding, I will argue that the sympathy of the poems of O'Hara and Ashbery offers a specific and powerful political vision. After summarizing Andrew Epstein's book *Beautiful Enemies* and differentiating my project from his, I will suggest that the moments of affective identification in O'Hara and Ashbery's poetry are typically produced between poet and audience, and that in this way, their poems form a kind of excursus on the nature of selfhood. Probing the same dilemmas of essence later questioned in poststructuralist thought, these poems instantiate a linguistic performance of selfhood, reading subjectivity as enmeshed in language, always unfinished, and necessarily social. Finally, I will compare the notion of selfhood introduced in O'Hara and Ashbery to that popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Confessions* occupies an important role in the advancement of the Romantic understanding of the human self. Because Ashbery and O'Hara revise Rousseau's idea of the

story is regularly offered – along with the fact O'Hara once vociferously expressed his distaste for Lowell's "Skunk Hour" in an interview – as proof of the animosity between these groups of poets. In actual fact, the lines cannot be so simply drawn. For his part, Lowell seemed mostly to try to stay above the fray. Ashbery, while he has no great affinity for Lowell's poetry, has been vocal in his enthusiasm for Bishop's poems. Precise qualifications of the relationships between these groups of poets seem difficult to establish; I wonder, in short, whether Altieri's summarizing gesture isn't precisely the oversimplifying coda he appears to wish it were.

self without entirely relinquishing it, I call their conception of subjectivity “post-Romantic” – a term indicating their avowal that the coherence of the self is inextricably bound up in its relationship to others.

It takes only a glance to note the formal differences between a Bishop poem and one by, for example, O’Hara. The difference between these camps (which are often themselves too neatly and easily demarcated) is essentially a simple one: Lowell and Bishop were working within the constraints of academic, recognized poetry; Ashbery and O’Hara, like the Beat poets, were working in an avant-garde tradition that blossomed outside it. However, over the course of the sixties the separation between these two spheres gradually lessened, until by the seventies they were, in some respects, nearly indistinguishable. This gradual convergence is one reason it is worth noting that the projects and aims of individual poets, even those historically positioned in opposing camps, were from the outset not so different.⁴⁰ For example, the New York School’s supposed aversion to traditional poetic techniques, while supported by O’Hara’s claim in his mock manifesto “Personism” that “I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have, I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff,” is belied by the quality of his poems, which repeatedly demonstrate O’Hara’s awareness and masterful use of such techniques (O’Hara 247). And the surrealist bent of Ashbery’s 1950s poetry needs to be considered in tandem with his early attachment to stringent poetic forms: the sestina, the sonnet, the pantoum, and even the canzone appear in his first book *Some Trees*, the poems often taking their titles from the forms that shape them.

If the New York School poets differentiated themselves from other poets of their day by flaunting their comparatively slapdash composition process, this aspect of their writing serves mostly to point to a more significant distinction: the New York poets sought to avoid any

⁴⁰ At the same time, the projects and aims of poets *within* the same camp were not necessarily identical. This fact accounts for John Ashbery’s distaste for the term “New York School,” which he sees as a shorthand way of blurring together several idiosyncratic and individualist poetic approaches, not least his own. As he has suggested in an interview, “the New York School label was a way of lumping us all together just because we happened to be living in New York for various practical reasons. The differences are greater than the similarities among our work” (Poulin 252). See also Herd 66, Lehman 26-8.

preconceived notions about what made a poem good, about what exactly a poet had to do in order to write a strong poem. Ashbery summarized this credo in a 1968 speech:

One thing that I am certain of as regards poetry is that I feel it should be anything it wants to be; that the poet should be free to sit down at his desk and write as he pleases without feeling that someone is standing behind him telling him to brush up on his objective correlatives or that he's just dropped an iambic foot. . . . This might be one of the definable characteristics of the New York School – its avoidance of anything like a program. (quoted in Epstein 78)

Other critics agree with Ashbery that this tactic of avoidance, this refusal to establish a concrete agenda or program, is what defines the New York School (and perhaps the avant-garde itself). As Mark Silverberg explains in his analysis of the avant-garde scene in New York, Ashbery and his peers wanted to avoid the sort of binary “adversarial stance” that would validate the structures and codes of the dominant culture it sought to critique in the very act of rejecting them (16). (This, arguably, is what happened in the case of the Beat poets.) Instead, Silverberg argues,

these poets turned from the habitual rejections of the avant-garde as they understood it to a new attitude of *indifference*. It is in this new stance or tone – less self-certain and ambitious than neutral and ironic, less transgressive and more deconstructive – rather than in any specific content, form, or geographical location that the coherence of the New York School lies. (19)

Silverberg's analysis is accurate insofar as it goes: this stance of indifference is the mantle the New York School poets tried to assume, and according to its logic O'Hara's criticisms of Lowell can only be characterized as a momentary letting down of the guard. However, my analyses of O'Hara's and Ashbery's poetry will make clear the difficulty – not to say the impossibility – of writing poetry that maintains a stance of pure indifference, political, moral, or otherwise.

Both O'Hara and Ashbery have been read by many critics as determinedly apolitical poets. Helen Vendler's influential analysis of O'Hara's poetry finds at its core a “radical and dismissive logic [that] flouts the whole male world and its relentless demand for ideologies, causes, and systems of significance” (“Frank O'Hara” 238). What sets O'Hara apart from so

many other poets, both of his own time and ours, she explains, is that “he genuinely has no metaphysical baggage. No religion, no politics, no ideology, no nothing” (249). The poems of Ashbery, as James Longenbach notes, have often been read as political in their form, though not their content: at the syntactical level, they disrupt the expected conventions and structures of language in much the same way (or so the analogy goes) that political action might transform a calcified or consumerist culture (“Ashbery and the Individual Talent” 104).⁴¹ This argument implies that the Ashberyean poetic is no more than indirectly and tangentially political – an assessment in keeping with Longenbach’s assertion that for Ashbery, “poetry cannot perform the substantive work of social protest” (104). David Lehman puts it more bluntly: “the absence of any overt political intent in Ashbery’s poetry is conspicuous” (309).

In an exchange in 1969, the poet and critic Louis Simpson rebuked Ashbery in the pages of *The Nation* for lauding the fact that Frank O’Hara’s poetry could be co-opted by no political faction. Simpson, a deep believer in the relation between poetry and political action, took Ashbery’s remarks as a subtle gibe at writers of political poetry. In a letter to the editor, Ashbery defended himself from Simpson’s remarks with the following words: “All poetry is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn’t poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest” (quoted in Lehman 309). The statement is a curious one: it seems to demarcate poetry as separate from politics immediately after linking them together (to approve of life and to disapprove of war is, after all, to involve oneself in questions of politics, however abstractly). On one level Ashbery’s point is well taken: simply to conflate poetry with politics, or to demand that poems must

⁴¹ While such readings of Ashbery’s poetry are certainly possible, their weakness, it seems to me, is that they tend to overemphasize form at the expense of content. Surely what is important in an Ashbery poem is not merely the way language is used but its semantic content. Many critics, justifiably flummoxed by one or another Ashbery poem, have read Ashbery as a poststructuralist of sorts, on which account all the Ashbery poem does is to remind the reader of the instability of language, the indeterminacy of reference, and the final impossibility of communication. This is the crux of Molesworth’s charge that Ashbery’s aesthetic “seems a flirtation with nihilism . . . an autotelic art that apotheosizes symbolism’s elevation of style over content” (165). See also Norton and Edelman for poststructuralist readings of Ashbery’s work. For his part, Ashbery has tried to distance himself from poststructuralist accounts of language: “For me, yes, language is communicating. I’ve never really understood what is meant by this idea that language doesn’t refer to anything . . . in my case it’s often very difficult, I suppose, to see the relation to what is being communicated, nevertheless I think it’s there even when it’s hard to connect” (Bartczak 217).

address specific political situations, is to force the poet to take sides on an issue about which he or she may not feel compelled to speak – and, thus, to perform an action itself insidiously political. But Ashbery's argument seems too binding in its own right. It seems possible to conceive of good poetry that is in favour of death, or war, and is nevertheless good poetry in at least an aesthetic sense. In his attempt to liberate poetry from moral posturing, Ashbery takes – ironically – a moral stance. Ashbery's words thereby offer a useful reminder of the inevitable closeness of the relation between ethics and politics, between the individual artist's conscience and the communal good. And it is with a sense of this closeness in mind that a strong claim can be made for an underlying political valence both within Ashbery's own poetry and within O'Hara's.

Just as in the work of Lowell and Bishop, it is the presence of sympathy in the poems of Ashbery and O'Hara that imbues them with their political character. As we've seen, in a Lowell or Bishop poem, sympathy is primarily experienced within the context and world of the poem, often by being extended from speaker to subject. But in the more postmodern writing of Ashbery and O'Hara, sympathy is centrally a function of the poet's acknowledgement of the reader (which hinges, of course, on the poet's self-consciousness about his own task as a poet). That is to say, in the poems of both O'Hara and Ashbery, the audience is constantly of paramount importance, and both consider the extension of sympathy from writer to reader as being an indisputable part of the poet's task.

It might be objected that it is not really possible for a writer to feel sympathy with a reader, since the distance between them is so great. After all, sympathy is typically thought to involve a social exchange between two or more persons present together in the same time and space. But sympathy does not in fact require such a setting to take effect. As often as not, it is induced in us vicariously, whether via mass media, film, music, or advertising. It is true that in order to sympathize with a reader she has never seen and can only envision, the writer's sympathetic imagination must operate at a higher level than it might have to in a situation of temporal and physical proximity. But this only underlines the fact that all forms of sympathy demand imagination, since the inadequacy of sympathy is implicit in its very definition. If we are all finally separate from each other, all sympathy can do is to offer a necessarily limited means of addressing that separation. One way to do so is through poetry, and poets who seek to

achieve such sympathy must therefore, like O’Hara and Ashbery, create a verbal space in which both writer and reader can share in the same state of feeling. While to do so may involve a level of imagination, generosity and creativity we are usually not inclined or asked to reach, such a challenge does not invalidate the possibility of sympathy between reader and writer.

To the extent that O’Hara and Ashbery wrote in reaction to their modernist forebears, the production of sympathy constitutes one of the primary means by which they did so. As Joseph Harrington observes, modernist poetry “was not to participate in the public sphere nor to constitute public speech, and, perhaps more importantly, neither was it to orient itself toward a reading public (indeed, pro-modernists declared the death of the poetry *reader*). Thus high modernism opposed both popular and political poetics” (17).⁴² In contrast to this modernist technique, in which the poem is altogether ignorant of the question of the reader, one finds Ashbery and O’Hara’s poems to be extraordinarily conscious both of their status as verbal, linguistic creations and of the importance of soliciting and engaging the reader. They intend, always, to reach out beyond their immediate circle of friends, beyond the hubbub and excitement of postwar New York, and into the life and mind of a reader who may exist in a markedly different place and time. Even when the pronoun “you” refers to a specific person (as it does in many of O’Hara’s poems), it is able to take on a significance, and a scope of address, beyond its immediate context, as when the speaker in a O’Hara poem tells Kenneth Koch:

once more you have balanced me precariously
on the wilderness wish
of wanting to be everything to everybody everywhere . . . (O’Hara 164)

These words are poignant because they express a wish that will be familiar to the reader – the lament of human limitedness, our common frustration at being unable ever to do (or be) more than one thing in one place at one time. Likewise, even if the poem is written to Koch, its final affirming line, spoken by Kenneth over the phone, is meant to reassure both the reader and the poet himself: “we are in America and it is all right not to be elsewhere” (64).

⁴² I would suggest, as a caveat, that this charge is accurate when we consider the early modernists, but seems to decrease in validity as one moves to high and late modernism. T.S. Eliot is a case in point: if *The Waste Land* is not particularly reader-oriented, *Four Quartets* strikes me as being much more so.

II. Gestures of Invitation

A side effect of the poet's sympathy with his imagined reader is the increased attention he pays to the practical aspects of poetry-making – its irreducibly linguistic quality, its status as a form of communication and as a temporal document. And this increased attention offers, in turn, its own reward, providing the poet with opportunities to advance philosophical positions about the nature of language, time, and the self. The poems of both O'Hara and Ashbery typically take this shape, intimating through their tone and style that the poem *qua* poem – and not only what the poem might be “saying” – represents, in some form, an assertion about the nature of reality. In particular, O'Hara and Ashbery use sympathy in their poetry to facilitate an ongoing exploration into the nature of subjectivity. Their poems are less interested than, say, Lowell's, in the difference between the poetic self or speaker and the empirical self. Instead, their concern is more directly with the ontological status of the human subject. What does it mean to be an individual? What does it mean to be ensconced in a network of relationships with other individuals? And (because O'Hara and Ashbery were poets, not philosophers) what specific means can the poet use to address and answer these questions?

It's not coincidental, of course, that such questions should be of interest to avant-garde poets in 1950s New York. The dilemma of what it meant to be an individual was, in a sense, as much a practical as a theoretical one for Ashbery and O'Hara: they were at the forefront of an avant-garde movement that simultaneously valued nonconformism and collaboration, autonomy and friendship. This problems posed by this paradox are taken up at length in Andrew Epstein's recent book *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. As Epstein suggests, critical accounts of postwar American poetry have often stressed the importance of group solidarity and interdependence, sometimes at the cost of underemphasizing what Epstein sees as these poets' determination to be unique and self-reliant. In fact, Epstein argues, both these currents were coexistent, and it is the tension between them that proved productive:

at the heart of experimental American poetry pulses a commitment to both radical individualism and dynamic movement that is sharply at odds with an equally profound devotion to avant-garde collaboration and community. This tense dialectic – between a deep-seated aversion to

conformity and a poetics of friendship – actually energizes postwar American poetry and poetics. (4)

This insight serves as the central thesis of Epstein’s book. Ashbery and O’Hara doubtless recognized the contradictions that inhered in considering themselves avant-garde and nonconformist on the one hand, and enthusiastically collaborating with a wide network of other artists on the other. It’s entirely plausible that some of their best poems are produced by just these competing tensions (this is especially true, I think, of O’Hara, who lived in New York his whole life; Ashbery moved to Paris in the mid-1950s and remained there until 1965, and thus did not experience this pressure in the same manner). The point, for Epstein, is not whether the paradox between collaboration and individuality can be, or even should be, overcome; the book never depicts these poets as having fully resolved this conundrum. Instead, Epstein celebrates the creativity that can be generated by the competition and anxiety so often enmeshed within artistic friendships. The beneficial aspect of the centrality of the trope of friendship in Epstein’s book is that it sheds light on the dynamic and shifting real-world contexts and relationships within which Ashbery and O’Hara produced so many of their poems. The reader can intuit, sometimes in great detail, the connection between a certain poem and the life of the poet who produced it. This connection, Epstein insists, is critical to a full understanding of any New York School poem, since “aesthetic and cultural forms cannot be fully understood through the study of individual authors in isolation or solely as manifestations of external sociopolitical conditions, but rather should be seen as a product of densely interwoven cultural, intertextual, interpersonal spaces” (5). Any poem at all – not only one produced by the New York School – “exists in a web of affiliations and disputes – it functions within a specific social context” (91).

Though this claim is undoubtedly true, Epstein’s focus on the immediate social context of New York School poems means that he sometimes underemphasizes these poems’ ability to resonate *outside* that context. In its relentless focus on the connection between poetry and friendship, *Beautiful Enemies* tends to reduce its glosses of the poem to commentaries on the poet’s own life and relationships, and to minimize the poem’s import outside the local sphere of the poet. To focus instead on sympathy allows for a wider range of application, for the simple reason that sympathy is more elemental and basic than friendship. The former is an affective state that applies to particular scenes or moments, while the latter is a relational construct used

to describe relationships over longer periods of time. Studying these poems in light of sympathy thus makes for a more affect-centred approach, one advantageous because it allows the critic to consider not only the immediate historical context of the poem – how it relates, for example, to the poet’s own friendships – but also the manner in which sympathy, a form of identification basic to friendship, is conveyed through the poem to the *reader*, even if the reader is not ensconced in the physical world of the poet.⁴³

For this reason I cannot fully agree with the formulation Epstein makes early in his book – one he italicizes for emphasis – that “for postwar avant-garde poets, *poetry is the continuation of friendship by other means*” (15). The definition is too narrow. If the poetry of O’Hara and Ashbery might sometimes enact the continuation of friendship, it also does much more than that. Ashbery and O’Hara write out of a particular social context, but they also write into a vastly greater domain, one that reaches to wherever their poems are read. Their consciousness of this domain is, I believe, very sophisticatedly and complexly realized in their poetry; and this aspect of their writing goes mostly unremarked in *Beautiful Enemies*. That said, in commenting on the work of these two poets, my goal is much less to disagree with Epstein than to provide an argument that extends his theme beyond the limits of friendship and into the more dislocated, tenuous, and expansive realm of sympathy.

All of which leads to the crucial question: what does sympathy look like in the poems of Ashbery and O’Hara? It’s accurate, but hardly revelatory, to claim that their poems establish a current of sympathy with their audience, since poets from Sappho to Baudelaire have done the same. Nor do these poets seek merely to establish the sort of trite, simplistic “oneness” that presumably unites poet and reader in the moment of reading the poem: O’Hara’s poetry is too arch, too ironic, too self-aware for such a sentimental gesture, while Ashbery’s poetry, equally self-reflexive, is too abstruse and layered to limit itself to constructing that sort of simple binary

⁴³ It could be hypothesized that in conveying such sympathy in their poems, avant-garde poets solve, or attempt to solve, the dilemma Epstein brings forward. That is, in order to be simultaneously part of a community and resolutely individualist, the poet forges an imagined community with his readership, and thereby, through the uniqueness and indissolubility of his words, invokes a space of aesthetic distance between himself and other poets – even (or especially) if those other poets are his friends.

connection. Nonetheless, both O'Hara and Ashbery are fascinated by the notion of the reader's position within the poem. It is the subject of Ashbery's poem "A Blessing in Disguise," in which he informs the reader that

You hold me up to the light in a way

I should never have expected, or suspected, perhaps

Because you always tell me I am you,

And right. (*Rivers and Mountains* 26)

This conflation of the identities of the speaker and reader of the poem is, as I suggested above, no simple erasure or trick. Instead, through such rhetorical gestures Ashbery means to explore the question of how separate selves can influence one another, textually and otherwise.

Frank O'Hara's poems also address the reader on occasion, though not as often as Ashbery's. An example is found in one of his early poems, "A Pleasant Thought from Whitehead":

Ah!

reader! you open the page

my poems stare at you you

stare back, do you not? (O'Hara 11)

Here O'Hara grapples with the same question that concerns Ashbery in "A Blessing in Disguise": what exactly defines the nature of the relationship between the writer and the reader? What can each do for the other? More often, however, O'Hara's poems, because they often record the day-to-day experience of his own life and therefore contain an immediacy lacking in Ashbery's work, seem more solipsistic and less reader-conscious than Ashbery's. After all, they typically appear to be less about the reader and more about O'Hara himself. But it is through his penchant for making the moments of his own life available to us that the profound nature of O'Hara's talent becomes evident. His poems function, in part, as reminders to the reader that there is no significance "behind" the event: there is only the event, which has significance in itself only as a piece of life, something to be remembered, enjoyed, and perhaps put down in words. This, in turn, is why so many of O'Hara's poems are simply titled "Poem": he wishes for the reader to realize the temporality and facticity of the poem, the inexorable fact that the poet

had once to sit down and write it.⁴⁴ Thus the beginning lines of O’Hara’s poem “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean Paul”: “It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering / if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch” (159). The “this” referred to in the second line is, of course, the poem itself. Beginning the poem by affixing to it a sort of time-and-date stamp, O’Hara continues by commenting on his own state of mind while writing it. He feels somewhat anxious, somewhat rushed. Such details function not only as descriptors of the moment but as gestures of invitation into it – into the scenes and actions the poem sets out to describe, but also into the act of writing the poem (which gives it existence) and the act of reading it (which gives it meaning).

III. Affect and the Shaping of the Subject

To gloss sympathy in Ashbery and O’Hara as both an exploration of intersubjectivity and a gesture of invitation requires an assessment of the relation between sympathy and the construction (or deconstruction) of subjectivity. Besides being a major theme of much recent critical work on O’Hara and Ashbery,⁴⁵ the concept of selfhood has been radically questioned and reshaped by a great deal of recent continental and poststructuralist theory. The thesis I want to propose in this chapter is that both poets use sympathy not only to appeal to, or draw in, the reader, but to probe the nature and boundaries of selfhood. In so doing, Ashbery and O’Hara construct and define, in their poems, what I will call the “post-Romantic” self.⁴⁶ The post-Romantic self owes many of its qualities – most notably its radical incompleteness and its

⁴⁴ James Breslin suggests another possible reason for the reductive names of many of O’Hara’s poems: “O’Hara titled so many of his works ‘Poem’ because he was aware that many of his readers would deny them the status of poetry” (259-60). While this is certainly plausible, I believe O’Hara was confident enough in his own talent, and supported by enough peers who wholeheartedly appreciated his work, to make such adversarial tactics unnecessary.

⁴⁵ Bartzak, Vincent, Crase, Norton, and Mohanty and Monroe, among others, have considered the question of selfhood in Ashbery at some length. Many scholars have also discussed selfhood in O’Hara, but the most cogent account, in my estimation, remains Breslin’s (see especially 267-76 and 295-6).

⁴⁶ The term “post-Romantic” is unsurprisingly more often applied to writers in the time period immediately following Romanticism – among them Melville, Flaubert, and Carlyle. I use it in reference to Ashbery and O’Hara to denote my sense that something in their work affirms Romantic values even while rejecting them. I have only discovered one other instance in which the signifier has been applied to either of these poets: Kacper Bartzak argues that Ashbery’s poetry, because it values contingency rather than organicism, is post-Romantic, but he defines the term differently than I do, figuring it as essentially the opposite of “Romantic” (58).

dependence on others – to postmodernity and to recent philosophical schools such as pragmatism, but it is at the same time still haunted by the dream of a unified, self-consistent and coherent self – the original Romantic self from which its name derives. While many critics have suggested, in reference to either poet, that they have (as Jody Norton writes of Ashbery) “no sense that the romantic, the spiritual, the transcendental ever has existed as an existential possibility,” my argument affirms the contrary: something in these poets’ conception of the self speaks to just those possibilities (295). At the same time, they remain guarded and doubtful about whether complete individual or cultural self-definition is ever possible. In their early poems, then, O’Hara and Ashbery simultaneously anticipate and problematize postmodernist critiques of traditional paradigms of subjectivity.

Even to use a phrase such as “the human self” is to make an ontological assumption many theorists have called into question.⁴⁷ In her book *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the Death of the Subject*, Rei Terada proceeds from the premise that the human self in its traditional guises is an untenable category. For Terada, emotion is both cause and evidence of dissociation within the self, since it “demands virtual self-difference” (31). In fact, Terada claims, “we would have no emotions if we were subjects”: it is exactly emotion that has produced the death of the subject (4). So far from inhering in a subject, emotion constitutes “the difference between subjective ideality and the external world” and is thus a strictly phenomenological occurrence – the filling of the gap between the way we expect to see the world and the way it in fact presents itself to us (44). In the very production of emotion, the category of personhood dissolves. “When I interpret my own mental representations,” Terada asks, “whose is the subjectivity to whom the emotion finally belongs? No one but a string of Humean ‘whos’ who are all the I’s I have” (46).

⁴⁷ I trace the lineage of this problem in philosophy and literary theory, but it was arguably established in O’Hara’s own time through the rise of psychoanalysis. By mid-century, Freud’s exposition of the self-difference and self-dissociation within the individual psyche had been embraced by mainstream thinkers in the United States. In his book *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), the literary critic Lionel Trilling makes the Freudian argument that individual experience is essentially – in Thomas Schaub’s words – “a psychological reality, an experience of complexity that has its generative roots in the ineradicable conflicts of the private self” (Schaub 21). Trilling’s thesis was to become, over the course of the decade, “the dominant interpretation of American culture and literature” in liberal thought (Reising 93).

Terada's redefinition of emotion as "nonsubjective experience in the form of self-difference within cognition" has important ramifications for affect theory (3). On Terada's account, the very affective responses that seem to originate within us – affects we use to codify and contain a sense of self – constantly disrupt that self even while they seem to inform it. However, the conceptual model provided by Tomkins, which sees the healthy society as a network of individuals in which affect is co-dependently generated and maintained by instances of mutual sympathy, provides a means of reading selfhood as a concept that is stabilized by the sharing of affect even where it is troubled by affective dissociation within the individual. In a perceptive essay that works to link some of the different theoretical fields in which affect is discussed, Anna Gibbs argues that affect plays a significant role in the shaping of the self:

In producing difference by means of cross-modal translation, affect organizes, both intra- and inter-corporeally, though it does so in very different ways in different cultures. It is this organization of the self into an ongoing and more or less flexible process patterned by affect that facilitates a relatively high degree of cohesion and a sense of continuity in time, even as the self continues to undergo both analeptic and proleptic reshaping by the work of memory and anticipation. The self – whatever form it may take in different cultures and however a sense of agency may be distributed between it and the world in any given culture – then becomes a complex and ever-evolving social interface. (196)

For Terada, the play of emotions within a subject covers over (but ultimately exposes) the absence of a unifying self in which the subject might cohere. But the communal experiencing of emotion affords us another way to see the problem. In recognizing my own emotion on the face of another, my own subjective experience of that emotion, together with the underlying reality of the self experiencing it, is confirmed. As Gibbs notes, Tomkins' research has proved that "[i]t is very difficult not to respond to a spontaneous smile with a spontaneous smile of one's own, and one's own smile provides sufficient feedback to our own bodies to activate the physiological and neurological aspects of joy" (191). In the case of a mother and her infant, this recognition of shared affect produces the nexus in which the concept of selfhood begins to be interiorized: "the infant's gradual recognition of the interiority of the other (as well as of itself)

varies directly and increases proportionally with its “increasing awareness that experience can be communicated and shared” (195).

While this framework offers a useful way to think about the role of affect in the formation of the self, it’s important to note that it in no way guarantees the stability or coherence of subjectivity. The “fleetingness” of selfhood, whatever its power in the social and cultural imaginary, remains a thorny philosophical problem. Terada’s definition of the self as “a string of Humean ‘whos’ who are all the I’s I have” (46) is particularly apt, since Hume was perhaps the first modern thinker to effectively disturb notions of the self extant since Aristotle. More recently, the work of psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan as well as that of Marxist theorists including Theodor Adorno and Frederic Jameson has shifted the debate over human subjectivity away from an emphasis on individual agency and toward the material and social processes within which and through which subjects are produced.⁴⁸ But in contemporary thought, Friedrich Nietzsche’s shadow still looms longest: the ideas of Derrida, of Foucault, and of Butler find their roots in his radical re-contextualization of the human self. Writes Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*: “The ‘subject’ is nothing given, but something superimposed by fancy, something introduced behind” (12-3). In fact, he adds, “Where our ignorance really begins, at that point from which we can see no further, we set a word; for instance, the word ‘I’ . . .” (13). Nietzsche’s resolute skepticism concerning all our categories of thought, moral and ontological, leads him to critique the work of Descartes, whose writings on individual identity offer a kind of philosophical analogue to the literary version of the self produced in Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Nietzsche seeks out the unjustified assumption that animates (and undoes) Descartes’ famous *cogito*:

‘Something is thought, therefore there is something that thinks’: this is what Descartes’ argument amounts to. But this is tantamount to considering our belief in the notion ‘*substance*’ as an *a priori* truth: – that there must be something ‘that thinks’ when we think, is merely a formulation of a grammatical custom which

⁴⁸ For a summary of theories of subjectivity in the twentieth century see Reynolds 4-10.

sets an agent to every action. In short, a metaphysico-logical postulate is already put forward here . . . (14)

This “metaphysico-logical postulate” is an unjustified assertion of some essentiality or inherent feature through which the self attains a unifying definition. The rejection of this assumption is arguably one of the defining characteristics of the poststructuralist tradition, from its predecessors Nietzsche and Hume to its recent apex in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari.

IV. Performativity and the Postmodern Poem

An influential poststructuralist reframing of the question of subjectivity appears in the concept of performativity – a term that, while it is now inextricably linked to queer theory, originated in linguistic philosophy. Theories of performativity are premised on the notion that the self is entirely socio-culturally and linguistically engendered.⁴⁹ Judith Butler, who is perhaps the key figure in this field, draws on the theories of J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida to argue that – in the summarizing words of Sedgwick and Parker – “identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes” (2). (J. L. Austin, a philosopher of language, first introduced and defined the performative speech act as an utterance that carries the force of an action within reality rather than being merely a description of that reality. The paradigmatic example: a pronouncement of marriage by a justice of the peace.) Such forms of discourse, Butler argues, are more culturally prevalent and more insidiously effective than we have till now realized, and

⁴⁹ A more pressing ethical concern in poststructuralist accounts of the self is that absolutist readings of theories of performativity would seem to render the very idea of political exigency redundant. If the subject is an entire social construction, then by extension, the subject’s *self-conception* is equally societally generated: that is, not only who we are, but who we think we are, is produced by determining powers whose origins lie well beyond our awareness. On this level our most private thoughts, our desires for autonomy, even our very awareness of our historical situatedness, all read only as so much data in the statistical field produced by and as the cultural moment in which we subsist. Thus a strict application of the premise that the self is socially engendered renders human agency a basic illusion fostered by an overwhelming determinism, all of which invites, in turn, an ethos in which political action can only be described as naïve. To respond that the knowledge of how we have been shaped by our own cultural and historical episteme provides us with a means of combating its most egregious flaws – that while we are products of past cultural forms, we have the power to shape future ones – is still no safeguard against a certain ineradicable fatalism. For if, after all, there is *nothing* to us but the press of socio-cultural forces, even the desire to reshape culture in more fitting, just, and equitable is itself merely a condition – perhaps an inevitable outcome – of that very culture. Human beings might be said to be little more than a culture’s means of self-adjustment, a complex auto-stabilizing pattern whose slight anomalies will, on a long enough time scale, balance out.

it is through the force of these verbal iterations that identities are constructed and, gradually, come to be performed. This shaping current of discourse inevitably precedes any subject and precludes the possibility of its agency. Hence, Butler writes, “[w]here there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no ‘I’ who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse” (225).

Critics of poststructuralism have pointed out that theories of performativity generally appear to defer or postpone, rather than to answer, insistent questions regarding whatever aspect of the self might continue from moment to moment. To label something “performative” is to take a verb and make it an adjective, which does not necessarily lessen the conundrum of just how to consider the noun it modifies – the subject, that is, who is doing the performing. Is subjectivity thoroughly theatrical, something assumed the way one might a series of masks? In fact, the notion of performance does anything but negate the possibility of some entity beneath the performer’s garb, some actor who, consciously or otherwise, inhabits the role of his or her socio-historical moment. What I am calling the post-Romantic verges on just this slippage between performativity, performance, and the performer. In what form does agency or continuity lurk behind the ever-accumulating iterations of word and action by which we are said to be defined? Is such agency self-consistent? The poems of Ashbery and O’Hara address these questions, and one way they do so is by instantiating the poem as a verbal metaphor for the self – and by extension, the writing of poetry as an exteriorized performance of subjectivity.

To discern this link between aesthetics and subjectivity, it may be helpful to consider the critical adage – so commonplace by now as to nearly be a cliché – that poets such as Ashbery emphasize the poem as a process that unfolds in the act of being read rather than as a static, finished product. The typical Ashbery poem, as John Emil Vincent writes, “proliferates meaning instead of locating it” (14). The discursive effect of an Ashbery poem is that it is less about a particular experience than about what Ashbery has called “the experience of experience” (Poulin 245). This means that, as Mark Silverberg explains, “an Ashbery poem is less an object than a linguistic event: it is ‘about’ its own coming into being” (115). Similarly, an O’Hara poem is meant to be “about” nothing besides itself, coming to fruition only as it is experienced in the mind of the reader. As O’Hara himself once put it, “I hope the poem to *be* the

subject, not just about it” (quoted in Boone 70). For Ashbery and O’Hara, the poem realizes itself incrementally, relationally, and temporally. It will not yield a deep and hidden meaning if enough critical pressure is applied; rather, its meaning remains refractory, diffuse, easily dislocated, as transient as time itself.

It is in this sense that for both Ashbery and O’Hara the poem can be analogized to the self. As Epstein suggests, the avant-garde ethic favoured by O’Hara and Ashbery entails “an aversion to fixity, a belief in the self as less an entity than an ongoing process” – qualities that also describe the *poem* (68). To take another example, Helen Vendler all but equates the nature of the poem with the nature of the self in her discussion of O’Hara’s work, observing that “[t]he theoretical question O’Hara forces on us is a radical one: Why should poetry be confined in a limited or closed form? Our minds ramble on; why not our poems?” (“Frank O’Hara” 235). Minds and poems both ramble on in Ashbery and O’Hara precisely because the poem becomes a vehicle for interrogating the properties and limits of the human subject. Consider Ashbery’s explanation of the state of mind needed to write good poetry: “I guess it amounts to not planning the poem in advance but in letting it take its own way; of living in a state of alert and being ready to change your mind if the occasion seems to require it” (quoted in Epstein 78). Note that his statement begins by restricting itself to the scene of planning and writing the poem, but easily and naturally shifts to include planning and living one’s life (good poetry requires “living in a state of alert”). A more subtly knit connection between poem and self can hardly be imagined.

Positioning the poem as a metaphor for the self has certain unique advantages. For one thing, it enables these poets to use style and voice (and not only content) in their poems to represent and envision subjectivity. But perhaps we can go a step further still. The very writing of poetry becomes, in Ashbery and O’Hara, the construction of selfhood. Even within the poem, every word denotes a choice made by a human subject within a grammatical field – a choice that, whether it alienates or encourage the other, shapes the boundaries of the self, or produces the textual difference that renders those boundaries untraceable. Prosody is here thus both an exploration of subjectivity and a verbal performance of it. If the work of Ashbery and O’Hara cannot be said to be performative in quite the manner that term has come to designate, it

nonetheless enacts the construction of an identity – even if that identity remains blurred and incomplete – through a wholly textual, rhetorical practice.

If the poet not only expresses but realizes his subjectivity in his poems, it is not hard to see why the reader occupies a position of such importance. Without readers, the poem remains silent; only through connection with the reader can a poetic identity be established. Here the ethical salience of the relationship of poem to self becomes evident: just as the poem depends on its reader for the actualization of its meaning, so the self requires the other for its development and actualization to become possible. In Ashbery and O’Hara, selfhood is interdependent, not independent; it is produced intersubjectively. The politics of community that accrues from this notion amounts to a rejection of Emersonian self-reliance and the American individualist ethos in favour of a conception of selfhood as constantly evolving and resistant to claims of essentiality.⁵⁰

As we will see, the relation between this model of the self and that offered by Rousseau in his *Confessions* is not merely one of antinomy; it is more intricate, more nuanced than might be supposed. Sympathy of the sort that flourishes in Ashbery and O’Hara is predicated on what might be termed emotional honesty – an ability to evoke, without manipulation or sleight of hand, felt emotions to which the reader can relate. Neither Ashbery nor O’Hara can be called confessional poets, because they leave the biographical, historical self outside the poem (including only – at most – the charming and anecdotal detritus of the day-to-day, in the case of O’Hara). But there is still a sense, in both poets’ work, of an individual personality that remains consistent throughout. Breslin praises what he calls O’Hara’s “conversational voice,” which “creates a very strong sense that the poems are spoken by an empirical individual” (276); similarly, John Koethe notes of Ashbery’s corpus that “[t]he sense of the presence of a unified subject that conceives these poems is very strong, almost palpable” (89). This sense of continuity between poems allows, even encourages, the reader to trust the poet; furthermore, it

⁵⁰ In a provocative argument, Terence Diggory links the work of the New York School to Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of the inoperative community, suggesting that the poem emblemizes not the self but “the *between* as such” – that is, the relationship between two persons, which for Nancy is logically prior to personhood (25). It nevertheless seems to me that O’Hara’s poems are much more tonally occupied with the self – both his actual self and that produced in his poetry – than with relationality, even if the two topics are entirely interfused with each other.

allows us to read the closing lines of O'Hara's poem "My Heart" as devoid of irony and to appreciate them all the more for the lack of it:

I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart –
you can't plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open. (91)

For all O'Hara's postmodern insouciance, these lines hint at a barely concealed Romanticism, overflowing with the sort of candor that might have come from the pen of Rousseau himself.

V. "Pity me . . . gentle reader": Rousseau and the Romantic Subject

Given that sympathy in Ashbery and O'Hara turns on a simultaneous disavowal and retrieval of Romantic subjectivity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* provides a promising point of departure. The Enlightenment self finds its philosophical origins in the work of Descartes, but its instantiation in Romantic literature can be traced to Rousseau (himself the inheritor of an autobiographical tradition established by Augustine). As Patrick Coleman notes in his introduction to a recent translation of the *Confessions*, Rousseau's work presents the reader with "two revolutionary ideas about the self. One is the uniqueness of the individual personality, an irreducible sense of self which can be distinguished from all social, cultural, and religious identities The other is the mobility of that self, a capacity . . . to play a wide variety of roles" (Rousseau vii).

For Rousseau, the importance of successfully achieving the first of these objectives can hardly be overstated. Seeming almost too assured in his confidence that the task can be completed, he claims that the "particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self, exactly as it was in every circumstance of my life" (270). Or again, "I should like to make my mind, as it were, transparent to the reader" (170). Possible or not, the task takes a great many pages, and the book's very length stands as evidence that for Rousseau the self is only explicable in often haphazard increments and anecdotes. In Book Seven, Rousseau presages a comical story involving an emotional breakdown during an encounter with a prostitute by promising, in typically overwrought fashion, that the anecdote will finally render his character fully

transparent to the reader: “Whoever you are, who aspire to know a fellow-man, read, if you dare, the two or three pages that follow; you are about to know in full J.-J. Rousseau” (311).

Of course, the very repetition of such claims signals the book’s tendency to defer, rather than provide, a full illumination of Rousseau’s character. Rousseau occasionally betrays his awareness that language cannot perform the task he has assigned to it; as Coleman suggests, some of the book’s most moving moments occur when Rousseau voices his dismay at “the inadequacy of words to express his feeling” (vii). But this is a realization actively resisted in *Confessions*, the central conceit of which is to affirm the full disclosure of the self through language. Even if the very nature of the book attests to the fact that, as Ann Hartle observes and as Rousseau himself surely intuited, “the self is an imaginative construction,” the *Confessions* consistently and repeatedly urges the reader to accept the authenticity of the portrait it offers (10).

As in the poetry of Ashbery and O’Hara, sympathy between writer and reader plays a crucial role in Rousseau’s *Confessions*. As Anne Vila notes, sympathy was a common trope in Enlightenment-era literature:

The notion of sympathy in eighteenth-century France is often described by modern critics as a positive form of moral sensibility that was seen as fundamental to all ethical and sociable behaviour. . . . [T]he period’s esthetics, moral philosophy, and sentimental literature . . . abounded in representations of the human being as naturally drawn to others through some kind of fellow-feeling – most typically, a sentiment of pity or empathetic participation in the suffering of another. (88)

Sympathy in Rousseau should be read not, strictly speaking, as pity, but as any form of feeling Rousseau describes or experiences in the text in order to evoke it in the reader. This action constitutes one of the central means by which Rousseau constructs a textual self. Repeatedly in *Confessions* we meet with the unspoken implication that feeling and emotion – rather than imagination or intellect – comprise Rousseau’s essence, and by extension the essence of any human being. His growth as a person requires Rousseau to suppose some parts of himself as variable, while his Romantic instincts require him to find an unchanging essence that defines him. Discounting his intellect and even his memory as tangential to his sense of self, he avers

that he is “left with only one faithful guide upon which I can rely: and that is the chain of feelings that have marked the successive stages of my being” (270). So great is the precedence feeling assumes over any competing category of the self that in moments of extremity, it seems almost to divide Rousseau in two:

It is as though my heart and my mind belonged to different people. Feelings burst upon me like lightning and fill my soul; but instead of illuminating, they burn and dazzle me. I feel everything and I see nothing. I am transported yet stupid; to be able to think, I need to be composed. (10)

Sympathy is therefore significant for Rousseau because it offers him a means through which to channel his feelings – which form, he believes, the core of his very self – out of the text and into the mind of his reader.

There is a singular and instructive difference, however, between the function of sympathy in Rousseau’s text and its function in O’Hara and Ashbery’s poems. Ashbery and O’Hara, as we have seen, extend sympathy toward the reader, recognizing, as Ashbery has put it, that “[w]hat the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader” (Poulin 246). Rousseau is similarly aware that the success of his text is conditional upon the sympathy with which the reader views him, but his strategy is very different, perhaps because he must maintain the fiction of a coherent, fully articulated self even while incrementally and haphazardly constructing that self.⁵¹ Rather than offer sympathy *to* the reader, Rousseau demands it *from* the reader. These appeals to the reader’s feelings recur throughout the *Confessions*. Typically inscribed within scenes that mean to emphasize Rousseau’s pathos, they often reveal instead his seemingly boundless narcissism. “Pity me in my affliction, gentle reader,” he begs, immediately after relating the story of his unsuccessful attempt, as a child, to purloin an apple from his neighbour’s storehouse (33). These moments, in which Rousseau pauses in his narration and reaches out of the text to instruct the reader what to feel (without self-consciousness or irony!),

⁵¹ Its construction is haphazard not only because Rousseau is not always confident about which version of himself he wishes to present, but because (as he willingly admits to the reader) his narrative is beset by moments of inaccuracy and uncertainty. For more on how the faultiness of memory and the unreliability of its narration complicate the *Confessions*, see Hartle 13-21.

suggest the writer's desperation to render himself fully consistent. As Coleman observes, *Confessions* is the story of a writer preoccupied with a single question: "What does he need to tell his readers to make them understand him?" (xxiii).

Despite Rousseau's many attempts to answer this question to his own satisfaction, it is the reader who must take on the responsibility for the accuracy of Rousseau's communication. All the fragments of his person are present, but the reader's task remains to knit them up into a cogent and tidy whole: "It is for the reader to assemble all these elements and to determine the being that they constitute; the result must be his own work, so that if he is mistaken, all the error is on his side" (170). Rousseau makes demands on the sensibility of his readership even while appearing to downplay them: "My task is to be truthful, it is the reader's to be fair. That is all I will ever ask of him" (349). The statement captures both Rousseau's seeming confidence in the perfect coherence and legibility of his textual (and, one presumes, actual) self, and his continual appeals to the reader to verify the reality of that self. I believe that these two qualities of Rousseau's text are deeply related, a fact that an examination of a key passage in *Confessions* may suffice to illustrate.

In Book II of the *Confessions*, Rousseau admits to his culpability in an event that has weighed on his memory ever since it transpired. As a young footman working in the household of the Comtesse de Vercellis, Rousseau impulsively steals a ribbon from his employer. When it is discovered on his person, he accuses a servant girl named Marion of having given it to him. Marion is wholly innocent, but Rousseau refuses to deviate from his lie, and the girl is assumed to be the guilty party. Rousseau's reflections on the scene of his accusation are telling:

I was stricken with remorse, but the presence of so many people was stronger than my repentance. It was not that I was afraid of being punished but that I was afraid of being put to shame; and I feared shame more than death, more than crime, more than anything in the world. I would have wanted the earth to swallow me up and bury me in its depths. It was shame alone, unconquerable shame, that prevailed over everything and was the cause of all my impudence (84)

Although the coherence of *Confessions* as an autobiography hinges, in Rousseau's view, on the autonomy and integrity of his own character, this scene reflects the extent to which Rousseau's

choices and actions – the expressions of whatever selfhood he purports to possess – are in fact constituted in relation to his perception of others and of their opinions of him. Rousseau confides to the reader that until now, he has revealed his guilt in this story to no one, and that, in fact, one of the primary reasons for the writing of the *Confessions* was to unburden his conscience with a public admission of his error. But if Rousseau was so horrified at the thought of public humiliation in the original scene, why should his disclosure of his guilt in the *Confessions* not fill him with a similar horror? The answer is that Rousseau needs, even craves, the audience of his readers, just as he craved the attention of the household in the scene of the theft, whatever his protestations to the contrary. “My task is to tell the truth, not to persuade others of it,” he insists; but in fact these *others* are the very condition of the literary production of what Rousseau calls the truth (195). As Paul de Man notes in his analysis of the ribbon scene,

[w]hat Rousseau really wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets. The fact that he made no attempt to conceal the evidence confirms this. . . . This desire is truly shameful, for it suggests that Marion was destroyed, not for the sake of Rousseau’s saving face, nor for the sake of his desire for her, but merely in order to provide him with a stage on which to parade his disgrace or, what amounts to the same thing, to furnish him with a good ending for Book II of his *Confessions*. (285-6)

De Man’s critique is devastating but, it seems to me, essentially accurate. In Rousseau’s *Confessions*, the Romantic self is presented as fully-formed and essentially unchanging, and the reader is posited as the ideal witness to its self-presence and self-affirmation. But the reader of the *Confessions* is placed so often in the foreground of the text by Rousseau precisely because the reader is not merely a witness to Rousseau’s selfhood, but is the cause of its realization. Rousseau *needs* the reader’s presence in order to be Rousseau. But because he labours under the impression that this is not the case, the relationship between Rousseau and his reader is not one of reciprocal sympathy. Rousseau expects and demands sympathy of his reader, but never himself offers it. In this sense, Rousseau is unsuccessful in producing a literary Romantic self: like the poems of O’Hara and Ashbery, the textual self in Rousseau is only realizable in others – that is, in its readership. What makes the Rousseauian subject Romantic, then, is less its autonomy or wholeness than Rousseau’s single-minded pursuit of, and belief in, that wholeness.

The Romantic self is defined not by any intrinsic qualities it might possess, but by the audaciousness of the attempt to uncover such qualities – even if the very nature of the attempt proves the reason for its failure.

VI. Retaining the Romantic Ideal

The distinction between the Romantic self and (what I am calling) the post-Romantic self rendered in the poems of O'Hara and Ashbery turns on the writer's awareness of the conditionality and dependence of the self he posits. O'Hara and Ashbery's engagement with their readers in their poetry is a function of just this sort of awareness. Sympathy resides in their work, then, not merely as a connective device but as an expression of the conviction that selfhood can only be produced in relation, that the development of the individual is dependent on the flourishing of the community.

This argument has already been posited in previous discussions of these poets' work (albeit not with the focus on sympathy my reading provides). In an oft-cited article, S.P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe counter the popular notion of Ashbery as a hermetic or private poet by arguing that the "most distinctive aspect of Ashbery's work" can be found "not in its emphasis on the self in isolation but rather in its counter-emphasis on the self as an ineluctably social construction" (44). In Ashbery's poetry, the social is configured "not as something outside, but rather as an internal force" that shapes how we understand ourselves (45). Kacper Bartczak puts the point even more firmly: the Ashbery poem, he writes, functions "as a simulated ground on which to watch the vicissitudes of our coming to realize the inescapable fact of sharing – that is the fact that others participate in what we once thought to be distinctly and exclusively *us*" (206). And the same can be said of O'Hara, whose poems encourage the reader to "participat[e] in the ongoing process of discovery . . . of what the poem is 'saying.' The observer can no longer be detached" (Perloff, "Frank O'Hara" 177). The participatory quality of their poems means not only to draw the reader in, but to assert what Lee Edelman, discussing Ashbery's great poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," calls "the fictionality of any autonomous self" (101). Rousseau himself hints at the impossibility of such autonomy in his *Confessions*, though he does not pursue his statement's implications: "If I am to be known properly," he writes, "I must be known as I was in all my relations with others, good or bad. My

own confessions are necessarily linked with those of other people” (390). The post-Romantic self is already visible, it seems, in Rousseau. But in the poems of Ashbery and O’Hara, such links between self and other are not merely confessional; they are constitutive. That is, while in Rousseau relationships with others are required to explain the history of the self, in Ashbery and O’Hara they are required in order to define it for the future.

But the reverse is just as true: in O’Hara and (especially) in Ashbery, the dream of a realized, separable Romantic self is never entirely extinguished. While this Romantic strain is less vivid in O’Hara, particularly in the later stage of his career, my chapter on O’Hara’s work will provide a corrective to the commonly held view that for O’Hara “the very notion of a self is delusory . . . and has to be dismantled” (Koethe 98). Instead, I think we have to return to the notion of the poem as a metaphor for the self, or as a performance of the self, to begin to come to terms with O’Hara’s picture of selfhood. The self in O’Hara is impossible to grasp or define, but for that very reason it consistently demands the poet’s attention. Instructively, in the great majority of O’Hara poems the final movement is not one of denial, but of affirmation: O’Hara resists metaphysical arguments, but neither is he a nihilist. And this trait bleeds into his treatment of the self; his many rejections of versions of the self are designed to pare away rather than to negate. As Crain puts it, O’Hara’s consistent goal is “to recuperate a true self that many false selves have occluded” (“Frank O’Hara’s Fired Self” 295).

Because Ashbery’s language is usually less specific and more abstract than O’Hara’s, the sense of self generated in his poems is less rooted and contextual, and is almost entirely a function of the consistency of voice Ashbery maintains in even his most esoteric poems. Ashbery’s poems can be read as gradual and public constructions of the self through language. Many critics have characterized Ashbery’s poetry as solipsistic and hermetic, and while they are correct to note that the question of selfhood continually surfaces in his work, the breadth of Ashbery’s vocabulary and his love for colloquy and idiom effectively provide him a method of positing an inclusive and social context within which to make sense of the self. As Douglas Crase suggests, through the heterogeneity of his language, Ashbery succeeds in pairing “a grandiose – what I would call an Emersonian – conception of the self” with “an experiencing of reality as fragmented, chaotic, and inauthentic” (58). How to retrieve the authentic self from the patternless and random data of experience is one of the central questions in Ashbery’s work.

And it remains a tangled question precisely because of Ashbery's refusal to completely abandon the ideal of the Romantic self. Epstein is right to claim that Ashbery and O'Hara work to deconstruct "the Romantic myth of the poet as solitary genius": they seek to lessen the distance between the poet and the reader, not to increase it (10). But the ineradicable fact of the differentiated self, the singularity of the individual consciousness, prompts, in their work, a fascinated and engaged enquiry – one whose forebear is Rousseau as much as anyone. As O'Hara reflects in an early journal entry, quoting a line from the opening lines of the *Confessions*: "Why should anyone stifle an impulse to be uniform? Je ne suis pas comme les autres, if I remember Rousseau, and if I am not better, at least I am different" (quoted in Epstein 49). The grand and paradoxical hope found in the restorative sympathy of the poetry of O'Hara and Ashbery is that such difference might be sustained – even celebrated – in the very act of assembling a response commensurate to it.

Chapter Five

Meditations in an Emergency: Frank O'Hara and the Self as Process

I. Emergence and Selfhood

Notoriously attentive to the particular and the momentary, a typical Frank O'Hara poem reads as though it could not have come into being on any day but the one on which it was written. Rife with local incidents and events that catch the poet's fancy, O'Hara's poems transform daily minutiae into literature. O'Hara also favoured the occasional poem, a piece of writing whose composition is precipitated by a noteworthy event of some kind. O'Hara's tendency to yoke the poem to the everyday has proved a singular source of interest for critics. One can even conceive of O'Hara's work as one unfurling, continuous poem, written in stops and starts over the period of some two decades – a vibrant and colourful expression of the consciousness of a gay man in postwar New York. This is the picture of O'Hara's work distilled for us by Helen Vendler, who remarks that his poems resemble “slices of life arbitrarily beginning, and ending for no particular reason” (“Frank O'Hara” 235). O'Hara, she writes, “believes in neither problems nor in solutions, nor even in the path from one to the other”: his work refuses any and all tendencies to try to figure things out, to resolve the conundrums that pertain to human existence (235). Vendler's assessment highlights O'Hara's disregard for the conventional beginnings and endings of poetry. Far from wishing to move from immanence to transcendence, O'Hara has no intention of memorializing the trivial and the frivolous in his poems. This is because for O'Hara, art itself cannot last; the poem cannot eternalize the world around it because it is as much a temporal object as what it records. The best poetry can do is to provide comfort despite that fact – a comfort many have found in the odd and often touching beauty of the details in O'Hara's poems. If O'Hara does not pretend to be able to stop time, his poems nevertheless represent his varied attempts to slow it down for the reader. They encourage us to truly notice the cornucopia of images and sensations with which life continually presents us and about which we so easily become complacent.

Andrew Epstein astutely observes that every O'Hara poem is in some sense a meditation in an emergency (which is also the title of one of his poems) (92). The phrase is especially

apposite in its placement of the relative stillness of the poem (“meditation”) within the ceaseless fracas and commotion of life (“emergency”). As Marjorie Perloff has noted, the fact that the meditation takes place “in” rather than “on” an emergency embeds the poetic self within the scene on which it comments; “no longer able to detach itself from the objects it perceives, [it] dissolves and becomes part of the external landscape” (“Transparent Selves” 192). The choice of preposition also broadens, rather than specifies, the connotation of “emergency,” which comes to encompass life itself. That O’Hara thought of life in such terms is evident from the first lines of his mock manifesto “Personism,” in which he implies, by way of analogy, that for him poetry is an instinctive response to a situation of extremity. “You just go on your nerve,” he explains. “If someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don’t turn around and shout, ‘Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep” (O’Hara 247). Its wit makes the metaphor memorable, but O’Hara’s archly comic tone should not disguise the import of the comparison. Existence itself is portrayed here as a state of emergency to which – for O’Hara – poetry is the only appropriate response. Writing is not simply a hobby, nor even a career: it is, in a figurative but deeply felt sense, a defense mechanism.

Why might O’Hara consider life to be a state of emergency? There are a variety of possible reasons, from the practical to the philosophical. To begin with the most straightforward of them: “The answer just beneath the surface is homophobia” (Crain, “Frank O’Hara’s Fired Self” 288). O’Hara did not shy away from discussing his homosexuality in his poetry, even though he lived in an era in which being publicly gay often led to ostracism, censure, and worse. Whether casual or covert, prejudice directed against the gay subculture undoubtedly affected the New York School poets. John Ashbery, who is less forthright than O’Hara about his homosexuality (as well as other details of his personal life), wrote very few poems in the early 1950s and relocated to Paris halfway through the decade. The culture of the day, he later admitted, induced in him a feeling of unease: “I couldn’t write for a couple of years. I don’t know why. It did coincide with the beginning of the Korean War, the Rosenberg case and McCarthyism. Though I was not an intensely political person, it was impossible to be happy in that kind of climate. It was a nadir” (quoted in Shoptaw 5).

To live and write as an openly gay poet in the Cold War era amounted to an act of defiance against entrenched cultural mores, one that involved risk on both personal and

professional levels. And while to restrict analyses of O'Hara's poems to discussions of their queerness would be, in my estimation, to limit the effect and vision of his poetry,⁵² his sexuality certainly solidified his opposition to the hegemony of fifties culture, and thereby seemed to infuse his poetry with an urgency and power it may not have otherwise possessed. From a perspective on the margins of the dominant culture (however rich and replete O'Hara's own circle of friends may have been) – particularly when that culture bears an active animosity toward the subculture to which one belongs – life begins to take on the contours of a state of emergency within which one must be constantly attentive and inventive. And such a stance necessarily affected O'Hara's poetry. Most obviously, it provides his poetry with a soft political dimension, despite his avowed political indifference. In a cogent article, Bruce Boone conjectures that O'Hara's poetry is political on the level of syntax: it reads as a kind of coded language to a cadre of like-minded readers and thus “becomes a homology for the community's project to move through time to some safe place in the future” (83). Similarly, Anne Hartman links O'Hara to Ginsberg, another queer fifties poet, noting that in “articulat[ing] dissident sexuality,” both writers “simultaneously address and construct a counter-hegemonic homosexual public” (48). On this reading, O'Hara's entire corpus can be read as subversively political, its attentiveness to its own environment and its camp braggadocio comprising a sort of how-to survival guide for oppressed minority groups.

To read O'Hara's poetry from this perspective is perfectly valid and often illuminating, but I also want to insist on a deeper level on which, for O'Hara, life acquires the status of an emergency. One way to do so is to pay closer attention to the various senses of the word “emergency,” as Caleb Crain has done:

An emergency, like an adventure, is something that comes up, something that happens, but it is also an occasion for emerging, for the discovery of what

⁵² One reason I hesitate to pursue a queer reading of O'Hara's poetry is that such a reading would imply that his poems are “about” his own life in a way that he did not seem to want them to be. Ashbery provides the perfect description of how the typical O'Hara poem, while it “emerg[es] out of his life,” has “little that is confessional about it Rather [O'Hara] talks about himself because it is he who happens to be writing the poem” (“Introduction” 130).

happens within as well as without, or for crossing the boundary between within and without. (“Frank O’Hara’s Fired Self” 305-6)

Crain’s linking of the noun “emergency” to the verb “to emerge” allows us to begin to see how O’Hara’s entire writing career – his many poems seeming almost to bleed into one long excursus – truly can be considered a meditation, or series of meditations, in an emergency. In O’Hara’s poems, it is the self which struggles to emerge; his poems enact the arduous process of self-emergence and self-construction in a landscape in which change and restlessness are at the heart of all things. Here, too, the affinity between poem and subject becomes visible; for O’Hara, the poem provides a linguistic means for determining and shaping one’s subjectivity. O’Hara’s poems can be designated meditations in an emergency because they constitute, for the poet, a way to assess his relation to his environment, to evaluate what it means to be a subject at a specific (and often innocuous) scene and moment in time. One of the chief goals of his “I do this, I do that” poems is simply to record the sensations that accompany selfhood in order to inch closer to defining it.

Finally, if the notion of emergency connotes change, motion, and a call to action, the word “meditation” hints at the reverse. A meditation involves slowing down, reflecting deeply on a subject or a situation in order to understand it, but also in order to centre the self. The word thus invokes a poetic resolution to capture and retain a sense of self rather than simply to abandon it to the dissolution provoked by the emergency around it. We can therefore tentatively suggest that O’Hara’s project is not quite as radical as it might seem: it entails a Romantic quest for selfhood rather than a straightforwardly postmodern rejection of the concept.

This account of O’Hara’s poetic interrogations of the self helps to explain why, as Breslin puts it, “[t]he self in O’Hara is . . . at once transparent *and* opaque” (268). His poems enact a paradox: in the very act of trying to construct and delimit the self, they testify to its continual fragmentation. As my analyses of his poems will argue, the role of the reader in O’Hara’s work is precisely to help remedy this seemingly untenable situation. O’Hara’s sympathy for his reader is predicated on his awareness that the reader provides the poet with an escape from solipsism and stasis. It is through his rapport with the reader that the poet can attain to that sense of unified selfhood which it is the focus of his work ruthlessly to deconstruct and endlessly to search after. The self in O’Hara is relational and can only be understood through its

interactions with those around it; as Dan Chiasson remarks, it is “constituted not apart from social life but precisely within, and between, friends” (131). And if this is true of the self, it must also be true of the poem, since for O’Hara the poem proffers a kind of verbal instantiation of the self and its vicissitudes, an avenue through which words might “both express and construct a self” (Breslin 287). Michael Clune is correct to note that in his poetry O’Hara “opens a way from individuality to collectivity, from the personal to the abstract” – but he does so not merely to broach the abstract but to articulate what personhood might entail in its own right, even if the concept remains inseparable from the reciprocal sympathy by which it comes into being (182). In this chapter, I will chart the path sympathy takes in several O’Hara poems. After discerning, in O’Hara’s mock manifesto “Personism,” an earnest avowal of the importance of the connection between an “I” and a “you” (or between writer and reader), I examine O’Hara’s poem “Joe’s Jacket,” in which this connection is forged by the unifying elements of place and memory. In the poem “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul,” I argue, O’Hara provides rhetorical space for the reader to enter the poem in order to effect a movement from individualistic pessimism to a communal post-Romantic optimism that refuses to restrict itself to the merely possible. Finally, in brief readings of “In Memory of My Feelings” and “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” I demonstrate that O’Hara’s politics resides in his affirmation of the intrinsic sociality of the self and his belief in the centrality of sympathy to any hoped-for future happiness.

II. O’Hara and the Reader

It is not always immediately apparent how such sympathy is exhibited in O’Hara’s poems, nor by what means it is extended to the reader. O’Hara regularly mentions his friends and acquaintances by name in his poetry, a tactic that might well establish the self as socially engendered. But how can the reader feel included in this group? Even if there are names we recognize, we cannot claim to have known them personally, as O’Hara did. We are not part of his coterie. That this fact incurs a (potential) problem in O’Hara’s work is a reminder of some of the stark differences between the styles of Ashbery and O’Hara. Ashbery’s poetry seems more conscious than O’Hara’s of the dangers of insularity, of creating an “in-crowd” from which the

rest of the world is necessarily excluded. David Herd sums up O'Hara in just this way, arguing that while his

name-dropping held the community together, and is part of the enduring fascination of his poetry, one has the unavoidable feeling, as an outsider, of peering in at a life from which one is separated. And while its vitality and grace are lessons for life, one can sometimes emerge from O'Hara's writing feeling not so much integrated with one's own circumstances as regretful that one was not party to his. (67)

While Herd's reaction is understandable, surely O'Hara's poems – as life-affirming and exuberant as any written in the last century – are not designed to leave the reader feeling regretful. To better parse out how O'Hara might have hoped the outside reader would approach his poetry, it is instructive to take a closer look at his famous and hastily written manifesto “Personism.” It's true that O'Hara wrote the whole essay tongue-in-cheek, but its underlying point is nevertheless a serious one. O'Hara's explanation of Personism is vexing at times, even seemingly contradictory, but its central tenet is that the poem should be written as though to one other person, thereby “sustaining the poet's feelings toward the poem” (O'Hara 248). The chief virtue of Personism, as O'Hara rhapsodizes a little further on, is that it “puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person” and that as a result “[t]he poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages” (248).

The poetic intimacy generated by this aesthetic stance goes some way toward providing a rebuttal to Herd's criticism that O'Hara's poems unwittingly exclude the reader. One might object that the other person to whom O'Hara writes will be another member of his close circle of friends, and that Personism thus only perpetuates the problem. But O'Hara nowhere posits that the poet needs an actual other person – a confidante or muse – to whom he can write the poem. Mark Silverberg's emphasis on this point is helpful: “The program of Personism, which so much of O'Hara's best poetry bears out, is the requirement to write *as if* one were speaking to one other person. It is a stance of conscious artifice” (52). As such, any reader can claim to be the recipient of the sympathy and confidential warmth that inhere in an O'Hara poem. In her gloss of “Personism” Marjorie Perloff also stresses the constructed quality of the pose: “‘Personism’ means the *illusion* of intimate talk between an ‘I’ and a ‘you,’ giving us as readers

the sense that we are eavesdropping on an ongoing conversation, that we are *present*” (“Frank O’Hara” 179).

In her analysis of O’Hara’s poem “All That Gas” Perloff illuminates how this poetic intimacy works in practice. Just as in Bishop’s poetry, pronoun shifts mark the way:

When O’Hara switches from ‘I’ to ‘we’ or to ‘one,’ he enlarges the poem’s horizons, making the seemingly personal situation (wandering around the Lower East Side on a rainy, windy night) fictive, theatrical. . . . Again, the confusing second-person references extend the range of the poem, drawing the reader into the situation. ‘Roll your own,’ the speaker tells us, and we are there, lighting our cigarettes. (“Transparent Selves” 192)

Because O’Hara’s poems feature events whose connection is strictly temporal and rarely causal – “Everything,” as Bishop’s phrase has it, “connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” – the reader is forced to play an active part in piecing together what the poem is saying. As our eyes move from one line to the next, from one random event to another, we “participat[e] in the ongoing process of discovery” involved in the reading of the poem as well as its writing (“Frank O’Hara” 177). In short, I think we have to side with the impression Charles Molesworth gleans from O’Hara’s poems: “You, too, can be in, they seem to say, and by accepting me fully in all my quirkiness, you will find that the value of your own quirkiness will become clear” (97).

O’Hara’s sympathy for the reader, then, if not obvious, is intuitively felt, and is always complicated by his struggle to acknowledge the blunt fact of individuality, of the irremediable separation between self and other. Between self and reader in O’Hara lies a conflicted space in which, as Breslin remarks, “familiarity, awkwardness, estrangement, delight, and hostility all coexist” (269). But at the last, as we will see in the close readings that follow, it is common sympathy – the willingness to feel with, and to depend on, others – that runs deepest in O’Hara’s poetry, infusing it with a resonant political ethic to accompany its nuanced ontology of selfhood.

III. Despondency and Recovery in “Joe’s Jacket”

While Frank O’Hara’s poetry is justly praised for its exuberance and zest for life, not a few of his poems reveal feelings isolation and depression for which the very act of writing proved a

palliative. Despite the whimsical style of their prosody, these poems often forge an immediate sense of the speaker's discontent, and their intensity is thus largely psychological, narrating the process by which the speaker in the poem comes to grips with, and often overcomes, an emotional low. One such poem is "Joe's Jacket," in which the speaker turns to his relationships with others to find relief from solipsism.

The poem begins, as so many O'Hara poems do, by establishing a setting for the reader: at the poem's opening, the speaker is aboard a train, traveling "to Southampton in the parlor car with Jap and Vincent" (161). In these first lines, the speaker is struck by a sense of nostalgia for a lost past self: "I / see life as a penetrable landscape lit from above / like it was in my Barbizonian kiddy days" (161). Struck by the inadequacy of the categories we use to describe selfhood, the speaker looks back into the past and sees "no central figure me, I was some sort of cloud or a gust of wind" (161). Past and present identity are both nebulous concepts, their connection unclear. The transience and untraceability of the speaker's past self, symbolized by cloud and wind, invites an obvious and immediate difficulty: why should the present self be any less ineffable? The introductory lines of the poem, then, narrate the speaker's realization of his inability to define himself.

This problem is temporarily assuaged in the last lines of the poem's introductory section, as, forgetting his dilemma, the speaker is happy to "find, through all the singing, Kenneth smiling / it is off to Janice's bluefish and the incessant talk of affection / expressed as excitability" (161). Through involvement in the lives and feelings of others, the speaker regains confidence in who, where, and why he is. The sequence is also meant to include the reader, who is integrated into the happy scene of community not only by the use of the first-person plural but by the casual namedropping of two of the poem's other characters, Kenneth and Janice. The implication is that the reader is privy to the scene; we are made to feel as though we too are invited guests, a sentiment that reaches its crescendo at the end of the first stanza. Here the speaker interrupts the narrative to remark, "now I will say it, thank god, I knew you would" (a phrase he repeats in the following section) (161). It's a curious statement, because the implied verb following the word "would" is missing. What did the speaker know "you" would do? The ambiguity of the phrase gives it the virtue of being universally applicable, an expression of confidence that holds both within and outside the immediate world of the poem.

But this confidence is short-lived. In a description of the scene at a party later in the weekend, the poem's mood again turns dark:

I drink to smother my sensitivity for a while so I won't stare away
 I drink to kill my fear of boredom, the mounting panic of it
 I drink to reduce my seriousness so a certain spurious charm
 can appear and win its flickering little victory over noise (161).

Stringing together a series of lines that begin with the word "I," O'Hara contrives to make his words enact, by their rote repetition, the solipsistic depression they describe. The lines also bring to mind O'Hara's drinking problem, one that, by most accounts, had morphed into full-blown alcoholism in the last years of his life.⁵³ But even aside from such historical details, it is clear that the poem is at its lowest ebb in these lines. The emphasis here is on the self to the exclusion of others (no other person makes an appearance in these passage). There occurs no attempt to identify with the outside environment, no desire to connect with other human beings. This is the self shorn of community, and it manifests itself as a profoundly unhealthy state: "then I am going home, purged of everything except anxiety and self-distrust" (161). O'Hara ends the line with the word "self-distrust," accentuating the speaker's unstable grip on his own identity.

The next stanza shifts the scene to the following morning. The night has passed, but the mood has not improved: the words "desperation," "strangulation," and "ugly" all contribute to a continuing sense of existential malaise. Perhaps trying to shake off this lethargy, the speaker in the poem begins to read another poem, D.H. Lawrence's "The Ship of Death," in which Lawrence attempts to reconcile himself to his approaching death. The poem conveys a feeling of resignation mixed with a vague hope for immortality; the speaker prepares himself to "die the death, the long and painful death / that lies between the old self and the new" (Lawrence 718).

⁵³ In his biography of O'Hara, Brad Gooch takes pains to recount the poet's increasing dependence on alcohol. Gooch quotes James Schuyler, who recalls meeting O'Hara during the last years of O'Hara's life and being "shocked at the physical change. His complexion was bad. His eyes were very red. It was just all that alcohol. He was a terrific alcoholic" (378). David Lehman's account mitigates Gooch's somewhat, but they agree in at least one respect: "That O'Hara had a world-class drinking problem is indisputable" (Lehman 170).

Andrew Epstein argues that the relation of “Joe’s Jacket” to “The Ship of Death” is one of “complex and ironic revision”: because it contains no paean to immortality, O’Hara’s poem “responds to and critiques, rather than follows, Lawrence” (119). Instead, I think we have to regard the relationship between the poems as one of thematic continuity. This continuity can be traced back to the final, hesitantly hopeful lines of Lawrence’s poem, in which a pathway to revitalized identity (“the long and painful death / that lies between old self and the new”) is hypothesized. While O’Hara’s concern in “Joe’s Jacket” is not with *literal* death (the topic of Lawrence’s poem), O’Hara is wrestling with the possible death of one version of the self – a toxic and unhappy one – in order to make room for the emergence of another. The last lines of Lawrence’s poem thus pertain directly to “Joe’s Jacket,” since O’Hara, too, harbours the hope (however ironic and postmodern his language might be) for a means of renewal through which the path to identity might become more straightforward and less fraught with difficulty.

The poem’s late turn toward positivity is paralleled by its sudden focus on Paris. In these lines the poem seems almost to marvel at its own recovery, its tone one of mixed exultation and relief: “we are soon in the Paris of Kenneth’s libretto, I did not drift / away I did not die” (161). As elsewhere in O’Hara, Paris is here a place retrieved in the imagination, a city whose “spirits of beauty, art and progress” can rejuvenate, even from a distance, the careworn soul (161).⁵⁴ Returning to the present moment, the speaker finds other ways of salving his feelings of dejection; he turns to his roommate (and sometime lover) Joe, discussing only the topics that seem safe enough to prevent his self from teetering back toward disintegration: “we

⁵⁴ A brief scan of the literature confirms that far more work still needs to be done on the question of exactly what the city of Paris meant to Frank O’Hara. Paris figures into many of his poems besides “Joe’s Jacket,” some of them, such as “For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson” and “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul,” among his very best. O’Hara wrote most of his “Paris poems” in 1959, and “Les Luths,” also written that year, features these revealing lines: “I am feeling particularly testy at being separated from / the one I love most by the most dreary of practical exigencies money” (O’Hara 179). Since John Ashbery was the only close friend of O’Hara’s living abroad (and in Paris) at this point, it is likely he who is referred to in the poem by the phrase “the one I love most.” For O’Hara, this was only part of the appeal of Paris, though. In his work it is a city consciously idealized and mythologized, a physical and spatial stand-in for the happy future, in which all the problems of the present moment have been resolved or forgotten. See also Peter Stoneley, who offers a helpful similar take in his recent article (the only one I have discovered that treats the topic at length) “Frank O’Hara and ‘French in the Pejorative Sense,’” in which he suggests that for O’Hara Paris represents a “happiness” definable as “heterogeneity without order or discrimination” (135).

talk / only of the immediate present and its indiscriminately hitched-to past” (161). The light over the “sleeping city” “lends things / coherence and an absolute” – the very things the speaker wishes he could find in order to orient himself.

The last section of “Joe’s Jacket” exhibits a muted hope that such coherence may be possible – that, buoyed by others, the speaker might move toward an authentic, if yet unrealized, sense of personhood. The metonymic object used to represent this progress is, of course, Joe’s seersucker jacket itself, which the speaker borrows as he sets out into another “less than average day” (162). The jacket is intimately connected to the speaker’s life not only because it belongs to his friend and lover Joe, but because of the many other memories associated with it:

when I last borrowed it I was leaving there it was on my Spanish plaza back
and hid my shoulders from San Marco’s pigeons was jostled on the
Kurfürstendamm
and sat opposite Ashes in an enormous leather chair in the Continental
it is all enormity and life it has protected me and kept me here on
many occasions as a symbol does when the heart is full and risks no speech (162)

The jacket is emblematic, on the most straightforward level, of the support O’Hara finds in the love of Joe LeSueur. As Susan Rosenbaum asserts, in “[w]earing Joe’s jacket . . . O’Hara clothes himself with love” (“*Flâneur*” 166). But it is not only Joe’s love that provides the poem’s ending with its note of optimism. The final lines of “Joe’s Jacket” emphasize the importance of physical place and interpersonal relationships in the journey toward selfhood. Joe’s jacket carries the memories of the emotional and spatial path the speaker has taken to this point: thus the conflation of locale and subjectivity in the phrase “Spanish plaza back” and the tenderly flippant use of “Ashes” – O’Hara’s nickname for John Ashbery – in the speaker’s memory of an earlier scene in which he borrowed the jacket. Such things – past places, continuing friendships, remembered conversations – are the very constructs that help to foment self-understanding. The others that populate the speaker’s life are thus indispensable. These include not only Joe (though the jacket is his, and his support centres the poem), nor only Ashbery, nor even O’Hara’s wider circle of friends, but also the reader, who witnesses the

evolution of the speaker's self on the printed page and thus shares in the identificatory emotion so integral to its continued emergence.

Andrew Epstein glosses the poem somewhat differently, concluding that the message of "Joe's Jacket" is that

vital selfhood (and poetry) depends on *abandonment* The difficult lesson is that one has to continue walking away, has to keep traveling into the ephemeral immediate present, and this movement inevitably entails leaving things behind, casting things off, like Joe's jacket and the friendship it symbolizes, or even one's former selves. (124)

It seems to me that this reading of "Joe's Jacket" too quickly discounts the Romantic tendencies at the poem's heart. After all, the speaker in the poem never does cast off the jacket, nor any of the friendships it brings to mind. Instead he celebrates them, having found in them a way to discern the "central figure me" he could not discover at the poem's beginning. The speaker's willingness to confront a future in which, as the poem's closing line puts it, "it will be just what it is and just what happens," suggests a level of confidence in the self and optimism about the future that were not present at the poem's beginning. His identification with others allows the speaker to manage the "anxiety and self-distrust" (160) that threatened to overwhelm him, and it is his recollection of shared physical and emotional experience that enervates him with the agency and resolve to face the unpredictable present with a sense of self no longer entirely unfixed.

IV. Self and Society in "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul"

O'Hara's interest in how the lives and paths of others affected his own existence and self-conception is immediately clear from the title of another poem he wrote in the same year,⁵⁵ "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul." Considered one of O'Hara's best "I-do-this-I-do-that" poems, "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" immerses us even

⁵⁵ O'Hara wrote "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" on August 7, 1959, which places it in the middle of his most creative and productive period, 1959-60 – a stretch of writing Bill Berkson calls the "*annus mirabilis*" of O'Hara's career (quoted in Epstein 115).

more forcefully and thoroughly than “Joe’s Jacket” into the world of O’Hara and his friendships; a dizzying array of characters seem to parade past us on the page. For John Ashbery, the names O’Hara mentions point up a recurring potential shortcoming of his poetry: “What is somebody who doesn’t know who Norman and Jean-Paul and Joan are going to think of this?” (quoted in Diggory 17). The problem, as Diggory suggests (and as we’ve already noted), is that “the reader will feel excluded by the implied existence of an ‘in crowd’ ” (17). However, numerous other signifiers in the poem work to counteract this threat of exclusion. Consider the poem’s simply first clause: “It is 12:10 in New York” (O’Hara 159). While noontime is, needless to say, an occurrence experienced universally and daily, the city of New York also proliferates associations and images even for those who do not live there.⁵⁶ By establishing these tropes at the outset, O’Hara offers the reader a foothold on the poem. Other words in the first stanza induce the same effect: “lunch,” “hangover” and “weekend” are concepts as familiar to the reader as the names O’Hara mentions are strange, mitigating the feeling of separation these names might evoke.

Almost as if he wants to erase whatever distance might still remain between himself and the reader, O’Hara dramatizes the experience of working on poetry with pronouns that invite the reader to identify with a common feeling – the feeling of working hard at something you love despite being uncertain whether you will be rewarded for your effort:

it is good to be several floors up in the dead of night
wondering whether you are any good or not

⁵⁶ In a recent interview in the journal *Smartish Pace*, the poet Mark Doty expounds on the effects and benefits of writing in and about New York:

New York City, of course, is all about interruption, about multiple stimuli competing for our attention, and that’s why Frank O’Hara is maybe the great poet of New York, in that he captured exactly its cascade of sensations, the continuous appearance of the beautiful, the ruined, and the random. . . . It’s a place that already resides in the imagination of readers; we have images of it, and even those who don’t live there often know their way around. It’s delightful to me that I can say I live on 16th St near 7th Ave and a good many people all over the world know what I’m talking about. Maybe that means there’s more burden on the writer to make it your own, to refresh the familiar. And maybe it means there is a complex and intriguing shared territory between writer and reader, since New York is as much myth as place.

Doty’s suggestion is of course equally applicable to O’Hara: the very city he lived in provided him another tangible method of allowing the reader to gain access to the social and physical contexts his poems (re)produce.

and the only decision you can make is that you did it (159)

It would be a mistake to read these lines as indicating that O'Hara doubted whether he was a good poet. "O'Hara had no doubts," David Lehman assures us, "about his talent and his originality" (170). O'Hara's self-deprecation in this poem (which begins with his remark that Grove Press "will probably not print" the poems he is currently writing) serves two main purposes. First, it reminds him (and the reader) that success often depends on a kind of self-forgetting. That is, even if he is aware of his talent, in order to produce good work O'Hara must write as though he is unaware of it. In this way, O'Hara's speaker implicitly suggests that his work shapes his sense of self, not the other way round: the self is a process that emerges through and in the work of art, not simply an entity that constructs it. Moreover, O'Hara's affected self-doubt provides him with a means of sympathizing with the reader, who need not also be an artist to have likely wondered, at some point, whether she was "any good or not." Consciousness of one's own greatness, on the other hand, rarely occasions any room for sympathy with the other. Thus, both by his diction and his pose of uncertainty, O'Hara works to draw the reader further into the poem.

After beginning the second stanza of the poem by musing on Paris, O'Hara reconsiders his current situation in New York, evaluating it purely through the actions and dispositions of others: Allen, Peter, Joe, Kenneth, and Norman are all mentioned in rapid succession. A glance ahead to the next section of the poem makes it clear that the speaker wishes to address his own wishes and feelings. But before doing so, he tosses out one-line analyses of the current situations of some of his close friends. Why preface an investigation of oneself with a consideration of others except to stress one's dependence on those others, on the networks of support and community they provide? Such indices of the speaker's friends are not mere preliminaries; they are a necessary prologue – necessary in part because it is only through these others that the subject can begin to grasp who he is and what he longs for.

And what does the speaker long for? The following lines tell us, in dramatic fashion:

I wish I were reeling around Paris
 instead of reeling around New York
 I wish I weren't reeling at all (198)

In these lines, as Charles Altieri's instructive analysis puts it, O'Hara "tries to encounter his present sense of emptiness with an escape into fantasy and a possible future, but the escape does not work. By the third line he is returned to a dangerously static vision of himself as object" ("Varieties of Immanentist Expression" 198). The belief that appears to underwrite O'Hara's vision is that a radical shift in spatial location might induce a similarly radical shift in mood, and even in self-image. O'Hara is captured here by the same notion he ultimately overcomes in "Poem (The fluorescent tubing . . .)", in which the speaker, after despairing that "I am so nervous about my life the little of it I can get hold of," resorts to phoning Kenneth Koch (O'Hara 164). The conversation concludes with Koch insisting on the importance of inhabiting and accepting the here and now. The speaker struggles to do the same in "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," and the poem does not merely describe, but formally exhibits, his gradually returning confidence and self-assurance.

The line that marks the poem's turn is a seemingly innocuous one that appears near the beginning of the poem's third and final section: "we are all happy and young and toothless" (159). Coming so soon after O'Hara's self-pitying wish that he might not reel at all,⁵⁷ this observation marks a surprising turn in the poem. The movement is one of spontaneity and enthusiasm, and it carries a tone of inclusiveness easily discernible in the shift from the solitary pronoun "I" to the more general and encompassing "we." The task, as the speaker sees it, is simply to carry on in spite of the odds – be they emotional, social, financial, psychological, or any combination of the above – and community offers the only means through which to do so. The self is not solitary, but can sympathize and be sympathized with. This sympathy is precisely what enables the basic continuing which can seem, at times, such an ordeal:

the only thing to do is simply continue
is that simple
yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do

⁵⁷ Note, too, that the word "reeling" is (not coincidentally, I would argue) only a consonant removed from the word "feeling" – a much more dangerous word in the context of the line, since the phrase "I wish I weren't feeling at all" implies the possibility of actions stemming from the very deepest kind of despair. "Reeling" also, of course, connotes drunkenness and, by extension, alcoholism, which had become a serious problem for O'Hara by this point in his career.

can you do it

yes, you can because it is the only thing to do (159)

This passage can be read in two ways: either the speaker in O’Hara’s poem is talking to himself, posing questions and then answering them, or he is enacting a conversation between self and other within the confines of the poem. Given that these lines occur within a poem that, as we have seen, celebrates friendship and community as catalysts for the growth and affirmation of the self, I think the latter option is the most tenable. Rather than spinning away into the solipsistic meanderings of its narrator (as the first reading would require), the poem here becomes dialogical in structure, almost as though the reader’s voice has entered the frame of the poem. By their candid insistence, these intervening questions – *Is that simple? Can you do it?* – actually force the speaker to take stock of his situation, and in forcing him to articulate an answer they increase his optimism and resolve. In other words, the sympathetic dichotomy between self and other – and more specifically, perhaps, between poet and reader – incites the poem’s turn from the brink of inward-focused despair (“I wish I weren’t reeling at all”) to a quiet, but quietly gathering, confidence and sociality.

Most of the poem’s remaining lines are given over to the wistful listing of Parisian landmarks and culture – the Seine, the Louvre, the Bar Américain – and artists connected either to Paris (such as Shirley Goldfarb) or to New York (such as Irving Sandler). Altieri notes that in his descriptions of these people and places O’Hara “reduces the present to sheer surface and the creative play of the individual consciousness,” but I think that more can be said about O’Hara’s technique and purpose in these final lines (“Varieties of Immanentist Expression” 199). Without question, the important word in the stanza is the verb “to continue”: O’Hara uses it no less than fourteen times, so that by the end of the poem it has nearly acquired the status of a mantra. To continue “is the only thing to do,” the speaker reasons, and the verb governs the entirety of his ode to Parisian life:

blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues

the Seine continues

the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all

the Bar Américain continues to be French

de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus (160)

The crux of these lines can be captured in a pithy summary: Paris continues. The logic of the poem moves from the necessary continuing of O'Hara and his friends, to the happy continuing of Paris, and back, finally, to the state of our own (and O'Hara's, and his coterie's) continuing:

and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy

we shall be happy

but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible (160)

The point, it seems, is to take our example from Paris, the essence of which (for the purposes of this poem) is continuation. If the defining fact of the Paris, the ideal city that personifies the speaker's longed-for happiness, is that it continues, then the same defining fact will do for O'Hara and his friends in New York. If the speaker cannot be in Paris, at least he can imitate the intensity with which life is lived there – with which it *continues* – and so borrow some of that metropolis' vibrancy and energy. Implicitly, then, the theme of the poem comes back once more to the betterment of the self through the inclusion of the other (whether this other be reader, close friend, or city). Two lines near the poem's conclusion encapsulate its arc: the sentiment "we shall not continue to be unhappy" is immediately followed by the more emphatic assertion, "we shall be happy" (160). This transformation – from the ill-disguised anxiety and uncertainty of a double negative (which in a literal sense affirms nothing at all) to a simple and straightforward claim of future happiness – emblemizes the journey from "I" to "we," from dissatisfaction to hopefulness, from reeling to feeling.

Is happiness then possible, in the last analysis? The speaker's last words on the subject are marvellously ambiguous: "I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it" (160). The many critics who paint O'Hara solely as a poet of flux and postmodern surface, characterized solely by the denial of closure and the refusal to define, might be challenged by this line, because the gesture it makes is in fact wholly Romantic. Pierre Reverdy was a hero to O'Hara, who memorably expresses his appreciation for the French surrealist poet in the final lines of his much-discussed poem "A Step Away From Them": "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy" (110). If that conclusion conflates O'Hara's emotional self with Reverdy's text, the close of "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" seems to do the opposite, demarcating a division between the two poets. The difference is easy to elucidate: Reverdy believes that all is possible, even happiness, whereas O'Hara does not. But the point of

the line is not to insult Reverdy for affirming something hard to believe. Quite the contrary: the speaker esteems Reverdy for doing so, precisely because to affirm the seemingly impossible is for O'Hara the true project of poetry. What O'Hara loves in Reverdy is less the content of his statements than their bravado, the vision that inspires them. And this is only fitting, since O'Hara's poetic project is to search for an authentic self he is not sure exists, to create the image of a self in language as a means of broaching the question of the very possibility of selfhood. Such a project is both Romantic and paradoxical; like the work of Reverdy, it affirms in the face of logic, seeking out the very thing it finds most incredible.

Still one more crucial parallel can be drawn between this poem's final line and the Romantic sensibility we have traced back to Rousseau's *Confessions*. "I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it" asserts a foundational tenet of the Romantic ethic: the primacy of feeling over knowledge. It is not insignificant that O'Hara's speaker in "A Step Away From Them" calls Reverdy's *Poems* "my heart" and not, for example, "my head." It is precisely their emotional vitality, rather than their philosophical or scientific content, that makes O'Hara value the poems. In a similar fashion, Rousseau stipulates early in *Confessions* that in the development of the human person, feeling is temporally prior to knowledge: "I had feelings before I had thoughts: that is the common lot of humanity. . . . I had as yet no ideas about things, but already I knew every feeling" (8). And in many other places throughout his autobiography, it becomes clear that for Rousseau, emotion's primacy is not only temporal but ontological. For Rousseau, emotion is simply more essential to selfhood than is knowledge. As he somewhat grandiloquently puts it, "My passions have made me live, and my passions have killed me" (214).

O'Hara's tacit and unapologetic willingness to value feeling over thought in the concluding line of "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" suggests that he is one heir of a Romantic tradition that begins with Rousseau and runs through Reverdy. It also serves as another reminder of the centrality of sympathy (which, after all, is the sharing of human feeling) to O'Hara's project. The importance of feeling for O'Hara derives largely from its function as a link between persons. This is why his poems include so many friends' names and faces, even if the reader does not recognize them: such recognition of others posits the centrality of shared human feeling both to self-realization and to the well-being of society. To be human is

to feel, and more specifically, to feel with others. Whatever else the self might be, it is inexorably social.

V. Politics, Selfhood, and the Post-Romantic

In equating the personal with the social, O'Hara's poetry manifests a dimension that is demonstrably political. O'Hara did not wish for his poems to be easily politicized, and thus this dimension is more hidden than candid, but it follows inevitably from the sympathetic ethos of his poetry. As such, I think we must reconsider Helen Vendler's characterization of O'Hara's poems as "the personal divested of religion, of politics, of mysticism, of patriotism, of metaphysics, even of idealism" ("Frank O'Hara" 239). Perhaps not all these "isms" reside in O'Hara's poetics, but some certainly do. However, they are manifested less in semantic content than in attitude, less in theory than in practice. O'Hara's politics, for example, inheres in his conception of the self as dependent rather than autonomous, as constantly in process and undefined. As Michael Clune has observed, this theory of individuality runs counter to the postwar narrative of the self as independent and containable:

The dominant discourse of the fifties sought to shrink the social world around the narrowly circumscribed, autonomous private sphere of the rational individual citizen. All choices were to be determined by private, stable, internal preferences. . . . O'Hara's representation of choice as a contingent and spontaneous attunement to one's environment reverses this dynamic, opening individual experience to a common life. (194)

If choice is intricately bound up in the development of the self, it is no less central to the development of the poem. Just as selfhood is produced through a series of conscious choices, the creation and direction of the poem depends on the poet's choice of words. O'Hara's poems constantly dramatize these scenes of choosing, their words often appearing on the page as though they had only just that moment been experienced by the poet. There is a political valence to this process, too: in recording the volatility and instability of selfhood, the poems resist ideologies of closure and totality. This theme resonates throughout one of O'Hara's greatest poems, the astonishing "In Memory of My Feelings," in which the speaker lists, then sets aside, his numerous selves, as though struggling to discover which parts of human existence

are essential and which accidental. For several critics, the poem resolves the question by denying essentiality altogether.⁵⁸ Epstein's reading of the poem is representative: he suggests that the poem's "rigorous dismantling of coherent human identity anticipates the obsession in postmodernist thought with the decentring and unmasking of the 'essential' human self" (99). But is this destabilization of the self stable enough in its own right? Is the dream of a unified and legible self ever completely extinguished?

"In Memory of My Feelings" reflects on what it might mean "to be born and live as variously as possible" (106). Without a doubt, the poem celebrates the multivalent, polyphonic aspects of subjectivity. But more than this, it narrates the ways in which the path to selfhood is complicated and enriched by the presence of the other:

I am not quite you, but almost, the opposite of visionary.
 You are coiled around the central figure,
the heart
 that bubbles with red ghosts, since to move is to love
 and the scrutiny of all things is syllogistic (106)

It's difficult to say whether the "you" in this section refers to Grace Hartigan (to whom the poem was dedicated), or to the reader, or both. What we can take from these lines, oblique though they must remain, is the sense of connection between individuals, the inarguable centrality of emotion to the human experience, and – "since to move is to love" – the relentless transience that defines the whole complex system. The poem's ending is no less difficult:

I could not change it into history
 and so remember it,
 and I have lost what is always and everywhere
 present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,
 which I myself and singly must now kill

⁵⁸ For example, James Breslin argues that while at the end of the poem "O'Hara rises up in what looks like an heroic gesture aimed at striking through all the masks, penetrating to authenticity and pulling himself together at last," the second-to-last line "splits the self in the very act of unifying it," and "In Memory of My Feelings" thus "ends by refusing closure" (296).

and save the serpent in their midst. (107)

Trying to gain a foothold on the text, many critics have read the figure of the serpent – which appears throughout the poem before its recurrence in the final line – as the residual, inviolable self that O’Hara is at last able to salvage. But this reading is arguably too reductive and straightforward for so evasive a poem. Alternatively, Breslin suggests that the serpent is itself the movement of O’Hara’s poetry: “that slippery, invasive, poisonous, beautiful energy that keeps proliferating new transparencies, selves, guises” (296). The serpent is not O’Hara’s “true” self, but the animating force behind all of his several selves. This ingenious analysis has the ironic drawback of making the poem itself somewhat static; since that force is on display from the poem’s beginning line, the poem doesn’t finally arrive anywhere new.

Another interpretive avenue through which to approach the poem is by recalling the central claim of “Personism,” the dictum that resides at the heart of O’Hara’s aesthetic: poetry is *relational*. It always instantiates a self (or writer) and assumes an other (or reader). We should likewise recall that for O’Hara the meaning of the poem takes place within and not outside it; the poem enacts or performs meaning rather than producing it to be retrieved after the fact. In its rejection of any traditional interpretive hermeneutic, “In Memory of My Feelings” exemplifies this position; as Breslin remarks, the reader will be frustrated who would be satisfied if only he could

grasp this dynamic, frustrating work and hold it still, if he could develop some distance and perspective that would allow him to create a text with stable parts in fixed relations. No such thing available. Instead, the reader is asked to “open” himself and let the poem invade him in the way the world constantly violates O’Hara’s transparent self. (291-2)

The tension works both ways: to let the poem invade you is also to invade the poem, which demands the reader’s participation. To whatever extent the speaker’s “true” self becomes visible in the poem, it only does so in concert with the reader. Neither positing nor rejecting the fully legible Romantic self, “In Memory of My Feelings” constitutes the journey toward that self – a pursuit whose completion requires the reader’s involvement. The redemptive tone of the poem’s last line signals its refusal to abandon the Romantic vision of fully achieved individuality, revealing again O’Hara’s post-Romantic portrait of a self that is always in the process of

Chapter Six

“A Backward Way of Becoming”: John Ashbery’s Mystical Kingdoms

Something

Ought to be written about how this affects

You when you write poetry:

The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind

Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate

Something between breaths, if only for the sake

Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you

For other centers of communication, so that understanding

May begin, and in doing so be undone.

– John Ashbery, “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* is her Name”

I. Sympathy, Memory, and Subjectivity in Ashbery

The scene in Frank O’Hara’s “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” is one of celebration shot through with wistfulness. The poem’s titular character is about to leave O’Hara’s circle, having succumbed to what he calls the “peculiar desire to get married” (114). Frank O’Hara well knew what the onset of distance between friends might bring: for some years already one of his closest friends had been living in a different continent. This friend, of course, is John Ashbery, of whom O’Hara was reminded while writing the poem: “I think of our / friends who are not here, of John and the nuptial quality / of his verses (he is always marrying the whole world) . . .” (O’Hara 116).

“Always marrying the whole world”: the line demonstrates that O’Hara possessed not only a lighthearted sense of humour but a sharp critical acumen. Full of emotions apparently directed both to everyone and to no one in particular, John Ashbery’s poems do seem to harbour a wish to marry the world. Consider “As You Know,” a poem from his first collection, in which the speaker promises his beloved a romantic future filled with travel to exotic places:

We are pointing to England, to Africa, to Nigeria;

And we shall visit these places, you and I, and other places,
Including heavenly Naples, queen of the sea, where I shall be king and you will
be queen,

And all the places around Naples. (*Some Trees* 57)

Or this excerpt from Ashbery's third book, *Rivers and Mountains*:

I miss the human truth of your smile,
The halfhearted gaze of your palms,
And all things together, but there is no comic reign
Only the facts you put to me. You must not, then,
Be very surprised if I am alone: it is all for you,
The night, and the stars, and the way we used to be. (*Rivers and Mountains* 14)

The tone of manifest generosity, of the willingness to include the other, exhibited in the above passages is matched and even exceeded in the opening lines of "Years of Indiscretion," from *The Double Dream of Spring*:

Whatever your eye alights on this morning is yours:
Dotted rhythms of colors as they fade to the color,
A gray agate, translucent and firm, with nothing
Beyond its purifying reach. It's all there.

These things are offered to your participation. (*Double Dream* 46)

Many similar passages could be culled from Ashbery's early poems, and taken together, they impel us to consider the status of the "you" addressed by Ashbery with such intimacy and regularity. Noting that the pronoun might represent "a reimagined self, an erotic partner, a syntactic counterword," Bonnie Costello's solution is to embrace its indeterminacy: "It serves, of course, all of these functions; its importance lies in its ambiguity" (494). Costello is correct to point out the wide range of semantic possibilities that apply to Ashbery's use of pronouns, but in this instance one interpretive possibility seems pre-eminent among all the others: the "you" instantiated in Ashbery's poetry is the poem's future reader. So argues Helen Vendler, who calls the reader in Ashbery the "invisible listener . . . of whom many of his poems are acutely conscious" (*Invisible Listeners* 57). John Emil Vincent remarks, similarly, that while

“[y]ou” is a supremely elastic pronoun within the books and the lyrics they contain . . . the largest sense in which later Ashbery takes “you,” in this case the reader, into account is by patterning his books such that each one provides a distinct point of entry. Each single poem doesn’t necessarily seem attentive to the reader, but each book has the reader’s listening firmly in mind. (5)

Ultimately, Costello takes the same approach to Ashbery’s poetry, noting that “[w]e are inscribed as readers everywhere in his pages” (495). Given their postmodern self-awareness and self-referentiality – “the subject of any one of my poems,” Ashbery has said, is “the poem creating itself” – it seems almost inevitable that the Ashbery poem be dialogical, engaging and addressing the reader, speaking not so much about a subject as to one (Poulin 251). We can denote in this recognition of the reader a similarity between Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, who, as we have seen, also wrote reader-conscious poetry. One reason for Ashbery’s careful attention to audience is his belief that the reader’s experience comprises the whole point of writing the poem. As he has remarked in an interview, “[w]hat the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader. I guess my poems are a kind of simplification of this problem, one which has always affected poets. The poem is not really in their hands: it’s in someone else’s” (Poulin 246).

Besides providing the final determinant of the poem’s meaning, the reader is also important to Ashbery as a key ingredient in the poetic articulation of a philosophy of selfhood. This topic is tremendously important in Ashbery’s work. While Helen Vendler summarizes Ashbery’s poetry as focused on two great themes, love and time, these themes only operate in Ashbery in relation to a third theme that intersects them, namely human subjectivity (*Invisible Listeners* 59). The story of a typical human life might plausibly be sketched as the story of a consciousness present to itself (time, or memory), and to others (love, or still more elementally, sympathy) over a succession of moments. Sympathy and memory are thus two essential categories that allow us to comprehend what it means to be a human subject. In this chapter I want to show how both love and time – or, to invoke the corresponding terms on which this chapter will focus, sympathy and memory – are marshalled in Ashbery as topics through which we approach a more complete understanding of selfhood. I will do so first by comparing memory and sympathy in Ashbery to the use of these concepts in Rousseau. I will then defend Ashbery as a poet who seeks to communicate and identify with the reader through his poetry,

despite the fact that he has often been labeled as attempting only to mystify the reader. My analysis of the early Ashbery poem “The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers” sees it as stressing the importance of both memory and sociality in the shaping of the self. In “The Ecclesiast,” I will suggest, Ashbery highlights our epistemological limitedness in order to explain how we shore up the vestiges of a Romantic subjectivity both through sympathy with one another and through our attempts to find coherence in a past we know is lost. Finally, I read “Soonest Mended” (which I consider the quintessential post-Romantic poem) as a pragmatist meditation on the importance of community for the emergence of the self, a poem whose trenchant political implications belie Ashbery’s supposed apolitical tendencies and urge a re-evaluation of our assumptions about the interconnections between the personal and the social self.

As concepts, sympathy and memory stand in notable contrast to one another. A function of the self’s consciousness of itself over time, memory tends to correspond to a self-contained, inward-looking process.⁵⁹ Sympathy, on the other hand, is a function of the self’s consciousness of and connection to other selves, and is thus an outward-looking process. Ashbery’s poems are very attuned to this dialectic, and are interested in searching out the proper balance between its two sides. Is the self’s attention to its own vicissitudes through time limited by its debt to the relational, to the bonds between self and other? Can these two forms of attention – to self and to other – cohere perfectly? In contrast to Rousseau, who used it to try to retain his notion of an autonomous self, Ashbery uses sympathy to establish the conditional, dependent nature of selfhood. In this respect he breaks (like O’Hara) with the Romantic self as it is traditionally understood. Memory in Ashbery seems to play a much more ambiguous role; scenes from the past are often presented as symbolizing a lost ideal, a place beyond our reach and one to which we nevertheless endlessly seek to return. That is, memory serves as the wellspring of a Romantic notion Ashbery’s poetry refuses to relinquish: that of the origin, an intact and integral

⁵⁹ This definition of memory only functions at the level of the individual, of course; I do not mean to deny, here, the power or effects of cultural and social memory. But since these forms of memory themselves often function through public manifestations or iterations of sympathy, it seems clear that memory, in its most basic instance, is not only a looking backward but a looking inward, and in this sense can be contrasted with sympathy.

self or truth that haunts the everyday present. Ashbery dispenses with the Romantic self even as his poetry perpetuates, in a wistful and nostalgic manner, the dream of it – a dream that can be neither fully endorsed nor denied outright. In this manner Ashbery formulates, alongside O’Hara, that picture of the self we have been calling post-Romantic.

In his *Confessions* Rousseau substantiates the idea that the coherence of the self depends on the legibility of its past. While Rousseau treats the past as an absolutely distant entity, never to be regained, he also believes the past to be powerfully formative of the present self. Thus his lament that “I had come in search of a past that was no more and could not be reborn” is balanced by his confidence that he is “as full of grandiose schemes as ever, and still the same person I ha[ve] always been” (264-6). This confidence is strengthened when Rousseau looks to the past, but weakened by his uncertainty about his future, which was to be beset by disputes with others (some of which were ongoing during the writing of the *Confessions*). In my earlier analysis of Rousseau, I suggested that his use of sympathy indicates a lack of self-awareness on his part: the reader’s sympathy for Rousseau is the very condition of a self Rousseau posits as independently realized and contained.⁶⁰ In contrast, the sympathy Ashbery displays *for* the reader is effected by their awareness of the dependence and relationality inhering in selfhood.) Ashbery thus uses memory to stabilize notions of a Romantic self that he simultaneously destabilizes through sympathy.

II. Ashbery and the Desire to Communicate

How might such notions connect to the place of the reader in Ashbery’s poetry? Bonnie Costello offers an insight into the dialogical relationship between poet and reader that proves particularly applicable here: “Literature intensifies the truth that there is no present in communication, for the poet is all anticipation toward his reader, the reader all memory toward

⁶⁰ “My memory,” Rousseau writes, “which will only retrace agreeable objects, is the blessed counterweight to my terrified imagination, which foresees nothing for me but a cruel future” (270). More than painting a contrast between a happy past and an unhappy future, this statement reflects an avowal of memory (because it provides room to conceive of a distinct, coherent self) and a disavowal of the imaginative faculties (because they threaten to dissolve it). Rousseau’s acknowledgement of this tension between stability and disarray suggests his cognizance of a lack of agency, even if he was unwilling to state it directly.

the poet. All literature exists, then, simultaneously in the past and in the future, but never in the present” (508). Ashbery’s sympathy is anticipatory, presuming a future reader and recognizing the incompleteness of the poem (and the self) in the present, or until it is read. This state of sympathetic anticipation allows us to answer a common argument in Ashbery studies, the idea that Ashbery uses words to create distance rather than closeness between himself and the reader. If, as Costello suggests, Ashbery’s poems reveal his recognition of “his distance from the reader, his isolation in the act of writing, the lonesomeness of words,”⁶¹ they also strive to overcome such isolation and loneliness through language (507). Language overcomes human isolation primarily by means of its basic purpose, which is communication, and the desire to communicate is therefore fundamental to Ashbery’s poetics.

The opacity of some of Ashbery’s poems makes it seem otherwise, of course; as Costello herself points out, some of his poems are replete with images “redundant in meaning but infinite in texture” (506). Thomas Lisk takes a more aggressive stance, claiming that Ashbery’s penchant for unspecific pronouns “keeps attention fixed on the poet’s consciousness (or on the experience of the poem itself) rather than on details about people around him in space and time outside the poem,” and again, still more forcefully, that he “uses unclear pronoun references for artistic control” and as “a means of . . . keeping the poet’s distance” (40). In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Ashbery reveals that his intention is not to maintain distance but in fact just the opposite; he means

to aim at as wide an audience as I can so that as many people as possible will read my poetry. Therefore I depersonalize it, but in the same way personalize it, so that a person who is going to be different from me but is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me, since we are all different from each other, can see something in it. (Stitt)

The elliptical nature of his statement should not obscure the point Ashbery is after. His poetry seeks to universalize without flattening individuality into sameness. That is, his attempts to forge connection in his poetry – to communicate – are not attempts to elide difference, but to

⁶¹ See also Bartczak in this regard: “If Ashbery communicates with his contemporaries in *Rivers and Mountains*, he does so out of self-imposed loneliness and isolation” (69).

find the point where differences intersect with one another in a productive fashion. The reader, Ashbery says, “is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me”: in this way our very separation from one another (emblemized in the writerly isolation Costello diagnoses) becomes, counterintuitively, a point of similitude. Rather than trying to minimize the distance between separate selves, Ashbery argues for the power of language to span such distances: “not through naïve personal identification” with the other, as Gardner notes, “but by means of an acknowledgement of its strict otherness and a continual, concentric openness to its directions and prodding” (159-60). Or as Ashbery puts it in his poem “Parergon,” “We need the tether / Of entering each other’s lives, eyes wide apart, crying” (*Double Dream* 55). The phrase “eyes wide apart” exemplifies a phenomenon in Ashbery’s work that John Shoptaw has helpfully identified as “misrepresentation,” noting that such terms “renovate” meaning rather than ruling it out altogether (2-3).⁶² “Eyes wide apart” revises the more conventional phrase “eyes wide open,” attributing to it instead a quality more often used to describe hands or feet. This revision suggests, it seems to me, the messiness and unpredictability, even the potential pain, of “entering each other’s lives,” even if it is a “tether” that we need. It thus posits both the divergence of individual lives and the requirement that these lives intersect one another in mutual support.

⁶² Although Shoptaw’s book, *On the Outside Looking Out*, is a major text in Ashbery studies, I have relied little on Shoptaw in this chapter. While I appreciate his work on misrepresentation in Ashbery, his penchant for neologisms also extends to “homotextuality,” the central term of his book and one I find much less useful. Shoptaw combines his terms to argue that Ashbery’s misrepresentation is homotextual, which is to say that the tendency in Ashbery to eschew direct referentiality in favour of evasive and slippery language is the function of a specifically homosexual politics (Shoptaw 4). This despite Ashbery’s claim, bravely cited by Shoptaw at the outset of his text, that “I do not think of myself as a gay poet” – a statement that, for Shoptaw, is itself misrepresentative.

Several problems inhere in this argument, not the least of which is the difficulty in distinguishing between misrepresentation and plain dishonesty once language outside the realm of poetry is included in the discussion. Furthermore, Shoptaw’s thesis is unfalsifiable and therefore untenable: as John Emil Vincent writes, for Shoptaw “homosexuality is everywhere in Ashbery’s poetry precisely because it shows up nowhere” (18-9). I do not want simply to discount the gay dimension of Ashbery’s poetry. Aside from producing what David Herd calls Ashbery’s moments of “deliciou[s] camp” (20), it means Ashbery’s voice comes from the margins and therefore makes the generosity of his poetry all the more striking. But neither will his sexuality be my main concern, both because (as Herd points out) it smacks of treating Ashbery’s poetry as confessional, which it clearly is not, and because, as Kacper Bartczak has argued, to “confine Ashbery’s poetic gestures to the difference in sexual preference is uncharitable in case of his rich poetry” (Herd 20; Bartczak n 142).

The demand for such intersections remains implicit in Ashbery but is a structuring principle of his poems. It explains why, for example, he intends for his poems to reach as broad and variegated readership as possible: he searches out in his poetry the connective tissues that exist beneath our superficial differences. In his own words:

What I'm trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience – like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. Something which a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever. The reputation that my poetry has as being something terribly private and difficult to get at is not at all what I hoped for. (Poulin 251)

The metaphor Ashbery uses here is a telling one. Just as anyone at all can wear a stretch sock and find that it fits, Ashbery wants anyone at all to be able to read his poetry and find in it something with which to relate. This desire explains the shifting nebulosity of Ashbery's pronoun usage: whether he uses "you" or "I" is beside the point, because the poem means to recreate verbally the consciousness of anyone at all. Similarly, while Ashbery's poems would frustrate a journalist by their consistent refusal to provide the most basic details of setting (who? where? what? when?), the ambiguity is meant to be productive. For Ashbery, such details delimit the reach of the poem, confining its impact only to those connected to the specifics of the situation. Rather than write a poem about a certain event, Ashbery means to write about the way we experience events in general, thereby making the poem accessible to everyone. That his attempt to do so has left some readers feeling disconnected and distanced from his work can only be considered an irony.

There is a strong sense, then, in which Ashbery's technique stands in stark contrast to O'Hara's. Where O'Hara, as we have seen, places the reader within a particular, richly realized context, Ashbery does the reverse: generalizing the context, he works to place it within the mind of the reader. Like O'Hara, he wants the reader to experience the emotional truth of a scene or moment, but his language attempts to represent the experience itself, and not (as in O'Hara) the visible scene. We might say that Ashbery skips a step in the process of acclimatizing the reader to the poem, which is why his poems are – at least for many readers – more difficult to enter. If he is right about his own poetry, though, the engaged reader will ultimately be able to intuit the imaginative sympathy at the core of his poems.

The above analysis should also make clear just how crucial such sympathy is to the effectiveness of an Ashbery poem. If the whole point of Ashbery's poetry is to narrate to others what experience feels like, the charge of solipsism and insularity is the most damaging criticism one could make of his work. For if Ashbery's poetry is limited to his own mind, it is valueless; if the reader cannot find anything recognizable and relational therein, Ashbery's aesthetic is no more than a failed attempt to communicate meaning. Predicated on the assumption that words offer a mode of connection between two persons who might otherwise remain unknown to one another, Ashbery's poetry manages instead to thrive on the very sympathy on which it depends.

Besides amounting to a rejection of the New Critical formulae valorizing the autonomy and inviolability of the poem, Ashbery's reliance on sympathy belies his aversion to political subtext in poetry. As David Herd points out, "Ashbery is, not least, a democratic poet . . . who wants nothing more than to speak to his contemporaries," and it is not hard to envision such anti-elitism extended beyond poetics and into politics (90). In discussing his own work, for example, Ashbery holds his implied pact with the reader to a very high standard, characterizing the relationship between poet and audience in unmistakably moral terms:

My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this; my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that's already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him.
(quoted in Herd 3)

Comments Ashbery has made elsewhere strike a similar chord: "I suppose if the majority of readers don't get anything out of a poem then it is ineffective . . . If this happens, then I have undoubtedly failed" (quoted in Herd 90). Ashbery is speaking here of aesthetic failure, but his tone of self-reproach hints at something more. If the Ashbery poem figures, like the O'Hara poem, as a kind of extended metaphor for the self, then the poem that fails to communicate is analogous to the subject who fails to sympathize with the other. The inability of the poem both to impart meaning and to provide pleasure (which is also, in Ashbery's estimation, a vital requirement for poetry) is strictly an aesthetic shortcoming, but thematically it symbolizes separate selves, a closed system, human beings cut off from each other in the ways that matter

most – that is to say, a *moral* shortcoming. For Ashbery, then, both the meaning of the poem and the development of self and society hinge on sympathetic communication.

Ashbery's poetry thus embraces a soft politics of shared action and shared feeling. More than that, it forms a meditation on the nature of intersubjectivity and ultimately of human selfhood. The dependence of poet on reader, of self on other, demands that we keep in mind the fragility and indeterminacy of selfhood, even as the pull of memory instills in us a desire to construct a narrative of the unchanging essentiality of personhood. In the readings that follow I hope to show how Ashbery's poetry, in navigating between these two tendencies, comprises a remarkable philosophical attempt to trace the contours of both our interactions with each other and our understanding of ourselves.

III. "Together at last, though far apart": "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers" and "The Ecclesiast"

We are afforded an early glimpse into the themes of memory, sympathy, and the self so prevalent in Ashbery's later work in a poem from his first collection, *Some Trees*, entitled "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers." The first part of the poem is an example of what Shoptaw calls "narrative collage" (26-7): a seemingly disparate set of incidents and characters that – as David Herd perceptively demonstrates – actually allude to literary forebears including Joyce, Wordsworth, and especially Boris Pasternak, from whose novel *Doctor Zhivago* the poem's epigraph is taken (Herd 45-6). Ashbery thus situates his own literary ambitions within an array of writers whose work has influenced his own. Not simply the outflow of the poet's inspiration, words find their form and meaning within the frame of historical influence and intertextuality. This idea is reinforced in the poem's second section, which suggests that besides words and poems, some of our most dearly held concepts take shape in a similarly arbitrary and unstable fashion. Morality itself is less an eternal norm than a necessary illusion, since "goodness [is] a mere memory / Or naming of recent scenes of badness," and as a result, our lives require the constant rediscovery of what it is we choose to deem good: "So fair does each invent his virtue" (*Some Trees* 28). The first two sections of the poem thus invite the conclusion that aesthetic and ethical advances come about through conscious choices made within a social

context, and that these choices enable us to communally negotiate the fraught process of self-invention.

In contrast, the poem's third section draws us back to its title – back to the early stages of the poem and, by association, of the speaker's life:

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
My head among the blazing phlox
Seemed a gigantic and pale fungus. (28)

As Herd notes, the speaker's comparison of his young head to a fungus is not without significance: since "a fungus is a parasite, feeding off its environment," the metaphor revisits and fortifies the idea that the self is socially constituted (47). But the first lines of the section invoke an immobilizing return to the past, giving the impression that the "small self" in the "bank of flowers" is in some ways still present today. Where sympathy provokes the speaker to move uncertainly forward, memory allows him to look nostalgically back, superimposing a reductive (and romanticized) image of the self onto an identity that otherwise remains difficult to define.

In its concluding lines, the poem appears to waver, caught between its depictions of a socially engendered future and an imperfectly captured past:

as the loveliest feelings

Must soon find words, and these, yes,
Displace them, so I am not wrong
In calling this comic version of myself
The true one. (29)

Looking at the old photograph, the speaker appears to commit to the Rousseauian notion that the "comic version" of himself represented on it is the "true one." This is not simply a rejection of an ontology of indeterminacy in favour of the comforting notion of a "true," complete (albeit fleeting) self. The poem's message is more wry and conflicted. Eventually, the speaker posits, the feelings we have about the past take the shape of words which slowly displace them.

Whatever true self he might possess therefore emanates not from the past, but from his *feelings*

about that past, as well as the words to which these feelings give rise. From the vantage point of the present, the historical self can only be imperfectly reconstructed at best. But since the historical self provides the only narrative of selfhood to which we can safely turn, we must rely on it. “For,” as the poem concludes,

as change is horror,
Virtue is really stubbornness

And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards. (29)

These memorable lines comprise a kind of self-conscious defense of the speaker’s mock-elegy for his past self. Stubbornness is a virtue because it embodies resistance to the horror of change, the hidden and real fear lurking at the poem’s heart. There is no way to “pause” the self, no real way to stop and take stock of life while it is being lived; change is constant and relentless, and ends in death, which is why it is horrifying. “The Picture of Little J.A.” holds out the myth of a realized past self as an antidote to that horror, even if the poem problematizes the very myth it clings to: our myths are doomed to turn into the words we use to describe them, and even those words will one day be lost. The poem is almost Kafkaesque in its consciousness of the ultimate futility of resisting change, but finds reassurance in the constructive power of individual memory. And in its final line it returns to the shared promise of social creativity; as James McCorkle argues, the poem’s “closing lines mark the shift from the personal statement on artistic development centered on the ‘I’ . . . to a generalized ‘we’ – our rewards as writers or as readers or as ethical beings” (83). Its closing image is not of a solitary self focused on the past, but a community of individuals bent on envisioning – aesthetically and ethically – the possible rewards of the future. Balanced between memory and sympathy, the poem ends by stressing the latter, yet does not deny the crucial importance of the former.

Ashbery’s second book, *The Tennis Court Oath*, is likely his most divisive. It was venerated by language poets such as Charles Bernstein but considered a failure by other critics, most famously Harold Bloom. In the latter part of his career, Ashbery has distanced himself from *The Tennis Court Oath*, admitting, for example, that as a young and nearly unknown expatriate American poet, he did not expect the poems he was writing at the time to be

published at all. As a result, many of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* appear to have been written in spite of the reader rather than toward her; in James Longenbach's words, they "demand a weighty justification for their obscurity" ("Ashbery and the Individual Talent" 114). But whatever other virtues the book had, the process of writing it seemed to pave a new way forward for Ashbery. The poems in his third book, *Rivers and Mountains*, were also composed while he lived in France in the early 1960s, but the book's tone diverges drastically from that of *The Tennis Court Oath* in its awareness of and sympathy for its audience. As Longenbach argues, *The Tennis Court Oath* may have thus "made *Rivers and Mountains* possible, if only by revealing the potential hazards of a poetics of embodiment" (114).

Thematically, in *Rivers and Mountains* Ashbery also seems to bypass *The Tennis Court Oath*, returning instead to some of the topics introduced in *Some Trees*. For example, the theme of clinging to stability in the face of transience, which appears in "The Picture of Little J.A. in the Prospect of Flowers," assumes a much more overt role in "The Ecclesiast." The poem displays Ashbery's renowned and much-debated tactic of using indeterminate pronouns without providing specific referents: the first line speaks of a "she" who then seems simply to disappear into the landscape of the poem. Ashbery has commented that this technique is meant to blur the distinction between separate selves, since in his view "we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved" (quoted in Perloff, "Transparent Selves" 195). The importance of "addressing someone" quickly becomes clear in "The Ecclesiast." The pronoun "she" fades out of the poem to be replaced by "you" – perhaps an address to some other person in the landscape of the poem, but also (if my earlier argument holds) an implicit address to the reader.

The poem's first section depicts the erosion of a long-held but decaying belief system. New facts have come to light – "the new dimension of truth had only recently / Burst in on us" – and as a result old assumptions must be discarded – "her mothball truth is eaten" (*Rivers and Mountains* 21). What is the origin of the "mothball truth" being replaced? The poem answers:

Tired housewives begat it some decades ago,
A small piece of truth that if it was honey to the lips

Was also millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it. (*Rivers and Mountains* 21)

As Mark Silverberg writes, this is “truth as gossip more than gospel,” and its erasure seems a necessary event (123).

But if old forms of truth were insufficient to the role expected of them, in its newly acquired dimensions the truth appears equally provisional and unsatisfying. The poem’s second stanza elaborates on this problem, and the quandaries it ponders are reminiscent of those observed in “The Picture of Little J.A.”:

There was no life you could live out to its end

And no attitude which, in the end, would save you.

The monkish and the frivolous alike were to be trapped in death’s capacious
claw (*Rivers and Mountains* 21)

No version of the truth, however produced, seems adequate to the task of living unless it can answer the problem of life’s brevity, that is, of our fleeting and solitary grasp on conscious existence. (It’s not without reason that the poem’s title refers to the biblical *Book of Ecclesiastes*, which makes much the same point.) In the same vein, Silverberg is right to suggest that one of the poem’s basic preoccupations has to do with the nature of knowledge. What claims to knowing truth can we make, and how are we justified in making them? The answer Silverberg provides is the straightforwardly postmodern one: “We cannot *know* with certainty in Ashbery’s world since new dimensions of truth are always bursting in on us, preferably when we least expect them” (121).

This is a useful starting point, but some corollary points are in order. First, the poem’s philosophical concerns are not only epistemological, they are also ontological. The observation that “there was no . . . *attitude* which, in the end, would save you” implies a way of being, an active decision about how to perceive the world (*Rivers and Mountains* 21, emphasis mine). It therefore stages for the reader the concept of selfhood and its possible permutations. The poem’s speaker both affirms the malleability of the self – it emanates from the attitudes we adopt – and laments the insufficiency of any pose we might adopt to save us in the end. Through the use of the second-person pronoun, the reader is forcefully included in this

equation: this problem is, or needs to be, universally felt; it presents one of the most pressing occasions for sympathy, since it speaks to a situation that involves us all.

Second, no analysis of the poem can be complete that does not pay close attention to the lines immediately following the threatening phrase “death’s capacious claw”:

But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper –
There was a key to everything in that oak forest
But a sad one. Ever since childhood there
Has been this special meaning to everything.

You smile at your friend’s joke, but only later, through tears. (21)

Faced with the uncompromising fact of death, the speaker turns again – just as he does in “The Picture of Little J.A.” – to the realm of memory. Even in the context of a community of others, such as might provide a “friend’s joke,” the prospect of inhabiting a knowable self adequate to the demands of a changing present and unknown future seems unpromising. In such a situation, the past might seem our only anchor.

Of course, while it is clear that the speaker has turned to reflect on the past, the specifics of what he is saying remain cloudy. What can be gleaned from the sad “key to everything in that oak forest”? Ashbery resists placing his biographical self within his poems, but at the same time, weighty moments from a poet’s own life easily are apt to become fodder for poetry. And Ashbery has spoken more than once in interviews about a certain memory from childhood that may be applicable to “The Ecclesiast.” He remembers that

[w]e had a mythical kingdom in the woods; various of our friends had castles in trees, and I was always trying to get plays that we could produce spontaneously. Then my younger brother died just around the beginning of World War II. The group dispersed for various reasons, and things were never as happy or romantic as they’d been, and my brother was no longer there. I think I’ve always been trying to get back to this mystical kingdom that [we] inhabited. (Rehak 15)

Commenting on this quotation, Epstein notes that “many of Ashbery’s best and most famous poems chronicle this sense of loss, this dispersal, and this desire to return to a mythical realm of idealized fraternity, a desire that continuously slams into the impossibility of that illusory dream” (277). “The Ecclesiast” manifests exactly this desire: the “special meaning” extant since

childhood connotes the realization that the most idyllic and romantic time of one's life is already past, and only its facsimile can be retrieved in memory. As a child, the speaker seemed to have a presentiment of this idea; scenes from his past seem tinged by melancholy even as they occur, though they have now become unlikely sources of consolation.

It's clear that the speaker in "The Ecclesiast" does not really believe that he can find in the past a means of true reprieve from the worries of the present and future. After all, the juxtaposed emotions in the wonderful line "You smile at your friend's joke, but only later, through tears" suggests that in recollection, even sweet moments are somehow made bittersweet. But the speaker's instinctual reliance on memory nevertheless betrays Ashbery's Romantic predilections, his vision of a past self that might again cohere in some happy unknown future. The confluence of past and present selves in Ashbery is reminiscent of Rousseau, whose *Confessions* narrates the struggle to unite them and so to resolve the puzzle of selfhood. Rousseau presents himself as a child possessing adult-like sagacity who grows up to be an adult of childlike innocence; "although in some respects," he writes,

I was already a man when I was born, in many others I remained for a long time, and still remain, a child. I never promised to offer the public a grand personage; what I did promise was to portray myself as I am; and if the reader is to know me as I am in my later years, he must have known me well in my youth. (170)

Rousseau's identification of his present with his past self is meant to assure the reader of the coherence (and therefore the validity) of his treatise. In "The Ecclesiast," Ashbery makes no such claims. In fact, the poem's second half rejects the idea of simplistic dependence on a past version of the self, attempting instead to breathe life into the tired proverb that there's "no time like the present" (*Rivers and Mountains* 21).

Indeed, the latter half of the poem is littered with clichés and catchphrases: "the shoe pinches," "giving in to . . . temptation," "time enough" (21). But as Shoptaw argues, these lines exemplify Ashbery's strategy of misrepresentation: familiar, comfortable sayings such as "If the shoe fits, wear it" and "Rules were made to be broken" are reshaped into augmented versions that combine the flavour of the original idiom with an unexpected twist (79). The effect is that,

in Lynn Keller's words, "[b]y slightly modifying hackneyed phrases or by mixing clichés with less banal diction, Ashbery infuses fresh energy into time-worn expressions" (244).⁶³

Furthermore, if the cliché can be said to embody a version of the past that has been dulled by our reliance on it, Ashbery's modification of cliché conveys the required balance between remembering the past (individually and collectively) and memorializing it. Ashbery's resistance to cliché even as he makes use of it signifies the self's contested relationship to its own past.

In its closing section, the poem's focus moves away from memory and the past and back toward the main theme of this study, sympathy, which for these poets is the vital ingredient in the ongoing development of self and society. Sympathy is required partly because of the unreliability of memory. Even Rousseau recognizes his own unreliability as a narrator, admitting that the "first part [of the *Confessions*] was written entirely from memory and is no doubt full of mistakes" (269). Along similar lines, in the last part of "The Ecclesiast" the speaker hints at the inadequacy of memory as a sole repository of selfhood while simultaneously reaching out to the other in unambiguously intimate terms, as if to posit human sympathy as a natural response to the fallacy of human memory: "My dearest I am as a galleon on salt billows. / Perfume my head with forgetting all about me" (*Rivers and Mountains* 21). The verb "to forget" establishes the insufficiency of the past as a locus for the self, and in case the reader needs (as it were) reminding, the human propensity to forget or to rewrite history is dramatized again almost immediately: "You wake up forgetting. Already / Daylight shakes you in the yard" (21).

In keeping with the turn toward sympathy and away from the past, the reader is addressed in terms that convey a sense of possibility and of the uncertain future: "You shall never have seen it just this way / And that is to be your one reward" (22). These lines offer, among other things, an encapsulation of one of the great benefits of reading poetry, and here the poet promises the reader that his words contain something new, a previously unconsidered perspective from which to see the world. Shared between poet and reader, this perspective represents the unity of feeling such a poetics seeks to produce. In its enigmatic final stanza, the

⁶³ On the use of cliché in Ashbery, see Monroe.

poem reflects again, momentarily, on the violence and discomfort inherent in existence – envisioning a “cold and delicate” night, one “full of angels / Pounding down the living” – but it ends with a resounding affirmation of the sympathetic unity that language, and more specifically poetic communication, can create even between persons separated by the exigencies of time and space and history:

The night is cold and delicate and full of angels
Pounding down the living. The factories are all lit up,
The chime goes unheard.
We are together at last, though far apart. (22)

IV. “Borne on Shoulders, at Last”

John Ashbery’s fourth book, *The Double Dream of Spring*, continues the trajectory he initiates in *Rivers and Mountains*, moving away from the experimental, nearly inaccessible language poetry of *The Tennis Court Oath* toward a more dynamic and reader-friendly style. As I have been arguing, the inclusive tone of the poems is not merely a tonal choice but is the outflow of a distinctly philosophical mission: to explore in verse the contours of a self not only Ashberyan but also somehow American. In *The Double Dream of Spring* this self becomes assertively other-centered, articulating itself as “radically porous, dependent for its sense of identity on the things and people it has around it,” to quote David Herd (118). The poems produce “an image of a self which appreciates its lack of sovereignty, and knows itself to be the subject of forces beyond its control” (118). They would seem, then, to amount to a resolute dismissal of the Rousseauian or proto-Romantic picture of the self that flits through so much of Ashbery’s earlier poetry. The picture, however, is not quite so simple. In what follows I will consider one of the most highly regarded poems in *The Double Dream of Spring*, “Soonest Mended,” which stands as a paradigmatic example of how Ashbery navigates dilemmas surrounding selfhood and sympathy in his work. Arguing against – and longing for – a historical self that might provide a sense of certitude, “Soonest Mended” defines the self as radically unmade and indeed as essentially indefinable – and yet suggests that the basic task given to us in human experience is that of continuing to attempt to define it. In so doing, and in its careful balancing of memory

and sympathy, “Soonest Mended” takes its place as perhaps the quintessential post-Romantic poem.

The poem is justly praised as one of Ashbery’s most important, but many critics have also detected within it an atmosphere of doubt and regret. Silverberg calls it “a poem of instability and imbalance” (173); for Bartzcak, it sounds a “note of troubled acceptance of our diminished selves” (88); Shoptaw sees it as disconnected from reality and “indulg[ing] in the fantasy of passive resistance” (107). These readings seem to me to miss the gathering – if guarded – optimism that characterizes the poem. By the time the speaker proposes, at the poem’s conclusion, that “this is action, this not being sure,” we have reached a sense of resolution and affirmation that belies that very statement’s uncertainty. In its meandering movement from past to present and from self to other, “Soonest Mended” enacts the very thing it proposes: a provisional ethic, a map for the road ahead.

The first-person plural is used throughout the poem, and the premise that its “we” refers not only to Ashbery and his friends but to an entire subculture is supported by Ashbery’s own comments: he has called “Soonest Mended” his “one-size-fits-all confessional poem which is about my youth and maturing but also about anybody else’s” (quoted in Shoptaw 105). The speaker begins by looking back through his personal and social history: his implicit (and Rousseauian) hypothesis seems to be that he will be able to find in the past an answer for the dilemmas of the present. But if the impetus of this search is Romantic, its fruition is markedly otherwise. The speaker sees himself as carrying out a supporting role, at best, in his society, and certainly not a leading one: he and his companions are “barely tolerated, living on the margin” of their culture (*Double Dream* 17). And to add insult to injury, they “were always having to be rescued.” This concession not only underlines the need for sympathy and community, it turns the bold mantra of Emersonian self-reliance on its head. In short, in reflecting on his own history in the poem’s first lines, the speaker discovers himself to be the precise opposite of a Romantic figure, traditionally conceived. Furthermore, his recourse to memory does him little good, since the changing present constantly invalidates the disappearing past: “Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused / About how to receive this latest piece of information” (17).

This existential confusion provides the poem with its central task: that of building “a sense of self equal to its moment” (Herd 119). The poem represents the project of selfhood as both intensely important and profoundly difficult, even when approached communally. The difficulty of the task owes partly to the pressures and constrictions of modernity, of the way life in a “technological society” seems to revolve less around self-betterment than around the everyday banalities of “food and the rent and bills to be paid” (*Double Dream* 17). Amid such distractions, the goal remains the same – “our ambition,” Ashbery writes, “was to be small and clear and free” (17). By choosing adjectives that are themselves small and clear, the speaker depicts his wants as stark, simple, and universal. But the universality of these wants does not make their accession easy: the main concern becomes that of survival, of “holding on to the hard earth so as not to get thrown off” (17).

This line, appearing relatively early in the poem, constitutes what might well be considered its emotional low point. The Romantic conceit arguably first propagated by Rousseau – that of thoroughly legible, self-reliant, internally consistent personhood – has been dismantled in the poem’s first twenty-five lines to such an extent that the speaker wonders whether autonomy is an entire delusion, whether he and his friends were merely “acting this out / For someone else’s benefit” (17). But here (as is similarly the case in many O’Hara poems) the mood of the piece begins to turn. The next line considers the possibility of “an occasional dream, a vision,” and the speaker begins to chart out the hazardous path to something approaching hopefulness (18). In fact, the last half of “Soonest Mended” reminds us that for all his negations of Romantic constructs, Ashbery is, as Lehman argues, “at heart a Romantic poet” who seeks in art a “redemptive enchantment” he is unwilling to refuse belief in (30). Or rather – as I have been calling him – Ashbery is a post-Romantic poet, because even his overt dismissal of traditional forms of Romantic thought leaves behind something of the visionary, the unifying, and the transcendent.

Consider one of the most quoted passages from “Soonest Mended”:

We are all talkers

It is true, but underneath the talk lies

The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose

Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor. (*Double Dream* 18)

In their avowal of “the loose meaning” inhering “underneath the talk,” these lines might be taken as a sort of poetic rejoinder to poststructuralist theory (which would posit the talk as necessarily prior to any meaning it generates). But besides expressing a brief sketch of Ashbery’s semiotics, they suggest a reason for the poet’s pursuit of beauty in poetry: it forms his attempt to discover and lay bare the tension between “moving and not wanting to be moved,” between the competing desires for definition and closure on the one hand, and escape and borderlessness on the other. The goal of the post-Romantic poet is to establish a version of selfhood that achieves both.

To do so requires fostering a sympathetic community engaged in overcoming the “hazards of the course” – the unofficial “rules” of life within the confines of modernity. Suggesting that the reader, too, has a stake in this game, Ashbery invites us into the poem, recalling the moment of shock

when, almost a quarter of a century later,
 The clarity of the rules dawned on you for the first time.
They were the players, and we who had struggled at the game
 Were merely spectators, though subject to its vicissitudes
 And moving with it out of the tearful stadium, borne on shoulders, at last. (18)

In recognizing his failure to become the person he once imagined he would be, the speaker again deflates the myth of the Romantic individual. To imagine yourself a player, even to the point of “struggling at the game,” only to realize your own marginality, to realize that all along, you were on the sidelines and unaware of it: this is the slightly ludicrous, belated sense of self-recognition that Ashbery wants to capture. In this reading, the game to which Ashbery refers – and from which he finds himself removed – is that of conformity to the norms of American culture and its signifiers of success, such as material wealth, fame, and political power.

This marks a further dissociation from the Rousseauian self; and yet, despite the marginalized status of the poem’s speaker, he is not without resources or direction. He “move[s] . . . out of the tearful stadium, borne on shoulders, at last.” Typically, of course, it is the star athlete who exits the stadium on others’ shoulders, and he does so only to return for the following match. Here, though, in a pointedly nonsensical image, it is the *spectators* who are carried out of the stadium. These lines thus offer a radical new vision of the self as necessarily

dependent on and supported by others, both distributing and receiving the sympathy so essential for personal growth. The image of the hero “borne on shoulders, at last” also instigates an ironic turn back toward Romantic typology, since the Romantic hero is usually assumed to be self-assured, self-aware and confident – all qualities the speaker in Ashbery’s poem lacks.

The reappearance of Romantic themes signals that Ashbery’s vision of a coherent subjectivity has not been vanquished, and it is buoyed by the poem’s return to memory, that Romantic archive of the mythic “true” self. As Berger argues, “Soonest Mended” carries out the search for this true self, “mov[ing] back through personal memory to an event *in illo tempore*, or sacred time, when the poet’s true chronology began” (182). Of course, given Ashbery’s awareness of such tropes, the process immediately reads as self-defeating:

These were moments, years,
Solid with reality, faces, namable events, kisses, heroic acts,
But like the friendly beginning of a geometrical progression
Not too reassuring, as though meaning could be cast aside some day
When it had been outgrown. (*Double Dream* 18)

These lines conjure up the worrying specter that troubles the poem’s speaker so deeply: if the past cannot provide a fixed guide for the present, and if the future remains unknown, from where should our sense of self and purpose derive? The poem’s conclusion is both ambivalent and freeing: if the randomness of experience dictates that “thinking not to grow up / Is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any rate” (19), it also demands an active, conscious, and communal attitude towards the self and the other, one that involves

learning to accept
The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago. (19)

Juxtaposing images of the future (“the seeds crooked in the furrow”) with images of the past (“the mooring of starting out”), the poem’s conclusion offers a poignant reminder of the self’s constant and perplexing position in the present. For while we cannot depend on the past for our

conceptions of selfhood, neither can we simply reject it. Instead we must “mak[e] ready to forget,” preparing for the dispersal of the constructed selves to which we cling – selves whose paths emanate from “the mooring of starting out,” a past that both constricts identity and makes it possible. The model of human relations underpinning such a practice can only be one of reciprocal sympathy. If the stirring last lines of “Soonest Mended” stress the ultimate indeterminacy of the self, the necessary and never-ending growth that its realization requires, it is through reliance on others that life remains vital and promising. For this reason the poem never relinquishes its use of the first-person plural, a communal “we” that embraces the environment both of the poem proper and of its audience.

The path to selfhood in Ashbery is thus a winding one, at times barely navigable. His poetry dismisses the Romantic trope of the “atomized, independent, and isolated” individual in favour of the notion that “human selves . . . are inextricably bound to one another” and must therefore rely on each other in the pursuit of their shared and separate identities (Epstein 128). For the same reason the poet must rely on and sympathize with his reader, whose presence enables the poem to be communicative rather than solipsistic, relational rather than inward-focused. At the same time, a sense of Romantic individuality energizes Ashbery’s poetry, and much of it derives from his attitude toward the past. In Ashbery’s poems, memory offers both speaker and audience a context within which to begin to shape the self. Its potency hinges on an intangible, unfulfilled dream for the restoration of the lost past in a future that will make sense of its ambitions and failures. “Much of my poetry,” Ashbery has said, “comes out of memories of childhood, the feeling of some lost world that can’t be recovered” (Poulin 253). If that lost world results in Ashbery’s Romanticism, his inability to recover that world results in the limit and endpoint of his Romanticism. The past is irretrievable, and the selves we create out of it are not inviolable. Sympathy – the task of feeling imaginatively with others – is therefore required if individuality is to be more than a fiction.

V. Moving On, Standing Still

In Ashbery’s more recent poem “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* is her Name,” an excerpt from which forms the epigraph to this chapter, Ashbery posits the longing for such sympathy as the reason the poet begins to write. This longing to be more than simply a separate self prompts the human

mind to face the “Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate” – its desire, that is, to be understood as a human person, notwithstanding all the quirks and complications such an understanding entails (Ashbery, *Houseboat Days* 46). With the phrase “Rousseau-like foliage” Ashbery refers primarily to the French Post-Impressionist painter Henri Rousseau, famed for his paintings of vivid jungle scenes. But Ashbery’s invocation of the “desire to communicate” might also bring to mind the other Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, who attempts a full verbal expression of the self in his *Confessions* less because he wishes to communicate than because he wishes to be comprehended. Ashbery, in contrast, realizes that communication must ultimately be other-directed and other-focused, must be offered “for the sake / Of others and their desire to understand you” and not merely for self-affirmation (46). This entails that the making of the self is a paradoxically unselfish process, an affirmation of the existence and value of the other. Such a process might appear to promote a “backward way of becoming,” as Ashbery phrases it in his poem “The Bungalows” (*Double Dream* 72). But it cannot fail to meet another of Ashbery’s standards: it is invariably “in favour of life” (quoted in Lehman 309).

As a final instance of how Ashbery’s poetry affirms both the value of memory and the primacy of sympathy in the construction of selfhood, it’s worth quoting at length from the final section of “The Bungalows,” which appears in *The Double Dream of Spring*:

Each detail was startlingly clear, as though seen through a magnifying glass,
 Or would have been to an ideal observer, namely yourself –
 For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar
 The way God watches a sinner on the path to redemption,
 Sometimes disappearing into valleys, but always *on the way*,
 For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful
 As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when completed,
 To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount of years.
 Who cares about what was there before? There is no going back,
 For standing still means death, and life is moving on,
 Moving on towards death. But sometimes standing still is also life. (*Double
 Dream* 72)

All of Ashbery's trademarks are displayed here to heightened effect: the positioning of the reader at the forefront of the poem, the thoughtful rumination on how past moments augment the sense of self ("it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful"), and the implied universality and shared feeling that resonate in each line. The poem's final two lines brilliantly summarize the tension in Ashbery between "moving on," in concert and sympathy with others, and "standing still" in order to grasp, if only fleetingly, an (immediately flawed) image of oneself and one's world. The fact that these desires compete in productive tension with one another suggests that while Ashbery does leaven his Romantic tendencies with a healthy dose of postmodern skepticism, he is not so devoted to the pragmatist ideals of indeterminacy and transience that he wishes to reject, out of hand, the very concept of the self.

Ashbery's assertion in "The Bungalows" that "it all builds up into something" reflects how his poems suggest a kind of soft politics despite the fact that his poetry avoids anything like direct political commentary. Put simply, Ashbery's poetics is too deeply predicated on sympathy between individuals not to assume an ethical and political stance. The political bent of his poetry finds expression not so much in his own "mode of 'belonging'" (Diggory 15) to a particular social group as in his effort to make the *reader* belong. As Vendler argues, by "fostering within the lyric poem a climate of mutual trust between poet and reader," Ashbery requires us to "engage in the imagined ethical modeling of an ideal mutuality" (*Invisible Listeners* 77). If the project of self-definition is necessarily a shared one, all actions must be considered in light of the community and not only the self. In its attention to its reader, Ashbery's poetry is defined by such consideration. It is why his poems, like O'Hara's, are in the first and last analysis methods of communication: refusing isolation, they proffer sympathy and commiseration. In his Charles Eliot Norton lecture on the poetry of David Schubert, Ashbery asserts that "the poem consists of speaking what cannot be said to the person I want to say it. In other words, the ideal situation for the poet is to have the reader speak the poem, and how nice it would be for everybody if that could be the case" (quoted in Herd 67). That, for Ashbery, is the perfect form of communication: the poem emerging, fully-formed, from the reader's mouth rather than the poet's. The image theorizes a level of emotional and intellectual connection that even poetry cannot make possible, and yet each next Ashbery poem takes the shape of a remarkable, carefully formed wish that it might be so.

The need for such a connection is only emphasized by the tenuously fashioned image of the self with which the poems of O'Hara and Ashbery leave us. To be faced with the complexity of selfhood is to admit to the limits of our understanding of it. It is perhaps fitting that O'Hara and Ashbery's poems harbor a definition of human subjectivity as inherently elusive as the self its function is to delimit. Their poetry also serves to suggest the possibility that our experiential notions of identity, especially those gathered through memory, run counter in some way to the contemporary picture of the self fomented in and by postmodernity. One might say that such post-Romantic poems occupy a space whose parameters are distinctly if uncertainly marked: they circumscribe the gap that has opened up between contemporary theorizing about the self and our everyday assumptions about it. This gap will not simply go away, either by blithely pretending that Rousseau was right or by completely jettisoning the intuitions central to our understanding of who we are as human beings.

This is not to say that the self, as it is modeled in the poems of Ashbery and O'Hara, leads only to a philosophical dead end. Beyond their purely aesthetic value, these poems perform, imaginatively and esoterically, an argument that still requires fuller working out in the analytic sphere. Throughout this argument, the importance of sympathy and community becomes clear: they form the fundamental means through which we come to understand ourselves *as* selves – inextricably tied to and shaped by others and simultaneously distinct from them. As such, the implicit hope offered in these poems is that by engaging with the internally conflicted and conflicting definition of the post-Romantic self, we might be led to re-evaluate some of our most basic human assumptions and most unquestioned cultural biases, and so attain to a more sustainable and more sustaining ethic of selfhood.

PART THREE

Sympathy and Transnational Optimism in Hayden and Tolson

“Man is motion toward the world and toward his like. A movement of aggression, which leads to enslavement or to conquest; a movement of love, a gift of self, the ultimate stage of what by common accord is called ethical orientation. Every consciousness seems to have the capacity to demonstrate these two components, simultaneously or alternatively.”

– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Chapter Seven

Racial Politics Reconsidered: Forms of Recognition in Hayden and Tolson

I. The Fisk Conference and the Black Aesthetic

The first two sections of this project have charted varieties of sympathy as they appear in poems of the Middle Generation and New York School, arguing that the sympathy inhering in these poems produces a politics that rejects hierarchies of class and gender while espousing communities of shared feeling as inducements to ethical action. Throughout, I have had to emphasize the implicitness of this politics, which emerged in an era during which many poets refrained from writing expressly political poetry. Whether late modernist or avant-garde, such approaches to writing poetry return us to the same conundrum introduced in the first chapter of this project: how to avoid political posturing and what might be deemed narrow provincialism in one’s writing without appearing entirely indifferent to important contemporary social causes. On this count, Frank O’Hara’s preferences (to take one example) seem clear: rather than being about those demonstrably separate or differentiated from him in some way, his poems tend, at least on a superficial level, to be about his circle of friends, all of whom are – like him – part of the bohemian New York avant-garde. (This is why the fact that his poems are designed to include the reader as well is so crucial to understanding his aesthetic.) Or again, a poem like Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” seems, at first glance, more to lament the absence of sympathy than to extend it to those who might need it most – a gesture that would not lack for potential

recipients in a Cold War culture in which homosexuality was read as deviance and socialism as sedition.

That is to say, nothing makes sympathy quite so necessary, or its lack quite so felt, as the concrete markers of difference (primarily, but not limited to, class, race, and gender) between individuals. Sympathy, in poetry and out of it, offers a response to the various injustices these differences inspire. As has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, in Lowell and Bishop as well as in Ashbery and O'Hara the sympathetic response to these injustices is both real and powerful. At the same time, the various aesthetic constraints that have lent their work much of its force have also made some of their poems seem wilfully esoteric. If they effectively navigate the relation between socio-political issues and poetry, they often do so precisely by seeming not to navigate it at all, or at least by leaving the exact nature of the relationship between the two spheres unexamined. The final section of this dissertation concerns two poets – Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson – for whom the connection between the political and the purely aesthetic demanded more overt, seemingly ceaseless examination and exposition, not only by themselves but by the various communities in which their work was received. This owes to the fact that their writing considers the problem of race, which continued, in the postwar United States, to make itself felt as a historically and culturally fraught marker of difference intersecting numerous other fractal points of division, among them class, dialect, and nationality. In this chapter I will contextualize my analysis of the poems of Hayden and Tolson by comparing their separate notions of the relation of politics to poetry. In their poems, I will argue, can be traced a current of affective optimism that addresses what Anne Anlin Cheng has called the racial melancholia afflicting minority cultures. This optimism hinges on their poems' insistence on the importance of recognition of the other in the development of an ethical society. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, I will show how this recognition is predicated on a heteroglossic mixture of idioms that disrupt the myth of purified languages and the ideologies of homogeneity and separateness they instantiate.

Melvin B. Tolson was born in Missouri and lived for most of his life in Oklahoma, where he taught at Langston University; Hayden, fifteen years Tolson's junior, was born in Detroit and taught for many years at Fisk University in Nashville before returning to Michigan in 1969. Wherever Hayden and Tolson are considered in conjunction with each other, it is

almost inevitably in reference to a single event that looms particularly large in critical appraisals of Hayden's work and career. In 1966, Fisk University, where Hayden was a professor, hosted the First Fisk Black Writers' Conference. The list of attendees included some of the most prestigious African American writers of the era, among them the Pulitzer Prize-winning Gwendolyn Brooks and the up-and-coming poet Amiri Baraka. In Harlem, New York, Baraka had recently begun to propagate what was to become known as the Black Aesthetic, and if the first question the conference organizers asked its attendees is any indication, one of the purposes of the conference was to weigh (but really to affirm) the value of this aesthetic stance. John Hatcher describes the conference as "center[ing] around one simple but pivotal question It asked simply: What are you first, a Negro or an artist?" (75).

Hayden's response not only made him an outlier at the time, it has become, as Brian Conniff writes, the "defining moment" of his career – though Hayden himself surely wished otherwise (488). "[V]isibly disturbed" by the question, Hayden publicly identified himself as a poet whose blackness was incidental, and thus not essential to his art, referring to himself (as Julius Lester recalls the phrase) as "a poet who happens to be a Negro" (quoted in Hatcher 78). With this sentiment, Hayden was pitting himself against the rising tide of the Black Aesthetic. In responding to Hayden's remarks, Tolson, who had honed his skills in oratory and argument for many years as both professor and coach of the debate team at Wiley College Texas,⁶⁴ seized on Hayden's use of the word "happens" and its implication of a kind of fatalism or lack of agency. His flair for the dramatic, which included, in David Llorens' recollection, a "sweeping gesture" and "booming voice," can only have made his retort to the comparatively mild-mannered Hayden all the more devastating: "Hap, hap . . . let me see, hap means accident. Is someone going to make M. B. Tolson an accident? . . . I'm a black poet, an African-American

⁶⁴ Tolson taught at Wiley College for more than twenty years before taking up a position at Langston University in Oklahoma. His skills as a debate coach at Wiley helped the school reach the national finals against Harvard University – an event later memorialized in the film *The Great Debaters* (2007), which stars Denzel Washington as Tolson.

poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident – and I don't give a tinker's dam what you think" (quoted in Farnsworth 297).⁶⁵

My purpose in this chapter will not be to choose a side on this issue, even if this anecdote seems to prompt us to do so by casting Hayden and Tolson in starring roles on opposing sides of a political divide. Instead, I want to begin to assess the rich problematic on display here by noting the evident *lack* of sympathy (in this moment, at least) between two individuals whose lives and careers should have made it easy for each to sympathize with the other. After all, the similarities between the two poets are several. Tolson and Hayden both embraced radical politics early in their careers, and their first collections – *Rendezvous With America* and *Heart-Shape in the Dust* respectively – reflect the influence and ideas of the Harlem Renaissance. Both of these books feature poems whose artistry is hindered, in the opinion of many critics, by too naked and earnest a political investment. Tolson remained on the political left throughout his life, but other than in his early poems, which are mostly “notable for their strong social protest with a Marxist slant” (Thomas 102), he reserved most of his explicitly political content for *Caviar & Cabbage*, the weekly column he wrote for the *Washington*

⁶⁵ On the day, Hayden was badly outnumbered and his position dismissed, and he became the pariah of the conference. In later assessments, though, he has been vindicated somewhat; even Robert Farnsworth, who authored the authoritative biography of Tolson, conceded that “Hayden was unfairly steamrolled by a vintage Tolson performance” (298). Some defenders of Hayden are harsher in their descriptions of his antagonists; in Conniff’s summary, for example, “a group of writers and students, led by Melvin Tolson, assailed Hayden as the stooge of exploitive capitalists and, all in all, a traitor to his race” (487). More equably, Darwin Turner points out that all Hayden had done was to “stubbornly [fight] back for the very right that Black cultural nationalists were demanding for Black people: the right to define himself and to resist any definition thrust upon him by others” (93).

Though he never spoke of the conference proceedings publicly, Hayden undoubtedly felt the sting of the affair for a long time afterwards. Visiting him a few days after the conference had ended, Julius Lester recalls that Hayden’s anger and dismay had not abated: “When I walked into the house, his first words to me were a tirade against the ‘nationalists’” (66). In a later interview, Hayden defends his position at greater length, refusing to concede any ground to what he regarded as the unnecessary politicization of the pure arena of poetry:

I am trying to, I think, reach the point where I am finally indifferent to designations. I don't care whether I am called a poet or a black poet or whatever because I know in my own heart what I am. I think of myself as being a poet. I am afraid today that *black poet* carries the implication, has the connotation, that the poet is interested in one kind of thing and that he closes his mind upon the world and concentrates on the ethnocentric. I would hope that in time we will get away from that. I feel that *black poet* means you are overspecialized, you are concerned with one kind of thing, one kind of experience. (Hayden, “An Interview” 18)

It’s worth noting that Hayden only remained at Fisk for three more years after the occasion of the First Black Writers’ Conference. In 1969 he would return to Michigan, where he remained until the end of his life.

Tribune from 1937 to 1944. While these columns “ranged far and wide” in their scope, as Gary Lenhart observes, they “returned most often to the politics of race, class, radical Christianity – and literature” (66). For his part, Hayden flirted with communism in his younger days, but was never an official member of any political party. This owes partly to his ongoing hesitancy to join any group,⁶⁶ but also to his conversion in 1942 to the Bahá’í faith to which his wife subscribed. In a sense, the Bahá’í faith discourages overly specific forms of political activism, since the faith subsumes all political creeds under the belief in “the essential oneness of all people and . . . the basic unity of all religions,” to use Hayden’s phrase (“A Certain Vision” 111).

II. Authorial Ambitions: The Situational Politics of Hayden and Tolson

Hayden’s and Tolson’s differing views on the relation between racial politics and poetry, brought into stark contrast at Fisk’s conference, highlight the question toward which criticism of African American literature has constantly been tugged: to what extent *must* African American literature be political, insofar as it emerges from a history of injustice and oppression and continues to subsist alongside or within a white culture that often (however subliminally or unconsciously) insists on its own pre-eminence? And if African American literature must be political, what should its politics look like? Within what contextual parameters should it be articulated, both in black literature itself and in the wider culture?⁶⁷ In the history of literary criticism, answers to these questions, especially when they are offered from a position at one or more removes from the debate, tend to quickly become anachronistic, and indeed, tend to be

⁶⁶ In an interview he puts the matter bluntly: “I’m not a joiner. I don’t get involved with groups. The Bahá’í Faith is about the only organized body I can stand” (Hayden, “Bicentennial” 82).

⁶⁷ The traditional debate over the role of race in black literature is a topic endemic to discussions of the poetry of both Tolson and Hayden. On Hayden’s relationship to this debate see, among others, Boyd 213, Hernton 326, Hatcher 59-63, Murphy 108-9, and Kutzinski; on Tolson’s, see Thomas 94-117, Werner, Gold 243-5, and Bérubé. This chapter explores ways of moving outside the restrictions imposed by the debate’s parameters: race is simultaneously a social construct and a self-evidently real and trenchant issue, but it seems to me that to constantly parse works by black authors in terms of the racial divide is not only to tread again over extremely well-trod ground, but to reify ethnocentric constructs that need have no bearing on a given work’s aesthetic value. My hope, then, is that these chapters are in keeping with Paul Gilroy’s injunction that we work towards “a series of answers to the power of ethnic absolutism that doesn’t try to fix ethnicity absolutely but sees it instead as an infinite process of identity construction” (223).

symptomatic of the very problem they diagnose rather than constituting progress toward its resolution.⁶⁸

For Hayden and Tolson, the dilemma of situating themselves within this debate was also tied to particular aesthetic assumptions. African American poetics was linked to a blues tradition and often (though certainly not always or necessarily) bears traces of its dialects, including, for example, the call-and-response techniques common in black folk music. The normative “white” tradition that had taken root within the academy, meanwhile, had founded itself on the modernist impersonality of Pound and Eliot, but by the early 1960s had begun

⁶⁸ As a brief example of this tendency, consider the prefaces to two of Melvin Tolson’s books, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* and *The Harlem Gallery*. At Tolson’s request, Allen Tate wrote the preface for *Libretto*, and while, as Bérubé notes, “the praise Tate’s preface bestowed upon Tolson was not immediately experienced as patronizing,” his introduction to Tolson’s poem has not aged particularly well:

It seems to me only common sense to assume that the main thing is the poetry, if one is a poet, whatever one’s color may be. I think that Mr. Tolson has assumed this; and the assumption, I gather, has made him not less but more intensely *Negro* in his apprehension of the world than any of his contemporaries, or any that I have read. But by becoming more intensely Negro he seems to me to dismiss the entire problem, so far as poetry is concerned, by putting it in its properly subordinate place (Tolson, *Libretto* iii).

If Tate’s first statement here is defensible, his second contention confuses the issue considerably: what does it mean, exactly, to become “more intensely *Negro*” in one’s apprehension of the world? And given that “the main thing is the poetry,” why should it even matter? Tate’s attempt to set the record straight on race in poetry is rhetorically perplexing enough that he comes closer to doing the opposite.

His disagreement with Tate’s position propelled Karl Shapiro to write the introduction for Tolson’s last book, *Harlem Gallery*, published twelve years after *Libretto*. In his introduction, which he viewed as a corrective to Tate’s effort, Shapiro insists that Tolson is in fact

the enemy of the dominant culture of our time and place. He is, to use the term he prefers, an Afroamerican poet, not an American Negro poet accommodating himself to the Tradition. . . . It is not enough to equate Tolson, as his best critics have done, with Eliot or Hart Crane To make him equal is to miss the point, just as it would be to make him *better than*. Tolson writes and thinks in Negro, which is to say, a possible American language. He is therefore performing the primary poetic rite for our literature. (*Harlem Gallery* 13)

Shapiro intended his introduction to correct Tate’s universalizing of Tolson’s work, which he believed to be an unjust assessment of a very specifically realized form of poetic genius. Shapiro’s introduction comes closer than Tate’s to articulating something like a Black Aesthetic, but he fails to explain the difference between an “Afroamerican” poet and an “American Negro” one (though we might easily hazard a guess), and his assertion that “Tolson writes and thinks in Negro” is clearly and dangerously essentializing. In short, neither of these prefaces, however well-meant, have stood the test of time; rather than shedding light on the contentious interrelation of racial politics and art, their very attempts to shed light on the controversy serve only to invoke, and thereby to reaffirm, the terms on which the debate must (and have continued to) take place. As Michael Bérubé points out, the central question – “should the African-American writer assimilate, resist, or ignore hegemonic Anglo-American forms?” – is one that ultimately only “reinscribes and monumentalizes a unitary, monolithic ‘tradition’ against which a culture’s marginal forces must continually defend themselves” (167).

moving towards an avant-gardist ethos that held its inherited tradition in as little regard as that tradition had held the one before it.

Faced with this array of alternatives, Hayden's solution was to avail himself of a universalist politics that would contain all of them. Rather than viewing his role as primarily that of a black poet writing about black culture and experience (though he of course was, and did), Hayden averred only that he "tend[ed] to identify with anything which is human, drawing the line of course against those people who are cruel and rapacious and so on" (Hayden, "Bicentennial" 82). Or as he put it in a later interview: "I think my range is fairly wide; certainly my sympathies are broad and human Nothing human is foreign to me" (Hayden, "A Certain Vision" 114). While his rhetoric of inclusion does not extend to the non-human world, Hayden's poetic sympathies are meant to resonate with all beings short of that dividing line – and are pointedly intended to supersede artificially sustained barriers such as race, nationality, or gender.

In many respects, Tolson's approach to a situational politics differs widely from Hayden's. For one thing, Tolson was more blunt, in his interviews and letters but especially in his poetry, about the challenges he faced as a black poet determined to find his way in a white academic culture. Indeed, Michael Bérubé's book *Marginal Forces / Cultural Centers* argues persuasively that Tolson's consciousness of the audience and reception of his poetry forms a central preoccupation in his work. This is particularly evident in *Harlem Gallery*, a technically magisterial, erudite long poem that consists, in the main, of a debate between two characters over the social role of art. Rather than generalizing his poetic mission, as was Hayden's preference, Tolson's strategy was to situate himself not merely within one domain but two, and thereby to forge from their combination a new way forward for African American poetics. The two contexts Tolson was determined to fuse were the African American literary tradition, replete with its own idiom and history, and the arena of canonical modernism which it was Tolson's ambition to join.⁶⁹ In Bérubé's analogy, Tolson hoped to endure "as an African-

⁶⁹ For a sustained critical treatment of Tolson's attempt to synthesize these spheres, see Werner, who contends that Tolson's true goal is to "subver[t] the authority of any single approach," and that as a result it "makes little sense to attribute any particular element of Tolson's performance to any particular tradition," since "[h]is point is

American literary version of the maroon, the escaped slave living on the frontier, imperialism's margin, raiding the nearest plantation periodically for supplies and planning the long-term offensive in the meantime" (145). He sought to balance both his high modernist poetics and his African American identity without de-emphasizing or sacrificing either one of them for the sake of the other.

Tolson thus situated himself within not one but two particular contexts, while Hayden chose only the widest context possible, opting for the sort of universalist approach a more politically radical poet might consider naïve at best.⁷⁰ Seen in this light, however, it becomes clear that the positions of Hayden and Tolson, while they confront each other on a semantic level (as is evident from the events of the First Black Writers' Conference), are in a basic sense co-directional: Tolson's narrower situational politics is subsumed under the wider reach of Hayden's. Both poets are simply citing the domains within which their work takes on meaning: and these domains evidently overlap each other rather than jut up against one another. For this reason it is possible to argue – as I do in this chapter – for a continuity of thought between the poetics of Tolson and Hayden, albeit one disguised by the fact that they chose opposite sides in a historically contingent and specific cultural battle.

Their self-contextualization was important for Hayden and Tolson in part because it enabled them to discover their own position within the landscape of twentieth-century American poetry. One of the tasks of any artist is to articulate, not only to others but to herself, her role in relation to the society around her. The poet's notion of an audience is deeply implicated in his understanding of his poetry and even of his own self. We develop formal and nascent political motivations in relation to others precisely in order, as Jacques Derrida reminds us in *Monolingualism of the Other*, "to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history"

precisely that the dichotomies, whether racial or aesthetic, are insufficient and destructive" (467). Tolson's reception as a poet, however, has proved the failure, at least on a pragmatic level, of his radical approach: "Public and private, racial and modern, Tolson's Afro-modernist blues suite remains ironically enmeshed in the dichotomies it so eloquently and thoroughly discredits" (471).

⁷⁰ The attendant irony here (to which I have already pointed briefly) is that for all his universalism, Hayden's poetry hews more closely, in terms of both form and content, to what might be called the African American poetic tradition than does Tolson's.

(55). Without this social and historical framework, the poet's task would be much more difficult: "One would have to construct oneself, one would have to be able to *invent oneself* without a model and without an assured addressee" (55). The ideal addressee for both Tolson and Hayden is of course the reader of their poems, but they speak to a critical audience outside their poems as well, in order to augment the methodologies and narratives that structure the reading of those poems.⁷¹ This task is necessary not only for Hayden and Tolson but for all poets who wish to speak to or for their own time and place: necessary because any culture will take it upon itself to delimit and corral the meanings available in a poetic corpus according to its own whims, with or without the input of the poet in question. This point is made forcefully by Michel Foucault in his famous essay "What is an Author," in which he argues that the very concept of the author in contemporary society is produced as a constraining force, a tool to organize, manage, and direct the haphazard power of signification that a text might carry. "The author," he writes, "allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" ("What is an Author?" 118). Or again, "he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses" (119).

If this maxim is true to some extent of all authors and cultures, it is arguably even more the case for black authors, and especially during a postwar era in American history that featured, at times, considerable racial tension. The "blackness" of Hayden and Tolson provided (and continues to provide) readers and critics with a ready-to-hand context within which to understand their poems, even if the poets did not wish to assume this mantle in the manner it was foisted on them. As Bérubé notes, "American writers of different races have historically been assigned radically different author functions," and one of the functions of the black poet, historically, has been to produce and reproduce in his or her writing the accepted signifiers and tropes of black culture (61). In other words, Hayden and Tolson had to situate themselves politically in order to respond to and mitigate against the culturally sanctioned exemplar of what

⁷¹ This is as much as to say that Tolson and Hayden both follow Wordsworth's dictum, penned in an 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont, that "every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished" (Wordsworth, *Letters* 103).

a black poet was supposed to write about, against “the assumption,” voiced or unspoken, “that a black poet has a responsibility to speak to a racially defined community in language that is legible to – because it is identified with – that community” (Hart 146). Hayden and Tolson articulated their political stances in order to negotiate their audiences, the communities to whom they wanted their poems to speak. And if – as Aldon Nielsen says of Tolson – they both produced poems “that constitute a considerably different audience from that addressed by those white modernists, and that constitute that audience on a different ground,” this should not be taken to mean that they simply acceded to the conventional societal expectations surrounding black poetry of their day (53-4). Instead, their poems use sympathy to radicalize the very notion of what a “black” poem can be and do, overstepping culturally and racially instituted boundaries in order, in part, to emphasize the constructed and arbitrary quality of these boundaries.

III. Responding to Racial Melancholia

Anne Anlin Cheng offers a powerful assessment of the boundaries imposed by race in American culture in her book *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Working from the premise that grief is one of racism’s primary aftereffects, Cheng suggests that this grief manifests itself in American culture – in the case of both dominant and minority ethnic groups – primarily in terms of a complex and ongoing history of melancholia. Borrowing the term from Freud, Cheng follows him in defining melancholia as “a condition of endless self-impoverishment” in which the subject becomes “psychically stuck,” unable to free itself of a psychologically scarring past (8). White mainstream culture is implicated in this melancholia because the history of slavery and exclusion it struggles both to deny and transcend is so at odds with its national ideology of freedom and equality. American culture must therefore attempt to repudiate the very historical conditions and choices that have produced and sustained it, and this paradox results in melancholic forms of cultural repression. Further, Cheng argues, white culture depends upon the same racial minority groups it ostracizes, its relation to these groups revealing “an entangled network of repulsion and sympathy, fear and desire, repudiation and identification” (12). At the same time, Cheng writes, “the social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychical experience of grief” (x). In the minority subject, melancholia is experienced as an internalized and gradually

unnoticed deep sadness that ultimately “conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity” (24).

Cheng is careful to manage the claims she sets out in *The Melancholy of Race*, proposing to assemble a vocabulary with which to address issues of grief and race rather than to perform an exhaustive and possibly doomed attempt to “get beyond” racialization and its effects (29). The situation of endemic and systemic cultural melancholia she diagnoses demands some gesture toward a reparative solution – and with it, to the realm of politics – but Cheng is wary of any answers that might underestimate the extent to which a history of oppression and stigmatism have conditioned the identities of those affected by the construct of race. Indeed, given the pervasiveness of melancholia, she conjectures that “minority discourse might prove to be most powerful when it resides *within* the consciousness of melancholia itself” (127). For Cheng, this means that our ethical responsibilities hinge on recognizing, not the other, but the interstitial space *between* self and other. “The project of intersubjective negotiations,” she argues, “might be retemporalized and respatialized as an in-between place, the middle ground that is not a copout but a crucial, strategic position in a divided world” (190).

In focusing on this difficult-to-define “in-between space,” Cheng seems to affirm the reality of self and other but to subsume this reality to that of the cultural melancholia into which we are all assimilated. As a result of this precondition, the “redemptive possibility of recognizing the self in the other and vice versa . . . proves to be difficult, if not impossible,” and the only plateau to which we can hope to attain is, finally, “a kind of knowing, in the fullest and most present sense of knowledge, that the distance between self and other is neither measurable nor stable” (180, 189). In the chapters that follow, I intend to read, in the poems of Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson, an alternative solution to the persistent melancholia Cheng diagnoses. Hayden and Tolson valorize recognition as the formative intersubjective relation through which can be produced forms of sympathy ontologically prior to the cultural melancholia their poems lament. Without denying the historical and material realities engendered by racism and colonialism – precisely, in fact, by paying close attention to those realities – Hayden and Tolson forge an optimistic politics of sympathy that refuses either to minimize racial grief or to reify the constructs that foster it, but one whose realization promotes the sharing of affect rather than its melancholic incorporation.

This sharing of affect takes the form of an uncharted and unconventional sympathy that destabilizes the premises on which arguments over the relationship between race and poetry take place. Sympathy in Tolson and Hayden builds certain connections by severing others. It encourages interstitial, hybrid interactions between people of different races, nations, and even eras, both to inculcate sympathy between individuals and to upend the binary oppositional assumptions that have historically functioned to divide people from one another. It will become clear in what follows that the ostensibly oppositional, relationship-defining moment at Fisk University has served to obscure the fact that the political philosophies of Tolson and Hayden relate to one another less in terms of stark opposition than complex interpenetration. Their differing stances on the question of politics in art fit within the realm of “both/and,” and need not be reduced to the binarism of “either/or.” The incident at Fisk underlines the degree to which, caught up in the categorical divides upon which their society hinged, Tolson and Hayden failed to find common ground as public figures. But in this sense their poems are more revolutionary than the poets themselves, since their work finds this common ground and more, “demonstrat[ing] the continuity” between identities rendered “mutually exclusive” by “racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses” (Gilroy 1).

IV. Navigating Sympathy’s Preconditions

If sympathy in Hayden and Tolson accrues around and finally dismantles a racial politics rooted in ethnic and historical essentialisms, it also, no doubt, makes itself felt in more immediately discernible ways. For instance, we can detect in Hayden and Tolson a continuation of the patterns and forms of poetic sympathy that characterize the poems of Bishop, Lowell, O’Hara, and Ashbery. These include instances of sympathy between the speaker of the poem and one of its characters or between the speaker and the reader. Such moments are especially prevalent in the poems of Hayden, who intended his poetry to be more populist, or at least less overtly modernist and difficult, than did Tolson. Hayden’s poetry repeatedly demonstrates, too, his willingness to “identif[y] with . . . the outsider,” as Yusef Komunyakaa has noted (334). Hayden’s consistent identification with the disenfranchised other allows him, in Pontheolla Williams’ phrase, to make sense of his “consciousness of his own pain” through “his awareness of pain in others” (167). This sympathetic consciousness is the impetus behind Hayden’s much-

anthologized poem “Those Winter Sundays,” in which the speaker recalls the deep cold winter mornings during which his father, hampered by “cracked hands that ached / from labor in the weekday weather /made banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him” (Hayden, *Collected Poems* 41). The sympathy the speaker failed to feel in his youth inspires feelings of regret and amazement in the present day: “What did I know, what did I know / of love’s austere and lonely offices?” (41).⁷²

As the phenomenon of “feeling with” another subject, sympathy is perhaps even more clearly visible in “The Whipping,” a Hayden poem that dramatizes domestic violence in order to weigh its effects and causes. The poem begins matter-of-factly: “The old woman across the way / is whipping the boy again” (40). Reflecting on the poem’s pedagogical value, Linda Wyman observes that early on in the poem, “[s]tudents’ immediate identification and sympathy are with the boy who is getting the whipping” (82). Indeed, as the woman “strikes and strikes the shrilly circling / boy till the stick breaks / in her hand,” the reader’s sympathy for the boy might be accompanied by feelings of reproach toward the woman (*Collected Poems* 40). The last lines of the poem are an attempt to force us to amend this view, to factor the woman’s own difficult history into our opinion of her:

And the woman leans muttering against
a tree, exhausted, purged –
Avenged in part for lifelong hidings
she has had to bear. (40)

As these final lines reveal, part of the poem’s motive is to incite us to reconsider our preconceptions by “extending our sympathies to the onlooker and finally to the old woman” (Wyman 84). Analogically, however, its concern is with the complex relationships between history, violence, and suffering: for while the poem’s immediate focus is domestic and familial, its metaphorical implications are much broader in scope: they are transnational, multi-ethnic. The poem reminds us not only that violence begets more violence, but that identity (both individual and, as in this specific poem, cultural) appears as a historical accumulation, and is

⁷² For a brief but excellent reading of “Those Winter Sundays” and its formal qualities, see Huddle.

thus only discernible if we are willing to consider the full force of the past. In this way we can begin to tease out the ways in which sympathy, even in Hayden's most straightforward and didactic poems, generates an insistent and transformative pressure which can be brought to bear on the significant social issues of his time and our own.

Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* does not present us with the kinds of intimate tableaux Hayden conjures up in poems like "Those Winter Sundays" and "The Whipping." Nor should this surprise us: *Libretto* is a brash, ambitious, challenging poem whose setting is resolutely transnational in scope. Indeed, as Matthew Hart argues, borrowing Paul Gilroy's famous term, *Libretto* might fairly be termed a "black Atlantic" poem (163). The texture of the sympathy it displays is necessarily fitted to the same international scale. Thus, while Hayden, in a poem like "The Whipping," uses the domestic sphere as a metaphor for the material history of black and white cultures, Tolson does just the reverse in *Libretto*, rendering the national familial and envisioning the ethnic as domestic in order to suggest that the forms of sympathy that inhere between family members can also flourish across continents:

"My Negro kinsmen,
America is my mother,
Liberia is my wife,
and Africa my brother." (lines 251-4)

Tolson expands on this metaphor elsewhere in the poem, as if attentive to the fact that this sense of connection between disparate cultures and classes might seem too easily attained. One example is the image he provides linking cultures to individuals growing from infancy through adolescence to adulthood and finally to senility – "All cultures crawl, / walk hard, / fall, / flout, / under classes under" – employing, once again, a reverse metaphor to convey the sense in which all societies, no matter how diverse, follow similar patterns of ascent and gradual decline (304-8).

The above instances of sympathy in Hayden and Tolson, while significant, do not typify the primary manner in which it features in their poems. Sympathy is most profoundly and unsettlingly present in Hayden and Tolson not as a realized fact but as a desired effect. Rather than simply displaying scenes that involve sympathy and encourage its cultivation (though some of their poems, Hayden's especially, do this as well), Tolson and Hayden present their readers

with scenes that require us to uncover and interrogate the very preconditions of sympathy's existence. Their poems do more than to ask what must be done to put the world in a better state; they trace the phenomenon of "feeling-with" back to its origins, dismissing factors incidental to its cause or revealing them to be so. They emphasize sympathy's transgressive power by positing its potential to reach across walls built to keep it out or deflect it elsewhere. The theorist Frantz Fanon has argued that "what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species" (*Wretched* 40). The poems of Tolson and Hayden recognize the importance, in contemporary society, of racial and national forms of belonging, and simultaneously demand whether and how such entrenched notions of belonging might be challenged or augmented. For this reason, sympathy appears in their poetry as a nascent and often untapped force, but one that – if applied more fully – promises a profound and radical disjunction of the status quo.

V. Recognition in Fanon and Hegel

Given that sympathy is something Hayden and Tolson hope their poems produce rather than merely display, their poems are inevitably concerned with answering the following question: what is required for the coming-into-being of a form of sympathy that has the potential to transform the conventions – whether racial, economic, or political – we so consistently and unthinkingly reify? The answer to such a question demands a theoretical consideration of the relation between self and other. This is one of the tasks the cultural theorist Frantz Fanon sets for himself in his influential book *Black Skin, White Masks*. The relation between self and other, he observes, is necessarily predicated on an implicit demand: "I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other" (*Black Skin* 229). This is as much to say that in some sense sympathy, or at least its precursor, is essential to the basic functioning of any social contract: "freedom requires an effort at disalienation," as Fanon puts it (231). From Fanon's existentialist perspective, our efforts in this regard determine the very nature of humanity: "I cannot disassociate myself from the future that is proposed for my brother. Every one of my acts commits me as a man. Every one of my silences, every one of my cowardices reveals me as a man" (89).

As is clear from the title of his work, Fanon approaches these issues through the challenging cathexis of race and its attendant realities. However, in his famous chapter “The Fact of Blackness,” his initial representation of the increasing tension between personhood and objecthood in the life of the (black) individual is devoid of any discussion of race:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. (109)

In the scenario Fanon paints here, the attention of others initially greets the subject as a blessing, because it frees him from the terror of being merely an object by granting him a subjectivity borne of his relation to others. However, this state of affairs does not last. Refracted through the prism of racial ideology, relationality returns the subject to an externally administered “crushing objecthood” that originates not through the absence of attention from others, but because of it: “just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. . . . I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self” (109).

The core movement of racism captured here lies in its refusal to recognize the other as both fully human and as racially specific in that humanness, which in turn guarantees the impossibility of sympathy. More than this, it encourages the development of other, potentially violent forms of feeling in the person of the oppressed: “Affect is exacerbated in the Negro, he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication, and all these factors chain him with an unbearable insularity” (50). As a possible solution to this toxic situation, Fanon theorizes the primacy of relationality, the basic connectedness between two individuals who might be separated by all other exigencies, race among them: “The only means of breaking this vicious circle that throws me back on myself is to restore to the other, through mediation and recognition, his human reality, which is different from natural reality. The other has to perform the same operation” (217). Here Fanon expresses

his belief less in the power of sympathy than in its essential precondition: *recognition*. Recognition of the other as human, and therefore of value, is for Fanon the basic unit and promise of social possibility, the condition on which any understanding of the self, and ultimately of civilization itself is premised: “In order to win the certainty of oneself, the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential” (217).⁷³

To support these claims, Fanon turns to the section in Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Mind* in which Hegel sets out the well-known dialectic between lordship and bondage. The centrality of the trope of recognition to Hegel’s argument is immediately clear:⁷⁴ “Self-consciousness,” he writes, “exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’ [*Anerkannt*].” Such recognition entails a reciprocal relationship between two individuals on the level of consciousness itself, since to know oneself as a distinct self requires, paradoxically, acknowledgement from without: “this other is for itself only when it cancels itself as existing for itself, and has self-existence only in the existence of the other” (231). Selfhood, for Hegel, is a function of interdependence, which means that recognition of the other is not only a prerequisite for the development of anything like civilization, it is fundamental to the possibility of the very concept of a self. We can therefore establish the moment of recognition not only as the necessary ground for sympathy, but as the moment at which sympathy becomes possible at all as a concept or idea. Hegel himself makes this clear when he notes that recognition –

⁷³ For Fanon, the problem of race precludes, at least in his own time, the possibility of Hegelian recognition. Blacks are considered equal to whites in name only: “the Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it” (*Black Skin* 221), and as a result he remains “a slave who has been allowed to assume the attitude of a master” (219). “For the French Negro,” Fanon concludes, “the situation is unbearable. Unable to ever be sure whether the white man considers him consciousness in-itself-for-itself, he must forever absorb himself in uncovering resistance, opposition, challenge” (222). Hegel’s dialectic is important to Fanon in part because the real-world dynamics of race expose its time-bound insufficiency. But in their poetry, Hayden and Tolson explore the possibility of forms of recognition that, through the restorative violence of their enactment, begin to work against the historical processes that have resulted in the alienation of the black citizen from (trans)national culture.

⁷⁴ For more on recognition in Hegel see especially Robert R. Williams’ *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, in which Williams argues that while the concept of recognition was introduced in the German philosophical tradition by Fichte, it was Hegel who “appropriated and transformed the concept of recognition and regarded it as the fundamental intersubjective structure of ethical life” (26).

because it reveals to the self not only the other, but *the self as other* in the eyes of the other – is the hinge on which human relationality turns:

Each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and hence its own certainty of itself is still without truth. For its truth would merely be that its own individual existence for itself would be shown to it to be an independent object, or, which is the same thing, that the object would be exhibited as this pure certainty of itself. By the notion of recognition [*Anerkennung*], however, this is not possible, except in the form that as the other is for it, so it is for the other; each in its self through its own action and again through the action of the other achieves this pure abstraction of existence for self. (232)

Hegel's claim here – that we arrive at a valid concept of self only by way of the other – is a landmark observation in Western thought that has been taken up in the work of numerous theorists. The importance Hegel assigns to recognition is crucial to my argument because it provides a philosophical and historical reference point for understanding the poems of Hayden and Tolson, in which recognition also plays a pre-eminent role. Hayden and Tolson stage, in their poems, scenes of recognition not only between individuals but between disparate cultural categories. In their poems, these categories are wrested from their conventional positions and forced into productive collision with each other. In particular, idioms and nationalities thought to be distinct encounter one another within the space of a single poem, sometimes a single line of poetry, in order to provoke moments of cultural recognition that will create space for the transformative identifications these poems seek to produce.

VI. Language, Idiom, Ethnicity

As a mode of communication directed toward others, speech implicitly follows on and encourages recognition. As Fanon observes, this makes language a phenomenon through which can be discovered “one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (*Black Skin* 17). Socially generative and socially engendered, speech is essentially participatory, linking the speaker with the addressee: “Each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write, I *promise*” (Derrida 67). Mikhail Bakhtin was also well aware of language's inherent capacity to foment

community. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, his influential study of the language of the novel, Bakhtin states that not only everyday dialogue, but

every other sort of discourse as well is oriented toward an understanding that is “responsive” – although this orientation is not particularized in an independent act and is not compositionally marked. Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse. (280-1)

Resistance or support: for while language can be a unifying force, it can equally become an instrument of power or exclusion when sufficient ideological force is attached to a given dialect. As such, language is one of the means subcultures use to differentiate themselves from one another – or, in the case of racist and colonialist cultures, to overpower one another. Even the attempt to mark off a particular idiom as “pure” and sacrosanct is one that challenges, and is challenged by, whatever looms outside its self-created borders. As Nielsen suggests, “each attempt to draw borders within the language of race and to establish ownership of a territory encounters and is countered by the already-in-place deterritorializing language of the other” (7). Another way of making this point is to suggest that language, even in its everyday use, always makes political and ethical demands of those who use it. Indeed, its very formation, as historical accumulation, constitutes a politically charged act (though one performed unconsciously and collectively). Bakhtin reminds us of the fact: “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others” (294).

If linguistic idioms have the power both to unite and to subdue, to sympathize and to antagonize, our ability to shape language toward positive ends begins, Bakhtin argues, with the realization that every dialect is itself interwoven with outside voices and outside systems of signification. This fact informs Bakhtin’s notion of “polyglossia,” which alone “fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language” (61). Against the fact of language’s polyglossic character, linguistic norms work to corral language into specific ideological patterns; they are the “forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic

nucleus of an officially recognized literary language” (270-1). For Bakhtin, the novel is a revolutionary genre precisely because it resists this movement, setting diverse and even opposing linguistic forces against each other in dialogic confrontation. And much the same operation is in effect in the poems of Hayden and Tolson. Their quest to attain and embody a high modernist poetic implicitly rejects the linguistic categories through which the high modernist poem is traditionally defined. Tolson and Hayden set idioms and voices against each other to disjunctive and liberating effect, and in so doing they redefine the space of poetry not as the hallowed arena of a language clinging to an ideal of purity (as Bakhtin argued poetic language must do)⁷⁵ but as a platform in which various linguistic forms and cultures, and the individuals made to instantiate them, cohabit a shared space. This space is defined not by the totalizing impulse of a hegemonic master language but by dialogue between dialects, indeed by the very fact of the *between* as such and the recognition it might spark, and no less, the sympathy it might provoke.

In a more directly political manoeuvre, Hayden and Tolson use their poems to situate the conjunction of nationalities as well as idioms. While both poets self-identify as American and

⁷⁵ I should acknowledge that in attributing the characteristics of Bakhtinian heteroglossia to the poetry of Hayden and Tolson I am taking Bakhtin’s theory down a path along which he was disinclined to venture. For Bakhtin, the relationship between the poet and language is markedly different than that between the novelist and language: the poet *owns* his language, such that it is (in a rather Hölderlinian fashion) wholly of a piece with the poet’s intention: “The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were, ‘without quotation marks’), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention” (285). As a result, Bakhtin argues, “The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style” (286). Bakhtin wrote at a time when the possibilities inherent in poetic form were only just beginning to be explored and stretched, and his undoubted awareness of these developments in poetry is reflected by his inclusion of the following caveat: “Elements of heteroglossia enter [poetry] not in the capacity of another language carrying its own particular points of view, about which one can say things not expressible in one’s own language, but rather in the capacity of a depicted thing. Even when speaking of alien things, the poet speaks in his own language” (287).

To align Hayden and Tolson with Bakhtin’s theory, one would have to fit their poetry into this last category, in which other voices and dialects appearing in the poem are not “authentic” but depicted, and are in the final analysis subsumed under the poet’s own voice. This distinction ultimately seems a tendentious one, however, particularly in the wake of the poststructuralist moment, which has convincingly demonstrated the impossibility of ever “owning” language. Even if we accept the terms of Bakhtin’s argument, we can note that while Hayden and Tolson do assume and demonstrate their control over the various spheres of language and history they bring into conjunction, their poems can be said to offer, at the very least, *representations* of the collision of diverse linguistic and ethnic instances.

wished to situate their poems within the American modernist tradition, they remain critical of aspects of their own culture, and their poems often seem to urge an internationalist perspective. This combination of allegiance to an unattained version of America with an optimistic belief in the unity of all nations is not a contradictory one. Indeed, Fanon goes so far as to argue that one emerges from the other: “It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately only the source of all culture” (*Wretched* 247-8). The nation provides the poet with a recognizable political superstructure to define himself within and against, even where the poet’s ultimate wish is to supersede such constructions. Matthew Hart notes in this regard that “despite the undeniable cosmopolitanism of modernist poetic form, it remains true that almost all codes of citizenship, and many important forms of cultural belonging, remain organized around affiliations to national communities” (37).

Writing within a rapidly globalizing American state that had begun exporting its economic and cultural ideals in earnest, Hayden and Tolson established a poetics that was both true to their vision of the American nation and open to other nationalities and cultures. In fact, this very openness was part of their vision, and was already true of the nation they lived in, given the growth of various immigrant cultures within the United States in the postwar years. As Hayden remarked hopefully in an interview, “America seems destined to bring together all the people of the world” (Hayden, “Bicentennial” 86). Hayden believed that this process would help in “pushing [America] toward internationalism” – a positive development, since, in his estimation, “nationalism in any form is one of the evils of our times” (86). Both Tolson and Hayden consistently valorized the heterogeneous over the homogenizing impulses of the American identity. Tolson refused to claim either for himself or for his poetry a single ethnic identity: “I, as a black poet, have absorbed the Great Ideas of the Great White World, and interpreted them in the melting-pot idiom of my people. My roots are in Africa, Europe, and America” (“A Poet’s Odyssey” 184). While for Hayden, the category of race was more pernicious still than that of nation – “As far as I’m concerned,” he says in one interview, “there is no such thing as ‘Black’ poetry, there is no such thing as ‘White’ poetry in America; there is just American poetry” – he wanted his poetry to transcend national boundaries as well (Hayden, “Conversation with A. Poulin” 35). “American life,” he asserts with not atypical grandeur, “is a

point of departure for me into an awareness of the universal” (Hayden, “Bicentennial” 87).

Although Hayden, like Tolson, expected his poems to speak to his experiences as a black man and as an American, he found much of the potential value of his poetry in the hope that it would reach beyond and outside these confines, even to the point of destabilizing them.

The esoteric richness of Tolson’s poetry testifies to the same desire. His wish was not to defy or refute “Americanness,” but to enrich it by bringing it into contact with forms of cultural expression previously alien to it. He was one of a group of modernist poets who, as Hart writes, “saw avant-garde forms, not as something toxic to ethnicity or nationality, but as the gateway to a negative dialectical politics of autonomy and interrelatedness that was alone adequate to the unevenly transnational character of the modern world” (5). Thus, from deep in the American heartland – Oklahoma and Tennessee, respectively – Tolson and Hayden begin to articulate what might we might call a poetics of diaspora, recalling Paul Gilroy’s sense of the word as “attempt[ing] to specify differentiation and identity in a way which enables one to think about the issue of racial commonality outside of constricting binary frameworks” (120). Their poems, as we will see in the chapters that follow, instantiate and remark on what Gilroy calls the “chaotic, living, disorganic formation” of the diasporic model (122) – but in doing so, they also express the hopeful and connective politics that such a model can produce, and one to which it continues to bear witness.

Chapter Eight

“You keep going on now or die”: The Will to Freedom in Robert Hayden’s Poetry

I. Hayden’s Categorical Critiques

Although the work within it spans a celebrated career in poetry, Robert Hayden’s *Collected Poems* is a relatively thin volume. The demands placed on Hayden by his work as a full-time teacher, as well as his tendency to endlessly revise existing poems rather than write new ones (a function of the very high standard he set for himself), both contributed to his modest output as a poet. However, the compactness of Hayden’s *Collected Poems* makes it possible for the attentive reader to readily locate some of the themes that feature strongly in his work. One such theme is sympathy, which generally appears to emanate, in its conventional forms, from the author or speaker out toward the various subjects of his poems. As Wilburn Williams Jr. remarks, the reader of Hayden’s work encounters within it

a consciousness struggling to retain the finest nuances of its own experience and seeking to enter into the experience of others from whom it is alienated by time and space. The fundamental source of Hayden’s productivity, the wellspring of his poetic activity, lies in the ability of the human memory to negotiate the distance between time past and time present and the capacity of a profoundly sympathetic imagination to transcend the space between self and other. (739)

Hayden’s best work consistently grapples, in Williams’ estimation, with a problem that is in some sense ineradicable: the varieties of distance – more cultural and emotional than spatial – that separate individuals. The great wish his poems harbour is to bridge this distance, or, failing that, to address the exclusions and hurts it occasions. In negotiating this problem Hayden’s tone can move, as Fred Fetrow suggests, “from almost sardonic disdain to sympathetic understanding” within the space of a single poem (75). His poems often draw upon his own history as an African American who grew up in inner-city Detroit. The late poem “Elegies for Paradise Valley,” written to memorialize some of the people Hayden encountered there, recalls a diverse group of characters whose idiosyncrasies only serve to endear them to the speaker:

Where’s Jim, Watusi prince and Good Old Boy,

who with a joke went off to fight in France?

Where's Tump the defeated artist, for meals or booze
daubing with quarrelsome reds, disconsolate blues?

Where's Les the huntsman? Tough Kid Chocolate, where
is he? Where's dapper Jess? Where's Stomp the shell-
shocked, clowning for us in parodies of war? . . .

Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell. (Hayden, *Collected*

Poems 167)

Pontheolla Williams notes that these lines remind us of the degree to which Hayden's "consciousness of his own pain was complemented by his awareness of pain in others" (167). In this respect, much of Hayden's poetry borrows its aesthetic from the blues tradition, reframing the common hurts wrought by racial segregation and urban poverty into an artistic endeavour to make sense of it. One way Hayden does this, in "Elegies for Paradise Valley" and other poems, is by stressing the sense of community inspired in him by others around him facing similar obstacles. The sense of connection the speaker feels to these outsiders is both profound and, because this very connection is predicated on their status as outsiders, tragic:

Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos: Gypsies:
pornographers of gaudy otherness:
aliens among the alien: thieves,
carriers of sickness: like us like us. (*Collected Poems* 169)

The straightforward reading of sympathy in action that this poem generates reveals Hayden's poetic intention to share in the feelings of others. However, poems like "Elegies for Paradise Valley" demonstrate not only the power of sympathy but its limitations. The characters in the poem all inhabit a particular location (even if the poem laments their eventual departure from it); they share similar economic circumstances, speak in similar dialects, and presumably share the same ethnic and racial background. If their living conditions are not ideal, they are at least experienced communally, for which reason it comes as no surprise that these conditions allow for emotional identification. But while such forms of sympathy are valuable in that they ameliorate loneliness and suffering, they may also reinforce the pervasive cultural scripts that discourage interaction between diverse societal groups, and thereby indirectly encourage the

divisions it is their expressed purpose to decry. That is to say, unless sympathy is radical enough to connect individuals *across* social divides, its very functioning might help to *produce* social divides. While it serves to connect those in local and defined communities to one another, fellow-feeling might easily be mixed with a sense of antagonism towards those the community defines itself against. In this manner, Hayden's phrase "like us like us" (169) bespeaks commiseration, but also implies the existence of an outside world populated by those "*unlike* us" – those with whom sympathy is more difficult given the divides between one community and another.

However, Hayden refuses to simply discount the possibility of sympathy across such boundaries. While not discounting the potential value of sympathy between individuals within the same social class or ethnic group (such as that on display in "Elegies for Paradise Valley"), I want to suggest in this chapter that many of Hayden's strongest, most memorable, and most unsettling poems concern themselves with a form of sympathy that exists and functions on an entirely different register. If sympathy shores up individual hurts and fosters social well-being within defined peer groups, what might it do if deployed *across* such groups – perhaps, even, with the intent of dismantling or redefining them? Can a sympathy that disrupts the cultural spheres through which we organize our lives alter our notion of how to define and achieve the ethical society?

In the previous chapter I noted Hayden's discomfort with joining groups and his universalist approach to the politics of poetics (a function of his Bahá'í faith). This universalist inclination affected Hayden's perspective on almost every social formation imaginable, including (and maybe especially) those of which he was a member by birth. Although he indentified himself as American, and was "deeply engaged by the topography of American myth," he remained at the same time an internationalist, inveterately suspicious of the scarring blindnesses and prejudices nationalist dogma could produce (Hirsch, "Mean" 80). Even though he assimilated its forms to a modernist aesthetic, Hayden consciously wrote within the African American poetic idiom: his poems consistently "emphasiz[e] the oral tradition," for example (Turner 98). But at the same time, Hayden did not want to be limited or constrained by his temporal and spatial location within American history. Drawing, in an interview, on one of his favourite poetic exemplars, he maintains that

I think of myself as an Afro-American poet in the same way that Yeats was an Irish poet. I have no desire to ignore my heritage, to ignore my experiences as an Afro-American. I have no desire to turn away from that anymore than Yeats wanted to turn away from being Irish. At the same time, I don't want to be limited to that. (Hayden, "Conversation with A. Poulin" 33)

Hayden is willing to write within a historical and socio-cultural framework insofar as he recognizes, as Yeats did, that the way to broad applicability is through specificity, that the universal can be apotheosized in the particular. His acceptance of his blackness and Americanness does not contradict his critique of limiting social definitions and his interest in what their dissolution might look like.

Hayden's very name reflects the malleability of cultural identities. Born Asa Bunday Sheffey, he was given to the Hayden family by his mother, Ruth Sheffey, when he was only eighteen months old. He was raised thereafter as Robert Hayden (P. Williams 3). It may be that Hayden's aggressive refusal to join larger groups and his disinclination to use nation, race, or heritage as a means of constructing a social identity is rooted, in part, in his own past: insofar as a name designates an identity, that of Asa Bunday Sheffey was denied him, and he was ushered into a different one. If his very naming imposes a limitation on Hayden, denying him the possibility of outstripping the bounds of whatever it signifies, his birth name refigures the problematic of the designation of "black poet" he rejected at the Fisk Conference. As Vera Kutzinski argues, both labels

are equally pernicious for very similar reasons: They assign to him fixed institutional identities unable to contain Robert Hayden the poet. These names or labels are representative of the legalistic definitions of self Hayden seeks to undo, of the kinds of societal and cultural strictures he struggles to efface. (172-3)

Hayden's categorical critiques, then, extend from nation-state and racial ideology all the way to linguistic markers and the definitional tools used to assign and locate selfhood. His impatience with such impositions is entirely of a piece with many of his best poems. Rather than simply reifying a construct of identification that restricts itself to inhabiting and witnessing a particular locale of shared suffering, these poems push the very notion of sympathy to its limits, forcing

the reader to confront a moment at which sympathy seems no longer to be possible precisely in order to urge a transformation of the ideological limits within which we accept its operation.

In this chapter I will examine at some length three Hayden poems that deal, in various ways, with the history of racial relations in the United States. It is in these poems that Hayden's appeal for the implementation of a broader, more radical kind of sympathy begins to take shape. "Night, Death, Mississippi," effects a call to sympathy through the boldly differing consciousnesses it juxtaposes on the page, further demonstrating the possibilities of identification in Hayden's daring representation of the point of view of a white supremacist. In "Runagate Runagate" Hayden's persistent hope for a better future is partly reflected by the several dialects he foregrounds in the poem, which together produce an affirmation of connectivity despite or beyond difference. Finally, I show how "Middle Passage" analogizes a prevalent theme in nearly all Hayden's poems: the historical path to freedom along which the oppressed persist, buoyed by forms of identification that usurp the ideological constraints holding them (and us) back.

II. Narrative Juxtapositions in "Night, Death, Mississippi"

The evocative title of "Night, Death, Mississippi" provides the reader with an immediate grasp of its setting. The poem's narration is uneasily divided between two entities. (As Turner points out, four different voices feature in the poem, but in this analysis I focus, in the main, on the dominant two [99].) At the poem's outset, its principal character is described by the poem's speaker as the "old man in his reek / and gauntness" (Hayden, *Collected Poems* 15). The old man is listening, with evident pleasure and even laughter, to the sounds of a lynching taking place near by. He is eager to congratulate his son, who is apparently a member of the lynching party, upon the boy's return home. Observing the old man "limping to the porch to listen / in the windowless night" (15), the speaker seems to view the scene with calm detachment, though the couplet's final adjective, "windowless," ominously conveys not only the heavy closeness of the night air but a corresponding sense of physical and moral entrapment. As if to more fully dramatize this entrapment, we are suddenly made privy to the old man's muttered thoughts, and are thereby caged, as it were, within his consciousness:

Be there with Boy and the rest

if I was well again.

Time was. Time was. (15)

These conscious reflections begin to mingle with scenes from the old man's memory, the first of which is sufficiently unnerving to crystallize the mood of the poem: "White robes like moonlight / In the sweetgum dark" (15). Alluding to a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, these lines leave little doubt about the old man's opinion of blacks or the reason he listens so intently to the cries piercing the darkness.

Further memories, still more unnerving, rise to the forefront of the man's thoughts in the poem's next lines:

Unbucked that one then
and him squealing bloody Jesus
as we cut it off. (15)

We are at this point fully enmeshed in the old man's sadistic reveries, and the intermittent reprieves that occur when the poem turns back to third-person narration only serve to emphasize the rift between his views and those of the original speaker. And to underscore this divide more fully, a third consciousness, presumably that of the victim of the lynching, is interspersed into the poem in its latter section. Half prayer, half incantation, this character's anaphoric utterances are italicized, as if to distinguish them as much as possible from the words of the old man which they encounter on the page: "*O Jesus burning on the lily cross*" (16). This first-person appeal to Christ contrasts sharply with the old man's dismissively dehumanizing account of what may have been the same scene – "him squealing bloody Jesus / as we cut it off" (15). In the line immediately following the victim's prayer for help, the old man again references Jesus in a casually blasphemous tone:

Christ, it was better
than hunting bear
which don't know why
you want him dead. (16)

The evident self-satisfaction of the lines leave no doubt as to where the old man wishes he could still be, were he not "fevered as by groinfire" (15): out in the fields and woods at the head of the party of men to whose efforts he listens, alone, with such bloodthirsty regret. Because the

greater part of the poem consists of the old man's thoughts and recollections, its words instantiate a kind of moral poison that seeps across the page – the rueful pleasure of a racist remembering how he and those with him “beat them till our arms was tired / and the big old chains / messy and red” (16).

The lexicon of fellow-feeling becomes superfluous here; the notion of sympathy with a mind so transfixed by hatred seems not merely unmanageable but undesirable. Indeed, the poem serves partly to remind us of the endpoint of sympathy: if emotional connection inheres anywhere in “Night, Death, Mississippi,” it does so only in the “close bond of shared ritual,” as Edward Pavlić puts it, between a racist father and his racist son (547). The recognition essential to self-definition is categorically absent from “Night, Death, Mississippi,” within which no humanizing recognition of the other takes place. The white supremacist fails to recognize the humanity of the African American, while much less troublingly, the reader cannot bring herself to sympathize with the old man and his twisted set of values.

But in order to be more than an unflinching, not to say sensationalist, poetic sketch of a mind gripped by a racist ideology, “Night, Death, Mississippi” cannot simply deny the humanity of the character it probes, ugly though this character might be. To do so would be to put into practice the very dehumanizing principles that animate the old man's hatred of the racial other. Rather, the poem seeks to find a way to understand the deeply flawed psyche it investigates even while condemning it. To see how it achieves this, we must consider the significance of the disjunction between the poem's narrative proper and what W. D. Snodgrass terms its “lyrical interjections,” which “stand in sharp contrast and opposition” to the main body of the poem (227). The various voices with which Hayden constructs “Night, Death, Mississippi” represent widely divergent value systems, but the poem refrains from offering any explicit debate between these voices. Instead, the voices simply exist, laid out in contradistinction on the page, so that the memory of chains made “messy and red” by the blood of the victim is immediately followed by the prayerful cry of that victim – a cry itself bookended by the self-satisfied recollections of the old man. This structuring is crucial to the poem, for if these voices and their attendant ideologies do not recognize each other within the world of the poem, they are at least compelled to do so in the *form* of the poem – that is, in the poem as laid out on the page. In other words, although the possibility of recognition (between

racist and fugitive) is denied in the poem's scene proper, it is enacted by the poem's very structure, its insistence on the proximity of one competing voice with another and therefore on the painful but potentially productive clash between the two. In this sense, "Night, Death, Mississippi" is emblematic of many of Hayden's poems about race, which do not depict scenes of recognition so much as they formally enact that recognition through their interweaving of contrasting voices and viewpoints.

"Night, Death, Mississippi," then, refuses the display of recognition only because it is determined to display the ugly processes of a racism itself predicated on the refusal to recognize the other. As Fanon writes, even the freed black man can never assume that complete recognition has been attained, since he is "[u]nable ever to be sure whether the white man considers him consciousness in-itself-for-itself," and must therefore "forever absorb himself in uncovering resistance, opposition, challenge" (*Black Skin* 222). But in dramatizing a scene entirely devoid of recognition, Hayden structures his poem as a challenge to the reader. What exists in the gap between the white racist's thoughts and the antiphonal pleas of the lynched black individual? Can a form of recognition denied to black individuals in history take place – in however reconstructed a form – on the page of the poem, or in the consciousness of the reader? The very attempt to structure this possibility may represent an example of the "resistance, opposition, [and] challenge" called for by Fanon (222). By layering the voices in his poems against each other, Hayden provokes in his poetry dimensions of recognition so often left unrealized in the course of history. To truly see the other and the other's words – even the horror of these words – is to define sympathy as an affective mode with the power to shatter existing racial and cultural paradigms rather than merely to reify them.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Martha Nussbaum makes a similar point, arguing in her book *Upheavals of Thought* that societies need to find ways to educate their citizens in the practice of empathy:

We should construct similar exercises in the extension of the imagination for our citizens. This means asking what groups they are likely to understand easily, and what groups might need more mental exercise before empathy can take hold. . . . The imagination faces obstacles, wherever society has created distinctions. These obstacles are not automatically overcome by stories of universal humanity, for frequently these function to cast doubt on the equal or full humanity of the group that is "different." (430)

But the most radical aspect of “Night, Death, Mississippi” – particularly when considered in relation to the political movements initiated in black poetry in the early 1960s – surely inheres in Hayden’s daring decision to narrate in the first-person the thoughts of a white supremacist. The implications of the extension of such a gesture from a black poet to the white subject of his poem can hardly be overstated. A proponent of the Black Arts Movement such as Amiri Baraka would likely have considered Hayden’s narrations in “Night, Death, Mississippi” not only unfeasible but undesirable – a rhetorical move that glosses over the separation caused by centuries of systemic oppression. But for Hayden, it is only through such exercises in ethical imagination that the poet can provide a route by which to begin to overcome such a separation. Well aware of the popular opinion that to even envision such a process would be a fanciful exercise requiring an ignorance of history, Hayden, as his poems and interviews reveal, believed just the opposite: history demands these kinds of interventions, these discomfiting juxtapositions, and it is the responsibility of the poet – whatever his skin colour – to effect them, because to do so is to encourage the self-realization of the ethical society. In Hayden’s worldview, full humanity is achieved not only despite, but because of, hardship and the difficult moral choices it demands. As he writes in his poem “Words in the Mourning Time,” his grief at injustice and death is tempered by his awareness

of how these deaths, how all
the agonies of our deathbed childhood age
are process, major means whereby,
oh dreadfully, our humanness must be achieved. (*Collected Poems* 90)

III. The Collision of Idioms in “Runagate Runagate”

Hayden does not provide enough detail in “Night, Death, Mississippi” to fix it within a specific time period, but it may well involve events that were still taking place in America at mid-century. Hayden explains in an interview that he “wrote this poem as a sort of catharsis for [himself],” having “read about the young Civil Rights workers who were killed in Mississippi”

(Hayden, “Conversation with A. Poulin” 38).⁷⁷ Written in response to racist acts that were taking place in Hayden’s own time, “Night, Death, Mississippi” is not an explicitly historical poem. Similarly, the formal patterns by which it foments Hegelian recognition are more hypothetical and theoretical than sociological. The Hayden poem “Runagate Runagate,” meanwhile, demonstrates that the principles advanced in “Night, Death, Mississippi” have been in effect throughout the history of African American culture.

“Runagate Runagate,” whose title derives from “an archaic expression for a runaway slave,” re-imagines the experience of escaped slaves traveling along the Underground Railroad (P. Williams 101). Throughout its various sections, the poem parallels the challenging physical journey the African Americans must undertake with a spiritual journey that includes the poem’s speaker and audience as well as its subjects. Faced with “the night cold and the night long and the river / to cross,” the fugitives imagine the unnamed “star-shaped yonder Bible city” that awaits them (Hayden, *Collected Poems* 59). This idealization of their ultimate destination emphasizes that the journey being made here is more than a physical flight from slavery, and could even be termed a striving for transcendence. “And this was the way of it, brethren brethren / way we journeyed from Can’t to Can” (60): the repetition of the word “brethren” underscores the communal nature of the journey, which is rendered as a movement not only from one place to another but from the realm of the impossible to that of the possible (“from Can’t to Can”).

Calvin Hernton suggests that in “Runagate Runagate” Hayden uses the “the most rudimentary forms and elements of the African American poetic tradition, which includes call-and-response, improvisations, polyrhythmic sounds, runs, and syncopations,” to associate his poem with a specific cultural community (324). Instances of sympathy seems to arise almost naturally within this tradition, partly because, as Hernton observes, it “is collective rather than individual. There is only one *I* in the entire first part of the poem, and it is a communal *I*” (324). While it is true that the freedom the fugitives seek can only be achieved if they remain unified,

⁷⁷ Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, three civil rights workers, were all shot to death on June 21, 1964 in Neshoba County, Mississippi. For an analysis of the causes, history, and repercussions of this event, see Mills.

and that this unity encourages and rewards occurrences of sympathy within the poem proper, the poem's narration is not as homogenous as Hernton's description seems to imply. While the colloquy of traditional African American dialect is very much present in the poem, the poem's various voices shape and twist this dialect in strikingly divergent ways. As Darwin Turner notes, "Runagate Runagate" contains at least four different consciousnesses: "a persona-narrator, a slave owner, a slave who escaped, and Harriet Tubman" (99). As my reading of the poem will make clear, the interplay of these various personas stages incipient moments of provocative recognition within the form of the poem (as we saw in "Night, Death, Mississippi"). Further, by framing such moments within a specific narrative context, Hayden demonstrates that recognition not only operates within the poem, it is formative outside the poem, in the lived history of black America.

"Runs falls rises stumbles": "Runagate Runagate" begins in an unpunctuated burst, four verbs conjugated in the present tense spilling over one another to convey the frantic emotion of a fugitive's flight (59). The poem's opening seven lines impress on the reader the enormity and drama of the action; Hayden here uses, in Hernton's phrasing, "words that reach out and engage, if not engulf, the reader" (322). We are privy in these lines to the thoughts of the escapee, whose is clearly focused on the conclusion of his or her journey, and the struggles that must be overcome to reach that endpoint:

and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
and the night cold and the river
to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going (59)

The enjambment in these lines occurs between the noun "river" and the verb "to cross," as well as between "somewhere" and "morning," in order to formally represent the distance that still requires traversing before day breaks and before the destination is reached. Likewise, the repetition of the phrase "keep on going" recreates the mindless, dogged persistence required to achieve the goal of freedom.

In this manner, the poem establishes its stakes as very high indeed, not only for the fugitive African American in question, but also, by analogy, for an American culture that is

itself traveling, in Hayden's estimation, through the darkness of prejudice and injustice toward an arduously won freedom. The next section of the poem expresses its resistance to whatever might impede that progress – a resistance localized in the fugitive's determined refrain: "No more auction block for me / no more driver's lash for me" (59). Following this couplet, a new voice is introduced into the poem, and as is typical of Hayden's work, the wants and worldview expressed by this voice could not more starkly contrast those of the voice preceding it. The stanza takes the form of an advertisement seeking two runaway slaves, Pompey and Anna. "Catch them if you can," the voice exhorts, "but it won't be easy" (59). At the close of the stanza, the voice of the escaped slave returns again to offer another singsong couplet: "And before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave" (60). The slaver's aggressive claim to ownership, captured in his possessive reference to the African Americans as "my Pompey" and "my Anna," is countered by the escapee's equally aggressive claim to freedom.

The ordering of these lines on the page constitutes Hayden's means of forcing his fictional slave owner to recognize the determination and desire, the resolute humanity, of the escaped captives for whom he searches. In fact, the slave owner's monologue is contained by the fugitive's refrain, which surrounds it on both sides. Paradoxically, here it is the white slave owner who, insofar as he is represented by his words, has been trapped within (we might even say "captured" by) the fugitive's insistence on his or her freedom and self-realization. Hayden here relates the will to be free with the will to oppress by – paradoxically enough – constraining the latter within the former. The dichotomy he presents is reminiscent of Fanon's development of a similar opposition in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon distinguishes between two basic human inclinations: a "movement of aggression, which leads to enslavement or to conquest"; and "a movement of love, a gift of self, the ultimate stage of what by common accord is called ethical orientation" (41). For Fanon, the desire for power over others is countered by the giving of the self to others, rather than by the ambition to be free – a differentiation that makes his dialectic model more explicitly ethical. But for Hayden, freedom at the individual and communal level is exactly what is required for such an ethical framework.

This framework accrues from the scenes of recognition Hayden's poems enact and the identification with the other they concomitantly produce. In "Runagate, Runagate," just as in "Night, Death, Mississippi," this recognition is achieved by an interpenetration of voices and

dialects. Hayden's inclusion of Harriet Tubman – “woman of earth, whipscarred” – in the poem signals the resolute historicity of his narrative (*Collected Poems* 60). While the clash of perspectives that occurs in “Runagate Runagate” encourages recognition and sympathy in the world of the reader, it also reminds us of the veracity and practicality of its own vision; this is a course of action that can work in the future because it has worked in the past. Besides borrowing from the aesthetic of the African American poetic tradition, Hayden makes use of various other idioms in the poem: Biblical language; snatches of Negro spirituals; the coaxing invective of a slave owner; the curt jargon of a wanted poster; and, of course, the words of Tubman herself. These idioms, and the social forces they represent, all intermingle and collide – which is, as the poem's framing and call-and-response techniques serve to remind us, just how history happens. In one such example, the speaker quotes Tubman's words directly: “Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says; / you keep going on now or die, she says” (60). “You keep going on now or die”: the phrase is both Tubman's brusque injunction to the fugitives and the wider historical imperative urged by the poem. On this journey, as on the journey of American civilization to its own flourishing, to pause is to perish; we must continue to recognize one another, to exhort one another to persevere, and (not least) to sympathize with one another.

The interplay of various linguistic cultures and dialects is deeply implicated in the progress urged by the poem. If, as Bakhtin suggests, languages develop within and gradually come to enforce ideological constructs, then exchanges between individuals and ideas from different linguistic backgrounds will help to broaden these ideologies and expose their limitations by forcing them into contact with one another. Our linguistic categories, as Bakhtin argues, are

conditioned by specific historical destinies and by the task that an ideological discourse assumes. These categories arose from and were shaped by the historically *aktuell* forces at work in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups; they comprised the theoretical expression of actualizing forces that were in the process of creating a life for language. (270)

“Runagate Runagate” examines the “specific historical destinies” of a specific oppressed minority group – formerly enslaved African American fugitives – in order to show how their literal progress northward was constantly either hindered or propelled forward by the various

linguistic forms they encountered. These patterns of dialect impinge on one another as part of a process that is itself dialectic (in the Hegelian sense), and in doing so they generate the moments of recognition and affective connection by which history progresses. In its final two lines, the poem provides an image for this forward movement of history, together with the deeper impulse that causes it: “Come ride-a my train / Mean mean mean to be free” (61).

Hayden’s aversion to particular political movements such as the Black Arts Movement, which he found too limiting and narrow, is best understood in light of poems like this one, in which contrasting idiomatic registers are set against one another in a historically grounded narrative. “Runagate Runagate” demonstrates the limitations of accepting politics as shaped by racial or national divides, since these divides are themselves shaped by the idioms that precede and inform them. Indeed, language, nation, and race are all, for Hayden, interlocking and interdependent constructs that can and should be unraveled and critiqued. The structure of each depends on the others so much that they cannot adequately be understood in isolation. One way to work towards an understanding of the ways in which these categories influence each other is to turn to the past events through which they have come to be defined. To do so is to practice a politics that critiques not only racism but the cultural and linguistic practices that (more insidiously) reify the divides through which racist ideologies are fostered. As Kutzinski remarks, Hayden does more, in poems such as “Runagate Runagate,” than to reject human slavery: “his struggle is also against the linguistic vestiges of slavery manifest in the continued confinement of Afro-Americans by a language that denies not only their complex historico-cultural identities, but their humanity” (179). “Runagate Runagate” attempts to expand these confining linguistic borders by pitting separate idioms against one another, placing them in a tension that not only frees the self from the linguistic (and therefore cultural and political) impositions placed on it, but re-opens it to the possibility of new, previously unthought definitions. Not content merely to celebrate freedom, Hayden’s poetry seeks, in what is ultimately a profoundly political gesture, to inaugurate it.

IV. “Middle Passage”: The Persistence of Sympathy

“Middle Passage,” Robert Hayden’s most famous poem, contains a refrain that appears in full at its beginning and end, and in truncated form in its middle: “voyage through death / to life upon

these shores” (*Collected Poems* 48). These lines link the poem to a theme evident in “Night, Death, Mississippi” and especially “Runagate Runagate” – that of the slow, uncertain progress of humanity through and despite misery and injustice. A glance at “Middle Passage” and “Runagate Runagate” confirms that these poems share many similarities besides. Their formal features are similar; both recount an event in black American history, though one is imagined and the other documented; and both use the technique of placing multiple and contrasting idioms in close contact with one another to produce recognition and reconfiguration. At the outset of examining “Middle Passage,” more closely, then, it may be helpful to enumerate some ways in which it differs, conceptually and thematically, from “Runagate Runagate.”

One point of difference can be noted in the two poems’ settings. While the precise setting of “Runagate Runagate” is unspecified, “Middle Passage” depicts, among other scenes from the journey from which it derives its name, the events of the *Amistad* Rebellion (so named because it took place on the ship *La Amistad*). There, on July 2, 1839, a group of 53 enslaved Africans being transported to Cuba revolted against their captors and took possession of the ship.⁷⁸ Hayden researched the history surrounding the rebellion working for the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, and was gradually able to shape his archive of copious notes and ideas on the topic into a poem (Fetrow 6, 15). Hayden’s attention to detail makes it clear that he intended the poem to be as historically accurate as possible. The poem’s veracity constrains its narrative to the precise dates, places, and characters involved in the rebellion, but this narrative is itself sufficiently multifaceted to offer Hayden numerous thematic footholds. For instance, the slavers’ ships form a shifting multicultural space in which individuals of various nationalities are forced into contact, thus instantiating a transnational context unavailable in “Runagate Runagate.” Indeed, the ironically named ships in the poem’s first line, “*Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy*” (48) (ironic, of course, because they

⁷⁸ Though it has received less attention of late, critics and historians have examined the *Amistad* Rebellion and its effects at some length. For a detailed account of the incident and its aftermath, see Howard Jones’ *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy*. Iyunolu Folayan Osagie’s *The Amistad Revolt* is especially insightful in its consideration of how the *Amistad* Rebellion figures in relation to questions of American cultural memory. On the relation of the *Amistad* Rebellion to the production of national and masculine identities, see Montesinos Sale 58-119. On the responses of Black Abolitionists to the revolt, see Finkenbine.

dispense neither hope nor mercy, have nothing in common with stars, and contain nothing Christ-like besides the suffering experienced by the blacks imprisoned on them) remind us that the poem is transnational in the most literal sense: it is set between nations rather than within one. The characters within it are constantly in motion simply by virtue of being aboard ships, which, as Paul Gilroy has pointed out, carry a potent symbolic currency in that they “were the living means by which the points within the Atlantic world were joined” (16). As such, ships are not only physical structures used in transportation and trade, they are “something more – a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production” (17). Hayden’s “Middle Passage” explores these forms of dissent as posited and enacted both in the world at large and on the laden ships by which early modern worlds were connected.

As transnational and transitory bodies, the ships operate in a liminal space whose characteristics also affect those on board. The history of the Middle Passage involves the colonialist appropriation and oppression of a people and culture for expressly capitalist purposes.⁷⁹ From an African American perspective, the history at stake is that of a people struggling to regain an identity and autonomy that have been unceremoniously stripped from them. As if reflecting this journey, however secondarily, “Middle Passage” is itself poised between two worlds: the modernist register from which it borrows and the African American culture whose resolve it celebrates. Many critics have noted the poem’s debt to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and even if (as Brian Conniff argues)⁸⁰ Hayden builds on Eliot’s poem in order to contrast the despairing worldview expressed in *The Waste Land* with his own stance of resolute confidence in the future, the formal similarities between the poems remain strikingly evident. By foregrounding his allusions to Eliot within a poem that prefers empirical facts to Eliot’s abstract imagery, and replacing the alienating despair of Tiresias, Eliot’s narrator, with a morally and pragmatically engaged speaker, Hayden works to merge a formalist writing style

⁷⁹ A more fierce evocation emerges in Melvin Tolson’s summation of the Middle Passage in his *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, to which I will attend more carefully in the next chapter: “here / Gehenna hatchways vomit up / The debits of pounds of flesh” (*Libretto* 149-151).

⁸⁰ See Conniff 498-501, where he posits that the problem Hayden locates in Eliot is his equivocation between clear moral condemnation and a lack of “convincing or consistent moral ground” (499). In contrast, “Middle Passage” finds its moral agency – and the pragmatic social concern that attends it – in the rebels’ courageous response to the injustice they experienced.

with a transnational politics of optimism. In this sense, his poetics aligns more closely than he may have realized with more overtly political aesthetic projects such as the Black Arts movement.

“Middle Passage,” like the Hayden poems we have already examined, is constructed using a variety of different voices. Snodgrass suggests that this marks another contrast between *The Waste Land* and “Middle Passage,” arguing that while *The Waste Land* contains divergent voices, they are all “aspects of one mind,” while the voices in “Middle Passage” “belong to a multiplicity of characters, each having a disparate and independent existence” (228). Hayden himself has noted that even “the voices of the dead” echo within the frame of the poem (“The Poet and his Art” 171). The complex intermingling of voices in the poem also reflects the real-world situation on ships involved in the Middle Passage. Stephanie Smallwood notes that their “cargoes regularly comprised multiple ethnicities and often many linguistic and cultural threads,” and that three or four major language groups were often represented by the enslaved Africans alone (105). Citing Bakhtin, we could point to such a historical moment as a prime site for the potential refiguration and development of language groups, and therefore of the cultural assumptions that proceed from them. In other words, the ships of the slave trade, whose very voyages were premised on the reification of (and profit from) racial division and injustice, could theoretically serve as migrant locales on which could begin the radical questioning of such divisions – albeit by and between the individuals who suffered their effects most acutely.

This is not, of course, to deny the fact that the heteroglossic conjunction of dialects on the transatlantic journeys described in “Middle Passage” produced, at least at the time, more misprision than recognition. The voices of the Africans on these ships were typically either ignored or wilfully misheard. And yet, within “Middle Passage” itself, the poet’s ability to evince such a wide variety of voices depends on his ability to imagine and intuit the consciousnesses that make use of them. Hayden’s poem thus documents how the reception of an utterance can change over time; voices are imbued with a poignancy or irony apparent to the contemporary reader if not to their original speaker or hearer. As such, they depict the possibility that on a long enough time scale, scenes of recognition can emerge even from events in which recognition seems nonexistent. The poem recounts a narrative in which sympathy is conspicuously and often appallingly denied; and yet the poem is the living document of

sympathy's persistence, for the poet must sympathize with each character in order to write the poem, as must its audience to read it. The poem's refrain, which speaks of movement from death to life, thus captures its basic sentiment. Despite all the atrocities it documents, Hayden's "Middle Passage" remains optimistic about the possibility of a society allied to life and not death, and equally about sympathy's surprising perseverance in the face of its most distressing absences.

The lines of the poem that immediately follow the first iteration of its refrain take the form of an excerpt from the ship's log. The excerpt begins with the recorded date of the entry, April 10, 1800, which places this voyage almost forty years prior to the fateful rebellion described later in the poem. The setting of "Middle Passage" is therefore not a single transatlantic crossing but a series of them. The sense of retributive justice felt in the poem is more than earned by the duration of the inhumanity endured, decade after decade, by the transported enslaved Africans. The names of four new ships – "*Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann*" – following the account in the ship's log, underlines the exploitative greed that came to define the journey, euphemistically named ships traversing the Atlantic in a ceaseless colonialist convoy (*Collected Poems* 48). Already in 1800, well before the *Amistad*'s fateful trip, the possibility of revolt permeates the tense relationships between crew and captives:

Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
 their moaning is a prayer for death,
 ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
 Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
 to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under. (48)

In this brief account, the sailor appeals to the authority of a translator or linguist, indicating his own inability to understand the Africans' intentions. The gap between sailors and enslaved Africans is here depicted as sufficiently wide to require the mediation of a third party. This lack of understanding of the oppressed other denotes the complete dearth of recognition in the scene.

The linguist's interpretation of the enslaved Africans' moaning as a death wish may well be correct, given that some of the captives resort to leaping from the ship, preferring death to the death-in-life they are forced to endure in the hold below. But the dissociation between the recorder's observations and the experiences of the enslaved Africans remains palpable. In his

log, the recorder dismisses their laughter as “crazy,” and his remark that those enslaved pray for the deaths of all those onboard – “ours and their own” – carries a tone of distancing judgment (48). The tacit sense of superiority that emerges in his description of the Africans exemplifies one of the poem’s chief paradoxes: its categorical inversion of civilized and savage, high-minded and heathen. As Nielsen suggests, in placing their words within his poem, Hayden intends to “allow the slave traders’ own language to redound against them, to let their own prayers raise the questions of who is truly heathen and whose souls are in need of chastening” (125-6). This contrast becomes starkly apparent in the juxtaposition that follows, in which the enslaved blacks’ recitation of a hymn – the well-known hymn “Jesus, Saviour, Pilot Me” – is interrupted by, but ultimately surrounds, the sailors’ prayer for “safe passage to our vessels bringing / heathen souls unto Thy chastening” (*Collected Poems* 48). As we have seen, this technique is also deployed by Hayden in “Runagate Runagate,” in which a slave owner’s request is bracketed by the chants of escaped slaves, and the effect here is much the same. The tableau in “Middle Passage” is perhaps still more striking, though, given that both idioms – that of the Africans as well as that of the traders – are explicitly religious, and are ostensibly directed toward the same God. Even though they speak use similarly religious phraseology, the vastly different social conditions and worldviews of these two groups dictates the lack of any form of affective connection between them.

The next voice in the poem is again encountered in the form of an entry into a diary or ship’s log. Here, in the growing unease of a sailor, Hayden begins to indirectly document some of the atrocities experienced by Africans on the Middle Passage:

A plague among
 our blacks – Ophthalmia: blindness – & we
 have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
 It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads:
 Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt’s eyes . . . (49)

Ophthalmia, an inflammatory disease of the eye causing blindness, was a common affliction aboard slave ships, both among the blacks and their captors. It is the first specific indication of the blacks’ inhumane living conditions on the journey (besides, of course, the telling fact that some threw themselves overboard), and this likely owes to its symbolic potential. If the

contagion of literal blindness has spread on board the ship to the extent that even the Captain has succumbed, a figurative blindness to the hurts and wants of the other is still more deeply present. This blindness is epitomized in one sailor's dream-vision of "*jungle hatred / crawling up on deck*" – a fearful and ignorant evocation of a mythological pan-African savagery meant to dehumanize the blacks and to assign to them toxic affects more acutely evinced by the slave traders themselves (49).

In the poem's next section, a witness's statement in a courtroom deposition describes in unemotional and matter-of-fact terms further horrors that took place at sea, including autosarcophagy, gang rape, and enslaved Africans being burnt alive.⁸¹ Hayden would have come across documented accounts of such events in the course of his research. Its unflinching attention to these atrocities imbues the poem with its moral force. But Hayden's poem is an attempt to move beyond a simple condemnation of those historical actors responsible for what he calls a "[v]oyage through death, / voyage whose chartings are unlove" (51). Hayden's approach is historically minded; to what extent, the poem asks, can a Hegelian vision of the ultimate progression and synthesis of world events still function, given the cataclysmic depths of an evil such as this one? It's noteworthy that the hope inhering in the poem derives mainly

⁸¹ The unbearable conditions in which many America-bound Africans crossed the Atlantic has been well-documented. Stephanie Smallwood writes in her book *Saltwater Slavery* that given the ships' crowded conditions, "illness was nearly impossible to avoid . . . Exhaustion, malnutrition, fear, and seasickness resulted in depressed immune systems and increased vulnerability to disease," which included smallpox, tuberculosis, and dysentery (136). The historian Herbert Klein lists "gastrointestinal disorders and fevers" as "[t]he "biggest killers," adding that scurvy and dysentery were also common (153-4). To prevent them from escaping, the enslaved Africans – especially the males – were required to wear "iron shackles" for "weeks and sometimes months at a stretch" (143). It was not altogether uncommon for Africans to leap to their deaths if given the chance (an occurrence described in "Middle Passage"); for example, Smallwood cites an entry in a ship's log which records that a captive "Leaped over board & drowned himself" (145).

One of the most tangible, if incomplete, ways to measure the suffering endured by Africans on the Middle Passage is by the number of them who died on the journey. Smallwood reports that "20 percent of the Africans carried into the Atlantic in the seventeenth century died at sea" (150). According to Klein, improvements in medicine and attempts to standardize requirements for passage, among other factors, meant that "slave shipbound mortality declined to less than one-half this level in the late eighteenth century" (138). This decline owed mainly to improvements in the blacks' living conditions. Since each enslaved African represented a financial investment, these improvements can in turn be attributed, at least in part, to their owners' wish to forestall economic losses (Smallwood 151). Even so, Klein reports, due to "the special conditions of slave transport," "rates never fell below 5 percent for any large group of vessels surveyed" (153). In summary, Klein cautions us against reading the Middle Passage as "the totally disorganized, arbitrary, and bloody experience pictured in the popular literature," but allows, in spite of this qualification, that "death occurred constantly on ship" (160).

from the *Amistad* rebellion, in which enslaved blacks responded to their oppression by seizing their autonomy in an act of calculated violence. One thus finds in this poem a surprising commonality between Hayden and Frantz Fanon. Although the two men could never be said to share identical views (Hayden rejected nationalism in any form, while in his later work Fanon embraced it as a political necessity for all oppressed cultures), “Middle Passage” celebrates the *Amistad* rebellion not as a violent rupture on the path to unity, but as the violent and necessary means by which unity will one day be achieved. As such, Hayden’s rendering of the event corresponds in some ways to what Fanon calls the “fighting phase” of a nationalist literature, in which

the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people’s lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. (*Wretched* 222-3)

Hayden differs from Fanon, however, in that he sees violent attempts to achieve freedom as instrumental in achieving not only ethnic self-realization, but a multiracial unity that supersedes it. Hayden values transnational and transcultural interdependence rather than nationalist independence; for this reason his work consistently affirms the importance of moments of connection between individuals from divergent ethnic or economic backgrounds. Ultimately, the difference between the two is philosophical: Hayden holds out hope for the possibility of recognition and sympathy even within systems of racial division that, for Fanon, entirely preclude it.

This hope is apparent even in Hayden’s description of the conditions on board the ships, where, as the poem tells it, an

effluvium of living death
spreads outward from the hold
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement. (Hayden, *Collected Poems* 51)

The “living death” Hayden describes here is accurate in an all-too-literal sense: conditions in the holds of slave ships deteriorated to such an extent that it was hard to distinguish the living from

the dead. While the brutality of such a scene makes any gloss but the most literal seem an aestheticizing evasion, it's worth noting that for Hayden, the living and the dead – whether black or white – also remain interlocked throughout history. Each choice made in the past affects those in the present and future; and furthermore, the way we choose to read the past has implications for our collective future. As Wilburn Williams Jr. writes, for Hayden the past “need not be past at all. His speakers confront their history as active participants in its very own making and not as distant onlookers bemoaning their isolation in the present” (740).

Those aboard *La Amistad* succeed in making the history for which they will be remembered not only by outright rebellion, but by smaller instances of human connection without which the transhistorical interdependence asserted by the poem would be impossible. Consider the italicized section of the poem in which one of the sailors is clearly affected by the stares of the tormented captives: “*the living look at you / with human eyes whose suffering accuses you*” (52). That this accusation strikes home, at least for one individual, reminds us not only that the Africans are spurred on by an indomitable will to freedom, but that the sailors – since they are not immune to the Africans’ gazes and are provoked to feelings of guilt – can themselves be influenced by the affective power of sympathy.

The central tension of the poem can be located in the fact that, whatever hope such moments might inscribe, “Middle Passage” still depicts a historical phenomenon made possible by a cultural and institutional refusal to sympathize with or recognize the disenfranchised other. Hayden is not hesitant to take advantage, in crafting his poem, of the ironies this refusal generates. One of the sailors declares himself “sicken[ed]” by the thought of “how these apes / threw overboard the butchered bodies of / our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam” (53). His reminiscence parallels the earlier section of the poem in which the Africans throw *themselves* overboard, unable to bear the living conditions that will eventually incite the very violence the sailor finds so inhuman. In another instance, the sailor expresses himself thankful that he and his fellow survivors have been “freed / from our unspeakable misery” – a claim in which the irony is laid on too thick to require further explanation (53).

While such tragic ironies starkly delineate the abuses of the colonialist enterprise, the poem does not remain fixated on its own moral indignation. Its final concern is with what *does* survive the Middle Passage despite the death and inhumanity that define it:

The deep immortal human wish,
 the timeless will:
 Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,
 life that transfigures many lives. (54)

“Immortal,” “timeless,” “deathless”: the synonyms follow one another, each the middle word in its line, formally embodying the invincibility they signify. This indomitability is a kind of will to freedom or will to life, a refusal to be subjected to the whim and rule of another – in short, a demand for recognition that will not relent until met. This urgent will is one of Hayden’s great themes; in “Night, Death, Mississippi,” in “Runagate, Runagate,” and in “Middle Passage,” he demonstrates the degree to which every occasion of the denial of recognition inspires a new iteration of the desire for it. This repeated desire appears in the closing lines of “Middle Passage,” where the poem’s refrain echoes a final time: “Voyage through death / to life upon these shores” (54). Life, for Hayden, depends on a rejection of the practices emblemized by the Middle Passage.

In this sense, the *Amistad* Rebellion, as an historical moment that crystallizes this rejection, provides an apposite image of how the demand to be recognized as human – the demand, ultimately, for sympathy – overcomes, on a long enough timeframe, the cultural forces that attempt to curb it. “Middle Passage” is rife with juxtaposed idioms, perspectives, and ideologies precisely because their confluence produces moments of sympathetic tension that unravel the binaries on which such cultural forces depend. The sympathy generated in the clash of these idioms is connective to the extent that it is disruptive; it functions as an emotional bond of mutuality with the power to transcend fixed categories such as race and class and to invade and reshape once-hermetic languages. What finally survives the Middle Passage, then, is not only the will to freedom (the intensity with which the enslaved “mean mean mean to be free”) but the affective posture that accompanies and, eventually, ensures that freedom. This is a stance of sympathy, predicated on recognizing the other and testifying – much like the poems of Bishop and Lowell, and of O’Hara and Ashbery – to the self’s dependence on others as the crucial element of its hesitating progress toward a social, material, and emotional wholeness which to take for granted is to endanger.

Chapter Nine

“Ghetto Laughter”: Unfashionable Hope in Melvin Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*

I. The Synthesizing Ambitions of *Libretto*

Upon a first reading of Melvin Tolson’s masterful and perplexing long poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, it’s not hard to agree with Michael Bérubé’s assessment that Tolson “fits into no ready-made pedagogical categories” (156). *Libretto* is characterized by its unnerving and vital openness and by a rich and diffuse dynamism. Its ambition is to be the greatest of African American modernist poems, and to do so by welding together the vernacular and formal qualities of black culture and modernist style. Allen Tate’s preface to *Libretto* represented, for Tolson, the book’s approval by the cognoscenti of the era and its entry into the literary canon, while in no way diminishing its status as black literature (Farnsworth 146, Bérubé 141). For as Farnsworth notes, Tolson’s modernist ambition was matched by his longheld sense of being “deeply compelled to speak in a voice that represented the people” – whether or not they were likely to fully understand (or even read) his poetry (92). One of the poem’s central tensions emanates from the uncertain but surprisingly productive conflation of the African American and modernist aesthetics. The inherent claim of *Libretto* is thus twofold: a double insistence, in Matthew Hart’s phrasing, “that blackness is equal to poetic modernity and that modernist form is no barrier to blackness” (144).

In making these claims, Tolson maps out the arena in which he believes sympathy must take place. By obliterating the divide between African American and modernist literatures, Tolson recuses himself from the tendency to categorize as a means of instituting divisions: “meld[ing] high-modernist techniques with an African American consciousness,” as David Gold puts it, allows him “to create a voice that would speak across both race and class boundaries” (243). In fact, Tolson argues in *Libretto*, the only significant divisions between people are neither racial nor linguistic nor national: they are economic in origin, and as such can be breached. And *Libretto*, with its cacophony of languages and voices encountering one another in rich disarray, stands as an exemplar of the sympathy between diverse groups for

which it advocates. In the poem's second stanza, Tolson characterizes Liberia – in notably optimistic terms – as “*Mehr Licht* for the Africa-to-Be” (*Libretto* 16). “*Mehr Licht*,” the German words for “more light,” are apocryphally said to be Goethe's last words. Using the final utterance of one of the great thinkers in the Western literary tradition to inaugurate a newly liberated African nation, Tolson synthesizes the historical developments of Africa and the West and claims the possibility of connection between seemingly distant cultures. This claim is also evidenced in the formal attributes of *Libretto*. Beginning with its first section, “Do,” the poem is divided into eight parts, each named after successive notes on the diatonic scale – which is, like high modernism itself, a thoroughly Western aesthetic invention. But at the same time, the opening section of *Libretto* assumes an evidently African American rhythm; it features, as Edward Brunner observes in his annotation of the poem, “a set of contrasts resembling a call-and-response pattern” of the sort popularized by the blues and folk tradition in black American culture (Tolson, *Anthology* n418).⁸² In subtending this call-and-response pattern, at the beginning of his poem, within an overarching framework that is firmly Western in origin, Tolson signifies the overlapping of the Western modernist and African American domains that his poem will extensively feature.

At first glance, these two registers don't appear to be equal in importance; the Western (and, by implication, modernist) mode seems to be the dominant one, since it encompasses the whole *Libretto*, while the call-and-response technique is used only in the beginning section and then at intermittent points throughout the poem. But Tolson uses this seeming imbalance of power to produce a sudden reversal: for as “the quicksilver sparrow that slips / The eagle's claw,” Liberia – and the African culture it symbolizes – consistently resists appropriation by the colonialist powers that hope to control it (Tolson, *Libretto* 7-8). In an endnote explaining his description, in line 42, of Africa as a “Question Mark,” Tolson recalls that Africa has been

⁸² This parenthetical citation will be used to indicate a reference to the edition of *Libretto* found in the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 418-70. This edition of the text has been thoroughly and helpfully annotated by Edward Brunner, and I cite it in this chapter as “*Anthology*” wherever I refer to his commentary. In citing the poem proper I will use the 1953 Twayne edition (which records line numbers rather than page numbers).

called “a moral interrogation point that challenges the white world” (*Libretto* n42); however, as Brunner points out, Tolson had also used the term “question mark” in a column he wrote for the *Washington Tribune* that extolled Africa’s resilience: “Every world conqueror has tried to conquer Africa. But in time Africa has swallowed them all. . . . Africa will swallow many a white army after we are dead and gone” (*Anthology* n421). The question mark of Africa, then, supersedes the colonialist and limiting answers that it invites.

In “Sol,” a later section of *Libretto*, Tolson includes an African proverb that illustrates metaphorically the continent’s eventual ascendance in spite of all those who would seek to conquer it:

“Africa is a rubber ball;
the harder you dash it to the ground,
the higher it will rise.” (*Libretto* 173-5)

The problematic dichotomy between Africa and the West is resolved here through an assertion of Africa’s refusal to be subjected to other nations, while not rejecting its interdependence with them. This defiant response to a supposedly dominant other is also evident in Tolson’s extensive use of endnotes in *Libretto*. As Schultz has argued, these endnotes – while marking the poem as distinctly modernist – also “enact the poem’s intertextual project, leading the reader not to explanations but to other texts, particularly primary texts” (126). The endnotes anchor and explicate the poem, but they also connect it to a variety of other documents, instantiating a reciprocal movement between texts and encouraging the reader to explore literatures of various genres and historical periods. In this sense, and simply because they both provide and defer the meanings of the lines they qualify, the footnotes of *Libretto* take on a central role in the poem. Edward Brunner argues in this vein that “a narrative in which the subordinate becomes the dominant is . . . embedded in Tolson’s annotations” (152). However obliquely, the endnotes reflect the historical situation described in the poem: the counterintuitive subordination of the colonizer to the colonized. The landscape of *Libretto*, then, is one in which Liberia’s embrace of resistive and self-assertive affects in the face of outside pressure produces an ethos of transnational interdependence.

The poem that looms largest in the background of *Libretto* is T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a poem that seeks order amidst dystopian fragmentation and one whose ambiguous

ending features a tapestry of varied voices and languages. While Tolson's poem shares some of the formal characteristics of *The Waste Land*, its mood is finally much more optimistic. *Libretto* evinces a recognition of the decay and narcissism attending modern cultures, but it offers, in its final sections, a hopeful response to this situation, positing the possibility of a global politics defined by recognition and the sharing of affect. Thus, situating itself within the larger modernist tradition, *Libretto* responds to the alienation and despair depicted in *The Waste Land* by conjecturing an Afro-futurist and transnational optimism. In this chapter I will demonstrate the political and ethical scope of Tolson's *Libretto*. I will first show how its use of a wide variety of languages and dialects constitutes a call to transnational interconnectivity and interpersonal recognition. I then show how Tolson's historical contextualization of racial and economic injustice offers a reminder of the limits of these ills and demands a response to them – one of ideological if not physical violence. Next, I will remark on Tolson's subordination of racial conflicts to class conflicts as a basis for his insistent optimism. I locate this optimism in Tolson's vision of a future Marxist-Christian democracy, which he begins to sketch out in the last sections of *Libretto*. Despite the savagery and corruption of Liberian history, I argue, Tolson's optimism can be defended as an instance of the poet's responsibility to enlarge the boundaries of what seems possible. Finally, I will read in Tolson's conception of a social order founded on sympathy an answer to the concerns Anne Anlin Cheng raises in *The Melancholy of Race*, one that also constitutes a timely imposition into the largely negative emphasis placed on the affects in recent theoretical discourse.

II. Writing Between Dialects

Michael North describes the modernist movement as an attempt on the part of both black and white writers to “free” language, “in dramatically different ways,” from the constricting effects of a limiting political culture (11). In its rich and diverse use of language, *Libretto* fits this description; containing “phrases in a dozen languages,” as Brunner notes, it circumvents tradition in order to reinvent it, “mount[ing] a series of raids against various kinds of established authority” (143, 145). That the languages featured in *Libretto* are foreign to one another allows us to consider how such foreignness might be re-examined, how meaning achieves a tenuous transmission across and between dialects. As Brent Hayes Edwards has observed, the

interaction between or interweaving of different languages can provoke moments of unexpected harmony, what he calls a “foreshadowing of community” in “the articulation of a connection across difference” (68). If, as Brunner suggests in his notes to *Libretto*, the poem’s last section (lines 489-770) begins in “sheer cacophony” in order to depict “the confusion of the postwar moment,” the very proximity of these myriad voices and languages to one another surely marks the poem as transnational not only in scale but in agenda (Tolson, *Anthology* n452).

The heterogeneous vocabulary of *Libretto* thus urges adaptation rather than stagnation, dynamism rather than fixity, and above all it underlines the requirement – by requiring it of the reader – to encounter the language, and with it the worldview, of the other. (These last two are inextricable; as Bakhtin insists, “all languages of heteroglossia . . . are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” [291-2].) The diverse languages with which *Libretto* challenges the reader serve as a reminder of the necessary subjectivity of any one viewpoint, whatever the language that shapes and accompanies it. This inescapable subjectivity also circumscribes, of course, the limit of sympathy: but so far from suggesting that sympathy is unavailable, it makes the need for it all the more evident. While the radical alterity that language symptomatizes causes the speaker of *Libretto* moments of doubt – “the letter killeth five hundred global tongues,” he notes, even as he speaks in several of them – the confluence of dialects in the poem dramatizes the navigation of ideas and relationships across the dividing lines of languages, suggesting that the barriers they create are ultimately permeable (*Libretto* 523).

The poem’s second section begins by citing an African proverb: “The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted: / ‘*Brow tron lo – eta ne a ne won oh gike!*’” (*Libretto* 58). While it’s unclear just who is meant by the “Good Gray Bard,”⁸³ Tolson’s translation of the proverb in his endnote deserves attention: “The world is too large – that’s why we do not hear everything” (n58). The poem’s transnational impulse is a response to this lament, and is expressed both as challenge and as corrective: in more grandiose terms, then, *Libretto* can be thought of as an

⁸³ Brunner conjectures that the title refers to Walt Whitman (Tolson, *Anthology* n419).

attempt to make the world smaller through language. Reflecting on the ancient economic practices that shaped modern civilization, the poem's speaker envisions "[s]ea lawyers" who, in service to their rulers, "[m]ixed liquors with hyperboles to cure deafness" (67). Figuratively, the *Libretto* might fairly be said to attempt much the same thing. Its locution is not so much *in* a language as *between* them. Its narrative arc reflects on the past and future of Liberia and the African continent at large, particularly in its relation to Western powers. Rather than being organized chronologically, the poem enacts a kind of thought experiment, choosing which points of local and world history to emphasize, establishing a historical timeline only to veer from it to geological time ("Glaciers had shouldered down / The cis-Saharan snows . . ."[227-8]) before ending with a fantastical ode to a future Liberia of the poet's imagination. Such hyperboles, such heady liquors, are all within the poem's purview. Its ambition is to cure a "deafness" which inheres in our relation to our shared past as well as to each other. This deafness, while it has repercussions on a global scale, is especially apparent in the case of Africa: "'Seule de tous les continents,' the parrots / chatter, 'l'Afrique n'a pas d'histoire'" (170-1). "Alone of all the continents, Africa has no history": the saying condemns the injustices perpetrated on the continent and the ingredients that gave rise to them – a dearth of recognition and of the human sympathy constitutive of community and progress. In narrating this history from an explicitly internationalist perspective, Tolson attempts in *Libretto* to rekindle this recognition and its attendant benefits.

III. Temporality and Violence

It is in "Ti," the second-last poem of *Libretto* (lines 255-488) that Tolson's critique of global culture is at its most wide-ranging. "Ti," as Brunner notes, "ranges widely across numerous historical, cultural, and political narratives, drawn from every corner of the globe"; it is in this section, too, that Tolson goes furthest in articulating a political worldview (Tolson, *Anthology* n435). A closer examination of "Ti" allows us to discern the political considerations that inhere in Tolson's aesthetic, which are arrayed as though from a wide-ranging set of perspectives and contexts in order to impress upon the reader the weight of the claims being made.

The theme of this section of *Libretto* is, in a word, subjugation – how the rule of one group of people by another has been a defining feature of human history. But Tolson's emphasis

is as much on the limits of empires – on their eventual endings – as it is on the grievances they incur:

No longer stands Diogenes' hearse
 readied for the ebony mendicant
 nor weeping widow Europe with her hands
 making the multitudinous seas incarnadine . . . (*Libretto* 265-8)

The governing phrase in these lines, “no longer,” invites the reader to consider the temporality (and eventual disappearance) of the events it describes. And even the most entrenched reifications upon which empires found themselves – race, nation, language, ideology – can all be read as interdependent and historically contained phenomena when seen on a long enough timescale:

Melamin or melanin dies to the world and dies:
 Rome casketed herself in Homeric hymns.
 Man's culture in barb and Arab lies:
 The Jordan flows into the Tiber,
 the Yangtze into the Thames,
 the Ganges into the Mississippi,
 the Niger
 into the Seine. (284-90)

In the first two lines of this passage, Tolson highlights the limitedness, respectively, of race and empire: the former is a construct dependent, in a physiological sense, on melanin (the pigment that determines skin colour), while no historical instance of the latter can stave off eventual extinction, however powerful it might be. Using a sequence of increasingly shorter lines whose very words seem almost to flow like a river, Tolson then describes the world's most famous rivers flowing into one another to contrast the (relative) changelessness and durability of the natural realm with the fickleness of the human. Further, to the extent that these rivers represent the cultures made possible by their presence, the rivers' interconnection indicates the complex and inextricable interdependence of various cultures over the centuries.

While not eliding cultural and ethnic divides entirely, then, Tolson certainly advocates here for a form of unity that supersedes conventional markers of difference. As Brunner

suggests, his “controversial assertion” in “Ti” is “that no one ethnic group has a particular claim on being oppressed or on oppressing others” (*Anthology* n435). This notion shapes the politics that remains visible in Tolson’s work, and separates him from a figure such as Fanon, for whom the transnational can only be realized in the development of the national. Fanon advocates in *The Wretched of the Earth* for a “literature of combat,” which he defines as “the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space” (240). By contextualizing colonialism and racism as time-bound entities, Tolson rejects the idea of outright violence, preferring, like Hayden, a Bakhtinian conceptual or linguistic violence engendered by the heteroglossic admixture of competing idioms and ideas which thereby encourages the recognition formative of sympathy. But Tolson’s depiction of transnational unity is not as unruffled as Hayden’s; in *Libretto* Tolson paints a more evasive and complex picture of the costs and rewards of building anything approaching an international community. In an earlier section of the poem, his successive descriptions of predators (a snake, a vulture, and a tiger) satiated by the prey they’ve recently devoured seems, despite its soothing incantatory refrain, only to presage further turmoil:

The beaked and pouched assassin sags
on to his corsair rock,
and from his talons swim the blood-
red feathers of a cock . . .

In the interlude of peace.

The tawny typhoon striped with black
torpors in grasses tan:
a doomsday cross, his paws uprear
the leveled skull of a man . . .

In the interlude of peace (Libretto 130-9)

As Brunner notes, the peace invoked here sounds “disturbingly hollow” given the placement of the refrain between stanzas describing carnivores glutted with prey (*Anthology* n428). Indeed, the very use of the word “interlude” seems to indicate the temporary status of whatever peace

has been achieved. These lines help to reveal the ambiguous place of violence in Tolson's politics: while undesired in human relations, it functions as a necessary and even potentially beneficial part of the natural order.

The drawback to incorporating violence within political ideology, however, is that it depends on the very power imbalances *Libretto* is written to address. Even if occasioned as a form of redress, liberating violence tends to replicate – albeit in reverse – the binaries and divisions it seeks to overcome. For this reason, Tolson chooses the softer political strategy of sympathy, with all its attendant complications, as the path forward for African Americans (as well as for those of other ethnicities). The consistent hope underlying *Libretto* is that the will to dominance can be matched and exceeded, in individuals from all nations, by what might be called the will to sympathy. Thus Tolson's description of blacks as “dusky peers of Roman, Greek, and Jew” (*Libretto* 295) functions not only as a reminder of the weight of the African philosophical and religious traditions, but as a valorization of equality as the natural state of things, and of recognition as the means through which it is – and must still be – achieved.

IV. The Ferris Wheel and the Merry-Go-Round

Such equality can only be possible, of course, if the forms of systemic oppression and injustice prevalent in many places in the world of Tolson's time emanate from conditional, socially constructed paradigms rather than inherent ones. Tolson stresses the temporal and spatial limitations of any one group's dominance over another in part to reinforce the arbitrariness of some of our deepest-rooted and most endemic divisions. The fundamental inessentiality of hegemonies of language and nation is a key tenet of *Libretto*, and in the futuristic utopia of the poet's imagination, these reductive binarisms will have been overcome, bringing the most deeply engrained and lasting struggle for equality in human history – that between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots – to the fore.

In other words, Tolson's vision of the world is in many respects a Marxist one. This becomes evident not only through close readings of his poems, but by examining other aspects of his career as a teacher and cultural critic. Gary Lenhart writes that in *Caviar & Cabbage*, a column he wrote for the Washington Tribune from 1937 to 1944, Tolson “consistently hammered ‘the Big Boys’ whose limitless greed promoted colonialism in most of the world and

racism in the United States. He stated frequently that the cause of racism was capitalism, the profits of which required an exploited low-wage class” (66). The essential problem in political and social relations, from Tolson’s perspective, is ultimately economic, not race-based.⁸⁴ This principle is evoked in Tolson’s summary of the American Civil War, during which, he writes, “the bells of Yankee capital / Tolloed for the feudal glory of the South” (*Libretto* 101-2). Here the central distinction between the opposed sides is found in their differing economic systems – the North’s advanced, the South’s outdated. The lines that follow the above-quoted couplet reinforce the connection between money and racial power. The history is an overtly capitalist one, in which a “family name / Dwarfed signatures of blood,” and a “decision’s cash / And credit bought a balm for conscience” (108-9, 114-5). Tolson summarizes this conceit beautifully and concisely later in the poem: it is the fate of all cultures, he writes, to “read the flesh of grass / into bulls and bears” (314-5). As Brunner notes, the phrase “flesh of grass” is redolent of Isaiah 40:6: “All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field” (KJV; *Anthology* n438). The idiom in which bulls and bears are contrasted is, of course, that of the stock market; Tolson’s lament is that the latter should predominate over the former, that even the fact of human mortality should be made to serve the whims of the capitalist engine.

It is in “Ti,” his wide-ranging examination of African and world history, that Tolson insists most explicitly on the historical and theoretical preeminence of the economic binarism in modernity: “Before hammer and sickle or swastika, two / worlds existed: the Many, the Few” (*Libretto* 341-2). The divide between those who stand to gain by the capitalist system and those who stand to lose by it predates any of the political ideologies written to explicate it, and is the originary inequality on which all other systemic injustices are based. “Like some gray ghoul from Alcatraz, / old Profit, the bald rake *paseq*, wipes the bar” – and passes, in the poem’s next lines, through eras and nations like an avaricious ghost (347-8). In his endnote to these lines, Tolson refers to the *paseq* as “the most mysterious sign in literature” (n348). The word is

⁸⁴ It seems entirely possible – given that Tolson understood ethnicity in economic terms – that his Marxist inclinations, more than any belief in the absolute “rightness” of creating a poetics of race, led him to affiliate himself with the Black Arts movement in the 1960s.

Hebrew, and its literal meaning is “separated,” but its function in ancient literature is precisely to unify the current text with a preceding one. It is a vertical line, rendered like so: |, and is meant (according to current scholarly consensus) to reassure the authenticity of the current text’s phrasing as compared to the original or source version (*Anthology* n441). The *paseq*, then, paradoxically signifies separation and produces unity, and in so doing it apotheosizes Tolson’s representation in *Libretto* of an overriding sense of hope that counterbalances scene after scene of chaos and strife.

For the present is already, Tolson argues in *Libretto*, becoming the future – a future in which to celebrate, as Lenhart phrases it, “the dawn of a pan-Africanism that would resolve ethnic strife between Africans” and “praise Liberian independence as harbinger of the liberation from colonial oppression” (73). This utopian future is most clearly expressed in “Do,” the poem’s eighth and final (and, as Tolson’s biographer Robert Farnsworth has noted, oft-criticized) section, but hints of its eventual ascendance are already present in “Ti” (Farnsworth 138). In this penultimate section, Tolson looks back at a bloody past scarred by “Yesterday’s wars,” during which

the ferris wheel
of race, of caste, of class
dumped and alped cadavers till the ground
fogged the Pleiades with Gila rot . . . (*Libretto* 462, 474-7)

This scene contrasts with the present-day situation, a democratic free-for-all in which “unparadised nobodies with maps of Nowhere / ride the merry-go-round!” (486-7). Farnsworth explains the terms “ferris wheel” and “merry-go-round” using one of Tolson’s newspaper columns from 1940. There, the poet argues for a historical progression from the former to the latter:

The history of man heretofore has been the history of the rise and fall of nations. I presume to call this the Ferris Wheel Theory of History. . . . I have another theory. It is based on economic and racial brotherhood. I presume to call this the Merry-Go-Round of History. On the merry-go-round all seats are on the same level. Nobody goes up; therefore, nobody has to come down. . . .

Racial superiority and class superiority produced the hellish contraption called the Ferris Wheel of History. Democracy will produce the Merry-Go-Round of history. (quoted in Farnsworth 157-8)

In a letter to his editor explaining the final section of *Libretto*, Tolson links the symbols of the ferris wheel and the merry-go-round to the past and future respectively (153). The poem's claim is that democracy of the kind just installed in Liberia is the antidote to the seemingly unending varieties of oppression with which the past is littered. The "Merry-Go-Round of history" represents Tolson's vision of the utopian future he depicts at length in *Libretto*'s last section. Combining Christian moral philosophy with a Marxist understanding of economics, Tolson envisages a future social compact governed by political equality and affective community.

From the contemporary vantage point, the utopian prognosis sketched out in *Libretto* appears naïve at best. At the present moment we are only recently removed from a series of mostly failed wars waged in order to export democracy, and can also look back at the sixty years since the publication of *Libretto* as a period defined, in the African continent and not least in Liberia itself, by civil war, bloodshed, and even genocide. Without the affective engagement its success demands, democracy is simply another political institution, one that might limit, at most, the inequalities and divisions that *Libretto* laments, but can never eradicate them. This is because such a task is not solely a political one but also, perhaps firstly, an ethical one; it concerns the realm of human actions both private and public, both individual and collective. And the poem's chief insight is that the democratic future it dares to forecast is bound up in the movement from the individual to the collective, from isolation to connectivity.

For this reason *Libretto* remains a poem characterized by an implicit politics, one that aligns imperfectly with the more distinct and specific form of socialism with which Tolson associated himself in his career as a public intellectual. In *Libretto*, the civilizational transition from the "ferris wheel" of caste to the "merry-go-round" of brotherhood is only predicated on democracy insofar as democracy is enacted not merely as a system of political organization but as a state of affective co-dependence. Thus the poem contains no direct political injunctions; rather, it is woven through with an implied demand for recognition of the other (especially the weaker) and a mingling of the supposedly distinct languages, ideologies, and categories whose integration produces the very unification it formally represents. Tolson's pairing of the

economic doctrine of Marxism and the religious principles of Christianity is an incisive example of this tactic. In describing the respective heads of these movements as “Marx, the exalter” and “Christ, the Leveler” Tolson differentiates between the two, perhaps in order to suggest a distinction not only between the effects of the Christian and Marxist philosophies but between the writings of Marx and the true goals of socialism (361, 363).⁸⁵ In any case, Tolson indicates that the synthesis of socialist and Christian ideals, rather than their mutual exclusion from one another, might foster the cultivation of an ethic of social unity. The confluence of such ideologies produces a social ethic that rejects too-easy political or religious affiliations in favour of more radical and self-questioning forms of inquiry – political and ethical models

⁸⁵ Edward Brunner makes a small error in his otherwise excellently annotated edition of *Libretto*. He transcribes Tolson’s note to the phrase “Christ, the Leveler” as referring to Acts 3:32-36, though it in fact mentions Acts 5:32-36. (Here is Tolson’s note, in full: “V. The Acts V, xxxii-xxxvi” [*Libretto* n363].) Indeed, the passage Brunner cites does not exist, as Acts 3 contains only 26 verses. The section of Acts from which Brunner quotes is in fact chapter 4:32-35, which describes the early Christian church as adopting what could fairly be called a socialist system of economic welfare:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common. . . . Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. (Acts 4:32, 34-5 KJV)

To refer to this passage as the source for the term “Christ, the Leveler” makes intuitive sense, and it seems likely, at first glance, that it is this section of Acts 4 to which Tolson intended to refer. However, as I noted above, his endnote mentions Acts 5:32-36, *not* Acts 4:32-36, and one could make the argument that the passage from Acts 5 also makes sense as a citation to the phrase “Christ, the Leveler.” Here is Acts 5:32-36 in full:

And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them. Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men. For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought. (KJV)

In the above passage, the high priest Gamaliel preaches caution to the assembled chief priests, arguing that unless the recent Christian uprising is from God, it will come to nothing, just as have the many military and quasi-religious rebellions that preceded it. In the context of these lines, Christ might be read as the “Leveler” in a less economic and more spiritual sense: all movements besides the one he inspired are human in origin and therefore doomed to fail. We are left, then, with the intractable question of whether Tolson himself made an error of transcription – intending to cite Acts 4, but in fact citing Acts 5 – or whether the latter, less well-known, and somewhat more vexing and difficult passage in Acts 5:32-36 is indeed the one he meant to cite. My own suspicion is that the former is the more likely case.

predicated on the emotional willingness to reach beyond the borders of the conventional and into the unpredictable but potentially liberating arena of the unknown.

V. Tolson's Political Optimism

Tolson offers a sense of what this unachieved political unknown might look like in the exuberant final section of *Libretto*, which sequences dreamlike descriptions of futuristic vehicles of transportation, all African in origin. (The stylization and utopianism of this section of the whole of *Libretto* – but especially this section – allow us to situate it as a precursor text in the Afrofuturist literary tradition.)⁸⁶ These include, in order, “The Futurafrique,” a sleek futuristic automobile; “The United Nations Limited,” a high-powered train; “The Bula Matadi,” a large cargo ship; and “*Le Premier des Noirs*,” an airplane belonging to a company called “Pan-African Airways” (575-693). Tolson then moves to a more explicitly political construction, a Pan-African governmental body that provides leadership and renewal not only to African culture but to the world:⁸⁷

⁸⁶ The term “Afrofuturism” was first coined by Mark Dery in 1994 to describe a black futurist literary tradition focusing on the intersections between race, futurity, and technoculture. See *Flame Wars: The Discourse by Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994). Recent explorations of Afrofuturism include a special issue on the topic in *Social Text* 71 (2002) as well as the recent publication of *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, eds. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

⁸⁷ In expressing this notion of a future unified political order, Tolson draws upon a current of utopianism that courses through the history of American poetics. He may well have had Whitman's exuberant “Passage to India” in mind in composing this part of *Libretto*. A further antecedent (of which Tolson may or may not have been aware) is Joel Barlow's epic poem *The Columbiad*, written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the last section of which contains these stridently hopeful lines:

Yet here thou seest the same progressive plan
That draws for mutual succour man to man,
From twain to tribe, from tribe to realm dilates,
In federal union groups a hundred states,
Thro all their turns with gradual scale ascends,
Their power, their passions and their interest blends,
While growing arts their social virtues spread,
Enlarge their compacts and unlock their trade;
Till each remotest clan, by commerce join'd,
Links in the chain that binds all humankind,
Their bloody banners sink in darkness furl'd,
And one white flag of peace triumphant walks the world. (Barlow x.85-96)

“The Parliament of African Peoples, chains riven in
 an age luminous with alpha ray
 ideas, rives the cycle of years
 lean and fat, poises the scales
 of Head and Hand, gives Sci-
 ence dominion over Why and
 Art over How, bids Man cross
 the bridge of Bifrost and drink
 draughts of rases from verved
 and loined apes of God with
 leaves of grass and great audi-
 ences . . . (711-22)

In this representative passage Tolson envisions a future Africa – whose riven chains indicate not only the absence of slavery, but of the various forms of colonialist oppression the continent has had to endure – that stands at the forefront of “an age luminous with alpha ray / ideas” (712-3). The overcoming of ignorance and prejudice requires the union of apparent opposites, including “lean and fat,” “Head and Hand,” and Science and Art (714-15). Again, Tolson (like Hayden) insists on the ultimate ephemerality of human categories, premising his vision of a utopian future on the presence of the sympathetic conjunctions that can transcend them. He even dares hope for a perfect kinship between poet and audience – the Whitmanian “leaves of grass” paired with the “great / audiences” receptive to them – of the kind he sought throughout his career but never fully found (721-2). In such a society, no perceived dissonance inheres between black poetry and modernist literature; all the poet must overcome are his own limitations.

In *Libretto*, then, Tolson figures Liberia, the first African republic, as a space within which to emplace political hope for a new Africa freed from the travails of its past, but also as one in which to imagine the possibility of a transnational political structure divested of the potentially restrictive markers of race, class, and nation. As Nielsen observes, for Tolson “Liberia is not the ahistorical blank of Eliot’s Africa; neither is it the impotent tribal dirge of the Eliotic modern. It is rather the fecund soil upon which African and American histories rendezvous, the territory upon which both histories are to be reconstituted” (64). Tolson’s

optimism was likely buoyed in this respect by the recent formation, at the end of World War II, of the United Nations – a multinational cooperative organization that appeared to embody the progressive internationalist perspective discernible in the last section of *Libretto*. The poem thus harbours the hope for the achievement of a globally-minded community of artists and thinkers that push modernism beyond its self-imposed limitations, rendering the spheres of the political and the aesthetic complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Given this rosy portrait of the African future, it's certainly clear that, as Brunner comments, Tolson's "visionary strain meets and exceeds his searing critique" (151). But the historical record comes much closer to reaffirming his social critique than to approaching the state of affairs he describes at the close of *Libretto* – an ending shot through with what Matthew Hart terms, not unfairly, "gaseous optimism" (174). Since 1980, when Samuel Doe led a military coup against the government, Liberia has been one of Africa's bloodiest nation-states. Doe was in power for ten years before he was executed and his own government overthrown by the Charles Taylor-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia. This event precipitated a civil war that left nearly a quarter of a million people dead. And even before 1980, Liberia was a democratic republic more in name than in fact: as Hart notes, during the postwar years it functioned as "an oligarchic state in which an elite group of 'Americo-Liberian' black settlers ruled an indigenous population in imperial fashion" (164).

Nonetheless, Tolson's confidence about the prospects of a free Liberia was not entirely unwarranted. Liberia had been a founding member of the United Nations in 1945, and its government was internationally involved in the years after World War II. In 1955, at the Bandung Conference, Liberia joined several other Asian and African nations in officially condemning colonialism. Liberia's independence also paved the way for many other African nations to follow suit. As Tolson himself pointed out in a 1965 interview, "In 1947 . . . there were only two independent black countries in Africa. Today there are thirty-three. It is a vision, right out of the Apocalypse" ("A Poet's Odyssey" 192). This rapid historical development helps to make Tolson's surrealistic depiction of the African future a little less tendentious, but we know today, and Tolson might have seen already in 1965, that most of the republics formed in Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century were little more than puppet governments installed to provide flimsy validation of the reign of autocratic and sometimes genocidal

dictators. Robert Farnsworth concedes that Tolson's optimism in Libretto was at least somewhat unwarranted, not to say myopic:

Tolson deliberately chose to look at the hopes and promises inherent in Liberia's past and its key position on a continent of nations emerging from European colonial rule. He deliberately looked past many well-known social problems of contemporary Liberia: the troublesome social division between the descendants of American settlers and the native African peoples and the dangers of the extraordinary power of American corporations and the autocratic rule of the national government. (165)

Tolson's choice to emphasize the positive aspects of Liberia's political situation while minimizing the negative ones must be considered in light of his responsibility to Liberia as its Poet Laureate. His telling of the future of the country whose national poem he had been commissioned to write may be informed less by confidence than by hope – a hope that, given the Liberian (and the African) past events, might be argued to border on irrational. But to refuse cynicism, to insist on the possibility of what appears unlikely, is perhaps one of the poet's great civic responsibilities. By any measure, it is the means through which Tolson undergirded his aesthetic with an ethic of hope founded on sympathy for the other, as well as the politics such an ethic might engender. As Farnsworth argues, "Tolson clearly saw himself in the vanguard of an army of black cultural soldiers who would make the African past a centerpiece of the world's future, not by re-creating the flip side of white racism, but by realizing a more racially enlightened democratic dream" (68). If this dream has not been fully realized either in Tolson's time or our own, it's possible that its very presence, if only as a social ideal, remains a vital ingredient in whatever progress *has* been achieved.

VI. "Ghetto Laughter"

It will have become clear that while Hayden and Tolson approached politics from different perspectives, and were divided on its relation to poetics, both writers' political philosophies are founded on a keen faith in the future betterment of human society – a faith that separates them from some of the other poets who feature in this study. William Hansell has judged that the "evils in [Hayden's] poems are scientific rationalism, materialism, and the failure of universal

love,” but adds that these moral shortcomings are finally transitory: “That mankind will ultimately triumph, Hayden seems certain, and equally certain is his belief that the preparatory trials will be harsh and prolonged” (24). Similarly, Farnsworth calls Tolson a “yea-sayer” who “believed that man was working his way toward a universal culture in which he would be freer than ever to realize his human potential” (176). By “articulat[ing] a dream of modernity beyond stereotypes or dualistic taboos,” in Hart’s words, Tolson’s poems sketch out the same “futuristic catholicity” they demand their readers work towards.

As my analyses of their poems have shown, however, neither Hayden nor Tolson allow their faith in the future of humanity to cloud their perspective on present and past injustice. *Libretto* is nearly impenetrable in its last two sections, and its allusive endnotes often do less to explain the poem than to require their own explanations. But in this way, the poem’s increasing complexity may itself emblemize the importance of continuing onward toward a future that must be built and not merely envisioned, in spite of the obstacles faced along the way. These are undeniably many, as the last four stanzas of “Ti” remind us. Beginning each stanza with the word “*Höhere*,” which he translates as “heights,” Tolson enumerates the *Höhere* of the human spirit “by listing,” as Brunner explains, “all the evils, the limitations, and the misconceptions that such greatness should be beyond” (*Anthology* n445). The gallery of images and ideas from which Tolson selects and arranges his litany of troubles is astonishingly vivid: “gold fished from cesspools” (*Libretto* 405), “epitaphs in blood” (409), “the pelican’s breast rent red to feed the young” (417), “the church of the unchurched” (420), “maggot democracy” (426), and (in a line he lifts from Baudelaire) “the *oasis d’horreur dans un déserte d’ennui*” [“oasis of horror in a desert of despair”] (429).

Short of despair, the only response to such ills (in Tolson’s view) is to believe that history contains a purposiveness that is fundamentally invisible from within it. In the poem’s long final section Tolson amplifies his indictment of the world’s horrors, historical and current: it is a savaged landscape in which “barbaric yawps shatter the shoulder-knots of white peace” (514); in which unapologetically colonialist “britannia rules the waves” (516); in which, since “pin-pricks precede blitzkriegs” (531), we are forever on the verge of war; and in which no

survivors are left in ruined cities to witness “blind men gibbering *mboagan* [“death”]⁸⁸ in greek / against sodom’s pillars of salt” (552-3). In lines 555-574 Tolson questions the future directly, asking whether respite from such turmoil and strife is possible. The poem offers only the briefest and most enigmatic of answers: “*Ppt knows*” (574). Tolson’s note to the line directs us to Jonathan Swift’s *Journal to Stella*. As Farnsworth explains, “Ppt” is “an abbreviation for Poppet or Poor Pretty Thing,” Swift’s pet name for the Stella of the journal’s title, whose real name was Esther Johnson and who may have been secretly married to Swift (161). Swift’s confidence in his beloved Stella, and especially in her understanding of him, is indicative of the kind of relationality that will answer modernity’s most pressing moral concerns. “*Ppt knows*”: the line insists, in Farnsworth’s estimation, on “[t]he need to act with faith in the midst of uncertainty” (161). More than this, it describes the mode of that action as intrinsically *relational* – both expectant of, and confident in, the understanding of the (possibly distant) other. In short, it prizes sympathy as the agent that moves us from moral lethargy to moral action.

Early in *Libretto* Tolson describes Africa as the “Mother of Science,” but adds that Africa has been torn asunder and is now “*lachen mit yastchekes*” (*Libretto* 273-4). The phrase is Yiddish; its literal meaning, Tolson’s note tells us, is “laughing with needles being stuck in you” (n274). He adds a secondary, more figurative definition: “ghetto laughter” (n274). Ghetto laughter is the enslaved African’s response to her captivity, the convict’s response to his unjust imprisonment, the colonized subject’s response to the appropriation of her land – in short, it is the response of the mistreated to the fact of their victimization. But it is an active and not a passive response, one that seeks to construct the very change in which it expresses belief. Tolson’s ghetto laughter is precipitated neither by a Nietzschean gaze into the darkness nor a Beckettian embrace of the absurd. For one thing, unlike these actions, it is not solitary; it is effected by commiseration. While it originates in and emerges from the ghetto, it affirms social, political, and spiritual values that can only exist outside it. A stance of affective sociality that produces optimism within and despite hardship, ghetto laughter can only have meaning if – against all appearances – it is exactly this laughter that finally silences the specter of the ghetto.

⁸⁸ Tolson’s note; see *Libretto* n552.

In other words, Tolson's *Libretto* argues that the sympathy effected by the *sharing* of grief or pain has the potential to overcome the sources of that pain, on a historical level if not an individual one.

In this manner we can discern in *Libretto* a response to the melancholic patterns of attachment Anne Anlin Cheng diagnoses in *The Melancholy of Race*. Like Cheng, Tolson rejects any simplistic politics of assimilation, but his poem proposes that by uprooting received norms, we can work to challenge the systemic patterns through which melancholia insinuates itself into modern culture. This is a solution that fits the problem, given that melancholia involves the incorporation of feelings of loss or shame: "the melancholic has introjected that which he or she now reviles" and is left "almost choking on," Cheng writes, "the hateful and loved thing he or she just devoured" (9). That is, melancholia designates a psychosocial condition in which the affective response to the loss of a loved object or condition is directed *inward*, and this negative affect begins to nurture and simultaneously feed on itself. In stark contrast, the moment of identification is one in which affect is directed *outside* the self and in conjunction with the other; it externalizes affect rather than internalizing it. In so doing, it also provides a way out of the closed loop of attachment and reattachment to the sources of pain and grief from which the melancholic subject seeks to flee. While Cheng notes that her study offers a record not only of the after-effects of grief but "a revelation of transformative potentials within grief," she concludes that such grief and its sources are finally too imbricated in the very origins of American culture ever to be escaped (65). *Libretto* is very much about this same cultural grief – its sources and fixations – but the poem valorizes, in the end, various forms of transnational and interstitial connection that counterweigh this grief, constituting a means by which the nationalist and colonialist "ferris wheel / of race, of caste, of class" might become a global "merry-go-round" of social opportunity (Tolson, *Libretto* 474-5).

By questioning the discreteness of entrenched cultural categories and insisting on the underlying connections between all human beings, Tolson's optimistic outlook also invites a reconsideration of the scope and direction of affect theory. The current dominant critical trend in affect studies is to focus on negative emotions, dark feelings, and troublesome aspects of social relation, often (though not always) to the exclusion of more remedial forms of affect. Indeed, the rise of affect theory hinged on analyses of shame in the work of Silvan Tomkins,

first by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and later by Elspeth Probyn and others. Since then, the focus in affect studies has unquestionably been on states of psychological relation founded in disjunctions between self and other or between self and world: I am thinking, for example, of Sianne Ngai's attention to affects such as irritation and envy in her study *Ugly Feelings*; of Heather Love's examination of queer loss and sadness in *Feeling Backward*; and of Lauren Berlant's critique, in her recent book *Cruel Optimism*, of toxic cultural affective attachments (what Silvan Tomkins would call scripts) to a hoped-for but increasingly unavailable and even oppressive future. While the contributions to the field offered by these analyses have been valuable – sometimes, indeed, crucially so – it's worth remembering that affective relation can be as much about unity as about disparity and can provoke solidarity as much as it can grief. Tolson's *Libretto* functions in part as a reminder that optimism in its various iterations (political, moral, and socio-economic) can be more than a simple myth manufactured and propagated by the dominant culture to quell dissent. A poetics of affective identification can be, in fact, that very dissent, finding strength precisely in the varieties of hospitality and recognition it depicts, envisions, and remembers.

While their work reads scenes of crisis and oppression as almost unmitigated by small acts of human goodness, the “almost” looms large for Tolson (as for Hayden). His prognosis is therefore one of *unfashionable hope*, in more than one sense of the term. It is unfashionable, first, in the sense of being out of fashion – out of step with an academic culture that all too easily dispenses with the idea of hope as insufficiently rigorous, distanced, or ironic. Secondly, and more crucially, it is unfashionable in the more literal sense of being unable to be fashioned – at least not fully: it always insists on the future good, it never ignores present-day injustices, it is always in progress. And if the day-to-day circumstances of the postwar era (or of our own era, for that matter) would seem to dictate that such hope is both unwise and unrealistic, it may be for just this reason that Tolson and Hayden insist upon it. I remarked in a previous chapter that for Frank O'Hara, one of the poet's tasks is to affirm the impossible, which O'Hara himself does with an almost flippant grace, assuring the addressee of his poem (and his reader) of an eventual happiness promised neither by logic nor by history: “we peer into the future and see you happy” (O'Hara, *Selected Poems* 116). Tolson's stance here is similar: his rhetoric of

confidence is less a prediction of the future than a brash avowal of the human ability to improve it.

VII. The Necessary Impossible

Tolson's *Libretto* presents us, then, with a rich problematic in which optimism, sympathy, and impossibility cathect one another in multiform ways. It's arguable that Tolson's optimism is in some sense structural in his project – visible throughout *Libretto* and not just in its final section. This is because there is a sense in which poetry is itself an exercise of good faith, of hope for connection with the other, exactly insofar as poetry intends to communicate (since its refusal to do so would risk solipsism). I explored this argument in more detail in my account of how sympathy is performed in the poems of O'Hara and Ashbery, and it can be discerned as an undercurrent infiltrating the work of all the poets we have looked at. Tolson affirms as much in a 1965 interview when he quotes a line from Robert Lowell's poem "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts" (published a year earlier in *For the Union Dead*): "'Hope lives in doubt'" (Tolson, "A Poet's Odyssey" 181). We might reformulate this to mean that hope for the future is predicated on the dire present, and that the sympathy on which such hope depends is necessary in direct proportion to its apparent impossibility. Harold Bloom locates a rich vein of this sort of paradoxical poetic insistence in the lineage of the American poets whose work he would term canonical: "[o]ur best poets," he suggests, "from Whitman through Stevens to Ashbery, make impossible and self-contradictory demands upon both their readers and themselves" (336). With *Libretto* Tolson unhesitatingly embraces this same tradition, together with its radical, if implicit, political potential. For by envisioning a utopian African future, Tolson's poem opens up a space between what is and what might be, one within which poetry begins to assume a necessarily ethical, but ultimately also political, dimension.

The emotional accuracy of Tolson's vision depends, in part, on the sympathy his poem champions – a sympathy with its own distinct and inalterable limits. As Cheng writes in *The Melancholy of Race*, scenes of anguish and aggression serve to remind us of "the impossibility yet urgency of sympathy" (189). Indeed, the very emotional bond between separate individuals that sympathy instantiates serves to underscore, by its impermanence and fragility, the fact that we are all in some sense alien to one another. The wish to feel with the other is further

problematized, as Cheng notes, by the fact that identity itself is unstable, “a fiction of ontological integrity organized by identification” (180). Achieving and sustaining emotional connection with the other involves assuming the presence of an ontological foothold that, so far from existing prior to identification with the other, is in fact produced by it.

This makes any hoped-for affective community a markedly tenuous venture. Cheng thus locates within human relationality “a crisis of unbridgeability” that must be navigated within, and not over against, the pervasive climate of racial melancholia within which it takes place (189). She concludes, in a tone somewhat melancholic in its own right, that the politics of identification remains highly constrained by its own (which is to say, our own) inadequacies:

In a world defined by sides, where everyone speaks in the vocabulary of “them” versus “us,” not to take a side means to exist in an insistent, resistant middle ground that is also nowhere. The perspective that sees beyond the self is also the perspective that takes on the view of the other, which is also an impossible perspective. . . . To hold that vision of knowledge, reserve, contemplation, vigilance, and multiplicity is also to remain homeless. . . . [U]nderstanding may mean understanding the limits of understanding. (194)

Cheng’s argument here is reminiscent of one alluded to earlier in this study, Terrence Diggory’s exegesis of Frank O’Hara’s Personism as mediating “the *between* as such” (25). For Diggory, Personism delineates less the connection between self and other than the realization, prompted the very fact of their relationality, of the inviolable *disconnection* between them: art reveals to us “the space in which persons are mutually exposed in their separateness” (25). Similarly, for Cheng the self identifies with the nebulous space *between* self and other rather than with the (technically unreachable) other. But at the same time, this very space uniting self and other can itself only be present through some form of identification, however tenuous. Cheng’s displacement of the basic centrality of emotional connection thus effects a kind of double move in which we come to identify not with the other, but with the limited and limiting effects of our attempts to sympathize. In contrast to this somewhat cautionary vision of identification, Tolson’s *Libretto* suggests that the effectiveness of affective sharing is not hindered by the fact that the self is a site of contested and conflicted meanings and histories. Rather, sympathy and subjectivity operate in a reciprocal pattern of mutual support, as identification and identity each

build on the other. Indeed, the unfinished nature of subjectivity only makes recognition and identification all the more urgent and necessary.⁸⁹

I have linked Cheng's model of identity and identification to Diggory's reading of Personism in order to point out a potential weakness to which both are subject. While they are intelligible on a theoretical level, it is difficult (impossible, even, to employ that word a final time) to translate these models to effective activism and real-world relationships. To "exist . . . nowhere," to "remain homeless," can only be undertaken as an intellectual exercise, not a practical one; and even at the level of theory, it seems to require a certain rescinding of political action. Cheng admits as much, calling "the 'no place' that is nonetheless an imperative" "the difference between ethics and politics" (195). I believe that *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* is instructive here because it articulates, in its appeal to an unreachd form of sympathy, a provisional strategy for filling the gap between the ethical and the political. For while *Libretto* may be the most overtly political poem in this study – it is, after all, a national poem written to celebrate the birth of an African democracy – the real weight of its politics emerges less in any explicit manner than in its challenging ethic affirming linguistic and ethnic hybridity and the transience and indeterminacy of social categories. The ethical imperative spelled out in *Libretto* is one of affective intersubjectivity – of feeling across and without regard to borders, be they ethnic, national, or economic. Through an undeterred optimism that emerges despite the discord it describes and enacts, *Libretto* advocates for a form of identification that will both disrupt and replace the antagonistic binaries conventional compassion might reify, such as the "vocabulary of 'them' versus 'us'" identified by Cheng (194).

Consider as a final example this encouragement from Tolson to his readers:

⁸⁹ The optimism lodged in Tolson's vision of sympathetic recognition is also (indirectly) challenged by Lauren Berlant, who wonders, in her book *Cruel Optimism*, what is really achieved in the hope for, and moment of, recognition: "Even amid the racial mediations entrenched in capitalist inequalities in the United States, optimism involves thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition. But, one must always ask, recognition of what? One's self-idealization, one's style of ambivalence, one's tender bits, or one's longing for the event of recognition itself?" (*Cruel Optimism* 43). Berlant's phrasing of the question precludes (as recent race theory has so often done) the most obvious answer – recognition of the other – as self-evidently impossible. Tolson's poetic stance can be thought of as a questioning corrective to that assumption.

O Peoples of the Brinks,
 come with the hawk's resolve,
 the skeptic's optic nerve, the prophet's *tele* verve
 and Oedipus' guess, to solve
 the riddle of
 the Red Enigma and the White Sphinx. (*Libretto* 371-6)

The enigma and sphinx might be taken to represent past and present, socialism and capitalism, East and West; they most likely symbolize some combination of those three. Their entrenched opposition is the riddle in need of solving, and to do so, Tolson believes, we will need to wear many different hats: those of the soldier, the skeptic, and the prophet. In a sense, then, the indeterminacy of identity here becomes a boon, a means of reaching between and beyond fixed patterns of behaviour to challenge what underlies them. The “*tele* verve” through which we attempt to shape a better world is – by the creative moral imagination it demands – the very path toward one, and hinges on accepting the reality of difference at the level not only of society but of self.

For this reason, the most apt and most affirming symbol to which to return in the leaving of *Libretto* is that of the *paseq*, the dividing line in an ancient text whose interruption of that text is the mark of its unity with preceding texts. Tolson formally represents this disjunction in a single line of his poem: “O Age, *pesiq*,⁹⁰ O Age” (367). The two divided ends of the line are precisely identical, bridged by the very word that denotes their disjunction. The sameness of these halves signifies a connection of self to other and of past to present in which the necessity of interstitial division is acknowledged. More importantly, this mirror effect embodies a unity whose perfection intimates that the action by which the *paseq* unifies distinct subjectivities overcomes the ontological structure by which it divides them. Which is as much as to say that unity is, in the last instance, more intrinsic to human existence than is the persistent separateness by which we're beset and tried: an idea whose truth might only be uncovered in some future state of being, one toward which time and the best poems pull us.

⁹⁰ *Pasiq* is a conjugation of the Hebrew word *paseq*; in his notes to the poem Tolson translates the former as “divided,” the latter as “divider.”

Conclusion

“Some Strange Resistance in Itself”: Isolation and Community in Robert Frost

I. Affective Connection and Literary Ambivalence

In focusing on their use of sympathy, this study of postwar American poets has gradually revealed the deeper theoretical issue with which any critique of sympathy's effectiveness is ultimately concerned: the tension between identification and difference. This tension is implicated in how we value the social poles of community and individuality and the possibilities that exist within these categories. Sympathy is finally about the movement from singularity to plurality, and my argument throughout this dissertation has been that this movement is both dissected and affirmed in the work of the postwar poets I have discussed. Insofar as sympathy is constrained by temporality and spatiality, we may always end where we have begun – at the self and whatever it can be reduced to. But any politics, even one that rejects the very notion of politics as it is currently thought, must always come back to what Heidegger calls *Mitsein* – to Being-With – and not just to *Dasein*, Being-There. Sympathy is a form of emotional connection that offers an avenue of exploring the possibilities and limits of Being-With – of what constitutes the imagined communities, to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, that remain integral to understanding cultures of the 20th and 21st centuries.

At the heart of much of the work I have traced in these pages is an undercurrent of ambivalence toward emotional identification that persists even where such identification is valorized. The poets I have been reading, from Lowell to O'Hara to Hayden, all are aware of the ineradicable aloneness of the self, of the partial failure of any politics, and of the false promises that so easily attend visions of community. What is significant, though, is that this intellectually healthy ambivalence does not prevent them from claiming sympathy's merits. The gathering optimism I have noted in many of their poems is a product of this claim. Bishop insists on the presence of “inescapable hope, the pivot” (*Complete Poems* 38); O'Hara determines to convince himself and his reader that “we shall not continue to be unhappy” (*Selected Poems* 160); Hayden espouses confidently that by means of trial and suffering, “our humanness must be achieved” (Hayden, *Collected Poems* 90). These paeans to community and expressions of faith

in betterment through identification with others occur *because of* (and not just in order to mitigate) isolation and despair. They are aspirational poetic responses to insufficiencies in lived experience, pointing to conditions that do not yet exist. As such, they are inherently ambivalent, indicating a tension between a troubled present and an idealized future and between felt alienation and glimpsed community.

This tension – buttressed on one side, in the American imagination, by the Benjamin Franklin-inspired, Emersonian mythology of the self-made individual, and on the other by Protestant and democratic overtures to spiritual and political unity – has numerous antecedents in American literature. One such source can be found in the work of Robert Frost, the New England poet whose non-conformism with modernist and late modernist aesthetic temperaments makes him something of an outlier in the history I have been tracing in this dissertation, but whose great popularity as a public poet owes in part to his ability to capture in his work the contradictory impulses and themes so central to the American character. While Frost’s great concerns are often said to be the relationship between humans and nature, as well as that between humans and (a possibly absent) God, the values and limits of social interrelation also take on major significance in his work. In his early poem “Mending Wall,” Frost uses the line “Good fences make good neighbors” to suggest the necessity of separation and individuation in the cultivation of neighborliness and friendship (Frost 33). “We keep the wall between us as we go,” the speaker comments – a tactic of use, it is intimated, in more areas than mending fences alone.

The impasse between difference and connection is further delineated in Frost’s long poem “Home Burial.” The poem depicts the different reactions of a husband and wife to the death, now long past, of their young child, so that the aspect of the poem that comes to the forefront in the poem is less the division between life and death than the divisions caused *in* life by the reality of death. At the denouement of “Home Burial,” Amy, the child’s mother, angered by her husband’s uncaring attitude, offers an analysis of the human self that suggests the paucity and final uselessness of all our attempts at emotional identification:

No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,

But before one is in it, their minds are turned
 And making the best of their way back to life
 And living people, and things they understand. (54)

Death (and the sickness that precedes it) is here figured as the inassimilable event that gives the lie to sympathy. And yet the affective disconnection on display here is between the two parents, neither of whom is near death, but whose differing approaches to the question of mortality render them both – at least in the context of the poem – very much alone. From the viewpoint of the mother, the pervading fact of what Heidegger has called “Being-Towards-Death” – a state we all share in by virtue of existing – overrides any moments of affective connection we may share.

This note of pessimism courses through much of Frost, but like many of the poets I have discussed at length, he also acknowledges the presence of some aspect of connectivity between humans that resists the realities compelling their separation. His poem “West-Running Brook” consists of a conversation between two young lovers who come across a brook and pause to meditate on what they see. Noting a place at which the current doubles back on itself, the male character reflects on the constant dissipation of existence, which

flows beside us in this water brook,
 But it flows over us. It flows between us
 To separate us for a panic moment.
 It flows between us, over us, and *with* us.
 And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love –
 And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
 The universal cataract of death
 That spends to nothingness – and unresisted,
 Save by some strange resistance in itself,
 Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
 As if regret were in it and were sacred. (259)

This passage emblemizes a theme prevalent not only in Frost but in much of American writing – the relentlessness of human striving despite what surrounds it, despite the mortal trajectory in which it is fixed. It is the ineffable fact of “lapsing unsubstantial” – of substance dissolving into

its opposite, the “universal cataract of death” – that “flows between” the lovers and “separates [them] for a panic moment.” But it is only a moment, not a lifetime, and so the lovers are undaunted; what counts more than the implacable pull of dissolution and decay is the bright, surprising, and even sacred “strange resistance” of human togetherness, however imperilled its path. Frost is no sentimentalist, and this instance is likely as close as his poetry comes to any kind of metaphysical hopefulness, but the “strange resistance” of which he writes might also be the source of the creative impulse itself. And the same can be said for all the poets I have discussed: if the poem is a means of forging connection with others, its questioning of the possibility of identification is also and simultaneously – at least potentially – itself an instance of the attempt to identify.

II. Integrating Sympathy and Politics

That the postwar poem is often (unduly) optimistic about the collective future, and that it not only documents sympathy but sometimes attempts to perform it, indicates its status as an imaginative foray into future aesthetic and political possibilities rather than simply a dramatic rendering of immediate social conditions. In other words, from both these aspects of the poems I have analyzed can be inferred the truth of Philip Sidney’s famous aphorism that poetry is often a kind of “invention,” “not laboring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be” (130). However, the performative and non-representative qualities of postwar poetry also raise questions as to how its depictions of sympathy can be synthesized within a workable politics. If theoretical constructs can only become pragmatically viable once they have been located and grounded within a real-world political corpus, then the same remains true of a poetics of sympathy tied to yet-unrealized evocations of community. But as I have shown, even if the sympathy these poets articulate fuels an unfinished soft politics, it nevertheless emanates from and within specific and identifiable historical circumstances. Indeed, it is in local, private, or domestic environments that sympathy proves most functional and offers the most praxis for the development of a politics of feeling. Ironically, it is when sympathy is deployed as a political tool affiliated to a vote-getting agenda – presented in a generic, undifferentiated form and aimed at a mass demographic – that it deflates into mere sentiment.

The challenge in the gestation of any politics of sympathy, then, is bridging the gap between the local and the national, between individuated affects and mass affect, between soft and hard politics. There is a sense in which sympathy, as an incentive to ethical action, is a better fit with the former. For example, it is possible to sympathize with a single televised starving family, but not with a set of facts detailing conditions of structural endemic poverty. This should remind us that more than sympathy is needed in fashioning responses to social injustice. Sometimes, indeed, sympathy proliferates in excess of need. As Paul Bloom observes in a recent article for *The New Yorker*, after the horrific school shooting that occurred in December 2012 in Newtown, CT, the town

was inundated with so much charity that it became a burden. . . . A vast warehouse was crammed with plush toys the townspeople had no use for; millions of dollars rolled in to this relatively affluent community. We felt their pain; we wanted to help. Meanwhile—just to begin a very long list—almost twenty million American children go to bed hungry each night, and the federal food-stamp program is facing budget cuts of almost twenty per cent. (P. Bloom)

Bloom here compares a singular tragic event, one saturated with scenes of painful affect, to the constant urgency of a dire situation that, lacking a means of attracting sympathy, ultimately inspires little more than apathy. This contrast reveals both the reach and the limitations of sympathy, which is evoked unevenly by various types of predicaments, and can be least effective just where need is most entrenched. The poets I have read in this dissertation work against this problem by emphasizing that sympathy is also required in situations less likely to attract public attention. But they also help to mitigate sympathy's uneven applications by incorporating it within what I have been calling a "soft" political strategy that resists totalizing gestures and remains cognizant of the cultural constraints within which it operates. In a soft politics, sympathy is an important contributing ingredient but does not override other basic and necessary components of a framework for social progress. That is to say, a soft politics recognizes the value of affect in the building of community without at the same time disparaging the role of modes of thought – such as reason, logic, and prognostication – traditionally understood to be *dispassionate*. Indeed, in pursuing a soft politics we will be compelled to ask why the two realms of feeling and thought need to be compartmentalized (and

even sometimes opposed) at all rather than integrated. This theoretical path might in turn open a window into a fuller prognosis of what the human community can achieve if it refuses the arbitrary conditions so often affixed to the interwoven practices of thinking and feeling.

Because soft politics interrogates commonly held assumptions about the function and character of political thought, it also produces a counter-argument to another of Bloom's objections to the integration of sympathy and politics: namely, that such integration provides no basis for voting along specific party lines. "A 'politics of empathy,'"⁹¹ writes Bloom,

doesn't provide much clarity in the public sphere, either. Typically, political disputes involve a disagreement over whom we should empathize *with*. Liberals argue for gun control, for example, by focussing on the victims of gun violence; conservatives point to the unarmed victims of crime, defenseless against the savagery of others. Liberals in favor of tightening federally enforced safety regulations invoke the employee struggling with work-related injuries; their conservative counterparts talk about the small businessman bankrupted by onerous requirements. (P. Bloom)

Bloom is right to observe that sympathy can be a weapon on either side of the political spectrum, but his point is actually attentive less to sympathy itself than to the ways in which characters and scenes redolent of sympathy are co-opted by political parties to garner votes. That is, what Bloom details here is not so much sympathy as it is a political stratagem capitalizing on the citizenry's tendency to sympathize – exactly the sort of rhetorical construct, in other words, that Berlant identifies in her critique of national sentimentalism. A soft politics would ideally be cognizant of moments (especially local or under-advertised ones) inviting sympathy, but it would be equally cognizant of sympathy's systemic appropriation and exploitation within the utilitarian endgame perpetuated by billion-dollar two-party political systems. The "politics of empathy" Bloom cites here is one produced by, and therefore entirely at the whim of, ideology. A soft politics of sympathy is, in contrast, inherently resistant to the closed-mindedness such ideologies require and foster. As this study has shown, a healthy

⁹¹ As Bloom uses it, this term is basically synonymous with what I have been calling the politics of sympathy.

politics of sympathy is one that affirms, at one and the same time, the flux of identity and the possibility of identification, operating on the twin assumptions that, firstly, the self is a mobile and dynamic entity and that, secondly, affective identification between selves – even across lines of party, race, gender, or nation – is not only possible, it is integral to the political health of any community and ultimately basic to democracy itself. After all, to the extent that democracy (I refer here to the concept and not the system) affirms the fundamental validity and authenticity of collective individual lives, this affirmation can only be predicated on the possibility of emotional and imaginative affiliations *between* those lives.

In a recent essay entitled “Imagination and Community,” the American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson elaborates on the link between (democratic) community and sympathy:

When definitions of “us” and “them” begin to contract, there seems to be no limit to how narrow these definitions can become. As they shrink and narrow, they are increasingly inflamed, more dangerous and inhumane. They present themselves as movements toward truer and purer community, but . . . they are the destruction of community. They insist that the imagination must stay within the boundaries that they establish for it, that sympathy and identification are only allowable within certain limits. I am convinced that the broadest possible exercise of imagination is the thing most conducive to human health, individual and global. (26)

The political potential of the work of the writers I have discussed in this study inheres most strongly in their poems’ refusal of just these limits, in sometimes explicit but more often tacit or unmentioned forms. It is when their use of sympathy outstrips these confines, even turns them on their head, that the work of these poets becomes illustrative of something beyond the aesthetic, a social value common to all great literature: the recognition of the essential validity of human experience writ large, as tableau and compendium of the many contesting and divergent viewpoints that must and inevitably do comprise it.

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Curriculum Vitae

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2013. Ph.D., English, Western University. Dissertation Title: *Feeling With Imagination: Sympathy and Postwar American Poetics*
2009. M.A., English, Saint Louis University, English (*Magna Cum Laude*)
2009. M.A., *Estudios Culturales y Literarios Anglo-norteamericanos*, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
2006. B.A., Philosophy & Comparative Literature, McMaster University (*Summa Cum Laude*)

PUBLICATIONS

Articles

2014. "Mystical Kingdoms: The Post-Romantic Self in Early Ashbery." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (forthcoming).
2011. "Between the Is and the Is Not: Northrop Frye, *Adaptation*, and the Romantic Imagination." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 37.2 (2011): 67-86.

Manuscript in Submission

2013. "Ghetto Laughter: The Transnational Optimism of Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*." Under review at *Research in African Literatures*.

Book Review in Submission

2013. "Review of Jennifer K. Ladino, *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2012)." Under review at *Modern Language Studies*.

Poems

2014. "Last Fare at the Carnival." *Euphony* 14.1 (2014) (forthcoming).
2013. "A Flight of Swallows." *Forge* 6.4 (2013): 96.
2013. "A Pastoral." *Booth* 4 (2013): 93-4.

CONFERENCES

As Presenter

2013. "Of Sympathy and Skunks: The Politics of Affect in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*." 43rd Annual Convention of the Northeast Modern Language Association. Boston, MA. March 21-24, 2013. Refereed.

2012. “‘Borne on shoulders, at last’: Sympathy in Ashbery’s Early Poetry.” 43rd Annual Convention of the Northeast Modern Language Association. Rochester, NY. March 15-18, 2012. Refereed.
2011. “T.S. Eliot on Literature and Mass Culture.” 2011 Conference of the Canadian Association for American Studies. Carleton University, Ottawa, ON. November 3-6, 2011. Refereed.
2011. “‘This is what matters for now’: Ashbery, Eliot, and the Question of Temporality.” The 2011 Joint Conference of the National Popular Culture & American Culture Association and the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture & American Culture Association. San Antonio, TX. April 20-23, 2011. Refereed.
2011. “Within and Beyond the Human: The Will to Power in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* and *The Jew of Malta*.” Newberry Center for Renaissance Studies Graduate Student Conference. Newberry Library, Chicago, IL. January 27-29, 2011.
2008. “‘Both to love and to fear us’: Changing Attitudes Toward Natives in Colonial Virginia.” Saint Louis University Madrid Graduate Conference. Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus, Madrid, ES. May 29-30, 2008.
- As Panel Chair
2012. Underground Ecocriticism Workshop. Western University, London, ON. November 2-3, 2012.
- As Panel Organizer
2011. “Modernist Thought and the Anxiety of Renewal.” 2011 Conference of the Canadian Association for American Studies. Carleton University, Ottawa, ON. November 3-6, 2011. Refereed.

SELECTED SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

- 2012-13. Ontario Graduate Scholarship
- 2009-13. Western Graduate Research Scholarship
- 2011-12. Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2011. Newberry Renaissance Consortium Grant
2010. Marguerite R. Dow Canadian Heritage Award in Creative Writing
2009. Western Faculty of Arts and Humanities Chair’s Entrance Scholarship
2008. Saint Louis University Madrid Graduate Scholarship and Teaching Assistantship
2006. The Abraham Rosenberg Memorial Prize
2005. The Dr. Harry Lyman Hooker Scholarship
2005. The F.W. Waters Scholarship in Philosophy
2004. The Ten Broeke-Bensen Memorial Scholarship

2003. The Horace A. Dulmage Prize in Philosophy

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Course Instructor

2013. ENGL 1027F, "The Storyteller's Art: Introduction to Narrative." Fall term.
Western University
2008. ENGL 150, "College Composition." Fall term. Saint Louis University Madrid

Graduate Teaching Assistant

2013. ENGL 2240G, "Feminist Literary Theory." Winter term. Western University
2012. ENGL 2200F, "History of Theory and Criticism. Fall term. Western University
- 2011-12. ENGL 1022E, "Advanced Introduction to English Literature and Language."
Full year. Western University
- 2010-11. ENGL 2400E, "Dramatic Forms and Genres." Full year. Western University
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University

Writing Tutor

- 2007-8. Student Writing Center. Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- 2010, 2012. Graduate Student Research Assistant. Summer term. Western University

SERVICE

2008. Intern, Student Life Offices, Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus
2008. Co-editor, *Abanico* (student literary magazine), Saint Louis University, Madrid
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