Writing at the Edge of the Person: Lyric Subjectivity in Cambridge Poetry, 1966-1993

Abstract

by

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Writing at the Edge of the Person argues that the poetry of the Cambridge (U.K.) poets J.H. Prynne, Peter Riley, and Denise Riley uses the lyric to present a form of subjectivity that incorporates exteriority. In other words, lyric subjectivity is not a retreat from the world but is rather a means of interaction with it. This engagement with lyric subjectivity, I claim, responds to Basil Bunting’s Briggflatts, which succeeds in presenting nondominative subjectivity in relation to the poem’s unified structure. Further, the poets’ work contributes to European philosophical debates about the relation between subjectivity, language, and ethics.

Experience (as Erfahrung) is central to the Cambridge poets’ conception of subjectivity, because, as Gadamer argues, experience thwarts conceptual certainty. Prynne’s poetry focuses on the perceptual middle ground between
concept and exteriority. Influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty, Prynne writes poetry centered on perception understood as reflection or reversibility. At this level, poetic language refuses to abstract itself from the material immediacy of perception.

In *Poetic Artifice*, Prynne’s student Veronica Forrest-Thomson argues that poetry must be understood at the level of its basic materiality before one can convert it into conceptual meaning. Her position had political appeal for the Cambridge poets who were deeply skeptical of new, late-1970s forms of capitalism. Peter Riley’s poetry of the early 1980s uses the earth of coal mines as a principle of impenetrable exteriority and of language’s fundamental materiality. Yet he maintains that one’s subjective relationship with such otherness is essential to being ethical. Riley’s poetry demonstrates that an experience with exteriority exposes a subject and leaves one responsive to the world.

Denise Riley’s work insists that Cambridge-inflected lyric subjectivity can help women negotiate the competing demands for self-identity and identity-as-woman. Her most recent poetry is deeply invested in contemporary painting in part because painting’s ability to have colors bleed into one another suggests to her the active, constructive symbiosis of disparate identities. Like Prynne, she deals with perceptual multiplicity through experiential reflection, which allows her in her poetry to assert subjective identity and a willingness to meet the challenges to stable lyric form and self-identity.
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INTRODUCTION

Keith Tuma begins his 1998 study of British poetry on a glum note: “In the United States, British poetry is dead” (1). The first sentence of Andrew Duncan’s *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (2003) is similarly forlorn: “No modern British poet has an international reputation” (1). Neither Tuma nor Duncan, however, thinks that there is a shortage of good British poetry; on the contrary, both argue that, in fact, a large amount of quality work just isn’t being widely read. Marketing forces and channels of distribution are central to this problem, but also a widespread critical prejudice imagines British poetry to have stopped roughly with Auden’s departure for the U.S. in 1939. The American critic Hugh Kenner wrote in *A Sinking Island* (1987) that British poetry has regrettably become a commodity that one can read and understand with minimal effort. Kenner points to the appeal of Philip Larkin (1922-1985), who is famous for asking that literature present “nothing difficult” (qtd. in Kenner 240). Kenner claims that Larkin represents an important shift in readers’ expectations of literature: “The resistant book was a norm for many centuries. The strange new comer was not twentieth-century ‘modernism.’… What was relatively new was the ‘easy’ book” (241). The success of Larkin through the 1970s and the pull his work still has on readers today mark a victory for easy poetry, that is poetry that
one can “get” quickly on a single reading—and a defeat for the serious and
difficult poetry that presumably can merit international attention.

In various essays of the 1980s, the American critic Marjorie Perloff has argued that the Poundian version of difficult modernism Kenner finds lacking in the U.K. has successfully worked its way into the American poetry known as Language poetry.1 As Language poetry gained traction in the U.S. in the 1980s—in no small part due to Perloff’s advocacy—poetry readers in the U.K. largely passed it over. Nevertheless, Cambridge-based poet and publisher Rod Mengham wrote a long review of recent Language writing for the British journal *Textual Practice* in 1989. He is highly critical of Language writing—which he identifies as the work of Charles Bernstein, Clark Coolidge, and Steve McCaffery—because it stretches too far the analogy between language and capital: “Although there are grounds for a comparison between language and capital, the ‘Language’ writers rely too heavily on their confidence in its scope, and problems begin to arise when they try to extrapolate a complex series of observations from what is no more than a simple analogy” (118-119). In an effort to resist the dominant, capitalist strategies of instrumentalism, Language writing presents itself as utterly disconnected from reductive notions of conceptual meaning: “language is atomized” (120). Therefore, in order to discount the possibility of an original, intentional meaning, the writer yields the control of the text over to the reader.

On this point, Mengham seems most skeptical of Language Poetry: “So, although

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‘thinking’ is retained as a main constituent in the endeavours of the “Language” school … this is not “thinking” as a reflection of the personality but a form of exercising the mind from the outside, as it were, as if initiative for thought came from the structures of the language” (121). Mengham doubts whether poetic writing can succeed when every effort is made to divorce language from subjective reflection. By banishing subjective reflection and intention from the writing, Language poets shift authority to the reader. However, Mengham notes, this shift is “a prepared context,” which demands that the reader enter “the orbit of theory and percept” (122): “Although it is ‘free’ to all appearances, the reading actually works by remote control” (122). Language writing, according to him, performs something of a bait-and-switch by boldly relinquishing the writer’s subjective presence and then insisting on the theoretical terms by which the work can be read.

Mengham’s reading of Language poetry was not warmly received on this side of the Atlantic—or, at least, by Perloff and Bernstein. In Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media (1991), Perloff pegs Mengham as a poetic naïf unaware that poetry can sometimes be difficult (171-172).² Mengham plays the straw man in Perloff’s argument (“Mengham’s is by no means an isolated case” [172]), but he suffers the full brunt of Bernstein’s criticism in a review of contemporary British poetry published in the American journal Sulfur in 1994. More precisely, Bernstein contends that Mengham and poets writing in Cambridge, generally, have “a tenacious commitment to an unobtainable lyric”

(206). This, he suggests, is a conservative vice: “Isn’t the jeopardy, indeed, ‘false assuagement,’ clinging to the vestiges of the old music as if it were the only music, the old truths as if they were the only truths?” (210). Whereas Mengham finds that Language writers futilely abandon subjective reflection in their work, Bernstein thinks the Cambridge poets persist in clinging to a defunct lyric tradition. The debate between Mengham and Bernstein indicates that the key disagreement between Cambridge poets and American Language poets centers on the feasibility of lyric subjectivity in contemporary poetry. This dissertation attempts to show how lyric subjectivity works in Cambridge poetry in the hope that it may allay American readers’ fears that subjective poetry can only play the old music of confessional content draped in figurative language. On the contrary, the Cambridge poets’ understanding of lyric subjectivity presents a subject as exposed to experience, therefore, making it incapable of the tidy conservatism Bernstein detects.

The poets I have in mind when I say—somewhat tentatively—“the Cambridge poets” are J. H. Prynne (1936-), Douglas Oliver (1937-2000), Peter Riley (1940-), Wendy Mulford (1941-), Andrew Crozier (1943-), Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1947-1975), and Denise Riley (1948-). There are more Cambridge poets than these, and often—woe to the list-maker—these poets write in a patently un-Cambridge-like way. Prynne is the oldest and best known of the group. He graduated from Jesus College, Cambridge University in 1960 and has since taught and worked as librarian at Gonville and Caius College. Through the 1960s Prynne developed a rare and vast understanding of poetry—British and
non-British; in these years, he became particularly interested in the work of the American poets Charles Olson and Ed Dorn. Yet, by the time of his first volume, *Force of Circumstance and Other Poems* in 1962, little of their influence shows, as it seems more indebted to Wallace Stevens than to the Black Mountain poets.\(^3\)

In the mid-1960s, Peter Riley and Andrew Cozier began issuing a worksheet called *The English Intelligencer*, in which many poets—however tangentially connected to the Cambridge scene (e.g., John Riley, Tim Longville, John James, Tom Raworth)—contributed. As uneven as *The English Intelligencer* may seem on a reading today, it then served as the definitive forum for the poets working out the influences of Olson, Dorn, and even Prynne in their own poetry. From the pages of *The English Intelligencer*, poets joined together and started up small magazines and presses, which became the *modus operandi* for British poetry in general through the 1970s. For example, Tim Longville and John Riley created the *Grosseteste Review* and the Grosseteste Press; Wendy Mulford founded Street Editions; Andrew Crozier began a short-lived magazine called *The Park*.

One of the earliest publications that featured a sampling of work by Cambridge poets was a special issue of *The Cambridge Opinion* in 1965 entitled “Carlos Williams in England.”\(^4\) This issue featured a reprinted essay by Williams, “Measure—a Loosely Assembled Essay on Poetic Measure,” two essays on Williams, then a host of poems written, for the most part, by young English poets variously indebted to Williams. Among the writers featured are

\(^3\) *Force of Circumstance* is a curiosity in Prynne’s career because, first, big and mainstream Routledge and Kegan Paul published it and, second, Prynne has ever since suppressed it from editions of his collected poems.

\(^4\) I thank John Temple for bringing this issue to my attention.
Gael Turnbull, Michael Shayer, Roy Fisher, Anselm Hollo, Tom Pickard, Jim Burns, Jeremy Prynne, Tim Longville, Andrew Crozier, and John Temple. The first poem, however, is “The Orotava Road” by the 65-year-old Northumberland poet Basil Bunting (1900-1985), whose long poem *Briggflatts* was to appear a few months later in the American magazine *Poetry*. Bunting had a spectacular career: friendships with Pound, Yeats, and Ford, a prison sentence for his pacifism during WWI, a job as a British agent in Persia during WWII, and then in his mid-60s Fulcrum Press published his *First Book of Odes* in 1965, followed by *Poetry’s* publication of his greatest poem a year later. Bunting’s resurgence in the 1960s offered a late-modernist antidote to the stultifying official verse culture, which, in Eric Mottram’s telling, remained in “a flaccid hangover from the dominant tastes of the thirties, forties and fifties” (15). Bunting insisted on the physical quality of his poetry, inflected by the Northumberland accent, speech patterns, and, as much as possible, the actual landscape of the place. Bunting sparked an important revival in Cambridge poetry in the mid-60s, the Sparta Lea Poetry Festival, which he, ironically, didn’t even attend. The poet Barry MacSweeney (1948-2000) organized this gathering of Northern poets and Cambridge poets in his grandparents’ cottages in Allenheads, Northumberland in March 1967. MacSweeney knew Bunting and fellow poet Tom Pickard from readings at Newcastle’s Morden Tower, and he knew Andrew Crozier and J. H. Prynne from Cambridge. Then he thought a lot of good could come of these poets getting together. A number of poets attended, and, in the end, it was a riotous, ten-day affair complete with drunken fits and fistfights. Nevertheless, the
exchange of ideas that did take place centered on Prynne’s introduction of Olson to the crowd (he played the Olson at Berkeley tape) and MacSweeney and Pickard’s championing of a Bunting-inspired, non-university poetry that emphasizes the basic materiality of language.5

The impact of Bunting’s poetry on the Cambridge poets was large and, in my reading, did much to fuel the new vitality in British poetry or what Mottram has labeled “The British Poetry Revival” (1960-1975). In 1972, Bunting was elected president of The Poetry Society, a government-sponsored organization under the umbrella of the Arts Council that received grants for poetry events and for the publication of its magazine, Poetry Review. Mottram became editor of Poetry Review and welcomed international, innovative poetry, challenging the stodgy image of British poetry. Things went awry in 1977 when an investigation found that the Society “has failed to achieve any satisfactory measure of control,” which Mottram took as a bitter defeat at the hands of the establishment’s taste in poetry (qtd. in Mottram 47): “Official preference could not tolerate an art that went beyond a leisure-hours consumer inclination to rapid reading; work which might necessitate concentration, trained ability to read, and a willingness to entertain the prospect of new forms and materials” (26). Mottram and Bunting resigned in a huff, but their five years in-charge created an audience for previously unread poets like Barry MacSweeney, Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths, and

5To my knowledge, MacSweeney’s interview with Mottram offers the fullest account of Sparta Lea (7-10). In “The British Poetry Revival,” Mottram cites MacSweeney’s summary: “Among those present living in a row of wood and stone cottages overlooking Sparta Lea cemetery and the River Allen: Tom Pickard, Andrew Crozier, Nick Wayte, John James, John Temple, Connie Pickard, Pete Armstrong, Tim Longville, Peter Riley, John Hall, J. H. Prynne, etc., as well as various painters…. Hours of taped readings taken at all hours of the day and night…. Two kinds of poet met here, read together, settled somehow to each others’ work” (37).
Tom Pickard and for recent American work by Robert Duncan, Anne Waldman, and Muriel Rukeyser. I don’t want to overstate Bunting’s contribution to Mottram’s editorial choices for *Poetry Review* or the effect the magazine had on Cambridge poetry, but the years Bunting spent as president of The Poetry Society clearly marked an important wave of modernism that unsettled—albeit briefly—official poetic taste in Britain.  

In an essay entitled “Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism” (1983), Andrew Crozier diagnoses the problem with the prevalent establishment poetry at this time. He argues that the poets associated with “The Movement” of the 1950s—principally Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis—developed a style that brings together a speaking subject and external reality. The poems characteristic of the Movement aesthetic, Crozier writes,

> are discrete … in the way they wrap around their author-subject. Their occasions are for the most part treated with scepticism, and the texts distort and buckle as a consequence of inner tension. Traditional forms are invoked not so much for the freedom they can confer as for support. They define the space in which the self can act with poetic authority, while at the same time, in the absence of assurances provided by conventionally felt poetic experience, they secure the status of the text. (206)

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6Keith Alldritt’s biography of Bunting, *The Poet as Spy: The Life and Wild Times of Basil Bunting* (1998), never even mentions that Bunting served as president of The Poetry Society. Mottram published only Peter Riley and Elaine Feinstein of the poets associated with Cambridge. Keith Tuma notes that Cambridge poet Andrew Crozier thought that the modernist/experimentalist take-over of The Poetry Society was “misguidedly grandiose and ‘diverted time and effort from activities of a more temporary and ad hoc type,’ from a ‘loosely coordinated series of guerilla actions and campaigns’ against the British literary establishment” (56). For Crozier, a more effective way to challenge mainstream poetic taste would have been to organize poetry festivals, and to start up small magazines and presses, which he and other Cambridge writers tirelessly did. Indisputably, however, The Poetry Society gained a readership for writers like Ashbery, Celan, Rothenberg, and many others, who had previously been largely unknown in Britain.
Traditional forms and, he later says, figurative language effectively supplant the need for a subject to experience anything in a poem. Figures that don’t quite hold up to scrutiny drive this poetry: “the energy of the figures, the rewriting of the world as it is, is made to guarantee the authenticity of the person, the subject” (220). The subject, however, is removed from experience, cushioned by figures. This is Larkin’s famous simile in “Whitsun Weddings” (1958):

> I thought of London spread out in the sun,
> Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat (Collected 116)

To Crozier, “squares of wheat” makes no sense if taken as a description of an actual landscape (what would a “square of wheat” look like? “Breakfast cereal?” hazards Crozier [220]); it is an example of the inscrutable rhetorical relation the poet fosters between self and world.

Crozier argues that Larkin and other Movement poets put so much stress on the persona that holds together the poem’s language, because they were reacting against a tendency in the poetry of the 1940s that freed language from the control of a speaking subject. Crozier has in mind poets influenced by Dylan Thomas, like J. F. Hendry and W. S. Graham. Crozier prefers the ‘40s poetry to the staid poetry of the ‘50s in part because it places subjectivity in a dynamic relationship with an unstable language. For Crozier, this option proves truer to experience:

> The poet does not constitute at one and the same time the poem’s protagonist and boundary. No surrogate enactment of the poet’s intelligence is provided as part of the poem’s interior, and instead the poem claims to represent the whole person. Through such a mode the things referred to in the poem participate actively in what is imagined,
they are not mere figurative devices, and the poet is acted upon as well as acting—an experiencing creature rather than a mastering intelligence. (228)

Crozier is not merely concerned with the technique of a few poets in the 1940s; rather, he is describing what the best poetry since the 1940s has attempted. It is a demanding order. This poetry responds to the singularity of material things in the world without subsuming them into abstract figures. Further, the poet cannot stand at a distance from what he or she is writing; instead, the poet needs to be open to the vicissitudes of experience. The poem then records a human subject’s experience with otherness, that is, with language, things, and people in their own irreducible, non-figurative way. In this dissertation, I show how this understanding of poetry motivates the Cambridge poets to write poetry attentive to such singularity through a mode of subjective reflection, which Mengham finds lacking in Language poetry.

The Cambridge poets were writing in an intellectual environment where the status of “subjectivity” was very much in question. In the shadow of Larkin’s presence, they inquired into how a poetic subject might be something other than the voice of a carefully constructed persona. From their perspective, a stable persona is impossible to present when they write of the disarming experience of the subject’s relation to exteriority. Contemporary European philosophers had been working out how best to articulate the kind of experience that effectively turns a subject inside-out. Before them, however, philosophers since the seventeenth century have variously tried to posit the human being as the subject
(literally, that which is thrown under) that serves as a foundation for metaphysical thought. The history of modern metaphysics starts with this distinction between thinking subject and everything else, which turns all-that-is-not-the-subject into an object of the subject’s thought. In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger argues that claims to be a subject overlook the more basic condition in which human beings find themselves, namely being-there (*Dasein*) in relation to Being. It is a matter of some dispute as to what extent *Dasein* escapes the subject-object structure of modern thought that Heidegger ostensibly wants to shake off. Nonetheless, his inquiry into the grounds of subjectivity led thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas to argue from the 1940s onward that the subject is fundamentally exposed to claims of exteriority. Otherness always already defines the subject and therefore precludes all attempts the subject may make to objectify it. Therefore, the subject lives in relation to exteriority through sensibility and not through cognition. Levinas uses the term “ethical” to describe the condition in which a subject comes into being as responsive to experience with singular otherness. In Simon Critchley’s summary, “[I]t is qua alien that the human being comes into its own, and what is proper to the subject is its expropriation by the other” (37). In this way, it is possible to think of subjectivity in a way that isn’t beholden to the objectifying tendencies of representational consciousness.

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7Jean-Luc Marion, for example, argues that *Dasein* is ultimately a traditional metaphysical subject: “Thus arises the prodigious paradox of 1927: the extasis of care, which radicalizes the destruction of the transcendental subject in Descartes, Kant, and Husserl, nonetheless leads to a miming of the subject by re-establishing an autarky of *Dasein*, identical to itself through itself up to the point where ipseity stabilizes itself in a self-positing…. The shadow of the ego falls across *Dasein*” (90).
The Cambridge poets, I argue, attempt to present this kind of subjectivity in their work. They achieve this end by enacting a moment of reflection in their language. Traditionally, reflection serves idealist epistemology to match things with concepts. But can poetry, language at its most resistant to conceptualization, do the work of reflection and serve a thoroughly exposed subject? Hans-Georg Gadamer has offered a provocative, non-idealist conception of reflection in which there is “an inner reversal of intentionality” (“On the Scope” 35). When intentionality turns back on itself, the phenomenological subject is at a loss and thereby becomes a responsive subject of experience (Erfahrung). Gadamer insists on distinguishing “‘effective reflection’ (die ‘effektive’ Reflexion), which is that in which the unfolding of language takes place, from expressive and thematic reflection, which is the type out of which Occidental linguistic history has been formed” (35). The “unfolding of language,” which, from Heidegger, we know runs counter to cognition and is best exemplified in poetry, takes place in reflection. How exactly this happens in the poetry varies considerably, but I claim that this movement of reflection in language, which supports a responsive, sensible subject, is definitive of Cambridge poetry.

Levinas says that subjectivity is possible only through sensibility, which takes place “on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves” (Otherwise 15). This is exactly where Peter Riley locates writing. In Lines on the Liver (1981), he writes that love is “at the edge of the person, which is where writing, among other things, takes place” (c). My argument is that this is where the writing of the Cambridge poets takes place, namely on the cusp between subjectivity and
exteriority. It is a dangerous place, since it is free of all concepts that might set straight once and for all who exactly who we are. Instead, writing—in the very act of using singular, poetic language—places the subject at some distance from certitude in the face of experience, which invariably is an experience with the non-identical, or with that which upsets all efforts to get a cognitive hold of it. Nevertheless, the poets treat this as a hopeful experience, because it highlights the variety of human experience and reminds us of the patience and fortitude needed in coming to some understanding (albeit provisional) of other people and other things.

The years 1966-1993—like my choice of poets—are necessarily inexact. 1966 is the year in which Bunting’s *Briggflatts* appeared. It is also the year in which Andrew Crozier and Peter Riley started issuing *The English Intelligencer*. In 1968, Prynne’s *Kitchen Poems* appeared from Cape Goliard’s press, and the first line of the first poem states concisely the most enduring criticism Prynne’s work: “The whole thing it is, the difficult / matter” (*Poems* 10). In the next year *The White Stones* marked the apogee of Prynne’s early poetry and earned him a devoted following. Prynne, Peter Riley, and Denise Riley produced a large body of work through the 1970s and 1980s. I’ve chosen 1993 as the outside parameter of this study, simply because in that year Denise Riley’s *Mop Mop Georgette* appeared, which is the last substantial collection of new work she has published to date. I begin with Bunting and move from Prynne to Peter Riley to Denise Riley and occasionally veer off on diversions all in the hope of demonstrating how subjectivity uniquely works in Cambridge poetry.
CHAPTER ONE:

FROM BRIGGFLATTS TO CAMBRIDGE:

SHAPING A SUBJECT THROUGH FORMAL ATONEMENT

In the past thirty or so years, strong divisions have surfaced among critics and poets around claims for and against subjectivity and formal completion in British poetry. A critical commonplace notes the striking differences between poets in London and poets in Cambridge. Though such groupings are always somewhat inadequate, Keith Tuma nicely articulates a widespread perception: “One stereotype has it that the poets of London are more prourban, outward looking, engaged with everyday life, while Cambridge poets are more self-consciously literary, more sentimental and romantic, more reflective, their urbanity poised against the London group’s rudeness, their radical pastoral utopianism against a nonviolent anarchism” (203). Tuma then points to a crucial distinction in the Cambridge poets’ “regard for the artifactual status of the poem as a resolved and ‘finished’ object” (205). If Cambridge poets emphasize the finished quality of a poem, then London poets stress the fluid indeterminacy of perception in their poetry. This point is at the heart of a debate between Cambridge poet Drew Milne and London poet Allen Fisher published in the journal Parataxis in 1994. In a published letter to Fisher, Milne complains: “The patterning and sequencing implicit in the titles and wider projects makes me feel
that the relation to the whole is too fragmented. At the same time, I find too many of your poems have an unfinished quality, albeit deliberately” (29). In his response, Fisher speaks sharply:

Both terms, “coherence” and “finished” are continuous with a regressive civic production that you would appear to oppose; the issues of “finish” and “completeness” were critiqued by Gustave Courbet and Charles Baudelaire in the mid-1800s, and subsequently by the later watercolours of Paul Cézanne; since the late nineteenth century the issues of “coherence and focus” have been critiqued by many physicists concerned with acuity and more recently by Bela Julesz regarding texture, Oliver Braddick on spatial frequency analysis in vision and K. W. Yau and others researching the effect of ions on light-sensitive current in retinal rods. (30)

Among other things, what emerges from this response is that Fisher’s understanding of perception demands a poetry that is as fragmented and incomplete as perception itself. Milne, in contrast, believes that poetry needs to achieve a moment of reflection from the perceptual flux: “In short, poetry needs to be able to reflect on the power of its refusal to be more, or less, than play” (36). Poetry comes to such reflection through the workings of subjectivity immanent in the poem. The poetic subject needn’t be an objectifying force, which controls perception, but it must be indicative of a way of being that differentiates human experience from sheer flux. Following Adorno, Milne contends that reflection of this order makes art something other than ordinary things in the world. When a poem achieves reflection and steps out of the disorder of perception, it is capable of asserting its own formal coherence, something Fisher says is contrary to the nature of perception and, accordingly, to the nature of human experience.

These competing claims cannot be easily resolved, and they are at the core of basic disagreements in contemporary poetry. In this chapter, I do not attempt
to settle the score but rather to provide a context that demonstrates how subjectivity can work in tension with form. Geoffrey Hill’s famous inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds in 1977, “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement,’” argues that the subject as manifested in a poem is a “menace” and thereby threatens the coherence of the poem’s form. Hill, however, creates too wide a gulf between subjectivity and form, to such an extent that the only kind of subjectivity that is permissible within a structure of formal completion lacks a fundamental openness to experience. In contrast, Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* (1966) shows that an experiential subjectivity exists only through formal wholeness. My hope is that by examining Bunting’s commitment to both subjectivity and form in the light of Hill’s depiction of their tension, we can better understand Milne’s defense of a poem’s finished quality, which is a hallmark of Cambridge poetry. What is remarkable about Bunting’s example, as seen through the lens of Adorno’s aesthetics, is that it demonstrates that formal completion needn’t curtail the dynamic and open subjectivity Fisher demands. This reading of Bunting provides a crucial—and overlooked—background for a definitive strain in Cambridge poetry in the late 1960s and 1970s.

I.

In his lecture, “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement,’” Geoffrey Hill sets out easily enough: “Ideally … my theme would be simple; simply this: that the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense—an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a
reconciling, a uniting in harmony” (2). For examples, he turns to Yeats, who wrote that “a poem comes right with a click like a closing box,” and to Eliot, who maintained that at this moment of completion the poet is overtaken by “exhaustion,” “appeasement,” and “absolution” (2). As Christopher Ricks has commented, Yeats and Eliot are describing different experiences, namely Yeats is talking about a poem’s form and Eliot is describing the poet’s physical and/or mental state; but for Hill these two elements of atonement are interdependent and only in ideal circumstances do they seamlessly come together.⁸

Even if a poem clicks “like a closing box,” it is inevitably burdened by “menace,” something Hill associates with “empirical guilt”: “It is one thing to talk of literature as a medium through which we convey our awareness, or indeed our conviction, of an inveterate human condition of guilt or anxiety; it is another to be possessed by a sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt” (6-7). The difference between these two positions is that the first treats language as a medium through which one expresses one’s emotions, and in the second the medium is inextricably bound to one’s guilt. The menace seems to result from the absence of a space where the poet could conceptualize his guilt and then articulate it in language. Such a space isn’t available because language is already complicit in the guilt. Indeed, language is intimately tied to the shortcomings the poet lives, which makes unity of formal perfection so difficult to attain. For this reason, Hill makes a distinction between an understanding of language where language seems

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⁸“There cannot be a reconciling, a uniting harmony, of Yeats’s and Eliot’s acts of witness here, any more than there can be of their intransigently inimical poetry” (Ricks 63).
to function cut off from the foibles of human experience and one that views language as an inconstant medium caught up in moral failings.

Since Hill is committed to working according to the latter understanding of language, it is important to grasp just what he means by a menace issuing from language’s possession of the writer. His idea is that the writer cannot escape the condition in which his or her existence and language are inextricably enfolded in each other. Perhaps Beckett gives us the best insight into this kind of possession, particularly through his character Henry in *Embers*:

> But I’d be talking now no matter where I was, I once went to Switzerland to get away from the cursed thing and never stopped all the time I was there. [Pause.] I uso’t to need anyone, just to myself, stories, there was a great one about an old fellow called Bolton, I never finished it, I never finished any of them, I never finished anything, everything always went on for ever. (94)

When one is possessed, one cannot step outside of this condition and make sound judgments about it; it is on-going and resists any sort of completion. Therefore, this kind of menace is in direct opposition to the pull of atonement, which spurs the writer to achieve “a uniting in harmony.” A writer’s menace impedes the drive toward conceptualization, since that would entail a movement of abstraction out of the dynamic condition of possession. Since Plato, philosophers have often held that we can make sense of the flux of particulars in the world only by connecting them up with stable concepts outside of experience. An important question raised by modernism is what happens when these organizing concepts are unavailable and we are left with just irreducible things. For example, Hill, in this vein, focuses on “empirical guilt” and not “original sin,” since the latter could
be satisfactorily explained through concepts provided by rational argument. Making this point, he cites a line from Helen Waddell’s novel *Peter Abelard*: “For one can repent and be absolved of a sin, but there is no canonical repentance for a mistake” (7). The menace resulting from one’s possession by language manifests itself in the poetic presentation of an individual subject unleashed from explanatory concepts. The subject is unstable because it stands among indefinable particulars with no governing concepts.

Menace’s destabilizing power counters the conceptual ideal of a poem’s formal perfection. For guidance through this quandary, Hill turns to Eliot’s late writings. In writing his plays, Eliot followed an “ascetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility” (9). Dramatic utility translates into patterns of formal unity, which Hill admires but finds too limiting of a rule for poetry: “That ‘poetry’ which is excluded on utilitarian grounds is, I would argue, that very element which could master the violence of the conflict and collusion between the sacramental and the secular, between the dogmatic exclusiveness of ‘sin’ and the rich solipsistic possibilities of ‘anxiety’” (9). Eliot opts for formal atonement without addressing the potentially rich but untidy elements of language that underscore moral failings and disjunctive form. He places what falls short of the ascetic rule in “a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus … At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express” (9). Hill thinks Eliot too easily converts

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9 Both Eliot quotations are from “Poetry and Drama,” p. 91 and p. 93.
too much of the “fringe” into music and so escapes the difficulty of addressing the
nub of moral complexity: “In certain contexts the expansive, outward gesture
towards the condition of music is a helpless gesture of surrender, oddly analogous
to that stylish aesthetic of despair, that desire for the ultimate integrity of silence,
to which so much eloquence has been so frequently and indefatigably devoted”
(9). In following too closely his own ascetic rule, Eliot surrenders the potentially
promising “fringe of indefinite extent” to the demands of formal utility.

Hill’s hope is that, insofar as language possesses the poet, he can
somehow craft it into harmony and, in doing so, alleviate some of the moral guilt
from which he suffers. From this perspective, poetry should remain faithful to the
density of both moral experience (empirical guilt) and language, for they are
inseparable: “I have argued, with [D. M.] MacKinnon, that ‘the language of
repentance is not a kind of bubble on the surface of things’ and I have endorsed
[Henry] Rago’s suggestion that we comprehend such language ‘in the very
density of the medium’” (13). Importantly, in writing poetry, one works through
the density in an effort to set the language right in the form of a harmonious and
unified poem. For Hill, this is the movement of atonement where a reshaped
sense of self emerges:

[I]n the constraint of shame the poet is free to discover both the “menace”
and the atoning power of his own art. However much and however rightly
we protest against the vanity of supposing it to be merely the “spontaneous
overflow of powerful feelings,” poetic utterance is nonetheless an
utterance of the self, the self demanding to be loved, demanding love in
the form of recognition and “absolution.” The poet is perhaps the first to
be dismayed by such a discovery and to seek the conversion of his
“daemon” to a belief in altruistic responsibility. But this dismay is as
nothing compared to the shocking encounter with “empirical guilt,” not as
a manageable hypothesis, but as irredeemable error in the very substance
and texture of his craft and pride. It is here that he knows the affliction of “being fallen into the ‘they’” and yet it is here that his selfhood may be made at-one with itself. He may learn to live in his affliction, not with the cynical indifference of the reprobate but with the renewed sense of a vocation: that of necessarily bearing his peculiar unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless. (17-18)

Hill is eager to maintain a subject in poetry but not of the order that pervades in confessional writing, instead one that acknowledges the density of the language that possesses him. The menace of language’s insufficiency constantly butts against, without negating, attempts for formal atonement. One’s encounter with empirical guilt affirms the provisionality of the technical perfecting of a poem. Indeed, Hill is never altogether confident that language’s menace and formal perfection can coexist. Nevertheless, the poet needs to shape the dense language of subjective experience into a unified whole if he is to have the opportunity to discover a “renewed sense of vocation” out of the “affliction” of empirical guilt.

Hill’s argument is tenuous. Toward the end of the essay, he concedes, “It is evident that my argument is attracted, almost despite itself, towards an idea by which it would much prefer to be repelled,” namely, a Stevensian “agnostic faith” by which artistic perfection supplants God (16). This predicament issues from Hill’s fundamental concern: How exactly can a poem give expression to both formal oneness and a destabilizing menace? In the 1940s, Maurice Blanchot made a case for the doubleness of literature. In “Literature and the Right to Death,” he says, “In order to write, he [a writer] must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form” (Work 314). But then in his account of Jean Paulhan’s Les Fleurs de Tarbes, he argues that one writes not by rejecting words and rules but by mastering them [“il en recherchera la maîtrise”]: “[H]e
will receive rules not as an artificial track indicating the path to follow and the world to discover, but as the means of his discovery and the law of his progress through obscurity, where there are neither paths nor tracks” (“How” 58). This discovery, however, is quite different from Hill’s where the writer’s self appears: “the self demanding to be loved, demanding love in the form of recognition and ‘absolution.’” The writer’s self for Hill is vindicated in the writing of poetry, whereas for Blanchot the writer “has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing” (Work 307). Blanchot’s “discovery” in writing is certainly more menacing than Hill’s desire for recognition, which, in the end, places menace in abeyance and concedes to the demand of formal perfection.

Further, Tenebrae (1978), the volume Hill was preparing when he gave the “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’” lecture, sides squarely in favor of formal atonement over subjective menace. As Vincent Sherry has noted, compared to Hill’s previous volumes, Tenebrae “is the most conspicuously finished, its surfaces most polished. But it can also show the handprints of its maker; it is sometimes mannered and overworked; it resorts too often to a mastery of techniques merely conventional” (157). For Hill, formal atonement and subjective menace are always in tension, and in this volume technique trumps empirical guilt, which leads to highly polished verse held together by a stable subject. If language had possessed the poet in the way he describes in the lecture, it’s hard to imagine that such formal perfection could be so easily attained. Accordingly, the impression one gets from the volume is that, despite Hill’s best
intentions, in practice menace and atonement aren’t compatible in poetry. The
fifth sonnet of “Lachrimae,” entitled “Pavana Dolorosa,” makes clear the priority
granted to atonement:

Loves I allow and passions I approve:
Ash-Wednesday feasts, ascetic opulence,
the wincing lute, so real in its pretence,
its el a passion amorous of love.

Self-wounding martyrdom, what joys you have,
true-torn among this fictive consonance,
music’s creation of the moveless dance,
the decreation to which all must move.

Self-seeking hunter of forms, there is no end
to such pursuits. None can revoke your cry.
Your silence is an ecstasy of sound
and your nocturnals blaze upon the day.
I founder in desire for things unfound.
I stay amid the things that will not stay. (137)

This poem, like the other six sonnets constituting “Lachrimae,” inquires into how
one can relate to a transcendent God. It then follows that the entire set is replete
with contradictions, which reflect those that human beings encounter in forging a
relationship with an infinite God. In the above sonnet’s second stanza, the
speaker is attracted to martyrdom because it would place him in the condition of
music, “this fictive consonance.” This condition, however, does not resolve
contradictions, as the final lines addressed to martyrdom show: “Your silence is
an ecstasy of sound / and your nocturnals blaze upon the day.” Martyrdom is a
renunciation of self, indeed, a “self-wounding.” It is also a renunciation of
mastery; in martyrdom, one has no ability to set things right. In the absence of an
active (self-legislating) self, martyrdom is incompatible with formal coherence:
“Self-seeking hunter of forms, there is no end / to such pursuits.” It then follows that in the sections addressing martyrdom, the meter and end-rhymes disrupt the poem’s Petrarchan shape; for example, note the slant-rhymes: have-move, end-sound. Only when the speaker gives up on martyrdom as a possibility and commits himself to the preservation of his self does the sonnet regain its formal perfection; note the rhymes: sound-unfound, day-stay. Further, the final line, “I stay amid the things that will not stay,” is the most forthright presentation of a self in the poem and is also an instance of pristine iambic pentameter.

Hill chooses mastery of craft over renunciation of self. Vincent Sherry has argued that in “Lachrimae” Hill’s technical mastery is its own menace in the way Hill finds an “agnostic faith” in Stevens, because, for Sherry, mastery presents itself as “an authority supplanting that of God to whom, he says, he would like to submit” (197). It seems to me, however, that this account negates the experientially subjective inflection Hill gives “menace” in the lecture. Hill writes, “the idea of ‘menace’ is entirely devoid of sublimity: it is meanly experiential rather than grandly mythical” (15). Menace befalls an experiencing subject. That menace is “meanly experiential” puts it in line with experience understood as Erfahrung, a journeying through. Experience as Erfahrung doesn’t leave a subject in a space whereby he or she could conceptualize what he or she is going through. For this reason, Gadamer says, experience is “painful and disagreeable” and so marked by a “fundamental negativity” (Truth 356). This negativity bars conceptualization but opens the subject to further experience: “a person who is called experienced has become so not only through experiences but
is also open to new experiences” (Truth 355). The formal completion noted at the end of “Pavana Dolorosa” forecloses the subject to further experience, just as the speaker resolutely declares: “I stay.” In this poem, Hill provides no compromise position between self-renunciation (characteristic of martyrdom) and non-experiential subjectivity. The poem closes affirming the latter through formal atonement. As will become clear in the following pages, I am not suggesting that radical form is the only way to present a menacing subjectivity; to the contrary, according to Hill’s terms, a subject open to experience must stand in tension with formal oneness. If the subject in “Pavana Dolorosa” had been possessed by language in the way Hill describes in his lecture, the concluding, steadfast self-assertion would be entirely elusive. Since he rejects this menacing and experiential possession, his poetry becomes more Eliotic than he says he would like it to be.

My claim is that “menace” and “atonement” describe a fruitful tension evident in British poetry from the 1960s onwards. Atonement is the moment of formal completion, and menace manifests itself in the subject’s encounter with experience, which undermines the achievement of atonement. In Tenebrae, Hill achieves formal mastery at the expense of subjective menace. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to show an alternative understanding of menace and atonement that doesn’t peg the terms against each other as mutually exclusive but rather seizes on the productive tension when both elements play out in a poem. From this point of view, the subjective openness afforded by menacing experience is possible only against the backdrop of formal wholeness. Basil Bunting, whose
Briggflatts appeared in 1966, is the preeminent advocate of this practice. I ultimately want to suggest that Bunting’s commitment to formal atonement, “a uniting in harmony,” allows him to present a poetic subject that is both fragmented and wounded, as is the language out of which the poet makes the poem. From this angle, the subject is just what rebuts charges of totalism due to the poem’s oneness.\(^\text{10}\) In a poetic culture largely uninterested in “menace,” Briggflatts, I contend, exemplifies the dialectic Hill describes between atonement and menace, but, unlike the example from Tenebrae, it presents a subject open to experience.

II.

At the time of the publication of Briggflatts and even through the late 1970s, poetry derivative of the Movement held sway in Britain’s poetic culture. For example, in 1974 review of Philip Larkin’s last volume, Alan Brownjohn let his enthusiasm get the better of prudence when he declared it “doubtful whether a

\(^{10}\)Here I have in mind arguments made principally in the 1980s by practitioners of Language poetry that find a relation between poetic form and politics. For example, Lyn Hejinian has written: “The open text, by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies” (272). In her talk, “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian doesn’t dismiss closed texts, “in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of the work” (270). For her, the difference between open and closed texts lies more in the level of semantic determinacy than in the degree of formal coherence, as I have been arguing. Nevertheless, it’s noteworthy that Hejinian sees a constitutive tension between openness and closure in poetry, just as Hill identified a tension between menace and atonement: “The point is not to find what’s closed and what’s open and then all line up and play tug of war…. The point is that there’s a very generative struggle between the two impulses. On the one hand, for the writer, faced with the world of meaning and the intention or hope to make something meaningful out of it, there is an urge to identify, locate, be comprehensive, have content. On the other hand, there is the, to me, endlessly obvious observation that no single thing ever holds it all, or even adequately comes to say what it was I thought could really get to this time. Which means that my whole project has to remain open. Even if I want it to be closed, I can’t do it” (291).
better book than *High Windows* will come out of the 1970s” (854). In the same year that Hill gave his address, Larkin, by far Britain’s most popular poet, gave a brief speech before awarding the Booker Prize (for Paul Scott’s *Staying On*). In trying to highlight the differences between a “good poem” and a “good novel,” he claimed that “[t]he poem, or the kind of poem we write nowadays, is a single emotional spear-point, a concentrated effect that is achieved by leaving everything out but the emotion itself” (*Required* 95). Accordingly, poetry for Larkin is an expression of the poet’s concentrated emotion and is the result of his paring away of experiential or (presumably) linguistic interference. This strategy seems of a piece with Hill’s understanding of Eliot’s ascetic resignation before “a fringe of indefinite extent.” Since Larkin was such a force in British poetry when Hill and Bunting were writing, I want to show briefly how his poetry achieves a sort of atonement without admitting the menace that accompanies authentic experience. Indeed, his poetry shies away from the uncertainty of experience and its concomitant linguistic thickness and, instead, slips into unempirical abstract language.

In 1955, Larkin issued a “Statement” in which he maintained, “I write poems to preserve things I have seen / thought / felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake” (*Required* 79). What is striking about this account is how removed “experience” seems from the task at hand, *i.e.*, the writing of poems. The poet doesn’t sound even slightly affected by experience;
indeed, he wants to preserve the experience not for self-understanding but for the experience’s “own sake.” In contrast to experience as Erfahrung, in which a subject is shattered by whatever befalls him or her, Larkin’s notion of experience is closer to Erlebnis. Erlebnis is not experience as risk because in it one never leaves the security of one’s already established identity. In this regard, Gadamer writes: “Everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life” (Truth 67).

When Donald Davie criticized the Movement in his retrospective essay, “Remembering the Movement,” he accuses the poets of focusing on a patently unmenacing kind of Erlebnis, by which they force experience into the strict parameters of authorial categories:

In ‘Movement’ poetry the poet is never so surrendered to his experience, never so far gone out of himself in his response, as not to be aware of the attitudes he is taking up. It is as if experience, as if the world, could be permitted to impinge on the poet only if he had first defined the terms in which it may present itself; as if the world never imposes its own conditions, but must wait cap-in-hand until the writer is prepared to entertain it (with the lighting and the angles previously arranged). (74-75)

Experience, therefore, is preserved in the poetry only insofar as it accords with or is at one with the attitude with which the poet has already decided to meet it. The poet tames experience in order to fit it in the unity of his or her life. The unsettling aspect of this approach lies in the Movement poets’ inflexibility in prioritizing unity of life over fidelity to experience.

Philip Larkin constructed such a strong persona for himself that his poetry became a reflection of an unflappable unity of life, whose chief characteristics
were self-deprecating humor and nostalgia. Typically, in his poems, a persona
reports a discrete experience through the filter of the poet’s strong voice. Due to
the split between persona and voice, one gets the sense that the poet is careful not
to get too caught up in the experience for the sake of the persistence of his
established voice. In this regard, Andrew Crozier has argued that Movement
poets tend to “lack … intimacy” with whatever particular occasion they write
about in their poems: “Occasions, however necessary they may be to poets, are
not felt to be trustworthy. They are not full with a world of realized experience”
(“Thrills” 204). As a result, the poems enact a unity of experience and persona
from which the poet keeps a comfortable distance. He does this, as Crozier points
out, by resorting to highly figurative language. Such language provides a buffer
between experience and poet and secures within the poem a unity between
experience and persona. In Larkin’s poetry, Crozier finds “a studied
indirectness,” whereby the poet becomes an inventor of figures, “and the energy
of the figures, the rewriting of the world as it is, is made to guarantee the
authenticity of the person, the subject. But such guarantees hold good only for the
subject, not for his experience; we are asked to trust the poet, not the poem”
(220). The implication here is that the experience that Larkin admits is a closed
circuit offering no subjective risk. Experience (as Erlebnis) affects a persona, and
the experience’s efficacy is assured by language’s retreat into abstract figuration.
Because the poet never really trusts experience, he keeps a distance by portraying
it in the impotent language of abstraction.
In Hill’s terms, Movement poetry demonstrates atonement without the setbacks of menace, which is undeniably ingredient in experience and linguistic renderings of it. Menace would require an affective subjectivity irremovable from the thickness of language. Oneness, however, can be achieved in the abstract realm of figurative language. Larkin’s poem “Sad Steps” exemplifies these charges. Written in 1968 and published in *High Windows* (1974), it showcases Larkin’s favorite themes of melancholy and nostalgia:

Groping back to bed after a piss  
I part thick curtains, and am startled by  
The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness.

Four o’clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie  
Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.  
There’s something laughable about this,

The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow  
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart  
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)

High and preposterous and separate—  
Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!  
O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,

One shivers slightly, looking up there.  
The hardness and the brightness and the plain  
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain  
Of being young; that it can’t come again,  
But is for others undiminished somewhere. (169)

The poem begins in Larkin’s unmistakable voice and immediately counteracts the hint of Wordsworth in the title with “piss.” Similarly, in the fourth stanza, he

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11Wordsworth’s sonnet beginning “With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb’est the sky” is a rewriting of Sidney’s sonnet 31 in *Astrophel and Stella.*
deflates Romantic phrasings with a simple “No.” Then the penultimate stanza begins by introducing a new pronoun, “One,” which jars against the unambiguous “I” featured so strongly up to this point. The “one,” however, serves to insist that the experience is not happening to the poet, but is being recast under the guise of generic experience. In this form, experience is devoid of its unsettling potential and, instead, is smoothly appropriated by the speaker.

Further, in addition to distancing speaker from poet this fifth stanza figuratively unites speaker and experience to the extent that the speaker appropriates the experience. The stanza begins with the speaker, “One,” “looking up there” at the moon, but by the end of the stanza ambiguity surrounds the agent of “that wide stare.” Since the speaker is the one looking, it makes sense that he would be the one staring, but “[t]he hardness and the brightness” seem to refer to the moon, especially after “Stone-coloured light” in the third stanza. The OED provides an alternative definition for “stare” (which affords only one example—from 1753): “the object stared at.” Yet when Larkin wrote “Aubade” (1977), another poem where the speaker awakens at 4 a.m., he clearly intended the standard—albeit verbal—meaning of “stare”: “Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare” (208). The point is that the moon, the impetus of this experience, and the speaker coalesce, as do the variable referents of “stare” in a “far-reaching singleness.” This unity disengages the poet, who becomes an unaffected commentator. The poet—outside of the experience—informs the reader, a bit like an impatient schoolmaster, that the experience “is a reminder.” In order to be able to tell us what exactly the experience is, the poet needs to
assume a proper distance. This distance can only be attained once the speaker appropriates and absorbs into his unified being whatever the experience has to offer.

The poet’s distance from the experience described in the poem manifests itself through hesitant and disengaged language. Specifically, this distance is clearest in Larkin’s famous negativity. For example, “Sad Steps” ends with an admission that youth is forever gone: “But is for others undiminished somewhere.” Andrew Swarbrick has argued that the poem deploys, “a language that looks unembarrassingly empirical but catches the fullness of impressions and experience, and which in its plainness honours the moon’s plainness” (147). Likewise, Janice Rossen thinks that the moon “symbolizes something definite” (38). On my reading, however, the language’s negativity proscribes definite, empirical plainness and forces an ill-defined abstraction. At this point, the poem has nothing to do with experience and is instead involved in speculation, which is quite the opposite of plainness. At the end of “Sad Steps,” the reader is left with the hollow of a negation reinforced by the tentative language: “can’t,” “But,” “undiminished.” The point is that when Larkin writes poems of an experience he has already reconciled to the unity of his life, his language is far removed from experience and falls into markedly unempirical abstraction. This technique is most apparent at the close of “High Windows”:

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (165)
The oneness Larkin is at pains to maintain is achieved in “thought” rather than in “words,” which is just what Hill said of the late Eliot; yet, Larkin’s atonement is still quite different than Hill’s in “Pavana Dolorosa.” The difference centers on the level of subjective engagement with experience. Hill’s poem ends: “I stay amid the things that will not stay,” which suggests a strong assertion of the self in the throes of experience. Larkin, however, opts out of experience altogether. The poet is detached from experience and crafts a poem treating it as a fait accompli. Once outside of experience, the poet resorts to abstract language since the gulf between experience and writing disallows concrete experience to affect the language: thought rather than words. Hill, on the other hand, never steps out of experience (“I stay”) as much as he resists its destabilizing pull.

III.

As much as Bunting might disapprove of Larkin’s poetry, he puts tremendous emphasis on a poem’s formal unity. His technique draws attention to the particularity of language and of the natural world. For Bunting, particularity and formal wholeness complement each other and never fall into abstraction. Bunting inherited his distaste for abstraction from Pound, whom he met Paris in 1922, four years after Pound issued his charge to poets: “Go in fear of abstractions” (Literary 5). Pound and Bunting maintained a friendship and a productive correspondence for several years. In 1935, however, Pound wrote letters to Bunting that seethed with his racist conjecture and even went so far as to
malign Bunting’s friend Louis Zukofsky for being Jewish. In their subsequent, acrimonious correspondence, Pound declared: “The poet’s job is to define and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice” (Letters 277). Bunting was aware of the racism this position could harbor and responded: “what the hell has justice got to do with it? Unless you want to string everything tight together, like a Hegel or a Tommy Aquinas, with a neat knot where the One True God should be?” (qtd. in Makin 80). Bunting is so angry here because he knows that such an appeal to “justice” is an abstraction, impossible for a poet to practice, but easy to use as a smokescreen for racist or authoritarian politics.

Bunting’s technique for avoiding this pitfall of Pound’s involves a certain fidelity to another Poundian principle: “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” (Pound, Literary 3). In a critical response to Zukofsky’s “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931,” Bunting wrote an open letter to Zukofsky in an Italian newspaper: “If I buy a hat I am content that it should fit, be impermeable, of good texture…. If I am a hatmaker I seek instruction in a series of limited practical operations ending in the production of a good hat…. I NEVER want a philosophy of hats, a metaphysical idea of Hat in the abstract, nor in any case a great deal of talk about hats” (qtd. in Makin 40-41). In Bunting’s eyes, any theory of poetry necessarily interferes with the work of poetry: making use of language’s thingly quality to present real circumstances. In 1935, Bunting wrote, “The most vivid poetry, in the long run the most durable because the least affected by changes of philosophic habit, is that which approximates most nearly to the structure of the event” (Three 29). In an essay on Bunting, Thom Gunn argues
that Bunting differs from Pound in that he locates the meaning of the past in
“literal fact”: “For Eliot the fecundity was in a past beyond recapture; for Pound it
was in a past that could be entered by the imagination which had brought it into
being; and for Bunting it is in a past not only recaptured and re-entered by the
imagination but literally prolonged” (29). To elucidate this claim, Gunn turns to
Canto 47, published in 1937: “Where Pound, in Canto 47, deals with the
representative—for even the man on the terrace is Pound only as a representative
of an individual awareness—Bunting deals with the specific, the young lovers, the
young man as ‘poet appointed,’ Antoinetta, Hastor (whom I take to be Lord Astor
of the Cliveden Set), Scarlatti, Eric Bloodaxe” (28). This insight explains Peter
Quartermain’s displeasure with the editors of the Norton Anthology of Modern
Poetry, whose footnotes to Briggflatts are “almost all wrong” and wrong in such a
way that treats the historical facts of the poem as the stuff of myth (Quartermain
56). That Bloodaxe and the others really existed is so important because the
language of the poem can come all the closer to the structure of the real events.

In Canto 47 and in the fifth section of Briggflatts, imagery of stars and of
expectation nicely exemplifies this difference between Pound and Bunting.
Pound translates Hesiod: “Begin thy plowing / When the Pleiades go down to
their rest” at the moment when Odysseus is about to descend into Hades to meet
Tiresias (Cantos 237). At the end of the canto, Pound uses the same language to
suggest the hope Odysseus should elicit from his meeting with Tiresias. Pound,
in other words, transplants his rendering of Hesiod into another register, namely
the present narrative context of Odysseus’ descent. In Bunting’s version, the
specific stars are relevant to the poet’s reflections of fifty years and to the cosmic order:

Orion strides over Farne.
Seals shuffle and bark
terns shift on their ledges,
watching Capella steer for the zenith,
and Procyon starts his climb. (62)

The constellation of Orion is in descent; Capella, the prominent star in Auriga, is at its zenith; and Procyon of the next constellation, Sirius, begins its ascent. Bunting uses the stellar ordering to mark the passage of time in his or his protagonist’s own life. He notes in the *Collected Poems*: “Sirius is too young to remember because the light we call by his name left its star only eight years ago; but the light from Capella, now in the zenith, set out 45 years ago—as near as fifty as makes no difference to a poet” (211). The specificity of “literal fact” Gunn draws attention to is evident here contra Pound. Pound imagines Odysseus through the lens of Hesiod. Bunting takes a Poundian image and fits it to the specifics (Capella’s rise) of a prolonged situation (guilt and memory) in his own life.

Yet for all of Bunting’s commitment to the things themselves, he insists equally strongly on formal wholeness. In the light of Bunting’s strident criticism of Pound’s increasingly totalitarian politics, this position is difficult to maintain. In a 1974 essay on Yeats, Bunting tries to rescue Yeats from a critical reception that focuses more on his right-leaning politics than on his poetry. He detects a common symptom among Yeats, Eliot, and Pound:
What these poets and many other writers really had in common was a love of order. With order in society it matters little whether you are rich or poor, you will not be harassed by perpetual changes of fortune, you can plan your life’s work within known limits, not felt as limits because they are as unavoidable as the limits imposed by our physique or the duration of human life. (“Yeats” 45)

Bunting goes on to suggest that such a conception of society is fantastic and disreputable because it disregards the material needs of the people in a society. “Weighing this up, if it is worth weighing at all, you must of course allow for my own conviction that ‘God is the dividing sword,’ and that order is no more than a rather unfortunate accident that sometimes hampers civilization” (46). Still, however, Bunting defends order as an aesthetic principle: “But my purpose is only to remind some critics that Yeats’s love of order is something he shared with Dante and Shakespeare and probably far more than half of the world’s great poets, as well as with nearly all the philosophers and historians” (46). Bunting wants to preserve order by fictionalizing it and, at the same time, revoke its mythologizing claims. Here I’m drawing on Frank Kermode’s distinction: “Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change” (46). A poet’s love of order, for Bunting, is a commitment toward providing frameworks in which he asks the invariably destabilizing question of how one can make sense in the world. In poetry, formal order cloaks a more fundamental disorientation. Order exists in poetry but only insofar as it provides an opening through which one discovers the inadequacy of logical constructs in facing experience.
Yet by 1966, when *Briggflatts* appeared, claims for aesthetic wholeness were few and far between. After suffering first-hand under the totalitarian regime of the Nazis, Emmanuel Levinas developed a philosophy that dispelled totalizing metaphysics. In 1948, he published “Reality and Its Shadow,” in which he is critical of art’s evasion of reality: “The artist stops because the work refuses to accept anything more, appears saturated. The work is completed *in spite of* the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out at the beginning of a dialogue” (*Levinas* 131). Art then separates itself from the exigencies of practical life and is at home in a realm of totalizing identity. In later writings, however, Levinas admits that poetic language can break down the privilege granted to metaphysical totality: “Poetic language will break through the wall while preserving itself against the rubble from that very breakthrough, which threatens to bury and immobilize its advance by breaking it down into projects and memories that are synchronous and eternally contemporaneous in significance” (*Levinas* 154). Poetic language here is language that functions on the level of particularity and that resists being subsumed into an idealized realm of meaning. In this way, language works as “proximity,” which can bring about a “subjectivity that enters *into contact* with a singularity, excluding identification in the ideal, excluding thematization and representation” (*Collected* 116). As a strike against totality, poetic language can effect a subjectivity that exists at the level of particularity and refuses the stability proffered by abstraction and idealization.
I want to suggest that Bunting’s commitment to wholeness in form allows him to present a poetic subject that is fragmented as is the language out of which the poet makes the poem. The subject that emerges through the poetry is just what rebuts charges of totalism due to the poem’s oneness. *Briggflatts*, I contend, exemplifies the dialectic Hill describes between atonement and menace. The poem is at one in its perfected formal structure but is menaced by a subjectivity that is best characterized as a finding-out in the night.

In *Briggflatts*, Bunting preserves a menacing subject through the formal atonement he achieves by weaving themes together in the fashion of a musical sonata. Traditionally, sonatas consist of three parts: exposition, development, and recapitulation. In this progression, two themes interplay with each other and finally reappear transformed but still recognizable at the end. *Briggflatts* is formally noteworthy for its five sections instead of the three that make up all of Bunting’s previous sonatas. Still, however, *Briggflatts* interweaves two themes throughout.\(^\text{12}\) The first theme, the focus of the first section, is a betrayal of love and the betrayer’s subsequent flight. The second section presents the other theme, namely the relationship between art and experience. The third section is the climax, and through the image of Alexander the Great it addresses single-minded ambition in contrast to the slowworm’s earthy humility. The fourth section marks a return of the first theme now countering flight with a return home. Finally, the second theme reappears in the fifth section where the poet’s self-understanding in

\(^{12}\)In “The Structure of Bunting’s Sonatas,” David M. Gordon nicely sketches the formal aspects of a sonata and unpacks the thematic structure of all of Bunting’s sonatas.
the natural order is a kind of art. In 1980, Bunting reflected on the importance of
the sonata form in his work:

Music is organised in various ways, and one of the inventions—[an] eighteenth-century invention, for which I think the chief responsibilities lie with Domenico Scarlatti and John Christian Bach—[was] the notion of a sonata, where two themes which at first appear quite separate, and all the better if they’re strongly contrasted … gradually alter and weave together until at the end of your movement you’ve forgotten they are two themes, it’s all one. And that struck me when I was very young, as a form that poetry could and should exploit. And I’ve tried to do it. And it’s to that, and that kind of manoeuvring, that I’m referring when I talk about Domenico Scarlatti in *Briggflatts*. (qtd. in Makin 258-259)

In *Briggflatts*, Scarlatti is invoked to counter a scientific or analytic approach to understanding the world where one “traces” particulars without acknowledging the whole:

As the player’s breath warms the fipple the tone clears.
It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti condensed so much music into so few bars
with never a crabbed turn or congested cadence,
ever a boast or a see-here; and the stars and lakes
echo him and the copse drums out his measure,
snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight
and the sun rises on an acknowledged land. (58)

For Bunting, Scarlatti’s music is significant because it condenses disparate materials within the wholeness of the sonata form. This technique differs from the one Hill criticizes in Eliot’s work where “the expansive, outward gesture towards the condition of music is a helpless gesture of surrender” (9). Scarlatti makes music by highlighting particularity, whereas, in Hill’s reading, Eliot’s music is an abstraction away from things of this world. As Bunting famously pointed out to Pound, *dichten = condensare*, which underlies his belief that
whatever musical harmony a poet achieves results from his crafting of language’s immanent meaningfulness and not its transcendent signification. In other words, he condenses language rather than use it as an outward-pointing instrument. For this reason, Bunting famously privileges poetry’s music over semantics: “[W]e lose very little by not knowing what the words mean, so long as we can pronounce them. I’ve tested that by reading to class. I’ve read German, Italian, Persian, and Welsh, and so far as I could judge, they got as much from it as they did from many English poems” (“Use” 42).

For Bunting, besides Scarlatti’s sonatas, the finest example of bringing together the aesthetic principles of condensare and harmony is the work of the early Celtic saints:

Columba, Columbanus, as the soil shifts its vest,
Aidan and Cuthbert put on daylight,
wires of sharp western metal entangled in its soft web, many shuttles as midges darting;
not for bodily welfare nor pauper theorems
but splendour to splendour, excepting nothing that is. (57)

These saints were connected with the monastic communities in Iona and Lindisfarne in the sixth and seventh centuries. For Bunting, their importance lies in their creation of the Lindisfarne Gospels, a detailed illuminated manuscript. One of the most salient features of this book is the intricate lines that form interweaving patterns, often along the borders of the pages. They give the pages

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13 Pound recalls in his ABC of Reading: “Basil Bunting, fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary, found that this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language. ‘Dichten’ is the German verb corresponding to ‘Dichtung’ meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning ‘to condense’” (36).

14 See, for example, the interlace pattern of the cross-carpet page introducing the Gospel according to Saint Mark, which is nicely reproduced in Janet Backhouse’s The Lindisfarne Gospels, p. 48.
a sense of what could be taken as excessive ornamentation: “There seems at first to be a confusion of detail and decoration, but the balance is never lost, and the main design shows through, ultimately, without insisting on itself” (“Codex” 15). The complex designs grant the pages formal wholeness. In a 1965 letter, Bunting glosses the above passage by referring to an ancient Celtic brocade, which bears resemblance to the designs of the Lindisfarne Gospels:

I have been talking of the Anglo-Celtic saints who ‘put on daylight,’ represented as a brocade in which wires of ‘western metal’ are woven…. Now the brocade is woven by shuttles, woven with extreme intricacy, for indeed it is nothing less than the whole universe: shuttles like midges darting, like drops from a fountain, like the dust of the little whirlwinds which continually form in the desert. It bears the rainbow and the moon’s halo, things beautiful but hard to define, and it opposes the sharp sun that wants all things to be chained to the dictionary or the multiplication table. It gives, not so much tolerance as enthusiastic acceptance of a world in which things are not measured by their usefulness to man. (qtd. in Makin 146)

Bunting connects the interlace of the Lindisfarne Gospels to the brocade because in both intricacy of the particular design reinforces the balance of the whole. Yet the particular details are of a different order than the whole. It is impossible to follow the linear progression of an interlace pattern through the whole page. So in Briggflatts, Bunting writes, “Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing” (57). Linearity is the method of the “dictionary-makers,” common targets of Bunting’s contempt. The weave of the brocade upends utilitarian or means-end logic. In rebuffing linearity and in going back over itself in the manner of a weaver’s shuttles, art is, in David Jones’ language, “gratuitous” (149). For Bunting, then, art achieves oneness or atonement by weaving
particular material elements in such a way that their harmony reveals more than they would if taken as discrete words or images.

Accordingly, Briggflatts contrasts displays of linear experience or consciousness with weaving. First, Eric Bloodaxe fails because he doesn’t reflect; he doesn’t go back over his experience. Eric was a tenth-century Norwegian, who had little luck establishing kingdoms around the Celtic world. In Bunting’s account, Eric fled Norway out of cowardice: “He seems to have left the place to his brothers to avoid bloodshed; and if so, that must have weighed on his kingly god-descended conscience for the rest of his life” (qtd. in Makin 173). His character in the poem enacts unreflective ambition, which, after stints as king of York, Dublin, and Orkney (in Bunting’s version), leads to his ignominious death in Northumbria, “[l]oaded with mail of linked lies” (50). Eric lets nothing get in the way of his megalomaniacal quest for power. As a result, his soldiers resent him:

Crew grunt and gasp. Nothing he sees they see, but hate and serve. (48)

Bunting relates Eric’s failure to reflect on his own past to his social isolation, which in turn compels him to construct a destiny for himself that is self-serving, delusional, and ultimately tragic.

Like Eric, Alexander the Great lives in a fantasy of self-sufficiency that is largely devoid of self-understanding. In the middle of the poem, Alexander leads

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15 Tenth-century Northumbrian history is hardly a settled matter. Peter Sawyer argues that Eric was king of York just once, and not twice as Bunting writes. Interestingly, in Sawyer’s and others’ accounts, Olaf, the subject of Geoffrey Hill’s Mercian Hymns (1971), kills Eric and assumes the throne.
his army of tired and homesick men on a world conquest. The soldiers lack ambition, desiring “barley pancakes” and other homey comforts back in Macedonia, and have little interest in crossing into another continent. Alexander, however, is eager to climb “the mountains of Gog and Magog on the edge of the world” (Bunting in interview, Tallman and Quartermain 9). The image of the warrior climbing a mountain alone (since the troops refuse) nicely exemplifies the willful, unreflective attitude Bunting wants to disavow. Alexander, however, attains a degree of self-understanding when the angel Israfel appears ready to blow his trumpet and so end the world. Alexander’s brush with mortality curbs his ambition and spurs him to lead his men back home to Macedonia. Contrary to the conquest of a mountain, Alexander’s retreat home suggests a salubrious reflection on his past. Particularly in relation to the poet’s return to Northumbria, Alexander’s reflection and subsequent return gestures toward the kind of productive weaving that makes art. Immediately after the scene with Israfel, the slowworm sings its song to the Northumbrian woodman. The slowworm is the exemplary artist. First, he opposes Alexander’s vertical ambition by “snaking” through ordinary trash or the earth’s dross:

Vaults stored with slugs to relish,
my quilt a litter of husks, I prosper
lying low, little concerned.
My eyes sharpen
when I blink. (55)

Unlike Alexander, whose gaze is fixedly skyward, the slowworm thrives by interrupting his line of vision and by embracing all aspects of the natural world. Single-minded ambition is not the way to proceed, since “[g]rubs adhere even to
"Stubble" (55). "Grubs" are the slowworm’s larvae and “stubble” is the basal part of the grass. The point is that artistic productivity comes out of a love of the coarse materials of the natural world and in the artist’s discernment of their harmony. Scarlatti, the Celtic saints, and the slowworm weave particulars into wholes without ever negating the efficacy of the particulars in their own right.

Essential to Bunting is the moment of reflection that makes something art and not an assortment of unrelated materials. As early as 1932, he was already articulating his skepticism of modernist collage techniques due to their inability to address the whole:

But a healthy language is supple and forceful like a living thing, it eludes the snares of dictionary-makers and its unit is the sentence rather than the word, the whole speech or poem rather than the sentence. It reflects reality not by pulling it to pieces and attempting to rebuild it from the correspondencies of fragments, but by one comprehensive act. (Three 24)

What he is criticizing here is the analytic and abstract pull of words that have no context outside of themselves. As the passage with the slowworm indicates, art needs to stay in the thick of materiality. Bunting’s idea that language and art, for that matter, work as “one comprehensive act” is comparable to Adorno’s claim that, “[a]rtworks have the immanent character of being an act” (Aesthetic 79).

Further, like Bunting, Adorno focuses on “[a]rt’s linguistic quality” (Aesthetic 166), which Simon Jarvis has elucidated:

The elements of language, morphemes or phonemes and the lexical items which they constitute, are not atoms of fixed meaning which are then simply added up to produce a sum total of meaning, but are variably meaningful, and meaningful only in their relation to other morphemes and phonemes. In an analogous way, Adorno argues, works of art organize elements which have no fixed or essential meaning in themselves into a meaningful relation. (103)
For both Bunting and Adorno, a meaningful relation of materiality taken as a whole is essential to art.

IV.

In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno makes a case for the formal coherence of works of art. For Adorno, the formal achievement of the work of art provides a necessary locus for non-instrumental ways of thinking. In this way, art offers an oppositional alternative to society’s pervasive instrumentalism: “social critique must be raised to the level of form” (250). Yet form is not an externally imposed structure on the raw material of an artwork since Adorno is suspicious of what he calls “instituted closure,” which “was synchronous with the rise of political fascism” (175). To the contrary, form is “the sedimentation of content” (139). Form grows out of its material and becomes coherent through its constitutive multiplicity: “It is the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth. A posited unity, it constantly suspends itself as such; essential to it is that it interrupts itself through its other just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not cohere” (143). Form is what differentiates artworks from ordinary things. Adorno would have little sympathy

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16This element of Adorno’s thought is crucial: “If in art formal characteristics are not facilely interpretable in political terms, everything formal in art nevertheless has substantive implications and they extend into politics. The liberation of form, which genuinely new art desires, holds enciphered within it above the liberation of society, for form—the social nexus of everything particular—represents the social relation in the artwork; this is why liberated form is anathema to the status quo” (255).
for, say, Duchamp’s shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*) because the object in itself does not create a space of unreality in which art can critique the otherwise pervasive political economy. Gerald Bruns clarifies this argument by relating Adorno’s idea of form to Michael Fried’s criticism of Minimalist art:

Fried’s position is that the materiality of the work must be experienced as a medium and not simply as material; otherwise we haven’t got art but simply a mere thing. The position is similar to Adorno’s formalism, which insists on matter as mediation, not in order to represent or intend something but simply to set the work apart from the empirical world (‘The concept of form marks out art’s sharp antithesis to an empirical world in which art’s right to exist is uncertain’ [Adorno 141]). (15-16)\(^{17}\)

Form then is the organization material takes on when it is disengaged from the empirical world of exchange value.

Given that form distinguishes artworks from objects in the world, unity within form preserves their status as art. In language close to Bunting’s own, Adorno writes that “[f]orm seeks to bring the particular to speech through the whole” (144). Adorno stresses that an artwork must be complete within itself because art’s autonomy from the empirical world is essential to art’s ability to offer a critique of existing political structures. Autonomy and formal unity, however, do not preclude complexity, for indeed even some of the most formally recalcitrant works of modernism have some structure:

Musical analyses, for example, show that even in those works most diffuse and hostile to repetition, similarities are involved, that many parts

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\(^{17}\)In the essay “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Michael Fried argues that Minimal Art is definitively theatrical and, therefore, undesirable since it depends on a strong distinction between subject and object. Bruns argues against Fried and in particular against his disapproval of art that borders on theater. For Bruns, Minimalism and other performative arts create a social space that is successfully communal; hence, his interest in Language Poetry, whose spirit, “is essentially that of the anarchist group: the idea is to create and maintain a space in which (granting historical conditions) anything is possible” (“Poetic” 24).
correspond with others in terms of shared, distinguishing characteristics, and that is only through the relation of these elements of identity that the sought-after nonidentity is achieved; without sameness of any sort, chaos itself would prevail as something ever-same. (141)

Unity comes about through a cluster of relations among the parts within a work of art. This establishment of identity—more like recognition of similarities (motifs, repeated phrasings, etc.)—fortifies the artwork against the empirical world and so fosters a non-identical relationship with the world. The identity within form works enigmatically, and for this reason it can exist in works “diffuse and hostile to repetition”:

Schoenberg noted that Ariadne provides no thread to follow through the interior of artworks. This however does not imply aesthetic irrationalism. Their form, their whole, and their logicality are hidden from artworks to the same degree as the elements, the content [Inhalt], desire the whole. Art that makes the highest claim compels itself beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary. (147)

Indeed, Adorno insists on drawing a distinction between a conception of form as a static whole and an understanding of form that is indeterminate. That unified form can incorporate fragmentation points to the active dialectic between resolution and irresolution in any work of art, which, for example, Adorno sees in Hölderlin’s late poetry: “Hölderlin so transmutes the form of unity that not only is multiplicity reflected in it—that is possible within traditional synthetic language as well—but in addition the unity indicates that it knows itself to be inconclusive” (“Parataxis” 136). Art’s inconclusiveness is characteristic of its own position of risk in a society that antithetically opposes it: “Only works that expose themselves to every risk have the chance of living on, not those that out of fear of the
ephemeral cast their lot with the past” (Aesthetic 34). In order to sustain itself in society, art needs to gesture toward its own completion but, at the same time, to expose itself to risks outside itself.

If form ensures a degree of autonomy from the empirical world, one must inquire just how a work of art can expose itself to risk. One answer lies in the fact that Adorno disliked Stravinsky’s music because, according to Martin Jay, it “revelled in the sacrifice of subjectivity whose pain Schoenberg had registered and resisted” (41). The risk and suffering Adorno finds so important in modern art come to light in the concept of subjectivity. First, it is crucial to stress that Adorno’s notion of subjectivity is not the product of the traditional dualism of subject versus object:

As contrary poles, subjective and objective aesthetics are equally exposed to the critique of a dialectical aesthetics: the former because it is either abstractly transcendental or arbitrary in its dependence on individual taste; the latter because it overlooks the objective mediatedness of art by the subject. (Aesthetic 166)

Adorno then asserts his own position: “In the artwork the subject is neither the observer nor the creator nor absolute spirit, but rather spirit bound up with, performed and mediated by the object” (166). Subjectivity is mediated by the materiality of the art; therefore, when we talk about the subject of a poem, it is not the “speaker,” the author, or the observer/reader, but instead it is a constellation of these elements as they are made present in the poem’s language.

Adorno goes on: “Art’s linguistic quality gives rise to reflection over what speaks in art; this is its veritable subject, not the individual who makes it or the one who receives it” (166-167). What speaks in art is not any private, expressive
content but rather its externalized and collective materialization: “The force with which the private I is externalized in the work is the I’s collective essence; it constitutes the linguistic quality of works” (167). For this reason, Adorno maintains that what speaks or what is the subject in art is—through a moment of reflection—a “We.” Collective subjectivity is achieved because art is fundamentally linguistic and language is fundamentally social. “Literary forms, by their direct and ultimately inescapable participation in communicative language, are related to a We; for the sake of their own eloquence they must strive to free themselves of all external communicativeness” (167-168). The words and sounds of literary language are primarily communicative but, when used in an artwork, turn away from this instrumental function and grant the artwork (the poem) its autonomous status. For Adorno, this turn away from functionality constitutes a collective subjectivity. The use of language outside the exchange economy reveals our social dependence on others.

Adorno’s aesthetic thinking is helpful in understanding Bunting’s attraction to a unified form, as the latter believed that formal wholeness focuses attention on the constitutive unrefined particularity. This is a paradox at home with Adorno’s thought:

Art is true insofar as what speaks out of it—indeed, it itself—is conflicting and unreconciled, but this truth only becomes art’s own when it synthesizes what is fractured and thus makes its irreconcilability determinate. Paradoxically, art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation; this is a possibility only for its nondiscursive language. Only in this process is its We concretized. (168)
In the dialectic of the reconciled and the unreconciled in an artwork the “We” or subjectivity comes into being. Subjectivity is what remains exposed and undefined and so at risk even as the form gestures toward completion.

V.

In *Briggflatts*, subjectivity is an uncontainable “menace” just at the point where the sonata form achieves its closure. In answering Hill’s call for poetry that is both “menace” and “atonement,” Bunting (albeit proleptically) locates the menace in a conception of subjectivity that exists outside of the subject-object dichotomy and, as in Adorno’s argument, is exposed and so outside the fold of formal completion. The fifth section of *Briggflatts* marks the poem’s homecoming, as is expected in any sonata, and it quietly announces the protagonist’s melancholic self-understanding. The protagonist, who is by this point Bloodaxe’s foil, accepts his guilt for the betrayal of his young lover some fifty years earlier and, accordingly, looks to a future without the guidance of any certain knowledge: “Then is now. The star you steer by is gone” (62). His melancholy culminates in the final lines:

Starlight quivers. I had day enough.  
For love uninterrupted night. (62)

The shift in the pronoun from “you” to “I” suggests his full acceptance of responsibility for his own past. As much as these lines endorse a grim resignation to the future, the “Coda” upends whatever solace such private ruminations may
provide with a recognition of the protagonist’s inescapable social commitment.

And so the pronoun shifts to “we”:

A strong song tows us, long earsick. Blind, we follow rain slant, spray flick to fields we do not know.


Where we are who knows of kings who sup while day fails? Who, swinging his axe to fell kings, guesses where we go? (63)

The unassuming, interrogative mode here cracks away at the synthesis the sonata form entails. The homecoming is really a send-off, which in effect leaves the protagonist at sea. His only armor is his rejection of Bloodaxe’s megalomania, which isolated the latter from the people around him: “Nothing he sees / they see” (48). The “we” is here concretized through a turn away from the light of reason or instrumental logic. Subjectivity, then, serves to undercut formal completion since it emerges as a condition of displacement and irresolution.

I want to suggest that the subjectivity in Briggflatts is produced dialectically against the strain of the poem’s formal structure. In an interview, Bunting explained that his line “For love uninterrupted night” comes from Catullus’ “nox est perpetua una dormienda”: “Una dormienda doesn’t mean one
night, it means a night that is *all one*, that never varies” (Tallman and Quartermain 12). It then makes sense that the subject in the “Coda” is up against something like a cosmic night as much as he is a part of an unsynthesized fringe of the sonata. The poem’s subjectivity serves as a menace, for it resists inclusion in formal closure. Hence, Donald Wesling’s observation: “Often Bunting’s closures have a trope of disavowal” (91). At the end of *Briggflatts*, the disavowal places the subject right in Eliot’s “fringe of indefinite extent,” which in Hill’s view, Eliot puts to the service of formal completion instead of retaining it as a locus of “empirical guilt.” Bunting’s protagonist accepts his guilt and rejects the options of blame or denial. That guilt cannot be forgotten or neatly compartmentalized leaves the protagonist in the unreconciled present of experience, very much at sea. His guilt manifests itself in the dense language of the “Coda” in a way that exemplifies Hill’s definition of menace.

In Drew Milne’s debate with Allen Fisher, he concluded his argument by asserting that “poetry needs to be able to reflect on the power of its refusal to be more, or less, than play” (36). In other words, he wants to preserve a place for reflection in art. Likewise, in *Briggflatts*, Bunting repeatedly demonstrates the value of reflecting upon experience through materiality, nicely portrayed in the image of the Celtic brocade. From this, we can come close to an understanding of reflection that resists abstraction from materiality and still manages to maintain a menacing subjectivity.

Robert Kaufman has argued that debates surrounding avant-garde (Benjaminian) and modernist (Adornian) aesthetics have their roots in the crucial
difference between Shelley’s politicized anti-formalism and Keats’ constructivism most clearly evidenced in his odes. More to the point, Kaufman sees in Keats’ negative capability amidst formal constructivism (or atonement) an example of Adorno’s plea for aesthetic autonomy: “Achieved construction finds its correlate in an investigative though nondominative subjectivity, a subjectivity represented by a cherished image of expression within construction that Adorno initially borrows from Kierkegaard” (366). Adorno’s nondominative subjectivity finds perfect expression in Keats’ theory of negative capability, “the ability to remain in an extended and speculative ‘being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’ with a concomitant suspension of ‘any irritable reaching after fact & reason’” (369). All of this then leads to Kaufman’s major claim:

In short, constructivism exists in dialectical tension with negative capability. For Adorno as for Keats, an exploratory but nondominative subjectivity—willing to suspend itself in defamiliarization or doubt—and an achieved construction are mutually constitutive…. The monumental construction exists to be energized, put into motion—even to be disassembled or dissolved—by the negatively capable subjects who exist in relation to it. (371)

I would like to supplement this account by suggesting that the poetic subject energizes this form by reflection. I don’t mean reflection in the Romantic sense of converting particularity into an ideal absolute. Rather, reflection is a moment of Erfahrung that asserts a non-conclusive self-understanding in the face

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18 To recall, then, the form that our schism takes in the twentieth century: A highly wrought, esoteric, and difficult constructionist art will be associated (by Adorno, Horkheimer, and others) with the preservation of a zone of critical negativity; among the chief exhibits here will be Schoenberg, Beckett, and Celan. The opposing camp (Brecht, Benjamin, Kracauer) will champion something of an art-into-life, technological-reproductionist position that proclaims itself exoteric or populist (Duchamp’s placement of the urinal in the gallery; surrealism; aspects of William Carlos Williams’s and the objectionists’ ‘poetic machine’; above all the mechanical reproducibility of cinema)” (Kaufman 379-380).
of irreducible particularity. Reflection doesn’t try to set things straight once and for all but is instead an admission of the futility of trying to understand comprehensively. Gadamer says that reflection needs to be indeterminate because of our fundamental historicity:

We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. This is also true of the hermeneutic situation—i.e., the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history [*Wirkungsgeschichte*]—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. (*Truth* 301-302)

Accordingly, reflection affirms the risk of experience since one can never make complete sense of the excess of particularity that gluts perception. In fact, reflection further exposes us, as Gadamer suggests in claiming that “there is most certainly an inner reversal of intentionality in reflection, which in no way raises the thing meant to a thematic object” (“On the Scope” 35). Since we can’t remove ourselves from experience through reflection, we open ourselves to the flipside of intentionality, which consists of all of the non-conceptual particulars of exteriority.

Bunting suffuses *Briggflatts* with reflection to the extent that the poem is formally at one and yet opens its immanent subjectivity to the risks of experience. The gesture toward aesthetic autonomy that the provisionally complete sonata structure implies paradoxically presents an opening in the “Coda” for the subject to disavow completion and to thereby open himself to the uncertainty of experience. In this way, Bunting is able to bring into balance the conflicting poles
of formal atonement and subjective menace that Hill finds in tension—though rarely maintained evenly—in all poetry.

VI.

The Cambridge poets achieve a balance of subjective menace and formal completion through experiential reflection. Demonstration and elucidation of this claim will be the focus of the following chapters. The remainder of this chapter will set the stage by showing in broad terms how Cambridge poetry achieves reflection by virtue of language’s inescapable materiality. As much as the poets refuse to admit a distance between language and experience as Philip Larkin and the Movement poets did, they also refuse to accept language as a processual flux entirely devoid of expressivity. Between these extremes, Cambridge poetry articulates a version of subjectivity defined through the vicissitudes of experience.

In the late 1960s, the chief outlet for Cambridge poets was a more-or-less monthly worksheet called *The English Intelligencer*. The issues are full of letters and editorials questioning just what it means to be a writing community.¹⁹ Nearly

¹⁹The most interesting exchange in this regard involved Prynne, Crozier, Peter Riley in the late 1966 and early 1967 issues. After a few letters addressing the need to write a distinct poetry from the important and admired work coming out of the United States (principally Olson), Crozier asked if the editor (Riley) was “pursuing a policy of deliberate exclusion” by not printing work by various British poets like Roy Fisher and Michael Shayer (165). Prynne responded by stressing the importance of a writing community: “I had thought that perhaps something might move, if there were perhaps some initial measure of trust, so that the community of risk could hold up the idea of the possible world; we could approximately and in some sense or other mostly be in it, or moving in part across the same face, giving out something and who am I to care how it might be done?” (190). Crozier seems to agree with this point in Prynne’s letter: “the poet’s art has to be teknos, on a level effective to society” (204). Riley responds with his vision of *The English Intelligencer*: “we want to set up an organ in which there’s no need to be deliberately provocative in order to get a response, and where no kind of defensiveness is called for…. For TEI to be a success there has to be a common faith among all those taking part in the possibility of poetry as to whatever extent a communal activity” (205). Twenty-six years after these letters, Drew Milne takes over these same demands for a Cambridge community of poetry in his own journal.
as common are angry notices of editors’ resignations. Yet, amid all strife and confusion, several seminal poems appeared for the first time. Prynne’s “Aristeas, Or Seven Years,” John Riley’s “Ancient and Modern,” Andrew Crozier and Peter Riley’s “Romney Marsh” poems, and Elaine Feinstein’s “Marriage” all came out on these pages. As soon as a normative aesthetic was beginning to take shape, Tom Raworth and Anselm Hollo wrote a spoof issue in May 1967. A poem purportedly by J. H. Prynne entitled “The English Passive Voice” lambastes the respect reserved for the poem as finished object:

It is the grammatical background of our mother tongue, which includes not only our way of constructing propositions but the way we bind our feet, dissect nature (Wessex) and break up the flux of experience into objects and entities to construct propositions about: the art of making pictorial statements, in a precise and repeatable form, is one that we have long taken for granted--which fact is important for science, because it means that science can have a rational or logical basis, even though it be the same drama enacted to help the growth of crops. (331)

The poem’s beginning pokes great fun at Prynne’s portentous tone, syntactic irregularity, and obscurity, but it also levels a more serious charge against his tendency “to break up the flux of experience / into objects.” The poem suggests that Prynne’s interest in achieving “a precise and / repeatable form” comes at the cost of experience. What’s more, Prynne reputedly breaks up experience by

_Parataxis:_ “these notes hope that some community of risk might overcome the fear of the forum, agoraphobia, and the embarrassment of becoming all too manifest, even a manifesto” (“Agoraphobia” 25).
submitting perception to abstract reflection out of which come constructed “propositions about” experience. Reflection removes poetry from the flux of the world and is then reduced to producing declarations of objectified, arcane knowledge of matters like “the growth of crops.” Unrepentant, in the next issue, Prynne published his unapologetically abstruse essay entitled “A Pedantic Note in Two Parts,” in which he argues for runes’ (and so, language and poetry’s) ability to resist abstraction. The upshot of this claim, vis-à-vis the spoof poem, is that poetry as a finished object maintains its particularity and autonomy in the face of political and economic pressure to co-opt language into the marketplace of exchange values.

In the issue just before Raworth and Hollo’s spoof (April 1967), Prynne’s “And Only Fortune Shines” appeared. Though it was not included in The White Stones (1969), it has all the markings of the formal completion characteristic of poems in that volume and probably fed the fire of the spoof’s criticism.20 (It has, however, been published unaltered in an “uncollected” section of Poems [1999] from which I will cite.) From the start, the poem makes clear its intention to explore the uncertain intersection of subjectivity and experience:

We are not the person for this as we do make away / over to the / side I tell you oh love the ones we are the touch of, as going in the dark, why should it be less. (134)

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20 In distinguishing Prynne’s poetry from Olson’s, Edward Larrissy notes that Prynne “gives his poems a rounded shape, with firm beginnings and with endings of conclusive or resonant closure” (64).
The first line indicates the anxiety the runs through the entire poem: how are “we” or “I” up to the task of meaningfully confronting experience? And to complicate matters, experience is caught up in the thickness of language. The “of love” of the third line begins to unravel the passage’s already tenuous semantic cohesion. If “love” is an apostrophe, then the remaining lines lack a verb and therefore any graspable meaning. But if “love” is an imperative verb as would be fitting following “I / tell you,” then “oh” is simply a disruptive cipher. Prynne places both possibilities in conflict to reinforce the linguistic roughness any experience “we” or “I” will face.

The poem’s major concern is how we can love at all when identity and metaphysical security are lost. After finding a moment of ostensible clarity, “we are then who we / love, in the open,” the poem slips back into confusion:

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daylight slides
into the bloodstream, how can we
hold what we are (134).
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The subject cannot stand over against exteriority, since inner and outer are deeply intertwined, making suspect any one position the subject assumes. Still, there’s room for a tentative resolution:

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We love what we
trust it is the coming age of
the face (134).
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Love and trust are secure positive values but only gain efficacy in the light of this somewhat apocalyptic “coming age of / the face.” An echo of Levinas’ thought is appropriate here. For Levinas, the “face” is the aspect of an ethical other that
brings about a reversal of subjectivity. Before the face, the subject is irrevocably
called to tend to the well-being of the other. The face dispossesses the subject of
cognitive knowledge and self-security as he or she is called into an uncertain and
demanding relationship. From this perspective, we can approach the poem’s final
lines:

The per-
son we now / are not I / will wait
for you as we both stand, so here
far from the star the needful
life of the cheek
the rise of,
the heart. (134-135)

The second line here hearkens back to the two typographic slashes of the poem’s
second line and recalls the initial pronominal uncertainty. Subjectivity remains
but is now marked by a state of waiting for a “you.” The imminent relationship
with “you” will be devoid of all controlling, prior knowledge, since as Bunting
put it, “the star you steer by is gone.” And so the subject is undetermined; it is not
an “I” and just who exactly constitutes the “we” will be determined in the future.
Yet the resolution to wait gives the poem some finality. The image of the rising
heart gestures toward a neat closure but gains a certain tentativeness from the
jagged comma between “of” and “the.” The closure the poem achieves, therefore,
is indefinite since it is overshadowed by the indeterminate subject position.

As much as critics have focused on Cambridge poets’ interest in achieving
formal completion, several writers have noticed a tradition of a lingering
subjectivity in the poetry. For example, in reviewing Denise Riley’s anthology
Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970-1991 (1992), a “sampler of … the alleged
Anthony Mellors remarks that “its tendency is to place poetry within the private realm of the author, so that the overall effect is one of interiority, the poem less an artefact that brings the reader into contact with the world than a compulsive object produced in retreat from mundane exigencies” (131). This account, written in 1994, rehearses some of the same complaints implicitly voiced by Raworth and Hollo in 1967. Again, it claims that the poetry undertakes reflection to extract perceptions from the world in order to produce a formally intact artifact in touch with the author’s interiority.

Similarly, in his discussion of still more recent work, Charles Bernstein maintains that in British poetry—as in American poetry—two groups emerge: “poets committed to open and new forms” and “those with a tenacious commitment to an unobtainable lyric, a sort of sprung voice that takes on a religious quality at times” (“Leaking” 206). Later in the same essay, Bernstein makes clear that the latter set of poets is connected with Cambridge and, in particular, with Rod Mengham’s Equipage Press: “While some of this work, but more generally some of the poetic tendencies often associated with ‘Cambridge,’ get bogged down in a decorous solemnity that pulls back from the ‘wild’ sonic and formal risks sometimes gestured at, there is certainly an enormous commitment, not to say devotion, evident” (210). Bernstein then continues, “Still, the virtually reified rhetorical surface of the sprung lyric—‘the voice belongs in the words and not to a speaker,’ in J. H. Prynne’s words—can seem more a house style than a ticket to a ‘true’ poetry that ‘wrings the heart,’ more a ‘vehement theology of the Word’ than a participatory democracy of language” (210).
In Mellors’ and Bernstein’s assessments, confusion arises over the subjectivity of the lyric voice. Mellors suggests that it lies too squarely within the “realm of the author,” whereas Bernstein says that it is part of the “reified rhetorical surface”; but the latter’s claim that it is mixed up with a fallacious belief in “an unobtainable lyric” implies that the poetry’s subjectivity never quite manages to attain the privileged subject position it hopes for. Mellors says the poetry is dominated by reflection, and Bernstein suggests that the poetry never quite manages to reflect away from the weight of language. Their criticism, however, bespeaks an either-or understanding of reflection and subjectivity: either the poetry reflects out of the density of language into the author’s subjective consciousness or it disqualifies reflection and is faithful to perception and language. Prynne’s “And Only Fortune Shines,” however, shows that the poem’s subjectivity is neither authorial nor inclined to fall into the objectifying role of traditional Cartesian conceptions of the subject. Instead, it is part of language and definitively open to exteriority.

Nevertheless, a standard criticism persists in seeing Cambridge poetry as too reflective, too subjective, and too lyrical all for the sake of producing a formally coherent artifact. For example, in a review of *A Various Art* (1987), an anthology of Cambridge poetry, Allen Fisher is suspicious of the poems’ reliance on direct perception and of their constructionist aesthetic favoring formal completion. The poetry in the volume written from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties and assembled by editors Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville works, according to Fisher, through a “civic address” by means of “the use of direct
perception to derive its descriptions and truth value, albeit concealed in the shift
artifice makes from the phenomenal to the imperative or idealised object. This
shift from reliance on the natural is a necessity to prevent the truth value from
existing independent of successive judgements” (67). Further, the poets’ “direct
perception of the world [is] a priori their writing” (70), which is, therefore,
“reliant on a Cartesian truth value established by the conscious perceptions of
emotions and what has been observed” (75-76). In other words, a controlling
subjective consciousness extracts phenomenal perceptions into an order governed
by objectification.

An exemplar of Fisher’s argument is Andrew Crozier’s The Veil Poem,
included in A Various Art but published as a chapbook in 1974. An important
element of Fisher’s case lies in Cambridge poetry’s “constructionist aesthetic,”
which emphasizes “ideal limits, self-referral and autonomy”: “By constructionist
can be understood both the factural method of building or arranging in piles into a
self-contained whole and the concept of a syntactical arrangement with meaning”
(70). Yet, curiously, The Veil Poem begins with a fragmented epigraph: “(left
unfinished” (113). Nonetheless, the poem consists of ten regular stanzas ranging
from ten to twenty-two lines each, which strongly suggest formal completion.
The poem’s major concern deals with how one attains wisdom given the flux of
human perception. A tentative resolution comes in the poem’s middle stanza:

Bend back the edges and pull what you see
into a circle. The ground you stand on
becomes an arc, the horizon another
each straight line swells out
leaving no single point at rest except
where the pitch of your very uprightness
bisects the projection of your focal place.
Here at the centre of every intersecting circle
each infinite yet wholly itself
whichever way you turn a way is offered
for you to carry yourself, its knowledge
will inundate you unless it is held
along every inch of your skin, shaped as
the grace you make for yourself. The starlings
are all in place on the lawn, scattering
up and down for little things, they rise
in flight or plant their beaks into the earth. (117)

The subject here tries to enclose all that he sees in an arc in which he stands at the
center, yet the knowledge perception grants him is only that which rubs against
his “skin.” Attempts at totalizing one’s perception of the world break at the point
of sensual interaction, namely the skin. Therefore, wisdom takes on an active and
non-cognitive guise: “the grace you make for yourself.” Wisdom can’t be
extracted out of the phenomenal world of perception; rather, it is a way or grace
by which one comports oneself.

In a letter elucidating The Veil Poem, Crozier says that it “is partly
screened through Olson’s’ Against Wisdom as Such” (n.p.). Olson’s essay
(1954) criticizes Robert Duncan for assuming the existence “of some outside
concept and measure of wisdom” (Collected 260). For Olson, wisdom is opposed
to abstraction:

I take it wisdom, like style, is the man—that it is not excriable in any sort
of a statement of itself; even though—and here is the catch—there be
“wisdom,” that it must be sought, and that “truths” can be come on (they
are so overwhelming and so simple there does exist the temptation to see
them as “universal”). But they are, in no wise, or at the gravest loss,
verbally separated. They stay the man. As his skin is. As his life. And to
be parted with only as that is. (261)
Yet, for Crozier, “stay[ing] the man” is just the trouble. How can identity be maintained through the flux of perception? Stable identity is abandoned, but a porous subjectivity is maintained. The final line of the prose poem “Driftwood and Seacoal,” which closes his collected poems All Where Each Is, addresses this tenuous balance: “So others in us, if, not therefore not, but also, go separately together” (310). The knotty syntax recalls Prynne’s conclusion to “And Only Fortune Shines” and offers a similar affirmation of subjectivity. Of “Driftwood and Seacoal” and of Crozier in general, Douglas Oliver comments: “This is decentering of a radical kind but one which is also able to resubmit—I won’t say recover—individuality in its complexity and ambiguity” (113). Far from assuming a “Cartesian truth value,” as Fisher asserts, Crozier’s notion of subjectivity exists within the uncertainties constitutive of exposure to exteriority, and in foregrounding this subjective openness The Veil Poem is “left unfinished” even as all of its stanzas formally draw to neat closures.

Fisher, however, would still contend that Crozier’s version of subjectivity entails a moment of reflection that is incommensurate with perceptual experience. For example, Fisher might inquire into how indeterminacy of perception plays a part in the final lines of The Veil Poem:

The dust beneath my fingernails is all the wisdom I have to take with me upstairs to my wife. (122)

However, here, the strong “I” needs to be understood through its unstable identity established through the poem. Accordingly, it is characterized by its perceptive skin, which is at odds with claims to knowledge. Nevertheless, it would be
possible to argue, as I think Fisher would, that the “I” here has none of the
markings of the indeterminate subjectivity Crozier supposedly values. In fact, his
efforts to preserve a space for subjectivity—no matter how open—risk falling into
a traditional subject-object opposition, as these lines show. Consequently,
Crozier’s subjectivity in the poem is not capable of sustaining its openness and
runs counter to the dynamics of perception. In a short essay entitled “The
Mathematics of Rimbaud,” Fisher stresses the ineluctable processual nature of
perception in a way that challenges claims for subjectivity:

> It becomes necessary to recognize the probability that the properties of
connections, reversibility and indecompossibility which define the space
of the same object (i.e. the structural integrity of the Gestalt) have as
origin not the physical properties of the outside world but the constraints
of the dynamic of our structure, a structure which can itself be changed.
(44)

The structure of human perception and the space of objects are both in flux, and
so subjective positions in poetry are inherently empty since they cannot determine
their own space nor that of their objects.

In order to better understand Fisher’s stance, we should look at his poem
“Clasp Flow Other” (1976), which addresses perception. This is its opening:

> Clasping the neck this
affair horizon chain of crystals
Unreachable railway
carriages repeating
dream Flow through belly through
fortress in fear to open all
Gates, eyes signal motion,
grip vision behind screen
Migrating metal, cloud
flowing hold, back watching
Wisdom never indifferent
to push out to grip it
Hold ungripped
flow charge the changing
To control the
filling graveyard body pity. (41)

The hope of clasping on to a perception is immediately dashed, since perception takes the shape of “flow.” Efforts to “grip” wisdom turn into a “[h]old ungripped.” Where Crozier would say that wisdom accompanies one’s openness, Fisher would deny one’s ability to stand in openness and so wisdom is defined negatively as an ungripping. The positive aspect of Fisher’s work lies in its continual process. His poems are parts of long projects that don’t ever come to a resolution. Fisher constantly defers the stance of subjectivity Crozier, Prynne and other Cambridge poets try to place against their poems’ formal completion.
CHAPTER TWO:

LYRIC EXPERIENCE IN J. H. PRYNNE’S EARLY POETRY

One of the most enduring criticisms of Cambridge poetry is that it unconvincingly attempts to be lyrical. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Charles Bernstein complains that the Cambridge poets have “a tenacious commitment to an unobtainable lyric, a sort of sprung voice that takes on a religious quality at times” (“Leaking” 206). What makes the lyric “unobtainable”? Before we can attempt an answer, we must first try to come to an understanding of what it means to call poetry lyrical. In criticism of poetry since the 1960s, no one definition of the lyric has been settled upon. In an essay discussing various perceptions of the lyric, Mark Jeffreys asserts, “Most of these recent criticisms of lyric share an expectation that the more lyrical a writer seeks to be, the more that writer will try to exclude history and otherness” (198). Further, in keeping otherness at bay, the lyric poet tends to overcompensate by emphasizing his or her interiority by pursuing emotional genuineness. As Harold Bloom has contended, “Lyric celebrates the poetic self, despite every denial” (8). In a word, the main current of criticism has portrayed the lyric as a bout between self and world in which the self dominates.

In an account of the lyric’s place in postmodern poetry, Marjorie Perloff argues that most readers of poetry still hold the mistaken conviction that poetry
means above all else lyric poetry. She quotes Harold Bloom in this regard:

“Wordsworth had no true subject except his own subjective nature, and very nearly all significant poetry since Wordsworth, even by American poets, has repeated Wordsworth’s inward turning” (“Postmodernism” 174; Perloff’s italics).

Perloff thinks this assessment of poetry is too limiting because she doesn’t believe the best recent poetry has much to do with Wordsworth:

Postmodernism in poetry … begins in the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded—political, ethical, historical, philosophical—to the domain of poetry, which is to say that the Romantic lyric, the poem as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion crystallized into a timeless pattern, gives way to a poetry that can, once again, accommodate narrative and didacticism, the serious and the comic, verse and prose. (“Postmodernism” 180-181)

Then, drawing on Zukofsky’s poem “A,” she says that this non-lyrical kind of poetry is caught up “in the network of everyday living” where “‘truths’ must be discovered phenomenologically” (“Postmodernism” 186). Perloff maintains that the lyric wrongly places poetry within the interiority of the poet. This emphasis on the lyric’s relation to interiority has its roots in Hegel’s aesthetic philosophy, which maintains that the lyric poet “must identify himself with this particularization of himself as with himself, so that in it he feels and envisages himself. In this way alone does he become a self-bounded subjective entirety and expresses only what issues from this determinate situation and stands in connection with it” (1133; qtd. in Middleton, “Lyric” 15). In this tradition, Northrop Frye has defined the lyric in terms of a poet’s turn away from external reality: “In lyric the turning away from ordinary experience means that the words do not resonate against the things they describe, but against other words and
sounds” (35). Against Perloff’s call for a “return [of] the material,” this understanding of the lyric nicely maps on to the trajectory from Hegel’s “self-bounded subjectivity” to Bloom’s “inward turning.”

Perloff is right to question the viability of recent poetry that still models itself on a Romantic lyric mode of an isolated speaker assessing his or her experience in the world.21 The problem with this kind of poetry is that it assumes that experience can be removed from language. For Perloff, a poet should not recast an experience in the form of a meditative poem, because such a gesture suggests that a space exists prior to and apart from language where the poet can go about experiencing the world. Poets can no longer stand apart from experience and then order it through an arsenal of poetic language, because they are always already caught up in what they are trying to give expression to. If this is the case, must poetry forsake meaningful displays of subjectivity and the lyric mode altogether? I want argue that J. H. Prynne’s poetry is lyrically subjective and still manages to attend to the “network of everyday living,” which Perloff finds definitive of postmodern poetry. What is at stake in this claim is not really whether Prynne’s poetry can be categorized under the banner of “lyric” but rather

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21 In a later response to several papers on the lyric, Perloff seems more receptive of the lyric mode: “But what need no longer be argued, it seems to me, is that lyric poets writing at the turn of the twenty-first century need do no more than record ‘sensitive’ responses to a generalized outerworld. But let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater: romantic poetics itself remains one of the highpoints of Western lyric—a poetics whose very violation today makes it an especially interesting object of study” (“Response” 254). Also, in an earlier essay, she suggests Language poets make use of an alternative definition of lyric: “Poetry, for these poets, has less to do with the Romantic conception of the lyric as ‘an intensely subjective and personal expression’ (Hegel), the ‘utterance that is not so much heard as overheard’ (John Stuart Mill), than with the original derivation of lyric as a composition performed on he lyre, which is to say that it is a verbal form directly related to its musical origins” (“Can(n)on” 14). In this chapter, I argue that the kind of lyric poetry Prynne writes does not abandon subjectivity in order to do justice to “the network of everyday living.”
that his poetry enacts a form of reflective subjectivity. In saying that the poetry is lyrical, I mean that it works with a poetic subject, however different it may be from the models Perloff calls into question. The best way to demonstrate just what kind of subject this is entails an examination of the volumes *The White Stones* (1969) and *The Oval Window* (1983). My reading of these poems finds that the lyric subject grants the poetry an insight into the human condition of vulnerability that would be lacking if Prynne were to banish altogether the subject in favor of a “completely written surface,” which is how Peter Ackroyd has described Prynne’s early work (132).

I.

*The White Stones* derives its version of poetic subjectivity from Prynne’s idiosyncratic reading of Charles Olson. Olson’s poetry is so important to Prynne because it sidesteps metaphoric language and addresses a poetic subject’s situatedness in an historical world. Prynne, in turn, takes up the project Olson articulated in his *Mayan Letters*: “I am trying to see how to throw the materials I am interested in so that they take, with all impact of a correct methodology AND WITH THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION” (*Selected* 83). Olson is here emphasizing the need for a poetry that offers an alternative to the spectatorial and domineering ego-position. Just how to write such an alternative remains a central and inexhaustible concern for both Olson and Prynne.

Prynne discloses his own preference of alternative ego-positions in his favorable reception of Olson’s *Maximus 4, 5, 6*, which London’s Cape Goliard Press published in 1968. Prynne, however, had access to drafts of this series of
Maximus through his correspondence with Olson. In a 1969 review of the volume for the journal The Park, Prynne writes that, “Olson’s poem is a growing back into itself and its historic matrix, not outwards and upwards from it” (“Review” 64). Two years later in a lecture at Simon Fraser University, Prynne expands on his idea that this volume of Maximus grows back into itself by connecting this movement with a break from the lyric condition. But just what Prynne means by “lyric” is unclear. At the beginning of the lecture, for example, he summarily asserts that Wordsworth and Milton “were never lyric poets” (“On Maximus” 4), and yet Olson’s first three sections of Maximus are, for him, examples of lyric poetry. He tries to clarify his position by arguing that the lyric depends on what he calls “the gracious condition of metaphor” (6). He then goes on to describe the lyric condition as a curve that goes outward and up from the individual subject and never comes all the way around to find grounding in the subject’s standing in the world. Accordingly, the language becomes less connected to the particularity of the subject’s physical experience. There then has to be a transfer from the particular to the whole, which can make for an imprecise and unacceptably abstract kind of poetry.

In contrast, Prynne understands the second series of Maximus to redeem the poem’s initial lyricism insofar as it treats the condition of the whole and thereby avoids metaphor. The first series focuses on the Figure Outward, but Maximus of the second series “folds back” into himself and turns his glance from the sea to the land. This turn importantly marks the difference between lyric and epic. Whereas lyric takes the particular and through metaphor relates it to the
whole, the epic uses myth to tell, as Prynne says, “the story of where you are” (7). Though Prynne is making strange generic distinctions in suggesting that the lyric traces an outward movement and the epic turns inward, he is most concerned with emphasizing the importance of a non-metaphoric poetry that is attentive to its subject’s own situatedness. The problem with the conventional lyric is that its language is figurative to the extent that it creates an artificial barrier between the poem and the world. By contrast, the epic, and in particular *Maximus 4, 5, 6*, uses the language of its subject’s concrete place in the world. Prynne tries to clarify this point by drawing on Heidegger’s idea of “home.” Insofar as “poetically man dwells on this earth” (9), he is unable to objectify things of this world and turn them into abstract concepts. Rather poetic subjectivity entails a subject’s opening up to what he or she cannot control. Prynne says this is just what Pound discovered in Cavalcanti: “He realized that that Cavalcanti poem [“Donna mi Prega”] really had some understanding of the condition of love which could be extended through the language into the absolute curvature of the way a person’s mind was open to what he heard and to what he saw and to what he felt. And indeed that particular notion of having one’s nerves set open is referred to affectionately by Olson in his poem …” (11). This kind of openness extends what Prynne calls “the condition of being” through language without ever resorting to conventional figurative language.

In short, the problem with the lyric for Prynne has less to do with the presence of a poetic subject than with its tendency to deracinate and metaphorize language. And the appeal of the epic lies in its ability to ground the language in a
subject’s historical situatedness. What Prynne tries to do in *The White Stones* is to write poetry that retains an historically grounded, lyric subject but refuses to make use of abstract language. The poetry, accordingly, is faithful to particularity and is lyrical in an anti-conceptual manner. Jan Zwicky, for one, has commented on the way in which the lyric rebuts conceptual systematic thinking: “Lyric coherence is not like the unity of systematic structures: its foundation is a heightened experience of detail, rather than the transcendence (excision) of detail” (120). Prynne’s poetry demonstrates that a non-traditional lyric mode is capable of both foregrounding detail without lapsing into abstract metaphoricity and making use of an individual subject open to the uncertainties of exteriority.

In taking this position, Prynne is continuing a tradition that runs from Pound and Williams up to Bunting and Olson. In Pound’s seminal “A Retrospect,” he advises poets to, “go in fear of abstractions”: “don’t use such an expression as ‘dim lands of peace.’ It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol” (*Literary* 5). Similarly, Williams writes: “The true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself” (14). In turn, Olson privileges the peculiar natural object and so writes in his essay “Human Universe”:

> All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing … such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. (*Collected* 157-158)
For Prynne, the poet needs to foreground particularity without slipping into abstraction, because, as Simon Jarvis has noted, “metaphorical or comparative identification may enrich or empower writing at the expense of that to which writing hopes to do justice” (“Quality” 73). And the key lesson Prynne takes from Olson is that a writer’s task is to do justice to rough-shod particularity.

In an essay that appeared in *The English Intelligencer* in 1967 entitled “A Note on Metal,” Prynne is explicit about the dangers of abstraction when it diminishes a thing’s own singularity, that is its being-in-itself as against its conceptual replaceability. In particular, he shows how the introduction of money in the Bronze Age led to an abstraction of value and to a dissipation of the spiritual significance of material stone. Before the Bronze Age, Prynne writes, weight marked the quality of substance in an economy of exchange. Before “the abstraction of property,” value was inherent in the material itself (*Poems* 128). The advent of metal inaugurated a “money economy” based on abstraction through “the concentration of theoretical power by iconic displacement of substance” (129). Accordingly, the magical power of substance gets abstracted into “number,” which becomes the basis of a new monetary system. In this new economy, the magic inherent in the weight of an object gives way to a sign that abstractly indicates the worth of something. In another essay written around the same time, “A Pedantic Note in Two Parts,” Prynne extends his argument to include the attendant move toward abstraction in the linguistic economy when cultures phased out the use of runes. In both essays, Prynne follows Olson in
arguing against forms of abstraction that displace whatever value there may be in what is materially present. A potential solution in the writing of poetry comes about when the poet grounds language in the world by not giving entirely into abstract figuration and metaphoricity. This means that language can be faithful to substance by rooting itself in the poetic subject’s turn inward, which is the locus of experience.

The 1960’s debate between poetic language’s flight into abstraction and its materiality clearly leaves its marks on the divergent practices of poetry. In contrast to Prynne, many poets still abided by tenets of the 1950’s Movement aesthetic, which encouraged generalizations through the voice of an unflappable speaking subject. For example, Donald Davie’s “A Conditioned Air” (1969) contrasts a Romantic poet’s understanding of the English wind (Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” for example) with the modern wind, which has more to do with indoor cooling systems than with the work of nature. The poem ends on a Larkinesque note insofar as the speaker begrudgingly accepts the hard knocks that make up contemporary English life:

The delicate movements of
Conditioned airs
I learn to love, as small
As that is, and as prompt
In its dispersed and shaking service. My
Storm-window’s foggy polythene claps and billows. (Collected 151)

The assured subjectivity that reveals itself here grants the rest of the poem the kind of metaphorical basis that Prynne opposes. The old English wind that is to blame for both Robinson Crusoe’s shipwreck and Romantic inspiration is duly assessed: “The wind / Was a draught in the flue of England” (150). England,
accordingly, is a fire, which the Romantic tradition regretta
tly tried to put out. In the phrase “the flue of England,” Davie piles an abstraction on an abstraction. First, “England” is not so much a geographic region as a vague spirit. This attitude is forcefully reappears four years later in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*: “we recognize in Larkin’s poems the seasons of present-day England, but we recognize also the seasons of an English soul—the moods he expresses are our moods too, though we may deal with them differently” (64). As much as such sentiment betrays a reactionary nationalism, it also indicates Davie’s penchant for abstraction in poetry. The process of recognizing “the seasons of an English soul” entails the reader’s construing the words on the page in such a way as to render a pre-ordained, transcendent abstraction. If we ask just what is meant by an English soul—let alone its seasons—the only possible answer comes in the form of a knowing grin because it consists of an entirely unpresentable abstraction. It discounts any occasion to say, “Look, that is an English soul,” but fosters exclusionary sentiments like, “You wouldn’t understand because you’re not English.” Accordingly, in Davie’s poem, the idea of a “flue” of England is perplexing, and it can only make some sense if we accept the first abstraction regarding the soul of a people. Moreover, the only way we can understand this metaphor is through the voice of a stable persona who remains integrated throughout the poem. His voice assures the reader that the flight into abstraction is secure by virtue of the reflections of a wise and fully present man. The language of the poem demands that we accept the stability of speaking subject.
In an essay on Davie, Anthony Easthope argues that the Englishness of Davie’s poetry resides in its allegiance to empiricism without engaging the problematic of poststructuralism, which, in England, “continues to have a dubious and oppositional stature in relation to the dominant culture and is either ignored in the main organs of the public sphere or vilified in ignorance as some French intellectual equivalent to mad cow disease” (26). So what happens if we question the unity of Davie’s assured speaking subject? In the same year Davie’s poem appeared in the volume *Essex Poems* (1969), Michel Foucault published “What is an Author?” in which he suggests that we “re-examine the privileges of the subject”: “In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse” (987). Foucault maintains that readers unjustifiably presume the presence of a stable, empirical author behind the text, who grants the text a certain homogeneity and unity. Instead, Foucault argues that the text holds together by a “complex function of discourse,” which he calls the “author-function.” Therefore, the text is cut off from author and organizes itself through its own discourse. Foucault’s claim jars with the presumption underlying Davie’s poem, namely the metaphorical language has meaning only insofar as it is guaranteed by the empirical persona the speaking subject assumes.

If we displace the fixity of a speaking subject and attend to the language’s own textuality, we may begin to see metaphors stripped of some of their abstract baggage. In the essay “What Metaphors Mean” (1978), Donald Davidson makes an argument toward this end. Like Foucault in some ways, Davidson contends we
are wrong to assume that metaphoric language posits a meaning apart from or transcendent to ordinary language. Metaphors do not carry a “hidden message” that we need to piece together: “Metaphor runs on the same familiar linguistic tracks that the plainest sentences do” (41). Davidson is challenging a popular conception of metaphor that places its meaning outside of language or, contra Max Black, that it has a “special cognitive content” (42). In contrast to Davidson, Karsten Harries, for example, has argued that modern poetry uses metaphor to get out of language: “Metaphor no longer has its telos in reality. It still invites us to take leave from familiar reality but not for the sake of a more profound vision of what is. Instead metaphors become weapons directed against reality, instruments to break the referentiality of language, to deliver language from its ontological function and thus to confer on the poet’s words a magical presence that lets us forget the world” (78). This version of abstraction is just what Prynne disputes in his discussion of the “magical” transformation of substance into coins in the Bronze Age. Davidson wants to get away from the kind of thought that urges us to try to decode the metaphor’s meaning, as if it were neatly tucked behind layers of imagery. Instead, he provocatively asserts, the meaning of metaphors is literal: “If this is right, what we attempt in ‘paraphrasing’ a metaphor cannot be to give its meaning, for that lies on the surface; rather we attempt to evoke what the metaphor brings to our attention” (44). What is at stake then is the effect of the metaphors in the reader’s behavior. “Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight” (45). In arguing that metaphor does not operate by matching up words with a ready
concept, Davidson understands metaphor to effect an experience with singular alterity. In Gerald Bruns’ assessment, “Davidson’s idea of metaphor as noticing the world, causing us to see not just one thing differently but an endless array of things we might have missed, helps to loosen the hold that the idea of metaphor as seeing likenesses between two dissimilar objects has had since Aristotle’s time” (Tragic 46).

This understanding of metaphor, I suggest, opposes the “gracious condition of metaphor” that withholds a cognitive content and that, accordingly, Prynne finds objectionable in much lyric poetry. Prynne’s The White Stones is an attempt to produce lyric poetry that doesn’t rely on abstract metaphors and instead makes use of surface-level metaphors that do not escape their textual particularity. The first lines of the volume exemplify just this kind of non-conceptual metaphor:

The century roar is a desert carrying too much way; the plane skids off with an easy hopeless departure. (38)²²

These lines are metaphoric, but they yield no concept by which the reader could more easily grasp what is being said. Quite the opposite, the words unravel when we try to put them together. First, “century” is destabilized once we grasp that it is an adjective modifying “roar,” which loses its ordinary meaning when we see that it is really a “desert.” The second clause is perhaps easier to decipher if we take it as an image of an airplane skidding off of a runway. That clause then modifies the first in a sense by enacting the poem’s commitment to ground-level particularity and resistance to the flight of metaphorical identity and abstraction.

²²All citations of Prynne’s poetry refer to Poems (1999).
This poem, entitled “Airport Poem: Ethics of Survival,” is able to bring its language of particularity to bear upon a form of poetic subjectivity that is socially engaged. Just as the tenor of a metaphor cannot be abstracted apart from the materiality of the language, the poetic subject cannot be isolated from the society in which it exists. Prynne’s subject can never be taken as an exemplar of Davie’s “English soul.” Yet, for Prynne, the issue of subjectivity is a movement that refuses to abstract itself out of its physical place but still, like Olson’s Maximus and Bunting’s Alexander, brings him back to the locus of experience. These are lines from the middle of the poem:

The heart is a changed petromorph, making pressure a social intelligence: essential news or present fact over the whole distance back and further, away. (38)

In a typical move, Prynne materializes the richly metaphoric “heart” into an entirely earthy phenomenon. According to one dictionary of geological terms, a petromorph is “a cave formation that is exposed to the surface by erosion of the limestone in which the cave was formed” (Parker 544). The heart then, Prynne implies, is external and, by extension, social. Its movement becomes clear in the poem’s final lines:

Of which the heart is capable and will journey over any desert and through the air, making the turn and stop undreamed of: love is, always, the flight back to where we are. (38)
The turn here is just like the turn Prynne detects in Maximus in the second volume of Olson’s poem. Love does not take us away from our social milieu but rather attunes us to our present situation.

The poetic subject in *The White Stones* is able to maintain something of the inwardness that seems essential to lyric poetry. Yet, subjectivity here is not of the sort that objectifies and controls the world from a set position. Rather, the subject is formed, in part, by what is external to it when it acknowledges the material conditions out of which it arises. Here, for example, are the final lines of the poem, “The Stranger, Instantly”:

```plaintext
the quick
placement of love as
trust: at the source.
And so here, it is others I most
take to, like stones
in the mist, in
the voice. (40)
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This is an example of lyric poetry not beholden to “the gracious condition of metaphor.” Yet the simile, “like stones / in the mist,” seems incongruous because of its pastoral implications. One could understand the stones to represent the others to whom the speaker takes. Then the mist would suggest the ambiguity that marks the speaker’s interaction with others. This interpretation, however, presumes the presence of a removed speaking subject who is already integrated before venturing out in the mist. In the final line, “in the mist” is qualified by “in / the voice.” Mist, which suggests external uncertainty, is now aligned with voice, which is the traditional mark of lyric poetry’s interiority. Accordingly, the potential abstraction of the “stones / in the mist” is reined in by its proximity to
inwardness. At the same time, voice is possible only through interaction with otherness insofar as lyric subjectivity is a social condition.²³ Prynne, in the end, challenges the assumptions someone like Helen Vendler makes when she defines the lyric as representing “the inner life” as opposed to the “social life” (xi). Prynne’s poetry doesn’t recognize such steadfast divisions between inside and outside, because the pressures of exteriority—what Prynne calls “the sequence of fact”—impinge upon interiority to constitute a poetic subject. At the close of “The Common Gain, Reverted,” Prynne describes the resultant subject as a man wandering:

> Not mine indeed but the sequence of fact, 
> the lives spread out, it is a very wild and distant resort that keeps a man, wandering at night, more or less in his place. (89)

The image of a man wandering more or less in his place is the kind of lyric inwardness that characterizes The White Stones. Prynne’s poetry is lyrical insofar as it performs this inward turn. But, for Prynne, inwardness is not the self-containment of an ego but is rather an acknowledgment of the poetic subject’s situatedness in the world. Inner and outer intersect in this conception of subjectivity.

²³My claim is at odds with Charles Altieri’s: “Prynne is not very interested in voice—that is, in modulations of language that dramatize the paths by which such imaginary projections attune themselves to specific kinds of situations. Since for him the situation is defined mostly by the density of semantic registers that emerge in the imagination’s engaging the world, lyric has to subordinate voice to more structural and comprehensive and impersonal modes of attunement” (44). Voice, in Altieri’s view, is caught up in “projections,” which imply a stable, psychological subjectivity. Likewise, Charles Bernstein sees voice in its confessional guise: “Voice … is inextricably tied up with the organizing of the poem along psychological parameters” (Content’s 407). Prynne, however, extricates voice from such subjectivist psychology by using it in a process of intermingling of inner and outer, which is definitive of the lyric.
In the poem “First Notes on Daylight,” Prynne echoes “the sequence of fact” in “The Common Gain, Reverted” with “the whole sequence of person,” which he elucidates:

the concentration
of intersect: dis-
covery back to
the way over, the
entire crossing an open fabric (69).

Prynne’s vocabulary here resonates with the language of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s late writings, which define subjectivity in terms of exteriority, that is, as embodied, as touched by the world rather than as grasping it in cognition. He maintains that between what I see and me there exists “a thickness of flesh” (*Visible* 135). This “flesh of the world” is the principle that binds things through the interactive force of perception. Flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, is the locus of commonality that allows things in the world not to be entirely alien to anyone’s perception of them: “The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and my making them flesh” (135). When I look at something, I am possessed by that thing: I not only see, but I am seen. Hence, perception is a thorough intertwining of seer and seen so that subjective consciousness no longer dominates what is outside of itself.

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24 The earliest evidence of Prynne’s interest in Merleau-Ponty is in a 1961 essay entitled “Resistance and Difficulty”: “Just as for Marcel and Merleau-Ponty the existence of my body, as mine, bridges the gap between my consciousness and the world, so the substantial medium of the artist and the autonomy of his creation establish the priority of the world while at the same time making it accessible” (30). That he goes on to relate this phenomenological insight to Hopkins’ poetry is significant insofar as it shows that Prynne is already thinking of Merleau-Ponty in terms of poetic practice. Elsewhere in this essay, Prynne writes that Merleau-Ponty’s “writings deserve to be much better know in England, and his recent death is especially unfortunate” (28).
Reflection, accordingly, loses its subjectivist privilege and operates through a porous version of subjectivity. David Michael Levin notes the importance of this step: “Going beyond Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, for whom reflexivity is a relation of consciousness to itself, Merleau-Ponty affirms, in perceptual experience, the operation of a different reflexivity: a relation of flesh to flesh he calls reversibility. ‘Every reflection,’ he writes, ‘is after the model of the reflection of the hand touching by the hand touched’” (66). The image of the hand touching the other hand is significant because it nicely encapsulates how we are always both feeling and felt beings. Reflection, then, is a reciprocity between beings, which Merleau-Ponty calls reversibility or reflexivity, and such an interactive relationship happens only in virtue of a “pre-established harmony” all things share in Being (133). Being is lodged neither in the perceiver’s interiority nor in a transcendent realm: “Being is what requires creation of us for us to experience it” (197).

Dynamic as this ontological position may be, it still falls short of offering an account of subjectivity. Yet, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty offers this elucidation: “[M]y body, which is one of the visibles, sees itself also and thereby makes itself the natural light opening its own interior to the visible, in order for the visible there to become my own landscape, realizing (as it is said) the miraculous promotion of Being to ‘consciousness,’ or (as we prefer to say) the segregation of the ‘within’ and the ‘without’” (118). Subjective reflection entails the making visible or the exteriorizing of one’s own interior. In this movement, the demarcations of inner and outer shift. The division of interiority and
exteriority is never set firmly because the movement of perception constantly challenges such boundaries. Rudolf Bernet points to the body as the locus of subjectivity: “It is indeed through the body that the subject builds a human world, but at the same time it is through this same body that the subject is dispossessed of it” (63). Reflection establishes subjectivity as a liability in the sense that I am always exposed to exteriority because I exist only in virtue of exteriority. Levin notes that this interdependence yields “a subjectivity whose identity is not necessarily centered in egological experience; a subjectivity that the mirroring has decentered, but not produced through a process that leaves it in a state of absolute alienation” (64). By remaining deeply entrenched in things, Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a sentient and sensible body maintains its subjectivity while at the same time upending the traditional Cartesian division of subject and object.

Prynne, I suggest, is working with an idea of poetic subjectivity in a similar way. The subject is not a persona assessing the outside world from the distance and recording his insights in the form of a poem. Rather the subject is already caught up in all the vulnerability experience entails, which is definitive of Prynne’s poetry in Drew Milne’s “anti-humanist” reading:

Prynne’s poems eschew the vocalisations of humanism, providing neither a congealed ‘voice’ nor an identifiable persona or civic personhood. The bardic temptations of post-humanist epic—that poetry could include everything and history—are brought into the briefer focus of lyric sequences. Song is acknowledged as an expressive parameter, but the agencies prompting lyricism are not those of a singer, and are more easily read as destructions of subjectivity akin to anti-humanist phenomenology. The lyric ego appears thrown by the collapse of subject-object orientations to the world: worldliness doubts the specialized knowledge it calls for. (“Speculative” 68)
Although it is true Prynne’s poetry deconstructs a version of subjectivity, he promotes another kind, which, in the manner of Merleau-Ponty, escapes the subject-object framework.

In an early essay entitled “Resistance and Difficulty” (1961), Prynne puts forth his understanding of how a subject can exist between the conflicting forces of interiority and exteriority. What he calls resistance is the recalcitrance the world poses in the face of human desire. The subject cannot control the world and, accordingly, has to experience the shock and disappointment of foiled projections. The subject comes up against what is entirely apart from it:

“[R]esistance itself comes nearer than any other differentiable quality to being completely inherent in the object, in the core of the other person’s distinctness from myself: the stone’s hard palpable weight is the closest I can come to the fact of its existence, and the reserve or disagreement of my neighbour is my primary evidence for his being really there” (28). Resistance marks the limit of my mind’s construction of the world. The example of the stone in this instance echoes Heidegger’s “On the Origin of the Work of Art” (1935/1936), in which the stony mass that makes up a Greek temple, for example, acts as a shifting reserve of what escapes cognition. The idea is the same here: elements in human experience inevitably frustrate attempts to rein them in under a subjectivist vision of the world. Yet, in contrast to Milne’s reading, the subject is not obliterated by experience. Rather, Prynne identifies difficulty as the subjective counterpart of resistance. “It is as if the senses reported to my mind the presence of resistance outside me by means of the internal sensation of difficulty” (28). This idea of
difficulty is similar to what Merleau-Ponty says about the artist hearing an internal echo of what he sees externally: “Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence” (Primacy 164). Further, for Merleau-Ponty, the body’s movement and experience of exteriority “radiates from a self” (162). Yet in the case of both Prynne and Merleau-Ponty, it would be wrong to concentrate too heavily on either interiority or exteriority because neither can be considered without the other. As Françoise Dastur writes of Merleau-Ponty, “there is no experience except of the metamorphosis of an inside into an outside and of an outside into an inside” (29; Dastur’s italics). A subject still stands, albeit, one that is continually confronted by forms of resistance to its vision of the world.

Charles Altieri makes a similar point in his essay on Prynne, but he defines the lyric more in terms of intentionality than subjectivity. Altieri’s reading of Prynne focuses on the poetry’s surfeit of conflicting discourses (e.g., geological, economic, pastoral) that yield an impersonal lyric: “The role of the lyric becomes the defining of spaces of mind where we find such contradiction itself sustaining the capacity of formal structures to establish a mode of intentionality that can compete with more practical orientations” (39). The subjective ingredient in lyric poetry is located between speaker and reader, in the very space between the incongruous discourses. Yet this isn’t a version of formalism precisely because of the overarching intentionality: “Prynne’s emphasis on the problems inherent in our efforts to establish secure meanings manages to shift the locus of intentionality from that of speaker to that of
something like the poem itself. The poems establish a mind’s feeling for its own capacities even as they test how difficult it is for these capacities to take hold in empirical space” (39). The conflicting discourses block an easily consumable meaning and instead require the reader to remain in the space of the poem. The poem becomes a proving ground for the mind’s ability to entertain what is discordant and other to it. And so the poem itself and not a deep-seated mental content becomes the locus of the speaker’s intentionality. In his book *Subjective Agency*, Altieri explains more fully what he means by intentionality in contrast to the more causal understanding of an “intention to”: “When we speak of an ‘intention to’ we are tempted to talk as if we were dealing with a distinct mental state of intending that we think we can identify and whose causal force we can trace. But if we conceive of intentionality as located within the activity, we can treat it as an aspect of the action itself—not a cause but as what Kant called a purposive purpose” (44). Intentionality, then, is a version of subjectivity that refuses to be isolated in a causal or spectatorial role. The intentionality that organizes a poem is caught up in the process of the conflicting discourses constitutive of the poem. Accordingly, intentionality is formed by exteriority, and the lyric subject stands in a position of openness.

Prynne’s poem “For a Quiet Day” demonstrates this kind of intentionality by taking a stand against “intentness.” The poem criticizes “some men that focus / on the true intentness” (58) and produce music on a “gilded harp,” which for the speaker, “is always too / fine, too hopeless.” Despite its ironic tone, the poem still manages to reveal an important point crucial to Prynne’s poetics. Poetry marked
by “intentness” is characterized by a subject who is isolated from experience and by transparent language—or, just the kind of poetry Prynne opposes. The alternative is the subject position of intentionality:

And if the intentness
is the more true, then
I want the gentler
course, where
the evening is more of what we are:
or the day as well—moist, casual,
broken by inflictions of touch. This
is the resting-place, out in the street. (58)

The plural subject “we” suggests the fundamental relationship an “I” has with otherness. Hardly isolated, “we” are “out in the street” and “broken” by intersubjective encounters. This image of the city street is a prime example of the locus of the lyric, namely where the subject is at home in the inassimilable mix of manifold particularity.

In one of the earliest accounts of Prynne’s poetry, Peter Ackroyd celebrates the poetry’s inassimilable materiality from an angle heavily indebted to early deconstructionist thought. He says that Prynne’s poems are “a new kind of language” and have “a completely written surface” (132). Further, “his poetry excises completely the role of the poetic ‘voice,’ whether as a personal or as a synthetic medium of expression” (132). Reading some lines of Kitchen Poems (1968), Ackroyd comments, “There is only a marginal denotative potential, since the language aspires toward completeness and self-sufficiency. There is an absence of essentially poetic statement, since it is the formal and written attributes which give it its status” (132). This reading, however, is only half right, for it
ignores the possibility of achieving a poetic subjectivity independent of subjectivist voice.

II.

Prynne most consistently articulates subjectivity in the context of the human subject’s wounded condition in the form of damage. The poem “Star Damage at Home” from *The White Stones* ends like this:

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We live in compulsion, no less, we must have the damage by which the stars burn in their courses, we take/set/twist/dispose of the rest. There is no pause, no mild admixture. This is to crush it to the centre, the angelic song shines with embittered passion; there is no price too high for the force running uncontrolled into the cloud nearest the earth. We live here and must mean it, the last person we are. (109)
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This passage results from queries into the efficacy of language given the problematic distinction between signifier and signified. The point here seems to be that the fundamental inadequacy of language reflects a more general state of incompleteness among all human beings. Our incomplete nature is a form of “damage,” which not only reveals a point of hurt but also opens us to an affirmative faith in the possibility of making sense of singular and non-conceptual things in the world. If the space between signifier and signified didn’t exist, our task of understanding would not exist. This task, however, offers a degree of affective fulfillment, which Prynne implies in these Rilkean lines: “the angelic song shines / with embittered passion.”
The potentially positive aspect of our wounded condition receives a more complex treatment in the volume *Wound Response* (1974). In particular, “Of Movement Towards a Natural Place” deals with one’s ability to remember and overcome a past instance of physical wounding. The first problem of such a recovery is that memory distorts past events:

> His recall is false but the charge is still there in neural space, pearly blue with a touch of crimson. (223)

Here the wound is a bruise, and it serves to remind the subject that something injurious happened to him. But construing just what happened and its meaning is Prynne’s focus here. How does one make sense of a wound in terms of both its source and its role in present life? The bruise takes the shape of a “contre-coup,” which is, according to Douglas Oliver, “an injury resulting from a blow suffered on an opposite part or a part at a distance, e.g. a fracture appearing on the side of the skull opposite to that on which the blow fell” (“J. H. Prynne” 97). Likewise, the wound carries significance not only at the point and instant of impact but also in the distance, in the future: “So the trace was moral but on both sides” (223). It is impossible to cover a wound and act like nothing ever happened, because the injury extends beyond a single instant into the present and even into the future. Douglas Oliver develops this idea: “Then the hurt doesn’t so much cast a moral trace into the future: rather the future is revealed as potential in the instant, like a shadow which is part of the cut” (102).²⁵ One’s wound and one’s future are

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²⁵N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge argue that Oliver’s reading goes too far toward eliminating subjectivity: “Placing oneself at the disposal of ‘the next instant’ would mean ending the distinction between the material world and the emotions, and parting with intention, hope,
tightly bound together preventing one from abstracting from the original incident and from assuming a brand new identity. One’s future is always already directed (but not dictated) by one’s understanding of one’s past experience. Accordingly, memory is the pivotal activity in determining one’s state of being-in-the-world in the present. One may feel like the person who was damaged was someone else:

Up there the blood levels of the counter-self come into beat by immune reflection, by night lines above the cut:

Only at the rim does the day tremble and shine. (223)

In these lines the emphasis shifts from the bruise to the cut, an opening through which one is vulnerable to forces of contingency. The day is what follows the present night, which is to say that the cut is a result of the past but is also the aperture to the future. The rim suggests that this anticipation takes place on the border between the otherwise integrated, unharmed body and the opening of the cut. The day trembles in the sense that the cut exposes one to uncertainty or, more grimly, to infection, but it also shines. The only way to arrive at this affirmative alternative is through a dangerous state of vulnerability. Or as “Star Damage at Home” has it: “the angelic song shines / with embittered passion.”

In his 1946 study of poetry, Basic Concepts of Poetics, Emil Staiger maintains that lyric poetry “is understood to show the reflection of things and memory and commitments to fidelity, at least as sources of continuity of identity. ‘Identity,’ indeed, would scarcely be involved, since a self placed entirely at the disposal of the next instant would not define itself against anything, subject against object, and so would repress nothing and have no abject” (29). My claim is that Prynne’s emphasis on the inescapable wound grants the subject a necessary historicity through which “the next instant” becomes possible and intelligible. This, as will become clear, calls for a different version of subjectivity and identity, which precludes traditional subject-object relations.
events in the individual consciousness” (79). After making this claim, he stresses that “consciousness” is not subjectivist in the sense that it absorbs what is outside of it. Rather, he says that lyric poetry operates through a mode of Stimmung, which is a word borrowed from Heidegger’s Being and Time, meaning both (inner) “mood” and (outer) “atmosphere.” Staiger explains in language resonant of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking:

Originally, however, a “Stimmung” is definitely not anything that exists “in” us. On the contrary, when “Stimmung” affects us, it is we who are “outside” in a very special sense; we do not stand opposite objects, but rather we are in them, and they are in us. The “Stimmung” opens up existence to us more directly than any perception or any comprehension…. [E]verything that is exists in the “Stimmung” not as an object, but as a condition. Conditionality is the mode of existence of man and nature in lyric poetry. (81)

Staiger finds Stimmung to be so central to the lyric because it offers a way to present interiority apart from a subject-object dichotomy. In this view, the interiority of lyric carries a temporal aspect, namely the poet erinnert (that is, both remembers and interiorizes) what is outside of his consciousness (82). The present emerges out of a reflected past.26

Heidegger’s understanding of Stimmung goes a step further in holding that, as the ontic counterpart of Befindlichkeit (“state-of-mind” or “attunement”), it is marked by Dasein’s anticipation of the future. As in Staiger’s account, Stimmung for Heidegger is not a product of subjectivist reflection, but, to the

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26Staiger, however, maintains an overly abstract conception of poetic language. For example: “The creating of lyric poetry is a rendering of the soul in words—something that in absolute terms is impossible. In the lyric, language does not want to be taken literally; it shies away from its all-too-concrete reality and wants to free itself from all logical and grammatical coercion” (93).
contrary, it is primordially a mode of self-disclosure: “The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the world as a whole, and makes it possible first to direct oneself towards something” (Being 176). “Mood,” for Heidegger, is always already caught up with the things of the world, which makes any version of self-enclosed reflection impossible. Further, it is what allows one to anticipate the future (“to direct oneself towards something”). Insofar as “mood” is a non-subjectivist mode of being that is fundamentally connected to both the past and the future, Prynne’s poetry examines its possibilities as a basic condition of the lyric.

For Prynne, this temporal conditioning of the lyric is complemented, as I’ve suggested with the help of Merleau-Ponty, by a spatial element. In his 1988 Warton lecture, “English Poetry and Emphatic Language,” Prynne goes to great lengths to show that the tradition of the English lyric is as much a form of outwardness as of interiority. He quotes Hegel to show the prevalent subjectivist view:

We saw that the efflorescence of epic proper required a national state of affairs which was on the whole undeveloped, not yet matured into a prosaic type of reality, whereas the times most favourable to lyric are those which have achieved a more or less completed organization of human relationships, because in those times has the individual person become self-reflective [in sich selbst reflektiert] in contrast to the external world, and reflected out of it, achieved in his inner life an independent entirety of feeling and thinking. For in lyric both form and content are provided precisely not by the whole external world or by individual action but by the poet himself in his own personal character. (qtd. in Prynne 138)

As we have already seen in the discussion of The White Stones, this version of lyric subjectivity is extremely problematic for Prynne. Yet it persists into the ‘80s
as the predominant understanding of the lyric in varied critical traditions. For example, a conservative view grows out of Donald Davie’s claim that the poet can access a national soul through his or her self-reflection. For example, Martin Booth’s assessment in 1985 emphasizes the emotional communication that goes on in poetry: “So a good poem, in short, emotively uses words to express intelligent or emotional thought from one human being to the other” (20).

Similarly, from the left, arguments derive from Lukács, who sees private subjectivity as a form of bourgeois consciousness. Prynne cites this passage from *The Theory of the Novel*:

> At the lyrical moment the purest interiority of the soul, set apart from duration without choice, lifted above the obscurely-determined multiplicity of things, solidifies into substance; whilst alien, unknowable nature is driven from within, to agglomerate into a symbol that is illuminated throughout…. [O]nly in lyric poetry is the subject, the vehicle of such experiences, transformed into the sole carrier of meaning, the only true reality. (qtd. in Prynne 139)

While readers in Davie’s tradition praise the virtues of lyric subjectivity and those following Lukács condemn them, both parties agree that in lyric poetry the subject is removed from the hubbub of the world.

Prynne argues against Lukács in order to contend that the lyric consists of a productive tension between exteriority and interiority. As a starting point, he takes up Hazlitt’s remark that “poetry is the most emphatical language that can be found for those creations of the mind ‘which ecstasy is very cunning in’” (qtd. in Prynne, “English” 135). As a way toward understanding just what “emphatical language” might be, Prynne traces the usage of the exclamation “Oh!” in the works of several poets from Spenser to Eliot. In the end, he concludes:
But I believe it important to recognize that, in the hands of writers with powerful creative intelligence, the calling up of such exclamatory powers in the language of passion is a form of acknowledgement and dialectical holding to the locus of a demanding but possible truth, at least as much as simply the expression of some feeling about a moment particularly stressed by the pressures of experience. (167)

Lyric expression is not the content of one’s inner deliberations; rather, it is primarily an acknowledgment of the insufficiency of one’s thoughts in the face of external pressures. The poet, however, should not turn his attention to externality and discard altogether subjectivity. Rather, Prynne indicates a “dialectical” relation between inner and outer. “Dialectical” here is more Platonic than Hegelian. Gadamer has explained Plato’s dialectic in terms of the question-and-answer structure of dialogue: “To ask a question means to bring it into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined awaiting a decisive answer” (Truth 363). In addition to its dialectical element, the lyric is also a form of “acknowledgement.” Stanley Cavell has written on the centrality of acknowledgment in realizing the limits of one’s subjectivity: “Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge” (63). In other words, acknowledgment offers a way of relating to things of the world and to other people that exceeds the skeptic’s criteria of cognition. Gerald Bruns points out the Cavell’s idea of acknowledgement runs counter to conceptual ways of knowing: “At all events acknowledgment means openness and acceptance of the other as such, that is, as other, as that which resists every effort on my part to reduce it to something containable within the legislation of my concepts” (Tragic 184). Acknowledgment shows the limits of my ability to control things and is, thereby, is an acceptance of my finitude and of my vulnerability. For Cavell,
when I acknowledge the presence of particular others, I realize and reveal the futility of my desire to control contingency.

Although he doesn’t mention Cavell, Prynne develops a similar understanding of “acknowledgement” in his readings of Wordsworth’s and Blake’s lyrical poetry. For example, in his discussion of lines in *The Prelude* (1805 version, 11.138-152), Prynne detects a mixture of lament and joy through the emphatic opening of the passage (“Oh soul of Nature, excellent and fair”). More specifically, Wordsworth is critical of his earlier, presumptuous self-absorption and ignorance of the suffering around him. Prynne comments: “it is the presumption not merely of thoughtless happiness but, seemingly, of all natural happiness, because its apparent sufficiency will not and cannot adequately acknowledge the contradictions of secular history which press against it” (164). If young Wordsworth had acknowledged secular history, or politics, then his self-sufficient idealism would shatter for he would be vulnerable to the unsettling proximity of human suffering. Prynne traces a similar delimiting of subjectivity in Blake’s *Jerusalem* where Albion laments that he has forsaken Jerusalem (Part 1, Plate 24): “The cry which Blake’s Albion utters, to and in the name of human imagination and the divine body, represents his acknowledgement of the division by which the cities of imagination and of deformed nature of become estranged” (166). As in the passage of *The Prelude*, the scene here shows an acknowledgement of one’s failings in attempting to control all exteriority. Definitive of Prynne’s version of the lyric, acknowledgement marks the breakdown of egotistical subjectivity.
III.

*The Oval Window* (1983) is an account of precisely this sort of breakdown and of what can positively emerge from this condition. The volume begins with a poem that describes a seemingly invulnerable subject:

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The shut inch lively as pin grafting
leads back to the gift shop, at a loss
for two-ply particles
    set callow,
set bland and clean, wailing as when
to wait is block for scatter. Ah so,
the estrangement of the cause brings off
a surcease of the affect, even end-up
battered in sawdust. You cut your chin
on all this, like club members on the dot
by a winter blaze.

What can’t be helped
is the vantage, private and inert; yet
in a twinkling mind you, to pick up
elastic replacements on the bench code. (312)
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This poem is the negative pole of a progression that will be enacted in the following 26 poems. The words of the first line subordinate semantics in order to present something like a portrait. I take “inch” to be a society-man who is closed off from the world (a shut-in[ch]); and he is not terribly exciting, as “pin grafting” seems to be an exercise in tedium. Unlike Hamlet, he sets his life at a pin’s fee and accordingly heads back to the gift shop to buy heavy-duty (“two-ply”) commodities. The poem at this point echoes the concerns of parts of *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones* in which Prynne criticizes the reductionistic
impulses of capitalism. For example, these lines are from “Die a Millionaire” (1968):

The twist-point
of this is again power by the grid, putting
lives into strings of consequence into
molecular chains like the pit-ponies we love
to cry over. (15)

Insofar as our capitalist society (one in which there is an “estrangement” between cause and effect of production) can program feelings as steadily as lines of ponies emerge from the coal mines, we are prone to “a surcease of affect” altogether. In closing himself off from the world and in stifling feeling, the bourgeois “inch” confines himself to one narrow “vantage.” In contrast to Aristeas, who sought “forms of alien vantage” (90), the inch deals in commodified “replacements” as opposed to what Prynne will later call “the real data” (319). As with metaphors, “replacements” work on a level of abstraction that reinforces one’s condition in “the estrangement of the cause.”

This idea of replacement figures importantly in the last line of the middle stanza of this opening poem of *The Oval Window*:

You cut your chin
on all this, like club members on the dot
by a winter blaze.

For one who is estranged from the cause, abstract replacements are quite natural. Prynne, accordingly, foregrounds this tendency by substituting “chin” for the word we might expect here, “teeth.”27 The rest of the sentence describes

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27Though mistaken on the placement of the line-break, Ian Patterson uses this example to make an insightful point about the whole volume:
something like a club-initiation ceremony, an event notoriously replete with empty symbolism. The subtle transfer of “chin” to the place of “teeth” suggests a worldview that is rife with abstractions and replacements. In our current use of language, clichés like “cut your teeth” have lost their original meaning, so “chin” might do just as well as “teeth.” The point here is that our capitalist conception of language deracinates language by turning it into an abstraction. As in the case of metaphor, such an uncritical view of language reflects capitalist ideals where the means of production is distanced from a commodity’s exchange value. Prynne notes an important connection between language and social and economic principles, and at the time of this volume (when Margaret Thatcher was unleashing her extreme fiscal and social policies) he perceives that in the name of gaining wealth people are closing themselves off from the exposure and experience constitutive of lyric subjectivity.

Due to the replacement in the phrase “cut your chin,” we are reminded of the literalness of the words, which has been forgotten in the form of cliché. For a moment, the poem challenges the self-enclosed nature of the club inductee by hinting at his vulnerability, namely his cut, an unasked-for aperture to the world. Yet, he refuses to acknowledge his wounded condition through his ingrained,

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Sometimes changed slightly, as in “You cut your / chin on all this,” the line ending giving that momentary pause before chin which allows us to slip in “teeth” (“You cut your teeth on all this”) and then remove it again; and sometimes in curious company: but like the man says, it can’t be helped, it’s the vantage, the point you start out from, the perceptual organs in the head. The paradox again being, of course, that for all the visual figures in the poems, many to do with windows, the guiding one, the Oval Window itself is in the ear, and it is this figurative ontology of the poems that gives access and point to these different registers of speech, and to the acutely fretted interplay of lingual patterning, assonantal rhyming, or whatever it may be. What this finally enables Prynne to do is put it all up front, in the medium itself as it is created out of the mouths of others as well as his own: in this sense, rabbit by proxy. (245)
unshakable perception: “What can’t be helped / is the vantage, private and inert.”

Language and subjectivity work together, and Prynne wants to remind readers not only of the dangers of ignoring human vulnerability to the unforeseen force of contingency but also of glossing over language’s connectedness to the world. Just as experience wounds the security of human projects, language works through ruptures that jar against abstraction. Prynne, therefore, wants to suggest that a meaningful understanding of language and of subjectivity entails an acknowledgment of one’s cuts.

In turn, *The Oval Window* foregrounds these wounds in the tension between inner and outer through which acknowledgement fosters a form of lyric subjectivity that is aware of its own inadequacy. The cover of this slim book of poetry depicts a close-up, black-and-white photograph of a primitive stone building with an opening (a window?) looking out on an empty, white background. In that white space, the title and the author’s name appear in capitalized, black print. Before we open the book, we are given an indication that the volume will have something to say about this exposed, outward-looking (albeit, not exactly “oval”) window. Yet the oval window is also a part of the ear; it is the opening that connects the eardrum to the inner ear. It is the threshold between inner and outer: a highly specified instance of Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world.” The volume, accordingly, operates within the interactive space between the internalizing window of the ear and the outward-looking stone window. Prynne tries to interchange these two stances as much as possible, risking the dissolution of the poetic subject’s presence. Certainly, the influx of
sound through the ear disrupts the subject’s illusions of expressive self-
sufficiency:

The internal view
assumes an infinite linear address space,
a table on which are laid out all
the rival manuals of self-sufficiency. (321)

In a characteristic move, Prynne demonstrates the impossibility of self-sufficiency
in lines like these, which immediately follow those just quoted:

Spring up, O well; sing unto it: but
the answer is a pool of values in prime
hock to a pump and its trade-offs. (321)

The first line here seems to borrow from the Romantics. But the “O” immediately
compromises the expressive, subjectivist zeal, for, as Prynne has argued, emphatic
language carries a tension deriving from exteriority: “the use of the lyrical O [is] a
marker for the boundary of one discourse where it is momentarily exceeded by
another” (“English” 168). Accordingly, “the answer” to the Romantic discourse
is a barrage of financial discourse in which the Romantic “well” of inspiration
becomes a “pool of values.” The point seems to be that self-sufficiency is
impossible because competing discourses constantly dislodge whatever position a
subject assumes. This is not to say that the subject dissolves into the various
discourses, but rather the subject exists only through such discourses.

Prynne often uses financial discourse as a way to expose its fundamental
abstraction. Take, for example, the twelfth poem of The Oval Window:

So what you do is enslaved non-stop
to perdition of sense by leakage
into the cycle: one man’s meat
better late than never. Motor life says
the branch office, a picture is not a window.
In a recursive procedure, the method
of solution is defined in terms of itself; as,
within the chain-guard, cold is the meaning
of heat notably absent. The arctic tern
stays put wakefully, each following suit
by check according to rote; it’s precious little,
only smoke damage where that came from. (323)

The first lines depict a bleak vision of the capitalist form of life. The rest of the
poem consists of corporate slogans intermixed with dictates relevant to
performing a reading of this poetry. For example, "the method of solution is
defined in terms of itself” is good advice for how Prynne’s poetry is to be read.
Conversely, capitalist culture thrives on abstraction by defining things in terms of
what they can be exchanged for; again, this tendency plays out among the spliced
clichés in the third and forth lines.

Resistance to this state of affairs demands a vigilance of language that
might teach us to discriminate between different discourses and to maintain a
flexible identity through the flux. To this end, Reeve and Kerridge gloss the line
about the arctic tern as follows:

To stay put wakefully, to have patience which is not passive lethargy,
repose which is alert and vigilant rather than timidly self-protective, would
be a control flow structure of a different order—something not far from
what Heidegger meant by ‘dwelling,’ a kind of reverential ‘letting-be’ and
‘letting-come’ of the world in which mankind was properly rooted. (174)

This assessment rings true because it provides a way of understanding Prynne’s
subjectivity that does not reduce it to cognition. I would like to go even a step
further than Reeve and Kerridge and suggest that Prynne’s poetic subjectivity
bears comparison not only with Heidegger’s idea of “dwelling,” but also with his understanding of “thinking.” Heidegger devises a complex interdependent relationship among the ideas of building, dwelling, and thinking, which he tries to elucidate in his “Letter on Humanism” (1947): “Thinking builds upon the house of Being, the house in which the jointure of Being fatefully enjoins the essence of man to dwell in the truth of Being. This dwelling is the essence of ‘being-in-the-world’” (Basic 236). Thinking grants us the opportunity to stand before Being while dwelling among the things of the world. Heidegger says that thinking is a commemorative activity and accordingly emphasizes the etymological proximity of the verbs denken (to think) and andenken (to remember). Thinking, for Heidegger, is not a matter of calculative reasoning, but it is the active opening to and preserving of whatever stands before one. As in Staiger’s account of the lyric poem, thinking is a non-subjectivist act of remembrance whereby one interiorizes external events only insofar as one dwells among them or lets them be. In an effort to clarify the meaning of andenken, Gadamer distinguishes it from recollection [Erinnerung] and the capacity to remember [Gedächtnis] by its peculiar interiority: “it is something that is neither forgotten nor something that one just happens to remember. It is something that stays on, that remains, not as something constantly present, but always as something that is our ownmost possession, something which one thinks about and which again becomes present to one in a certain rich multiplicity” (“Thinking”156). In the end, Prynne’s vigilance is a way of thinking that entails a version of subjective identity, because vigilance is a form of remembrance.
The Oval Window, I contend, is an examination of the kind of subjectivity that such vigilance brings about. Starting with “the shut inch” of the opening poem, the volume enacts a dissolution of self due to the overpowering force of various technical discourses. Stable subjectivity is discarded under the pressure of, among other things, rigid computer commands:

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PUT SKIP EDIT,
PUT SKIP DATA, the control flow structure
  demands a check that subscripts do not exceed
  array dimensions. (324)
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Earlier in this poem, Prynne introduces the pun of “skip” as a computer function and “skip” as a dumpster. Another important reference in this passage is the implication that “the control flow structure” derives from “a lifelong transfusion” in the fifth poem and is all that is left of a human life (316). The upshot of these lines is that technical discourse diminishes human life to the confines of predetermined coordinates (“array dimensions”). This is a bleak assessment of contemporary culture insofar as it overpowers human interiority and deposits its refuse in the dumpster. Technical discourses trump individuality.

The second half of the volume, however, performs something like a recovery operation attempting to find a mode of subjectivity that neither disregards the presence of myriad conflicting discourses nor remains refuse in the dumpster. Immediately following the pointedly subjectless and rebarbative poem (“Droplock to gab / off you steel” [327]), another poem tries to begin reconstituting a subject:
At the onset of the single life
it is joined commonly to what
is untasted, lettered out
along the oval window’s rim. (328)

I want to argue that “the single life” is Prynne’s lyric subject. The subject is fundamentally connected with what cannot fit into a system of cognition; and this dynamic meeting of self and other takes place on the threshold of perception (“along the oval window’s rim”). The perspective here is not ruled by a disembodied spectator that goes about understanding things of the world by subsuming them into the demands of his conceptual framework. Rather, the locus of experience endangers the subject that desires to control exteriority, and this, according to Rod Mengham, is the starting point for establishing “the single life”: “Yet what we call danger from a position of vantage encourages the attempt to start ‘lifelong transfusion,’ a perpetual reconstitution of the self—unthinkable from the overhumanized point of view” (“Lifelong” 207). Mengham’s emphasis on the active nature of this reconstitution is crucial because the self can never achieve autonomy apart from exterior discourses. Thus the rest of the poem, whose beginning I have cited, is interspersed with words and phrases from one of the clown Lavatch’s speeches in Shakespeare’s All’s Well That Ends Well (4.5.37-43). Reeve and Kerridge point out that Lavatch’s words during this scene are particularly contrarious to the trajectory of the rest of the play.28 Accordingly,

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28This is the speech from which Prynne borrows: “I am a woodland fellow, sir, that always loved a great fire, and the master I speak of ever keeps a good fire. But sure he is the prince of the world; let his nobility remain in’s court. I am for the house with the narrow gate, which I take to be too little for pomp to enter. Some that humble themselves may, but the many will be too chill and tender, and they’ll be for the flowery way that leads to the broad gate and the great fire” (4.5.37-43). Reeve and Kerridge note that Lavatch “occupies himself for the most part by chopping up and twisting into new shapes the scraps of words and phrases that other characters
“the single life” takes shape only in relation to its surrounding discursive heteronomy. Consider, for example, these lines:

Speak truly along the lip there, let
his nobility remain in’s
court. I am for the house again

and the egg-timer, give the sweet air
back as nipped by the bud of ruin. (329)

Speaking truly is a difficult undertaking here since it takes place “along the lip,” equal to “along the rim” as a perceptive threshold. The second and third lines are verbatim from Lavatch (4.5.49-50). Then “sweet air” seems to have something in common with “the onset of the single life,” suggesting the possibility of a new beginning, but it is then ambiguously mixed up with “the bud of ruin.” Just as there’s no way to read All’s Well that Ends Well that excludes Lavatch’s dissent, so too there’s no way to extricate “sweet air” from the “bud of ruin.” A few lines later we read:

This is the place

where, deaf to meaning, the life stands
out in extra blue. (329)

The “extra blue” and “sweet air” are born in ruins or at least emerge out of conflicting discourses. That subjectivity or “the life” is “deaf to meaning” suggests that it is outside the scope of calculative reasoning.

have let drop” (164). He disrupts the play, which, they claim, “is primarily concerned with a pragmatic world of opportunities, moving forward, seizing advantage, forcing apparently ineluctable destiny to submit to the drive of the human will” (164-165). Lavatch, however, “has no place in this condition, neither as a tacit supporter in spite of some world-weary reservations, nor as a sufficiently coherent opponent to be singled out for exclusion” (165).
It seems that “the onset of the single life” is a way of “dwelling” in Heidegger’s sense of the word. The subject’s perception is antithetical to subjectivist control and takes the shape of one’s being in the midst of various discourses. It is just this refusal to control that characterizes Heidegger’s understanding of “dwelling”: “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence” (Basic 327). Dwelling is a way of being that lets things be what they are; or, put negatively, dwelling is not a means of matching objects to cognition. Prynne’s understanding of perception connects with Heidegger’s notion of dwelling all the more because in this poem Prynne expands the meaning of “the oval window” to include a window of a dwelling, a stone cabin. The poem’s final lines focus specifically on the cabin’s oval window:

The dip stands down  
in the oval window, in  
the blackened gutter stop of the newly born. (329)

The first phrase means that the oval window is vertical, so the dip is down. But then the second phrase becomes indeterminate if we read “dip” as the subject of the prepositional phrase. Such indeterminacy may be just the point since this is part of the dwelling in which controlling reason plays no part. Instead, we are left with the hint of an unspecified relationship between the oval window as both perceptual threshold of the dwelling and “the newly born.” I understand “the newly born” to refer to the reconstituted subject originally mentioned in the opening line, “the onset of the single life.” The newly born single life, now that the “onset” is past, emerges through the sordid image of “the blackened gutter
stop.” Echoing “the bud of ruin,” this association is appropriate insofar as the subject is fundamentally at home with alterity. When the subject dwells among the singular things of the world, it does not have the opportunity to abstract itself from the messiness that ineluctably characterizes perceptual interaction.

The volume closes with a poem that affirms the viability of such a subject. Nearly every word echoes other words in earlier poems, adding a vibrant resonance:

Standing by the window I heard it, while waiting for the turn. In hot light and chill air it was the crossing flow of even life, hurt in the mouth but exhausted with passion and joy. Free to leave at either side, at the fold line found in threats like herbage, the watch is fearful and promised before. The years jostle and burn up as a trust plasma. Beyond help it is joy at death itself: a toy hard to bear, laughing all night. (339)

The first line makes use of both audible and ocular registers to employ the full doubleness of the oval window. The reconstituted “I” is on watch at the window only to hear—of all things—the air. The subject’s vigilance, “waiting for the turn,” echoes the “arctic tern” that stayed put wakefully earlier in the volume. And still vigilance is Prynne’s solution to founding a poetic subject, for it is only when one is on watch and open to otherness that it is possible to engage in “the crossing flow / of even life.” The subject need not be washed away in this flow or “lifelong transfusion,” as it is phrased elsewhere (316). Instead, the implication is that the subject’s final “passion and joy” is achievable only through moments of “hurt.” Exposure to the vicissitudes of the perceptual flow is very much a part of
what it means to be a subject. Before acceding to the Nietzschean spirit of the concluding lines, Prynne stops his reader short by inserting “a toy” for what we might take to be the apogee of subjective experience. Though we can trace “toy” through the volume and see that it is usually associated with the risks of experience (e.g., “It is a child’s toy, shaken back in / myopic eddies by the slanting bridge” [331]), its presence here is primarily disruptive. It forces the reader to hesitate before walking away with too easy a meaning. In other words, the final line affirms the possibility of a reconstituted subject but only insofar as the subject continues to maintain a vigilance of unfamiliar discourses.

Insofar as the lyric calls for some kind of subjective reflection, it is important to try to identify exactly what kind of subject emerges by the end of The Oval Window. One version of the subject Prynne would at least be partially sympathetic toward is what Joseph Margolis calls “the technological self” in his study Texts without Referents (1989). Building on Thomas Kuhn’s insight into the relationship between scientific discovery and society, Margolis argues for a “symbiosis of self and world” (44). In being constituted by the world, the technological self carries no essentialist baggage. If the self inhabits a world entirely in flux, the self has no claim apart from that flux. Any claim for the self’s independence from the world would betray a privileged position outside of the dynamism of history. Margolis elaborates Marjorie Grene’s assertion that “to be a person is to be a history”: “To be a person is to be culturally constituted as such. To be real as a person or as a self entails the reality of those powers and attributes by which selves or persons are rendered real” (57). There is then no division
between how we view ourselves and how we view the world, for both are cultural constructions, historically constituted. Some of Prynne’s poetry seems to endorse such a view. For example, a volume like *High Pink on Chrome* (1975) makes for difficult reading largely because the identity of the speaking subject is never demarcated from the surrounding discourses. Here is the first stanza of a poem about midway into the sequence:

What he says they must do is
actually starve beforehand: then
is the fulfilled backwash. If I
had given less, or given more,
it might have been prudent too. This
furtive admission of degrees,
the trial of an F₁ hybrid, splits
our cold lunch into panic.
Give or take another sandwich,
himself at a glance, sanctus. (254)

This stanza makes use of some of the procedures of *The Oval Window*, but these lines give the reader even less of an opportunity to penetrate the layers of discourse. Here the subject really is indistinguishable from the different kinds of fragmented discourse. The language achieves a symbiosis of self and world.

In contrast, *The Oval Window*, for the most part, resists such a symbiosis by, in fact, working toward the reconstitution of a subject. This subject is not removed from the flux of the world, like Margolis’ technological subject, but it is not interchangeable with the flux. It performs a subjectivity not dictated by the essentialist subject-object structure Margolis is eager to escape. But still at the end of *The Oval Window* the subject that emerges stands vigilant and, so to some extent, at a remove from the world. How then is this subject not guilty of
betraying a privileging essentialism? I want to claim that Gadamer’s description of hermeneutical experience answers this predicament. For Gadamer, experience is a divestiture of self-certainty and a realization that one’s cognitive control over situations is always upended. There is no key to unravel experience; rather, one is always perplexed by experience because it thwarts expectations. In this way, experience always wounds since one is inevitably hurt by not having one’s expectations met, and yet one is left exposed to new experiences. Gadamer calls this the essential negativity of experience. Yet such damaging exposure has “a curiously productive meaning” in that it grants human beings an awareness of their finitude and of the limits of their own knowledge:

Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power of the self-knowledge of his planning reason. The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion. Rather, the person who is situated and acts in history continually experiences the fact that nothing returns. To acknowledge what is does not just mean to recognize what is at this moment, but to have insight into the limited degree to which the future is still open to

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I want to note Margolis’ disagreement with Gadamer. Margolis argues that Gadamer is a “closet essentialist” because he reputedly programs historical understanding by holding on to “the classical,” which is, for Margolis, something like an opprobrious transcendental signifier (46-48). In so doing, Gadamer shies away from what it really means for the technological self to interact within a historical flux. In my reading, however, Gadamer doesn’t match Margolis’ portrait of him. First, Margolis misreads Gadamer’s emphasis on tradition. When Gadamer praises the classical, he is not suggesting we understand it as a fixity outside of history. To the contrary, the classical only has meaning when we challenge it and engage it through the difference that historical distance provides. Then it is an active or interactive process: “the historical process of preservation (Bewahrung) that, through constantly proving itself (Bewährung), allows something true (ein Wahres) to come into being” (Truth 287). Second, Margolis wrongly assumes the role fixity plays in Gadamer’s thinking. He writes that Gadamer (and Habermas) “ensure a comfortable fixity of humane or rational values within the traditions of human understanding” (50). Gadamer argues that understanding has a similar structure to experience and that experience (Erfahrung) is just the opposite of fixed, scientific knowledge because it is definitively open to further experience: “the birth of experience as an event over which no one has control and which is not even determined by the particular weight of this or that observation, but in which everything is co-ordinated in a way that is ultimately incomprehensible” (Truth 352).
expectation and planning or, even more fundamentally, to have the insight that all expectation and planning of finite beings is finite and limited. Genuine experience is experience of one’s own historicity. (*Truth* 357)

The subject of experience is then denied the comfort of a fixity to latch on to. He is very much, as Margolis insists, constituted by experience, but he also develops an awareness or consciousness of his situatedness in history through which he constitutes himself. The process of developing a self-consciousness is a part of one’s exposure to the flux of history and cannot absent itself from the shifting foundations of one’s historicity.

It is in this way that I understand Prynne’s poetic subject, and that such a subject emerges is what makes his poetry lyrical. Allen Grossman has defined the lyric in relation to “the person”: “Lyric is the mode of visibility of the speaking person ‘who always and all times says I’ (Nietzsche)” (233). As in Gadamer’s conception of experience, the person of the lyric is not closed off: “the word *person* does not specify a static or isolated state of affairs, but a profound interaction, a drama always going on, of acknowledgement and presence” (21). The presence is always uncertain for it is at the behest of experience, and acknowledgement, as I’ve suggested with regard to Cavell, pierces all illusions of achieving a self-aggrandizing certainty. Prynne’s subject, “a toy hard to bear, laughing all night long,” gives voice to the shiftiness ingredient in lyric poetry as it marks the difficulty in maintaining constancy yet affirms in tragic joy the dangers of hazarding expectations of an uncertain future.
CHAPTER THREE:

TRACING SUBSTANCE:

MATERIALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN CAMBRIDGE POETRY

Veronica Forrest-Thomson was one of Prynne’s most ardent advocates, since she saw in his poetry a firm concentration on language’s non-semantic elements. In her posthumous critical work, Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry (1978), she says: “All the same Prynne’s work in this line is the most important in English poetry since Eliot” (142). She supports her unfashionable assessment by pointing to the opening lines of his “Of Sanguine Fire” (Brass, 1971), which, she argues, are
tendentiously obscure. They resist the reader by making him work; they positively repel him by implying that no amount of arcane knowledge will help him produce an interpretation, that however hard he tries he will not get away with (or through) these lines into a non-poetic realm. He will have to recognise that he is stuck with the lines on the page, that these words have a meaning but not an extended reference to the world outside, and that his limitation/expansion will have to take place within the levels of the poem, internally and artificially. (48)

Throughout Poetic Artifice, she is at pains to justify poetic language vis-à-vis prose or ordinary speech, and in doing so she hopes to resuscitate poetry from “the general dreariness of English verse in the 1950’s and 1960’s” (x). Her project is most basically a defense of Wittgenstein’s observation: “Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information is not
used in the language-game of giving information” (qtd. in Forrest-Thomson x). In order to elucidate the language-game of poetry, she first needs to combat the common reading practice that proceeds according to the language-game of giving information. She calls such a practice “bad naturalization”: “This critical process I shall call ‘Naturalisation’: an attempt to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible, by translating it into a statement about the non-verbal external world, by making the Artifice appear natural” (xi). The problem with bad naturalization is that it strives to get around the fact that the poem is made of language by seeking to know what the poet is really trying to say. And Prynne, she finds, makes it impossible for readers to get beyond the language into a realm of conceptual meaning.

In order to appreciate and to understand modern poetry, readers need to pay attention to poetry’s artifice, which, for Forrest-Thomson, has been most successfully foregrounded by a rather idiosyncratic canon of poets: Donne, Swinburne, Pound, Eliot, Empson, Plath, Ashbery, and Prynne. She proposes that we read poetry through a process of “internal limitation and expansion,” which registers, “what happens when the world of ordinary language is drawn into the poem’s technique so that those parts of that world implied by the meaning of words and phrases are limited by their function inside the poem but also expanded by the power released when levels other than meaning become important” (27). This technique holds language in suspension so that its rhythmic and syntactic relations can play out before any external meaning dispenses with language as a mere exhausted instrument. Whatever ordinary meanings the words may have,
these are relevant only insofar as they complement the non-semantic elements:

“Good naturalisation dwells on the non-meaningful levels of poetic language, such as phonetic and prosodic patterns and spatial organisation, and tries to state their relation to other levels of organisation rather than set them aside in an attempt to produce a statement about the world” (xi).³⁰ Forrest-Thomson’s poetry, accordingly, attempts to foreground “phonetic and prosodic patterns” so that the reader can appreciate language before it is converted into conceptual meaning. In Poetic Artifice, she offers one of her own poems as an example of her practice:

**Pastoral**

They are our creatures clover, and they love us through the long summer meadow’s diesel fumes. Smooth as their scent and contours clear however less than enough to compensate for names.

Jagged are names and not our creatures neither in sense or fullness like the flowers. Raised voices in a car or by a river remind us of the world that is not ours.

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³⁰ In a work that did much to rekindle interest in Forrest-Thomson, Charles Bernstein’s “Artifice of Absorption” (1987) takes issue with her claims about the non-lexical elements of poetry:

**It**

Seems to me she is wrong to designate the nonlexical, or more accurately, extralexical strata of the poem as “nonsemantic”; I would say that such elements as line breaks, acoustic patterns, syntax, etc., are meaningful rather than, as she has it, that they *contribute* to the meaning of the poem. (5)

Alison Mark has noted, however, that Forrest-Thomson indicated that she was more accepting of Bernstein’s position than she seems to be in Poetic Artifice: “Shortly before her death, in her discussion with the French poet Michel Couturier at the 1975 Cambridge Poetry Festival, Forrest-Thomson referred to a less intransigent formulation: ‘semi-meaningful’ levels of language” (118).
Silence in grass and solace in blank verdure
summon the frightful glare of nouns and nerves.
The gentle foal linguistically wounded,
squeals like a car’s brakes, like our twisted words. (125)

Right away artifice announces itself in “creatures clover.” Despite the reader’s naturalizing instinct to read “creatures’ clover” or even “creatures, lover,” the text asserts its intractability. Then “meadow’s diesel fumes” further jars us much like Eliot’s “patient etherised upon a table.” Then in the final quatrain, “the gentle foal,” we realize, as Forrest-Thomson comments in Poetic Artifice, “is important for [its] entle oal sounds rather than for [its] physical being” (125). Every effort is being made to keep meaning at bay, as, for example, “the alliteration and assonance in ‘Silence in grass and solace’ help to combat any non-poetic extension at this point” (125-126). The poem tries to deflate the pastoral ideal for the reason that poetry works in the business of naming, which is not capable of idyllic description. Artifice demands too much at the level of language that it, happily, cannot invest itself in externalization, or in pretty pastoral pictures.

Forrest-Thomson’s project is in important ways an extension of theories of literary language current in France in the late 1960s. Inspired by Saussure’s distinction of langue and parole, many writers were exploring the possibilities of language when no longer seen as a transparent instrument of communication.\(^{31}\) In

\(^{31}\)Forrest-Thomson was among a fairly small group of British academics that embraced French structuralism in the early 1970s. In 1973, she claimed in a review of the work of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida that they successfully brought about “a literary revolution in France and [their work] will lead—at last—to revolution in our theory and practice of literature in this country” (qtd. in Bergonzi 100). At this time, she and her husband, Jonathan Culler, attended Frank Kermode’s seminars on structuralism in London. In 1975, the year of Forrest-Thomson’s death, Culler’s Structuralist Poetics appeared, which was the first full-length book to apply structuralist theories to literature in Britain. Where langue is the system of language and parole is individual speech acts, literary criticism, Culler argues, should investigate “the conditions of
Roland Barthes’ famous essay “The Death of the Author” (1968), he maintains that when we read a text without assuming that its meaning is located in an author’s intention, we are in a position to engage in something like Forrest-Thomson’s practice of good naturalization:

In multiple writing, in effect, everything is to be disentangled, but nothing deciphered, structure can be followed, ‘threaded’ (as we say of a run in a stocking) in all its reprises, all its stages, but there is no end to it, no bottom; the space of writing is to be traversed, not pierced; writing constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it: writing seeks a systematic exemption of meaning. (53-54)

Forrest-Thomson takes this insight and designates “Artifice” for Barthes’ “structure,” and when a reader “traverses” a text she attends to the interplay of language’s irreducible elements. Accordingly, Forrest-Thomson writes that the aim of Poetic Artifice is “to develop a method of demonstrating … in practice” claims for the “priority of form over meaning” and of “fiction over reality” (28).

The question that constantly lurks behind Forrest-Thomson’s polemic is precisely what do the non-meaningful elements of a poem do if they do not produce meaning. She comes closest to an answer when she articulates a hope that poetry produces a vision of the world different from everyday discourses. “If poetry is to justify itself … it must assimilate the already-known and subject it to a reworking which suspends and questions its categories, provides alternative orderings” (53). By frustrating normal semantic processes, poetry becomes a forum to question those processes. This questioning suspends meaning long enough for the reader to understand that smooth exchange of signifier and

meaning” at the level of langue (viii). Accordingly, Forrest-Thomson views “artifice” as the condition of meaning and, therefore, as the fundamental property of literary language.
signified characteristic of contemporary society is not the only way to go about perceiving the world. Indeed, she hopes poetry can provide an alternative. She explains that Prynne’s “irrational obscurity” is “a cover for a deeper and more profound rationality which, while discontinuous with the world of ordinary language, is continuous with a world which is an imagined alternative” (51). Her argument, however, grants little clarity as to what this “alternative” might be like or what recommends it other than the fact that it isn’t beholden to the strictures of everyday discourse. At the end of her own poem “Pastoral,” the reader isn’t offered an alternative, just the negative knowledge that our perception of things in the natural world is “linguistically wounded,” an important insight but one which clearly stops short of rendering “alternative orderings.”

Adorno spent considerable energy trying to clarify the alternatives literature can offer when it refuses to concede to the demands of social discourse. Like Forrest-Thomson, he finds that poetry, in particular, forces a reader to focus on the irreducibility of its language where the concept semantically produced falls short of matching one’s experience of the writing. Indeed, poetry is an occasion to defer referentiality so that one can perceive the subtle inner-workings of a language used as art and not as its common function of communication. But Adorno goes further than Forrest-Thomson in maintaining that poetry’s individuality or singularity reveals an alternative vision of society:

immersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. It thereby anticipates, spiritually, a situation in which no false universality, that is, nothing profoundly particular, continues to fetter what is other than itself, the human. The
lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individualization. (“Lyric” 38)

When poetry resists naturalization and its concomitant subsumption into meaning, its individuality stands squarely in the foreground, which then, for Adorno, allows it to participate in the universal. Poetry achieves its individuality by “constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws” (“Lyric” 40), which is precisely what Forrest-Thomson so fervently demonstrates in *Poetic Artifice*. Through its individuality, poetry establishes a “distance from mere existence,” which, “becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different” (“Lyric” 40). Through this lens, I think we can begin to see what Forrest-Thomson has in mind in her hope for “an imagined alternative.”

Nevertheless, she makes no indication of following Adorno’s connection of this imagined world with “something universal.” He arrives at this position by arguing that language, no matter how singular and uncompromising it may be in poetry, belongs fundamentally to society: “language remains the medium of concepts, remains that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and to society” (“Lyric” 43). In poetry, the subjective voice becomes one with language at the objective level of concepts, which is precisely where society enters the poem. As I indicated in the first chapter, Adorno’s notion of subjectivity cannot be equated with either the poet or the speaker of the poem. Rather, it is a constellation that emerges through language, which then dialectically relates it to society. “That means that even resistance to social pressure is not something absolutely individual; the artistic forces … that impel a
constricted and constricting social condition to transcend itself and become worthy of human beings; forces, that is, that are a part of the constitution of the whole and not at all merely forces of a rigid individuality blindly opposing society” (“Lyric” 43). Subjectivity, under the guise of “artistic forces,” is just what engages society even as it protests the present social conditions in refusing to reduce itself through everyday discourse. In short, the subject voices a sense of alienation by identifying with a use of language that is not exhausted by communication. The language then draws attention to the failures of society and thereby brings about such alienation at a universal level. This indictment is at the same time a plea for an alternative existence where human beings may be part of the society to which they nominally belong.32

Forrest-Thomson is unable to elucidate whatever “alternative orderings” poetry can create because of her unbending refusal to admit subjectivity to her

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32 In this way, poetry plays a key role in Adorno’s utopianism. Adorno describes his utopia in terms of the self’s relation to the non-identical: “The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one’s own” (Negative 191). As for the limits of Adorno’s utopian thinking, see his “Bloch’s ‘Traces’: The Philosophy of Kitsch” (1960), in which he argues Bloch’s utopia suffers for it is “distilled into a universal concept that subsumes all the concrete data which alone could be utopian” (60). Rolf Tiedemann has shown how Adorno’s conception of utopia is continuous with his theory of non-communicative language: “Ultimately, reconciliation is due less to any systematic obligation than to a historical-philosophical necessity, though Adorno’s philosophy also claims that it is grounded in precisely that moment in language when the communication of people with one another is at odds with itself: in language as an autonomous moment” (128). Barthes, too, has a conception of utopia that manifests itself in language. In “The Rustle of Language” (1975), he calls the “rustle” [le bruissement] the unintelligible sound of language working well: “there is always too much meaning for language to fulfill a delection appropriate to its substance. But what is impossible is not inconceivable: the rustle of language forms a utopia. Which utopia? That of a music of meaning; in its utopic state, language would be enlarged, I should even say denatured to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal” (77). Barthes’ utopia is undialectical and lacks the urgency that Adorno sees in the struggle between subjective voice and objective society. Forrest-Thomson sides with Barthes’ utopian vision where poetry becomes a “vast auditory fabric” and where the subject dissolves in the pleasure of the text.
critical approach. From the opening pages of *Poetic Artifice*, she is eager to
discount the possibility of committing bad naturalization. In particular, she
follows Barthes’ assessment of the writing subject: “the *I* of the discourse can no
longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored”
(17). Commenting on Eliot’s “A Cooking Egg,” she is quick to remind her
readers: “Nor need the ‘I’ be thought of as a particular person. For the purposes
of the poem the ‘I’ is simply a voice” (x). Concluding her study with an attempt
at rescuing Sylvia Plath’s work from the reaches of exhilarating biography, she
writes of Plath’s favorite pronoun: “But like all true artificers ‘I’ remains
enigmatical, presenting only the words on the page” (163). Of course, this isn’t a
bad critical practice, but her interest in destroying all vestiges of subjectivity
seems to compromise her more Adornean intention: “Our reading must work
through the level of meaning into the external world and then, via the non-
semantic levels of Artifice, back into the poem, enriched by the external contexts
of reference in which it found itself momentarily merged” (20). Certainly, “the
level of meaning into the external world” and, I would argue, the poetry’s internal
meanings need to take into account subjectivity. Perhaps this is what Prynne says
she recognized in her last poetry: “My personal view is that the poems within
this final collection [*On the Periphery*, 1976] work through this formal notion of
artifice to allow into realization forces she had tacitly been preparing to meet; a
new invasion of subject” (“Veronica”).

The danger of Forrest-Thomson’s position of excluding subjectivity is that
it can cultivate what David Marriott calls a “fetish of the signifier” and disavow
society, including all recuperative “alternative orderings.” In this line, James Keery detects a “structuralist solipsism” in Forrest-Thomson’s critical work (“Blossoming” 113). Keenly aware of the problems of such a stance, Rachel Blau DuPlessis has recently adopted a critical practice she calls “social philology,” which attends to the non-semantic particularities of texts all the while seeing them in their materialist, social context. This, she maintains, sidesteps the pitfalls of “structuralist solipsism”: “Indeed, ‘dead author’ or ‘author function’ claims seem to be made precisely to ignore the social and material relations of literary production” (17). In contrast, she claims:

Poetry is the repository and expression of subjectivity, a site where the materials of social subjectivity are absorbed and articulated, where pronouns, personae, speaking positions are produced. Poetry does not necessarily construct a seamless subjectivity, consistent between the inside speakers and the poet’s artifact (the enounced and the enunciations), but a subjectivity whose very articulation in language reveals organized multiplicities, contradictions, and projections. (4)

This position, like Adorno’s, fosters a reading that patiently responds to the particularities of poetic language without rushing to impose external meaning, but it also understands poetry as something that isn’t entirely closed off from the empirical world. British poetry in the 1970s and 1980s struggled to discover a kind of writing that could be both “a repository and expression of subjectivity”

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33The guilty party for Marriott, in this regard, is Language poetry. The point remains the same, however: “what is nevertheless instituted by this disavowal of heteronomous speaking subjects, is a fetishist logic of the subject as a pure function of signification, pure occurrence, which tirelessly refers to itself as a figure of pure representation” (338).

34One of DuPlessis’ touchstones comes from Bakhtin and Medvedev’s The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: “Every concrete utterance is a social act. At the same time that it is an individual material complex, a phonic, articulatory, visual complex, the utterance is also part of social reality … When the poet selects words, their combination, and their compositional arrangement, [s/he] selects, combines, and arranges the [social] evaluations lodged in them as well” (qtd. in DuPlessis 13).
and “a site where the materials of social subjectivity are absorbed and articulated.” The fundamental question becomes: how can poetry reflect the materiality of the world through a mode of subjectivity?

I.

When Poetic Artifice appeared in 1978, the central issues in British domestic politics, the Treasury’s debt and the related unrest in the industrial unions, were the accretion of policy decisions throughout the decade. In 1970, the Conservative Edward Heath became prime minister and immediately faced the brunt of a foundering national economy. Part of Heath’s strategy emerged from the Selsdon Park Conference in 1970, which articulated the new-right’s plan to cut state industries in an effort to impose fiscal austerity.35 “In this way, the Heath Government can be seen as ‘premature Thatcherism’” (Beynon and McMylor 31). In late 1971, inspired by its own new leadership, the National Union of Mineworkers pressed the government for pay raises; yet, no deal could be reached and the miners began a strike that lasted six weeks. The miners won important concessions from the government and considerable sympathy from the public. The miners continued to remain in the national spotlight, as the

35Upon their election in 1970, the Conservative party announced a “quiet revolution,” which would refashion Britain’s economy according to severe free-market principles: “It is to reorganise the functions of government, to leave more to individual and corporate effort, to make savings in government expenditure, to provide room for greater incentives to men and women and to firms and businesses. Our strategy is to encourage them more to take their own decisions, and to stand on their own feet, to accept responsibility for themselves and their families” (qtd. in Taylor 139-140). However, by 1972, Heath had to soften the edge of his reforms due to pressure from trade unions and to general skepticism among the public. In that year, it is commonly perceived that his government made a “U-turn” on its policies of state intervention, but how drastic this U-turn actually was is open to debate. See Taylor’s balanced analysis in “The Heath Government, Industrial Policy and the ‘New Capitalism.”
increasingly beleaguered prime minister tried to make the Treasury soluble. The 

*Sunday Times* reported that “[i]n 1973, 40,000 miners were suffering from ‘The Dust’—pneumoconiosis, accepted as incurable” (Childs 175). As grim facts like this became more widely known, the miners in 1974 again pressed the government for more concessions, which it in turn failed to make. A one-month strike ensued, precipitating a general election, which returned Labour candidate Harold Wilson to the office of prime minister.\textsuperscript{36} The miners, however, remained in a vulnerable political position, as the national economy stagnated and as they lost much government support for their state-sponsored work. James Callaghan succeeded Wilson for three years until Conservative Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 and again in 1983 on her strict privatization platform. Consequent to her anti-industry policies, the miners went on strike again for a year in 1984 and 1985. They were reacting to Thatcher’s plan to close less efficient mines as a measure of fiscal restraint. The miners, with little public support this time, eventually returned to work without gaining any concessions from the government. From 1974 to 1984, British society grew incrementally less supportive of the miners and their work. Of course, this is true for many reasons,

\textsuperscript{36}Anthony Easthope has argued that 1974 “can be seen as the ‘moment’ of British intellectual Marxism” (*British* 2). He explains that at this time Raymond Williams accepted a more Althusserian position that aligned him with theorists from the *New Left Review* like Perry Anderson. “At the heart of Williams’s revaluation of Marxism is the fact that the social formation is now understood in temporal rather than spatial terms” (12). By acknowledging the temporal basis of social formation, theorists more readily engaged with the political events of the day. Easthope notes that Terry Eagleton’s *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1974) tried to bridge the gap between literary criticism and contemporary politics. For example, “it is dedicated to ‘the working-class movement of West Yorkshire’ and so precisely to those Yorkshire miners, notoriously the most militant, who had led the struggle to topple the Conservative government in the weeks before the book’s own acknowledged dating: ‘April 1974.’ In this as in its attempt to make cohere culturalist notions of the authorial imagination with a historical materialist conception of economic class the text addresses itself from the moment of British Marxism” (16). Poetry of this time similarly strives to establish a relationship between language and the material conditions pertinent to the miners’ political struggle.
but perhaps most important is the fact that by the early 1980s technology could convert relatively little coal into a more efficient source of energy. So the coal itself increasingly became more distant and less connected with what it could be converted into.

Poets sympathetic to the miners and to left-wing politics grew increasingly aware of the political implications of the bare materiality of their work and drew on the materialist theoretical resources of thinkers like Adorno, Barthes, and Forrest-Thomson. Douglas Oliver’s *In the Cave of Sucession* (1974), for example, succeeds in drawing attention to the material basis of language and, at the same time, in forging a non-egological poetic subject. The poem features an inquirer delving into a Derbyshire cave in the hope of finding some guidance from an oracle. The inquirer enters and earnestly asks, “How should I reform my life” (2), but it is soon apparent that a direct and transparent answer would not be forthcoming: “Eventually, the oracles you listen to become, as oracles should essentially ambiguous” (10). In large measure, the oracle’s obscurity is a result of the inevitable mediation of language. Oliver wrote his poem inside the dark cave (Suicide Cave) on a typewriter, and, to mark this adventure, he left his typing mistakes uncorrected. Though he enjoys the humor of his editorial leniency, his method betrays a more serious intention:

> The method of writing was governed by the following rule, among others: nothing was to be included as a source in the elaboration of the text that did not in some way or other literally occur during the adventure. Alteration of this data’s essential nature or correction of it by subsequent research was forbidden. Central to the project was that the adventure itself had to form the poem and the poem the adventure. (qtd. in Riley, “Some” 173)
The adventure involves sitting in an “abandoned lead mine” (2), asking questions, and writing. Seeking to present the “data’s essential nature,” Oliver pursues a connection between a mining cave and language, which emerges most clearly in the language-as-stone imagery. In brief, language lacks transparency and resists easy conversion into a communicable message, just as unmined and unprocessed earth serves no economic purpose. Hence, the oracle’s ambiguity. Bruce Andrews has argued that one strategy of disrupting capitalist modes of communication entails “actually instituting opacity, promoting a spillage or dissemination—Not from caring about message or meaning, but caring about the eruptiveness of material being put into distinctive relationships” (134).

Accordingly, in Oliver’s poem language is ingrained in the inquirer’s experience in the cave and cannot be a posteriori grafted onto the experience in a descriptive function. In an essay on Oliver’s poem, Peter Riley writes, “language scatters out from the adventure because it is integral to it. It is then only against Everything/Always (the impossible) that our realities are fragments: it is only true linguistically” (167). This inherent relationship between experience and language is another manifestation of Forrest-Thomson’s basic assumption that poetry does not presume that language has a reservoir of meaning outside of the words’ singularity in the poem. For example, note the hardness or earthiness of Oliver’s language:

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Down there hardly worth-while as himself
to receive a dubiously likely motivated answer
not from the lead sulphide sky
    ore lowers to ground
or does the man seat himself either
    getting even in a profound cavern. (1)
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Oliver doesn’t bound the words as the assonance and internal rhyme of the anti-pastoral “lead sulphide sky” clearly show, but he demonstrates language’s intractability by disrupting semantic progression. For example, it’s hard to read “ore” in the fourth line as “ore” and not as the more natural “nor” following “not” in the previous line or even, more simply, as “or.” After breaking free of the second line’s confusing syntax, the smooth, straight-forward diction of the third line sets the reader up for the arresting “ore” waiting at the end of the next line’s half-line space. “Ore lowers to ground” is a fine declarative clause, but it breaks the flow of the previous lines; it’s not clear why this information is conveyed to us at this point. The disruption is compounded by the disjunctive “or” beginning the next line. This “or” reinforces the strangeness and singularity of the previous “ore.” The point seems to be that poetic language operates on a level of unicity and non-transferability just as unrefined as ore. Oliver commits himself to exploring the limits of a project he articulates in a poem from 1969: “Lead solidifies / into words, apt to quarrel” (“The Furnaces”).

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This is a stance that brings together aspects of Poundian poetics and leftist politics. In 1970, Pound’s study of stone sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was reissued, and in this work Pound celebrates the sculptor’s “new form”: “It is not a mimicry of external life. It is energy cut into stone, making the stone expressive in its fit and particular manner. It has regard to the stone. It is not something suitable for plaster or bronze, transferred to stone by machines and underlings. It regards the nature of the medium, of both the tools and the matter” (110). Pound’s friend Basil Bunting tested language’s ability to do the work of stone in Briggflatts. Recall how the poem opens with the mason engraving words on a tombstone and then how it ends with a coda that presents hard-cut lines like: “rain slant, spray flick” (72). In the 1970s, poets invested in the miners’ struggle had an interest in pursuing the analogy of language and stone. Perhaps the best example is the Northumberland poet Barry MacSweeney’s Black Torch (1978). The poem deals with a nineteenth-century miners’ strike, but its politics and experimentation place it squarely in the late ‘70s. This is an excerpt from the prologue entitled “Iron & Bread”:

    have come from the north to feed you
    iron voice brazen tongue red dust
    of heart heart’s unease unquiet
The final stanza of the “Introit” (the title given in Selected Poems) of In the Cave of Suicession aligns poetic language with “night,” whereas everyday discourse exists in “light”:

Across the night his tongue lash scores the limestone
in seconds what the stream of centuries more so
whose direction takes the sediment
we hear to light
outside this stupid stupid stupid careful questioning
of what no-one can tell what we keep telling all the time. (1)

The language of the night consists of a coarse irreducibility: “tongue lash scores,” which sharply contrasts with the airy metaphor of “the stream of centuries.” The latter “takes the sediment … to light” and thereby denies it its fundamental materiality. When language comes to light, it operates “outside” of its obscure origins and inevitably loses something. The “we” represents the culprits of external naturalization who cannot fathom the tiring and unproductive questioning that underlies poetic writing. It then follows that the rest of the poem, following this introit, takes the form of an inquirer questioning a cave. As might be expected, the answers he receives are obscure and lack an easy conversion into the transparent language of the day.38

38 The form of the poem came from Swedenborg’s books: question (from poet); answer (from cave). I still find the whole poetic process uncanny” (“Form”). Paul Celan’s poetics also seems crucial here. In the Meridian speech (1960), Celan says poetry is a movement into the uncanny: “Perhaps—I am only speculating—perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself. Though where? in which place? how? as what? This would mean art is the distance poetry must cover, no less and no more” (44-45). Later in the speech Celan suggests that poetry as dialogue best deals with these interrogatives: “The poem becomes—under what conditions—the poem of a person who still perceives, and still turns
The inquirer, however, does glean meaning from his persistent questioning of the cave. One answer that has particular resonance with him comes near the end of the poem: “Greater darkness is axiomatic. Real situation, to crawl through the eye of a bee. You have to rely partly on the light within you” (16). The bee image is here to suggest a salutary narrowing of one’s attentions.

In the version of Cave included in Kind, Oliver elucidates: “A bee has a compound eye which presumably gives multitudes of single images…. All our human [sic] grandness depends on merging: the focusing and perspectives of sight, the esemplastic imagination, the two-in-one of love and its act. And yet from both man and bee we have that tremendous presentiment of purpose” (85). The darkness characteristic of the oracle’s speech is perceptible only through the speaker’s focused attention on the particular, tangible events before him. Peter Riley has written of Oliver’s poetry: “Each poem is a very particular act of discovery within reality: an almost geometric vision of centrality and distance is plotted which would become abstract and doctrinal were it not for the fervent insistence on the unique validity of the instance, so that the poet refuses to withdraw his diction from its occasion” (“Douglas” 50). The act of imagination towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation—often desperate conversation” (50). In In the Cave, Oliver enacts Celan’s implicit poetics of conversation. Celan, however, never dramatizes the unfolding of the question and answer. Rather his poetry is always poised in the waiting after a question has been asked. Gadamer maintains that in Atemwende (1965) the conversation takes place in the indeterminacy between the identities of “I” and “You”: “Who am I and who are you? The poem provides its own answer to this question by keeping it open” (86). For Oliver, too, the poem provides an answer—albeit, one veiled in the obscurity of the uncanny speech of the oracle. For Oliver’s explicit engagement with Celan, see his later poems: “Trink,” “A Little Night,” and “The Weekend Curfew.”

39Oliver is clearly alluding to Coleridge’s theory of imagination, “or the esemplastic power” (307). In Biographia Literaria 10, Coleridge defines his neologism: “to shape into one; because, having to convey a new sense, I thought that a new term would both aid the recollection of my meaning, and prevent its being confounded with the usual import of the word, imagination” (239).
does not take the form of recasting the present in another language (or “diction”).

Rather, it is precisely the act of committing language to the present occasion, to the hard physicality of the “real situation.”

Q  How shall I write this?
A  By living it; that rule has not changed. (3)

In Oliver’s poetry, the living self is inextricably bound to language and to materiality. A definitive part of subjectivity involves losing oneself, in opening oneself to the risk and to the harm that befalls us once we stop trying to control and organize experience. At the edge of experience, the subject encounters the dark language, which is the central event of Oliver’s poem in Riley’s reading:

We as living intelligences are unique in this structure as we exert back-pressure, against the sinking, without reserves of time, jerk ourselves back into waking and nature with us in our perception’s language. What we get when it works, in the book, is neither asking of nor avoidance of the total question (not-our-question) but the question-and-answer which delivers us from such totalisation, anchored onto good as it verges on the unanswerable, where humanity verges on something-else. The edges of experience, from within. That is surely the cave where you push so hard at your own condition (receding centre) that it gives at the heart onto an outside. (“Some” 164-165)

Riley suggests that the crux of Oliver’s poem is a proposed reconciliation of materialism and anti-materialism in poetry. First, he commends the inquirer in the poem for not asking “the total question” (“what do we exist for?”) because that entails theology and answerability, which are outside the realm of poetry.

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40 In the preface to his Selected Poems (1996), Oliver writes, “since 1969, I’ve had a life-project to widen my political attention by progression from one book to the next, going always outwards, and then drawing inwards by a movement of inclusive contradiction. In such a way, I’ve tried to show that any political flaws in the public arena also reside in the ‘self’—in ‘myself’—and therefore inside the area of the poem-as-art too” (1). Olivier cultivates an interdependent connection between self, language, and politics, which here surfaces in the material resistance of the stone.
(163-164). Instead the inquirer asks poetry’s proper question: given that we exist for something, “to what purpose or end are we best supposed to further it in our acts?” (163). An important response comes when “we exert back-pressure, against the sinking.” The sinking is the cave, the dark stone opening of earth. When we enter into and press against the stone, we are also externalizing ourselves (“it gives at the heart onto an outside”), as is the case in Prynne’s 1969 “Airport Poem: Ethics of Survival” where a “petromorph” makes “pressure a social / intelligence” (Poems 38). In a question-and-answer relationship with material exteriority (the “greater darkness”), we “rely on the light within” by actively meeting what at first seems utterly unbroachable. For Oliver, the self lives not by reiterating settled answers, but rather by casting itself against the unknowable where it is in a position to further goodness in its acts at the “edges of experience.”

*In the Cave of Suicession* is an important volume in 1970s poetry, because it incorporates language as a material medium in a way that carried the leftist political weight of the time. More important, however, it differs from works like Forrest-Thomson’s “Pastoral” in proposing a model of poetic subjectivity that exists within language’s own materiality. Peter Riley follows Oliver in insisting on the materiality of language and on the viability of a poetic subject at the edge of experience. Riley corresponded often with Oliver in the 1970s, and he was clearly impressed by *In the Cave of Suicession*. Indeed, his essay on the book for the *Grosseteste Review* seems in places to be more a set of notes toward his own poetic practice than an analysis of Oliver’s work. Specifically, for Riley, *In the
Cave clearly showed the feasibility of establishing a relationship to material substance through dialogue. In *Lines on the Liver* (1981), he articulates his basic premise: “The quest remains, not to find yourself but precisely to lose yourself into the interrogation, which as it persists in staying within your experience is that much stronger in its resistance to disclosure and resolution” (4). Losing the self—not irreparably, albeit—is a touchstone for Riley’s poetics, insofar as it entails a reciprocal and productive contact between the boundaries of self and other or, as figured in *Tracks and Mineshafts* (1983), subject and material substance.

II.

How does poetic language relate to things? This was a key question in the poetry of the 1970s—especially once it became freighted with the political significance of materiality highlighted by the miners’ crises. Artists like Bob Cobbing claim that poetry resides where things are things without mediation. On the other side of the debate, writers like Tom Raworth conceive of language as at a remove from things. I will argue that Peter Riley follows Oliver and Prynne in assuming a position between these extremes where language is a mediation but one that can productively resonate with a thing’s material substance through a form of poetic subjectivity.

In 1972, Bob Cobbing unequivocally stated his justification for a materialist poetics: “Poetry is a physical thing” (“Some”). In turn, he jettisons the idea that language is a mediating instrument. Language, rather, is of the same
order as things. A theoretical coordinate for this position can be found in the writings of Maurice Blanchot, who says his

hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature—that is given to me and gives me more than I can understand…. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing. (Work 327)

Cobbing writes, “Gone is the word as the word, though the word may still be used as sound or shape. Poetry now resides in other elements” (“Some”). As Cobbing’s collaborator Henri Chopin insists, “Get rid of all those bits of paper, whole, torn, folded, or not. It is man’s body that is poetry, and the streets” (427). It then follows that in Cobbing’s work “[m]oaning, sighing, shouting, even sneezing, became as common as words or phonetics.” (Sheppard). For Cobbing, poetry is a physical event that brings into its fold the everyday actuality of language.41

No one fares worse in Forrest-Thomson’s estimation than concrete poets: “Having, as it were, established discontinuity with the world of language by

41Importantly, Cobbing did not limit his art to traditional understandings of language. In founding Writers Forum in 1952, he stood at the center of developments in Sound Poetry in the U.K. In the early ‘70s, he formed Konkrete Canticle with Paula Claire, Michael Chant, and Bill Griffiths. In a brief history of Concrete Sound Poetry, Cobbing acknowledges the influence of the 1950s work of French artists François Dufrêne and Gil J. Wolman: “They had gone back beyond the word, beyond the alphabet to direct vocal outpourings which completely unified form and content. They were back where poetry and music began. In primitive song, the melody often starts on a high note, generally falsetto, and descends. High is high both in volume and in pitch; low is both soft and deep. The emotional outburst, the physical giving out of sound and breath is the song” (“Concrete” 386). The materialist dimension of Cobbing’s work is even more apparent in his sound recordings than in his visual work since the mediation of written words is entirely obviated. A recording of Konkrete Canticle’s work from 1971 is available at http://www.ubu.com/sound/konkrete.html.
simply ignoring the urgency of continuity and meaning, these ‘poets’ have found it necessary to establish a more radical and spurious continuity with the physical world normally mediated through language. They treat words as physical objects; they try to avoid mediation altogether” (44-45). Or, the complaint is that in a concrete poem what you see is what you get. A concrete poem eliminates artifice or, at least, the kind of artifice that, for Forrest-Thomson, suspends meaning and gestures toward alternative orderings, because it upturns the privileged space of the poem. Artifice, Cobbing might respond, does its work in material reality.

The antimaterialists, in contrast, maintain that poetic language is at an unbridgeable remove from things; therefore, poetry should not try to bring things into its realm of language. The central theoretician in this camp is Viktor Shklovsky, who in 1923 asked, “In what lies the enchantment of art?” His response is unequivocal: “That the outside world does not exist. Things replaced by words do not exist, are not perceived; nor do words scarcely seen, scarcely pronounced, exist…. The word in art and the word in life are profoundly different: in life, the word plays the role of a bead on an abacus; in art, it is a texture” (qtd. in Sheldon 352). Language in life is beholden to an instrumental economy, whereas in art language simply presents itself relieved of the burden of representation. Poetry can help a reader become more attuned to things of the world, but things have no place in poetry since they are irreducible to language. This point in Shklovsky’s criticism is a species of Mallarmé’s aesthetic, which culminates all efforts to deliver art from the everyday world.42

42At the end of *Crise en vers*, Mallarmé famously declares: “When I say: ‘a flower!’ then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the
The antimaterialism derivative of Shklovsky and Mallarmé appeared in late modernist British poetry most clearly in the work of Tom Raworth. The guiding principle in Raworth’s poetry is that the words on the page bespeak their own justification, shorn of a relation to the outside world. Raworth, however, is difficult to put into any poetic camp; indeed, some of his poetry resembles the usual calyces arises, something all music, essence, and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets” (Selected Prose 42).

Peter Middleton has argued that antimaterialism came into ascendency in the personal lyrics of the 1970s (“Substance” 50). The personal lyrics are a distinct version of antimaterialism from that of Raworth. As I will argue, Raworth’s poetry removes itself from external reference but affirms the materiality of the language’s recalcitrant presence. Craig Raine’s work nicely exemplifies the different personal lyric-brand of antimaterialism. Consider, for example, “The Onion, Memory” (1978), in which the speaker describes the poignant longing he feels years after going through a divorce:

Because there’s everything and nothing to be said,  
the clock with hands held up before its face,  
stammers softly on, trying to complete a phrase—  
while we, together and apart,  
repeat unfinished gestures got by heart.

And afterwards, I blunder with the washing on the line—  
headless torsos, faceless lovers, friends of mine. (29)

In these lines, the language serves the imagery, which harbors the poem’s emotional force. The reader absorbs the words as concepts, for they bear none of the impenetrable materiality of a Cobbing poem. The phrase, for example, “everything and nothing to be said” is a cliché that demonstrates just how far the language is from lived experience. Finally, the last line entirely bypasses the physicality of the clothes on the line in order to foreground their imagistic meaning. What matters to Raine is not things but rather words’ potential to communicate an immaterial image. Raine advances this program to the uncompromising antimaterialism of his Martian poems, which describe ordinary things and activities through the imagery of defamiliarization:

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings  
and some are treasured for their markings—  
they cause the eyes to melt  
or the body to shriek without pain. (1)

These lines from the opening of “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home” (1979) begin the series of clever metaphors that constitutes the poem. In the end the poem is a feat of demonstrating linguistic equivalences: from the perspective of one looking on from the outside, what we call “crying” is really just the same as eyes melting. The actual matter of crying is not broached; there is no sense of what crying might be once it has been pegged as eyes melting. Raine’s antimaterialism consists of his rendering of things and experiences into verbal images that operate as stable representations.
materialist work of Cobbing. For example, “Visual Petrarchan Sonnet with Intruder” from Act (1973) lists in a single column of thirteen words for (and including) “black,” “red,” “brown,” and “blue” in Spanish, French, and German. Then after the fifth word, the Russian word красный (red) appears in handwriting on an unsteady angle (90). This poem and several of its kind show Raworth’s discomfort with the artifactual nature of poetry whose energy constantly disrupts attempts to stabilize it or to understand it as propositional speech. In Raworth’s long poem Writing (1982), the processual nature of poetic composition is removed from material things and instead manifests itself in the physicality of performance. In other words, whereas Cobbing’s work is a forum for things to enter into the poetry, Raworth’s poetry is cut off from things and is material only by virtue of the language and the poet’s voice. Raworth has said, “I write down fragments of language passing through my mind that interest me enough after thought has played with them for me to imagine I might like to read them” (qtd. in Robinson 8). Language is disconnected from things and distanced from conventional, semantic meaning:

  this clears
  pleasure from words
  pleasure from shaping the letters
  easing my spine
  however i wish
  revolving my head
  to a strychnine arc
  strangers in my dreams
  quite adroit
  not too hilarious
  children
  dance to static
  in the kitchen
  the idea
is suffused with light
a suffusion
of light
not memory
but once only
way not only
form
but manner
still
i gave the matter
some thought
off into sound
red pointing fists
float
to real blood
we flash back
on is present’

how would you play
with that
idea my friend
as through the texture warps
a previous song called

‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY BING (256-257)

These lines from the first half of Writing nicely demonstrate Raworth’s anxiety over material representation. The central event here is the children dancing in the kitchen to static on the radio. But the real-world status of this event is unclear. Is it an “idea” abstracted out of the physical world? If so, the “suffusion / of light” gives it an aura of Thomistic intellection, which is undercut by the recurrent cinematic imagery through the poem. Perhaps the children dancing are merely markers of a half-forgotten memory of a scene in a movie, and the “suffusion / of light” is simply the work of the projector. Yet the speaker wants to insist that the scene of children dancing happened objectively and isn’t subject to the flux of
memory: “not only / form / but manner.” This protest, however, is short-lived, since the speaker’s thought turns to a revolutionary scene that has a tentative or floating connection to “real blood.” This scene, too, lacks further exposition, and the reader’s drive for narrative coherence is upended in favor of a poetry of the “present.” The “idea,” then, no matter if it’s the children, the revolution, or any stable referent, exists only insofar as the warp of the poem’s texture allows.

This long poem is called “Writing” because it isn’t about anything other than its language. To reinforce this point, opposite the title page in the 1982 Figures Press edition Raworth reproduced a sonogram of his own reading of the poem. The trajectory of language never quite gets beyond its happening; it never crosses the gulf to take reality as its matter. Tony Lopez has commented on this aspect of Writing in terms of meaning: “The meaning is all potential: pointing towards what is repeatedly deferred, partly adhering to experience but snapping back before any fixed context or verifiable statement can be established. The lines seem to refer back and seem to almost arise meaningfully out of a context which is then turned and modified into another meaning that arises in relation to the following lines” (3). There is meaning in this poetry, but it rests on the hinge of the next line, which transforms that meaning to keep it efficacious in the present. When Lopez says that the poetry “partly adher[es] to experience,” the experience is the processual experience of the reading upon which meaning depends quite heavily. John Barrell’s essay on Raworth broadly shares Lopez’s insight, but he comes to it by arguing that Raworth’s reading voice equalizes the textual divisions between language and metalanguage: “Some of the bits of
language in the text, like some of those in our head, are longer than others, or manage to reach some form of completion before they are interrupted, and in doing so make some general statement about something. But the reading voice refuses to grant them the authority they claim for themselves as general statements. It treats the things it says about the things it says as just more things it says” (401). Writing deals only with writing and is unable to make general statements or to treat things as stable objects outside of the processes of perception and of writing.

Yet, without fostering connections with material things in the world, Raworth’s poetry then runs the risk of teetering into irrelevance. The poetry faces the problem of an inability to speak adequately of things and, at the same time, of a fervent drive to keep moving in the present. Ken Edwards describes this tension as “the poet’s arbitrary juggling with language against the impossible project of miming the given simultaneity of the actual world hitting the senses” (41).44 This impossibility significantly limits the range of the poem, which is the point of the 1971 poem “Reference”:

This is the poem from which i quote
‘this is the poem from which i quote’ (82)

Poetry is a self-enclosed world that has no recourse outside of its own language. Yet variety comes through the work of the “i,” who does the quoting. For all that dissipates in self-cancellation in this two-line poem, “all that remains,” Peter Middleton notes, “is this vanishing point of agency, the self, the ‘i’ on which all

44Edwards’ connection of Raworth’s poetry and miming recalls Mallarmé, because Mallarmé, too, views the mime’s disconnection from the world to be emblematic of poetry: “that is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction” (Selected Poetry 69).
this spins, a self that seems both apart from the text and dependent on it” (“Silent” 21). In *Writing*, however, Raworth continuously denies the possibility for much to depend on a self:

i can’t hold a thought
longer than to see it disappear (296)

Indeed, disappearing is the state of Raworth’s textual subjectivity. Whenever a voice seems to take a stand, it is interrupted and lost in the flow of the poem:

i want
nonadministered justice
how do you eat?
throw all away
but the tray (264)

In the first major review of *Writing*, published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Colin MacCabe applauds Raworth’s ability to write from the standpoint of a dissipated subjectivity. “The great pleasure of *Writing,***” MacCabe concludes, “is that it celebrates joyfully the release from the imaginative constraints, and the mendacity, of the coherent voice” (1455). This surely is a negative pleasure and doesn’t quite explain the status of the “i” that does the quoting in “Reference” or the “i” that does the wanting in *Writing*. In refusing to incorporate the materiality of things in his poetry, Raworth handcuffs the agency of his “i,” which the lower-case explicitly makes clear. John Barrell sees an important paradox at work in Raworth’s conception of subjectivity, which represents

the coherence of the self and the release from the constraints of coherence as the equally impossible alternatives which define the limits of utterance—which confine our utterances within the limits, on the one hand, of a voice so thoroughly impervious to interruption as always to be producing and instantiating, in all it says, its entire at oneness with itself;
and, on the other, the equally impossible notion of an infinite plurality of
voices, so thoroughly emancipated from coherence that no connection ever
appears between any two words they speak. (391-392)

Barrell locates Raworth’s poetic subject between an anarchic self (“an infinite
plurality of voices”) and a despotic self (“its entire oneness with itself”). As
much as Barrell tries to resuscitate something of the subjectivity MacCabe deems
to be lost, what remains of a subject in his reading is ineffectual. Since Raworth’s
poetry refuses the bearing of materiality outside of its own reflexivity, any
figuration of a self inevitably lacks an identity for it cannot be differentiated from
something apart from itself. In other words, if we are able to talk about a subject,
we need to show how it differs from something that is not beholden to the same
experience of subjectivity. In brief, subjectivity requires otherness. Accordingly,
Raworth’s poetic subject, as delineated by Barrell, adds nothing to the dissipated
subjectivity of MacCabe’s reading (where Writing “dissolves the unity of the
personal voice into differentiated bands of sound”). This becomes clear in
Barrell’s conclusion where the subject has no effect on the “arbitrary juggling
with language” that Ken Edwards finds:

If they [the varied voices in the poem] could speak long enough to
complete the sentences they begin, if we could put a full stop, however
provisional, after more than the odd one or two, if we could be sure of
identifying some voice in the poem as the voice of the poem, then we
could read Raworth’s poetry as a poetry of self-affirmation and so of
political affirmation. But the poetry never pauses except in a parody or in
the pretence of the closure it still seems to desire, as if to show just how
provisional, how disablistingly arbitrary, any closure must be. And so if
there is a politics in Raworth’s poetry, it must be deferred and
contradictory as everything else in his writing. (409)

Subjectivity plays no role in this assessment of Raworth’s poetry. Concomitantly,
exterior materiality plays no part in the poetry’s neutrality. And further, it would
seem that politics is out of the question for a poetry that so fervently resists exteriority.⁴⁵

On this point, Barrell is contesting Andrew Lawson’s claim that “Raworth is in fact the most politically acute and direct poet writing in Britain now” (Lawson 424), because in Lawson’s reading Barrell finds a debilitating connection of politics to egological subjectivity. He challenges Lawson’s characterization of Raworth’s poetry as taking a stand of political protest entailing an assertion of self-affirmation: “The subject of enunciation—the subject which can comment on and connect everything that gets said in the poetry—seems at first to be as dead in Lawson’s reading of Raworth’s work as it is in mine; but then Lawson proceeds to resurrect it, apparently so that it can protest against the culture that has brought that death about” (408). In particular, Barrell prefers Lawson’s reading of Raworth that takes the poetry to be an “instantiation” rather than a “description” since description, by definition, foregrounds too readily the describer and concomitantly uses propositional language. Nonetheless, Barrell would like to indicate a political dimension in Raworth’s poetry, albeit one that isn’t reliant on a subject or on a prescriptive message. In the end, the closest he comes to locating such a politics is in suggesting that Raworth’s poetry takes seriously a question posed by Stuart Hall: “Is it possible, acknowledging the discourse of self-reflexivity, to constitute a politics in the recognition of the necessarily fictional nature of the modern self, and the necessary arbitrariness of

⁴⁵Oliver in *In the Cave of Suicession* and MacSweeney in *Black Torch* were able to incorporate politics in his writing because they insisted on the substantiality of language. If language is bound to material substance, then capitalist exchange economy is also fundamentally rooted in its labored materials.
the closure…?” (409). It is unclear what kind of politics Barrell has in mind in his linking of Hall and Raworth other than one that constantly rejects the temptation to give a description of or a prescription for contemporary culture.

III.

Barrell finds himself making contradictory claims for the commitment of Raworth’s oppositional politics because of the inscrutability of the poetry’s antimaterialism. Can late modernist poetry make much political headway by pegging language against reality, which is, everyone can agree, saturated with the markers of capitalist economy? C. D. Blanton has suggestively argued that most efficacious poetry with regards to oppositional politics runs counter to Raworth’s tack: “A poetry that divests itself to substance, devolves toward that terrain obscured by capital, begins potentially to effect a politics” (132). In other words, poetry can challenge the capitalist exchange economy by sustaining a relation to the material world.

To support this claim, Blanton examines Prynne’s “A Note on Metal” (1968), a tract concerning the shift from a stone-based economy to a metal-based economy in the Bronze Age. Blanton stresses that Prynne’s idiosyncratic history is particularly noteworthy (and all the more in view of Raworth’s antimaterialism) because it maintains a place for substance in the metal economy: “The qualitative hegemony of metal, however, does not fully eclipse the substantiality of stone, but rather complicates and even sublates it. Indeed the power of economy relies on its capacity to preserve substance as a sedimented concept or ground, as a sort of
historical unconscious against or across which power implicitly measures itself” (130). Insofar as poetry operates in a comparable mode of signification as an economy, language likewise maintains a relation to substance even as it is clearly divorced from things in the world. Blanchot, for one, addresses how language destroys the reality it is trying to speak for: “For me to be able to say, ‘This woman,’ I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist” (Work 322).

Blanton’s claim for Prynne’s poetry is that what is left of a thing’s being in poetic language is substance. Substance is not characterized by the full presence of a thing’s essence. Rather, it is a trace of the thing, a remainder that resists being subsumed into our conceptual knowledge of the thing. Prynne preserves or at least fosters a relation between poetic language and things, whereas Raworth’s procedures explore language’s own imaginative space. For Blanton, Prynne’s approach is rife with political possibility:

The possibility that language might provide a counter-currency with an alternative and conscious relation to substance, a space of symbolization which frames the history of origins differently by reasserting the difficulty and the danger of the material, draws poetry out of the realm of mere aesthetics altogether. The emergent moment of an exilic history augurs a destruction, promises a rejection or forgetting of any poetics devoted merely to the service of reified values. (131)

The “exilic history” is the account of transfer of substance from things into language. Accordingly, language is capable of serving as a “counter-currency” to challenge normal modes of signification. By granting language a relation to
substance, Prynne views language as something more than a medium that links concepts. Instead language bears a trace of the substance of material things.\textsuperscript{46}

How is it possible for poetry to revive substance in its language? Bob Cobbing offered one alternative that privileges sonic impulse over written construction. Prynne, however, downplays the value of the sound of his work, most clearly evidenced in his famous reluctance to give readings. Prynne suggests that language can work within the exchange economy as a menacing counter-currency to the insubstantial circulation of finances. The following lines come from the middle of “Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self,” which was originally published just a few months before “A Note on Metal” in \textit{The English Intelligencer}:

5. And not silk, except for ties, or the sky as even for exchange, the coin of the face we look up to as a vault ready for trust. That much is trickery, but the \textit{names},

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
do you not see, are just the tricks we trust, which we choose.
\end{quote}
\end{center}

The qualities then are a name, corporately, for the hope that they will return to us. The

\textsuperscript{46}Levinas’ conception of the trace is particularly instructive here, because for him the trace does not suggest the absence of something once present: “Its original signifyingness is sketched out in, for example, the fingerprints left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and commit a perfect crime. He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. He has passed absolutely” (“Trace” 357). The trace, then, is not a sign pointing to something or someone that is now missing like fingerprints point to a fled thief. Rather, the meaning of the trace resides in the thing that bears its trace, but the presence of the trace disturbs the stable identity of the thing. Accordingly, in Prynne’s poetry, the presence of substance in language does not indicate a lost unity of word and thing. Instead, the substance in language is a disturbance of the present order enabled by the material opacity before which the poetic subject in the language stands exposed. For a lucid comparison of Levinas’ and Derrida’s understandings of the trace, see Robbins 26-31.
The problem this poem addresses is that language fails to connect with what is signified and that capitalism has only exacerbated this situation. Yet this is not an elegy; rather, Prynne pitches his hope in language even as it is caught up in the advanced exchange economy. The first sentence of the stanza foregrounds the abstractness of language: “sky” seems a capricious rhyme with “ties,” thereby implicating the capricious “value” of silk once it is converted into ties for modern-day entrepreneurs. “The coin of the / face” is an indeterminate inversion of capitalism, which worships the face of the coin. This inversion is the hoped-for possibility shadowing the current economy, and it shows itself in the language’s doubleness, notably in: “a vault ready / for trust.” Is this Lear’s “heaven’s vault” or merely the local bank’s vault? And is this the virtue of trust or merely a conglomerate of trustees? Prynne insists on both, for it is impossible to ignore the abstraction capitalism has imposed on language, and yet it is unnecessary to assume that economy has utterly dismantled the possibility of meaning. Our task is to “choose” language rather than quiescently accept whatever language our culture interpolates upon us. Whatever substance out of which capitalist language has abstracted itself, that substance is still knowable to us through language: “The qualities then are a name.”

What Prynne means by “quality” is extremely difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, it appears regularly in the early poetry as a key concept. In his dissertation, Jeremy Points writes: “he seems to use the term to point to the materialization, the formation of essential properties as a way of stressing the emergence of quality through the interaction between two kinds of process. But what he emphasises about ‘quality’ is the hope, and therefore presumably the need, for the return of whatever quality represents” (193). Less helpful but certainly intriguing are Prynne’s comments in a 1967 letter to the editor of The English Intelligencer, Peter Riley: “I address myself
valued in the exchange economy. The poem begins: “The qualities as they continue are the silk / under the hand” (19). The relationship of the material to the human senses is paramount. Poetic language draws us to acknowledge the feel of silk under the hand in the midst of the underhanded business deals. Poetry brings readers into contact with the substance of things that everyday economics leaves as a remainder: what doesn’t sell. If we name carefully, Prynne suggests, language’s relationship to things will be more apparent to us than our ordinary culture’s language usually allows.

Prynne’s poetry maintains a relationship to substance by acknowledging the multivalence of language and, more importantly, by asserting the proximity of material to signification. The hope for the return of substance is not nostalgia, but rather it reinforces the belief that when we deliberately choose our language we are protesting the economic force that instantly converts things into commodities, worth into value, and words into concepts. Jeremy Points claims that “return” for Prynne maintains its urgency in the present: “the ‘return’ he envisages is not so much a recovery of a lost past, in an ideal sense, as a reconstitution of it within the context of contemporary social conditions” (194). The return of substance in poetry takes the form of a trace because its mode of presentation contradicts the economy of representation. In “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille writes, “matter, in fact, can only be defined as the nonlogical difference that represents in relation to the economy of the universe what crime represents in relation to the law” (129). Matter stands in excess of signification, yet its place in language to the primal history of quality as a designation for accumulations of motive simultaneous with patterns of behavious [sic] as convergence” (256).
disrupts the flow of exchange. Or in Bataille’s language, the general economy is always in relation to the restricted economy; a self-sufficient general economy is impossible.\footnote{Scott Cutler Shershow follows Jean-Joseph Goux’s insight that, in Shershow’s summary, “economic restriction (investment with return) seems always to displace a general economy of loss and sacrifice” (470–471). Shershow points to a central tension in Bataille’s project where, “on the one hand, it is a historical and sometimes arcadian account that describes, and attempts to undo, the ascendancy of bourgeois economism; on the other hand, it is an epistemological theory conceding that every labor of thought or writing is economistic because every thinker or writer, as Derrida argues, ‘never give[s] anything without calculating, consciously or unconsciously, its reappropriation, its exchange, or its circular return’”(482). The general economy, therefore, meets resistance from the restricted economy at not only the level of fundamental economics but also at the level of basic epistemology: what I know or what I experience sooner or later takes the form of propositional language. From this tension in Bataille, Shershow attempts to demonstrate “a recurrent displacement, in which the restricted economy, the economy of return, is itself what returns on the other side of any attempt to inscribe its opposite” (484). He wants to show how a restricted economy can within itself harbor a general economy. His evidence for this possibility centers on Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of community, which “is formed by finite beings who are infinitely ex-posed to one another” (490). In Prynne, poetry’s instantiation of a return of substance brings together in an uneasy tension the inexhaustibility of matter and the inherent restrictiveness of language.}

In Derrida’s reading of Bataille, the relation of the general economy to the restricted economy becomes explicitly an issue of language. In a key footnote, he writes:

One would commit a gross error in interpreting these propositions in a “reactionary” sense. The consumption of the excess of energy by a determined class is not the destructive consuming of meaning, but the significative reappropriation of a surplus value within the space of restricted economy. From this point of view, sovereignty is absolutely revolutionary. But it is also revolutionary as concerns a revolution which would only reorganize the world of work and would redistribute values within the space of meaning, that is to say, still within restricted economy. (337)

Prynne, I contend, is engaged in such project of “reistribut[ing] values within the space of meaning.” The “space of meaning” is expanded in the poetry to go beyond the restrictive trajectory of word to concept. In “Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self,” the hand that makes silk ties has been forgotten in the world

\footnote{Scott Cutler Shershow follows Jean-Joseph Goux’s insight that, in Shershow’s summary, “economic restriction (investment with return) seems always to displace a general economy of loss and sacrifice” (470–471). Shershow points to a central tension in Bataille’s project where, “on the one hand, it is a historical and sometimes arcadian account that describes, and attempts to undo, the ascendancy of bourgeois economism; on the other hand, it is an epistemological theory conceding that every labor of thought or writing is economistic because every thinker or writer, as Derrida argues, ‘never give[s] anything without calculating, consciously or unconsciously, its reappropriation, its exchange, or its circular return’”(482). The general economy, therefore, meets resistance from the restricted economy at not only the level of fundamental economics but also at the level of basic epistemology: what I know or what I experience sooner or later takes the form of propositional language. From this tension in Bataille, Shershow attempts to demonstrate “a recurrent displacement, in which the restricted economy, the economy of return, is itself what returns on the other side of any attempt to inscribe its opposite” (484). He wants to show how a restricted economy can within itself harbor a general economy. His evidence for this possibility centers on Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of community, which “is formed by finite beings who are infinitely ex-posed to one another” (490). In Prynne, poetry’s instantiation of a return of substance brings together in an uneasy tension the inexhaustibility of matter and the inherent restrictiveness of language.}
of commerce. Its presence has no place in the exchange economy, for it exceeds and does not fit into the set concepts of the marketplace; indeed, it is of the general economy. But Prynne gestures at its absence by culling energy in his language that resists exhaustive signification. “The qualities then are a name, corporately.” As much as “corporately” here refers to an association of shareholders, it subtly draws on the corpus (the hand) that made the ties for the men around the boardroom table. Prynne opens the space of meaning within the restricted economy of language to an excess that undercuts conceptual meaning.

Prynne insists that we can’t evade this doubleness of language (the corporation and the corpus, or the concept and the substance), and he suggests that the way to resist capitalism and to maintain a connection between language and substance lies in fostering subjectivity in language. The poetic subject then serves as point of contact between language and substance. Here is another passage from “A Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self”:

4. The name of that is of course money, and the absurd trust in value is the pattern of bond and contract and interest—just where the names are exactly equivalent to the trust given to them.

   Here then is the purity of pragmatic function:
   we give the names of our selves to our needs.
   We want what we are. (19-20)

The challenge is to articulate a kind of “trust in value” that is not absurd, but rather a trust that cultivates concrete meaning not financial meaning. The problem is not in language per se, but given the doubleness of language we are
confused in the meanings we draw from it: language or “the names are exactly equivalent to the trust / given to them.” Prynne rejects a transcendental theory of meaning in favor of a theory that proposes that meaning comes about through one’s active engagement of trust. Barring a Cratalytic understanding of language, trust is the only possible way to establish a relation between language and things. In giving “the name of / our selves to our needs,” we make a commitment to what is outside of us. In this non-capitalistic investment of self in things, we can resist the marketing lure of wanting what we aren’t because we want only what we have committed ourselves to.

This then is the “exilic theory of substance”: in using language, we connect ourselves with things through the trust we exhibit in the language we speak. Substance returns to us in virtue of this trust because we remain cognizant of language’s vulnerability, namely that it could easily traffic in abstractions as the prevailing economy demands. The act of trust in language effects a return of substance. Trust, as a mode of subjectivity, is for Prynne a form of damage. As I argued in the second chapter, damage is trope for the potentially positive condition of wounded subjectivity. A poem from The White Stones, “In the Long Run, to be Stranded,” nicely brings together Prynne’s exilic theory of substance and damaged subjectivity. In the third line, Prynne picks up a theme in “A Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self”: “The city / is the language of transfer / to the human account” (47). The doubleness of language suggests that “transfer” and “account” carry both the financial and more literal meanings, just as “vault” and
“trust” do in the earlier poem. The poem then notes the importance of maintaining this doubleness:

hold to this city or the slightly pale walking, to a set rhythm of the very slight hopefulness. (47)

Hopefulness comes with our holding to the city or to a keen awareness of language within the exchange economy. From this comes “a thickening of words,” which marks language’s renewed relationship with substance. It is really just a subtle shift:

The stirring is so slight, the talk so stunned, the city warm in the air, it is a too steady shift and life as it’s called is age and the merest impulse, called the city and the deep blunting damage of hope. That’s where it is, now as the place to be left and the last change still in return: down there in the snow, too, the loyal city of man. (47)

This “thickening of words” is the return of language’s materiality from its abstractness in the exchange economy. It affects the city in “the deep / blunting damage of hope.” Hope, for Prynne, is the existential condition that complements one’s trust in language. It does not suggest a desire to escape the world. On the contrary, hope is a commitment to the world in that it is a future-oriented will to retain language’s proximity to substance. The poem “How It’s Done” ends with these lines:
the movement to be found, in the
distance is the sound that I too hope for,
here at the rock point, of the world. (44)

The “rock point” is, like “the loyal city of man,” where the movement of
substance returns to our present condition.

Ernst Bloch has argued that hope is the grounding principle of Marxist
philosophy. In the introduction to his three-volume study, *The Principle of
Hope* (1959), he states plainly just how much importance he attaches to hope:
“Indeed, what is designated by this concept lies in the horizon of the
consciousness that is becoming adequate of any given thing, in the risen horizon
that is rising even higher. Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that
has still not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but,
concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as
a whole” (7). In virtue of the dialectic articulated here, Bloch insists “that men
determined circumstances (subject) just as they were determined by them
(object)” (Hudson 193). Bloch reformulates the poles of subject and object as
“latency” and “tendency” in his exposition of the phenomenology of hope.
Tendency is the basic dynamism in matter, and latency is the potentiality that is
still concealed within matter. What is striking about Bloch’s ontology is that
material substance is fundamentally dynamic and future-oriented: “Matter … is
not the mechanical lump…. [it] is Being which has not yet been delivered; it is the

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Indeed, for Bloch, hope is the most basic human emotion: “But the most important
expectant emotion, the most authentic emotion of longing and thus of self, always remains in spite
of all of this—hope” (*Principle* 75).
soil and the substance in which our future, which is also its future, is delivered” (Principle 1371). The most physical and unrefined elements of our world contain within them the latency that is an unrepresentable utopian potentiality.

What is important here in relation to Prynne’s poetics is that latency is hidden within tendency, just as substance is hidden in language in Prynne’s poetry. Latency is the agent of the hoped-for concrete utopia that commits one to the reorientation of present material conditions. “Every great work of art, above and beyond its manifest content, is carried out according to a *latency of the page to come* [auch noch auf eine *Latenz der kommenden Seite* aufgetragen], or in other words, in the light of the content of a future which has not yet come into being, and indeed of some ultimate resolution as yet unknown” (Principle 95; Jameson trans. 149). The hope that art is able to express resides in “the latency of the page to come.” Therefore, the subjective aspect in the instantiation of hope inhabits the material of the book, the writing itself. Writing, then, is the “rock-point” of hope, for it attests to its own intransitivity as material and yet it maintains its substance in its latent openness to futurity.50

IV.

I want to argue that Peter Riley’s *Tracks and Mineshafts* (1983) is an exploration of this “rock point,” and, with a healthy dose of Prynnean hope, the

50Bloch addresses the materiality of art most cogently in his writings on Expressionism in painting. For example: “Even in abstract painting a tuning into the figurative is unavoidable, even if one does not associate it with Marc’s ‘organic’ pantheism. The result is the constant creation of ciphers, i.e., the dissecting, blending, mutual illuminating of things, that puzzles as well as wants to point toward something: toward ornaments without ornamentation, toward written pictures, toward objects as if made from signatures…. [T]he cipher itself figures as one that points further ahead, that gives further meaning in a world that is unfinished and open” (Literary 510-511).
poem establishes a non-egological subjectivity between materialism and anti-materialism. A few years after the publication of *Tracks and Mineshafts*, Riley wrote, “We forswear a hope that has no substance” (*Passing* 71). Constantly *Tracks and Mineshafts* asks just what kind of hope does not forswear substance and then how does poetry, mere words on the page, help to advance this hope. Riley approaches this question by linking the material substance of the earth with primal language:

> Don’t we already know it and as if in preparation are brought constantly up against the world of ordinary things, that stand for personal redundancy—the mass of the earth in its hideous simplicity that alone gives energy and light any substance or durability, where language crashes and resurrects, flesh reconstitutes itself awhart times—it is the message that exceeds us, the concept not grasped, the emptiness of total being, pure sign of itself to which such substances as metal, poetry, history, can only be tools of an interim script. Immoveable and unspeakable, mournful dump of matter…. (27-28)

Earth is not just the ground upon which we stand, for Riley; rather, it is a principle of the anarchic, of all that defies conceptualization. The earth gives “substance or durability” to whatever issues out of it. Earth is the chaos that, paradoxically, provides us with stability.

In *Tracks and Mineshafts*, substance is that which undergirds our relationship with things in the world. And, without fail, substance carries with it the unsettled and unsettling principle of earth. What is most basic (*hypokeimenon*) is that which cannot be grasped by cognition and which thereby casts a shadow over our attempts to conceptualize things. The problem, Riley maintains, is that in contemporary capitalist society, we have glossed over the fundamental enigma of substance in our rush to possess things. In an essay
accompanying *Tracks and Mineshafts*, Riley, in great technical detail, contends that developments in mining have expedited the conversion of ore into metal in a way that seems contrary to their basic chemical properties: “the socio-economic results of metal’s passing through human culture were such as to set forward gain procedures before agricultural delay and patience, and the reference to the whole round of creation by which any human process maintains its beneficence, was being concentrated in a small ulterior token, easily neglected, the coin artfully debased to its own surface” (*Two* 13). Echoing key concerns in Prynne’s “A Note on Metal,” Riley here criticizes capitalism from the perspective of a metaphysical inquiry, which the poem takes up, namely, how is substance valuable in an age where it is easily forgotten in favor a “small ulterior token?”

In the poem and in the accompanying essay, Riley approaches this question by linking substance with language. Substance is presented as a source of language that our everyday language cannot quite contain. In a scene in the poem depicting the speaker’s deep descent into a cave, an encounter with substance frustrates language: “And it is this shifting and elusive edge experience that seems to draw us on, eroding our certainty by a substance that is there all the time and isn’t anywhere at all because we don’t yet have any words for it” (33). Yet a few lines later the earth reveals its own “nascent language”:

Gaining cavities, cracks and entire vacant layers of the stratification, it is released and opens out into vast efflorescences of ore, crystals and cave-pearls, colours of sky and flesh held in translucent stone, breaking into the confined air in formal excrescences. The metallic compound lies at the centre of it, amassed. It is as if a whole warehouse of books lies under water, the books stacked on their sides; the pages congeal together in pure amnesia, cubes and tables of documentation piled up all round us, totally inert. But the gilt letters one by one float off the bindings and assemble on
the surface in a matrix of red and blue inks, a dazzling unreadable scum, a potentiality. As if expecting us. Always referred to as “true”, this nascent language is there, and ready, as soon as our organs of perception are tuned to meet it. (33-34)

Mining is like the writing of poetry in that both the miner and the writer try to tap into a resistant source, always just beyond the reach of their best effort. This nascent language, “a dazzling unreadable scum,” is the underside of our speech, just as ore is the underside of mined metals. It “crashes and resurrects” beneath the surface of our everyday language. The idea here is that a fundamental, unbroachable level of language enables and yet undermines the purported stability we strive for in communication.

Some of the imagery in this passage and in much of Tracks and Mineshafts derives from Heidegger’s thinking in “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935/1936). In art, Heidegger sees a conflict between earth and world. World, for Heidegger, is the place and condition in which we live; it is the grounding upon which we go about our everyday lives and anticipate our future. The earth is the underside of the world; it is the shifting foundation that unsettles everything we do. It calls silently to our understanding in the world through works of art, but it is always self-secluding and so resists any attempt to master it. Accordingly, the “earthy character” of a work of art is that which constantly challenges our drive for comprehension. Heidegger goes on to say that the earthy character of art manifests itself in a language that really can’t be articulated in our ways of

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51In Two Essays, Riley is more explicit about the relationship between mining and writing. For example: “And the dark, persistent, penetrative work processes of the mine are just as intimate to the whole, as the patient waiting and spasmodic outbursts of agriculture. The darkness, the refusal of ‘width,’ has always struck me as very like all the creative processes in which love is specific, and the reward instant and eternal rather than eventual” (12).
speaking. Yet poetry, as “projective saying,” reveals the nature of this unsayable language through the active conflict between world and its resistant counterpart, earth. The unsayable language that characterizes earth is just what Riley has in mind when he writes of “the message that exceeds us.” A language that can’t be understood entirely provides the foundation for all that poetry can say. For Heidegger, this language shines forth in truthfully announcing the being of things as they really are. Likewise, Riley describes the appearance of this language as the “effulgence” that poetry brings about. In the *Tracks and Mineshafts* essay, he writes: “Poetry is surely one of the places where the creation of form, the achievement of truth, and the effulgence of language as an ever newness, are all the same thing” (*Two* 28). Yet such an achievement is not easily realized. It comes about only after devising a way of presenting the unsayable language in the everyday speech that ultimately constitutes poetry.

Riley tries to explain this situation later in this same essay. He likens what I have been calling the unsayable language to a dream: “Just as bodily awareness is a constant threat to sleep and its dreams, so there must be a dream-like force which constantly threatens the awake mind and seeks to return it to the instant, spherical modes operative during sleep” (20). When awake, we can never fully grasp a past dream because it is incompatible with our conscious, linear conception of time. Yet dreams still influence and even threaten this state of consciousness. Riley then writes that the dream “array[s] our time (or some of it) before us like a book in which we could read for the messages of consequence, but this display is ours in the mode of falling—disjunct and arcane—and we are
left with a kind of comic-strip waiting for its story to be written in, urgency in an unknown language, incomplete, misleading, and often very obscure” (24-25). In our conscious state, we cannot understand the missing, obscure language, but we still feel its urgency. Therefore, Riley admits, this unsayable language is not really language at all but the structure—or the framing of the comic strip—that allows language to function. He writes: “The dream is not language but a linguistic structure. Structure is where language fails. It is the doubt about language…. The dream is a structure, an anti-language, because there can be no actual transmission, no distance covered, no other reached” (Two 27). In other words, our language can’t establish a stable relationship with this fundamental anti-language because language and anti-language operate on completely different levels, just as dream-experience and consciousness exist through different modes of temporal progression. Still, however, the anti-language or what in the poem is earth’s language remains necessary to language because it is the undying origin that undergirds all we say.

Riley’s anti-language is substance. Writing cannot straightforwardly present the world, but it can function because of it. Indeed, as we saw in the example of Prynne’s poetry, the general economy can work within the restricted economy by expanding “the space of meaning.” Now in Riley’s work, the poetry inquires more directly into how language can relate to the earth, which, he says, resists but engenders poetic utterance. In Tracks and Mineshafts, the closer the poem gets to encountering substance, the more obscure the language gets. Substance, therefore, is not a free pass to a realm of clear and distinct ideas:
“things also clasp and contain the light, have it in substance, not only shed it—the objects in absolute presence by light or dark, holding energy close and ripe, solid, with nothing to say” (26). We don’t have a chance of developing a concept that matches this experience. We have certain knowledge of what these things are.

Riley is exploring the hitherside of propositional logic. Daniel Tiffany has argued that the substance of things is fundamentally obscure: “the innate obscurity of matter in the history of physics, like the inscrutability of things in lyric poetry, betrays the inescapable role of language in depicting the nonempirical qualities—the invisible aspect—of material phenomena” (“Lyric” 75). Just as modern physics remains puzzled over the basic properties of matter, poetry, too, reflects an epistemological uncertainty through figurative uncertainty. By tapping into the earth’s unsayable “nascent language,” Riley expresses the imponderable or at least scarcely present substance that undergirds poetic language.

Further, Riley explores the experience of “the point of contact” between poet and substance. What characterizes this “point of contact” between person and world? “Contact,” as derived from Olson’s Mayan Letters, implies a lack of objectification and a strong sense of mutuality. A dramatization of “contact” unfolds in this poem in the “King’s Field” section:

52 See Tiffany’s Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric for a reading of the relationship between poetry and science on materialism.
53 just behind
the point of contact perception opens
onto a cleared space, a settlement, holding
people of all ages together. (7)
The light (this morning) falls out of the sky and passes into the ground and the stone and slate of the roof falls into heat and number at substance, where shadows contrive and the rising penumbra intercepts this divine speed ay at the forge of our lives (31)

Light here is celestial: “Still the authentic embodiment of light playing to and from the world, remains celestial whether it lasts long or not” (28). Yet Riley stresses that whatever transcendent qualities it may harbor, the light pervades in the world. In fact, it “falls into heat / and number.” Heat is here what ultimately becomes of coal after it has been mined, transported, sold, and burned. “Number” harkens back to Prynne’s 1968 volume, Kitchen Poems, which includes “A Sketch for the Financial Theory of Self” and figures numbers as the agents of capitalism. Riley is here following Prynne in “A Note in Metal” in allowing for the possibility of substance to emerge within the structures of capitalism. Light,

54For Prynne, numbers are the abstracting force behind purchasing power and commodity fetish. In “Die a Millionaire,” for example, the tone is particularly acidic:

The grip is purchase again, and the current chic of information theory will tell you how many bits of that commodity it takes to lift one foot/lb. of shit to a starving mouth, or not starving actually, but just rather unthinkably hungry. (14-15)

Several lines later, the poem deals specifically with the coal industry:

what is scattered over those colliery towns is not soot or sulphur or coal or foaming detergent but the waste produced by mass-conversion of want (sectional) into need (social & then total.) (15)
heat, number, and substance all converge “at the forge of our lives,” where light can only be understood as a “penumbra,” suggesting that a pure relation with light is impossible. We can only relate to light through a filter of darkness.\footnote{And how casually we brush it off, with clear excuses, headaches and liabilities, crushing the distance between us to a slight thing—you and I, descend the steps and pass under the cloud into reality, where things also clasp and contain the light, have it in substance, not only shed it—the objects of earth in absolute presence by light or dark, holding energy close and ripe, solid, with nothing to say” (26).} Our point of contact with light and with substance takes place in our present lives, despite the prevalence of an abstracting capitalist economy. Commenting on “A Note on Metal,” C. D. Blanton writes, “The iconic displacement of substance, the gathering of portable meaning into metals [heat and number], opens a space of distant negotiation, an abstract and potentially global locus of work and poetic signification” (129-130). Riley identifies this locus in our lives or, more accurately, at the point of contact with otherness where we act in the hope that the substance of the thing will shine some light on how we live. Peter Middleton has noted this moment of hermeneutic application: “The ‘resistance of / matter’ is such that only the unremitting work of body and imagination through love and creativity can find the ‘stone in the heart’ and transmute it, although Riley is insistent that this ethical call to the reader does not just require a decision of will, or some access of passion…. It requires a transformation of the way we inhabit the world conceptually and materially” (“Substance” 56-57).

Still it is not clear what kind of “work of body and imagination” one’s relation with substance might entail. Soon after the passage in which Riley writes of his apprehensions of encountering “the utterly unbroachable world-thing,” the book turns toward praxis as a tentative resolution. At the end of the “King’s
Field” section, there is a page of prose entitled simply “Letter.” The identities of the sender and recipient are not made clear, but, to me, it makes most sense to think of the poet receiving the letter, because the sender accuses the poet of sidestepping practical action: “I think it is important to know that this, your state of being, is only the occasion of what you do (your poetry, your music, your work) and not its content; it was a 1960s confusion from which several derived lasting damage, to think your fate would respond to a conditional, shorn of act” (32). Thus, sharpening one’s perception in the form of language is no longer permissible because it is removed from practical action. Yet this is not reason enough to turn away from the resistance language presents and to write a poetry that foregrounds a removed and safe poetic subject that characterized much of Britain’s contemporary poetry. Instead, Riley refashions subjectivity so that it neither is lost in rebarbative poetic strategies nor isolates itself altogether from language’s resistant underside but, instead, proves amenable to practical action.

In the essay Riley wrote on Tracks and Mineshafts, he says that one’s perception of language’s recalcitrance is like the realization of a dream’s incommunicability: “The whole dream is an instantaneous vacancy, a moment containing absolutely nothing because it is not in life. The polished sides of this empty sphere are made to reflect us back to ourselves, fragmented and distorted into a world which we then plot forth as a series of events” (Two 28). The experience of mining language’s unsayable foundation reflects the subject’s brokenness and vulnerability in relation to exterior things of the world. This kind of subjectivity is the condition for practical action, and so Riley writes in Tracks and Mineshafts:
It is a dangerous condition, for the world returns to ourselves in the end by the formats of our acts—intimately, eventually, the world has us as we have had the world; right through the boundaries of our estates the world splits back at us, returns our vocabulary ground to a knife edge while the residue crumbles and totters over our heads. (24)

Our understanding of the world is conditioned by our action. But still our own position is constantly jeopardized because the world comes at us differently than we had anticipated. And thus our language comes up short because it is incapable of encompassing all that experience presents, since there is always “residue” that serves as the underside of language.

Emmanuel Levinas has developed a line of thinking that takes the residue of language (that is, what resists cognitive appropriation) as an instance of an experience with the ethical. Works of art precipitate contact with this uncanny aspect of being:

From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles, without transitions between them. They are naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being. In this falling of things down on us objects attest their power as material objects, even reach a paroxysm of materiality. Despite the rationality and luminosity of these forms when taken in themselves, a painting makes them exist in themselves, brings about an absolute existence in the very fact that there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry. (Existence 56-57)

Levinas breaks down generic distinctions, since, for him, all kinds of modern art engage in forging contact with that which resists conceptual thought. The importance of art, in this account, is that it brings about an experience that forces us to relate to things we can’t master or even satisfactorily explain. This disconcerting experience, Levinas contends, is analogous to how we relate to
other human beings, whose presence always exceeds our capacity to rationally understand them.  

Even though the other may exceed all of my conceptual capacities, we are connected through language since language is able to bridge the fundamental separation between us. “The relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors, the revelation of the other to me. In other words, language is spoken where community between the terms of the relationship is wanting, where the common plane is wanting or is yet to be constituted” (Totality 73). Importantly, language is not a medium that communicates between like concepts; rather, it is up to the task of manifesting the disarming alterity of “swelling or abscesses of being.” So language, in Levinas’ account, has two key aspects. First, language serves all that resists conceptualization, primarily, the call of the Other. Levinas says that the infinite Other manifests itself in the face of the human other “through the original language of his defenseless eyes” (Basic 12). Still, however, language does the work of propositional speech: “The world is said and hence can be a theme, can be proposed. The entry of beings into a proposition constitutes the original event of their taking on signification; the possibility of their algorithmic expression itself will be established on this basis” (Totality 98). In Totality and Infinity, Levinas suggests that the anti-conceptual, original language shadows propositional speech and emerges as “the inverse of language”: “The inverse of language is like a laughter that seeks to destroy language, a laughter infinitely

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56In Levinas, however, one does not relate ethically to otherness, because a relation implies a totalizing sameness. The other must always break relations, for he or she is infinitely other.
reverberated where mystification interlocks in mystification without ever resting on a real speech, without ever commencing” (91). Speech harbors within it an anarchic principle that constantly seeks to disrupt the rational sense of whatever is being said. This is precisely the situation Riley addresses in *Tracks and Mineshafts*, where he writes of a “nascent language” found in the “dazzling unreadable scum” deep in the “[g]aining cavities, cracks and entire vacant layers of the stratification” (33-34).

For Riley, the motivating question is just how poetry can tap into substance to access this “authentic script.” In “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948), Levinas inquires into what happens when art conflates the image with reality. For Levinas, the image is antithetical to concepts; it is allied with the disrupting “inverse of language” from *Totality and Infinity*: “An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity” (Levinas 132). The image isn’t a representation of an object in reality; rather, things bear images in themselves: “There is then a duality in this person, this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments. We will say the thing is itself and its image” (Levinas 135). In art’s relationship to a thing, the image or the thing’s anarchic shadow manifests itself. In Riley’s terms, the “nascent language” (or Levinas’ “original language”) of exteriority presents itself in poetry—in the limited words of propositional, everyday speech. Poetry is able to maintain a relationship to substance through its own language.
Levinas contends that poetry’s mode of signification mirrors a human being’s fundamental disposition, which is what he terms “ethical”: “We call ethical a relationship between terms such as are united neither by a synthesis of the understanding nor by a relationship between subject or object, and yet where the one weighs or concerns or is meaningful to the other, where they are bound by a plot [une intrigue] which knowing can neither exhaust nor unravel” (Collected 116 n.). In an ethical relationship, terms—or most centrally, people—are related in a way that stymies cognition and generalization. In contrast to the metaphysical tradition, the ethical approaches and touches otherness rather than grasping and appropriating it. Without reeling the other into a position of objectivization, the ethical subject relates to exteriority through proximity, which is a constant approach. The ethical “indicates a reversal of subjectivity which is open upon beings and always in some measure represents them to itself, positing them and taking them to be such or such … into a subjectivity that enters into contact with a singularity, excluding identification in the ideal, excluding thematization and representation—an absolute singularity, as such unrepresentable” (Collected 116). In an ethical relation, one touches the other as a point of contact, which defies the logic of representation and accordingly issues an excess of signification. Levinas continues to say that this contact “is the original language, the foundation of the other one” (116). The unrepresentable original language of ethical contact is the “foundation” [fondement] of propositional speech. The importance of this claim becomes clear when read against Levinas’ phenomenological insight: “what appears cannot appear outside
of signification. The *appearing* of a phenomenon is inseparable from its *signifying*, which refers to the proclamatory, keygmatic intention of thought. Every phenomenon is a discourse [*est discours*] or a fragment of discourse” (112). Our understanding of things is a linguistic experience, and beneath this discourse lies a foundational language of ethical proximity. Accordingly, Levinas maintains that “the proximity of things is poetry” (118).

Poetry connects with things through a human subject’s proximity with otherness. In the mode of proximity language functions according to singularity and, accordingly, disrupts thematization: “Proximity is thus *anarchically* a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, and ideality” (*Levinas* 90). The question remains, however, of how language—even this original, foundational, and anarchic language—relates to things. How can poetry maintain a relationship with substance? In writing, the substance is patently absent, but its trace reverberates as an echo that constantly jars the stability of propositional language. Further, in contact with poetry, one’s control is assaulted and the self remains only in a liminal sense. Writing takes place at the edge of the person, according to Riley, because the inverse of language lays hold of the self-possessed subject and brings him or her into a relationship of contact where grasping and understanding are unable to operate. In writing, one is put in a relationship of proximity with substance, where substance isn’t the object of mimesis but is rather the stirring that gives the earth presence as a trace in language. When I say a flower, I certainly do not get a flower, but Riley’s poetic practice suggests that instead I get a rustling that makes me question the
self-subsistence of the word “flower.” This is the earth’s silent calling, and draws me into a relationship where I am responsive to the call. I respond to the substance of the world.

In *Lines on the Liver*, Riley writes that love is “at the edge of the person, which is where writing, among other things, takes place. This edge is furbished to a seemingly inhuman sheen as it extends into script, but the resulting compaction makes possible an entity which as it is so completely itself can begin to act helpfully…” (c). Poetry then is writing at the edge of the person that can probe into the depths of the inhuman language that the self cannot comprehend but which still comes from a broken person concerned with practical action. Like Levinas, Riley stops short of issuing any kind of prescriptive ethical charge. Instead, he advocates an attunement to the otherness that defines our place in the world. Such an attunement places one in position to approach the ethical modicum of “completely answering the world” (*Tracks* 29). This answering requires a distance because one cannot absorb or even grasp whatever form of exteriority may crop up. Between self and other there is a productive barrier at the site where poetic writing takes place. Riley writes: “The barrier is life, and flesh; it is us” (48). Poetry then testifies to the proximity of self and other without slipping entirely into either extreme.
CHAPTER FOUR:

DENISE RILEY’S POETICS OF REFLEXIVITY

In 1982, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion introduced their anthology of contemporary British poetry by making a claim for a recent “shift of sensibility”: “It follows a stretch, occupying much of the 1960s and 70s, when very little—in England at any rate—seemed to be happening, when achievements in British poetry were overshadowed by those in drama and fiction, and when, despite the presence of strong individual writers, there was a lack of overall shape and direction” (11). If very little seemed to be happening in British poetry in general, the common assessment of women’s poetry in that period is doubly bleak. In 1974, Geoffrey Summerfield introduced his Penguin anthology entitled *Worlds* with a baleful disclaimer: “I regret the omission of women poets from this book. This is simply due to the fact that Britain in the last fifteen years has not produced a woman poet of real stature” (2). The male-heavy selections in Michael Horowitz’s *Children of Albion* (Penguin, 1969) and Edward Lucie-Smith’s *British Poetry since 1945* (Penguin, 1970) seemed to confirm Summerfield’s view. This practice of exclusion did, however, generate the impetus for small presses to publish a number of poetry anthologies that contained work exclusively by women. For example, Lilian Mohin’s *One Foot on the Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969-1979* (Onlywomen
Press, 1979); Diana Scott’s *Bread and Roses: Women’s Poetry of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Virago, 1982); Carol Rumens’ *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry, 1964-1984* (Chatto & Windus, 1985); and Fleur Adcock’s *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women’s Poetry* (Faber, 1987). Inevitably this turn toward women’s poetry has raised pressing questions about what makes women’s writing distinctive and about how women’s writing can have any practical, political effect.

In this chapter, I lay out two competing aesthetics for women poets in the 1970s and 1980s. The first can be called “post-feminist” and asserts that there is nothing definitively distinctive about poetry written by women and that women poets should seek to express an ungendered human truth. The rivaling position maintains that women’s poetry is distinctive because either it comes out of women’s experience, which is uniquely marginalized in society, or its language preserves a primal connection to women’s bodies. Both positions easily expose themselves to criticism: Isn’t “post-feminist” poetry merely non-feminist if it fails to critique the masculine structures of language and society? How can there be such a thing as women’s experience since the variety of women in the world (or are we talking only of a select group of educated English women?) patently resists unification? Isn’t a connection between women’s language and their bodies simply a metaphysical ploy aimed at establishing a stable origin? So run the standard arguments. Despite all the criticism, satisfactory answers are difficult to come by.
After presenting the foundations for these debates, I maintain that Cambridge poet Denise Riley productively offers a poetry that overcomes the contentious binaries that governed much of the feminist poetry of the time (women vs. men, women’s experience vs. reality, self vs. exteriority). In her prose, she argues that “women” is an unnervingly difficult and ultimately impossible term to define but necessary to use for practical considerations, namely the improvement of women’s political standing. This position underlies the dynamism of her understanding of identity. A woman needn’t—indeed, she can’t—abolish subjective identity in order to write poetry true to her experience. Derived from a reading of Merleau-Ponty, Riley’s argument proposes a reflexivity of subjectivity that incorporates inassimilable aspects of exteriority. She looks to contemporary abstract painting as a guide to conceiving ways of portraying the self’s relation to the world in non-representative (or non-objectifying and non-binary) terms. Her work suggests that there is a dynamic flesh of the world, in Merleau-Ponty’s language, in which self, world, and language participate. Yet the subject in this flesh is in process, which means that she is exposed to the kind of fragmentation that characterizes an experience of exteriority. This subjective dynamism, however, entails reflexivity or reflection, and when poetry enacts a reflection bringing the subject in relation to the non-identical the result is a lyric poetry in the distinctive tradition of Prynne.
I.

Perhaps most striking of the women-only poetry anthologies of the 1970s and 1980s is Carol Rumens’ *Making for the Open*, which makes a case for a post-feminist poetry in the years 1964-1984, a period which many observers have viewed as one of peak-feminism (see, for example, Pykett 255). The appearance of Rumens’ anthology, however, did indicate a strong desire among many publishers, readers, and poets to move beyond the divisive labeling of poetry according to its gendered or, at times, ungendered content or style. In her introduction, Rumens is clear about her intent: “Above all, I hope the book might prove to be a small stepping-stone to the time when we do not feel obligated to think of writers in terms of gender at all” (xviii). From her perspective, the attention brought to women’s writing in the 1970s has narrowed the range of women’s writing, which then runs the risk of turning writing by women into a ghettoized field of interest. “Those writers concerned with ‘the stern art of poetry’ as an end in itself have tended to be swamped by the noisy amateurs proclaiming that women, too, have a voice. This anthology is different from its predecessors in that the poems proclaim only themselves. That women have a

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57 Sylvia Kantaris perhaps marks the breaking point of these debates in a letter to the editor of the *TLS* in August 1983:

> Every poetic movement in our past and recent history seems to have been fully documented, with one exception: The Hysterical Women’s Movement (1963-1980). We know this movement existed because reviewers frequently mention it in relation to women poets who appear to have reacted against it… I … am only interested to know the names of the poets who have been … harshly castigated by Ian Hamilton as “post-Plath hysterics” or “muscular harpies of the Adrienne Rich school.”… These are only two amongst many examples of reviews and critical articles which measure the poets under consideration against the Hysterical Women’s Movement, but in none of them are we given the names of members of that movement, or titles of the books they wrote. All we know is that their voices were almost uniformly “shrill” or “strident.” (qtd. in Bertram 287)
voice, and the right to be heard, goes without saying” (xv). Rumens is eager to preserve an exclusive space for poetry that is unencumbered by whatever ideological strife that may be taking place off the page. The goal of her anthology, therefore, is to celebrate the work of women poets who have achieved a certain degree of aesthetic freedom:

Language can be used authentically (and poetry is the language at its most authentic) only by those whose existence, whose being, is authentic. ‘Post-feminist’ expresses a psychological, rather than political, condition, though its roots are no doubt political. It implies a mental freedom which a few outstanding women in any age have achieved, and which many more, with increasing confidence, are claiming today. (xvi)

Women’s liberation, from this perspective, embraces the unity of self and language: the language of poetry reflects or embodies the poet’s mental freedom.

Notwithstanding Rumens’ call to authenticity, a perennially vexing virtue, she articulates her belief that poetry should entail moral seriousness. If women poets focus specifically on topics derivative of “women’s experience,” their poetry is myopic because it fails to address social and moral issues unrelated to sexual difference. In particular, in her own poetry of the mid-’80s Rumens repeatedly returns to the suffering of people in communist Eastern Europe. For example, in “Geography Lesson,” which appeared the same year as Prynne’s The

58 The difficulty with calls to authenticity in poetry becomes manifest in Marcia Holly’s “Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic” (1975), in which she champions authenticity because it counters ideology: “When we are dealing, then, with literature in which sexuality is dramatized within the context of an androgynous theme, the standard for judgment is how well a writer presents the human condition, a judgment that a critic can make only after s/he differentiates between what is derived from an arbitrary ideology and what is an authentic concern of people” (44-45). This opposition between ideology and authenticity increasingly came under attack through the 1980s. For example, Marjorie Perloff has repeatedly argued that authenticity is a fool’s game in poetry because it ignores the material mediation of language. In one essay, she picks up on Jed Rasula’s description of authentic poetry as a commodity produced within an “ideology of privacy” that ignores the cultural shift that has effaced the separation of public and private (Perloff, Radical 19; Rasula 77).
Oval Window and Peter Riley’s Tracks and Mineshafts (1983), Rumens strives for a level of authenticity secured by an untroubled relation of speaking subject and her language:

Here we have the sea of children; here
A tiny piece of Europe with dark hair.
She’s crying. I am sitting next to her.

Thirty yellow suns blobbed on cheap paper,
Thirty skies blue as Smith’s Salt-wrapper
Are fading in the darkness of this weeper.

She’s Czechoslovakia. And all the desks
Are shaking now. The classroom window cracks
And melts. I’ve caught her sobs like chicken-pox.

Czechoslovakia, though I’ve never seen
Your cities, I have somehow touched your skin.
You’re all the hurt geography I own. (Selected 70-71)

Here authenticity takes the form of empathy. The poem turns on the stark conceit, “She’s Czechoslovakia,” and then the girls’ convulsive sobs cut her off from her surroundings just as the Iron Curtain isolated Czechoslovakia from the West. The props of the classroom lesson fade “in the darkness of this weeper,” and the windows are now imperceptible behind the tears. The speaker’s sudden feeling of empathy is peculiar: “I’ve caught her sobs like chicken-pox.” In this awkward line, Rumens reveals the difficulty of establishing an interpersonal relationship in a poem. Immediately after this affective moment of infectious empathy, Rumens returns to the abstraction of the nation, which is a conceptualization of the crying girl. The speaker’s experience of crying with the girl (who, we infer, is Czech) leads her to hazard that she has “somehow touched” Czechoslovakia’s “skin.” This realization, coupled with the ambiguous, final line, seems to make the point
that Cold War politics carry little weight in the face of actual, human, affective relationships. Though the speaker has never been to Czechoslovakia, she is capable of imagining the suffering people endure there. Indeed, it is a moral responsibility to imagine and to risk being affected by human suffering beyond one’s physical environs. Hence, we can understand Rumens’ uneasiness about the prospect of women poets writing about the plight of being a woman in England.

The difficulty arises, however, when one considers the status of the poet’s subjectivity within the context of language. In the introduction to her anthology, Rumens articulates a rich pronouncement about an important characteristic of post-feminist poetic practice: “Language can be used authentically (and poetry is the language at its most authentic) only by those whose existence, whose being, is authentic.” First, “authentic” is a famously slippery term, and Rumens unfortunately does not go on to provide any clarification. We can, however, still understand her to be saying that poetic language emanates from a human subject, and that there is a causal link between oneself and one’s language. Or a subject uses language that originates with one’s “being.” Language here is construed as a projection of an agent who is in control of it. The subject makes language; language doesn’t make the subject. In Rumens’ poem’s final line, the subject’s instrumental relation to language is manifest: “You’re all the hurt geography I own.” The “you” here is a coalescence of the girl and Czechoslovakia. This bond is held in tension because of the physical adjective “hurt” before the abstract concept “geography.” Yet the closing “I own” reduces the untidy image to an
object of possession. The subject ends by conceptualizing the experience of empathy, which in fact devalues it because this experience becomes a category comparable to other experiences. Rather than exposing the subject to further experiences (as is the case in experience understood as *Erfahrung*), this experience has closed her off since she had relegated it to an object of possession. Experience and language are, of course, deeply connected. If one is capable of possessing experience, one has failed to experience language, which, at least for Heidegger, is an experience of dispossession. Language cannot be controlled; there is always a lurking hitherside that threatens the conceptual rightness of our speech. Rumens does not engage this possibility, since, for her, language is an instrument that “can be used” to communicate how an unflappable poetic subject has possessed and conceptualized experience.

The advantage of conceptualizing experience is that it remains open to the possibility of achieving universalization. Indeed, a major goal of post-feminist poetry is to get beyond the narrow confines of women’s poetry. In her introduction to the second edition of *Making for the Open* (1987), Rumens writes: “Poetry is an act of concern … for the many forms of human truth” (xviii). The poet Anne Stevenson made a similar—if more explicitly Woolfian—point in her 1979 lecture “Writing as a Woman”: “A good writer’s imagination should be bisexual or transsexual” (19). Then poetry can be a source of truth for everyone no matter one’s gender. In her critical appraisal of post-feminist poetry, Vicki Bertram challenges the assumptions of both Rumens and Fleur Adcock, who edited the 1987 edition of *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women’s Poetry*:
“They subscribe to the belief that art and politics should inhabit separate spheres, and that great art transcends the individual’s local experience to offer universal truths. They ignore the fact that the concept of universality is implicitly gendered; it is *male* experience (and invariably white, middle-class, male experience) that has been, and still is, passed off as universal” (274).

Stevenson, Rumens, and Adcock may accept this point, but they believe the only way to write truthfully is to write within this male tradition and to challenge it on its own terms from a woman’s point of view. Stevenson, for example, writes that men and women share more in common than not:

For better or worse, women and men writers in the West, in the later twentieth century, share a common consciousness. Their language is a reflection, or a definition, of that consciousness. If anything we want *more* communication, *more* understanding between the sexes. We are beginning to see that though our physical functions differ (necessarily) our psychic needs are alike. If there is to be a new creative consciousness—one that is not based on phallic values of conquest, power, ambition, greed, murder, and so forth—then this consciousness must have room for both male and female; a consciousness the greatest literature has, in fact, been defining for a long time. (20)

In the same year Stevenson’s essay appeared (1979), Onlywomen Press published Lilian Mohin’s feminist anthology *One Foot on the Mountain*, which explicitly challenges Stevenson’s resolution of sexual difference through an equally male and female creative consciousness. Mohin’s program is ambitious: “The conceptual restrictions of what it is appropriate for women to be, to think, to write are being carefully eroded and we are creating a new and entire way of perceiving. We can only remove the enormous morass of patriarchal concepts encompassing, impregnating, surrounding, bearing down on us through this piecing together of new ways of thinking” (1). Whereas Stevenson hopes to tap
into the androgynous consciousness that has produced great literature “for a long time,” Mohin wants to forge an entirely new and entirely feminine “way of perceiving.”

But just what are the “new ways of thinking” Mohin has in mind? “To begin to write from within the female experience is still a new task—we are all unsure, not able to trust that our perceptions are not infiltrated by the pervading present patriarchal culture” (2). The trouble, however, is that women’s perceptions are always affected by patriarchal culture. The best solution, Mohin suggests, is for women to come together, pool their experiences and trust in the authenticity solidarity affords. Poetry is an expression of women’s solidarity, evidenced, for example, in this untitled poem by Mohin included in the anthology:

we come together, having chosen
to come

trust and distrust

six women sit around a table, breakfast over,
talking, yellow light on wary eyes,
eyes holding, letting go, holding,
a firm palm on one
sharp shoulder blade

we come together, having chosen
to come

The O.E.D. says trust is ‘to do some action with the expectation of safety, or without fear of consequences’

safety isn’t a realistic possibility
most of our consequences hurt

having chosen,
it is necessary to come together
not faith, but the slow swelling
of what we need; trust
wrung from our distrust
drop by globule
spoonfuls, speech, touch, cupfuls,
a sea, our own tides. (147)

What is distinctive about women’s experience here is its physicality in contrast to the conceptuality of Rumens’ “Geography Lesson.” Trust is “wrung from our distrust,” and speech and touch are linked rather than speech and thought.

Although Mohin’s feminist aesthetic pegs itself largely in oppositional terms against traditional, masculine values, she begins to articulate some positive elements of women’s experience pertinent to a young and vibrant feminist poetry movement.

II.

In her introduction to her selection of women’s poetry in *The New British Poetry* (1988), Gillian Allnutt states her editorial criterion, which puts her at some distance from many of the poets in Mohin’s *One Foot on the Mountain*: “My own definition of a successful feminist poem is one that is written by a woman with respect not only for her own ‘truth,’ her way of seeing and feeling the world, but also for the language—‘man-made’ but not, given a little loving attention, unmalleable—which she uses to express the truth” (77-78). Of course, it is not entirely clear what it might mean for a poem to be written “with respect … for language,” but it surely takes us far from the direct, expressive style popular through the 1970s in women’s writing. From Allnutt’s perspective, poetry needs
to address the fact that language itself complicates the signifying process.

Already in the late ‘60s in Cambridge, the poets of *The English Intelligencer* were exploring the creative possibilities of poetic language through their reading of Charles Olson. Olson stressed the physicality of language whose energy a poet can tap into by embodying the active, original force of the world. Language is not a tool the poet uses to express something; rather, it is itself the energy of poetry. And in being active, poetic language is incapable of expressing or matching concepts or categories. Therefore, we no longer read a poem and understand its meaning as conceptual referent because language and concepts are incommensurate.

In 1959, Olson responded to a query from Cambridge poet Elaine Feinstein about his understanding of speech rhythms and “the use of the Image.” Subsequently, this letter has been treated as an addendum to his foundational 1950 essay “Projective Verse.” Olson’s letter reflects many of his varied and puzzling concerns of the time, but they are all grounded in one rich insight: “speech as a communicator is prior to the individual and is picked up as soon as and with ma’s milk” (*Collected* 250). Language is a point of interaction between self and world, and its origins are not found in the recesses of one’s interiority. Rather, language is poetically energized in the active process of the self’s relation with the world, which is concentrated in the porousness of one’s skin. In Olson’s essay “Human Universe” (1951), he makes this point: “Art does not seek to describe but to enact. And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own
process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again” (162). The self is not a monad for Olson; rather, one is always already connected with the processes of the cosmos. Therefore, his aesthetic jars with expressive modes of poetry that use language as a transparent medium to convey abstract concepts.

In the poem “Marriage,” published in The English Intelligencer in 1966, Feinstein makes use of Olson’s poetics in recasting the possibilities of women’s poetry. The poem is conventional in some respects: it is about the pain of a strained marriage. Yet the language achieves in places a tone reminiscent of some of Prynne’s poetry from this time:

We have taken our shape from the
damage we do one another, gently as
bodies moving together at night, we amend
our gestures, softly we hold our places:

Then the final stanza reaches a resolution characteristic of Olson:

any yet we go toward birthdays and other
marks not wryly not thriftily
waiting, for where shall we find it, a
joyous, a various world? in a fury
we share, which keeps us, without
resignation: tender whenever we touch what
else we share, this flesh we
bring together it hurts to
think of dying as we lie close (TEI 111, Feinstein 23)

The image of shared flesh loses all vestiges of a simple, romantic union of lovers, because here flesh is marked by difference. Flesh is the point of one’s interaction with exteriority, so it is necessarily disruptive and discontinuous. In contrast to Rumens’ ability to “own” the experience of touching the girl’s skin in
“Geography Lesson,” Feinstein’s experience of touching is fraught with unbridgeable separation. Tenderness, for Feinstein, is, however, still possible in such an ambiguous condition. In “Human Universe,” Olson admires the Mayan people because “they wear their flesh with that difference which the understanding that is common leads to. When I am rocked by the roads against any of them—kids, women, men—their flesh is most gentle, is granted, touch is in no sense anything but the natural law of flesh” (158). The flesh, for Olson, counters the Aristotelian demand for “logic and classification” that pervades modern Western societies.

The final stanza of Feinstein’s poem admits Olson’s celebration of the flesh as a way to “hew to experience” or to “stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way” (Olson, Collected 157). Hewing to experience, however, demands that one avoid slipping into the kind of metaphorically conceptual language that Rumens uses in identifying the schoolgirl with Czechoslovakia. Rather, experience entails physical rifts, which Feinstein signals in her choppy syntax and Olsonian spacing. Flesh is indeed affirmative for Feinstein, but it is marked by gaps and uncertainty.

III.

For feminist poets in the 1970s, appeals to the body were alluring because the physicality of a woman’s body resists subsumption into the masculine discourse of “logic and classification.” French theorists were particularly preoccupied with explicating *écriture féminine*. In “The Laugh of Medusa”
(1975), Hélène Cixous called on women to write the “self,” which entails subverting masculine, logical categories and giving voice to an elemental “native strength” (250). A woman, Cixous contends, doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she’s saying. (251)

A woman’s body is pegged against conceptual thought, which is responsible for the social conditions that have marginalized women’s voices. Cixous believes that women’s bodily writing opens a “space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (249). In terms of practice, she endorses a writing that sweeps away syntax and that invents “the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (256). Such writing gives voice to “a woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardo” (256). Writing the body is a strategy of reinforcing language’s materiality against the ideological status quo of meager conceptualization, and it thereby holds out the possibility for an alternative, materially-based social structure.

Denise Riley’s Marxism for Infants (1977) explores the possible intersection between feminist poetics of the body and socialist politics. The title itself indicates a key struggle feminist, experimental poets were dealing with through the ‘70s, namely how can difficult poetry affect anyone outside of its select coterie of readers? The title of Riley’s volume comes from George Orwell’s The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), a book full of contempt for academic
socialists: “Sometimes I look at a Socialist—the intellectual, tract-writing type of Socialist, with his pullover, his fuzzy hair, and his Marxian quotation—and wonder what the devil his motive really is. It is often difficult to believe that it is a love of anybody, especially of the working class, from whom he is of all people the furthest removed” (178-179). Earlier in the book, Orwell voices a similar complaint:

> For it is brought home to you, at least while you are watching, that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. You and I and the editor of *Times Lit. Supp.*, and the Nancy poets and the Archbishop of Canterbury and Comrade X, author of *Marxism for Infants*—all of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel. (34-35)

Indeed, how can experimental poetry do anything for the working class or women? Two years after Riley’s friend and collaborator (in *No Fee* [1979]) Wendy Mulford published *Marxism for Infants*, she emphatically writes of her concern that she may be just as disconnected as Comrade X:

> The first problem is one of isolation. My writing is read and heard mainly by men engaged in poetic practices of differing kinds for whom my work has significance because of the attempt I have been making to work at the level of the production of meaning. But I want to join my voice with the voices of other women struggling to destruct the lie of culture. (‘‘Notes’’ 33)

In this essay, Mulford never articulates a solution to her feeling of isolation, but she does vigorously assert the need for experimental writing for any feminist or socialist progress: “I think in order to transform society from this inhumane, partial, literally murderous state we have to recognise first that material reality, to see laser-sharp how it is structured at its deepest level on the sexual divide in
order to be able to work together, as men and women, to change it, a task as urgent for artists as for workers in any other field” (36). Even if working-class women do not pick up *Marxism for Infants* (Comrade X’s or Riley’s), the feminist/socialist poet still does her work to lay bare the material basis of language, which Mulford and Riley view as a necessary step toward political progress.

*Marxism for Infants*, Riley’s first volume, negotiates the thorny ground of feminist poetics by oscillating between drawing attention to the material force of the female body and what Mulford calls the “revolutionary practice in the field of the signifier” (32). Attempts to thematize the body constantly battle with the identity of the body. This strife is particularly evident in the seventh poem:

```
    she has ingested her wife
    she has re-inhabited her own wrists
    she is squatting in her own temples, the
    fall of light on hair or any decoration
    is re-possessed.  ‘She’ is I.  (*Dry Air* 11)
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The “she” is methodically taking possession of her own body from the designation of wife that previously burdened her. Before Riley allows this movement to grant her character a sense of regained power or composure, she abruptly questions the poem’s ability to name “she.” The concluding sentence is not a moment of expressive clarity, because Riley’s concern is with the very possibility of writing “she” at all. In the volume’s famous opening poem, “A note on sex and ‘the reclaiming of language,’” Riley announces her challenge as a poet:

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The work is
  e.g., to write ‘she’ and for that to be a statement
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187
of fact only and not a strong image
of everything which is not-you, which sees you \textit{(Dry Air 7)}

Riley’s poetry attempts to write “she” emptied of all of the strong images readers traditionally attach to women. In this, she is reclaiming the materiality of language’s signifying process.

Riley suspects that “writing the body” may in fact be too laden with categories to help in exposing language’s most basic workings. The fourth poem of \textit{Marxism for Infants}, however, ends with a tentative endorsement of the body as source of identity:

\begin{verbatim}
I cannot understand the function of the living body
except by enacting it myself
and except in so far as I am a body
which rises towards the world \textit{(Marxism, n.p.)}
\end{verbatim}

Riley’s apprehension is marked by the two “except”s and by the sense of alienation from “the world” a concentration on one’s body entails. That Riley omitted this poem from her 1985 collection \textit{Dry Air} suggests that she was not comfortable with such a conditional endorsement of the body. Further, a poem from \textit{Marxism} she did include in \textit{Dry Air} highlights the body’s instability in relation to knowledge:

\begin{verbatim}
and through each transforming
yourself to be not here whose body shapes a hundred lights a glowing strip of absence night’s noisy and particular who vanishes with that flawless sense of occasion I guess you’d have if only I knew you at first light leaving ‘the wrong body’, old, known \textit{(Dry Air 18)}
\end{verbatim}
This is the second half of a poem that details the drama of what Riley later calls living “inside a designation” (*Dry Air* 26). It inquires into the key question of Riley’s early poetry: how does a woman act and identify herself when she is called “woman”? Apparently, she transforms herself according to the occasion. But this practice effects a void and a further disconnection of self and world. In acting according to a designation, the body “shapes” a “glowing strip of absence,” which effectively erases the body. The poem doesn’t offer a solution to this existential problem, but it nicely lays out the theoretical ground of much of Riley’s work.

Riley’s study entitled “*Am I that Name?*: Feminism and the Category of *Women in History* (1988) works through the relation of women’s bodies and what “women” has meant through history. How can “women” mean anything at all that isn’t either essentializing or so loaded with singular, local meanings that the collective term loses all of its force? Riley is tempted to declare brusquely that “women” don’t exist; however, she knows that political progress depends so heavily on the term. In the end, she settles for a compromise: “I’d argue that it is compatible to suggest that ‘women’ don’t exist—while maintaining a politics of ‘as if they existed’—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did. So that official suppositions and conservative popular convictions will need to be countered constantly by redefinitions of ‘women’” (112). Indeed, she endorses a loose and floating definition of women solely for political efficacy:

So feminism must now be agile enough to say, ‘Now we will be “women”—but now we will be persons, not these ‘women.’’ And, in practice, what sounds like a rigid opposition—between a philosophical correctness about the indeterminacy of the term, and a strategical
willingness to clap one’s feminist hand over one’s theoretical mouth and just get on with ‘women’ where necessary—will loosen. A category may be at least conceptually shaken if it is challenged and refurbished, instead of only being perversely strengthened by repetition. (113)

One way in which the category can be shaken is in language use. She recalls Empson’s corrective regarding Richards’ claim that language is radically metaphorical. Although Empson allowed the woman-beauty equation, he found “cat” to be utterly devoid of metaphorical potential. Empson shows that the passage of time alters the connotations words have; for example, he points out that “Chastity” has lost its referential force over the years. In turn, Riley pleads that “woman” may be able to shake off its encumbering baggage: “If it were true that ‘a word can become a “compacted doctrine” or even that all words are compacted doctrines inherently’ then it would be vital to grasp these means ‘by which our language is continually thrusting doctrines upon us, perhaps very ill-considered ones’” (108). That goal is the impetus behind Riley’s extensive historical and sociological research.

At the same time, however, it is necessary to question the efficacy of the ostensibly libratory, feminist discourses that assume an underlying identity of all women rooted in their physical bodies. One target would be Cixous, who argues, “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations” (252-253). Already in 1985, Toril Moi had made a forceful case against Cixous’ project insofar as it is “as marred as much by its lack of reference
Riley’s argument against “body” theory is largely in tune with Moi’s: feminist theory that draws its resources from a concept of women’s bodies is essentialist and is therefore inadequate to deal with the empirical history of women. Riley attacks Irigaray—or, at least Elizabeth Gross’ reading of Irigaray, which asserts that “the reinscription, through discourses, of a positive, autonomous body for women is to render disfunctional all forms of knowledge that have hitherto presented themselves as neutral, objective or perspective-less” (qtd. in Riley, Am 101). Riley discounts the possibility of an “autonomous body for women,” because the body “is not, for all its corporeality, an originating point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect” (102). It is most forcefully an effect of the discourses that define what a body is: “The body becomes visible as a body, and as a female body, only under some particular gaze—including that of politics” (106). Riley maintains that women’s bodies exist just as women do in a vexed

59Moi continues to argue along a similar deconstructive path in her partisan criticism of Luce Irigaray’s theoretical writing. Irigaray maintains that “womenspeak” (le parler femme) has its source in the non-identical morphology of women’s bodies, in particular in women’s differential genitalia: “her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two—but not divisible into ones—who stimulate each other” (100). Therefore, Irigaray contends, woman is always already marked by an originary alterity incompatible with masculine univocal logic. Derived from a women’s physical body, women’s language celebrates its incommensurability: “One must listen to hear differently in order to her an ‘other meaning’ which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. For when ‘she’ says something, it is already no longer identical to what she means” (103). Moi’s criticism of this position follows on Monique Plaza’s earlier analysis of Irigaray, which concludes that for, Irigaray, “[a]ll that ‘is’ woman comes to her in the last instances from her anatomical sex, which touches itself all the time” (qtd. in Moi 146). Or, in short, Irigaray is guilty of essentializing women through biological sex. Moi suggests that the implications of this position are counterproductive for feminism: “the paradox of her position is that while she strongly defends the idea of ‘woman’ as multiple, decentered and undefinable, her unsophisticated approach to patriarchal power forces her to analyse ‘woman’ (in the singular) throughout as if ‘she’ were indeed a simple, unchanging unity, always confronting the same kind of monolithic patriarchal oppression” (147). As soon as woman is essentialized, political progress grinds to a halt because static, idealized woman has no brief within history.
network of language, politics, and history. We would make a metaphysical error in placing too much weight on either category because they are always shifting and non-originary. Riley says that we need to take what she calls an “ironic” stance on these matters so that we can speak meaningfully about women and women’s bodies without getting caught in an a-historical trap that seeks to base the terms in non-negotiable concepts.

In 1979, Julia Kristeva’s “Women’s Time” laid the foundation for the kind of criticism of body theory that Riley takes up in Am I That Name? Kristeva distinguishes between two generations of feminism. The first was interested primarily in establishing the social and political equality of women, which corresponded to a linear conception of history. Feminists inspired by the Paris demonstrations of May 1968, however, stressed women’s fundamental difference from men and, therefore, engaged with a non-linear temporality. Kristeva argues that the second feminism, which was still pervasive in the late 1970s, has the potential merely to reverse the prevailing sexism and assert another version of univocal sexism in society: “Rather, the very logic of counter-power and of counter-society necessarily generates, by its very structure, its essence as a simulacrum of the combated society or of power” (203). The point here is that direct opposition to an existing ideology works within the terms of that ideology and has no chance of opening space for an alternative vision. Elsewhere Kristeva explains: “But, to invert Spinoza’s phrase, as everyone knows every negation is a definition. An ‘opposing’ position is therefore determined by what is being opposed” (“Why” 274). Kristeva argues that a feminist account of maternity is
needed to challenge dominant ideology and to offer a positive description of social relations outside of a closed master-slave dynamic. Interestingly, in Riley’s account of “Women’s Time,” she never acknowledges Kristeva’s argument for maternity; instead, she focuses on Kristeva’s relocation of the battle between the sexes to “the very place where it operates with the maximum intransigence, in other words, in personal and social identity itself, so as to make it disintegrate in its very nucleus” (qtd. in Riley 110; Kristeva 209). Although Kristeva never suggests that motherhood is definitive of womanhood, she does say that maternity offers us some insight into the differential identity of women: “redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech” (206). In short, maternity is a productive and creative instance of feminine singularity, which is an aspect of feminism neither of the two generations of feminists adequately grasped.

Kristeva connects maternity to literary creation and says that “aesthetic practices” should bring out the “singularity of each person” and the “relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence” (210). A new generation of feminism, Kristeva believes, should focus attention on women’s non-essential singularity in relation to their creative desires, which, for Kristeva, are replete with psychoanalytic significance.

In *Am I that Name?* Riley largely follows Kristeva’s argument in “Women’s Time,” but in the end she thinks that Kristeva unrealistically pushes the category “women” into oblivion.

Julia Kristeva’s recommendation is a bold stroke—that the only revolutionary road will slice through the current confusions to bypass
women’ as an anthropomorphic stumbling-block. But this would only follow if you assume that the identity of “women” is really coherent, so that you are faced only with the options of revering it, or abandoning it for its hopeless antagonistic conservatism, as she proposes. (110)

Is this really what Kristeva proposes? Kristeva, in fact, comes out flat against the coherence of “woman”: “I think that the apparent coherence which the term ‘woman’ assumes in contemporary ideology, apart from its ‘mass’ or ‘shock’ effect for activist purposes, essentially has the negative effect of effacing the differences among the diverse functions or structures which operate beneath this word” (193). This sentence seems perfectly in tune with Riley’s argument. Riley breaks with Kristeva not so much over the coherence of “women” but rather over the possibility for the political collectivity of women. Kristeva argues that “aesthetic practices” should work “to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes” (“Women’s” 210). Demystification, however, comes at the cost of political solidarity, as Toril Moi has indicated: “The stress on negativity and disruption, rather than on questions of organization and solidarity, leads Kristeva in effect to an anarchist and subjectivist political position” (169). Riley, on the other hand, is eager to maintain the political purchase in the term “women”: “modern feminism, because it deals with the conditions of groups, is sociological in its character as it is in its historical development. It cannot escape the torments which spring from speaking for a collectivity” (111).

Clearly, Riley is more invested than Kristeva in the political potential of women’s solidarity, whereas Kristeva is more interested than Riley in the
individual or singular subjectivity of particular women. Put differently, Riley does not see an insurmountable barrier between the individual and the social, whereas Kristeva does (at least, in this essay from 1979; her later work engages more squarely with social issues). The individual, for Kristeva, is shorn of stable identity: “What can ‘identity,’ even ‘sexual identity,’ mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?” (209). The individual is marked by difference, which, for Kristeva, means that the psychoanalytic realm of the imaginary constantly unsettles the discourse of identity. The individual subject then is in process enacting “an interiorization of the founding separation of the socio-symbolic contract” (210). Just as language and society consist of symbolic and semiotic levels, the individual internalizes that difference. It becomes Riley’s challenge as a poet in the years after the publication of Am I that Name? to investigate the intersection of the individual subject’s instability and the sociological and political context in which women find themselves.

IV.

One of the unexpected upshots of Am I that Name? concerns the referentiality of language. In the end, Riley settles for an uneasy compromise regarding the meaning of “women.” The term in itself does not objectively mean anything in particular, but, for pragmatic political reasons, she allows us to use the term with what amounts to a wink and a nod. She doesn’t follow Mallarmé’s dictum “Quand je dis une fleur...” because women have too much at stake to give
up completely the link between language and reality. This commitment to the political puts her at some distance from Kristeva, who in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) argued that poetic language’s mimetic function is “internally dependent on a subject of enunciation who is unlike the transcendental ego in that he does not suppress the semiotic *chora* but instead raises the *chora* to the status of a signifier” (57). Kristeva goes on to say that mimesis “must posit an object, but this ‘object’ is merely a result of the drive economy of enunciation; its true position is inconsequential” (57). But Riley insists that the object of “women” is consequential. What kind of poetry can attest to Kristeva’s insights about the non-representational nature of modernist poetry and still admit that the “object” of language has a “true position” in the world?

In the 1980s some feminists doubted the knowability of things in the world since they are always framed within the strictures of masculine discourse. For example, Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka introduce their anthology, *Discovering Reality* (1983), by arguing that women are outside of the existing bodies of knowledge because these “take men, their lives and their beliefs as the human norm” (ix). Elsewhere, as Cora Diamond has noted, Harding expands her argument to claim, in Diamond’s words, “that masculine bias goes down into the fundamental structures of knowledge and is determinitive of our very conceptions of objectivity, experience, and rationality themselves” (1002). From Harding’s point of view, women find themselves in an epistemological blind alley. The poet Stef Pixner contributed a poem to *One Foot on the Mountain* that struggles to find
some way out of this situation. The title bluntly states her starting-point, “THAT WORLD THROUGH THE WINDOW IS A BAREFACED LIE”:

that world
through the window
is a barefaced lie.

there is ink on the yellow fields
and the moon
has been glued to the night
like an egg is a scrapbook.

bitter the battering moth
and the greases that wind
shaken wave.

bitter the bird that flies
in ever smaller circles
as the poisoned world contracts.

there is a cold wind
inside me
and a bird
flies like a black rag
over the fields
behind my eyes. (224)

If the outside world is a lie, what is one to do? This poem suggests that at very least the self is not a lie. The poem sets up a strict subject-object dichotomy where what is outside is false and what is inside is true. The final stanza centers all of the poem’s energy on the speaker’s stable subject-position. The cold wind ushers in the cold truth “inside me” and helps push the “black rag” of a bird out beyond the speaker’s ken. Pixner’s rhetorical move here proved widely popular with feminist poets through the 1980s and led to many confessional pieces that work within the binary structure of self against and isolated from the world.
In 1992, Riley published a piece entitled “A Short History of Some Preoccupations,” in which she considers the intellectual contexts of the socialist and feminist debates in which she participated in the 1970s and 1980s. After stressing the importance of Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* for demonstrating the power competing discourses have enjoyed in shaping history, she then draws attention to Merleau-Ponty’s insight into “the perspectival character of knowledge.” She cites the conclusion of *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

> I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style…. The fact remains that I am free, not in spite of, or on the hither side of, these motivations, but by means of them. For this significant life, this certain significance of nature and history which I am, does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it…. Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but on the contrary because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world. (qtd. in Riley, “Short” 127)

Even if the perceptible world is determined by a wide range of often unwelcoming discourses, one need not retreat from it as Stef Pixner portrays in her poem. Rather, if one acknowledges one’s place within the dominant psychological and historical structures, one can gain access to the world, albeit in a heavily mediated way. But Merleau-Ponty’s point is that this mediation is positive because it disabuses us of the illusion that we have recourse to a private and isolated refuge in the self.

In notes written in 1959, Merleau-Ponty expresses his dissatisfaction with his formulation of the relationship between self and world in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The problems posed in *Ph.P.* are insoluble because I start there from
the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction—“(Visible 200). It seems that Riley is in agreement here with Merleau-Ponty and even more in line with the corrective he proposed just before his untimely death in 1961. First, however, to get a sense of Riley’s distance from “the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction,” we can read her final poem in the sequence “Seven Strangely Exciting Lies” (1993):

Thickened with books again, vexed by the grave again, falling downstairs and not looking

and going outside again there’s a world, there’s one in here also

Stay at once in both of them though not for keeps yet certainly (Selected 84)

The outer world helps constitute the inner through the active bridging of the two described in the final two lines. The certainty afforded to the “not for keeps” flux of identity indicates a rejection of a consciousness that would graft objectification onto things in the outer world. Riley’s later poetry—after Dry Air (1985)—is continually concerned with the intersection of inner and outer and with the dynamic version of subjectivity that emerges. This development from her earlier interest in the possibility of writing “she” accords with Merleau-Ponty’s revision of his phenomenology.

In his writings in the early 1960s, Merleau-Ponty maintains that we can get around the consciousness-object split by conceiving of the body as a sentient thing among other things in the world. In “Eye and Mind” (“L’Oeil et l’esprit”), he writes, “Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in
the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing…. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body” (Primacy 163). It is impossible to abstract oneself from this condition, because as Merleau-Ponty had written earlier (and from which Riley later borrows for a title of a poem), “I am from the start outside myself and open to the world” (Phenomenology 456).

There is no rigid distinction between self and world; instead, self and world are wedded in a rich fabric of visibility. When I look at things in the world, I do not take cognitive possession of them, but rather I open myself to the reversibility of vision, which in effect puts me in the position of being seen. This experience is an intertwining of flesh and has nothing to do with the objectification of a thing: “I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I see it” (Primacy 164).

Merleau-Ponty says that painters are exemplary in their rendering of the dynamism of vision because they do not reproduce an external reality, but instead their work offers a “fabric of brute meaning” afforded by their experience of seeing “according to” the world: “The painter’s vision is not a view upon the outside, a merely ‘physical-optical’ relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible” (181). Paintings reveal a level of visibility between the see-er and the seen, a dimension Merleau-Ponty calls “depth.” Depth allows a viewer to be
drawn in and to participate in “the being of space beyond every [particular] point of view” (173). Moreover, depth shows the connectedness of divergent figures and materials within the painting: “The enigma consists in the fact that I see things, each one in its place, precisely because they eclipse one another, and that they are rivals before my sight precisely because each one is in its own place. Their exteriority is known in their envelopment and their mutual dependence in their autonomy” (180). Depth is what holds together all (materials and figures) that goes into a painting. It is, therefore, the invisibility that underlies all visibility, because I cannot see it apart from its role in painting’s own visibility.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that color may be the closest visible correlative of depth: “It is for the benefit of color that we must break up the form-spectacle. Thus the question is not of colors, ‘simulacra of the colors of nature.’ The question, rather, concerns the dimension of color, that dimension which creates identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something—creates them for itself, for itself….” (181). He breaks off abruptly here because he knows that color is unquestionably visible: “The return to color has the merit of getting somewhat nearer to ‘the heart of things’ [Klee], but this heart is beyond the color envelope just as it is beyond the space envelope” (181). Merleau-Ponty seems committed to non-representational painting that uses color to bring about a showing of the interdependence of its constitutive materials. It then follows that when a viewer sees this painting, he or she would undergo an experience of the reversibility of vision, which is a phenomenological discovery of the unifying flesh of the world.
In the early 1990s Denise Riley’s and Wendy Mulford’s poetry started to engage with abstract painting. Though their poetry of this period is distinct, their work with painting explores the relation between poetic language and reality. In an interview in 1995, Romana Huk asked Riley about her work’s relation to paintings by Ian McKeever and Gillian Ayres:

Well, these are all painters of large, energetic, unbounded, differently vigorous abstract work, which relies heavily on brilliance of or density of colour, or the floating quality of colour, as well as a roughness or visibility of brushwork. So that you get a feeling of speed and heaviness and immediacy just by being in the same room as those paintings. And is it possible to do it with poetry? My attempts are always going to end in tears; black and white typography on the page is so remorsefully different. (21)

As with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the flesh of the world, color offers an immediacy that connects the see-er and the seen. Can poetry achieve this same effect? Nigel Wheale noticed the “painterly” quality of Riley’s work in the early ‘90s: “the poetry is alert to vibrancy and mordancy of what we see.” He goes on to say that Riley’s poetry manages to achieve the effect of color not merely as “an attention to the surface of things, because the colours inform the emotional cast of what is being described” (Wheale 70). Color or what in the poetry amounts to a brightness of language manages to bridge the gulf between writer and external world through a connective “emotional cast.” Through her “attention to the surface of things,” Riley presents an affective relation between poet and world that avoids objectification of exteriority and still celebrates the reflexivity of lyric, subjective poetry.
What is it to write color? Wendy Mulford’s volume of poetry *The Bay of Naples* (1992) is a concerted engagement with some of the most colorful paintings in the contemporary British art world, Howard Hodgkin’s “Forty Paintings 1973-1984,” which were exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1985. The back cover of Mulford’s book states: “The poems do not describe the paintings but are inspired by and have a variety of direct or tangential connections with them.” In each of the paintings in this exhibition, Hodgkin condenses vibrant bright colors on a wood surface without a frame. He has said that he is “a representational painter, but not a painter of appearances. I paint representational pictures of emotional situations” (qtd. in Graham-Dixon 7). Representation here lacks the traditional sense of an artist reproducing on canvas things in the world. Instead, like Riley, his work grows out of an “emotional cast” that binds inner and outer. Still, however, Hodgkin’s paintings are in a sense realistic, as he explained to an interviewer:

I want to get the sort of evasiveness of reality into my pictures, I mean, looking at you now, I don’t see Ingres’ portrait of Monsieur Bertin, for example. Because I’m always seeing something else and something more. I might be looking past you or looking at the light falling on part of you or thinking of you. So it’s my idea of you as well as what I see that’s in my mind. But this kind of realism which depends also a lot on illusionism, is, of course, evanescent, frail and difficult to establish. (qtd. in Graham-Dixon 214).
The outside world is the source of his painting, but it is only recognizable in his paintings as something quite different due to the impure nature of perception. In his “Valentine,” blue is at the center, which may represent a clearing outside, but that opening is blocked, first, by dabs of red, yellow, and green and then by an accumulation of figures, each crowding others out. Most pronounced is a yellow-
green, horizontal arrow pointing, as if to indicate to the viewer where exactly the representation of the valentine may be found. Hodgkin’s art, however, doesn’t work within that kind of symbolic system of reference. The valentine is all the material globs of paint that recall all the events, memories, and feelings the painting experiences in relation to it. “My subject matter is simple and straightforward,” he said in an interview:

It ranges from views through windows, landscapes, even occasionally a still-life, to memories of holidays, encounters with interiors and art collections, other people, other bodies, love affairs, sexual encounters and emotional situations of all kinds, even including eating… All these subjects have one thing in common—seen through the eyes of memory they must be transformed into things, into pictures using the traditional vocabulary of painting, where scale and illusionism, among other ingredients, play their part. (qtd. in Graham-Dixon 216)

His painting is an active contest of competing materials that are all layered with sometimes inconsistent associations.

Mulford begins The Bay of Naples with “Valentine” to emphasize the principles that guide the entire volume: rich but unstable reference and dynamic, competing play within language:

there are spaces we cannot reach
in the heart of the circle the words grown viscous
tasting of sherbet vanilla praline nuts
a whole cosmos turned to toffee by the clowns. your sector dismisses you. waves
you goodbye. old-fashion burble procreates
a past the single arrow qualifies.
such attachment. such astigmatic vision. regard
flies everywhere, bouncing off the surface
of the globe. she is nowhere constituted and bits
hang off her all the time. if we do not grip
the cobalt, we slide off the edge. for
where our present is is strictly speaking
irredeemable. terms jostle. within
the elastic limits speeches slide collide
bumping against the steel skull-cap it’s
undeniable the step is gone. all’s to do. is
dusted off our loss & panic slither,
reclaims our corralled selves maybe not feed
the gorging beast whose hungry flanks
rub up against our metal bars. collapses. free
falls. a stranger beckoning,
fluttering in the turning leaves. within
the heaped-up coals the finger points no
place, no movement. it happens here,
arrow, cobalt, bullet-bunch
no other valentine (3-4)

The opening lines deal squarely with the difficulties of reference. Just as the blue sky entices but frustrates the viewer in Hodgkin’s painting, Mulford portrays a space we want to reach but cannot because there words are “viscous” and refractory. Distinctive valentines are all amalgamated in this space. Instead, all valentines contribute to the viscous and heterogeneous play of meaning that poetry entertains. This play is an active investigation into what happens when “terms jostle” and poetry becomes a material presencing within the context of representational language. Linda Kinnahan sees in the poems of *The Bay of Naples* an intersplicing of different registers of language: “the verbal devices frame and reframe our perceptions and the emotional valence of the poems so that we are watching the frame of language dissolve into the subject of language, the workings of the representational medium” (206). Mulford sees in the painting the meaning of “valentine” overdetermined by the competing swathes and dabs of color. This quality is positive because the richness of the different and multiple associations of “valentine” produces a singular work of art that is buoyed by its own multiplicity but in the end is “no other valentine.” Therefore, in the poem
Mulford explores how multiplicity and singularity can coexist. She blends the frame of jostling, indeterminate meanings into a structure of representation when, following Hodgkin, “representation” means more than the representation of appearances. What results in an exploration of the interplay between subjectivity and exteriority in which “our corralled selves” are exposed to a “stranger beckoning.” In the end, the encounter with the stranger is the experience with the multiplicity of meaning of the kind of poetic language that proves irreducible to the reach of our concepts.

Mulford finds in Hodgkin’s paintings a way of expressing artistically the experience of confronting too much meaning, more meaning than can fit comfortably into an objective sketch of a thing or into a propositional sentence. In “Lure, 1963” Denise Riley turns to Gillian Ayres’ painting Lure to examine how the experience of subjectivity is riddled with many of the trappings we like to think are firmly outside of our awareness. Unlike Hodgkin, Ayres uses relatively large canvases to explore the connectivity and fusion of competing colors. Mel Gooding describes Lure and its companion painting, Scott, in terms of their abundant, dynamic color patterns: “brilliantly coloured forms, like the petals of great flowers, are now almost entirely contained within pools of stained colour, which might be flowing out of the rectangle or floating into it; they suggest a continuity with the world beyond the edge” (76). The autonomy of the painting is put in question because the colors seem to seep onto the canvas from outside of the frame. The interplay of the colors and the seemingly porous border suggest that there is a fundamental confusion between interiority and exteriority.
Accordingly, Ayres’ work appeals to Riley, whose poetry consistently betrays a vibrant, painterly quality. In her 1995 interview, Riley says she admires the “speed and heaviness” in the work of Ayres and Ian McKeever but feels in writing poetry attempts to achieve such an effect “are always going to end in tears; black and white typography on the page is so remorselessly different” (21). Nevertheless, like the painters, she can write with “speed,” which she understands as a “trace” or “gesture.” As an example, in the interview she points to her poem “Red Shout” from *Mop Mop Georgette* (1994). This is the poem’s first sentence:

“Terrible to think it’s more alive here when I’m alone than when I’m not—that something might come right just where ‘the edges of a page begin to bleed and show that it is human’—and come more right than when I do the same—I see how there could be an okay life whose feeling was kept collared and pinned down only over the writing—I still wait for a really human sign as light and shocking as an annunciation—sometimes I get it and in democratic form: Red Shout. (Selected 75)

In Riley’s account, these lines depict an opposition between the writer’s sense of containment and “a bleeding over the edges.” The “human sign” is the moment when the art’s bleeding or openness affects the artist. “And in the end what works is the possible vulnerability of the maker of that vivid gesture: perhaps somebody in a state of tremulousness. So I suppose that short poem is a kind of advocacy of outward gesture, as opposed to contemplative containment and purity” (21). The bleeding of colors that Riley finds in Ayres’ paintings operates as a gesture that draws the artist into the vulnerable, responsive position that admits external conditions into the constitution of her own subjectivity. In the terms of the poem,
bleeding is what makes us human, and strict categories defining what is mine and what is other fall apart.

This aesthetic of blending categories comes from Ayres’ painting. Riley’s poem “Lure, 1963” redirects many of the “bleeding” qualities of Ayres’ painting toward concerns of subjectivity.

Figure 2. Gillian Ayres, *Lure*
Navy near-black cut in with lemon, fruity bright lime green. I roam around around around around acidic yellows, globe oranges burning, slashed cream, huge scarlet flowing anemones, barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping When will I be loved? Flood, drag to papery long brushes of deep violet, that’s where it is, indigo, oh no, it’s in his kiss. Lime brilliance. Obsessive song. Ink tongues. Black cascades trail and spatter darkly orange pools toward washed lakes, whose welling rose and milk-beribboned pillars melt and sag, I’m just a crimson kid that you won’t date. Pear glow boys. Clean red. Fluent grey green, pine, broad stinging blue rough strips to make this floating space a burning place of whitest shores, a wave out on the ocean could never move that way, flower, swell, don’t ever make her blue. Oh yes I’m the great pretender. Red lays a stripe of darkest green on dark. My need is such I pretend too much, I’m wearing. And you’re not listening to a word I say. (Selected 50)

Initially the poem recognizably describes Ayres’ Lure. “Navy near-black” is as good as any description of the blended colors in the bottom-center of the painting. Although, in places, the poem diverts from the painting (for example, the “black cascades” and “deep violet” are absent in the painting), it nicely captures the energy of the competing colors. The colors are the agents in this contest for visibility where they sing, weep, burn, and sting. Amidst all this activity an “I” emerges shielded by a cloak of irony brought on by the refrains of pop songs. The entrance of this first-person subject in the second line is caught up in the catchy refrain of Dion’s “The Wanderer” (1962): “I roam around around around around.” The end of that sentence contorts into the “barbaric pink” singing and weeping “When will I be loved?” which is the title of the Everly Brothers’ 1960 hit song. Through the poem, lines of Betty Everet, The Platters, and Bobby Vee all join in the movement of the colors.
Riley is concerned with the impurity of the subject. Just as Ayres’ colors overlap in their own formation, half-remembered song lyrics or, more broadly, incidental events outside of our control form who we are. Insofar as there is a human subject in this poem, it is so layered with shards of the seemingly inconsequential that the “I” is never known apart from its role as a receptacle for bygone song lyrics. For Riley, however, this is a promising first step toward an understanding of subjectivity, because poetry must present the subject in a position of exposure to things outside of its purview. In other poems, it is clear that for Riley there is a subject by virtue of the vicissitudes of exteriority. As we have seen continually in the Cambridge poets, the subject becomes a subject only in the moment of exposing itself to what is outside of its control. For Riley, this movement of subjectivity is startlingly physical. For example, her poem “Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else” begins with a “shot”:

A body shot through, perforated, a tin sheet beaten out then peppered with thin holes, silvery, leaf-curled at their edges; light flies right through this tracery, voices leap, slip side-long, all faces split to angled facets: whichever piece is glimpsed, that bit is what I am (Selected 47)

The bit of flesh that takes hold as the “I” at the end of these lines repeatedly makes tentative assertions throughout Riley’s poetry of the ‘90s. Here is “True North” in its entirety:

My body’s frame arched to a drum houses a needle. A splinter of this world has stuck in me, snapped-off, afloat down syrupy blood. It points me on. This thick body can’t dim its brilliance though it vexes the car of my flesh. Sliver of outside that I cradle inside and which guarantees me my life also. (Selected 60)
In contrast to “body-writing,” the poet’s true north here is not the surety of her physical body; instead, it is the “sliver of outside” that has “stuck” in her flesh. Exteriority is internalized and is, therefore, definitive of Riley’s conception of subjectivity.

In a 1994 review essay of Riley’s _Mop Mop Georgette_, John Wilkinson argued that Riley’s characteristic movement of internalizing the external is hopelessly narcissistic. Wilkinson draws on Stephen Frosh’s account of narcissism:

> What strength has a self based on the internalization of others—indeed, to what should we ascribe the sense of selfhood which each of us seems to have? These are repetitive queries of contemporary experience: behind the mirror which the self needs to persuade it of its own existence, is there anything real? “Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object”; possibly, I am so like everything that I am nothing at all. (qtd. in Wilkinson 59)

From this, Wilkinson asks, “Could any formula better describe the claims Riley’s poetry makes on its reader?” (59). For Wilkinson, the problem with Riley’s poetry is that its narcissistic structure threatens the possibility of speech. The poetry turns in so much upon itself that it, in effect, cancels itself out through “the mirroring of a mirroring, the reflexiveness of reflexiveness” (59-60). From a more political perspective, Wilkinson worries that Riley’s reflexiveness flattens out external difference: “the body here is a collection of external objects _par excellence_, but it is one thing too, it is a repeated thing” (60). On this reading, narcissistic reflection is an equalizer of all the external conditions that affect the
subject. Wilkinson takes Riley’s “A Shortened Set” as exemplary in this regard, because

this poem ends by allowing the equivalent more-or-less integrity of others’ feelings, if no axiomatic integrity of self; although it might be argued that the resultant ‘out post-sexual’ has through this apparent act of grace withdrawn into a narcissistic redoubt, unable to entertain the claims on her which admit others’ unlikeness would bring through an intolerable breach. (62)

The passage Wilkinson has in mind here comes near the end of “A Shortened Set,” in which the speaker suggests that her biological parents’ abandoning her as a child left her “impossibly slow”

at admitting unlikeness or grasping the
dodgem collision whose shock isn’t
truth but like the spine says is no
deception. (Selected 44)

Wilkinson thinks that Riley’s failure to acknowledge the impossibility of adequately “admitting [exterior] unlikeness” peremptorily leads her to a “narcissistic redoubt” manifested a few lines later:

The loves are returned to
themselves, leaving
an out post-sexual. (44)

This, for Wilkinson, is a moment of narcissistic surrender because the affections of others have no relation to the subject. Further, on this reading, Riley’s boundless sardonic wit simply reinscribes the suffocating reflexivity characteristic of her narcissism. For example, from “A Shortened Set”: “There has been damage, which must stop at me / I think that’s finished” (Selected 38-39). Such
“attitudinising,” one of Riley’s terms from this poem, effectively finishes off exteriority and, with that, all hope. Wilkinson concludes his essay by suggesting that in Mop Mop Georgette “frail hope is snatched and disintegrated by a tireless and apparently omnipotent, insatiable hunger, sardony does prevail” (69).

Wilkinson’s argument grows out of a critical consensus on the reflexive nature of Riley’s work. In no uncertain terms, James Keery wrote in 1994 that Riley’s poetry is marred by “a fatal reflexiveness” (13). Wilkinson furthers this argument by contending that Riley’s reflexiveness is symptomatic of writing “trapped within the narcissistic orbit” and fully manifested through sardony (68). The Canadian poet Lisa Robertson has challenged Wilkinson’s reading of Riley’s “sardony as a method of managing narcissism” by arguing that the poetry’s narcissism is not at all the closed circuit Wilkinson detects (Robertson 394). If we can agree that there is a manifest reflexivity in Riley’s poetry, is it possible to understand this reflexivity as an effect of subjective openness and vulnerability? I believe it is, and I take my lead from Robertson: “Riley’s narcissism frustrates the expectation of nurturance. But it is active in the sense that her reflexivities pose a series of transitive spaces from which we can think and judge otherwise, tentative spaces which disturb foundational unities” (394). Whereas Wilkinson sees reflexivity as a closed orbit of narcissistic desire, Robertson sees it as an activity that disturbs unities or that breaks closed systems. Robertson comes to Riley’s work in an essay that begins by addressing Rousseau’s Sophie in Emile whose pleasure in writing falls into silence and then into the domestic economy. Riley’s poetry introduces skepticism into this progression through the reflexive
gesture that often yields sardony, which, in Robertson’s reading, deflects “the
trajectory to well-socialized femininity” (394).

Riley’s reflexive sardony defuses claims to a stable, feminine identity, but,
I maintain, it produces a subject responsive to claims of exteriority. “Dark
Looks” begins in Riley’s characteristic tone of the 1990s:

Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work. The writer
properly should be the last person that the reader or the listener need think
about
yet the poet with her signature stands up trembling, grateful, mortally
embarrassed
and especially embarrassing to herself, patting her hair and twittering If, if
only
I need not have a physical appearance! To be sheer air, and mousseline!
and as she frets the minute wars scorch on through paranoias of the
unreviewed
herded against a cold that drives us in together— (Selected 74)

The poet’s fretting about her own physical appearance leads to a desire “to be
sheer air, and mousseline.” That wish, however, proves to be entirely fanciful as
“a cold … drives us together.” If this poem settled on the wish to be sheer air,
Wilkinson’s charge of irresponsible narcissism would seem entirely appropriate.
But Riley’s inward turn actually opens her to exteriority. Her insecurities about
her own identity morph into an acknowledgement of others, “us together.” When
Romana Huk asked Riley about Wilkinson’s reading of her poetry, she responded
by offering an understanding of narcissism that isn’t in the least solipsistic:
“Narcissism is a condition of being fragmented, but it’s through that
fragmentation and lack of a boundary that you become aware of and respond to
other people’s differences: you’re constantly struggling with those differences,
and you don’t suffer from illusions about your own finished quality” (20). In Ayres’ paintings, Riley sees the “lack of boundary” between self and others exemplified by the bleeding of colors. Paint on the canvas has the ability to enact the porosity she finds in the human subject’s relation to exteriority. In this regard, she recalls Merleau-Ponty’s description of the narcissism of vision: “Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises [exercer], he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity” (Visible 139). Narcissism here entails opening oneself to the gaze and the approach of things on the outside. For Merleau-Ponty, the “more profound sense of narcissism” is “to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate [émigrer] into it, to be seduced … so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen” (139).

Subjectivity then is a narcissistic activity, and, therefore, in so thoroughly exposing the subject to exteriority, it operates as a condition of vulnerability.

Riley successfully brings together her concerns about subjectivity and painting in an untitled poem in “A Shortened Set” derived from a painting of Ian McKeever. McKeever has always been interested in the flexible boundaries of painting. For example, in the 1970s he produced a number of works that gradually bore the marks of the natural world. Painting for a Hole in the Ground (1976) was just that: he left a painting in a hole in the ground on Chobham Common, Surrey so that the elements—rain, leaves, and whatever else that may
fall—would become integral to the painting: “He wanted his subject (the
‘activity’ of the landscape) to inscribe itself in the painting—to ‘present itself’
instead of his trying to represent it” (Biggs in McKeever 20). In 1985, he walked
for six weeks through Sweden’s Lapland to collect “information” (as he describes
his research) for a series of paintings entitled The Lapland Group. In these works,
his own wandering and mobility intersect with the rough and cold natural
environment. Here, for example, is Glacier III-Lapland (220cm x 170cm), on
which, I suspect, Riley based her poem.
How can black paint be warm? It is. As ochre stains slip into flooding milk, to the soft black that glows and clots in sooty swathes. Its edges rust, it bleeds lamp-black slow pools, as places of dragged cream shoot over it to whiteness, layered. Or the cream paint, leaden, wrinkles: birch bark in slabs, streaked over a peeling blue. A twist of thought is pinned there. A sexual black. And I can’t find my way home. Yet wandering there I may. By these snow graphics. Ice glazed to a grey sheen, hard across dark grass spikes. (Selected 38)
As in “Red Shout,” here the bleeding of colors serves as a metaphor for the human subject’s relation with otherness. The metaphor becomes somewhat more pronounced with the abrupt description: “A sexual black.” Here Riley is echoing McKeever’s gnomic assertion from a 1982 essay: “You have to be tempted by painting’s desire. Painting is sexual. That mysterious ‘other’ is only the other that she allows” (54). At very least, from this, we can understand that, for McKeever, painting exists only in relation to otherness, which accords with the constant bleeding of colors in his work. Likewise, as we have seen for Riley, identity depends on exposure to otherness: “And / I can’t find my way home.”

The wandering motif and the search for home are characteristic of the way in which the Cambridge poets have managed to articulate the position of subjectivity in their lyric poetry. Eric Bloodaxe in Briggflatts turns back toward home after wandering at sea and accepts the vulnerability ingredient in the uncertain circumstances:

Blind, we follow
rain slant, spray flick
to fields we do not know. (63)

More generally, however, Cambridge poetry demands a wandering, a leaving of conceptual categories in an experience at the level of the flesh. Again, the voice of Merleau-Ponty seems to preside over this poetry, for he argues that an experience with the flesh of the world is “to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced” (Visible 139). Subjectivity is a process of
emigrating to the non-identical where, in Prynne’s poem of 1968, Aristeas finds his flesh “touched” after his mysterious leave-taking:

Leaving the flesh vacant then, in a fuller’s shop, 
Aristeas removed himself for seven years 
into the steppes, preparing his skeleton and the 
song of his departure, his flesh anyway touched 
by the in-vading Cimmerian 
twilight (Poems 92)

Through this poem, in the Cimmerian twilight “the / vantage is singular / as the clan is without center” (92). In other words, Aristeas’ emigration is an experience with the singular, unforeeable things of exteriority, which are impossible to grasp cognitively, for they are decentered and multiple. In the face of such irreducible exteriority, Prynne suggests in “The Common Gain, Reverted” that the place of subjectivity is an openness that thwarts attempts to contain it and make it mine:

Not mine indeed but the sequence of fact, 
the lives spread out, it is a very wild and distant resort that keeps a man, wandering at night, more or less in his place. (89)

In conclusion, the wandering subjectivity we see in Cambridge poetry is the backdrop against which we can understand Riley’s tricky demand for women: “So feminism must now be agile enough to say, ‘Now we will be “women”—but now we will be persons, not these ‘women’” (Am 113). She does not want an end to identity and subjectivity. Rather, she wants a flexible enough female subject who can shake off her identificatory categories and risk exposing herself to the inassimable singularities encountered in her experience. Then her identity would be known “by these snow graphics,” as Riley writes in the poem from “A
Shor"tened Set.” Just as with writing on a snow-covered ground and the bleeding of painted colors, subjectivity can be open enough to risk exposure to exteriority and agile enough to revise—through experience—who “she” is.

The Cambridge poets tirelessly pursue the encounters at the edge of subjective experience. Their poetry betrays an ethical trust insofar as they conceive of writing as the flexible boundary between self and world. They locate language at this intersection, which proscribes both expressive poetry and materialist poetry. Positively, however, their poetic language is able to enact what Gadamer calls “an inner reversal of intentionality in reflection” (“On the Scope” 35). Their poetry does not reveal an intentional, mental content, but rather it exposes a human subject to a reversal of intentionality. It describes poetic experience as Erfahrung in which meaning is ambiguous because conceptual categories and propositional language are stymied once the particulars of exteriority upend intentionality. Accordingly, I think we do best to read the Cambridge poets from an ethical perspective, because their most basic question is how we can live without reducing things and people to replaceable categories. Their answer is that we need to attune ourselves to the seemingly inconsequential particularities at the edge of our awareness. Their poetry written at this edge is a good indication of what form this attunement may take.
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