Sound, sense, and story : narrativity and poeticity in the contemporary lyric poem

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SOUND, SENSE, AND STORY:
NARRATIVITY AND POETICITY IN THE
CONTEMPORARY LYRIC POEM

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
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I had thought this part of the thesis would be easiest to write, but it isn't. I'm up at 2A.M. at the moment because of the difficulty of the task. The tremendous exercise of thought that is academic research is solitary at best, but I imagine it would be functionally impossible without a strong network of support. Here are the nodes of mine:

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Abstract

This thesis explores the questions of how narratives are generated uniquely through the mechanisms of poetry and investigates the history of narrative theory and its orientation towards poetry. This thesis makes three main claims: firstly, that poetry is indeed very much capable of generating narrative; secondly, that the existing theoretical toolbox of narrative theory is inadequate to properly articulate the mechanics of narrative generation in poetry; and thirdly, that a synthesis of poetics and narrative theory is necessary for this aspect of literary poesis to be properly understood. Being primarily a theoretical work, it takes for its primary material a series of narrative theory and poetics texts, including the work of Brian McHale, James Phelan, Monika Fludernik, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Giorgio Agamben, John Shoptaw, Majorie Perloff, and David Herman. These theoretical texts are investigated comparatively from a meta-hermeneutical perspective (in the vein of Rita Felski and Derek Attridge) and surveyed to construct a new theoretical model that fits our reading purposes. Said theoretical model is thus applied to a series of poetic texts of varying lengths and styles to test the robustness of the method: these texts are Arthur Yap's "sociability", Derek Mahon's *The Hudson Letter*, John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror", and Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé's *The Wrong/Wrung Side of Love*. Over the course of reading these texts from the re-designed theoretical model proposed in this dissertation, the argument is made that poetry's unique quality of being structured around what DuPlessis terms "organised pauses or silences" renders it phenomenologically unique. We conclude on the argument that poetry demands a conscientious receptiveness to alterity and a sensitive attendance to form that require the reader to enter into a creative co-writing of the text with the author.

Introduction: Poetics versus Narratology

How do poems tell stories? Like all worthwhile questions, we have no easy answers—only further intriguing questions, such as the distinction between poetry and prose, or what makes a poem a poem. Within academia, the question narrows down to the place of poetry in the field of narrative theory—a question which appears slightly ungracious, when the historical context of narrative theory as a discipline is considered. After all, nearly three decades ago, at a time when the field of narrative studies was still coming to the fore, Benjamin Harshav noted in his capacity as editor of *Poetics Today* that narratology represented “an attempt to develop a meta-language in which to speak about the art of fiction”: “a logical division of Poetics”, in other words; “a Poetics of Prose” (Harshav 5, 6, 208). Tellingly, the common employment of “poetics” as a kind of shorthand or synonym for all attempts at systematizing the interrogation of literary form reveals to us the privilege poetry has traditionally enjoyed as a genre of high art, and by extension, the journey prose fiction has had to take on its way to literary respectability. Viewing narratology this way, the call for poetry to have a seat at the narratological table must surely rankle.

Yet this call is not as easily dismissed as it might seem. In the three decades since Harshav’s original observation, narrative theory has developed into a diverse, thriving discipline in its own right, with practitioners in fields as varied as media studies and cognitive neurology. Subjects of narratological inquiry now includes genres far beyond the original scope of prose fiction, such as graphic novels and video games. Yet as Brian McHale (who served as assistant editor of *Poetics* in 1980) has pointed out, poetry remains largely an afterthought as a storytelling vehicle. In a 2009 article entitled “Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry”, McHale observed the paradox of this omission:

Contemporary narrative theory is almost silent about poetry. In many classic contemporary monographs on narrative theory, in specialist journals such as the one

you are now reading, at scholarly meetings [...], poetry is conspicuous by its near-absence. Even the indispensable poems, the ones that narrative theory seems unable to do without, tend to be treated as de facto prose fictions; the poetry drops out of the equation [...] [Yet] most poems before the nineteenth century, and many since then, have been narrative poems. (McHale 11-12)

There is a sense, then, that the relationship between narratology and poetics has begun to tip, so that poetry is now knocking on the door of the narrative theory party, asking to be let in. McHale acknowledges in “Beginning” that there are certain “honourable exceptions to the general rule of narrative theory’s blindness to poetry”, and names Peter Hühn and James Phelan as examples of narrative theorists who have begun to apply the narratological method to poetry. In the introduction to *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry*, Hühn indeed does make such a case for the premise that “narration is an anthropologically universal semiotic practice” which is “one of the basic operations at work even in lyric poetry”, and states his belief that “modern narrative analysis [...] can help us conceptually refine and enhance the study of lyric poetry” (Hühn and Schönert 1). Yet McHale nonetheless finds Hühn’s approach to narratologically analysing poetry inadequate, noting that Hühn is more interested in examining narrative’s relationship to the lyric—viz. the lyric mode’s ability to mediate and organise temporal events through a refracted speaker—than he is in poetry per se, and that Hühn’s method could equally be applied to prose fiction as well as to lyric poetry (McHale 13). Similarly, he observes that Phelan’s analysis of Robert Frost’s “Home Burial” remakes the poem into a “honorary short story” by failing to account for the “regular meter, the lineation, or the other, less conventional features of spacing” that usually distinguish poetry from prose fiction. The problem of “the poetry [dropping] out of the equation”, then, remains for McHale; another methodology is needed, one which accounts for the “poeticity” of poetry, the “differentia specifica” (McHale 14).

This thesis, then, represents in part an examination of, as well as a response to, McHale's call to incorporate a closer attention to poetic form into our narratological lenses. In the pages to follow, I have attempted to follow the arc of the discourse between members of the narrative theory community, while staging my own theoretical interventions and refinements to the ideational structures of thought that shape our conceptions of narrative in theory. In addition, I have also attempted to remedy certain gaps that McHale's cursory probe into the subject has failed to address. As I have previously mentioned, McHale's argument that narrative theorists ought to be more historically inclusive hinged upon the long legacy that poetry has had as a storytelling genre. Accordingly, in both his original article as well as in subsequent papers, McHale has mostly focused on non-lyric narrative poems with rigid formal structures from *before* the late 20th century as a way of demonstrating the way that poetic form can interact and produce meaningfully narrative signification. In 2010's "Affordances of Form in Stanzaic Narrative Poetry", for instance, McHale examines the "narrative affordances of the Spenserian stanza" present in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (53), and again the employment of the *ottava rima* form by Kenneth Koch in *The Duplications* (56); similarly, in "Narrativity and Segmentivity, or, Poetry in the Gutter", he interrogates the "oblique and difficult relationship to forms of narrative coherence, and to the tradition of narrative theory" (34) posed by T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. This focus is, in all likelihood, McHale's attempt to correct for the overwhelming focus of his colleagues on the lyric poem as representative of all modes of poetry. In turning away from the contemporary lyric and focusing instead on older forms of poetry from the Western canon, however, McHale has inadvertently left some gaps in the poetic narrative theory project he incepted, which I shall now detail.

The first salient vacancy here is that there still remains a substantive need for criticism that examines contemporary poetry as it operates in the late 20th and 21st century through the lens of narrative theory *and* poetics; that is to say, criticism that bridges the gap between poetic

form and the narratives these poems generate and participate in. McHale persuasively argues that contemporary lyric poems deserve to be examined for their poeticity, rather than the mere rhetorical situations of their lyric mechanism, but his persuasiveness in “Beginning” only serves to highlight his subsequent neglect of this very task. Also conspicuously missing from the discussion is an accommodation of poems that have arrived after the lyric: that is to say, poems that were consciously conceived after the late modernist and postmodern experiments at deconstructing the singular, centred self. I have attempted to remedy this gap in the critical discourse by examining two prominent contemporary poets from the Anglosphere; namely, the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, as well as the American poet John Ashbery. In lieu of a much more extensive study of poetic evolution throughout the 20th century that would take up much more space than this thesis can accommodate, I believe that these two poets function as acceptable substitutes for discussing the major stylistic developments in contemporary poetry. Mahon, for instance, has been lauded in verse by Belfast poet Michael Longley as a fellow “poetic conservative/in the city of guns and long knives” (“Letter to Derek Mahon”) for his reinterpretation of traditional poetic forms, yet his mid-career switch to examining the debris of postmodern civilisation marks him as a committed poetic innovator as well. Similarly, John Ashbery has been described as a postmodern poet whose work unsettles received assumptions about the rhetorical situations of the lyric. While his poems might not fit as easily into the classical Genettean model of narration, I argue in this thesis that it is imperative to read them alongside the novelistic experiments of the 20th century for the way they experiment with diegetic and ontological situations.

The second vacancy is just as significant. There is, as always, a pressing need for the Western academy to recognize and include the cultural production of societies outside North America and Continental Europe, and outside the Anglosphere at large. To that extent, I have selected the Singaporean poets Arthur Yap and Desmond Kon to be read alongside the work

of Derek Mahon and John Ashbery, with the presented order here roughly corresponding to the way I have organised them in the chapters to follow. The conscientious reader who is acquainted with the discourse surrounding Singaporean poetry will no doubt notice that there is a conspicuous lack of political interpretation and contextualization around the presented poems in this thesis. To this, I offer two disclaimers. Firstly, I believe that the task of contextualizing the Singaporean literary corpus in terms of its relationship to the ideological structures of the PAP party-state has already been admirably and extensively performed, not only by scholars such as Philip Holden, Koh Tai Ann, and C.J. Wee Wan Ling¹, but also by literary practitioners themselves, such as the poets and playwrights Edwin Thumboo², Kuo Pao Kun, and Alfian Sa'at. I am thus of the opinion that contemporary Singaporean literary discourse is not lacking for sociological commentary. Secondly, the exigencies of the thesis format mean that my aim to focus upon the tools of narrative theory and poetics necessarily demands an extensive engagement with questions of style and form. In the interest of brevity, I have had to prioritise the texts themselves over the conditions of their milieu. While it is no doubt true that no cultural work is ever produced in a historical vacuum, and that the legacies of colonialism and empire continue to exert pressures upon the contemporary world, I believe that the current literary discourse is better edified by my attendance to the aesthetic nature of the poems I have selected than by acts of deconstructive reading. Furthermore, while I am a firm advocate for the critical inclusion of Asian and Southeast Asian literature in the global narratological discourse, I believe that in order for this critical inclusion to take place

¹ Certain publications that typify the work of these scholars might be Holden's "Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global", Koh's "The Singapore Experience: Cultural Development in the Global Village", and Wee's excellent "The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore".

² Thumboo's interview with Peter Nazareth in 1978 for *The Iowa Review* is particularly illuminating of his belief that the postcolonial poet plays a crucial role in inventing the national imaginary; Kuo's article "Uprooted and Searching" is a good meditation upon the diasporic and hybridized nature of Singaporean identity; Alfian Sa'at's entire oeuvre has been a career-long deconstruction of the PAP state-sanctioned narratives that drive Singaporean society, but for the most explicit articulations of his political stances, one need look no further than his Facebook page.

meaningfully, the texts included must be read not merely as signifying the historical or socio-political contingencies of their respective cultures; rather, the academy must afford these literary works the same gaze as works from the Western canon. That is, the critical gaze must see these texts as artistic constructions in their own right, with an empathetic involvement in their own inner aesthetic logic.

The quest to unpack this inner aesthetic logic, however, will inevitably entail certain theoretical complexities. Much of the poetry that has emerged in the past century and a half or so has been marked by a push towards the experimental, towards blurring the traditional categories that have come to define literature. With that in mind, this thesis will tentatively attempt to return to first principles and define, as it were, the profound moving parts that will make up the machine of this thesis. That is to say: if we are to be discussing narrative in poetry, what constitutes narrativity, and what is poeticity?

In this light, McHale's call for a *differentia specifica* to poetry strikes me as a sensible move. In my first chapter, I will examine McHale's definition of poeticity as segmentivity in "Beginning to Think About Narrative in Poetry", when he picks up a throwaway thought from Rachel Blau DuPlessis's essay, "Manifests":

Poetry is the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen, units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence [...] therefore, I propose that *segmentivity* [...] is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre. (DuPlessis 51, emphasis in original)

While DuPlessis begins by describing the material, visual conditions of poetic verse on the page as the "underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre", she moves on to acknowledge that the "sequenced, gapped lines" allow a kind of musical, or rhythmic interplay, where the visual organization of the line is contrapuntal to the syntactic conventions of language. I will further explore this proposal in my next chapter. For now, however, I suggest that DuPlessis's proposal

of segmentivity as the main meaning-making mechanism of poetry echoes to an extent the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who claims that “poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence only in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere” (Agamben 109). While this formulation of segmentivity appears, when applied strictly to the materiality of the poem, to be limited only to the technicalities of verse, when we zoom out to look at a looser definition of the concept, segmentivity could serve as a fractal for narrative at large as well, in the way that narratives are often sequential and segmented compositions themselves, made up of measured events, scenes, etc.). Shoptaw goes further: expanding on the model of poetic segments derived from metrical organisation, he proposes the measure of a poem to be “its smallest unit of resistance to meaning. [...] Insofar as a unit of meaning calls attention to itself and either delays or disrupts the argument or movement or progressive development of the text, it establishes itself as a measure of construction” (212). McHale thus suggests after Shoptaw that the “various narrative gaps” in a typical poem can be “played off [...] meter, sentence, line, and section, sounding a rich “chord” that would be inaudible if the narrative were recast as plain prose” (17). Resituated in narrative theory, then, segmentivity proves to be even more useful. Not only does it reinvigorate our understanding of poetic concepts such as meter and rhyme by demonstrating them to be a dialogue between “sound and sense”, segmentivity is also capacious enough a concept to allow for a three-way conversation, so that “story” joins in the game. In my first chapter, I will thus investigate and explicate the model of poeticity that these various theorists have proposed. I will essay this model of poeticity as a practical method for reading narrative in poetry by applying it to two poems by Arthur Yap and Derek Mahon respectively. The intimate degree of this reading method naturally calls for a certain depth and intense scrutiny that is only possible with enough space; therefore, the two poems I have selected are shorter than the other literary texts in this thesis.

If we are to investigate what poetics may do for narratology, however, the complementary question presents itself naturally: what can narratology do for poetics? Naturally, it is my stance that narrative theory has developed a valuable arsenal of concepts and lenses over the past five decades that allow us to better understand the narrative elements of poetry. The advantages of being able to apply concepts such as focalization, psychic distance, and diegetic levels to poetry, for instance, are immediately obvious. Yet a toolbox does not a trade make. A second, related question thus quickly follows: if segmentivity is the defining trait of poeticity, as DuPlessis, Shoptaw, and Agamben might suggest, what defines narrativity? Any attempts to understand the former naturally leads us in a quest to resolve the latter question. Aware of this problem, Peter Hühn and Jens Kiefer, in the introduction to *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry*, offered us this pre-emptive definition of narrativity:

Narrativity consists of a combination of two dimensions: sequentiality, or the temporal organization and linking of individual incidents to form a coherent succession, and mediacy, mediation being the selection, presentation, and meaningful interpretation of such a succession from a particular perspective. [...] Sequentiality (and within it, eventfulness) has clear priority in the definition of narrativity: [...] temporal structure alone is a constitutive element of narrative texts. (1)

In the Hühn-Kiefer model, they have settled upon a distinction of *sequentiality* from *mediacy* as a heuristic which roughly corresponds to the story-narrative discourse binary that Gerard Genette established³, and which is still often used today by narratologists. The Hühn-Kiefer paradigm thus posits a rough relationship between segmentivity and mediacy: so long as the

³ Genette's distinction between story and narrative discourse is, of course, familiar to anyone acquainted with narrative theory, but it might be useful here to recapitulate his definitions as a refresher: Genette uses the specific term "narrative discourse" to describe the text that is produced by narration, by "the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself", while the story is the sequence of events that the narrative discourse translates, recounts, and enunciates ("Narrative Discourse" 26). While we might imagine a story as theoretically existing apart from the narrative act which produces the narrative discourse, in practice, all stories are always instantiated by narrative discourse: as Genette reminds us, "narrative discourse is the only [level of narration] directly available to textual analysis" (27).

narrative sequence—in Genettean terms, the *story*—remains constant, the mediation of the story—or the narrative discourse—may vary. This variation might occur in several dimensions, but as we have established earlier, the degree of segmentivity in the text determines how poetic it is. Inverting this equation, Hühn and Kiefer argue, it stands to reason that *sequentiality* offers us the distilled definition of narrativity; it is “temporal structure”, expressed with a high degree of segmented language, that gives us narrative poetry.

James Phelan therefore echoes this definition of narrativity when he investigates the difference between the lyric and the lyric narrative, a term he uses to categorise the work of Robert Frost’s “Home Burial”. While the lyric is “somebody telling somebody else that something *is*” (635), the lyric narrative requires somebody to be “telling somebody else that something *happened*” (631). For Hühn, Kiefer, and Phelan, then, there is a consensus that time is a crucial element in narrativity. As I shall elaborate later on, this model of narrativity has been critiqued by postclassical narrative theorists to be insufficient for several reasons. The first echoes McHale’s discontent with the hermeneutic approach that Hühn, Kiefer, and Phelan have all taken towards reading poetry. By neglecting the poetic style and form that comprises a poem, and instead attempting to extract a transcendent story from the poem, these narrative theorists betray the paradigm they are operating under, in which form is seen as a container for content. Story and sequentiality and *meaning*, in this mode of thinking, become the centre which is housed by the exterior margins of narrative discourse, poeticity, style. In my thesis, I shall thus investigate and deconstruct this proposition of narrativity, with reference to Monika Fludernik’s alternative model of a “natural” narrativity, which she proposes as “mediated human experientiality” (26). Under Fludernik’s model, the temporality which dominates in the sequentiality paradigm becomes relegated to merely one of the “major constituents of narrativity” (16), with human experience becoming the defining trait of narrativity instead.

As I shall later explain, I find this model of narrativity to be also inadequate in certain ways, not least in the way it accommodates—or fails to—poetry in the equation. One might have noticed my conscientious employment of the terms “poeticity” and “narrativity” thus far in this introduction. These terms are thus employed to avoid a rigid construction of separate categories in this discussion, which primarily seeks to discover narrativity *in* poetry. Much of the existing scholarship on narrativity and poeticity constructs the two qualities as binary so that narrativity is often defined by what *isn’t* poetry, and vice versa. As this thesis shall demonstrate, this approach is misguided and unnecessarily shuts us off from processing alternative mechanisms of narrative-making that aren’t housed in novels or films. Although narrativity and poeticity are distinctly *different* phenomena, they can—and often do—occur within the same text; in fact, as this thesis will demonstrate, narrativity and poeticity are often *co-constructed* by each other. Instead of proposing a one-dimensional spectrum between narrativity and poeticity, then, this thesis suggests instead reading narrativity and poeticity as two separate dimensions in which a literary text might move, so that the false dichotomy of narrative versus poetry is avoided. To that extent, my intellectual approach in this thesis will entail not merely a reading of narratology and poetics besides each other, but also a dialectic reading of both disciplines *through* and *by* each other, modifying both approaches synthetically through the process. As shall be articulated more fully later on, it may be argued that the hermeneutic approaches we employ in academic interpretation of literary texts often reconstruct the texts we seek into a homogenized narrative, so that the interpretative lens comes first, rather than the actual text. By reading two different hermeneutical approaches against each other, then, this thesis will thus also constitute, in part, a sort of meta-hermeneutic investigation.

As has already been explained, then, work of four poets have therefore been selected for this research, namely, Arthur Yap, Derek Mahon, Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, and

John Ashbery. These four writers are selected not so much as primary texts of thematic affinity, in the way that a conventional thesis might entail, but more as a showcase of the variety and diversity of poetic forms to which this hybrid methodology may be applied. These writers will be divided heuristically, according to their mimetic relationship with reality and tradition. The short poems of Yap and Mahon, for instance, with their experimentation within the confines of the lyric and carefully enjambed lines, are ideal subjects for a segmentivity-driven methodology. Yap and Mahon are also habitual storytellers who frequently employ third-person narration in their short poems; their work is therefore extremely ripe for analysis of the musical interplay between sense, sound, and story. We will also examine two long postmodern poems/poetic suites by John Ashbery and Desmond Kon that are much less conventionally mimetic: namely, “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror” and *The Wrong/Wrung Side of Love*. These two texts make use of their length to iterate several ontological games, ars poetica statements and recurring characters—experiments which, I argue, necessitate the employment of narratological studies of novelistic architecture.

Structurally, the main body of this thesis will mirror the arc sketched in this introductory chapter. In the first chapter, this thesis will further examine the definitions of poeticity that narratologists and poetics theorists alike have proposed. We will look towards DuPlessis, Shoptaw, and Agamben’s proposal of enjambment and segmentivity as one possible—if initially limited—definition of poeticity which fords the demands and concerns of both narratology as well as poetics. This thesis will demonstrate how this concept of poeticity is compatible with classical narratology by applying this method to the poems of Arthur Yap and Derek Mahon, who write what James Phelan has nominally described as “lyric narratives” (631), a hybrid form which combines the rhetorical situation of the lyric poem with narrative forms. This chapter will consist of intense close reading, with an exhaustive attention to the meter and sound patterning of the poems, as a way of understanding how the poeticity of a

poem can score the reading process (as music might), and how this level of control over the phenomenological experience of reading might affect our perception and construction of narrative.

In my second chapter, we will look at the various definitions of narrativity that have been proposed by different narratologists: as eventfulness, sequentiality, or mediated experientiality, and demonstrate how all these various proposals of narrativity, in part, are still constructed upon a binary notion of narrativity as the opposite of poeticity. Subsequently, we will map the parallels between the problems of narrative theory's approach to poetry and critical theory's hermeneutics of suspicion. We will discuss how the solutions Felski and Attridge offer to hermeneutics might be transposed into narrative theory, exploring as we do so the relationship between the form-content dichotomy and the story-mediation relationship that we have investigated so far. We go on to read John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and Desmond Kon's *The Wrong/Wrung Side of Love* as two examples of experimental poetry that disrupt the boundaries between reading and writing, between hermeneutic and phenomenology. In so doing, this thesis will demonstrate that the toolbox of narratology is crucial if one is to properly attend to the technical games these avant-garde writers play at the margins of poetry and narrative.

In conclusion, it is my belief that the juxtaposition of poetics and narrative studies, while counter-intuitive at first, may in fact provide us with useful insights into both fields. A meta-study of the dynamic and relationship between these two modes of inquiry may also yield productive perspectives into hermeneutics and phenomenology. While seemingly simple, the question of storytelling in poetry leads us to engage with the substance of poetry itself—perhaps the very substance of literary form. What do poetry and narrative mean, ultimately, and how far can these boundaries stretch? This thesis intends to find the answer to these questions.

Chapter 1.1: The Poeticity of Poetry

In a 2012 article for *The Guardian* contemplating the death of the novel and the continued survival of poetry, the British-Hungarian poet George Szirtes defines poetry thus: as a genre where “the presence burns more than the narrative drive” (“The death of the novel”). While narrative might always contain an “implied ‘and then’ and a ‘because’”, Szirtes argues, “no one reads [William Blake’s “Tyger Tyger”] to find out what happens in the last line” (Szirtes, “The death of the novel”). In positing a binary opposition between poetry and storytelling, Szirtes inadvertently defines poetry as, in some sense, a resistance to narrative consequentiality, a refusal to move along with the momentum of a story. What Szirtes means by “presence” is less clear, but we are to infer from its opposition to momentum that it entails a stilling of language, a compressed, intense encounter that demands full attention, that manifests *itself* as happening, rather than constantly deferring our attention to the next narrative event. This resistance to narrative linearity, Szirtes seems to suggest, is not to be confused with stasis. While “presence” represents an act of language apart from the movement of the narrative drive, it is also paradoxically a “burn[ing]”: an activity, an encounter, a self-contained recurrent event, in a sense. Yet the fact that Szirtes has not suggested that poetic presence happens in the absence of the narrative drive is telling. Rather, poetry happens when an *excess* of presence occurs as to dominate the narrative drive. In all literary poesis, Szirtes seems to imply, presence and narrative drive are always present, and it is the modulation of the proportions and counterplay between these two forces which afford us the distinctive categories between poetry and fiction.

This definition of poetry is useful, to a limited extent, in helping us contemplate the difference between poetic language and narrative language. We may note that Szirtes’s definition offers little to no formal information about poetry—presence may burn more than the narrative drive in prose just as much as in verse; simultaneously, as Perloff is fond of

reminding us, narratives are often carelessly cast in verse by lesser poets when they could just as easily be rendered in prose without significant loss of aesthetic affect. Yet the relationship of verse to poetic language is equally interesting. Excavating the etymological roots of our Modern English word “verse”, we find a similar notion, echoing Szirtes, of resistance to linearity. When I speak of writing “verse” as lines of poetry organised by rhythm or metre, I invoke a dead metaphor from the Latin *versus*, which uses the image of a ploughman furrowing ruts in the earth as a way of illustrating how lines of poetry turn away, quite literally, from the margins of the page (Andrew et al.). We are, of course, also familiar with *versus* in its contemporary usage, as denoting an antagonism, an opposition, or a contrast between two choices. *Versus* therefore implies, it implicates, poetry in the notion of a turn; it gives to us the wonderful image of language pivoting back upon itself to meet itself. Poetry happens, the etymology seems to suggest, at the fulcrum, in the moment linearity cannot go on anymore, when the presence of language burns with such intensity as to create a rupture in continuity, both visually and conceptually. Pushing our investigation further back in time, however, we may yet find that the Latin *versus* itself descends from the Proto-Indo-European *wert*: to turn, to wind, to rotate (de Vaan). From this Proto-Indo-European root derives the Germanic *wurdiz*. *Wurdiz* takes the notion of the turn further: while *versus* might have applied *wert* to the quotidian, material act of ploughing the earth, *wurdiz* expands the idea of turning or rotating to grand, cosmic proportions by applying it to the notion of fate, or destiny (Kroonen). If *wurdiz* rings with a vague familiarity, it is because this Germanic word is the direct predecessor of the Old English word meaning the same concept, *wyrd*, which is a dominant theme in one of the first few poems and narratives in the English canon: *Beowulf*. In suggesting that there is a dominant arc to a person’s life that is unavoidable, *wyrd* thus inherently invokes narrative as an essential condition of existence, and incidentally reminds us that there is no neat way to strain out the poeticity from narrative, and vice versa.

There is a sense, then, that the idea of the poetic turn contains within itself the narrative impulse as well. Szirtes suggests that narrativity is predicated on causal chains: on “an implied ‘and then’, and a ‘because’” (“The death”), which poetry is not beholden to. I will further investigate this notion of narrativity as causal sequentiality in my second chapter. For now, though, it is important to note that this distinction Szirtes makes between narrativity and poeticity is more thematic than formal; that is to say, the characteristics he assigns to narrative and to poetry have more to do with what each genre is interested in exploring, rather than the technical qualities such as rhyme or meter that poetry is traditionally known for. As our brief thought experiment journeying back to the beginnings of English poetry indicates, and as Brian McHale reminds us, “most poems before the nineteenth century, and many since then, have been narrative poems” (12). It is true, as Szirtes says, that poetry is not *obligated* to include the sort of causal chains narrative fiction depends on. I would like, however, to propose a refinement: while poetry is not by any means necessarily causal, it excels at condensing narrative to a series of causal chains. Let consider the following reframing of the points we’ve just discussed through the notion of segmentivity McHale finds in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s 1995 essay, “Manifests”(a concept previously mentioned in our introduction, but which is salient enough to bear repeating):

Poetry is the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen, units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence [...] In short, all the meanings poetry makes are constructed by segmented units of a variety of sizes. The specific force of any individual poem occurs in the intricate interplay among the “scales” (of size or kind of unit) or comes in chords of these multiple possibilities for creating segments [...] therefore, I propose that segmentivity [...] is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre. (DuPlessis 51, emphasis in original)

For the sake of clarity, we will break down DuPlessis's definition itself into several different segments. Firstly, DuPlessis's proposal hinges upon the recognition of poetry as consisting of "sequenced, gapped lines", thus assuming verse as the formal foundation of poetry. Accepting that assumption for the moment, we may interrogate DuPlessis's insistence that a "line" of poetry is always "sequenced, gapped" as revealing a fundamental belief in the poetic turn away from linearity I discussed earlier. Poetry, in her mind, is defined by the creation and modulation of several "segmented units" conjoined at regular intervals. That is to say, not only does poetry subvert the linearity of the narrative drive, it does so *recurrently*, in such a manner that the rhythm of subversion becomes a measure of consistency in its own right. To say that a line is "gapped", then, implies the existence of at least two "dimensions" in which the poem functions. Gaps occur because there is a first dimension in which normative expectation of continuity operates, and then a second dimension in which another force—deliberately or otherwise—organises the material in a manner contrary to the continuity expectation. In the context of a poem, the continuity expectation is often quite simply found in a sentence. Line breaks often occur in the middle of a sentence where otherwise they might be expected to proceed in normal linguistic usage. As we may discuss later, this "gap" may also be manipulated at different scales. Crucially, however, it is the existence of separate "dimensions" within poetry which I wish to impress upon the reader at this moment, for this concept will be a significant recurring one as this thesis progresses.

We come to the second part of DuPlessis's definition: her suggestion that these "bounded units" operate "in relation to chosen pause or silence". DuPlessis reaches for an aural or musical metaphor here to describe the use of negative space as an organizing aesthetic principle. As we have already established, the gaps which occur at the break between two objects are not merely incidental happenings between two bounded linguistic units; rather, they are crucial to establishing the borders and haecceities of the units they disrupt; quite simply,

just as a length of rope may be made into two lengths of rope with a quick snip, so may a string of language be turned into two separate lines of poetry, with their own internal symmetries and aesthetic balances, with the deployment of the gap. This principle of negative space is similar throughout most artistic forms, but it is of particular significance to us in our inquiry into poeticity. As I articulated in my previous paragraph, gaps in poetry—in enjambed lines, for instance—arise from the tension between two organising forces, be it between syntax and sound, or between meter and sentence. On a readerly level, however, gaps *reveal* the existence of the multiple dimensions in which the poem operates. A line of language may be assumed to be operating under the conventional, left-to-right linear expectations of English prose until enjambment occurs. As Culler reminds us, our encounter with the formal features of poetry often instantly “bring to play a new set of expectations, a set of conventions determining how the sequence is to be read and what kind of interpretations may be derived from it” (188-189). At the moment of enjambment, several things happen: the reader is firstly made aware of the “poeticity” of the language they are encountering, and all the senses and sensibilities with which one usually brings to bear upon poetry (which we, of course, do not apply to the language of, say, a restaurant menu or a car manual, except perhaps when in a found poetry workshop) are engaged. This set of sensibilities may apply retroactively, in the sense that we are suddenly aware of the meter, assonance, and images which might have been present in the phrase we have just read. Moving forward and through the poem, one is suddenly also sensitive to the permutations of poetic organisation possible throughout the text. The gap at the end of a line regularly opens up a moment of suspense in which one wonders about the outcome of the sentence we have just been reading. In a regularly metered poem with a rhyme scheme, this gap also has the function of opening up a minute tree of possible word companions with which one might rhyme the word that has just ended a line—a range of possibilities which opens and shuts, rhythmically, throughout the poem as one reads it.

In that sense, McHale is right to read DuPlessis's notion of segmentivity next to Shoptaw's definition—or rather, his re-definition—of poetic meter. Shoptaw, as McHale notes, was attempting to “redefine the traditional notion of poetic measure in such a way as to accommodate the formally various unmetered poetry of such contemporaries as John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein” (McHale 16). To that end, Shoptaw claims the poem's essential measure to be “its smallest unit of *resistance* to meaning” (qtd. in McHale 16, emphasis mine), rather than the “smallest unit of *construction* of meaning” (Ibid., emphasis in original). While this idea might seem paradoxical, McHale says, juxtaposition against DuPlessis's emphasis on the structuring function of negative space reveals its genius:

It is where meaning-making is interrupted or *stalls out*, where the text breaks off and a gap (even if only an infinitesimal one) opens up, that the reader's meaning-making apparatus must *gear up* to bridge the gap and heal the breach. A gap is a provocation to meaning-making; we intervene to make meaning where ready-made meaning fails [...] We know [this] from narratology, which acknowledges narrative gaps and gap-filling to be one of the engines driving narrative progression.

In this manner, we can see that silence has a crucial function in poetry. DuPlessis and Shoptaw both echo Culler's observation that the restraints of poetic form represents, paradoxically, not “a way of imposing new constraints”, but “a way of liberating the word from the constraints which discursive order imposes on it [...] the word ‘sparkles with infinite freedom and is ready to radiate towards a thousand uncertain and possible relations” (214). It is thus this “chosen pause or silence”, judiciously employed, which liberates and transforms quotidian language into poetic form. In my next chapter, I will further elaborate on the phenomenological implications of this feature of poetry from a hermeneutical perspective.

Chapter 1.2: Poetic Polyphony

For the time being, let us return to the idea of dimensionality in poetry, and the function that silences/pauses/gaps play in this aspect. We know from music theory that the notion of the rest as an interval of silence is foundational to the compositional integrity of any given piece. In poetry, however, these “chosen pauses” may also be seen as allowing the poem to borrow another important musical capability: that of counterpoint. Simplifying for the sake of our argument, counterpoint as understood within the Western harmony tradition occurs when two different melodies are played at the same time, overlapping to create a consonant effect. In musical counterpoint, the structure and the individual voices are mutually dependent: Rahn notes that “the internal voices that create each of the voices [...] contribute to the emergent structure of the polyphony” (177). This phenomenon is possible because of the inherently *polyphonic* nature of music; physiologically, we are always able to perceive more than one sound at a time, and to also perceive them in unity with each other. Writing and reading, on the other hand, is by nature monophonic; our phenomenological experience of text only allows us to replicate a single dominant voice in our head at any one instant. What writing relies on heavily is the relative ease with which one is able to rewind and revisit a previous line—a temporality unavailable during the act of listening to music (that is, up until the past decade or so). To switch into using a visual metaphor for a moment, writing has the ability to induce a sort of linguistic afterimage—a persistence of vision, almost—for the poetic line, and it is this poetic afterimage that one holds onto and which interacts with the current line as one reads through a poem—a phenomenon which Modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein exploited to great degree. Some forms of poetry have sought to replicate this polyphonic phenomenology in reading, such as the twin cinema format pioneered by Singaporean poet Yeow Kai Chai and popularized by fellow Singaporean poet David Wong Hsien Ming. I have included a screenshot of this form to illustrate my point:

For the end comes reaching

a sonnet in twin cinema

For the end comes reaching	in the quiet
as a watchmaker's hand	harvests
taking what is	now af-
forded by friends &	filiations
I live prodigal	of death come
by another name	as a crest of words
jailed by a sentence	in a story stopped
bankrupt by tradition	& words begot—
for the end comes fully	fed yet un-
sated, what remains is	breathing,
your face	your free wonder
un-	conceding
covered in	the earth & sun
my blood	as ether, burning pious

As we may observe, the lateral juxtaposition of these two stanzas here creates the potential illusion that they form one unified poem, but one may also read it separately as two individual stanzas, creating at least three potential reading experiences. In that manner, a certain degree of polyphony and counterpoint is achieved through this use of the visual space on the page. To be sure, in this instance, the counterpoint created here in this twin cinema form still behaves similarly to more conventional free verse: that is to say, it is the short memory of the prior line one holds against the current one, not true polyphony itself. Nonetheless, the metaphor of musical harmony is a useful way for us to think about narrative in poetry, not least because the persistence of poetic afterimages we have observed here has significant implications for the sequential operations of narrative in itself. I will return to this point in my next chapter on narrativity, when we discuss the possibility of enjambment as a phenomenon that occurs not just on the level of the line, but across diegetic and ontological levels, as well as across an entire oeuvre. Returning to my earlier point about the dimensions opened up by the gap, however, we may perceive here what Shoptaw refers to as “countermeasurement”, and what DuPlessis has termed the “intricate interplay among the scales” of the various measures or segments within the poem. McHale observes that in various instances, “measure at one level

or scale is played off against measure at another level or scale” (17). If, however, as previously noted, “narrative gaps and gap-filling [are] one of the main engines driving narrative progression”, it stands to reason as well that the level of the narrative exists as one of the scales against which measures could be played off each other by. This perspective is especially interesting in light of the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who shares certain similar ideas to DuPlessis and Shoptaw. For Agamben, “poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic and the semantic sphere” (109). While Agamben shares this emphasis on segmentivity with DuPlessis and Shoptaw, he takes the “awareness of the importance of the opposition between metrical segmentation and semantic segmentation” to a further degree than the previous two theorists we’ve looked at, so that it is only “the possibility of enjambment [which] constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose [...] For what is enjambment, if not the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause?” (109). Agamben thus argues it is the “virtual [possibility]” of this opposition between meter and syntax that guarantees the presence of poetry, and that any “discourse in which this opposition cannot take place” is necessarily prose (109). As I will demonstrate shortly, however, the inverse is not necessarily true: that is to say, this “opposition between meter and syntax” may happen, but a narrative dimension might still yet be present, so that one observes a complex interplay between sound, sense, and story.

Chapter 1.3: Reading Arthur Yap’s “sociability”

To illustrate my point, let us examine a short poem: “sociability” by Arthur Yap from late in his career, only published in his *Collected Works* in 2013 (xv). Although the poem is narrated mostly from a third-person limited perspective, as I will shortly demonstrate, it resists being cast into prose as what McHale might call a “honorary short story”. Yap’s “sociability” fits rather nicely into Phelan’s description of a lyric narrative—it is, certainly, about a series of

happenings, and the presence of an omniscient third-person narrator throughout the poem certainly qualifies as somebody *telling* us about said happenings. As I will demonstrate, however, “sociability” also works on a level more intricate than the presented rhetorical situation that Phelan identifies in the lyric. McHale has been explicit in his criticism of Phelan for conflating the lyric with all poetry, pointing out that Phelan’s concept of the lyric narrative ignores “the regular meter, the lineation, or the other, less conventional features of spacing that differentiate [lyric poetry] from prose fiction” (13). In this instance, however, I argue that the lyric narrative poem here fulfils all three criteria of that description. Not only is the poem a clear example of a lyric that investigates the interiority of a single subject, it is also a narrative which relies heavily on sequentiality for its aesthetic effect. Moreover, I also argue that the narrative is uniquely shaped and designed to manifest and exploit the ambiguities of poetry’s segmentivity.

Let us examine the music of the first stanza of the poem in question, using techniques and critical tools borrowed from the discipline of poetics, with a close attention to the sound patterning and the meter of this poem:

she used to be a social escort.
 after her expiry date, she became
 an acupuncturist with a homely mien
 not previously maintained at her job. (“sociability”, 1-4)

The poem opens with a strong, declarative endstopped line. We are introduced to a protagonist and quickly furnished with a backstory, as per narrative conventions. Eight syllables long, the line itself is written in an easy, familiar pattern of four troches:

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^
 she used to be a social escort. (1)

This familiar rhythm, however, is quickly complicated throughout the rest of the stanza. Although the next few lines preserve the pattern of having four stressed syllables through each line, the rhythm is cluttered and irregular compared to the falling rhythm of the first line. The second line bursts out strong with a stress on the first syllable of “after”, but departs subtly from the regular trochaic patterns of the first line. In a stanza without any detectable dominant assonance, we nonetheless may observe that two out of the four stresses in this line emphasize the long “A” vowel sound. Moving on to the third line, we find that the stress patterning of the first two lines have been completely scrambled here:

^ / ^ / ^ ^ ^ ^ / ^ /

an acupuncturist with a homely mien (3)

While Yap maintains the semblance of four stressed syllables in this line, one finds oneself having to work to accommodate the line to the precedent set by the previous two lines. The easy familiarity of the first line has been replaced here with a concatenation of accents at the front and end of the line, with one of them being, strictly speaking, only a secondary stress (the “puncturist” in “acupuncturist”). In order to regulate the music of the stanza, the line skips uncomfortably through the clutter of unstressed syllables to the end of the line, where we are greeted with the “homely mien” of the protagonist. This rhythmic discomfort continues in the next line:

^ / ^ ^ ^ / ^ ^ /

not previously maintained at her job. (4)

On first reading, the reader might find herself curtly stressing only three out of the nine syllables present in this line. As with the previous line, in an attempt to force the line into a coherent scheme, I return to the first word of the line and lean heavily into it— “not” —in an effort to mirror the strong first vowel of the second line in the stanza. The effect creates an emphasis on the negation and inverted logic of the line. The long “A” sound makes a return

here, with “maintained” rhyming, belatedly, with the “became” of the second line. This vowel sound thus anchors us to a sense of change throughout the stanza, and incepts the ironic tone of the narrative we are being ushered into. A “homely mien”—an unattractive visage, that is, to use the American instead of British interpretation of “homely”—is presented here in this line as something to be “maintained”, suggesting a shying away from sexualisation. Crucially, it is a *performative* ugliness we are presented with here, one which, the poem suggests, is being put on for professional reasons. The stanza hence pivots twice upon the long “A” sound: the first time narratively, with the vowel signalling a massive change in our protagonist’s past, and the second time conceptually, in an example of what Ezra Pound might call “logopoeia”: that is, “the dance of the intelligence among words and ideas” (“Others” 57); the subversion of the usual “habits of usage...the context we expect to find with the word” (“Literary Essays” 25).

The inversion of the usual relationship between effort and beauty thus mirrors the larger inversion that is occurring throughout the stanza, and here we may observe the countermeasuring, or intricate play among scales, that Shoptaw and DuPlessis suggest. By framing homeliness as an artifice to be worked on and “maintained”, Yap skilfully presents this existence as an anti-thesis to our protagonist’s former existence of prostitution in the first line, which is characterised through the formal conceit of the falling rhythm as one which is much more familiar and comfortable. Here we see how crucial it is to read the narrative of this particular stanza through a combination of narrative theory and poetics. A narratologist might be able to detect, for instance, the significance of the third person limited focalization operating in this stanza. Using this narratological concept, we might see the opening of the poem as refracted through the character’s voice—one could easily imagine a former escort ruefully describing the day she passed her “expiry date” with a jaded edge in her voice, for instance. Further, narratology might also allow us to characterise the logopoeia apparent in “a homely mien/not previously maintained” as an example of bifocality in the text: that is, a moment when

the omniscient narrator briefly reveals himself to the reader by embedding a layer of irony into the text that is apparent only at the hermeneutic level. To focus strictly on the poem on the level of the narrative, however, is to miss all the additional layers of significance embedded in the stanza as a musical movement. Through poetics, as we have established previously, we are able to detect how the stanza's rhythmic construction moves from the trochaic familiarity of the first line into the rough arrhythmic dissonance of the fourth line, taking us on a trajectory from comfort to discomfort. Without an awareness of this trajectory through the phonological senses of the stanza, we might be tempted to read the narrative arc of the stanza as merely detailing a former prostitute's life as she moves from the margins of society into a socially acceptable job. Reading these two trajectories as two melody lines engaged in a contrapuntal duet through the stanza, however, we understand the real arc here to be about the increasing isolation of this woman's life as she ages, and her bittersweet longing for the sense of community she once shared with her former escorts.

The familiar falling rhythm of our protagonist's prostitution past in the first line—which figures as a tonic note, or as the musical “home” in the movement of this stanza—thus foreshadows the way she later returns to her former agency in search of companionship. Having already encountered the contrapuntal relationship of narrative and rhythm in the first stanza, one is therefore primed to pay closer attention to the effects of poetic form in the rest of the poem. Here are the next two stanzas:

when her parents got married,
she was four. born on february 29,
she had a real birthday every four years.
no earlier or later proxy-date would do;
not that anyone did anything, leaving her
and her birthday alone for herself.

it was on such a day that she stuck a needle
sharp into a kneecap. the old lady didn't dare
gainsay that an acupuncturist with a homely mien
wouldn't show such avidity as a practitioner.
she stratified her lips into a pencil line. (5-15)

Here, again, we must borrow the microscope of poetics in order to make sense of the narrative that Yap is developing here. To an extent, one might argue that these two stanzas represent two facets of Yap's poetics: the second stanza, which functions as an expository passage for the rest of the narrative, is pared down and accessible, reminiscent of Yap's earlier work. The third stanza, on the other hand, with words such as "gainsay", "avidity", "practician" and "stratified", is characteristic of the more complex, self-consciously literary register that characterize late Yap. Yap's success with this late-career evolution of his style is debatable: as his sister ruefully notes in the preface to his posthumously collected complete works, despite the latter pieces being more widely distributed in *The Straits Times*, the poems that have endured and which continue to garner critical attention remain the earlier ones from his prolific, accessible spell in the 70s (xv). Nonetheless, in the context of this poem, this elevated (and opaquer) register is a clear artistic choice, meant to contrast with the spare style of the previous stanza. Specifically, when juxtaposed with the narrative drive of the poem, the function of this register becomes markedly deliberate in its deployment—a way to *resist*, or to tease, the sensemaking impulses of the reader. Examining the first sentence in the third stanza ("it was on such a day [...] kneecap"), we see how it spills over the enjambed edge of the line into the second, where it abruptly stops in the middle of the line—like a sudden horrified take of breath, so that the rhythm of the sentence performs the "sharp[ness]" of the act. Crucially, the syntactic construction of the stanza leads us towards a certain linguistic trap. Observe the way the enjambment of the first line isolates subject and predicate in the sentence ("she stuck a needle",

11) from the object (“sharp into a kneecap”, 12). Left stranded on its own in the second line, the disembodied object of the previous sentence here is quite literally manifested by the disembodiment of the body part: the “kneecap” with an invisible owner. At this juncture, then, the natural impulse of the reader is to force the second sentence—which begins in the middle of the line—to adopt the orphaned object of the first sentence: that is, we are inclined to read the “kneecap” presented to us here as belonging to the “old lady”.

This interpretation of the second line, however, produces a mysterious, confused narrative which halts the drive of the story as we try to process it together with the next two lines:

[...]

gainsay that an acupuncturist with a homely mien
wouldn't show such avidity as a practitioner.

Adopting the reading forced onto us by the enjambment of the first line—that is, that the predicate act here of “gainsay[ing]” is being performed by the victim of the needle (and owner of the kneecap), we find ourselves with a psychologically implausible scenario. This is the narrative produced by this syntactical interpretation, which I have paraphrased to the best of my ability in novelistic prose for the sake of clarity:

It was common knowledge: the acupuncturist was *so* unattractive, she wouldn't have been that passionate about her job! Nonsense, the old lady with the injured knee thought to herself. Even though she wanted to, she didn't dare contradict this assertion.

As we can see, this version of the event plainly makes no sense. What, for instance, would the “homely mien” of the acupuncturist, or her “avidity” for the job, matter to the supposed victim in this story? Who, indeed, is making the initial assessment that the acupuncturist's appearance would result in her dispassion for the job? Why did the old lady-victim feel so differently about this assertion—which is framed as something widely accepted by the word choice of

“gainsay”—and why did she crucially not speak up? Attempting to make sense of this version, we might suggest that the victim sees a link between the acupuncturist’s passion for the job and her accidental wounding of the kneecap—another implausible causal link. Scanning ahead to the last line of the stanza, we see *someone* performing the act of “stratif[ying] her lips into a pencil line” (15). This image here is an excellent example of what Neil Murphy has described as Yap’s “desire to free language from its habitual usage” through his use of catachresis: that is, a poetic device which “occurs when language is torn from its normal usage in the service of new meaning, new linguistic explorations; words lose their moorings, their referential anchors, and enter into curious dialogue with each other to generate new meanings” (187-88). In this given instance, a series of ungainly metaphors clunk against each other: lips are not typically stratified, and certainly one does not often stratify items into pencil lines. The subject of this sentence is frustratingly ambiguous here, too, because the preceding sentence contains *two* sets of subjects and predicates: the gainsaying old lady, and the acupuncturist, who “wouldn’t show such avidity”. Who, then, is this pressed-lip person?

In order to clarify the narrative, we read on to the next few lines of the next stanza:

such was her mood when, alone again,
a tapestry of feelings a single thread
couldn’t unravel, she entered the door
of her *used-to agency*. greeted tepidly,
[...] (16-19, emphasis mine)

It is here that we realise the trick the poem has played on us. In examining the phenomenological aspects of reading, Culler notes that line breaks present us with “a pause in reading and hence brings about syntactic ambiguity”, which, as has just been demonstrated, Yap stokes to arch effect in this particular stanza. Culler further observes, however, than quite often “after passing over the pause [we discover] that the construction was not in fact complete

and that the elements preceding the pause must be given a different function in the new whole” (215-216). Thus it is that we enter the stanza assuming, correctly, the subject here to be the same person who has “stratified her lips into a pencil line” earlier on. It isn’t until we’re *four lines deep* into the stanza, however, that we realise the person we’re tracking here “used-to” be a social escort. This movement of the narrative swiftly clarifies our dilemma in the previous stanza: that the figure in the last line of the previous stanza who is performing the act of “stratif[ying] her lips into a pencil line” is, in fact, the same protagonist who “used to be a social escort” until she became an “acupuncturist with a homely mien”. This bait-and-switch in the fourth stanza thus catapults us back to lines 13 and 14 of stanza three. Reading it again now closely, we come to realise that *all* three personas in these two lines—the old lady, the acupuncturist, and the practitioner—are, in fact, one and the same character: a fact occluded until now by the deliberate syntactic awkwardness of the sentence. This realization forces us even further back into the poem, back to line 12, where the connection we made between “kneecap” and the “old lady” there is suddenly severed by the introduction of a fact a whole *seven* lines after it into the poem.

Paraphrasing the story here into an approximate prose version again, we might find something like the following:

Yes, she was ugly now that she was old, unlike in her youth when she had been a social escort. It was true, too, that she had stuck the needle accidentally into the kneecap of the customer. Still, the old lady thought to herself, she loved her job. She had tried her best to be professional. Truly, she had. But there was no use protesting that. It had been a small act of charity, wasn’t it, hiring an old, unattractive woman like her in the first place? She kept her quiet as the accusations flew in. She pressed her lips closely together. That was the one dignity she afforded herself. Quietly she took her leave. It was her birthday.

The narrative thus suddenly unlocks itself. The extent to which form resolves character and narrative here becomes suddenly, heartbreakingly, clear. So complete is the old woman's loneliness here that no other persons are allowed to enter upon her solitude—not even into the syntax of the poem. Quite literally, no other subjects appear, nor speak, in this poem: the customer she injures is limited to her kneecap, while her employer is only present passively, as someone who might have suggested that she displayed no professionalism in her job (and as someone whom presumably has fired her). Visions and illusions of alternate persons appear, but they all collapse into a single persona at the last; the stanza is frustratingly solipsistic by design. Understanding this stanza through the synthesis of narrative theory and poetics we have employed so far, then, the subtle—but characteristically Yap—catachresis of line 15 also becomes clear. Isolated, the notion of a person who has “stratified her lips into a pencil line” seems like an odd, confused metaphor which forces together two incommensurate images: one geological, the other scribal. In the context of the protagonist's personal history, however, we may retune our understanding of “stratified” to detect also its sociological implications: to *stratify* oneself, that is, in the sense of positioning yourself socially, so that you occupy a different hierarchical level in relation to another. The image of the pencil line here lends further nuance to the image: we may see the pencil line as a strikethrough, a crossing out of text, so that the deliberate choice of silence on the part of our protagonist stems from her social standing in relation to the people she interacts with. This reading is certainly narratively possible, but not quite fully satisfying: why the sudden odd reference to writing, and the specifically Latinate words (“avidity”, “practician”, “stratify”) in this stanza? Retuning our ears further, we thus come to the conclusion that the act of stratification in the final line of the stanza is in fact a way of *elevating* our protagonist above her immediate peers: our protagonist refuses to lash out or protest at her humiliation precisely as an act of dignity against her circumstances. The Latinate register here enacts that self-perception in a brilliantly compressed way: instinctively, the gap

between the heartland working-class circumstances of the setting and the Eurocentric language of the narration communicates the mood of our protagonist's interiority without further exposition. (This is, of course, the genius of mediating this narrative through a third-person speaker, in that Yap permits himself a range of registers and codeswitches through the narrator that a strict immersion in our protagonist's first-person reality might not allow—yet another reason why an understanding of narrative theory is crucial to detecting all the elements of a literary text). We may further read the catachresis in the last line as a way of suggesting the solipsistic nature of this perception. By twice dislocating the verb here (“stratified”) from its usual function, Yap defamiliarises the physical act of pressing one's lips together, so that we are reminded that our protagonist's reality here is fundamentally a solipsistic, constructed one which she carefully keeps sealed off from the world.

As we have seen, then, the story Yap is telling us here cannot be separated from the poetic form through which he mediates it. The poetic language which comprises the narrative does not merely represent a compressed version of a story which might otherwise be told as prose in expanded form. As Culler reminds us, “the analysis of poetry cannot go very far if it restricts itself to mimetic effects” (217). Rather, we might say that the framing of this text as a poem unlocks our awareness of the different dimensions of language in which narrative meaning may be encoded: the rhythmic, the musical, the syntactical. As I have demonstrated in my reading of the third stanza, the specific temporal qualities of a poem's hermeneutic experience are a crucial element of its aesthetic construction. Understanding that the linguistic meaning of a poem is constructed in real time at a pace directly controlled by “chosen pauses or silences”, Yap deliberately plays off our conventional expectations of linguistic sensemaking against the segmentivity of the format, leading us first one way, and then another, down the tree of possibilities I mentioned earlier, before collapsing entire pathways, forcing us to return to an earlier juncture to pursue new avenues of narrative meaning. This experience of

the poem as being, in essence, always a ghost of ambiguities—a reading in concert against its own extinguished probabilities, its own negated narratives—is signposted in a self-reflexive image at the end of the poem. Periodically, we are told, our protagonist contemplates the various places where she might commit suicide as a means of exiting her torturous loneliness, until sleep sweeps through her mind and “takes over each and every choice/and these potentials, too, are in repose” (31, 32). These potential suicides are an image of multiple potential futures branching out from the end of the poem, closed off, in one sense, by the ending of the poem, and by the sleep of our protagonist in another. In a very real way, though, the “repose” of these “potentials” are not absolute: rather, they remain lurking around the margins of this narrative; deferred, not cancelled, the spectre of these ghost futures are as much responsible for the pathos of the poem’s ending as the actual narrative we have just read. The actual text is therefore defined after a fashion by its own negative space, as Shoptaw and DuPlessis have suggested.

To that end, as I have demonstrated, one might argue that poetry, in the sense of its formal definition by DuPlessis as segmented language broken up by “chosen pauses or silences”, is always charged by a negative current. Switching tracks for an instance, might we also consider the *lyric* form as fundamentally haunted by negative space and by absence, only in a narrative sense? As we have established, the act of organising language into visual and rhythmic segments is predicated upon the perceptive effect that blank space creates upon the reader. To that end, one might also suggest that narrative focalisation within a storyworld—to use David Herman’s definition⁴—works in much the same way. Let us posit that all stories start with an expectation of a working universe predicated upon an axis of space and time—what David Herman might call a storyworld, or Bakhtin a chronotope (qtd. in Abbott 21,

⁴ Herman defines “storyworlds” as “the worlds evoked by narratives; reciprocally, narratives can be defined as blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation” (105). For Herman, “mapping words (or other kinds of semiotic cues) onto worlds is a fundamental – perhaps the fundamental – requirement for narrative sense-making”(105)—a conversation that is more fully explored in the next chapter, when we investigate the nature of narrativity.

161)—which functions similar to ours. (This referential expectation of narrative, of course, is often problematised and subverted, as I will show in my next chapter, but for now, let us begin with the premise that this “natural” mode of storyworld creation is the default one which subsequent experiments deviate from.) Within this storyworld, it is reasonable to assume the existence of several subjectivities, the interiorities of which a typically omniscient narrator might inhabit and focalise the story from. Indeed, as McHale has persuasively demonstrated in his application of narratological principles to the *Illiad* (18-26), the third-person omniscient narration mode is one that has traditionally been used in Western poetry. Simplifying to a certain extent, then, might we perhaps use the lens of narrative focalisation to better frame the “lyric transformation” (qtd. in McHale 14) of poetry that Alastair Fowler has posited? That is to say, the gradual dominance of lyric poetry as the “default mode of poetry” might be described as a tendency to favour more tightly focalised narratives over broader ones. Seen this way, with focalisation functioning as a “zooming in” towards the mind of specific subjects within the broader storyworld, we might make a case that the lyric form functions via negativa as well, building an intense interiority by shutting out representation of other subjectivities. Not only does this process take place in Yap’s “sociability”, as I have demonstrated, it also takes place in a self-reflexive way. As Boey Kim Cheng argued in his critical introduction to Yap for *poetry.sg*, it is Yap’s capacity to make sure “the historical contingent is kept out” that allows the “world [to be] brought into focus and contained in a miniature scene, a *tableau vivant*” (Boey). Crucially, this selective act of exclusion and focus is what produces the “lyric sensitivity or subjectivity” after an “illusive, vanishing” fashion; towards the end of Yap’s career, Boey identifies the emergence of a “narrative eye that can flesh out characters and story in a few deft touches” and attributes it to his oeuvre-long focus on minimalist restraint as well.

Chapter 1.4: Reading an excerpt from Derek Mahon's *The Hudson Letter*

Yap, of course, is often described as a poet of the city, and the “characters and stories” that Boey describes all take place within the cityscape of Singapore. To narrativise the private lives of subjects within Singapore, then, is to essentially perform the act of lyric focalisation I have described earlier—to survey the broad chronotope of this Potemkin island, to zoom in to their interiorities, and to then *rhapsodise*, to sing the raw materials of human emotion and sensibilities into poetic form, until these lives vibrate at the frequency of rhythmic verse. This project, I argue, is not dissimilar to the one the Northern Irish Derek Mahon undertook back in the 90s, with his collection *The Hudson Letter*. Just as Yap was praised by Boey for his restraint and commitment to silence, so was Mahon often noted to be a poet of *absence*. Observing that Mahon shared thematic and stylistic similarities with “many of the great masters of the century—Rilke, Celan, Beckett”, John Banville characterised Mahon’s poetry thus: as imbued with the “secret weight [of] absence, the hollow heavy ache of all that is not there: happiness, love, family, the cherished place, Heimat, whatever.” (“Slouching Towards Bethlehem”).

The Hudson Letter is therefore formed as a long verse sequence, itself composed of several shorter poems which work as a loose mix of epistolary addresses and dramatic monologues. Having established already the various forms of rhythmic counterpoint available to a poet on the level of the sentence and the line, we may now observe in Mahon’s work the same dynamic in effect, only across the larger architecture of a well-orchestrated poetic symphony. We might speak of breaks and turns on the level of the line, but within the larger context of Mahon’s own oeuvre, *Hudson* represents a significant departure from the stylistic thread that had ran all through his prior work as well. In his chapter on *Hudson*, the Mahonian scholar Hugh Haughton noted that not only did this collection represent a “poetic resurrection” after a fallow decade for Mahon, it also marked a “drastic change of form, scale and voice” (226). Prior to the 90s, Mahon’s work had been marked by such a certain formal intensity in

its use of “elegant stanzas” and ‘cool’ cantabile” that fellow Northern Irish poet Michael Longley hailed him as the “bravest and most stylish wielder of the singing line” (qtd. in Haughton 2) in the nation. Indeed, the release of Mahon’s *Selected Poems* in 1991 saw widespread acclaim from his fellow writers including the novelist John Banville, who hailed Mahon’s poem “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” as “the best single poem written in Ireland since the death of Yeats” (qtd. in Haughton 2). For brevity’s sake, let us examine that poem very briefly to get a sense of the style that Mahon is renowned for:

Even now there are places where a thought might grow —
Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
To a slow clock of condensation,
An echo trapped for ever, and a flutter
Of wildflowers in the lift-shaft,
Indian compounds where the wind dances
And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
Lime crevices behind rippling rain barrels,
Dog corners for bone burials;
And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford...

Much has been made about the “intricate historical time-sense” (Haughton 115) ticking all through this poem, but I shall now undertake to apply certain narratological lenses to this piece—most specifically, the notions of narrative time that Genette describes in *Narrative Discourse*.⁵ Appropriately for a poem that takes mushrooms as its central image, this complex

⁵ Genette quotes Christian Metz in noting “all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives (three years of the hero’s life summed up in two sentences of a novel or in a few shots of a “frequentative” montage in film, etc.”, and characterises it as the difference between “story time” and “narrative time” (“Narrative Discourse” 33). While story time refers to the time represented by the sequence of events happening in the represented happenings, narrative time refers to “the temporality of written narrative [...] the time needed for “consuming” it is the time needed for *crossing* or *traversing* it, like a road or a field.” (34, emphasis in original)

temporality is somewhat psychedelic in the way it simultaneously renders both local as well as cosmic realities. This ambiguity has yielded a range of interpretations: while Haughton reads the poem's hyper-specificity of place and history as a partial allegory for the "contemporary violence [...] [and] unresolved political differences in Ireland" as it "fester[ed] and grow[ed], like the mushrooms in the poem", other commentators like Seamus Heaney have argued that the "allegorical approach ties the poem too neatly into its place" (qtd. in Collins 257). Without moving into interpretation, however, the mere temporal dynamics present in this poem are already fascinating from a narratological perspective (and tellingly different from the later Nineties style we shall examine shortly). The opening of the poem—"Even now"—suggests an ambivalent relationship with history and tradition. A hint of the *ubi sunt* is perceptible in the way it implies a falling away from the former state of things, but concurrent to that implication is the preservation of hope, the persistent state of a universal truth that abides across historical vagaries. As Collins observes, this layered "co-existence of pessimism and possibility" is not manifested as a dialectical oscillation between thesis and anti-thesis; rather, it is already synthetic, "inseparable through the poet's close attention to the shaping of each phrase" which cleaves both moods to each other (257). Glancing quickly at the scenes Mahon has chosen to focus on, we may notice his preference for quotidian locations, transformed through the intensity of the poetic act into rhapsodized moments. The ordinariness of these spaces, however, belie the extraordinary acts of imagination that Mahon undertakes to present us with these scenes. The first stanza casually stretches out across the entire globe, cutting cinematically between three separate locations strewn across three continents. In doing so, Mahon presents us with a sense of the global human world that is nonetheless tightly spatialized together with the claustrophobic "echo trapped for ever, and a flutter/of wildflowers in the lift shaft". This uncanny effect is further exacerbated by the fact that these moments are, strictly speaking, impossible phenomenologically and epistemologically— they are defined precisely

by the absence of human presence, so that one has to, in effect, imagine oneself as an invisible spirit of sorts drifting immaterially through these scenes. The subtle anti-realism of the opening here thus undergirds the otherwise formally conservative verse with a disquieting otherness—a faintly alien sense of intrusion. This sense of the cosmic is further reinforced by the way time is manipulated between lines: in the “Peruvian mines”, for instance, “a slow clock of condensation” ticks away without human presence, but the image of an “echo trapped forever” after the line break stretches out the ephemeral lifespan of an echo into the impossibly long narrative time of eternity. The second stanza thus sinks us into the unbearable slowness of history by detailing the growth of a “thousand mushrooms [crowding] to a keyhole”; one can’t help but imagine here the infinitesimal daily motion of these mushrooms as they arc in despair towards the “one star in their firmament”, “waiting for us in a foetor/of vegetable sweat since civil war days”. The precise dating of the shed’s abandonment to the Irish Civil War gives us a definitive timespan for the poem: “A half century, without visitors, in the dark”. Haughton acknowledges, however, that the poem finally draws most of its power from its ability to move beyond the specific political conditions of its making, into an “extraordinary visionary meditation [...]” (118) on the rise and fall of civilisations, and the recurrent cycles of predacity, repression, and marginalization that repeat all through history.

Having now been acquainted with Mahon’s most enduring poem as a writer, then, we might also be sympathetic to the task he subsequently faced in attempting to escape the long shadow of “Disused Shed”. Collins notes that Mahon himself had worked this very anxiety into his subsequent poetry, lamenting in “Heraclitus on Rivers” that “your best poem, you know the one I mean, /the very language in which the poem/was written, and the idea of language, /all these things will pass away in time.” (qtd. in Collins 183-184). Mahon’s strategy for escaping this self-fashioned creative bind was simple: in invoking the ghost of Yeats as praise for “Disused Shed”, Banville might very well have unknowingly prophesied the Yeatsian

transformation Mahon was himself about to undertake in the 90s. Just as Yeats famously abandoned the formal lyricism of his Romantic years for a wilder, more fluid Modernist expression, after all, a similar point might be made about Mahon's conscious stylistic shift in the 90s. With *Hudson*, Mahon fashioned a "tonally unstable idiom that [was] often cacophonous, inelegant, and prosaic" (Haughton 226). Where Mahon had previously adopted a "panoptic distance" that played off cosmic scales of time and distance against minute *realia*, *Hudson* saw Mahon attempting to bring the focus of his poetic gaze down into smaller, more contemporary forms, focalising instead through certain characters. This strategy, Mahon explained in an article for *The Irish Times*, represented his attempt to write the long poem "as an alternative to increasingly weary fictional forms"—a "long meditative poem, or poem of reverie, masquerading as narrative" (qtd. in Haughton 226).

The cumulative effect, then, is that of a sustained—if segmented—narrative running through the various sections of the long poem, such that one might make a reasonable argument for *Hudson* as a verse-novel. These various shorter sequences allow Mahon to swoop through the city like a Wim Wenders angel, alternately offering us the panoptic views of lower Manhattan he made his name on, as well as ventriloquizing the colourful characters that populate the city. In the beginning of the sixth untitled sequence of *Hudson*, for instance, we see an example of how Mahon uses the billboard-and-newspapers language of commercial advertising and news reporting as a metonym for the "aerial view" (Haughton) of the city:

"INSIDER TRADING REPORTS ARE LINKED TO PRICE OF BONDS
NO SOLUTION AT HAND WHILE NUCLEAR WASTE PILES UP
NEW YORK TOUGHING IT OUT TO GET THROUGH THE COLD
ALT SEX MF FF NIGHT OWL SCAT PEDO SNUFF
AT&T BOEING CHRYSLER DUPONT DIGITAL DOW JONES
EXXON GENERAL MOTORS IBM NYNEX SEARS
PARANOIA WEST SIDE ROMEOS AMERICA AFTER DARK
ESCAPED BRONX SEABIRDS SPOTTED IN CENTRAL PARK" (1-8, "VI")

Here, again, I shall borrow certain tools from poetics and marry them to a narratological perspective in order to read this poem. What Mahon is after here is a way of rendering, through

the commercial apparatus that operate within the legal boundaries of the urban district, a sense of the linguistic-information stream that constitutes a daily bank of references for New Yorkers, forming what might be described as a recognisably Manhattan discourse. To the reader only acquainted with Mahon's earlier work, which aspired to elegant, formalist heights, this sudden irruption of the decayed language of postmodernity might be shocking. In the context of Mahon's attempt to authentically—not *realistically*—represent America, however, the project being undertaken makes perfect sense. What Mahon means to achieve here, I argue, is to take on—in some sense—a long poem project that is consciously in dialogue with narrative and the contemporary novel. Examining the first few lines of this poem again, we might see here a representation of what James Wood calls “the saturation of language in mass media [...] a debased language” of the sort novelists such as Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace might evoke in their attempt to “prosecute an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America” (Wood 47). Wood therefore cites Auden's poem “The Novelist” in delineating the different responsibilities and freedoms available to novelists and poets. In the instances of Pynchon or Wallace, their referential responsibilities as novelists undertaking the much longer project of prose fiction compels them to “slow down, learn how to be ‘plain and awkward’, and ‘Become the whole of boredom’ [...] to become, to impersonate what he describes, even when the subject itself is debased, vulgar, boring” (Auden qtd. in Wood 47). On the other hand, Auden sees the poetic form as liberated after a fashion, allowing poets to “dash forward like hussars” (5).

It is perhaps this poetic mobility Mahon speaks of when he posits the narrative poem as an “alternative to increasingly weary fictional forms” (Mahon qtd. in Haughton 226). Examining the first six lines of the poem, we find no discernible evidence of poetic form or consideration towards organisation of sound at first—the dissonance on display here is perhaps more akin to the avant-garde experiments of a Charles Bernstein or a Kenneth Goldsmith than

a singing lyricist of Mahon's reputation. Moving through the poem, we gradually become sensitive to some form of rhythmic organisation taking shape, like a wave of dissonant guitar distortion giving way to a classical symphony. The first three lines of the poem are written in the terse, declarative shorthand of newspaper headlines, and instantly generate for us a manifested storyworld, to use Herman's term again. Herman explains that "print texts" typically contain "semantic cues" that function as "blueprints for creating and updating storyworlds" (107), and lists among the variety of cues that might thus operate the likes of "typographical formats, the disposition of space on the printed page [...] and (potentially) diagrams, sketches, and illustrations" (107). Despite elsewhere noting that the Modernist experiments with voice and consciousness (such as in the case of Joyce's *Ulysses*) "reduced the contrast effect [i.e. generic differentiation] between novelistic discourse and the expressive dimensions of the lyrics, however, Herman fails to draw the natural conclusion: that specificities of tone, voice and register function crucially as semantic cues that capably generate storyworlds as well. In Mahon, for instance, we may thus see that his casual sampling of the journalistic tone perches us at a certain ontological height, one on which we may look over New York as an omniscient narrator does, surveying all its bureaucratic, financial, and meteorological events within a compressed frame of time and space. This journalistic tone persists, intersplined occasionally with the neon-billboard language of gutter advertising ("SCAT PEDO SNUFF", 4) and stock market listings. Out of the tumbling dissonance of these early lines, however, the poem suddenly settles into an approximate iambic groove in the 7th line, and we are suddenly surprised by a heroic couplet with the mention of the "ESCAPED BRONX SEABIRDS" (8). The sudden emergence of rhyme and meter in the poem hence precipitates a gear shift: not only does the poem suddenly switch to "lower case" and settles into a "downbeat variant of classical hexameter", it also breaks from the experiment with debased language of the first eight lines by focalising through the perspectives of the "ESCAPED BRONX SEABIRDS" instead. What

a pleasure it is to then encounter in the next line the dactylic delight of the “Inca tern and Andean gull”; indeed, what relish Mahon takes in making that line sing—burstingly—out of the muck and grime of the Bronx! Even without a clear stanza break that demarcates a rest in the music of the poem, Mahon’s modulation of registers through these lines enact a nimble reorientation towards another direction. This sudden shift in atmosphere and formal signature is clearly an example of Mahon taking advantage of the poet’s relative mobility as compared to the novelist. While it might be a bit of a stretch to describe Mahon as a postmodernist in any significant sense, that gorgeous slide from atonal dissonance into the formal, metered music that occurs between the 7th to the 9th line is certainly an irruptive transition only possible—or imaginable—to a 20th century poet. Even as Mahon shifts the poem into a more classical form, then, he does so with an acknowledgement of his contemporary times, thus manipulating, in the fashion that Eliot describes Joyce as accomplishing in *Ulysses*, a “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (483).

As the twin seabirds flee their “storm-wrecked cage in the Bronx Zoo”, then, the poem focalises partly through them and we take to the skies above, surveying:

above Yonkers, New Rochelle, Great Neck, Elmhurst, Astoria,
Long Beach, Red Hook, Bay Ridge, the whole ‘tri-state-area’,
a transmigration of souls, crazy-eyed as they peer
through mutant cloud-cover and air thick with snow-dust,
toxic aerosol dazzle and invasive car-exhaust,
or perch forlorn on gargoyle and asbestos roof,
fine-featured, ruffled, attentive, almost too high to hear
the plaintive, desolate cab-horns on Madison and Fifth:
like Daisy’s Cunard Nightingale, they belong in another life. (“VI”, 12-20).

Here, the poem sweeps through great physical distances at a dizzying speed, as we fly over the “tri-state area” together with the birds. What is notable about this perspective is the sense of continuity that persists despite the abrupt formal and narrative rupture earlier on. The metaphorical bird’s-eye view the omniscient narrator constructs through linguistic ventriloquism in the first eight dissonant lines have here been replaced and matched by a *literal* bird’s-eye view, one that traverses physical space instead of a language-scape. A curious contradiction emerges: in prosecuting the “decomposition of language in America”, as James Wood might say, Mahon nonetheless demonstrated the ability of poetry to generate an immersive storyworld merely by mimicry of a sociolect or an urban discourse alone—a storyworld that holds its own against one manifested through physical descriptions of material reality. The switch over from postmodern language to a traditionally rhapsodic description of the world therefore works much like a match cut might in a film, with two different spaces or objects joined together by the cut through the compositions of the shot to emphasise the spatial-temporal continuity between them. In a neat inversion of the usual tenor-vehicle relationship, the physical ascension of the birds through the sky is described here with a spiritual metaphor: as a “transmigration of souls” (14). This lofty register, however, comes crashing back into a grittier idiom in the next few lines, as the aerial view only yields the polluted reality, with the “mutant cloud-cover”, the “toxic aerosol dazzle and invasive car-exhaust” (15) all calling back to the pesky “NUCLEAR WASTE” piling up at the beginning of the poem. The central anxiety of the poem begins here: one realises the tension between these rare, vulnerable birds, “fine-featured, ruffled” (18), and the inhospitable urbanity they have escaped into. This realisation sinks in precisely as the rhyme scheme of the poem begins to flag and glitch: hitting line 15, with the introduction of the polluted skies, we shift away from the strong masculine rhymes of the previous six lines. A more oblique rhyme scheme takes over: “snow-dust” and “exhaust” works somewhat between line 15 and 16, but the hanging extra syllable in “asbestos roof”

marks line 17 an orphan line. Swinging the camera back around in line 18 to focus on the birds themselves as they soar “attentive[ly]” through the sky, the ending here of “high to hear” is a callback to the strong masculine rhymes between 11 and 14, but this, too, proves to be an orphan line.

What happens next, I think, is a fantastic demonstration of the way rhyme—or the expectation of rhyme—can instantiate and embody the emotional narrative of the poem. Here is an approximation of a reader’s hermeneutic experience of the poem: after a run of slant rhymes and orphan lines, the reader might find herself anxious for a return to something returning to a couplet in the poem—an affect mirrored by the poem at line 18, with the image of the birds in the sky attentively searching for the faint sounds of the city. This expectation of rhyme is accentuated as the reader trots through the falling iambs of line 19 ending on “Madison and Fifth”, only to find herself tripping over the concatenated stresses of “Daisy’s Cunard Nightingale” in line 20, towards the disappointingly slant rhyme of “in another life”. Yet the sound of the “plaintive, desolate cab-horns” in the earlier line is striking enough that one might revisit line 19, morphing “Madison and Fifth” into a phantom malapropism to match the next line: “Madison and *Fife*”, the reader might hazard, and the consistency of the wind instrument theme corresponding to the “cab-horns” throughout the line is pleasing enough for a moment. Even as this absurd act of mutation is being performed upon the line, though, the text reminds the reader of the wishfulness of the act: such ideals belong to “another life”. The text here is thus haunted by its own phantom, with the poem’s formally perfect potentialities lurking out of the reader’s reach, as they did towards the end of Yap’s “sociability”. In enshrining the “concept of totality” as a central driving force behind our reading processes of poetry, Culler defines “the action of modern poetry” as one which consciously enacts the “failure to realize [...] the continuity promised by formal patterns” (201). It is precisely this gap between dissonance and clarity, then, that drives the narrative of the poem. The stylistic

tension between the past and the present here mirrors the struggle of the birds to survive out in the concrete jungle, and Haughton observes that Mahon “clearly identifies with the ‘fine-feathered, ruffled, attentive’ exotics, since, like them, he has to survive in the competitive, toxic atmosphere of Manhattan [...] [competing] with the newspapers and those electronic headlines” (Haughton 239). The poem therefore ends on a note of uncertainty about the “less than fair” chances of these birds as they “compete/in the fight for survival on the city street” (31-33)—a self-reflexive image, that is, of Mahon expressing vulnerability about the potential failure of his experiments, even as he finishes them.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, then, lyric poems are capable of generating and sustaining narratives in their own right and are worthy subjects for narratological analysis. This study, however, cannot take place as is—an appropriate attendance to the poeticity of the poems and their unique technical constructions as linguistically dense forms is required in order to understand fully the way these narratives take shape. As I have shown, techniques borrowed from the field of poetics can be suitably adapted in order to illuminate the storytelling effects of poetic details such as enjambment, metrical organisation, and counterpoint. In service of detailing the affective impact of these poetic techniques on narrative-building, I have also attempted to reconstruct the phenomenological experience of my sense-making efforts as I move through these texts. In my following chapter investigating the definition of narrativity and how narrative techniques can help us further attend to avant-garde poems, then, I shall also explain why an awareness of phenomenological hermeneutics is crucial to my attempts to reform and re-theorize narrative theory for the reading of poetic narratives.

Chapter 2.1: The Narrativity of Narrative

As we have already established in the previous chapter, poetry and poems have historically been and continue to be a narrative genre. This fact is self-evident enough in the instances of classical epic poetry that McHale investigates, or even when the poems themselves are lyric narratives with evident third-person narration, as in the case of the two poems we saw earlier. Just as narrative poetry preceded the lyric, however, in this chapter, we will see that narrative in poetry continues to exist after the lyric too, even when the contemporary poets in question are aiming to deconstruct the unified lyric voice we are used to reading in poetry. To be certain, the narrativity in these poems is not often immediately recognizable, in part, because work that exists out the margins of poetic form often consciously seeks to resist accessibility and easy interpretation. What we must also keep in mind, however, is that many writers working within traditionally narrative genres such as short fiction or novels in the 20th century were also themselves experimenting with pushing at the boundaries of narrativity. To that extent, these experimental poems must themselves be read within and alongside the larger projects of poststructuralism and postmodernism, using the concepts that post-classical narratology has developed to read those corresponding novels and short stories.

In attempting to investigate and articulate all the mechanisms through which poetry as a genre might generate narrative, then, the goal of this thesis is to synthesize a hybrid method of poetics theory and narrative theory. In doing so, it is necessary for us to zoom out of both concepts, so that we look not merely at what these various theorists believe, but also how the hidden assumptions of their thought patterns lead them to certain conclusions. In the first chapter of this thesis, we attempted to pin down a working definition of *poeticity*, to use McHale's term, in an effort to understand what poetics can contribute to the narratological conversation. When the question is inverted, however—when we ask ourselves what narrative

theory can contribute to poetics—the corresponding question of what *narrativity* is pops up. This chapter will thus attempt to figure out exactly what we mean when we speak of narrativity.

In many respects, this question is not a new one. From Aristotle to Forster, from Genette to Fludernik, the history of narrative theory is replete with arguments over what constitutes narrative itself, so that one is reminded of Bertrand Russell's maxim that "everything is vague to a degree [we] do not realize till [we] have tried to make it precise" (498). With the benefit of historical hindsight now, we may see the significance of the *logia* in narratology's name as betraying Gérard Genette's original aim of developing a "pilot science' of literary studies" through the "mechanics of narratology [...] that is distinguished by a *respect for the mechanisms of the text*" (8, emphasis in original). In some respects, classical Geneatlean narratology—the starting point for many contemporary narrative theorists—was very much a product of its time as a structuralist project, with a systematic method of narrative that is predicated upon a series of binary opposites. Even after poststructuralism and deconstruction, however, some of these binaries often go unchallenged: rarely, if ever, do contemporary narrative theorists ever question the predication of narrativity and poeticity as antonyms. This conceptual restriction naturally makes it difficult for us to imagine poems which are successfully poetic *as well* as narrative, much less poems in which the poeticity edifies the narrativity of the text, and vice versa. To reiterate my disclaimer from earlier on in this thesis, then, I have attempted to solve this problem by speaking not of poetry and narrative as absolute, mutually exclusive categories, but rather, of *poeticity* and *narrativity*, instead, as variable qualities. I emphasise this, at the risk of sounding pedantic, because I do not believe these two impulses towards language to be mutually exclusive poles of a spectrum. Rather, I propose we see poeticity and narrativity as two axes upon which literature might be iterated, with varying degrees of poeticity and narrativity present in any given text at any one time. This twin-axis model is especially important in light of the experimental texts we will be considering in this

chapter: John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror", and Desmond Kon Zhicheng Mingdé's *Wrong/Wrung Side of Love*. As I will later demonstrate, the nature of avant-garde experimentation necessarily precludes fixed categories and essentialist definitions—doubly so when one encounters postmodern games that disrupt our typical reading codes. The texts I have selected for this chapter do precisely that, blurring as it were the lines between the poem and the narrative. These two poems stage ontologically recursive, self-reflexive loops that necessitate the inclusion of the reading act in the storyworld of the text, yet still demand a close attention to language and form in order to trigger these hermeneutic mechanisms in the first place. At the margins of literary form, experiments such as these combine poeticity and narrativity in a manner that resists neat categorisation, demanding that we refine our conceptual structures to allow for deeper nuance and ambiguity in the way we read.

To recapitulate our conclusions from the previous chapter, we have already explored the proposal that poeticity be defined as segmentivity: as a way of organising language according to units of varying scale and size, created by the presence of significant ellipses. As we saw in our readings of Yap and Mahon, the variety of segmented units thus created can be played off among each other to create a pleasing aesthetic effect, comparable to the use of counterpoint in instrumental music or in painting. In that manner, we may also speak of poetry as fundamentally based around the idea of the *turn*. In one sense, poetry often manifests, quite literally, as words turning away visually from the margins of the page where they are conventionally expected to reach towards, so that the presence of white space on the paper functions as a parenthesis of sorts that signals to the reader the unique properties and behaviour that language will now take on. The precise manner of this different behaviour is the question. I have previously alluded to Szirtes's quote that "poetry is where the presence burns more than the narrative drive", keeping in mind that Szirtes's phrase betrays the constant engagement of *both* "presence" and "the narrative drive" within literature. To articulate, for Szirtes, two

“essential instincts” arise when one seeks to engage the world through language: the first is “the cry of encounter linked to the desire to name”, which he links to poetry; the second is the “evaluation of options as a result of the encounter”, which he links to narrative. The distinction that Szirtes establishes here is perhaps fundamentally conservative, with a keen eye on tradition and history. One may see in Szirtes’s “cry of encounter”, for instance, an essentially Romantic poetic not dissimilar to Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (51), with Szirtes’s subsequent “desire to name” possibly corresponding to the “tranquillity” in which Wordsworth posits poetry must be mediated from.

Crucially, Szirtes’s association of narrativity with “options as a result of the encounter” is not new as well. This notion of “the encounter” as the starting point of narrativity echoes a common proposal by certain narrative theorists that eventfulness is a pre-requisite for narrative. As Abbott observes, a statement of fact along the lines of “‘my dog has fleas’ is a description [...] but it is not a narrative because nothing happens.” (Abbott 14). A simple rephrasing of the phrase, however, significantly increases the degree of narrativity present in the statement: “My dog was bitten by a flea”, Abbot says, becomes a narrative because it “tells of an event [...] a very small one—the bite of a flea—but that is enough to make it a narrative” (14). The inclusion of the past perfect tense here thus immediately introduces a temporal order into the sentence structured around the predicate (“bitten”), suggesting a state of affairs prior to the event—a blissful, flea-less dog—and a state of affairs after the flea bite. This perspective thus constitutes one common view among narrative theorists: the notion that narrativity revolves around *happening*. It is this perspective of narrativity that Phelan adopts in describing the deployment of the lyric form towards narrativization when he describes lyric narrative as “somebody telling someone else that something has happened” (631).

As Abbott acknowledges, however, this perspective is often contested by other narrative theorists who feel that narrativity requires not just the presence of singular happening,

but plural events that come together to create a linear order of sorts. This is the idea of an eventful causal sequence, which Genette relies heavily on in constructing his ontological categories of narrative discourse and story, as well as his temporal categories of discourse time and narrative time. This notion is so fundamental to the Genettean model that he devotes the first chapter of *Narrative Discourse* to it, and structures the entirety of his model around “the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story” (35). Proponents of this argument posit that narrativity is not only concerned with happening, it is also concerned with *what happens after*—what Szirtes has described as the “options as a result of the encounter” (Szirtes). This notion is predicated upon two ideas: sequentiality and causality, with some theorists further suggesting that the more causally linked a sequence of events are, the stronger the degree of narrativity present in the text. For E.M. Forster, all narratives are a matter of sequentially arranging and mediating events, but it is the degree of causality present in the narrative discourse which distinguishes between “story” and “plot”:

Let us define plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died, and then the queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. (86)

The distinction that Forster makes here, it has to be said, is not a widely accepted one: Chatman’s rebuttal, for instance, that the mind “inveterately seeks structure” and assumes a “causal link that the king’s death has something to do with the queen’s” (45-6) is widely cited in almost every narratological study of causation, from Abbott to Fludernik and Herman. What is useful here for our purposes, however, is the presentation of narrativity as a spectrum again. Echoing Forster, Edward Branigan proposes a narrative schema which sees the narrative as the endpoint of a continuum of information organisation along the axis of causality: while reality

might exist on one end of the spectrum as a “heap” of “virtually random [...] data or objects assembled largely by chance”, a narrative is a “series of episodes collected as a focused chain”, that is, a “series of cause and effects with a continuing centre” (20). This sense of narrativity as predicated upon causality, Branigan argues, means that it inevitably leads to a final ending point where “its cause and effects chains are judged to be totally delineated”, so that “the ending is seemingly entailed by the beginning [...] the feature of narrative often referred to as closure” (20). Corresponding to this, we might briefly turn to Barthes’s “Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of the Narrative”, where he identifies “two main categories of units, Functions and Indica” (8). These two categories of units roughly map out over Genette’s distinction between story and narrative discourse, in the sense that “one corresponds to a functionality of doing, the other to a functionality of being”, so that a “strongly functional narrative” propelled along by the boiled-down nature of its storytelling would resemble “folk tales”, while “strongly indicational narratives” would explore much more the mimetic representation and evocation of reality, as in the case of “psychological novels” (8). Barthes further suggests that within the category of functional narrative units, we might identify “cardinal functions (or nuclei)” that “constitute real hinges in the narrative” as well as “complementary [functions]...catalyses” that “fill up the narrative space between hinges” (8). In Forster’s reckoning, this second sub-category of “complementary functions” are quite necessary for framing the cardinal functions as such—that is, the framework of the novel, in his view, requires that the narrative space between hinges be filled in order for the key events to stand out causally as such. Yet Chatman is also certainly right when he suggests that the mind is more than capable of filling in the blanks between two presented events so as to create a clear causally linked sequence of events. Barthes observes that the space between two events such as a phone ringing and a protagonist picking up the receiver may be populated with a myriad of other banal occurrences, such as the protagonist putting out his cigarette or walking towards the phone, and that while “these

catalyses remain functional, insofar as they are correlated with a nucleus”, their functionality is in fact “diminished, unilateral, parasitic” (8-9). He thus goes on to conclude that the “mainspring of narrative activity is the confusion of the consecutive and the dependent [consequence], what comes after being read in the narrative as if it is caused by [...] a systematic application of the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*” (9). In other words, Barthes argues, not only does narrative not require the deliberate articulation of causality, it is, in fact, the automatic assumption of implicit causality that creates narrativity, in his view.

At the same time, a casual survey of the history of literature is sufficient for us to clock that a broad spectrum exists between inexorable narratives (such as *Oedipus Rex*, in which causation and predestination is responsible for much of the affective pathos of the story) and seemingly random, chaotic texts such as Beckett’s *The Unnameable*. While not synonymous with avant-gardism, it is certainly the case that many 20th century experimental texts commonly push the limit in terms of rendering implicit rather than explicit the causal links between narrative events, demanding that the reader actively step into the text and co-construct the narrative alongside the author⁶. At this juncture, we may observe two potential disagreements to the causal sequence model of narrativity. The first is especially pertinent to the arguments presented in this thesis so far: Chatman might be right in suggesting that all narratives already inherently work through the reader’s imagination and active filling in of narrative gaps. This attribute of narrativity, however, seems strongly reminiscent of Shoptaw’s definition of poetic measure as “the smallest unit of resistance to meaning”—the “gap” which provokes “the reader’s meaning-making apparatus [to] gear up to bridge the gap and heal the breach” (qtd. in McHale 16). Just like poems, narratives are also fundamentally segmented,

⁶ Particularly pertinent here is the distinction Barthes makes between writerly and readerly texts in *S/Z*: while Western civilization has largely been built upon readerly texts that render the reader merely a passive participant whose only freedom in reading is to “accept or reject the text [...] nothing more than a referendum”, the contemporary novel, on the other hand, is writerly, a “perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would eventually make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves* writing...” (4-5).

functioning through chosen pauses in the narrative discourse that delineate scenes from scenes, chapter from chapter, paragraph from paragraph. In this way, we might say that even the seemingly straightforward suggestion that narratives are continuous causal sequences as opposed to the recursive and disjointed nature of poems is not so straightforward after all; narrativity and poeticity prove again and again to overlap in their meaning-making mechanisms. This phenomenon thus demonstrates the point this thesis (and chapter) attempts to make: that there is no inherent quarrel between narrativity and poeticity, and that narrative theory can meaningfully contribute to the analysis of poetry.

The second disagreement has to do with consciousness. One of the most commonly voiced disagreements to the causal sequence model of narrativity is that it leaves room for unexpected textual genres to enter the discussion. In much the same way that Diogenes the Cynic famously contested Socrates's definition of man as a "featherless biped" by presenting a plucked chicken as a man, we might also say that a textual genre such as the cooking recipe or the instruction manual fulfils the criteria set forth by the causal sequence model. A cooking recipe certainly is predicated among a series of events—is, in fact, a guide towards precipitating a series of events, all causally linked so as to yield a final teleological consequence. While the overlap between instructional texts and literary texts can yield interesting results at times—second person narrative forms may occasionally adopt an imperative tone, and more than one fiction writer has married the recipe format to the novel, with Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* coming to mind—this categorisation appears much too broad for the purposes of this literary inquiry. One might also say that the failure of the causal sequence model to acknowledge or take into account the hermeneutical processes Chatman observed is a significant omission: if gap-filling is such a crucial engine of narrative activity, surely any theory that ignores the phenomenological goings-on of engaging with narrative must be necessarily incomplete?

These quarrels with causal sequentiality underline Monika Fludernik's proposal for a reconceptualisation of narrativity. Provocatively, Fludernik proposes to shift away from plot as the central constituent of narrativity, towards a focus on what she terms "mediated human experientiality" (26). Echoing Dorrit Cohn in suggesting that the distinction of narrative is its ability to "portray consciousness, particularly another's consciousness, from the inside" (20), Fludernik argues that it is the capacity for "quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience" that constitutes narrativity. Correspondingly, Fludernik agrees with Chatman that "readers actively construct meanings and impose frames on their interpretations of texts" (9), but she goes even further that suggest that this act of meaning-construction precedes any *a priori* notion of narrativity itself, so that the readerly construction of the text "supersedes any inherent or essentialist understandings of narrativity" (235). On both a mimetic as well as a hermeneutic level, then, Fludernik's definition of narrativity could be said to prioritise phenomenological experience—the *whats-it-feel-likeness* of reading and existing with fiction. This definition of narrativity results in certain unconventional interpretations and allowances:

"In my model there can therefore be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level. [...] Merely plot-oriented narratives are therefore here argued to represent a zero degree of narrativity even though they are traditionally endowed with proto-typical narrativity." (9-10)

Against Forster and Branigan, Fludernik argues that attempts to view narratives as solely defined according to their "bounded sequentiality" (16) renders them staid and frozen, requiring a reconstruction of the narrative as a whole after the reading process is completed, so that "narrative in these typologies always appear to be static, spatial" (15). In an attempt to account for the dynamic conscious experience of encountering a narrative as it unfurls, Fludernik accordingly reworks the theoretical framework for narrativity in the way I have

described earlier, subsuming causal sequentiality under what she terms “actionality”—a way of describing the way goal-oriented action and motivational choice are part of the anthropomorphic condition. This redesigning of narrativity therefore prioritises the phenomenological experience of human existence—what is most crucial, according to Fludernik, is that the text can be related back to some aspects of what it feels like in the first person to be a human subject. Remade into a mere component of mediated experientiality, causal sequentiality thereby becomes merely one of several pillars that constitute narrativity in Fludernik’s book, so that one may remove it from the equation and still read the final product as a narrative—albeit one in which very little happens.

A curious thing happens, however, when one considers the central question of this thesis in the context of Fludernik’s model. Let us step back for a moment now to regard narrative theory as an object of analysis, reading it from a meta-hermeneutical perspective. As I mentioned in my introduction, and again at the beginning of this chapter, poetry is often figured by narratologists to be a floating Other, hovering at the margins of the narratological conversation, defined only in opposition to narrativity. This structuralist dynamic plays out in Fludernik’s model. Although Alber initially praises it for its capaciousness for varied forms of narrative, such as when it proves capable of accommodating “initially alien and uncommunicative texts” such as Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*, the failure of the model for Alber is evidenced by its inability to distinguish between narrative and the lyric (68-69). Similarly, Herman agrees with Alber in that Fludernik’s accommodation of an intersection between narrative and lyric is proof enough of the intellectual looseness of the experientiality model (141). Crucially, Fludernik herself qualifies the boundaries of her model thus: by describing the point where “narrativity can longer be recuperated by any means [a variety of natural cognitive parameters]” as that when “the narrative genre merges with poetry” (26). It is thus obvious that the signification of poetry as fundamentally *anti-narrative* takes precedence for

these theorists—poetry is an *a priori* inversion of narrative, so much so that Fludernik goes to great lengths to disqualify the history of narrative poetry as “hypothetical or allegorical scenarios” that demonstrate a “typical lack of experientiality (and hence narrativity)” on the basis of a single glossed-over reading of Ben Jonson’s “How He Saw Her” (255). (One does indeed wonder what Fludernik would make of classical narratives such as *The Odyssey*, or even relatively contemporary lyric narratives by fiction writers, such as Raymond Carver’s “Suspenders”—would she similarly dismiss *The Illiad* as hypothetical, and if so, where does one draw the line between fiction and hypothesis?) Similarly, Alber and Herman’s dismissals of Fludernik’s model stem from their inability to perceive a clear distinction between narrative and lyric poetry in it, despite the hazy definitions of poetry employed in these discussions in the first place. This is despite Alber’s insistence that “in the realm of extremely experimental writing, the traditional distinctions between genre are erased” (68), and Fludernik’s similar acknowledgement that “it is only in the context of publication [...] [that] generic classification frequently determines the direction in which interpretation may move in the reading process” (235).

Chapter 2.2: Towards a Phenomenological Hermeneutics of Narrative

I raise these points not to discredit the validity of Fludernik’s theoretical model. Rather, I mean here to illustrate the way that two common fallacies proliferate across the model making efforts of literary theorists. The fallacy concerns a mental habit that Thomas Kuhn observes among scientists when regarding a challenge to dominant scientific paradigms:

The laymen who scoffed at Einstein’s general theory of relativity because space could not be “curved”—it was not that sort of thing—were not simply wrong or mistaken. Nor were the mathematicians, physicists, and philosophers who tried to develop a Euclidean version of Einstein’s theory. What had previously been meant by space was necessarily flat, homogeneous, isotropic, and unaffected by the presence of matter. If it

had not been, Newtonian physics would not have worked. To make the transition to Einstein's universe, the whole conceptual web whose strands are space, time, matter, force, and so on, had to be shifted and laid down again on nature whole [...] Consider, for another example, the men who called Copernicus mad because he proclaimed that the earth moved. They were not either just wrong or quite wrong. Part of what they meant by 'earth' was fixed position. Their earth, at least, could not be moved. (148)

What is the relevance of this quote to our discussion? Simply this: that within theoretical models, the integrity of the theoretical structure and the attendant positions that compose its architectural symmetries often takes precedence over the subjects being described by said theoretical models. In Fludernik's case, for instance, her model of mediated human experientiality is an attempt to modify the theoretical framework of classical narratology, which is itself predicated upon a continuum that sees poetry and narrativity as mutually exclusive binaries. This importance of preserving the definition of poetry as anti-narrative may explain the strange mental acrobatics Fludernik performs in simultaneously categorising poetry as "the point where narrativity may no longer be recuperated" as well as in dismissing instances of narrativity in poetry as "hypothetical or allegorical" (26, 255). In the same way that the earth represented fixity in Ptolemy's model of the universe⁷, then, the functional position of poetry as marginal Other within the model of classical narratology here ensures that even as postclassical narratology evolves to accommodate new experimental forms of narrative, the centre-margin relation abides.

The second fallacy I mean to describe here goes back to the problem McHale diagnosed when he critiqued the hermeneutic methods that Phelan adopted in his attempts at reading lyric poetry, and goes some way in explaining why the two theoretical models we are attempting to

⁷ My particular comparison of narratological paradigms to the Ptolemaic model of the universe is not without precedent. In the footnotes to *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette compared Mieke Bal's attempted overthrowing of his model of focalisation to the debate over heliocentrism, before adding wryly: "the question now, of course, is to know who is Ptolemy—and everyone believes himself to be Copernicus." (77)

synthesize in this thesis seem to be at odds at times, even when they attempt to describe the same texts. The subject-object relation has been a persistent problem for phenomenologists and critical theorists all through the 20th century, but the complexity of the problem becomes even more pronounced within the context of hermeneutics. I submit that a common thread runs through Fludernik's banishment of poetry from her experientiality model to Phelan's remaking of poetic form into what McHale has called an "honorary short story" (13). Both these instances hinge upon the prioritisation of the theoretical model one has spent one's entire academic career constructing at the expense of the literary texts that these theoretical models appropriate, interchangeably, as objects of scrutiny. This suggestion might sound unfairly critical of narrative theory, but I do not mean to single out narratology for castigation—rather, one might argue that this hermeneutical error actually proliferates across the entire discipline of literary studies, emerging out of the contemporary push by universities towards interdisciplinary collaborations. In this reckoning, I submit that narratology's inability to adapt and see beyond its conventional methodology is similar to the dogmas that feminist scholar Rita Felski ascribes to critical theory in *Uses of Literature*. Alluding to Paul Ricoeur's ideas of "the hermeneutics of suspicion", Felski describes the "well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves" that comprise contemporary literary discourse. Felski therefore observes that the sum of these practices add up to a "effect of rendering the work of art secondary or supernumerary, a depleted resource deficient in insights that must be supplied by the critic" (Felski 6). While Felski is herself sympathetic to the ideological inclinations of literary theory and the notion that literature can be "a potential medium of political enlightenment and social transformation", she nonetheless notes the "problem of subordination": "What is lost," she asks, "when we "haul in the literary text to confirm what the critic already knows [...] when we deny a work any capacity to bite back?"

At stake, then, is the question of subjectivity. Felski's reification of literature as possessing a "capacity to bite back" frames the work itself as a body with a mouth: a mouth to which speech has been muted, a body which has been tamed and domesticated. By imposing a pre-determined frame of meaning over the text, the ideologically-inclined suspicious critic ironically objectifies the work, denying it alterity and subjecthood. Felski thus finds herself turning to phenomenology as a way of returning "to the things themselves [...] to see—to really see—what lies right under our noses", an orientation which entails "an undogmatic openness to a spectrum of literary responses" (17-18). This phenomenological turn as a way of countering the reductive objectification of the literary text by pre-determined frames thus resonates with Derek Attridge, who suggests that literature's affective powers stem from its ability to catalyse an "irruption of *otherness* or *alterity* into the cultural field" (Attridge 136, emphasis in original). In contrast to the hermeneutics of suspicion, then, Attridge advocates a mode of reading which "attempts to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text, work[ing] against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work" (80).

Herein lies the rub. When applied to literature, the goal of narrative theory, ideally, ought to be to most closely identify and explicate the way a text is itself and no other; the precise means, in other words, by which it produces its own singular permutation of aesthetic affect. Yet it is perhaps an unavoidable consequence of the narratological project that theorists from Genette to Fludernik will attempt to construct universal theoretical models that exhaustively categorise the functions and workings of literature. This impulse comes to us from the natural sciences, where the aim is to gaze upon the object with analytic detachment and empirical rigour. Perhaps more than any other example in the subject-object relation problematic, however, literature resists objectification; in fact, one might say that literature is

subjectivity *par excellence*. One must remember that writers—film auteurs, novelists, and poets alike—do not write in a vacuum, but in fact often create with an awareness of the potential interpretations of their work. Let us take Joseph Campbell's notion of the monomyth, for instance. In his comparative study of myths from various different cultures, Campbell observed that they were often structured around a common narrative arc where “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (30). This descriptive observation of the narrative structure of myth has gone on to percolate through to mass culture, with several popular fantasy franchises such as the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* films all acknowledging their conscious application of the archetypal patterns Campbell describes (186). On the other hand, writers are also often capable of consciously subverting or even teasingly trapping critics and theorists within their hermeneutic tendencies: consider, for instance, the way Vladimir Nabokov built in interpretative traps throughout *Lolita* that self-reflexively anticipate and parody potential psychoanalytic readings of the novel, thus springing what Zadie Smith terms “defensive humiliations [...] of potential readers” (“Changing My Mind”). It therefore stands to reason that any potential attempts by theorists to pin down essentialist definitions of poeticity and narrativity—including the ones essayed by this very thesis—will potentially face challenges from subsequent experimental writers seeking to explode the continuum of history. The point here, obviously, is not that we should discard narrative theory as a lens through which to examine poetry, or literary texts in general. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that literary texts are not staid unchanging objects, but rather, an active evolving discourse that is more than capable of responding and conversing with its readers; correspondingly, we ought to think of our hermeneutics as heuristics first and foremost, so that what takes precedence is not the lens, but the act of seeing.

To be sure, one might argue that this proposal to consider writers and critics as entangled in the same discursive community is a tad overblown: while poets and novelists might, on occasion, be aware of academic theories, is it not still the case that poesis and theory-making are fundamentally different activities? Returning to Fludernik, however, I submit that if one is to accept her proposal that human experientiality constitutes narrativity, then one must also concede the salient, natural conclusion: that literary theories and the hermeneutics they yield are also, in effect, narratives in their own right—including Fludernik’s own model of mediated experientiality. Each truth-claim about the universe, after all, is simultaneously a bounded sequence of several events as well as an anthropomorphic quest for teleology. In my following readings, then, I shall attempt to read the critical discourse surrounding the texts as narratives alongside the primary texts themselves. This approach might sound unnecessarily recursive, but as I shall shortly demonstrate, it is crucial when examining avant-garde poems which are characteristically postmodern in the self-reflexive stance.

Chapter 2.3: Reading John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

One example of a text which self-reflexively gestures towards the relationship between the critical gaze and the art object is John Ashbery’s 1972 poem, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”. Arguably Ashbery’s most canonically recognised piece, “Self-Portrait” is both the title poem in the collection of the same name as well as an ekphrastic interpretation of a 1524 Parmigianino painting—also of the same name. Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait” thus consciously adopts what Ashbery has described as a “mock-art historical essay form” (“The Library of America Interviews John Ashbery” 4), playing off Ashbery’s well-documented career as an art critic. In the following passage from the poem, we see Ashbery cogently examining the precise problematic relationship we have just been discussing, that is, the relationship between theory and the reality it seeks to describe:

[...] Each person

Has one big theory to explain the universe
But it doesn't tell the whole story
And in the end it is what is outside him
That matters, to him and especially to *us*
Who have been given no help whatever
In decoding our own man-sized quotient and must reply
On second-hand knowledge. (*Self-Portrait* 81-82, emphasis mine)

The passage here hinges upon the identity of the collective first-person: who, exactly, is the “us” that Ashbery takes pains to single out as “have been given no help whatever”? The task of attempting to “explain the universe”, appropriately, is a universal one, a function perhaps of the teleological drive Chatman described when he argued that the mind “inveterately seeks structure” (45-6). Academic criticism and literary poesis are thus blurred in this reckoning: the work of having “one big theory to explain the universe”, Ashbery says, fails at “[telling] the whole story” (81)—suggesting that the true aim of theory-making is to narrate the universe in the first place, and that one might just as easily speak of a narrative of theory, as much as of a theory of narrative. To that extent, *Self-Portrait* appears—at least on first glance—to be a partial fulfilment of Harold Bloom’s suggestion that “as literary history lengthens, all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry” (Bloom qtd. in Schultz 28).

Yet Ashbery’s stance on the relationship between art and criticism, as I shall shortly demonstrate, is more complex than that. In an article examining Ashbery’s late-career ambivalence towards Harold Bloom’s canonization of his poetry, Susan Schultz suggested that Ashbery consciously fought to diminish Bloom’s hold over him towards the end of the 20th century. Famously, Harold Bloom has argued for a certain narrative of artistic transmission—the process which he terms “the anxiety of influence” (Schultz 22). Without going into further

detail, this notion hinges upon the Oedipal confrontation between poets and their “strong precursors”, a confrontation in which the poet maybe only prevail through the deliberate “misreading” of the poetic legacy before them. In that artistic narrative of Western literary evolution, Bloom places Ashbery as being in the wake of the Modernist Wallace Stevens, “whose [own] poetic fathers (hence one-sided sparring partners) were Emerson and Whitman”, so that Ashbery is at his best not when trafficking in postmodern nonsense, but when “he dares to write most directly in the idiom of Stevens”—that is, Schultz notes, when Ashbery most conforms “neatly into Bloom’s scheme of [literary] influence” (Bloom qtd. in Schultz 28). This restrictive—and frankly, presumptive—reading of Ashbery has not gone without rebuttal from the poet. Schultz notes that some three years after the abovementioned review by Bloom, Ashbery published his “own literary criticism in the form of a “verse epistle” [...] an “essay on criticism”, or an essay *of* criticism [...] suggesting that the critic ought not to consider himself more than a handmaiden to the poet” (Schultz 31). This poem, titled “Litany”, reaches its peak in the following verse, which Schultz sees as an “attempt to completely de-authorize the very genre of criticism”:

“Nor
Should it take itself as a fitting subject
for critical analysis, since it knows
itself only through us, and us
only through being part of ourselves, the bark
of the tree of our intellect.” (Ashbery qtd. in Schultz 32)

On the face of it, the implications are stinging. As Schultz notes ruefully, Ashbery “more than implies” that “the critic ought to confine himself to barking rather than to biting” (32)—essentially comparing literary critics to dogs. Thankfully, this venom of this passage appears to be tongue-in-cheek and at least partly satirical, as evidenced in an earlier line when Ashbery

self-deprecatingly qualifies that critics should “not be too eager to criticize us: we/could do that for ourselves, and have done so” (Ashbery qtd. in Schultz 32). Yet the undertone, Schulz argues, is clear: the sanctity of art is to take precedence over the critical instinct for Ashbery, and it is the makers, not the explainers, who are the true meaning-making heroes of the universe.

Yet does it not ring a tad false and neat as well, this portrait of Ashbery earnestly coming down on the side of artists versus critics? Since we have been discussing the intersections between literary theory and narrative-making, allow me to be somewhat cheeky in this moment and self-reflexively read the various critical interpretations around *Self-Portrait* as narratives in their own right. Taking this approach towards Schultz, then, we might say that her reading plays right into Bloom’s pen: it neatly recapitulates Bloom’s narrative that literary creation is engendered by some sort of primal will to power, manifesting in the “inherent competition between poets and critics” (Schultz 30) that Bloom codes as a “father-critic and son-poet” dynamic (Schultz 26). One would also be severely remiss to ignore Ashbery’s own considerable body of art criticism when considering his stance towards the artist-critic relationship. As I mentioned previously, Ashbery’s long career as art critic ran parallel to his work as a poet for fifteen years, during which time he wrote for publications as varied and widely read as the Paris *Herald Tribune*, *New York* magazine, and *Newsweek* (“Library of America” 4). To be certain, Ashbery has always emphasized (with reference to his work prior to the writing of *Self-Portrait*) the pains he took to separate his critical and poetic writing: while his poems might have been “spontaneous and unrehearsed”, his “critical articles were clear and usually intended for a general readership” (4). It wasn’t until Ashbery had stopped writing art criticism temporarily in 1973, he claims, that he “felt [he] had been given permission to write poetry about a painting” (4), to presumably preserve the distinction between these two textual genres.

Yet it is also no accident that *Self-Portrait* is a partial pastiche of art criticism, composed in a certain learned critical register that deliberately mimics the essayistic voice. In contrast to Schultz's suggestion that Ashbery means to diminish the authority of the critic over artists, Richard Stamelman reads "Litany" as Ashbery's advocating for a form of criticism which would "try to give expression to and communicate an understanding of the fragmented experiences of ordinary men and women living in the temporal world of random happenings" (610). Stamelman thus observes that this version of criticism "would not differ greatly from poetry in its choice of subject matter", that it would, in other words, function as a creative undertaking in and of itself. Accordingly, Stamelman interprets *Self-Portrait* as primarily engaged in a critical, antagonistic re-reading of Parmigianino's original painting. In Stamelman's view, where the original artwork reached for a typically Italian mannerist "image of artistic unity" which proceeded out of an optimistic "faith in the representability of world and self through art", Ashbery's ekphrastic poem speaks to the failure of art to attain those ideals, so much so that the poem's end sees Parmigianino "flattened and pushed back into the dead past; self-portraiture is stripped of authority and authenticity; and knowledge appears as no more than the random coalescence of fragments" (611). To creatively re-present Stamelman's representation of Ashbery's representation of Parmigianino's representation of reality, then, one might observe that Stamelman's characterization of Ashbery's reading mode here bears certain similarities to the hermeneutic of suspicion that Ricoeur has described. In Stamelman's narrative, Ashbery undertakes an aggressive project of reading Parmigianino against the grain in an attempt to expose the inadequacies of artistic representation when it comes to the task of restoring "the reality of what existed before the unravelling"—said unravelling here referring to the "age of disbelief" Wallace Stevens once characterized the modern era as (qtd. in Stamelman 612). Zooming even further out, one may observe that Stamelman's efforts to characterize Ashbery as an aggressive re-reader of Parmigianino are

themselves further located in a certain narrative of Ashbery as the poet of high postmodernism. Accordingly, his work must primarily seek to decentre the grand narratives of Western civilization, and Ashbery's selection of an Italian Mannerist painting from the Renaissance era to deconstruct only reinforces that narrative. Ironically, one may argue that this interpretation by Stamelman is itself predicated upon a view of literary and cultural history as transmitted through a series of confrontations—a perspective not entirely dissimilar from Bloom's. Stamelman's characterization of *Self-Portrait* as a “centrifugal [...] self-decentering poem” engaging in “multiple displacements” which achieves a “decentered representation of the sixteenth-century painting” (615) is therefore revealing: Ashbery's poem can only come into being through the critical act of deconstructing an earlier artistic predecessor. In examining the opening of *Self-Portrait*, for example, Stamelman notes that “Ashbery quickly sums up the painting's features” through a series of “fragmentary perceptions” before “repeatedly question[ing] [...] the illusions of totality and detemporalized wholeness which such representations contain” (616). Critique and ekphrastic poesis, in this reckoning, are made into the same act.

At the risk of turning this examination of “Self-Portrait” (even more) insufferably self-reflexive, I will now undertake to offer my own critical reflection of this poem, one which resolves and synthesizes the tensions between Stamelman and Schultz's readings. Instead of positioning Ashbery as either defender of artistic autonomy, as Schultz does, or deconstructive postmodern poet-critic, as Stamelman believes, I propose that we see a fundamental dialectical movement in *Self-Portrait* instead. This dialectical movement follows the trajectory of thought throughout the poem, describing the motions of a gyre that alternately swings through enchantment with the artistic object and meditation on the milieu of its making. Crucially, this movement recurs and returns repeatedly to the portrait it engages with. The weaving of Parmigianino's original portrait into the ekphrastic poem and its internal movement here is

crucial. While Stamelman similarly observes that the poem is full of “movements, swervings, turnings” (618) in his reading, the motion of the poetic narrative is figured as an anti-thesis to the fundamental stillness of the portrait. Accordingly, Stamelman characterizes the face of the painter in *Self-Portrait* as “protected, embalmed, sequestered, imprisoned” (616). This fundamental stillness, he suggests, is coded as a negative thing in the poem: “to bring forth the unified and coherent image”, Stamelman imagines Ashbery arguing, “entails the deadening of the painter’s spirit and the sacrifice of his freedom” (616). In other words, the painting’s escape from narrative time—from the temporal sequentiality we have discussed at length earlier in this chapter. Stamelman thus argues that the poem’s introduction of time and movement into its own ontology functions as a critique of the painting’s “homogenous, undifferentiated image of self” (618). Examining the following lines, for instance, Stamelman argues that the portrait’s temporal stasis “distorts the meaning of human existence”:

“The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move

As little as possible. This is what the portrait says.” (*Self-Portrait* 69)

These lines, according to Stamelman, demonstrate the falsity of attempting to “freeze one moment in the painter’s life [...] [as a] perfect and essential embodiment” (616). Fair enough—that the poem is attempting to engage with *some* notion of stillness at this instance is evident. What is less unclear, however, is Stamelman’s argument that stillness is presented in these lines as a negative quality. Examining the six quoted lines here, we may notice that a perceptible rhythmic shift occurs in the middle of lines. As I have argued before, the contrapuntal movement of a poem through the established rhythms of the lines is a significant aesthetic

dimension we must not ignore when attempting to fully perceive the phonological codes of poetry. So it is here: the reified soul of the painting rocks in an endstopped rhythm through the first three lines, so that the commas that end each sentence circumscribe the space described by the portrait, inside of which the focalized perspective may perceive the “raindrops at the pane, /the sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind” (*Self-Portrait* 69). Against this endstopped rhythm established in the first three lines, however, a second more haphazard contrapuntal line emerges: the long melodic line of the autumn leaves is abruptly disrupted by a tersely emphasized “outside” in the next line, upon which the poem suddenly switches gears. The next two lines end in contradictory propositions: “it must stay...” is obviously at odds with “It must move”. Yet the specific enjambment of these two statements call us to read them as a subtle couplet of sorts—paired together not by rhyme, but by a dialectical relationship that repeats, on a micro scale, the oscillating thematic movement of the entire poem itself. Lest we read this sudden emergence of enjambment might seem accidental, the firm full stop in the next line (“This is what the portrait says”) returns to an endstopped rhythm, so that our attention is specifically drawn to the disruption. The lines here thus belie their own semantic content by running over their borders, spilling over their prescribed boundaries, refusing precisely to “stay/posing in this place” (69). The pairing of endstopping and enjambment in this small passage thus already illustrates a tension between stillness and movement—between enclosure and irruption—that moves through the entire poem, but this tension, crucially, *belongs* to the soul of the portrait: it is the spirit of the artwork that is “restless” and “longing to be free” (69). We can thus see that, contrary to Stamelman, the formal features of the poem here compel us towards an empathetic affinity for the art object, instead of an antagonistic critical stance.

Examining the rest of the poem, then, we see all through the first stanza clear signposts towards reading the movement of the text not as a linear rhetorical sequence, but as an

oscillation between two dialectical positions—a wavelength between two parameters. What these positions are, precisely, is stated quite plainly early on:

“Adhering to the face keeps it

Lively and intact in a recurring wave

Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.

But how far can it swim out through the eyes

And still return safely to its nest? The surface...” (*Self-Portrait* 68)

As we may observe, rather than simply adopting a deconstructive opposition to naturalistic art, the poem in fact begins with an acknowledgement for the aesthetic qualities of the painting—a reverence for the aura of the artwork. Importantly, it is the presence of the visage in the portrait that anchors the lifelikeness of the artwork here. Ashbery’s consistent description of the portrait with the present tense suggests that it is possessed of its own internal time; the portrait lives within a condensed, distilled temporality; it is always its own enactment. Yet it is the gaze of the viewer—the poetic lyric subject in the poem—that constructs this presence. Syntactically, the “face” is the object of the sentence upon which the act of “adhering” is performed, and it is this action—the attention, the perceptive gaze of the viewer—which “keeps it/lively and intact in a recurring wave/of arrival”. Mirroring this, it is the “gaze” of the painted Parmigianino which is so powerfully affective at conveying the “combination/Of tenderness, amusement and regret” (69) that jolts the poetic subject into realizing the banal materiality—the flatness—of the portrait. Paradoxically, then, it is the recognition of the portrayed face as a subject which catalyses its own flattening: later on in the poem, for instance, it is again the “eyes [which] proclaim/That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there/And nothing can exist except what’s there” (70). This notion of a “recurring wave” is thus crucial to how we must understand the way *Self-Portrait* engages with Parmigianino’s portrait. Yes, it is indeed true that the intensity of the poetic gaze here transforms, as per Stamelman’s suggestion,

the artwork into “surface” after a certain period, so that we come to realise that—of course—“the soul is not a soul, has no secret [...] That is the tune but there are no words” (69). The oscillation that moves through *Self-Portrait* is one that traces—accompanies, beats along with—the teleological impulse, so that the aura of the artwork pulses at a regular rhythm, with the banal quotidian waiting in the negative space between the peaks. This dialectic relationship thus works on one level as a *mise en abyme*—a series of infinitely recursive reflections that trigger each oncoming state. In a curious way, then, might we even see both contesting theories of narrativity (viz. sequentiality versus experientiality) playing out in this recursive oscillation? Against the frozen time of the portrait, it is the addition of the narrative drive—the sequenced temporality of the poet’s recognition and subsequent defamiliarisations as interpretative events—which allows the poem to critically relate to the original mediated experientiality of the Parmigianino painting. Juxtaposed against the frozen temporality of the portrait, this onward movement is a visible increase in narrativity, but the trajectory of this onward movement as it winds around itself—as it reverses, oscillates—in recursive fashion is also distinctly segmentive. In this way, by perceiving sequential narrativity and poeticity as two different dimensions in which one might stretch out, we can see how a text may demonstrate a high degree of both characteristics without both qualities being antithetical to each other.

Chapter 2.4: Reading Desmond Kon’s *The Wrong/Wrung Side of Love*

This notion of narrativity and poeticity as intersecting perpendicular dimensions to each other is important to keep in mind when reading single poems, but it is also similarly applicable to certain poetry collections in which the individual poems combine to yield a certain narrative and diegetic unity. In such texts, the specific division of the entire collection into smaller poems may provide us with yet another scale at which contrapuntal interplay may be achieved. One

such text is a long poetic sequence by the Singaporean poet, Desmond Kon Zhicheng Mingdé⁸. To briefly bring Kon into the conversation we have been having in this chapter about hermeneutics and narrative-making in experimental poetry, I will provide a quick biography of him here.

By his own acknowledgement, Kon's praxis is highly steeped in critical discourse. In an interview with *Kitaab*, he explained that "looking for a centre" in his poetry was a "self-defeatist approach" due to his fondness for "[working] in postmodern narratives" ("Philosopher, hermit, journalist, historian, poet: Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé," *Kitaab*). Elsewhere, Kon has described "the big, unwieldy cloak of postmodernism" as "a kind of cavern to house [his] personality" ("Poet of the Month: Desmond Kon Zhicheng Mingdé"). This awareness of literary theory and critical discourse means that the typical Kon text is often characteristically highly allusive and hypertextual—a self-aware tissue of citations, hyperlinking back towards the centres of culture from which it draws. An example of this hypertextuality may be found in the collection *I Didn't Know Mani Was a Conceptualist*, which features a recurring character: the ideal Da-Ren figure of Chinese philosophy. Mencius argues that the sage-like Da-Ren has the duty to not only "censure a ruler" or "criticise the policies of his government," but also "correct what is wrong in a ruler's mind"; the Da-Ren hence considers "compliance [. . .] to be the way of women" (Mencius 4A20, 3B2). This moral exhortation towards rebellious political defiance is deliberately juxtaposed against the Dadaist impulse towards catachresis—viz. categorical confusion—and meaninglessness, when Kon's Da-Ren in *Mani* observes: "Dada makes gods of men / [. . .] then makes them men again" ("Effort of Surrealism"). An erudite Eliot-like figure, Da-Ren anachronistically flaunts his recognition of Western art, philosophy and theology, crowing at "Giorgio de Chirico [. . .]

^{8 8} Part of this next section on Desmond Kon is adapted and expanded from his critical introduction for the national poetry archive *Poetry.sg*, which I initially wrote in 2015 and subsequently updated in 2017.

hiding in his own silhouette” (“Effort of Surrealism”), handing out Caravaggio paintings (“A Koan Catalogue”) and holding conversations about apocryphal gnostic scriptures (“Morning Star”). Zafar Anjum notes that the reader’s bewilderment is shared by the character of the archivist, who “simply nods and keeps quiet in the face of complexities, knowing that ‘keeping silence to such answers connotes understanding, or at least acknowledgement or, quietly, simply lack thereof’” (“Review: *I Didn’t Know Mani Was A Conceptualist* by Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé”). Instead of aiming for a mimetic representation of exterior realities, then, a characteristic Kon poem functions instead as a prism that exposes the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the exercise of language while also demonstrating a keen learned awareness of academic discourse.

This conspicuous demonstration of theoretical complexity means that we have to read Kon’s work as, on some level, conscious reactions against other discourses. In a personal interview I conducted with Kon in late 2017, he explained to me that he has undertaken a recent formal shift in his work as a conscious response to the work of Giorgio Agamben, who argued that—in a similar, but more restrictive vein to DuPlessis—poetry is defined by enjambment. For Agamben, “poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic and the semantic sphere” (109). While Agamben shares this emphasis on segmentivity with DuPlessis and Shoptaw, he takes the “awareness of the importance of the opposition between metrical segmentation and semantic segmentation” to a further degree than the previous two theorists we’ve looked at, so that it is only “the possibility of enjambment [which] constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose [...] For what is enjambment, if not the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause?” (109). Agamben thus argues it is the “virtual [possibility]” of this opposition between meter and syntax that

guarantees the presence of poetry, and that any “discourse in which this opposition cannot take place” is necessarily prose (109).

Upon examining Kon’s output in the past three years, then—an incredibly prolific period which has seen his release no less than nine full-length poetry collections—one is struck by the distinctive endstopped style adopted in these books, beginning with the 2015 collection *The Wrong/Wrung Side of Love*. In the endnotes of that collection, Kon describes the endstopped form as a “technique forced throughout, displacing the enjambment used in much poetry” through “single-lined clauses, phrases, fragments and interjections” (“Notes”, *Wrong/Wrung*). Kon thus explained in our personal interview that he pivoted towards this form (away from the paragraphed prose poems of *Mani*) as a way of “deconstructing [the] neat distinctions between prose and poetry” of Agamben’s philosophy. Articulating further, he said:

The endstopped device was more of a reaction against the then perceived laboriousness of enjambling a line. I had, at that point, read many poems that defied any real logic of what makes for effective enjambment, and it all seemed quite arbitrary and futile – especially when the intentionality can become very much lost, upon reader reception and interpretation. The endstopped line was my way to take the idea of enjambment out of the equation; yet, the endstopped line didn’t altogether remove the validity and importance of how the poetic line should end. The endstopped line only forced other choices upon me, as author, decisions that went beyond the ones that enjambment engenders. [...] (Kon, “Personal Interview”)

Part of the severity of his endstopped lines, he explained, also emerged out of his “intrigue with the monostich”, after the Russian symbolist Valery Bryusov (or perhaps Ashbery’s interpretation of Bryusov in “Haiku 37”). Described by the American poet William J Higginson as a “one-line poem [which] does not exceed one line of type on a normal page (or computer screen) [...] and is obviously intended to be read as one unbroken line”, the monostich resists

enjambment through its avoidance of “forced pauses, indicated by space, grammar, syntax, or punctuation, though it may include logical punctuation, as in the case of multiple adjectives preceding a noun” (Higginson, “Simply Haiku”). Kon further attributes his fascination with the monostich to the demand for brevity and attention to the construction of the line which the form entails, explaining that it “forced [him] away from larger tropes like the poem’s theme or symbolism, to tighten [his] lens, to return to attending to the moments along a line” (Kon, “Personal Interview”).

One might therefore see *Wrong/Wrung*, then, as composed according to a fractal pattern, producing a recursive structure which spins outwards in scale. Each individual poem in the collection is made up of several monostiches which combine to form a single larger poem—an effect which Kon uses to dialogic effect, bouncing back and forth between speakers to produce what Hemingway might describe as “anti-metronomic” dialogue. These poems, however, are themselves part of an interconnected whole which is organised in the collection according to the letters of the English alphabet (*a la* Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*, perhaps). This alphabetic arrangement becomes a visible, conscious artifice when one realises that the poems in the collection feature recurring characters and events; that is to say, a temporal sequence in the Forster sense of story certainly exists in the text, yet this sequentiality is deliberately scrambled by the alphabetic arrangement of the poems. This arrangement thus produces a strange effect: presented otherwise in conventional prose, the collection might very well resemble a conventional novel, yet this particular composition of its poetic and narrative discourse is a clear signal that the allegiances of the text are first and foremost pledged towards the world of language, instead of mimetically representing any exterior reality. One might therefore say that the text is rhizomic in structure instead of teleological, privileging language instead of voice, presence instead of consequence.

As must be apparent by now, Kon's work lends itself to academic analysis—at first glance, much of the text appears to explicate itself for the critical reader. An example of the collection's endstopped lines may thus be found in this excerpt from an early poem in the collection, which also self-reflexively serves as an *ars poetica* manifesto:

“[...] Francis liked to work in enjambment.

He liked things to stop halfway, as if in mid-thought.

He liked to listen to the pauses in a conversation.

To appreciate the silence.

You can examine silence, Francis said.

It has a noise to it, an awareness like a soft murmur.

Francis cupped his hand over his ear.

As if to trap the sound he heard.

These are full clausal structures, I said.

These will mirror the end-stopped lines to come.

How do you mean? Francis asked.

There'll be a novel.

About what? Francis asked.

About what it's like to end every thought like that.

With suddenness and stoppage, I said.

With that sort of structure, I said.

Would it still be poetic? Francis asked.

It's a novel written up like a poem, I said.

That's got to be examined, Francis said.

Examine away, I said.

Francis was himself examined for cancer.

Francis called it an exegesis of his ailing body.

Francis was diagnosed with cancer.

Francis died from cancer.” (9-32, “Examination”)

As we may observe, a specific musical effect is produced by the stringencies of this form. Though deceptively stripped down, the severe separation of each intact sentence into distinct lines allows Kon to modulate a rat-tat staccato rhythm through the poems. In lieu of a regular meter throughout the poem, the selective use of anaphora (“liked...” in lines 9 to 11, “silence” in lines 12 and 13) allows Kon to achieve the illusion of a polyphonic effect, with the repetition operating in much the same way as an arpeggio might in classical harmony, establishing the terse rhythmic base of a first voice against which the longer lines stretch out. Against the obvious presence of this form, the poem acknowledges the legacy of enjambment, echoing Agamben and DuPlessis in its description of silence as being able to speak with “an awareness like a soft murmur” (14). The assignment of enjambment here to the Francis figure thus creates a dialogic relationship between endstopping and enjambment paralleling the actual conversation taking place between Francis and the lyric speaker, who lays explicit claim to the liminal nature of the text (“It’s a novel written up like a poem, I said.” 26). The novelistic characteristics of this poem are obvious, not only in the presentation of direct quotations in the poem, but also in the modulation, towards the end of the poem, of the tension between narrative time and discourse time. The direct presentation of the conversation between the lyric speaker and Francis occupies most of the poem, belying the lengthy temporal jumps towards the end of the piece, when Francis is diagnosed with and dies from cancer in the span of four lines (28-32).

At this point in the text, one might reasonably assume that the lyric speaker’s awareness of the formal conceit of the text and the persistent use of the first person aligns this persona with the biographical Desmond Kon author-figure. The dialogic relationship between this lyric

speaker and the Francis persona, too, implies a diegetic level around these characters equivalent to the real world, so that one is inclined to read these narrated events (such as Francis's cancer) as non-fiction. As I will shortly demonstrate, however, this homology is a complicated one for several reasons. To begin with, Kon has habitually demurred the biographical lyric stance in his work, preferring instead to encourage alternative hermeneutic approaches towards the poetry. In an interview with *The Urban Wire* after winning the Singapore Literature Prize in 2016, Kon admitted: "My poetry is known to be opaque. Impenetrable is the word associated with my work..." ("Desmond Kon: In Love with Words"). This view of Kon's work is amplified when one situates him among his literary peers and forebears. Writing at the turn of the millennium, Rajeev S. Patke asserts categorically that "the entire tradition of poetry in Singapore works within the conventions of the lyric poem" (297). Kon's demurral of the reflexive first-person stance in his work, on the other hand, aligns him with another poetic tradition: that of impersonality, viz. T.S. Eliot's declaration that the poet has to undertake

"a continual surrender of himself [. . .] to something more valuable [. . .] a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality [. . .] poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. (Eliot 958, 961)

More specifically, Kon's relationship to the Singaporean canon resembles the dynamic Marjorie Perloff describes between Language poetry and the poetic mainstream in the 1980s, as a "serious challenge to the delicate lyric of self-expression and direct speech," via his turn away from "transparency and straightforward referentiality in favour of ellipsis, indirection" ("Poetry on the Brink"). It is this apparent denial of self that has led his work to be described as an eschewal of "lyrical narcissism for a communal dialectics" (Timothy Liu as qtd. in blurb of *Phat Planet Cometh*). To view Kon as simply opposed towards lyric expression, however, would be a shallow reduction of his work. At first glance, it is true that Kon's poetry

bears little resemblance to the Romantic definition of the lyric: as an expressive “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [. . .] recollected in tranquillity” (Wordsworth 151). Nor can it be said that he engages in the brand of lyric poetry defined and subsequently rejected by Ron Silliman, as “simple ego psychology in which the poetic text represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object. And the reader likewise.” (qtd. in Perloff, “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject”). At the same time, we are also hard-pressed to detect in him the same antagonistic approach towards the notion of “voice” that characterises the poetry of Silliman or Charles Bernstein. Rather, Kon makes space in his texts for a multitude of dialects and subjectivities, and the foci of his poems often shift from perspective to perspective without privileging a central consciousness. Focalised through fictive personas, this splintering of his poetic self allows Kon to stage dialogues through various perspectives in *Wrong/Wrung*, allowing for a novelistic heteroglossia in the shared storyworld of the text. Most intriguingly, though, several of these characters are borrowed from elsewhere in Kon’s oeuvre, in a manner similar to John Banville’s “nuanced engagements with [his] other fictions” (Murphy 94). In lieu of enjambment at the level of the line, then, one might speak of a diegetic or ontological enjambment occurring, where characters run over the margins of their individual books, into other ones. Consider the following excerpt, for instance, where the Jasmine and Jeremiah characters are borrowed from Kon’s epistolary novel, *Singular Acts of Endearment*:

Me, me, me.

Love isn’t just about me, me, me.

Thanks, I knew that, Jeremiah said.

Now that you’re over being angry.

Yes? Jasmine asked.

Are you ready for a fuck? Jeremiah said.

I hate you, Jasmine said.

You can say that while we're fucking. ("respite," 1-8)

As noted, the the speakers of the poem intrude upon the text, having crossed over from another narrative in Kon's oeuvre. This, together with the third-person focalisation of the passage, renders the exchange palpably fictitious. To that extent, one is tempted to read these poems as existing on a diegetic level lower to that of the first-person lyric speaker, who appears to be simultaneously the heterodiegetic narrator of the Jasmine/Jeremiah poems as well as a homodiegetic narrator when describing the events of his own life. As *Wrong/Wrung* progresses, however, it becomes clear that the ontological status of the main lyric speaker is not as simple as it appears. On the one hand, this narrator appears to be a typically postmodern narrator in the way it habitually breaks the fourth wall to comment on the formal and stylistic qualities of the poems, such as in "intimations", when the narrator observes that "This book is not written in iambs. / [...] This book is for the reader who thinks this is prose." (12, 14). The temptation for readers is therefore to privilege this narrator as the Author-God figure of the text, as the biographical Desmond Kon, reading lines such as the following as autobiographical recollection structured into confessional lyric:

I do remember the times I was happy.

My mother helped me with my jigsaw puzzle.

Ten years later, she bought me my first drawing pens.

My dad bought me a box full of comics.

He also slipped me a hundred through the window.

He also drove me to the main road to catch a cab.

It was after dinner on a Sunday, and I had to book in.

My army camp was far away in Choa Chu Kang.

I booked in early because army made me happy. ("happiness," 11-19)

This expectation, of course, is duly subverted. As *Wrong/Wrung* progresses, the first-person lyric narrator is revealed to be just another character within the text, one who is still subject to the authority of the author:

I brought my wheels today, Francis said.

You just used a synecdoche, I said.

A synec-what? Francis said.

You used wheels for your bike, I said.

Wish I had rented your body.

That was what the woman from Jericho said.

Francis and her started comparing chests.

Let's pop the bubbly for coming this far.

That was what Jeremiah had to say.

How did you get here? I asked.

The author sent me, Jeremiah said.

What author? I asked.

The one who writes everything.

The one who writes in everything. ("synecdoche," 1-16)

Several things are happening here. The first-person narrator recognises Jeremiah from earlier poems in the collection, but is baffled by Jeremiah's ability to enter this "higher" level of reality, to which Jeremiah simply replies that he has been sent by "the author [. . .] who writes in everything" (13, 16). This passage thus complicates any assumption the reader might have that the first person narrator of *Wrong/Wrung* represents, unproblematically, the real-life Desmond Kon. Yet one last ontological twist occurs in the endnotes to the collection. Though both the Jasmine-Jeremiah and Gigi-Geronimo couples are revealed to be characters from *Singular Acts of Endearment*, the Francis figure whom the first-person narrator often

speaks to is left unacknowledged, adding an extra layer of mystery to the whole text. Returning to the notion of an ontological and diegetic enjambment, then, we might say that the postmodern fourth-wall breaking here, in the context of a poem, functions as another form of enjambment—one in which the transgressions occur upwards rather than sideways, erupting through the diegetic boundaries of the storyworlds.

As I have demonstrated, then, a wide variety of narratological techniques and tools are required in order to make sense of the ways that experimental poems continue to construct narratives within their own forms. In order to truly read and attend to the nuanced constructions of these texts, one must let go of a strict adherence to rigid categories of narrativity and poeticity that posit both traits as opposing Others. Postclassical narratology has attempted to respond to the experiments of avant-garde writers in the 20th century by enlarging and adjusting the interpretative lenses one uses to examine these texts. As I have shown, however, a strategy of merely updating the theory from time to time to fit the new literary techniques being pioneered is insufficient—and inelegant. Rather, literary theorists must embrace the commitment to phenomenology that the contemporary Western tradition is built on and fully acknowledge the subjectivity of literature as a capacious mode which is able to both gaze as well as speak for itself. Only then may we hope to truly achieve discourse between criticism and literature that edifies both fields of knowledge.

Conclusion: The Lens and the Landscape

I began this thesis with a single, simple question: *how do poems tell stories?*

This research question, in part, was significantly provoked by Brian McHale's original call 9 years ago in *Poetics Today* for the field of narrative theory to include poetry into the equation. To that extent, this thesis has been, in part, an obedience to as well as a quarrel with McHale. I have embarked on a series of dialectical quests into poetics and narrative theory, into hermeneutics and phenomenology, in hopes of finding a meaningful synthesis between them. Having now come to the end of this thesis's main body, it might be appropriate here to recapitulate the arguments I have essayed thus far, as a means of examining where we have ended up in relation to where we set off, before surveying the journey yet before us.

In my introduction, we reviewed the existing state of narrative theory's approach towards poetry, and agreed with McHale that a better methodology of analysis was required if the "poeticity" of the poems was to be properly attended to. This would, I suggest, only be possible by an alliance of techniques and critical tools between narrative theory and poetics. In an effort to determine what contemporary narrative approaches were eliding, we attempted to pin down the precise haecceity of poetry in Chapter 1. In reviewing the different theories that Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Giorgio Agamben, John Shoptaw, and George Szirtes have all variously put forth, then, this thesis came to the conclusion that the poeticity of any given poem revolves around the symmetrical aesthetic organisation of said segmented units. Most importantly, we noted that DuPlessis's suggestion that "chosen pause or silence" is one of the significant structuring forces of poetry has crucial implications on a hermeneutical and phenomenological perspective. The intricate interplay thus created by the complex organization of said segmented units therefore allow for the quality of poetic polyphony in poetry, which we explored at length through our close readings of poems by Arthur Yap and Derek Mahon.

In Chapter 2, we thus attempted to answer the reverse question of what narratology could offer to poetics. This was undertaken by evaluating various models of narrativity in chapter 2 in a bid to find a model in which space had been made for narrative poetry. Nonetheless, an investigation into the diverse models constructed by theorists as diverse as Forster, Chatman, and Fludernik revealed that the one constant was an unquestioned assumption that poetry signified the opposite of narrative. I argued that this assumption was predicated upon a particularly pernicious fallacy common among literary theorists who habitually employ certain hermeneutical frames, be they feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, or narrative theory: that is, the tendency to prioritise and preserve the integrity of the theoretical frame, even when the structure of the model is challenged by the literary texts that enter the analysis. We thus turned towards the meta-hermeneutical work of Derek Attridge and Rita Felski in a bid to examine what precisely happens when we read the way we do, and noted that narratology and its accompanying tools could still be effectively applied to poetry when we let go of the received assumptions we have about the incompatibility of narrative theory with poetry. Accordingly, this thesis proceeded to demonstrate that claim by applying the critical methods of Monica Fludernik and Gerard Genette to the poetry of John Ashbery and Desmond Kon.

Having completed the adumbration of the arguments presented in this thesis, then, let us look at the work that remains to be done. To be certain, this thesis does not represent a conclusively finished theoretical model; if anything, I acknowledge that the fissures opened up by this line of inquiry have only resulted in new questions to be addressed. As mentioned, we have discussed at length the nature of narrativity in poetry, and the ways in which the twin qualities of narrativity and poeticity are intertwined with each other in the examples presented in this thesis. As we have seen, these qualities are not necessarily antonyms to each other, not binary poles on a simple two-dimensional spectrum, and most certainly not locked in a rigid

homology to their respective genres. One instinctive question which might subsequently follow from this train of thought is the corresponding question of poeticity in works which are typically presented as belonging to prose fiction genres. On this subject, let us turn briefly towards a modern master of poetic prose: the novelist John Banville. Quoting his fellow Irishman John McGahern, Banville has remarked before that “there’s verse and there’s prose and then there’s poetry, and poetry can happen in either” (“15 Questions with John Banville”). Banville’s own work, of course, has repeatedly demonstrated this possibility. Neil Murphy has written extensively, for instance, on the vision which Banville offers us in his work, in which the novel is not merely a mimetic genre, but also one in which the possibility exists for an “artistic ontology with an inherent system of value”, so that the resulting “fictional storyworlds are intricate, multi-layered, narrative structures that act as frames in which Banville’s medley of characters each extend what can be viewed as one long elaboration of the same impulse: to create art forms that self-consciously engage with, and are ultimately conditioned by, the meaning and presence of art” (2). Reading Banville’s insistence that his novels are works of art alongside his claim to fashion poetry in prose, we might thus infer that Banville’s belief in poeticity extends beyond the “formal density” of his work (Murphy 2). To be certain, the lyricism of Banville’s prose and the extent to which his storyworlds are always rendered in extensively rhapsodic fashion underline the nature to which the novel, under Banville’s craft, may function as a work of high poeticity in terms of its syntactic care and linguistic dexterity. Certainly, it is theoretically possible for a work of criticism someday to engage with a Banville novel at the same exhaustively microscopic level of linguistic scrutiny that the methodology of poetics offers, and which this thesis has demonstrated in chapter 1—although it must be said that such a work might end up at a biblical, and frankly unpublishable, length.

Yet Banville’s philosophy towards his work offers another perspective towards reading poeticity in prose fiction, one which has already appeared in this thesis. Over the course of this

thesis, we have investigated the prospect that poeticity, as a way and a method of organising language and representation according to segmented units punctuated by negative space, may also be detected at scales and levels larger than the line. The close reading of Desmond Kon's *Wrong/Wrung Side of Love* we undertook, for instance, demonstrated that the behaviour of poetic language in verse may be iterated across novelistic storyworlds at a much larger scale, with characters and motifs crossing over between ontological realities in a sort of enjambment similar to the way that syntactic boundaries are disrupted by the usage of line breaks in verse poetry. This phenomenon is not unlike the "nuanced engagement with Banville's other fictions" that Murphy detects in *The Sea*, which works in concert with its "poetic use of language [and] its philosophical range" to construct a "sophisticated, multi-layered literary, mythic and artistic form" (94). Other possible ways of reading poeticity in prose fiction includes further investigating the notion of literary counterpoint that we first encountered in Chapter 1. If rhythmic variation within the span and the constraints of a short verse poem may yield such nuanced and rich harmonic effect upon closer inspection, what might we find when we investigate novel-length works predicated upon repetition and variation? Novels such as Alessandro Baricco's *Silk*, Gertrude Stein's *Ida*, and Daryl Qilin Yam's recent *Kappa Quartet* all come to mind as possible examples of this sort of contrapuntal composition. In the decades to come, we might well discover that the lasting legacy of postmodernism upon the contemporary novel is stylistic—rather than philosophical or sociological—viz. the awareness of ontology as a possible aesthetic dimension in which the artist may engage in the sort of contrapuntal movement, symmetry, and inversion that defines all great works of art. This research direction is certainly intriguing, and constitutes an area in which further theoretical work might be done to mirror the arguments in this thesis.

One further avenue of inquiry remains. Over the course of the work we have done in juxtaposing poetics and narratology as hermeneutical paradigms, we have come to see how the

critical gaze of the reader may transform the text into something other than what the author had intended. As noted in Chapter 2, narratology has its contemporary roots in the structuralist movement, with Gerard Genette still considered one of the key figures of the field. Yet the more narrative theory evolves to accommodate other approaches, the more it becomes clear that an acknowledgement of poststructuralist reader-response dynamics is needed. It might well be at the last that poeticity and narrativity are not *a priori* qualities or noumena (to briefly invoke Kant) that exist before the reading act, but that it is the reading act itself and the intensity of the critical gaze that co-constructs these texts in a phenomenological event. That is to say, the poeticity and narrativity of any given text might depend, in the end, upon the generosity and the patience of the reader in investing empathic energy into the literary work. The hypothetical poetics reading of Banville's novels mooted earlier here, for instance, is such an exhausting scenario precisely because one can imagine the tremendous mental and practical resources one would need to invest in order to attend to the minutiae and intricate details of Banville's thickly constructed tapestries at the level of the line and the syntactic unit, in addition to the ontological riches of his storyworlds which Murphy has written extensively on. The scenario holds regardless of the writer involved: swap out Banville for Nabokov, Hemingway, Jeanette Winterson, or Elena Ferrante, and the titanic labour required in said hypothetical scenario remains the same. Intuitively, then, we understand that the unpacking, the tender unfurling of literary construction can only ever be truly accomplished and manifested through an immense work of spirit on the part of the reader.

This acknowledgement of the reader's creative powers alongside the author might seem to be a contradiction of the point this thesis has been making all throughout: that the goal of critical reading ought to be to read better and truer, to read closer and clearer; to attend upon the initial impulses of the literary work, in a certain kind of waiting on authorial intent. Yet there is no contradiction when we consider the larger picture. It is precisely because reading,

as we now understand after poststructuralism, is such a powerful imaginative act comparable to writing that the dangers of over-reading are so alarming. That a reader is capable of transforming any text into a political diatribe (of any positionality) through well-argued rhetoric married to a convincing essay structure is not in doubt. What we might question instead are the ethics of doing so, as well as what we lose in the process. “Is not the most erotic part of the body,” Barthes asks in *The Pleasure of The Text*, “where the garment gapes?” (9, emphasis in original). It might be that the pleasure, the frisson, the *jouissance* of literature that Barthes describes emerges not in the muscular mental flexing of the reader, but precisely in that delicate balancing act between two subjectivities instead, so that the encounter between the same and the other necessarily requires the presence of both in other to be manifested, so that we constantly negotiate the “seams of the two edges, the interstices of bliss” as we allow the text to impose upon us a “state of loss”, to unsettle our “historical, cultural, psychological assumptions” (14), to plunge us, eventually, into *la petite mort*, into that which constitutes the little death of the readerly self, which is the true state of bliss. Zadie Smith notes that the annihilation of the Author as commonly interpreted might fill us with a giddy sense of joy at the “radical transaction of power” (“Changing My Mind”), but it is a short-lived one, in the end, when we read only in affirmation of what we already know. Instead, she asks that we consider the paradigm proposed by Nabokov: that we seek not the “antic pleasures of [our] own interpretations, but the serious satisfaction of *twinning the emotion of creation*” (“Changing My Mind”, emphasis in original).

It is a curious model presented here, then, at the end of this thesis—an anti-model, almost. Having surveyed and demonstrated the power of marrying different critical tools from different methodologies, we now end on the suggestion—or the ethical imperative, rather—that these tools must be discarded when the time calls for it. For the map is not the territory; the lens not the landscape. Poetics and narrative theory are but crutches and aids to help us

along, in the end; to refine and sharpen our understanding of what happens when we encounter the literary work. As literature continues to evolve and mutate in fascinating—and no doubt unpredictable—ways in the decades to come, the job of the reader must, as always, begin with the willingness to walk with the work on its own plotted path, instead of a preconceived, prescribed track. This thesis thus ends with this exhortation: that we, as readers, find ourselves always at the start of our reading journeys, ready to let the text lead us wherever it may go.

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