

Poetry as postmodern

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2010

Zhang, J. (2010). Poetry as Postmodern. Final year project report, Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/100054>

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HL499: Graduation Essay

06 December 2010

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Adriana Neagu, Brian McHale said, “Poetry from certain points of view had been postmodern before the postmodern, or had always already been postmodern” (“Literature and the Postmodern”). This is precisely the inspiration behind this paper’s inception, and the impetus for its investigation of how poetry can be considered postmodern. I must here qualify that I do not seek to prove that poetry *is* postmodern. Rather, I try to make a case for how poetry displays certain postmodern characteristics, and hence, the title of this paper: “Poetry *as* Postmodern.”

To do that, I shall first consider, in Chapter One, Denis Donoghue’s *On Eloquence*, and will be referring to it at length, for Donoghue’s description of eloquence is central to my argument of how eloquence correlates demonstrably to postmodernism in many ways: eloquence’s deviation from the referential is analogous to the postmodern distrust of reality, its capacity for anarchic irruption echoes postmodernism’s commitment to chaos, its fondness for play mirrors postmodern frivolity, its desire for maximal self-pleasure is similar to postmodern literature’s impulse for self-reflexivity, its creation of an imaginative life is akin to postmodernism’s construction of textual realities, and finally, it arguably gestures toward what postmodernism insists on: that the real flickers because our apprehension of it is mediated by equivocal language.

In Chapter Two, I shall argue that poetry, because it exemplifies verbal eloquence, reveals these postmodern tendencies most clearly, as poetry’s intimate relation to silence is

similar to the postmodern concern with the metaphysics of absence. I shall consider how the poetic form is inherently geared towards the exploration of the limits of language: how the shape of the poem is a figure for the language of silence, how the poetic line is, by its fragmentary nature, suggestive of the unsaid, and how the pleasure of rhythm in a poem, its near-condition of music, tries to detract from the realm of literal and linear sense to create a world which detaches from literal meaning and linear time.

CHAPTER ONE

Around 2000 B. C., the Egyptian scribe Khakheperresenb pens this complaint: “Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance that has grown stale, which men of old have spoken” (qtd. in Barth 206). In 1984, Raymond Federman, writing of postmodern fiction (what he terms “Surfiction”), argues that

the only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction; the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it: the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man’s imagination and not in man’s distorted vision of reality—that reveals man’s irrationality rather than man’s rationality. . . . However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality. (7)

Even though there is almost 4000 years between them, these two writers express somewhat similar sentiments about writing. Admittedly, what the scribe is lamenting for is the staleness of all language, and what he wishes for is an entirely fresh and totally alien vocabulary, while what Federman is speaking of is specifically how postmodern fiction is a more suitable genre of fiction for contemporary times, but both writers’ conclusions actually originate from the same source: the desire for inventiveness, the immeasurably vast promise of imaginativeness.

Khakheperresenb's yearning to break away from "repetition," from "utterance[s] that ha[ve] grown stale, which men of old have spoken" is echoed in Federman's advocacy for "the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it." And this brand of fiction that "tries to explore the possibilities of fiction," "that constantly renews our faith in man's imagination and. . . reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality" is not unlike the Egyptian scribe's desire for "phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used." Imagination, or imaginativeness, which Federman associates with irrationality, is that which seeks to break away from what is stale and over-used, that is, from that which is familiar and predictable because it has been cast into some sort of official order and subsumed under a canonised system. Brian McHale observes that "[t]he classic formulation [of postmodernism] is [Jean-François] Lyotard's: 'Postmodernism . . . is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and that state is constant'" (qtd. in McHale, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* x), and he interprets Lyotard to be suggesting that "'post-modernism' signifies the full range of possibilities. . . available before a normalizing modernism had made its choices, and which became available again after normalized modernism had run its course" (x). "Normalized" is akin to what Khakheperresenb wants to escape from, from what has been canonised, and is familiar because it has been conventionalised, and "the full range of possibilities" parallel what the scribe yearns for: the strange and surprising, which exists outside of officialised possibilities.

It seems then that literature's dissatisfaction with the old and the predictable, and its pursuit of the new and the strange are analogous to postmodernism's distrust of rationality and order, and its aspiration toward irrationality and anarchy. Analogous, not identical, because postmodern literature, with its distinctive characteristics, retains its status as a specific literary movement, and is to be distinguished by the interrogative way in which it ruptures all structures, to the point where it self-consciously undermines its own narratives. I

shall consider Denis Donoghue's *On Eloquence*, in which he discusses what makes writing imaginative and pleasurable, what makes them "eloquent," and endeavour to make a case for how eloquence shares much in common with postmodernism—not that eloquence is postmodern, but that it has postmodern tendencies—primarily its departure from the referential and the rational, its gift for irruption, its devotion to pleasure without consequence, its impulse toward playful self-reflexivity, and its creation of textual worlds.

FREEDOM FROM THE REAL

At the very beginning of *On Eloquence*, Donoghue declares that "we take pleasure in eloquence that is not merely or completely referential" (2), and toward the end of the book, he lists, as one of the arguments rallied against eloquence, that it "does not represent the real, it replaces it with its own voice" (146). The voice of eloquence is distinctly different, Donoghue continually reminds us, from the voice of rhetoric, which "has an aim, to move people to do one thing rather than another" (3), and is concerned with "saying the persuasive thing at the right time to the right person or people" (112). Rhetoric, caught up in its pragmatism, is anxious to convince people to do things, to effect changes in the world or in themselves. Eloquence, however, "does not serve a purpose or an end in action" (148), and simply wants to "[say] the right, beautiful, possible thing, regardless of consequences" (112), and it can do so because it is freed from its obligation to the referential and the rational. "Husserl's opposition to eloquence," Donoghue points out, "arises from his care that a proper language be available to science and logic. 'Proper' is what he calls 'univocal.' An improper language is one that feeds passively on association, cultural sedimentation, and equivocity" (164). The "proper language" of rationality is thus built on a system of linear and empirical formulations, not "the free play of associative constructions" (165); it is founded on denotative meaning, clarity and singularity, not connotative signification, ambiguity nor

ambivalence. Rationality and rhetoric is the lexicon of the referential, devoted to the encyclopaedic reality, the former keen to classify it and the latter to change it. Eloquence, on the other hand, is the vocabulary of dreams, faithful only to the imagination, and is eager to play, with no thought for responsibility. The practical and fixed terms of rhetoric will not do especially in the realm of poetry, for rhetoric is, according to Mary Oliver in *A Poetry Handbook*, the

kind of language that is clearly unsuitable when one is writing a poem. I call it informational language. It is the language one would use if one were writing a paragraph on how to operate a can opener. It is a language that means to be crisp and accurate. Its words are exact. They do not ever desire to throw two shadows. The language is cold. It does not reach for any territory beyond the functional. (89)

Eloquence's impulse to move away from the functional, from the referential and rational, is not so dissimilar to postmodernism's opposition to a fixed reality and its distrust of grand, unifying narratives, like rationality, empiricism, religion, and history, which propose to organise the world into classifiable components, and thus claim knowledge of it. And eloquence accomplishes this deviation from the referential by means of irruption and pleasure, which are akin to the postmodern inclinations toward anarchy and play: "Eloquence, as Geoffrey Hartman has said of art and might say of play, 'is a re-/minder, both forceful and delightful, of unbound energies—anarchic, self-pleasuring—behind and within codification'" (qtd. in Donoghue 2-3). The unbound energies of eloquence are forceful and anarchic, because it requires violence to break out of codification, yet it always remains somewhat within codification, because language "is never entirely detached from things and its responsibility toward them" (Donoghue 2). However, even though "reality quite normally furnishes the images" in an eloquent work, "the[se images] are no longer anything in reality,

they are forms to be used by an excited imagination” (Langer 253). Thus, with whatever freedom it can find, eloquence strives, as much as possible, to estrange itself from reality, into the world of the imagination, for according to Langer, “[e]very real work of art has a tendency to appear. . . dissociated from its mundane environment. The most immediate impression it creates is one of ‘otherness’ from reality” (45). “Otherness,” or what Langer elsewhere calls “strangeness” (52), is hence the effect created by eloquence’s escape from the weight of its duty to things, and its leaping toward delight and self-pleasure.

THE GIFT FOR ANARCHY

Again and again, Donoghue asserts eloquence’s irruptive nature, and its inexorable propensity for excess, refusing to be imprisoned within any structure. “The main attribute of eloquence,” he states from the beginning, “is gratuitousness”; it is “recognize[d]. . . as a flare of expression, an excess or superabundance of its qualities” (3). “Flare” implies abrupt explosiveness, and what eloquence bursts out of is the structure of predictability, the burden of banality: “[i]t is against dullness, dryness, routine, habit, ‘the malady of the quotidian,’ the oppressiveness of one-damn-thing-after-another” (149), and what eloquence seeks is extravagant surprise: it is “speech in excess of expectation, a coloratura flourish” (154). Since it is endowed with a talent for disrupting order, eloquence aspires toward violence which, crucially, is what its emergence into independence depends on, for it is “at least remotely derived from the violence of the gods; first physical violence, then violence extended to words as magic” (154).

“Magic” is also, and aptly, the same word Langer refers to when she discusses the way in which a poem is able to transform the images of the real into imaginary substance: “There are countless devices for creating the world of a poem and articulating the elements of its virtual life, and almost every critic discovers some of these means and stands in

wondering admiration of their ‘magic’” (246). Magic is the art of irrupting expectation and overcoming the ordinary, that is, it is the art of shattering rationality, for it is determined to display that which resists subsumption under rational thought. Hence, the magic of poetry, also the magic of eloquence, colludes with one of postmodernism’s desires: for anarchy. Just as postmodernism revolts against hegemonic systems, and quests for play and frivolity, eloquence, “exempt from duty and obligation,” also withdraws from “an official culture given to power and authority,” and chooses instead “the gratuitous authority of freedom, play, and pleasure” (151). The latter qualities, for Donoghue as well as for Husserl, characterises chaos, but while Donoghue approves of the chaos of unofficiality, Husserl registers his strong objections against it. “Profundity [*Tiefsinn*],” Husserl believes, “is a mark of the chaos that genuine science wants to transform into a cosmos, into a simple, completely clear, lucid order. Genuine science, so far as its real doctrine extends, knows no profundity” (qtd. in Donoghue 166). “Cosmos” is simply another word for a grand, unifying narrative, and the chaos of eloquence, like the anarchy of postmodernism, serves to rupture such structures: “The only necessary thing is to break the circuit of social mastery, if only for an interval” (Donoghue 152). In the language of post-structuralism, the “circuit of social mastery” easily translates into closed binary oppositions which enforce the dominance of one term over the other, while “necessary” is reminiscent of post-structuralism’s insistence on freeing imprisoned dualities into a field of differential terms at play. Just as post-structuralism seeks to undo what Hélène Cixous calls “death-dealing binary thought” (qtd. in *Moi* 110)—“death-dealing” because both terms are constantly locked in battle with each other—and sees *différance* as promising endless life because it is unfixed and in endless motion, eloquence “[d]elighting in difference. . . opposes—but without argument—the otherwise omnivorous culture of the same” (Donoghue 3) and “flourishes in a language and wants to have more abundant life there” (149), as it is “value[d]. . . as a sign of freedom as

we are ever likely to enjoy” (3). Having somewhat wrestled free from its chains to reference and rationality, this abundant life eloquence pursues is a life abundant with play, abundant with pleasure.

IN PRAISE OF PLEASURE

Unlike rhetoric, anchored to its serious tasks of investigating and improving the real world, eloquence has no practical or discursive aims. It is, therefore, unhinged from rhetoric’s allegiance to the conscience, and unhindered by rhetoric’s anxiety about consequences, for eloquence only cares about “saying the right, beautiful, possible thing, regardless of consequences” (Donoghue 112) and is “morally indifferent [as] it shows one’s determination to speak vividly, whether what one is saying is true or false” (158). What eloquence is concerned with is exquisite and evocative expression, and only exquisite and evocative expression. In that sense, eloquence’s nonchalance toward consequences resembles postmodernism’s vexation of meta-narratives like morality and religion, whose principles are organised around achieving good consequences. The difference is that eloquence simply does not care to be bothered with moral or social consequences, while postmodernism takes the trouble to fracture meta-narratives that preach the importance of consequences. However, regardless of their points of departure, their trajectory is the same: eloquence, unworried about being irresponsible, and postmodernism, venturing to be irresponsible, both aspire toward frivolity and play.

Thus, the accusation that postmodernism encourages moral relativism is not unlike the charge that eloquence is “morally indifferent” (158), and just as postmodern play has been branded a phenomenon to be wary of, “Husserl’s response to [eloquence] is ‘to put a stop to the free play of associative constructions’” because “[t]hey are a ‘constant danger’” (165). Arising from its conviction that everything is a construction with no final validity,

postmodernism does not claim to narrate the truth. Instead, it revels in the constructedness of construction. In the case of postmodern literature, its joy is found in the artifice of language, not in the quest to uncover the truth with language. In the same way, eloquence “does not represent the real, it replaces it with its own voice, complacently narcissistic.” It adores its own voice, “the charisma of speech,” instead of the content of the real, and it “claim[s] to transcend the properties of law, custom, and reference” (146), which are narratives that profess to codify the truth.

Further, the pleasure of eloquence is self-pleasure, for its “energy. . . tak[es] satisfaction in its own processes”; it is “self-delighting” (147). As “a gift to be enjoyed in. . . practice” (3), the delight of eloquence, like postmodernism’s, resides in the constructedness of its own construction, the inventiveness of itself. As Donoghue tells us repeatedly, eloquence “is a mark of invention rather than of communication, an intrinsic achievement rather than a device for getting something done” (147). The name for this intrinsic inventiveness is style which, like postmodernism, “caresses an encyclopedic culture out of its projects of mastery, into a liberalizing impotence” (Bersani, qtd. in Donoghue 187). “Liberalizing” because both eloquence and postmodernism can undertake inventiveness freely, and “impotence” because eloquence does not care to do anything for the real world and postmodernism destabilises totalizing narratives of reality that are concerned with consequences. Instead, what eloquence and postmodern texts enjoy is playing around in the tentative worlds they enjoy constructing. Just as eloquence’s emphasis on style as much as content parallels postmodernism’s primacy of the signifier over the signified, eloquence’s pleasure in self-pleasure is analogous to postmodern literature’s self-reflexive playfulness.

SELF-PLEASURING SELF-REFLEXIVITY

In the introduction to *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist*, Keith Hopper states that “[i]t is the linguistically structured reality of *The Third Policeman* which ultimately defines it as a work of post-modernism” (17). For Hopper, postmodern literature has divorced itself from the real, and has created, in its place, its own textual reality, which according to Ihab Hassan, is a fictive reality the postmodern text is not only aware of, but also constantly refers to: “Post-modernism is the rejection of representation in favor of self-reference. . . [and it] takes the subjective / idealism of modernism to the point of solipsism” (qtd. in Hopper 17-18). Since “[r]eality is called into being by the process of naming, and is contingent upon the songlines of discourse” (Hopper 10)—that is, since reality, the signified, is always already mediated by naming, the signifier—postmodernism has dropped the signified out of the signifier-signified equation, and has replaced the referent with reference. The result of this is self-reflexivity, in which the text refers endlessly to itself, in the signifier-signifier composition of the textual real, which is the nearest form of reality one can ever get to anyway, since it is impossible to have unmediated access to the signified.

This ascendancy of the signifier in postmodernism mirrors the preeminence of the means of expression in eloquence. As Kenneth Burke argues, “Eloquence, by stressing the means of literature, requires an interest in the means as ends. Otherwise eloquence becomes an obstacle to enjoyment” (*Counter-Statement* 167). Eloquence’s interest in the means of literature, the intrinsic inventiveness called style, is no different then from the postmodern inclination toward self-reflexivity which, simply, is the unending reflection on style. Hence, according to E. M. Cioran, “[t]he artist reflecting on his means is. . . indebted to the sophist and organically related to him. Both pursue, in different directions, the same genre of activity”; since “the sophists were the first to occupy themselves with a meditation upon words, their value, propriety, and function in the conduct of reasoning,” sophistry is therefore

“the capital step toward the discovery of style, conceived as a goal in itself, as an intrinsic end” (126).

It is significant that, in Burke’s consideration of eloquence and in Cioran’s reflection on style, both writers gesture eventually (or perhaps, inevitably?) toward what in postmodernism is known as the textual real. After declaring eloquence’s interest in the means of literature as its ends, Burke proceeds to contrast “the Stendhal procedure,” which aims to let “the reader [forget] that he is reading,” with the style of “Hugo of *L’Homme qui rit*,” which “never [lets the reader] forget that the book was ‘written.’” The former is realism, in which “[r]eaders seek in art a substitute for living,” while the latter is metafiction, which is rife with “bristling epigrammatic ‘unreality,’” and Burke’s point of this contrast is that “[t]he primary purpose of eloquence is not to enable us to live our lives on paper—it is to convert life into its most thorough verbal equivalent” (167). In Cioran’s case, after he has established the common pursuit of style shared by the self-reflexive artist and the sophist, he states that, “[h]aving ceased to be *nature*, they live as a function of the word. ‘Reality’ is not [the sophist’s] concern: he knows it depends on the signs which express it and which must, simply, be mastered” (127). Burke’s conviction that eloquence’s foremost endeavour is to transform life into its textual counterpart is not far from postmodernism’s substitution of the signified (“life”) with the signifier (“its most thorough verbal equivalent”), and Cioran’s certainty that the sophist (the forerunner of style) and the self-reflexive artist (the reflector on style) are concerned not with reality, but with “the signs which express it” is echoed in the postmodern primacy of the signifier over the signified. Taking both writers’ arguments together, one is led to conclude that the inventiveness of style foregrounds the constructedness of reality, which is not unlike Hopper’s claim that the “[s]elf-awareness of literary practices is . . . an integral part of a wider post-modernist ethos, as it forcibly reminds

the reader of the ineluctable writtenness of ‘reality,’ and, on a macrocosmic scale, that the real world is not ‘given’ but constructed” (9).

What Burke and Cioran seem to be suggesting is that eloquence strives, as much as possible, to depart from the real, and takes as much pleasure as it can in its own fictive reality. Like eloquence, poetry does not seek to be faithful to the real world, for “all poetry is a creation of illusory events” (219), and thus, it is in self-pleasure that the eloquence of poetry’s pleasure lies, for pleasure in anything outside itself would require it to withdraw from imaginativeness, and come into contact with the real. Donoghue, agreeing with Cioran and extending Burke’s argument, says,

one of the aims of speech and writing is the conversion of the shapelessness of a life into the formal felicity of eloquence, and we are likely to be especially gratified by those occasions in which we find ourselves paying just as much attention to the way in which something is said as to the said thing. Or just as much attention to the trajectory of a sentence as to the outcome of it, the completed meaning. The meaning is over, but you have had the pleasure of seeing it rise, shine, and fall. (170)

Meaning is not so much the point of eloquence; pleasure is. Meaning is the interest of the real, and in order to have pleasure, eloquence needs to retreat as much as it can from reality. What other way then to flee as much as it can from its responsibility to the real world, than by designing its own world to dwell in—just as poetry is interested in creating “a virtual ‘life,’ or, as it is sometimes said, ‘a world of its own’” (Langer 228)? And what other tactic to have maximal play and freedom, than by referring to itself, so that it can find pleasure within itself, and itself—to be “expressive through and through” (52)?

MAKING WORLDS

The way in which eloquence exults unashamedly in its own, and only its own, pleasure, is like the dancer who, enthralled in his/her passions, is triumphantly vivacious in the moment of his/her dancing. Thus Donoghue remarks:

[t]he dancing of speech is eloquence: the aim of a dance is not to get from one part of the village green or the stage to another, it is to create and embody yet another form of life beyond the already known forms of it. In dancing, the dancers enjoy the certitude of being alive in their bodies. (2)

Just as dancing takes its form from its desire to be free from gravity, and leaps into a flight of lightness, eloquence is made by its wish to break loose from the weight of the real, and fashions a frivolous world of imaginativeness. And the creation and embodiment of this other form of life depends on eloquence's anarchic tendency, for "[o]ne of the capacities of eloquence is to try to make us ignore the context and remember only the eloquent words as if they floated free of it" (171). Virginia Woolf describes eloquence's emergence into autonomy in the same way. In *To the Lighthouse*, the words Mrs. Ramsay hear coming in from the window "sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves" (80).

It is not enough, though, for eloquence to break away from already known forms of life and from its context, it must be memorable, and the memorability of eloquence's independent existence is contingent on its inventiveness: R. P. Blackmur calls eloquence "those deep skills of imagination by which we get into words what, when it is there, makes them memorable, and what, when it is gone, makes them empty" (qtd. in Donoghue 71), and Donoghue observes that "[t]he instances of eloquence that I remember, in the sense that they have lodged in my mind without effort on my part, are gratuitous, they stand alone as . . . things added to a life otherwise thought to be already known" (148). He requires no effort on

his part to remember them for they are gifts of the imagination, so they cannot be subsumed under or mixed with the experience of the real, which because it is mundane, is easily forgettable. And empty space is what strengthens the gap between these eloquent moments and the real, for each instance of eloquence Donoghue finds memorable “seems to be surrounded by empty space. Each exists in an eternal present moment” (45). Away from the real, and therefore not bound by the rules of inexorable time, eloquence is eternally present for, having taken up residence in the reader’s mind, it comes to life—and lives—only when it is recalled, and thus is not subject to being swept back to the past by the intruding of the future.

Hence eloquence, propelled by its anarchic inclinations, deviates from the real and from its context and, being surrounded by an empty space that fortifies this separation, is driven by its imaginative impulse to craft a world of its own, which is memorable precisely because it is unlike the literal, ordinary world. Poetry performs this same gesture of departure from the real world into the world of the poem, a split which, according to Langer, is initiated from the very first line of the poem, for she believes that the “*illusion of life* is the primary illusion of all poetic art. It is at least tentatively established by the very first sentence, which has to switch the reader’s or hearer’s attitude from conversational interest to literary interest, i.e. from actuality to fiction” (213). Thus eloquence’s, and poetry’s, desire to shape another form of life that is imaginative is arguably akin to postmodern literature’s instinct for constructing multiple realities that deviate from encyclopaedic reality, for “the ontological dominant of postmodernism,” McHale argues, is orientated around “issues of fictionality, modes of being, the nature and plurality of worlds, etc” (*The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* 4). The difference is that while eloquence simply posits its independent existence, postmodernism not only projects different worlds, it interrogates the fabric of all kinds of realities. Being “designed to dramatize ontological issues” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*

15), it is obsessed with the question of reality, and what constitutes it, the possibilities of other realities, and what constitutes them, and what happens when two or more realities collide (10). But the type of existence eloquence posits and the kinds of realities postmodernism projects are similar in their quests for non-referentiality, that is to say, they resist the fixity and singularity of the literal, and revel in the ambiguity and multiplicity of the metaphorical.

WORLD AS TEXT

Earlier, I have argued that just as eloquence's self-pleasuring inventiveness shapes formless reality into its stylistic equivalent, postmodernism's self-reflexive impulse conflates the signified with the signifier, in order to point out that there is little difference, or rather, that it is impossible to tell the difference, between reality and fiction. For this reason, one can say that eloquence resonates with the postmodern notion that "there is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida 158), and if there is nothing outside of the text, then there is nothing that is not unequivocal; since the real is always already conditioned by a web of significations, literal reference is no longer possible. Donoghue, in his argument for the multiple significative possibilities of language, cites Derrida's conviction in the differential properties of words:

Derrida remarks in his commentary on 'The Origin of Geometry,' that 'a poetic language, whose significations would not be *objects*, will never have any transcendental / value for [Husserl].' Indeed, words and language in general 'are not and can never be absolute *objects*.' They do not possess 'any resistant and permanent identity that is absolutely their own.' They have their linguistic being 'from an intention that traverses them as mediations.' The 'same' word is always 'other,' Derrida says, 'according to the always different

intentional acts which thereby make a word significant [*significant*].’ (165-166)

As meaning is inescapably differential and situational, its significative possibilities are thus endless. In fact, if a word corresponds strictly to only one thing, one would never be able to make abstractions or connotative meanings. Hence if, according to Langer, “[a] symbol is any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction” (xi), then all of language is symbolic and thus equivocal—for abstractions depend on a departure from the singularity and clarity of literal reference—and if Derrida is right in “noting that equivocity is the mark of every culture” (qtd. in Donoghue 166)—and by extension, of the world—then apprehending the world is no different from reading text, for the world, like text, is constituted by equivocity.

In the same way, since “we take pleasure in eloquence that is not merely or completely referential” (2), eloquence is derived from language’s potential for abstractions, for it turns away from univocal meaning, and relishes in the multiplicity of signification. Its delight is found in ambiguity, for Woolf, in “On Not Knowing Greek,” asserts that “ambiguity. . . is the mark of the highest / poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means” (qtd. in Donoghue 80-81), and it revels in ambivalence, as it unanxiously holds together contradictory interpretations: “A strange feature of. . . eloquent passages, is how blithely it seems to accommodate rival meanings. If we find it unforgettable, we easily carry the embarrassment of not having decided what it purports” (172). Eloquence thrives then on the surplus, not on the singularity, of meaning; it “is a striking excess of saying, such that no single statement is fully made” (140). It also resides in the suggestive shadows of connotative meaning, for it lies in “the shadow beyond the words, as we say that connotations are slightly apart from the denotations that provoke them” (93), and since it “works best in darkness, when we can’t see anything and can’t fend off the seductive words which ‘creep into our

understanding,' like the serpent tempting Eve" (161), eloquence lures us away from the light of clarity into shades of meaning that prompt imaginativeness.

Eloquence's indulgence in ambiguity, ambivalence, excess, shadows and darkness is its joy in equivocity, which is exactly what constitutes language's differential properties, its figurative nature, which because it transcends fixity of meaning, inheres protean potentialities. Thus Donoghue likens eloquence, in its mutability, to metaphor: "Eloquence, like metaphor, offers itself nonchalantly and is indifferent to contexts and formulations" (172). Like metaphor, eloquence does not insist harshly on a singular meaning, but instead, is variable and floating, availing itself to a plurality of meanings. And what eloquence gestures toward, in its pleasure in the metaphorical, is that because all of language is unfixed and differential, it can thus never fully fulfill its referential duty, for language can never coincide with the objects it signifies, only gesture toward them. This echoes the postmodern conviction that, because the signified is always conditioned by the differential signifier, reality is constantly in flux. Hence, the alternate form of non-referential life that eloquence creates, like the linguistically structured realities postmodernism constructs, reminds one that, since all of language is metaphorical, and since one can only apprehend the world through language, the "real world" is, at most and at best, a textual world, constituted by equivocal signification.

ELOQUENCE AND POETRY

The attentiveness to style in eloquence, the way in which it "pay[s] just as much attention to the way in which something is said as to the said thing" (Donoghue 170) is, for Langer, particularly patent in poetry, as "[t]he significance of any piece of literature must lie, supposedly, in what the author says; yet every critic who is worth his salt has enough literary intuition to know that *the way of saying things* is somehow all-important. This is especially

obvious in poetry” (208). If poetry thus typifies all the impulses of eloquence—which as Donoghue discussed it, is kept to the domain of verbal eloquence—poetry is surely the verbal art in which eloquence’s postmodern characteristics can be seen most clearly. Hence, a study of poetry, particularly the eloquence that is engendered by the poetic form—since that is what all poems share—might yield the conclusion that poetry has indeed all along been postmodern, before the postmodern came along.

CHAPTER TWO

“Eloquence,” declares Burke, “is simply the end of art, and is thus its essence. Even the poorest art is eloquent, but in a poor way, with less intensity, until this aspect is obscured by others fattening upon its leanness” (*Counter-Statement* 41). Langer articulates the same sentiment, and goes on to expound on how eloquence is created: “Whenever craftsmanship is art, these principles—abstraction, plastic freedom, expressiveness—are wholly exemplified, even in its lowliest works” (60). These principles of craftsmanship Langer has listed coincide exactly with the characteristics of eloquence discussed in Chapter One: for a work of art to be eloquent, there must be a turning away from the literal and discursive (“abstraction”), a freedom to be playfully inventive (“plastic freedom”), and it must, according to its metaphorical and non-discursive standards, be effective in expressing its own reality (“expressiveness”). If all art is, in varying degrees, eloquent, it stands to reason that all art resonates, in varying degrees, with postmodernism. And in the realm of literary art, it is poetry that most exemplifies eloquence, for:

the purely verbal materials—metrical stresses, vowel values, rhyme, alliteration, etc.—are more fully exploited in poetry than in prose, so the technique of writing is more strikingly apparent in verse and more easily studied in that restricted field; and. . . all forms of literary art, including so-

called ‘non-fiction’ that has artistic value, may be understood by the specialization and extension of poetic devices. All writing illustrates the same creative principles, and the difference between the major literary forms, such as verse and prose, is a difference of devices used in literary creation. (213)

Since poetry, when compared to other forms of literary art, exemplifies eloquence the most, it must mean that poetry, in terms of literary eloquence, exhibits postmodern tendencies to the greatest degree. In this chapter, therefore, I shall argue that poetry is, like postmodernism, “writing-as-experience-of-limits” (Kristeva, qtd. in Edelstein 30), for it explores the limits of language. To do that, I shall first consider language’s relation to silence, and consequently demonstrate how the unique poetic form, its typography and musicality, inhabits the boundary between language and silence.

LANGUAGE AND SILENCE

“Not everything that is said,” Donoghue asserts, “is said verbally: there are frowns, significant smiles, cries and whispers, gestures that have cultural implications. What is said verbally is only a part of what, in principle, might be said (93). Hence, what is said inheres within in what is unsaid, or rather, what is unsayable. Blackmur calls the unsaid, “gesture” and purports that it is always proximal to language: “Words are made of motion, made of action or response, at whatever remove; and gesture is made of language—made of the language beneath or beyond or alongside of the language of words” (467), and because the unsaid is found outside of language, it is thus, according to Burke, without sound: “the poet whose sounds are the richest in our language is meditating upon *absolute* sound, the *essence* of sound, which would be soundless as the prime mover is motionless, or as the ‘principle’ of sweetness would not be sweet, having transcended sweetness” (“Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats” 572). For Roland Barthes, the unsaid is a text’s pensiveness, which needs to be

present in order for language to function, just as sound cannot exist without the essence of sound. In his study of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, he states that

the classic text is pensive: replete with meaning (as we have seen), it still seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning, one it does not express but whose place it keeps free and signifying: this zero degree of meaning (which is not its annulment, but on the contrary its recognition), this supplementary, unexpected meaning which is the theatrical sign of the implicit, is pensiveness: the pensive (in faces, in texts) is the signifier of the inexpressible, not of the unexpressed." (qtd. in. Cave 210)

Barthes' idea of ultimate meaning, which is anterior to language and is therefore ineffable, recalls Frederick Buechner's conception of truth as silence: "A particular truth can be stated in words. . . [b]ut truth itself is another matter. . . [t]ruth itself cannot be stated. Truth simply is . . . [b]efore it is a word. . . truth is silence" (16). And silence is, eventually, what all these writers can be said to be commonly referring to—be it Blackmur's gesture, or Burke's soundless absolute sound, or Barthes' inexpressible ultimate meaning, or Buechner's inarticulate truth—and this non-verbal element is what undergirds and supports the verbalisation of language, since "words fail unless they find the providential form of themselves, the pattern, like that of a Chinese jar moving 'perpetually in its stillness.'" (Donoghue 95).

However, because what is said always already carries within it what is unsaid, that is to say, language can never fully express what it wants to say, it is thus always found wanting. The unsaid, which makes manifest the said, is also the same thing which undermines it. As Donoghue observes, "writers are constantly complaining about their means. . . They seem to yearn to have a different kind of genius and a different instrument" (47). But this anguish at language's inadequacy is not merely a cause for lament, for it yields its own kind of

eloquence—the eloquence of limits—which is “available somewhat desperately and nailbitingly at the outer limit of language; available to minds that sense that there are further things that might be glimpsed, even if it’s unlikely that they can be known or expressed” (Donoghue 140). Since poetry epitomizes verbal eloquence, it is the literary form that explores most closely this outer limit of language, of silence, and hence, the eloquence of the poetic form is arguably the eloquence of limits. By extension, the language of poetry is the language of silence, or rather, according to David Michael, poetry is the language of truth, best expressed in silence: “The poet and the poem exist not only to give us comfort in the time of need, but also to confront us with hard truths, truths that are probably best confronted with silence, but if spoken are best done so through poetry” (“Reading with the Old Masters”).

If Blackmur is right in claiming that “[m]eaning is what silence does when it get into words” (“The Language of Silence: A Citation” 177), and that “[p]oetry is the meaning of meaning, or at least the prophecy of it” (“Language as Gesture” 476), then poetry is intimately concerned with silence, and indeed, is a figure for silence. As Kathleen Raine says in “Triad”:

To those who speak to the many deaf ears attend.

To those who speak to one,

In poet’s song and voice of bird,

Many listen; but the voice that speaks to none

By all is heard:

Sound of the wind, music of the stars, prophetic word. (84)

Poetry cannot be silence, for it is inescapably made up of words, but just as the voice that “speak[s] to many” is a trope for the voice that “speak[s] to one, / In poet’s song and voice of bird,” and this poetic song is a trope for “the voice that speaks to none,” which is heard in

“Sound of the wind, music of the stars, prophetic word,” so poetry can be *like* the “prophetic word,” prophetic of the “silence that tries to speak, and. . . the language of silence which we translate into our words” (Blackmur, “The Language of Silence: A Citation” 161). Poetry can thus be conceived of as a metaphor for silence, an emblem of the unsayable. As Buechner says of the prophets in the Bible:

They put words to things until their teeth rattled, but beneath the words they put, or deep within their words, something rings out which is new because it is timeless, the silence rings out, the truth that is unutterable, that is mystery, that is the way things are, and the reason it rings out seems to be that the language the prophets use is essentially the language of poetry, which more than polemics or philosophy, logic or theology, is the language of truth. (19)

The language of poetry, therefore, is a vocabulary that is unlike, and more importantly, that exceeds “polemics or philosophy, logic or theology”: what Langer calls “discursive symbolism” (vii) and what Donoghue calls “rhetoric.” As poetry is unconfined by the referential duty of words, its univocity and fixity of meaning, it gestures toward language’s limit, where language can become equivocal and multiple. Poetry thus resides in this boundary between speech and silence, and its eloquence arises from its using of words to enable an opening through which we might glimpse the silence.

THE POEM AS VISUAL METAPHOR

Consider, for instance, how poetry has been imagined to be a door that opens into the ineffable and infinite realm of silence. In Mary Oliver’s “Praying,” she casts her prayer in the poetic form, believing that it is

the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.” (*Thirst* 37)

and the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, in the first sonnet of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, speaks of Orpheus’ poetic song as being able to transform our hearing, from poorly apprehending music to profoundly listening to a music which, because it is “pure transcendence,” is the music of silence:

And where there had been
just a makeshift hut to receive the music,

a shelter nailed up out of their darkest longing,
with an entryway that shuddered in the wind—
you built a temple deep inside their hearing. (227)

It is hardly a coincidence, I think, that both poets use the metaphor of spiritual entrance to attest to poetry’s efficacy in allowing us to perceive silence. It *needs* to be spiritual, for silence cannot be apprehended in the province of discursive rhetoric, which is devoted to actuality. But importantly, since language can never escape completely from its referential duty, poetry can only provide the portal to, but not the entrance into, silence; the furthest language can ever reach beyond itself is the shore, not the world, of silence. Thus, for Oliver, a poem is a “doorway” into “a silence in which / another voice may speak.” This other voice is presumably God’s, but surely, it is not the same voice in which we speak, for it is a voice we are only permitted to hear in silence. And for Rilke, poetry is able to construct a deeper way to “receive the music,” and is imagined to be a “temple,” a place of worship, presumably to the song of silence, whose “entryway” is able to better withstand the force of this other song, an awesome force because it is unfettered by words. “If the doors of perception were cleansed,” William Blake writes, “every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite” (39).

Poetry is precisely the means by which the “doorway” and “entryway” of our perception are purified, allowing us to glimpse into the unbounded, unspeakable and unendurable silence.

Notice, also, how the shapes of both poems approximate the relationship between language and silence. In Oliver’s prayer, “the doorway” is divided from “silence” by a stanza break, and in Rilke’s sonnet, the transformation from the shivering “entryway” to the unfaltering “temple” is separated by not just a line break, but by a wide dash as well. Both poets, in speaking of poetry’s ability to open a way to silence, see it as necessary to make us pause momentarily, aurally and visually, before we approach silence, as if to say poetry’s entrance into silence is mirrored in the poetic form itself, by its line breaks and stanza breaks, which is typographically what characterises poetry as a distinct literary form.

Thus, we come to understand that the poem’s visual form is itself a metaphor for language’s relation to silence, as poetry is a figure for the language of silence. The poem, as such, does not begin from the first line of the first stanza to the final verse of the concluding stanza, not even from its title to the last punctuation. Rather, the poem, as such, is the poem-on-the-page: it is the words of the poem surrounded by white spaces, just as language exists in relation to the silence which encompasses it—visually, the poem is the white of the page sculpted by its inked words, and aurally, it is the shape of silence sculpted by its sounds. As Eugene H. Peterson says,

“Poetry requires equal time be given to sounds and silences. In all language silence is as important as sound. . . . The purpose of language is not to murder the silence but to enter it, cautiously and reverently. The poet carefully arranges words in settings of silence, letting the sounds resonate, the meanings vibrate. Silence is not what is left over when there is nothing more to say but the aspect of time that gives meaning to sound. The poem restores silence to

language so that words, organic and living, once again are given time to pulse and breathe.” (60)

All poems can hence be seen as concrete poetry, for a poem’s visual (thus also aural) structure is a metaphor for the way poetry uses language to shape and enter into silence. This sculpting of silence is done primarily by the poetic line. In the metrical line, the carving of silence is done by sounds, and in free verse, it is accomplished by the visual shaping of the page, for according to Oliver:

Turning the line, in free verse, is associated not only with the necessary decision at each turn (since the poem is not following any imposed order), but it also has much to do with the visual presentation on the page. . . . The pattern on the page, then, became the indicator of pace, and the balance and poise of the poem was inseparable from the way the line breaks kept or failed a necessary feeling of integrity, a holding together of the poem from beginning to end. The regular, metrical line gave assistance to a listener who sought to remember the poem; the more various line breaks of the ‘visual’ poem gave assistance to the mind seeking to ‘hear’ the poem. (54, 56)

The poem-on-the-page is hardly different, then, from the poem-as-listened-to, for what the one configures by visual demarcations, the other conditions by aural markings: both kinds of poems—all poetry—depend crucially on a correspondence, whether visual or aural, with silence, in order to peek into the unsaid and while there, to create its song.

THE POETIC LINE

In “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence,” Louise Glück professes her preference for poetry which trafficks in the unsaid:

I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary. It is analogous to the unseen; for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied. (73)

But all poems *are* made in this vocabulary of the ruin, incomplete and always nostalgic for the unseen whole. For a word is never really full of meaning, rather, it is filled with emptiness; since what it means is always forever deferred, a word is actually a gaping (w)hole—pure signifier, holder of silence—always meant to gesture toward, but never touch, what it means. Thus, because language always holds the unsaid within itself, poetry can be seen as a metaphor for the language of silence, for its visual form constantly approximates, with line breaks and stanza breaks, the silence which it is sculpting. Each verse, because of its fragmentariness, is itself an ellipsis, a disruptive moment, and the hesitation which exists between line breaks, at the end of one verse and before one reads the next, is a moment replete with suggestive meanings, which the subsequent verse might satisfy, or subvert, or even take in a completely surprising direction.

It is my contention that poetry's exploration of limits is akin to Julia Kristeva's conception of postmodernism as "writing-as-experience-of-limits." Consider how Glück's account of the kind of poetry she likes is evocative of the metaphysics of absence that postmodernism is concerned with, its preoccupation with fragments and destruction, as her words recall McHale's formulation of postmodern poetry. For McHale, the way to present anti-structure in the postmodern poem is "to build visual voids—blank spaces. . . or even to *build ruins*" (*The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* 15), which echoes Glück's "ellipsis," "the unsaid," "eloquent, deliberate silence," "unseen," "ruins," and the result of which is "a

textual world poised strangely between being and nonbeing, yielding an effect of ontological ‘hovering’” (15), which is reminiscent of Glück’s “suggestion,” the vacillation between the presence and absence of meanings. It goes without saying that postmodern poetry is to be distinguished from other kinds of poetry for its consistent ontological threat to itself, the way in which it self-consciously and aggressively undermines its own structure and status, which renders itself uncertain and flickering. However, following Roman Jakobson’s formulation of the shifting dominant, postmodern poetry’s interest in absence and ruins can be said to foreground the inherent postmodern characteristics of poetry’s concern with the unsaid and the fragmentary. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale appropriates Jakobson’s idea of the dominant, which is the principal focus in a work of art, to make the case for how postmodernism is structured according to the ontological dominant. He argues that ontological issues have always been present in modernist texts, but they have not been brought to the fore, simply because modernism is organised according to the epistemological dominant, thus questions of knowledge and knowability are given preeminence at the expense of other concerns. Postmodernism emerged, then, due to the shifting of the dominant, from epistemological to ontological, and hence, postmodernist texts are obsessed with questions of reality, while epistemological issues have now become marginal. (6-10). In the same way, perhaps all of poetry, by its formal construct, is structured principally according to its preoccupation with the metaphysics of absence, of emptiness and silence, which postmodernism has only now began to be dominated by. It is perhaps not very surprising, then, that poetry correlates somewhat with postmodernism, as postmodern impulses can be said to always have been present in the poetic form, a form entirely composed of ruins: of fragmentary and incomplete poetic verses.

The poetic “verse,” according to Oliver, “derives from the Latin and carries the meaning ‘to turn’ (as in versus)” (*A Poetry Handbook* 35), and is what is unique to the poetic

form: “Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines. More than meter, more than rhyme, more than images or alliteration or figurative language, line is what distinguished our experience of poetry as poetry, rather than some other kind of writing” (Longenbach xi). It is hardly a coincidence—or if it is, it is a remarkable coincidence—that a poem, which is made of verses, of turnings, is also at the same time concerned with tropes, which is turning from the literal. As Harold Bloom observes, “Poetry essentially is figurative language, concentrated so that its form is both expressive and evocative. Figuration is a departure from the literal, and the form of a great poem itself can be a trope (“turning”) or figure” (1). The composition of the poem, then, depends crucially on the turning of the line, as a figure for its turning away from actuality into the world of the poem. If, according to George Oppen, “[t]he meaning of a poem is in the cadences and the shape of the lines and the pulse of the thought which is given by those lines” (qtd. in Longenbach vii), the visual layout of the lines is then integral in structuring the thoughts contained in the poem, and on how they are to be received by the reader.

This can be seen in one of the earliest Old English poems, “Caedmon’s Hymn,” composed by Bede. I have reproduced here the “West Saxon form with a literal interlinear translation” (Norton 24) as it appears in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature (Vol. 1)*, in which “[t]he large space in the middle of the line indicates the caesura” and “[t]he alliterating sounds that connect the half-lines are printed in bold italics” (25):

Nu sculon	herigean	heofonrices Weard
Now we must praise		heaven-kingdom’s Guardian
Meotodes	meahte	and his m odgeþanc
the Measurer’s might		and his mind-plans
w eorc W uldor-Faedar		swa he w undra gehwæs

the work of the Glory-Father, when he of wonders of every one,

*e*ce Drihten *o*r onstealde

eternal Lord, the beginning established. (25-26)

In Old English verse, alliteration is the device that dominates each poetic line, which is also usually made up of four principal stresses, with two stresses aligned to each half-line, and separated, by a caesura in the middle of the poem, from the next two stresses in the corresponding half-line (19). Hence, each line is structured very strictly according to this alliterative principle, with a mandatory caesura denoting one half-line from another, and a preliminary consideration of this section of the poem will show that the thought expressed in each half-line is laid down with extreme care, in order to suggest intricate ideas which only the lineation of a poem can bring about.

Except for the first line, the attribute of God is assigned to every other half-line, and the imputation of this attribute into creation is assigned to its counterpart. This relationship between God's attribute and God's creation is suggested by alliteration, while the difference between the Creator and creation is implied by the caesura. "Now we must praise," Caedmon declares as an imperative in the first line of the poem, and immediately alliterates—and thus matches—"praise" (*herigean*) with "heaven-kingdom's Guardian" (*heofonrices Weard*). Thus he initiates us, aptly, into the hymn by stating that only God is worthy of our praise, and this praise of Him is required of us; it is a command, not an option. And now Caedmon commences his praise of God formally. He starts by standing in awe of God as mighty Measurer, and suggests that God measures out His plans for this vast creation with His power, as he alliterates "the Measurer's might" (*Meotodes meahte*) with God's "mind-plans" (*modgeþanc*). Then he traces the glorious wonder of each and every member of creation back

to the glory of the one God, as he alliterates “the work of the Glory-Father” (*weorc Wuldor-Faedar*) with “wonders of every one” (*wundra gehwæs*). Following which, he ponders on how the immortal God, who exists outside of time, can thus be the originator of time, and the beginnings of each of His wonders, as he alliterates “eternal Lord” (*eþe Drihten*) with “the beginning established” (*or onstealde*). Each half-line that contains one of God’s characteristics is divided from its complementary half-line that describes how this specific characteristic is present in creation, and hence, in the hymn, we can systematically praise God and His creation: God’s might and His mighty plans, God’s glory and His glorious wonders, and God’s transtemporality and His authoring of time. This complex movement of praise is made possible, and clarified, by the alliteration and caesura that govern each line of the poem, and would have been lost if rendered in terms other than poetic lineation. More importantly, the nuances of this complexity are expressed by “suggestion”, which is yielded by each clearly lineated—by each “ruined”—poetic line, and not by discursive reference, as an engagement of the visual and aural imagination is required to apprehend the intricacy of the poetic thought. Certainly, if the language of the literal is used in the hymn, it will fail in opening the doorway of praise of God (who belongs to a different ontology), because it is weighed down by its responsibility to encyclopaedic reality.

Another way in which the poetic line resists the language of the literal is by creating either a space of silence or a moment of ambivalence in the short pause that appears between the end of one line, and the beginning of the next. As Oliver observes, “Always, at the end of each line there exists—inevitably—a brief pause. This pause is part of the motion of the poem, as hesitation is part of the dance” (*A Poetry Handbook* 54). Oliver’s “hesitation” is likely to be no different from what Glück means by “hesitation,” and so this brief pause is just as apt an opportunity to explore the unsaid, through the two ways in which to end a poetic line: either by caesura or by enjambment.

The caesura at the end of a line creates what Oliver terms “[a] self-enclosed line,” which “may be an entire sentence, or. . . a phrase that is complete in terms of grammar and logic, though it is only a part of a sentence [and] the pause works as an instant of inactivity, in which the reader is ‘invited’ to weigh the information and pleasure of the line” (54). We have seen this at work in “Caedmon’s Hymn,” in which the reader is asked to ponder on the way in which an aspect of God’s divine character relates to an aspect of His creative genius in creation. Each line’s self-enclosure is demarcated by its logical or grammatical structure, and as the reader is forced to a slight halt at the end of each line, s/he is invited to contemplate on the set of poetic thought contained in that line, before proceeding to consider the next one.

On the other hand, enjambment “turns the line so that a logical phrase is interrupted—it speeds the line for two reasons: curiosity about the missing part of the phrase impels the reader to hurry on, and the reader will hurry twice as fast over the obstacles of a pause because it is there. We leap with more energy over a ditch than over no ditch” (54). This leaping from one line to the next permits us a glimpse into the unsaid, by means of suggestion. In one of her own poems, “After Her Death,” Oliver wrestles with the restlessness of grief, the sense of lostness her partner’s loss has afflicted on her: “I am trying to find the lesson / for tomorrow. Matthew something. / Which lectionary? I have not / forgotten the Way, but, a little, the way to the Way.” But she begins to look outwards to nature, and notices she is surrounded by a calmness that is so different from what she is inwardly struggling with:

The trees keep whispering

peace, peace, and the birds

in the shallows are full of the

bodies of small fish and are

content. They open their wings
so easily, and fly. So. It is still
possible. (*Thirst* 16)

“It is still / possible,” offers us two possible meanings at the same time, the one informing the other, with either and both being valid. The trees are at peace, are breathing out peace, as it were, and the birds are satiated, they spread their wings effortlessly to glide; plant and animal equally are rested. Oliver has welded an image of stillness, which is untroubled by the grief that so worries her, and she sums up for us: “So. It is still”, making sure to slow us down with “So.”, so that we can better apprehend and enter into stillness. At the end of this line, however, she turns it, and at “possible,” the stillness has now become made available to her, as we read the run-on line: “It is still possible.” “Possible” stands by itself as a poetic line, and the weight of the preceding lines rests entirely on this one word, just as all the stillness of nature, of the trees and the birds, has been, by the turn of the line, poured into Oliver. “It is still” in nature, and being a pupil of nature, she learns “[i]t is still / possible” to be still, in spite of her restive sorrow. Due to the enjambment, we are made to hurry from “still” to “possible,” but not before we are allowed to glimpse, as we hesitate in the space of the line’s turning, the flickering of two possible meanings. Thus, we flit, by means of suggestion afforded to us by the poetic line, between the said and the unsaid.

THE CONDITION OF MUSIC

Another way in which poetry detracts from the said to explore the unsaid is when it aspires toward the pleasure of rhythm more than it is faithful to literal sense. Donoghue has pointed out that eloquence pays as much attention to what is said as well as how it is being said. I would argue that some poems are so committed to musicality that the means of expression is privileged over the ends of expression. In “The Music of Poetry,” T. S. Eliot observes that

“there are poems in which we are moved by the music and take the sense for granted, just as there are poems in which we attend to the sense and are moved by the music without noticing it,” and it is in the latter kind of poems which leads us to “enjoy the music, which is of a high order, and we enjoy the feeling of irresponsibility towards the sense” (185).

Take, for example, a section of Galway Kinnell’s strange poem, “Everyone Was In Love,” in which the hissing sibilance in *s*, *th* (marked out in bold), the soft semivowels *f*, *h*, *v*, *w* (marked out in italics), and the fluent liquids *l*, *m*, *n*, *r* (marked out in underline) are used so excessively that the pleasure of the poem is derived more from sound than from meaning:

One day, *when* **they** were little, Maud and Fergus
 appeared in **the** doorway naked and mirththful,
with a dozen long garter snakes draped over
 each of **them** like brand-new clothes.
 Snake tails dangled down **their** backs,
 and snake foreparts in various lengths
fell over **their** fronts. *With* heads raised and swaying,
 alert as cobras, **the** snakes writhed **their** dry skins
 upon each *other*, **as** snakes like doing
in lovemaking, **with** **the** added novelty
 of caressing soft, **smooth**, moist human skin.

We are so distracted by the music that we do not much care why the children has appeared wearing snakes, or where the snakes have come from, or whether the children are in danger, for we are, like Maud and Fergus in the poem, “deliciously pleased” and “enchanted” by the pleasure yielded to us by all the melody; we are “in love.” At the end of the poem, Maud takes a “lumpy snake” from her brother’s shoulder and asks the speaker to look inside its mouth, where he quickly identifies a frog slowly being swallowed into the snake. The

speaker then adds, “Perhaps thinking I might be considering rescue, / Maud said, ‘Don’t. Frog is already elsewhere.” (5) Maud, who as the playful child is the figure for the playfulness of sound in the poem, asks the speaker not to attempt rescue of the frog, as if to say, we too should not try to recover any form of meaning in the poem. For what the poem is concerned with is not consequences or sense, but simply pleasure, its luxurious delight in music. It wants only to draw us “very slowly as if into deepest waters” of rhythm, and to bring us “elsewhere,” away from referential meaning and social concerns.

Consider also these lines from E. E. Cumming’s “i carry your heart with me”:

it’s you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you
here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)

It is uncertain why the beloved is what the moon means (what *does* the moon mean?), or why the beloved is the sun’s song (what song *does* the sun sing?), and the most bizarre line makes no sense at all: “here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud / and the sky of the sky of a tree called life” (200). But we do not bother ourselves with these questions, for the music in these lines is pleasurable, and that is all that matters. So the moon can mean whatever it wants, as long as it means the aria of airy assonance, and the sun can sing whatever it wants, as long as it sings the song of sibilance, and the root of the root and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky are lively with the refrains of semi-vowels and round mutes. The song of Cumming’s and Kinnell’s poems has so taken over the sense of the words, that the music of the poems has *become* the meaning; it is the primary vehicle through which the poems come to us and affect us—aurally, and thus, bodily. Hence, these poems bear out what Donoghue

himself is convinced of, that “formal eloquence [i]s the only reason for the existence of music” (Donoghue 41), and the eloquence of poetry’s musicality is, like postmodernism but in varying degrees, marked by a desire to be irresponsible toward literal meaning. Only: while poetry’s song aspires toward beauty, postmodernism’s production of beauty is purely incidental in its preoccupation with frivolous play. Or perhaps, a certain postmodern strand is necessary in all works of art as a condition for creating beauty?

In fact, all of art can be said to be committed to this quest of erasing the distinction between literal meaning and stylistic expression. As Walter Pater famously claims, “*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it” (111). Following Pater, and applying his sentiment to the verbal art of poetry, Robert Hass avers that “[p]oetry was an art near to music. It did not reach down to the mere world of objects. It made a music which lifted the traces of objects where they half survived in the referential meaning of words—street, apple, tree—toward a place where they lived a little in the eternal stillness of the poem” (xvii). The “eternal stillness of the poem” recalls Donoghue’s comment that each instance of eloquence “exists in an eternal present moment” (44), which I have earlier suggested means that eloquence resides in a space that does not run according to mathematical time. Milan Kundera would see this as eloquence’s anarchic resistance against the linearity of time, for he believes that “[b]eauty is an abolition of chronology and a rebellion against time” (73), which is not so unlike postmodern literature’s protest against the laws of material reality, and its campaign for disorder, or for its own laws of textual reality.

In the same way, according to Joseph Brodsky, “a poem, with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, is a game language plays to restructure time” (194), for he is convinced that the desire to reorganise linear time is inherent in every kind of music: “every

song, even the bird's song, is a form of restructuring time” (196). Rhythm is the name for which an arrangement of sound patterns is produced in relation to time, thus poetry’s creation or disruption of rhythm is also its reshaping of time, inducing us into an experience of temporality that is different from real time. As most of poetry’s pleasure is found in its sound-making, it is devoted to a wide range of devices to effect rhythm, some of which are: line break, stanza structure, metrical pattern, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, half-rhyme, and onomatopoeia, and this is testament to poetry’s potential to detach us from the real: from mathematical time, via its production of music, and from the expressible referential, via its conditioning of silence.

As Donoghue notes, “When writers aspire toward the condition of music or the even more occult state of silence (‘Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence’) they yield to ‘angelism,’ as Maritain called it, the ‘refusal of the creature to submit to or be ruled by any of the exigencies of the created natural order.’ They want to be angels, free of earth, its knowledge and its means” (48). This testament to poetry’s yearning to break away from the order of actuality is analogous to the postmodern disillusionment with reality, as Maritain’s “angelism” recalls McHale’s comment on the phenomenon of angelic representation in relation to postmodernism:

Angels. . . belong to a class of motifs that function as ‘ontological pluralizers.’ That is, whatever other meanings we may invest it with, whatever other desires it may embody, an angel is also, and preeminently, a representative of the world from which it comes—a world other than our own. By ‘representative’ I mean ‘synecdoche,’ the part that stands for the whole, the whole in this case being the other world, or indeed other *worlds* in the plural. A part of another world that has irrupted into this one, the angel stands for the whole of that other world from which it comes and to which it belongs, and

beyond that for the general principle of ontological difference. Angels *stand for* the plurality of worlds; whatever else they might mean, angels also mean something like, “There is more than one world.” (*The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* 22)

There is more than one world, and the world of the poem is one of these—a world which, like the worlds of postmodern texts, is unfastened from the real world, so that it may revel playfully in the limits between language and silence, in ambiguity and ambivalence, in shadows and suggestions; it is, like postmodernism, an experience of limits. This is not to say, however, that poetry coincides perfectly with postmodernism, for poetry is devoted, and structured according, to the pleasure principle, of song and silence, of the imaginativeness of the image, while postmodernism is completely unconcerned with the pleasure of beauty, since it distrusts all meta-narratives—beauty being one such grand theory—and disrupts them without thought or mercy. Postmodernism, unlike poetry, is so committed to frivolity it does not even take itself seriously.

But poetry *does* take beauty seriously, for it adores the pleasure and imaginativeness words can bring. “Poetry insists” says Marie Howe, “on the integrity of words, of a word” (“The Complexity of the Human Heart”), insists on it so much, in fact, that it creates—grammatically, typographically, and rhythmically—a textual world it could dance in, a world full of strangeness and otherness: an imaginative reality, constituted by equivocal textual laws, and which is a conduit to silence. Poetry is dominated by, and indeed is itself, the poetics of limits: the postmodern before the postmodern, having always already been postmodern.

(12, 117 words)

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