

Roland Barthes and English-Language
Avant-Garde Poetry, 1970-1990

Submitted in part fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the engagement of English-language poets with the writing of Roland Barthes, and considers how a reading of Barthes may help understanding of a range of challenging experimental work. The introduction to the thesis lays a groundwork of how Barthes has been read in English since the first widely available translations of his work appeared in the 1960s, and thus establishes the intellectual context in which poets have written since.

Beginning in the first chapter with Veronica Forrest-Thomson, the first of these poets to have looked at Barthes in detail, it looks both at poetry and of poets' writings in the fields of criticism and poetics. From Forrest-Thomson the thesis moves in the second chapter to North America and considers the place of Barthes, particularly his *Writing Degree Zero*, in the intellectual context out of which emerged what has come to be known as 'language writing', combining a survey of this writing with close readings of the work of Ron Silliman, Ray DiPalma, Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, and others. In the third chapter, the investigation of this diffuse tendency in poetry is followed through various strands, focussing in particular on periodicals and archival material. Finally, the fourth chapter looks at Anne Carson, Deborah Levy, and Kristjana Gunnars, and considers Barthes' relevance to their texts' thinking about writing. The intersection of theory and the emotional life is explored using the theoretical lens of Chris Kraus' experimental fiction, particularly her notion of a 'lonely girl phenomenology'.

Barthes has had a diverse range of effects on poets' thinking about writing and their writing practices, and our understanding of Barthes as a writer, what we mean by the 'Barthesian', and individual notions of his such as the 'death of the author' and his work on the possibilities of the fragment, have changed over time. The thesis considers the potential of Barthes' writing to help us think about literature and its future utility for poetry studies.

Declaration

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Abbreviations

‘AI’: Veronica Forrest-Thomson, ‘After Intelligibility: Poetic Sense in the Work of Roland Barthes’, Girton College Archive, Cambridge, Papers of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, GCPP Forrest-Thomson 4/3/1.

CP: Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008).

IMT: Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).

LD: Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1979).

NS: Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987).

PA: Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978).

RB: Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977).

WDZ: Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968).

Introduction: A Great Indelicacy

‘A work of art in which there are theories is like an object that still has its price-tag,’ wrote Marcel Proust: ‘a great indelicacy’.¹ However, there is a concentration of texts in the recent history of English-language poetry which make much of their intellectual price-tags. They are eager to interact with ‘poetics’, using this umbrella term in its sense of the theory and commentary of poetry, the parallel discipline whose practitioners are often poets themselves. As such, at times the line between the art and the study of its practice becomes blurred in a way that may be ‘indelicate’, but that indelicacy is one of the main distinguishing features of poetry – especially experimental poetry – of the recent past.

The critical voice of Roland Barthes has proved all but impossible to ignore over the last half-century. This applies not only to literary scholars, but to creative writers as well, and never more than when these two categories overlap. My principal goal here is to see how poets responded to Barthes in the first decades after he began to be read in English. I begin with poems and critical work by the Scottish poet-critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson published from 1970, and continue until the end of the 1980s, when Barthes’ writing becomes so widely read, and opinion about

¹ Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. by Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 1999), pp. 278-9. Jean-Michel Rabaté follows other commentators on this passage in pointing out that Proust, in fact, frequently indulges in theorising, but argues that Proust’s theories are only ever ‘a stage, a partial truth discovered on his way to a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge’. Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 122. Rabaté has returned to the theme more recently in *Crimes of the Future: Theory and its Global Reproduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 70-1.

it (at least, beyond the specialist field of ‘Barthes studies’) so often already settled, that there is little remarkable about including Barthes in one’s poetic practice.² This thesis is designed to replace that uninterrogated assumption with a literary-critical history, to contribute to the greater genealogy of the contemporary avant-garde, and suggest applications for Barthes in examining these often otherwise baffling textual phenomena. Approaching from the other side, it will also use a reading of poetry to explore what Barthes still has to say to us today, and what we as Barthesian readers have yet to find – or co-produce – in his texts. Is it, after all, surprising that poets of all people would ask what happens if ‘language is not exhausted by the message engendered by it’, if ‘language can survive this message’?³

Aims and Objectives

As such, it would certainly be possible for a literary-critical project to draw together poetry of the 1970s and 1980s that exhibits qualities we could describe as ‘Barthesian’. They might include a sensitivity to the perpetration of ‘myths’ and codes, a certain playful delight in language, and in general a desire to address what Henry Sussman has called ‘the bearing and tack of systems’, their ‘rustle’.⁴ However, my objective here is more precise: I will instead demonstrate that poets are responding to Barthes, and the aim of my analysis will be to expose what these

² When I told one writer that I was conducting research into poets who responded to Barthes in their work, he replied, ‘Who hasn’t?’

³ Barthes, ‘Inaugural Lecture’, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1983), pp. 460-1.

⁴ Henry Sussman, *The Task of the Critic: Poetics, Philosophy, Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 23. Sussman is alluding to Barthes’ notion of the *bruissement* of language, ‘the sounds of a pleasure which is “working”’, of language ‘in its utopic state’. Barthes, ‘The Rustle of Language’ in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 76-9 (p. 77). It may help in reading Sussman to consider Andy Stafford’s suggestion that ‘rustle’ is an inadequate translation of ‘bruissement’, which is closer to ‘the sound of an engine running smoothly’. Stafford, *Roland Barthes* (London: Reaktion, 2015), p. 120.

responses tell us, both about Barthes and the poetry in question. Therefore, when I do employ the term ‘Barthesian’, it is always with an analytic eye towards the complex of ideas assumed to be derived from Barthes. Barthes has few imitators as such, but many seem to find his writing style infectious. *Mythologies* begets mythologies, and reading Barthes empowers one to find the myth in everything. We accomplish this not primarily by following his general comments about myth in ‘Myth Today’, but by being exposed to the style. As we shall see, Forrest-Thomson’s difficult engagement with Barthes culminates in what is almost a Barthes *imitation* in her essay on Flaubert’s *Salammbô*. Likewise, after Barthes’ death, Joseph Timko and Alan Davies both choose to memorialise him in the pages of the American poetry journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* with essays that adopt his style and techniques. The first use of the word ‘Barthesian’ in English appears to be in John Weightman’s *Observer* column on ‘The Paris Scene’, where it is used to characterise pastiche of Barthes; Weightman quotes a sentence that Raymond Picard has scornfully ‘[t]ranslated into Barthesian’.⁵ Today, that term is more commonly used to refer either to behaviour stemming from the assumption that ‘the author is dead’ and irrelevant to criticism, or to Barthes’ proclivity for fragmentary and allusive remarks and the speculative reconsideration of terms. However, the notion suggested by Picard via Weightman of a Barthesian language with its own vocabulary and grammar can help us to understand how his readers engage with him. There is an appeal to the notion of becoming like Barthes, the louche but infinitely insightful critic on the constantly productive but never-ending quest for the *lapsus*, the

⁵ John Weightman, ‘The Paris Scene’, *Observer*, 9 May 1965, p. 27.

slippage.⁶ But to stop at the Barthesian and fail to look beyond is to miss most of a writer's engagement with Barthes. Louis-Jean Calvet writes, with reference to the C erisy colloquium on Barthes' work, that 'Barthesians' see among the many aspects of Barthes an image only of themselves.⁷ The question then remains: in which Barthes do they see that image? Faced with any potentially Barthesian moment, I try to identify which of the various theoretical questions is being tackled from among the many that trouble Barthes as well as his readers and provoke this 'Barthesian' behaviour.

I also aim to address the question of influence. We suppose writers 'get something' from other writers, and our principal way of understanding this is to say they are *influenced* by what they read. This term is problematic for this project for two reasons, one particular and one general. The particular problem is that Barthes is famous for his announcement of 'The Death of the Author', in which he claims that 'to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth' of, and bring about the 'death' of, the godlike creator-figure of the 'Author'.⁸ In the light of that argument, it seems any writer would be hypocritical to insist on the primacy of the facts of her own intellectual background in determining what her text means. The general problem is that, for all the insistent concern of critics like Se an Burke (also expressed by poets in the 1970s and 1980s) that the death of the author was really the empowerment of the *critic* rather than the reader, Barthes has come to be seen as, at

⁶ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 61. (Hereafter *LD*.)

⁷ Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 222.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 148. (Hereafter *IMT*.)

least partly, right.⁹ Look at any introductory textbook or attend a first-year undergraduate lecture: the conventional notion of literary studies today acknowledges, even if it does not always take full advantage of, the fruits of the reassessment of authorship brought about by structuralism and post-structuralism. The same can be said, therefore, of writers themselves, and so in order to understand how any given English-speaking writer responds to Barthes, we must examine how his critical omnipresence happened in the discourse of literary theory in this language.

‘Insular and Pragmatical Minds’: Barthes’ First Readers in English

It is difficult to say when Barthes first began to be read in the English-speaking world. An article by the French poet Yves Bonnefoy for the determinedly Anglo-American literary magazine *Encounter* in 1958 bemoaned the lack of contact between French literature, and literary criticism, and those in Britain and America. Bonnefoy wished French critics would write more like the New Critics, but there was some hope. ‘Not that minds which are very close to Anglo-Saxon formalism cannot be found in France: however Marxist he may be, this is true of Roland Barthes.’¹⁰ Bonnefoy refrains from elaborating any of Barthes’ thought, but this alignment with formalism is clearly derived from *Writing Degree Zero*, which was instead long categorised as primarily a ‘Marxist’ work. While it is true that formalism and Marxism are both part of the backdrop for Barthes’ early essays, they are at the service of Barthes’ radical aesthetic theories of *écriture*, at least in the minds of more

⁹ Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 61.

¹⁰ Bonnefoy, ‘Critics: English and French’, *Encounter* 58 (July 1958), 39-45 (p. 43).

recent readers. But without the poststructuralist context of the later Barthes to put this in, early readers tried and failed to fit the early Barthes into schools they recognised, a tendency particularly pronounced in those Anglo-American readers of whom Bonnefoy speaks.

Although an essay by Barthes on Robbe-Grillet does appear in the US-based English-language periodical *Evergreen Review* in 1958, in the main it would be several years before ‘bridging’ projects like those Bonnefoy proposed came into being.¹¹ One of the first was the ‘Critics Abroad’ issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* in September 1963. Various international critics contributed: Hans Mayer, Umberto Eco, Raymond Picard, and Barthes. Barthes’ essay ‘Criticism as Language’ introduces the reader to four critical tendencies: existentialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism. He writes that the sum of these influences means French criticism is ‘national’ and ‘owes little or nothing to Anglo-American’ tendencies, for all he shares a self-confessed ‘formalism’ with the New Critics, as Bonnefoy suggests. However, he does outline a ‘tension between interpretative and positivistic (academic) criticism’.¹² Presaging their famous argument, Raymond Picard disagreed with Barthes, although without either referencing the other, about the lay of the land. As a lecturer at the Sorbonne, Picard was an avatar of the positivistic/academic tendency that Barthes opposed, but Picard’s article ‘Critical Trends in France’ sees him fighting a war on two fronts. Like Bonnefoy, he wishes

¹¹ Barthes, ‘Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet’, *Evergreen Review* 5 (Summer 1958), pp. 113-26. For the circumstances of this publication, which involve Barthes’ translator Richard Howard’s friendship with the *Evergreen Review*’s editor, see Loren Glass, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 44, 178.

¹² Barthes, ‘Criticism as Language’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1963, 739-40 (p. 739).

that Anglo-American criticism were better known in France, and agrees with Barthes that ‘its influence can be regarded as practically nil’.¹³ He goes on to align himself both ‘against the exaggerated practice of biographical criticism’, for which he blames the fascination of the (French) public with biographies, and considers ‘*intentionnalité* (roughly, the question of a man’s general outlook) [...] an ambiguous and even dangerous notion’.¹⁴ The other tendency he opposes is that whereby ‘the literary work itself is reduced to a mere pretext for a psychological or philosophical essay which in effect passes beyond it’ – a clear reference to Barthes’ own critical practice at the time.

Barthes’ *On Racine* had been published that year and was reviewed in the aforementioned ‘Critics Abroad’ issue. A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer identifies it as ‘psychological criticism’ and praises Barthes for being able to carry it out without allowing ‘the work as literature [...] to be overlooked’. ‘M. Barthes,’ we are told, ‘has a genuinely inventive intelligence’, and ‘throws great light’ on Racine’s use of the conventions of tragedy, yet the reviewer is politely puzzled as to why Barthes (‘curiously enough’) would shy away from any ‘literary judgement’ of ‘aesthetic value’, which criticism of the time would have been expected to make.¹⁵ Yet the review was, largely, part of the positive reaction to *On Racine* that frustrated Picard to the point that he felt compelled to respond with the pamphlet *New Criticism or New Fraud?* calling into question the value of Barthes’ work, which, as in his *TLS*

¹³ Raymond Picard, ‘Critical Trends in France’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1963, p. 719.

¹⁴ Picard, ‘Critical Trends’, p. 720; emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ ‘Myth-Probers and Other Critics’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1963, p. 741.

article, he proposed became distracted from the texts under consideration by theories, and therefore was not true criticism.¹⁶

The London literary press was aware, at first dimly, that there was a conflict playing itself out in Paris. British intellectuals followed French literary criticism: Barthes and his widely admired seminar at the *École Pratique des Haute Études* were mentioned in one of a pair of short articles for the *Observer* describing ‘The Paris Scene’ in 1965,¹⁷ and in 1966 there was ample coverage of ‘the Picard-Barthes debate’.¹⁸ It was a narrative easily absorbed, Barthes’ new ideas pitted against Picard’s old, traditional ones, and the *Times Literary Supplement*, while unable to bring itself to side against Barthes the new broom, took a schoolmasterly line in favour of moderation, suggesting in one article that Barthes may continue to do what he has been doing ‘provided he avoids the aberrations that M. Picard has so brilliantly stigmatized’, and in another that ‘the mass of non-academic intellectuals indignantly *assume* that M. Barthes is right and M. Picard wrong’. Barthes was urged to be ‘more humble, less prophetic’.¹⁹ Barthes’ immodesty is of more interest to the writer than his ideas, and is one of the reasons he emerges from the herd of structuralists.

A few scholarly articles had made reference to Barthes before the London literary press latched onto the story, and *On Racine* had been made available in the

¹⁶ Picard, *New Criticism or New Fraud?*, trans. by Frank Towne (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1969).

¹⁷ Weightman, ‘The Paris Scene’, p. 27.

¹⁸ ‘Civil War Among the Critics’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 February 1966, p. 83; ‘Crisis in Criticism’, *TLS*, 23 June 1966, 545–6 (p. 545).

¹⁹ ‘Civil War’, p. 546.

United States in a translation by Richard Howard, but the impact of a major study of France's most 'classic' author is not as great outside of France.²⁰ Even so, Barthes does appear on critics' radar; two articles in early numbers of *Comparative Literature* make reference to him, one in the context of the opinions of 'Marxist' critics on Robbe-Grillet, the other more generally contemplating the 'apocalyptic' crisis in American criticism, of which it sees Barthes as one of many harbingers: in *Writing Degree Zero*, 'the avatar of the new literature is absence'.²¹ In 1967, Laurent LeSage published a dossier-anthology on the new tendency in criticism whose prefatory Author's Note preoccupies itself with discussing the Picard-Barthes debate, although without using either of their names.²² If we read between the lines of the Introduction and then on to page 43 (where the name 'Picard' finally appears), it is possible to put the story together. Whether out of a desire to preserve scholarly neutrality or to avoid an unseemly trade in gossip, LeSage ends up producing a rather oblique account of the press battle that, arguably, had first brought the 'French New Criticism' to significant international attention. Exposure like this happens too late for Barthes, or at least for his enduring reputation as a critic, which was to be absorbed into the Johns Hopkins conference and 'poststructuralism', which had already begun when LeSage's study was published.

Barthes was one of the critics present in 1966 at the conference on 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' at Johns Hopkins University in

²⁰ Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964).

²¹ Martin C. R. Jarrett-Kerr, 'The Conditions of Tragedy', *Comparative Literature Studies* 5 (1965), pp. 363-74; Ihab Hassan, 'Beyond a Theory of Literature: Intimations of Apocalypse', *Comparative Literature Studies* 4 (1964), 261-71 (p. 269).

²² Laurent LeSage, *The French New Criticism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967).

Baltimore often credited with bringing structuralism to Anglo-American scholarship, and at the same time with inaugurating post-structuralism.²³ While Derrida's 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' was to make the greatest lasting impact, quickly becoming a 'sacred essay',²⁴ Barthes delivered the paper 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?', which argued that writing was neither an active nor a passive activity, but had a special grammar and thus a special relationship to the writing subject. This paved the way for 'The Death of the Author', but it also suggested that the struggle to understand the nature of writing exposed the shortcomings in the 'human sciences' regarding the understanding of language; 'literature can raise the fundamental problems of language without which it could not exist'.²⁵ Although it has seldom been cited by poets, Barthes' contribution reserved a place for experimental literature in the wider project deconstruction would seek to inaugurate.

The following year, the Anglophone awareness of Barthes' work sharpened still further with the appearance of his first books to be published in Britain. Annette Lavers had proposed to Barthes that she translate *Le degré zero de l'écriture*, which was published as *Writing Degree Zero* by Jonathan Cape in 1967, along with *Elements of Semiology*. British reviews failed to see potential in the two texts; the *TLS* struggles to divine what 'Barthes seems to be saying, in very sibylline terms',

²³ Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

²⁴ Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Athlone, 1980), p. 80.

²⁵ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 21.

and finds the structuralists in general ‘precious, difficult and abstruse’.²⁶ Meanwhile Barthes’ volume is judged by Philip Toynbee in the *Observer* to be the ‘hardest’ in the Cape series; Toynbee has ‘heard [Barthes’] name being bandied by Robbe-Grillet and others’, but finds *Writing Degree Zero* ‘a series of noisy squibs’ and *Elements* ‘an intellectual activity which seems to serve no purpose but its own internal elaboration’. His final paragraph, however, is what Tom Buchan calls ‘a proudly obtuse escape-clause’,²⁷ in which Toynbee writes that Barthes may well have unseen merits which, as yet, ‘can mean very little to the insular and pragmatistical minds of English readers’.²⁸

The two books were published separately in the United States, with *Writing Degree Zero* carrying an admiring preface from Susan Sontag, and her outlook perhaps represents the less ‘insular’, although still ‘pragmatistical’, early American reader of Barthes. Her well-known and popular *Against Interpretation* having been published two years previously and expressing rebellious discontent with the literary *status quo*, Sontag gave Barthes her seal of approval, perhaps helping make him a serious object of study for American readers. The career beyond academia which had caused Barthes himself so much anxiety was for her a selling point, and she enthuses about ‘this rare breed of intellectual virtuoso’, ‘this magnitude of intellectual appetite and ambition’.²⁹ She is, however, realistic about *Writing Degree Zero* and its drawbacks – it is ‘compact to the point of ellipsis, often arcane’ (pp. vii-viii) and

²⁶ ‘Deep Waters’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 October 1967, p. 960.

²⁷ Tom Buchan, ‘Writing Versus Literature’, *Scottish International* 2 (1968), pp. 8-18; see below for wider discussion of this article.

²⁸ Philip Toynbee, ‘Semantic Frontiersmen’, *Observer*, 17 December 1967, p. 21.

²⁹ Susan Sontag, ‘Introduction’ to *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968), p. xi. (Hereafter *WDZ*.)

‘seminal but not representative’ (p. viii) – recommending *Essais critiques* for an example of Barthes’ full range. She touches too upon the relevance of Barthes for the French literary community, announcing the ‘triumph of modernism’ in Paris (the *nouveau roman* or ‘post-novel prose narrative’ being her prime example) and celebrating the appearance of such ‘a provocative minority current’ (p. ix) while in America Joyce, Stein, Woolf, and Burroughs were still considered avant-garde. For Sontag *Writing Degree Zero* defends avant-garde literature from the implied attack by Sartre that it ought to be more ‘socially committed’ (p. x), attempting to problematise the overly simplistic situation he sets out. She also stresses the idea of *écriture* as a third term in ‘the common-sense dualism of language (social property) and style (individual decision)’ (p. xii); *écriture* points both ‘toward society and toward the nature of literature’ (p. xiv). For her, this is the key discovery of the text, rather than the ‘degree zero’, which as she points out is only ‘one solution to the disintegration of literary language’ (p. xvii).³⁰ This text, she writes, is to be seen as, if not a total ‘demystification of the myth of “art”’, ‘highly serviceable’ and, what is more, ‘healing’ and ‘therapeutic’. This tradition of the essays as inspirational material continues throughout their readership; Ron Silliman’s 1975 selection of nine American avant-garde poets, ‘The Dwelling-Place’, takes its title from *Writing Degree Zero* – ‘it is the word that is the dwelling-place’ – and even in Adam Thirlwell’s introduction to the 2012 edition, one of the new Hill & Wang editions

³⁰ Barthes hails a ‘proliferation of modes’ towards the dream of a no longer alienated language (*WDZ*, p. 87), a charge language writing was to take up enthusiastically (see Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis).

recently issued of all Barthes' works with new introductions, the reader is exhorted to read the book, '[a]nd then you need (like Barthes) to begin a revolution'.³¹

Scholarly Reception in Britain and America

The first English publication of *Writing Degree Zero* gained new readers for Barthes and revived old debates: in 1968, various articles appeared which made a greater attempt than had the newspapers to theorise Barthes' critical contributions. One of the first truly scholarly papers devoted to Barthes in English is 'The Critical Position of Roland Barthes'. Writing in 1968, its author, Hugh Davidson, concerns himself with the debate, current (or at least recent) at the time of his writing, between Barthes and Picard, and not with *Writing Degree Zero*, the translation of which had just been published and was to go on to make a great impression on the rest of the English-speaking world. Davidson is concerned to present a particular narrative: that a diverse group of intellectual movements – the by now familiar list of 'Marxism, Freudianism, existentialism, structuralism, and', here, 'phenomenology' (p. 367). As usual, Barthes' exact relationship to these ideas is mostly overlooked, with the exception of structuralism, but that is not the scope of Davidson's article, which intends rather to explain Barthes' position. Picard's is already the clear one of traditionalists, 'unavowed positivism or concern with little facts' (p. 368), so Barthes is shown to be anti-positivist, and the fact that Davidson has to explain from such fundamental terms means he anticipates an uphill battle for Barthes in America, imagining Anglophone Picards everywhere.

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), p. xi. The only difference between this edition and that cited elsewhere in this thesis is the introduction, Thirlwell replacing Sontag.

What is most relevant about Davidson's essay is its arrival at a decisive moment for Barthes. A footnote contrasts *Critique et vérité* with his landmark conference paper 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?', 'in which', Davidson comments, 'it was clear that [Barthes'] views had evolved somewhat'.³² What makes this article seem a strange artefact when contrasted with other early Anglophone Barthes scholarship was that *Critique et vérité* has always had a small readership in the English-speaking world, of interest mostly to specialists not even in literature but in criticism *qua* criticism. Forrest-Thomson, devouring Barthes in whatever scraps she can find him in the late 1960s, avoids *Critique et vérité* altogether in her otherwise thoroughly referenced essay 'After Intelligibility'. When it was finally translated into English as *Criticism and Truth* by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman in 1987, a review said that this 'famous pamphlet' had to be read with a 'consciousness of history'.³³ Even in the Foreword, Philip Thody argues only half-heartedly for its 'wider interest than its immediate applicability to the world of French studies'.³⁴ That publication was the beginning of a rounding-out of Barthes publications, a desire to see all of the 'major' works in print, and then in English print. It took over two decades to make it there, however, because it was simply not a priority for readers of English, who, like Thody in his own book on Barthes, feel they have already been exposed to an attack on the critical language 'not even of yesterday but

³² Hugh M. Davidson, 'The Critical Position of Roland Barthes', *Contemporary Literature* 9;3 (Summer 1968), 367-76 (p. 370).

³³ Timothy Raser, review of Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keunemann, *South Atlantic Review* 53;3 (September 1988), 91-2 (p. 91).

³⁴ Philip Thody, 'Preface', in Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keunemann (London: Continuum, 2007), p. xi.

of the day before yesterday'³⁵ in the form of the New Criticism, despite the *nouvelle critique*'s different approaches and goals. On the other side, Paul de Man writing to French-language readers to introduce them to the new criticism thought of Barthes as being 'not that different from New Criticism'; work like Barthes' addressed 'hidden or unconscious philosophical propositions' when, '[i]n its own inadequacy, it brings them out to the surface, and thus leads to authentic ontological questions'.³⁶

What was responded to, instead, was the explosive character of *Writing Degree Zero*, and when that volume appeared in translation in 1968, there was a spate of articles on its implications, fifteen years after it was first published. What these articles did have in common with Davidson's was that they sought to explain Barthes to their readership, even those outwith their society's cultural centres. Tom Buchan writes a surprising and pugnacious essay in an early number of the literary magazine the *Scottish International* called 'Writing versus Literature', in which he outlines another Barthes, this time one based wholly on *Writing Degree Zero*. The essay is full of frustration: with academia (the 'stifling network of post-graduate studies', p. 9) and its established approaches both to literature and the human sciences, but most of all with those 'insular and pragmatical minds of English readers'. Buchan is one of those whom Sontag predicted in her introduction that Barthes would inspire, as he is eager for something, a 'History of Writing', to replace the 'myth of art'. As such, he is fascinated with the 'new concept' represented by

³⁵ Davidson, p. 368; cf. Thody, *Roland Barthes: A Conservative Estimate* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 59, 117-8.

³⁶ De Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 231. This essay, 'The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism', was originally published in Paris as 'L'impasse de la critique formaliste', *Critique* 14 (June 1956), pp. 483-500. Barthes himself was to echo De Man's notion of 'inadequacy' several times, as in *A Lover's Discourse*'s discussion of the *lapsus* (*LD*, p. 61).

écriture, which will allow for the acceleration of the development of ‘new forms and new formats’ for written culture. Like Thody comparing Barthes and Coleridge almost a decade later,³⁷ Buchan writes, after quoting Barthes on how ‘the adoption of a real language is for the writer the most human act’, that this ‘could almost be from the Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*’ (*sic*; p. 10). Barthes is seen as a romantic revolutionary, a view echoed from Silliman to Thirlwell, and in this he is one who advocates the ‘human’, and hence a repositioning of the role of the ‘humanities’ and ‘human sciences’.

Buchan, like the *Scottish International* as a whole, hopes that a projected radical independent Scotland will be able to bridge the gaps with the Continent that British culture, he believes, has been unable or unwilling to do. He is frustrated by the ‘hip but uncomprehending’ (p. 8) response to Barthes in the British mainstream press discussed above, while hoping that an independent Scotland will ‘abandon such insularities along with the political connection’ (p. 9). This dissatisfaction with Britain’s response to Barthes and thinkers like him (minus Buchan’s nationalist zeal) is also found in fellow Scot Forrest-Thomson’s review of Stephen Heath’s book *The Nouveau Roman* in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 1973. Forrest-Thomson believes the real value of the book not its study of the movement in the French novel, but that it brings thinkers like Barthes to British readers and ‘will finally prompt a revolution in literature in this country’.³⁸ Heath’s was one of the first scholarly texts to make Barthes available to the British academic public who did

³⁷ Thody, *A Conservative Estimate*, p. 10.

³⁸ Forrest-Thomson, ‘New Novels and New Critics’, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 2 February 1973, p. 17.

not follow French publications as he and Forrest-Thomson did. Perhaps bowing to the pressure of the academic marketplace, he wrote his monograph on Barthes in French, but it still represents a remarkably detailed study made by a British writer, and Heath was not alone in the Anglophone world in his enthusiasm.³⁹ The popularisation of Barthes began in earnest that same year, with American critic Robert Scholes devoting a section to him in *Structuralism in Literature*, an introduction for students. Although today Derrida is regarded as the most important import via the Baltimore conference, Scholes gives higher estimation to the contributions of Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov.⁴⁰ A year later, Jonathan Culler published *Structuralist Poetics*, which has since become regarded as a seminal work in the field and is heavily informed by Barthes. As we shall see in the next chapter, Culler's text bears a notable relationship to Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* and devotes a chapter to poetics. Culler, like Forrest-Thomson (perhaps even more so, as the subject is not treated in *Poetic Artifice*) sees the potential in Barthes for understanding poetry, which was to be borne out in particular by the practitioners and critical readers of 'language writing'.

Champions and Translators

Culler also became in 1983 the author of an introduction to Barthes published as part of the Fontana 'Modern Masters' series, and which has since been reissued in the

³⁹ Heath, *Vertige du déplacement: Lecture de Barthes* (Paris: Fayard, 1974).

⁴⁰ Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 142-56. Derrida rates only a single passing mention, albeit as a 'star performer' of the structuralist activity (p. 157). This is due to Scholes' desire to focus on those writers whose work is applicable to writing literary studies, but the fact that he does not see much use for Derrida in this is in itself remarkable.

‘Very Short Introductions’ series from Oxford University Press (2002).⁴¹ Like many before and after him, Culler contributes to the idea of the ‘many Bartheses’ – the mythologist, the critic, the structuralist, the hedonist – thus ensuring that this view of the ‘man of parts’ would be how new readers would come to see him. This effort at popularisation would never have happened, however, had not there been a number of translators who were also enthusiastic champions of Barthes’ work in Britain and America. The first figure to consider is Annette Lavers, who with Colin Smith translated the *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology* volume, as well as selecting and translating the English *Mythologies*, published in 1972. She knew Barthes personally; the two met when she sent Barthes a copy of a book she had written on the figure of the psychoanalyst in literature and he replied enthusiastically. She offered to show him around London, followed by trips to Oxford and Cambridge in 1969 and 1974, doubtless disseminating his thought in influential academic circles, both in universities and publishing.⁴² He spoke to Frank Kermode's influential literary theory seminar at University College London, and generally inserted himself into the literary-critical climate.⁴³

Something similar happened in America, where the poet Richard Howard translated Barthes’ first book in English; *On Racine* appeared with little fanfare from

⁴¹ A side-by-side comparison of the two versions is instructive to those wishing to discover how the reception of Barthes changed in the intervening two decades. For instance, in the bibliography of the original Fontana edition, Culler writes that Thody’s text ‘contains much information and is fascinating in what it takes for granted’. This wry comment was removed from the 2002 Oxford University Press ‘Very Short Introductions’ edition, in whose bibliography Thody is not mentioned.

⁴² Marie Gil, *Roland Barthes: au lieu de la vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), p. 303. Lavers went on to write an important book to the Anglophone understanding of Barthes’s career, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After* (London: Methuen, 1982).

⁴³ Michael Payne et al., *Life After Theory* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 53.

Hill & Wang in 1964. Howard had been a champion of Barthes' since they met when the latter was teaching at Middlebury University in Vermont in 1958, and was translator of his first essay to appear in English in the *Evergreen Review* that year (see above).⁴⁴ In 1967, Howard translated the now-famous essay 'The Death of the Author' for *Aspen* magazine, a unique 'multimedia' publication whose issues came in a box that contained booklets, sound recordings, posters, and sometimes even reels of film.⁴⁵ The essay appeared alongside others by Susan Sontag and George Kubler, but due to *Aspen's* small circulation, it was not much read, appearing in the original French in the Marseilles-based journal *Manteia* in 1968 and not acquiring its current influence and importance in the Anglophone world until at least 1977, when it appeared in *Image Music Text*, the collection of essays edited by Stephen Heath (on which more later). Howard translated *Critical Essays* for Hill & Wang, then returned to translate *Roland Barthes* (1977), *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) (which had been something close to a bestseller in France), and, after Barthes' death, *Camera Lucida* (1981) and *Empire of Signs* (1982).⁴⁶ These translations made Barthes widely read throughout the English-speaking world, but they have also come to be authoritative, and there are few alternative perspectives available to those who read Barthes in English rather than French.

⁴⁴ Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 321.

⁴⁵ *Aspen* 5-6 (1967) <<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>> [accessed 9 December 2013].

⁴⁶ As well as these major works, Howard produced English-language editions of Barthes' French essay collections including *The Responsibility of Forms* (1985) and *The Rustle of Language* (1986), and posthumous publications such as Barthes' *Incidents* (1992), *Mourning Diary* (2010), and the complete edition of the *Mythologies* (2012). To list all of his Barthes translations here would be to reproduce a large part of the bibliography to this thesis.

Barthes' posthumous publications have been many and various, but their influence on the course of poetry is questionable.⁴⁷ Certainly the first ones to appear did not set forth entirely new theoretical ideas, but they may have helped to broaden a consciousness of Barthes which, as we have seen, was already well-established in the English-speaking world. Sontag's *A Barthes Reader* had not initially been planned as a posthumous volume, as she explains in the opening essay, but helped disseminate certain texts in English, such as Barthes' inaugural lecture at the Collège de France.⁴⁸ It also excerpted *The Pleasure of the Text* and *A Lover's Discourse*, which were placed in comparison with *Writing Degree Zero* and early but significant essays like 'Myth Today' to give a full and representative range of Barthes' career, although Sontag still complains that it does not provide a complete picture.⁴⁹ This was not, however, the first time American readers had had access to a collection of Barthes' essays, as (the far less representative) *Image Music Text* had been published in New York as well as London and was received with great interest in the American poetic community. Bruce Andrews' 'review' in the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, did not use the word 'Barthes' outside the title, as if taking the essay's title as an injunction not merely to rob Barthes of absolute authority over his text, but to efface him from existence altogether.⁵⁰ Many of the

⁴⁷ Since Barthes' death, the view of his work has changed with posthumous publications not only of books of texts Barthes only saw in periodicals, but of texts Barthes did not prepare (and in some cases did not intend) for print. The earliest of these post-dates the *terminus a quo* of this thesis, so I will not devote space to them here except where they shed light on an earlier passage.

⁴⁸ Susan Sontag, 'Note' in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, p. xxxvii. Previously, the Collège de France lecture had appeared, in Howard's translation, in *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 3-16, and in the *Oxford Literary Review* 4;1 (Autumn 1979), pp. 31-44.

⁴⁹ Sontag, 'Note', p. xxxviii.

⁵⁰ Andrews, 'Code Words', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 54-6.

more significant essays to ‘appear’ in the eighties were only being translated from previously collected French volumes, *The Responsibility of Forms* and *The Rustle of Language*, so as not ‘to distort [the] structure’ of the French volumes on which they are based.⁵¹ This last volume appeared in a translation by Richard Howard in 1986 and repeated ‘To Write: an Intransitive Verb?’ as well as various essays from Heath and/or Sontag’s collections, including ‘The Death of the Author’ and ‘Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers’, the only one to appear in all three. ‘To Write’, coming out of Baltimore in 1966, was an early representative piece of work for many English-language readers, but in other cases those preparing introductions to this new work added their own inflections. Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe, when they edited their 1971 anthology of (soon to be post-)structuralism *Signs of the Times*, included a landmark interview with Barthes in which Barthes and Heath try to negotiate the possibilities of a ‘scientific poetics’.⁵² Here, Heath brings *S/Z* to the fore, to which Barthes responds that he is not the only one trying to ‘crush’ together writing and reading: ‘this is a theme now circulating throughout the avant-garde’.⁵³

Some of the translations by both Heath and Howard have become commonplace in Anglophone scholarship, but strong concepts often group around untranslated or untranslatable French words. For instance, it is common now to see the word *écriture* (writing) imported into English in literary-theoretical contexts,

⁵¹ Richard Howard, ‘Preface’ in Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. by Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1985), p. v; see also Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*. These books are translations of the posthumous essay collections *L’obvie et l’obtus* (Paris: Seuil, 1982) and *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), respectively.

⁵² Stephen Heath, ‘Interview: A Conversation with Roland Barthes’, in *Signs of the Times: Introductory Readings in Textual Semiotics*, ed. by Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe, and Christopher Prendergast (Cambridge: privately printed, 1971) pp. 41-51.

⁵³ Heath, ‘Conversation with Barthes’, p. 141.

most commonly in discussing the work of Derrida, or the concept of *écriture féminine* as espoused by Hélène Cixous and others. Even in French it requires some clarification – which is why Derrida speaks in *Of Grammatology* of *archi-écriture* towards his concept of the ‘trace’ – but because English lacks a noun for the concept that is not also a form of the verb rather than being merely derived from it.⁵⁴ Most translators of Barthes give ‘writing’ without comment, but early commentators, like Forrest-Thomson, often keep the original. Susan Sontag addresses the problem in her 1968 preface to the English translation of *Writing Degree Zero* (‘Barthes’ meaning relies on a special inflection in the French word’) and comments dryly that ‘[o]nce we had the word “scripture”, but that’s no longer available’. She opts in the end for the somewhat awkward phrasing ‘personal utterance’ as expressive of the ‘ensemble of features of a literary work’ (‘tone, ethos, [...] naturalness of expression’) which add up, not to the ‘objects’ of language or style, but to a ‘function’.⁵⁵

As with the contentious use of ‘bliss’ for ‘*jouissance*’ in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Sontag finds *écriture* both untranslatable and central to understanding the text.⁵⁶ Forrest-Thomson, too, tackles *écriture* early on, albeit in an unpublished essay, her ‘After Intelligibility’ circa 1971. Forrest-Thomson sees it as ‘the class on which the typology of literary texts is founded, the mark of difference between

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 56-60, *et passim*. Spivak makes particular mention of this term, which she translates throughout as ‘arche-writing’, in her ‘Translator’s Preface’, pp. xv, lxxii.

⁵⁵ Sontag, ‘Preface’ in Barthes, *WDZ*, p. xvii.

⁵⁶ Armine Kotin Mortimer’s *The Gentlest Law* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989) is a commentary on Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* which throughout argues that ‘bliss’ is inadequate and prefers the notion of ‘rapture’. Mortimer, pp. 24-9. However, recent new translations have continued to use ‘bliss’; see Barthes, ‘Supplement’, in *A Very Fine Gift and Other Writings on Theory*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull, 2015), 161-6 (p. 163 n. 1).

literature and other systems of signs'.⁵⁷ In her doctoral thesis, 'Poetry as Knowledge', she defines *écriture* slightly differently as the 'assimilation of criticism by creative literature, or [...] the amalgamation of the two' ('Poetry as Knowledge', p. 32). This is a narrower definition, and a rather narrower one than that adopted by other Barthes scholars of the day. This may be attributable to Forrest-Thomson's not having fully absorbed *S/Z* by the time of the thesis, but Sontag, writing before *S/Z* in 1968, allows a broader sense (and one with which Forrest-Thomson could likely have disagreed): *écriture* permits a view of literature 'innocent of the necessity of "judgment."' ⁵⁸ When, during the 1970s, Derrida became better-known in the English-speaking world, *écriture* climbed to new heights of importance as a critical idea and acquired a host of additional meanings and associations, such that today Forrest-Thomson's view of it seems limited. As this thesis progresses, we shall see just how Barthes' translation and critical reception shaped poets' understanding of him in the two decades following Forrest-Thomson's initial impressions.

⁵⁷ Forrest-Thomson, 'After Intelligibility: Poetic Sense and the Work of Roland Barthes', GCPP Forrest-Thomson 4/3/1, p. 7. (Hereafter 'AI'.)

⁵⁸ Sontag, 'Preface', p. xviii.

Barthes and the Poets

Whatever its shortcomings, Forrest-Thomson's sustained engagement with Barthes is one of the very first to exist with an English-language writer (particularly a poet), and it is that engagement that I shall analyse in Chapter 1.⁵⁹ That she is a poet, and that she works this engagement into poetic texts, was what first directed me to the importance of this small but crucial tradition in the self-theorising of poetry. The critical literature on Forrest-Thomson is slight. A monograph likening some of her approaches and strategies to language writing by Alison Mark appeared in 2001, and another linking her to other women poets' views of their task and role as a female Orpheus appeared the following year, although that book, Anne Mounic's *Les tribulations de Persephone*, remains untranslated from French. While a number of critical interventions that touch on Forrest-Thomson have been made by her fellow poet-theorists such as Charles Bernstein and Robert Sheppard, there remains much work to be done.⁶⁰

In large part, Forrest-Thomson is alone as a British poet in undertaking this detailed dialogue with Barthes in her poetry. That attempt takes place on a much larger scale in North American poetry, in particular with some (but by no means all) of the poets who became known as the 'language' writers, whose first grouping, under the sign of Barthes, I shall explore in Chapter 2. Mark attempts to link Forrest-Thomson to these writers, but there are significant differences in their praxis and in

⁵⁹ Although Barthes' major translator Richard Howard is a poet, and although his enduring translations clearly involved deep intellectual engagement, Howard does not signal in his poetry or poetics a major Barthesian current of thought. Therefore, I have passed over his poetry in this thesis.

⁶⁰ Bernstein, *Artifice of Absorption*, *Paper Air* 4;1 (1987), p. 8 (this work was published as special issue of *Paper Air* magazine), and Sheppard, 'Linguistically Wounded: The Poetical Scholarship of Veronica Forrest-Thomson' in Richard Margraf Turley (ed.), *The Writer in the Academy: Creative Interfrictions, Essays and Studies* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 133-55.

their conceptions of poetry; more than this, however, the problem is that Forrest-Thomson did not know them and her work could not speak to theirs. Characterising these writers as a ‘school’ or movement is problematic: it can be useful in understanding history and readership, but they are often so diverse in their strategies that what groups them are the publishers they have in common, their personal relationships, and their fondness for one another’s work: in short, their sympathies. Virtually all would have been conversant with Russian formalism’s notion of *ostranenie* or estrangement, Marxist views on society (whether through theory or political activism), and at least some French theory, including poststructuralism and feminism. Their attitudes to these varied widely, but they knew and responded to them, and that response developed from these overlapping bases. In addition, their esteem for earlier modernists such as Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, and Gertrude Stein instilled in these poets the willingness and desire to cite and to theorise openly in their work.⁶¹ Despite the difficulty in connecting its ‘members’, it is possible to say that certain broad critical consensuses have emerged around language writing. Some are disapproving, such as the belief that it is elitist and confined to the sphere of academic discourse.⁶² It is also sometimes placed in contrast to the New Narrative

⁶¹ Much has been written about these links which assumes the influences they have in common rather than examining them. However, some careful scholarship exploring those influences has been done: for Pound, see Christopher Beach, *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 237-53; for Zukofsky, see Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 160-2; for Stein, see Peter Nicholls, ‘Difference Spreading: From Gertrude Stein to Language Poetry’ in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed. by Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 116-27, Astrid Lorange, *How Reading Is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), pp. 11-4, and, for Stein and Hejinian, see Deborah M. Mix, ‘A Vocabulary of Thinking’: *Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women’s Experimental Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), pp. 97-124.

⁶² This began with the San Francisco ‘poetry wars’ in the 1970s, chronicled by the language writers themselves throughout their collective autobiography project *The Grand Piano*, and continues into the present; see Steve Lavoie and Pat Nolan (eds.), *Life of Crime: Documents in the Guerrilla War Against Language Poetry* (Berkeley: Poltroon Press, 2010).

writing movement, which includes such writers as Robert Glück and Bruce Boone. New Narrative's critique of language writing's political praxis included a belief that theory that questioned authorship harmed writing's political usefulness for liberating the marginalised voices of women and ethnic and sexual minorities.

As I discuss in Chapter 3, 'Barthes in Journals', the influence of Barthes both contributed to these problems and worked against them, the attention to nuance and the body which becomes prominent in his late work having the potential to effect a 'return' to the possibility of an individual subject. Although in some ways language writing parted from the subject, its practitioners seem to have found it necessary to experiment with these theoretical positions in order to redefine subjectivity. Jed Rasula asserts that Barthes and Foucault 'had a tremendously fertilizing impact for certain communities of American poets as they were translated' and that 'figures like Derrida were being discussed at the Ethnopoetics conference [...] in 1975 well in advance of academic assimilation'.⁶³ 'Well in advance' is an exaggeration; Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* had appeared in translation from Northwestern University Press in 1973 and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's important and influential translation of *Of Grammatology* was to appear in 1976, so 'assimilation' was already underway. However, Culler admits in the foreword to the 2002 edition of *Structuralist Poetics* that he knew less than he should have about Derrida in the mid-seventies, because he was 'much less celebrated than Barthes' at the time.⁶⁴ In any case, the 'fertilizing' of

⁶³ Rasula, *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. xii.

⁶⁴ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. xi. Culler more than redresses this in *On Deconstruction*, the 'sequel' to structuralist poetics, in which Barthes is largely considered to have been dealt with. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 7, 35. Catherine Belsey notes a similar early prominence of Barthes in the foreword to the revised edition of her *Critical Practice*. *S/Z* and the writings of Louis Althusser were the strongest influence on her original 1980 text, but Derrida and Foucault, among others, were in the following

which Rasula speaks did not cease in 1975, and interest in these theorists continued (and even intensified) after ‘language writing’ came into being.

Outside these movements, there have been a few isolated engagements with Barthes, but few are particularly sustained or critical. John Ash’s poem ‘Nymphéas’, originally published in 1981’s *The Bed*, is subtitled ‘for Roland Barthes’ and makes a number of oblique references to his work: ‘fake mythologies / milky’ and the ‘babble of civilised voices’ link to the same Barthesian topoi Forrest-Thomson favours: ‘Wine and Milk’ and the opening lines of Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, respectively.⁶⁵ Likewise, John Tranter’s ‘Roland Barthes at the Poets Ball’ expresses the feeling of the myth at the party: ‘You are painfully conscious of your discourse / reified into sudden vomit’.⁶⁶ There are doubtless many other poems with references like these; however, with these small samples of material it is harder to situate Ash or Tranter in a specific tradition of readings of Barthes. In Chapter 4, my final chapter, I will thematise some of the most sophisticated and complex of these ‘outside’ engagements, bringing together three writers who use Barthes as a resource for thinking about love poetry. I begin by suggesting a poetic methodology for applying theory to the emotional life, drawn from the experimental novels of Chris Kraus, and examine how Barthes is used in this way in the poetic classicism of Anne Carson, the suburban drama played out with an angel by English novelist Deborah Levy, and the poem-cycles of Icelandic Canadian poet Kristjana Gunnars. As with the Forrest-

decades to attain a much greater prominence in Anglophone theory. Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi-xii.

⁶⁵ Ash, *The Branching Stairs* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), p. 39. The poem’s title is shared with the original French title for Claude Monet’s famous ‘Water Lilies’ series. For Forrest-Thomson’s usage of Barthes in her poems, see the next chapter of this thesis.

⁶⁶ John E. Tranter, *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982), p. 152. The omission of an apostrophe from the poem’s title is Tranter’s.

Thomson and language writing chapters, I begin with direct references to Barthes and follow their resonances throughout the texts. I allow the experience of working from a poetics whose connections are already laid out in a scholarship begun by the poets themselves to inform the forging of a larger theory of poets' readership. This is my model for how we ought to read a pattern picked out in a constellation of texts even when we are not furnished with the luxury of a precedent in poet-initiated poetics.

Reading Proust's aphorism, we might think that, if we are trying to be 'delicate' in our reading practices, then theories should be as unknown to the reader of the text as the price to the recipient of a gift. But, as Barthes argues in 'The Death of the Author', and as such a wide range of poets set out enthusiastically to prove, texts are coproduced by their authors and readers, and our understanding is, if anything, better served by understanding what contributed to an innovation, its 'cost'. Although many readings of that notorious essay over the last fifty years have seen it, disapprovingly or not, as an injunction to ignore texts' makers and making, in fact it urges the opposite, in the very prosecution of its radical argument. 'In the multiplicity of writing', writes Barthes, 'everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*' (*IMT*, p. 147; emphasis in the original). What follows is not a decipherment, but a disentangling of Barthes' thread from two decades of poetic texts.

Chapter One: Barthes and Forrest-Thomson

Veronica Forrest-Thomson

Veronica Forrest-Thomson began her studies at Girton College, Cambridge in 1968. There, she was to study with poet-critics William Empson and J. H. Prynne, to write the poems of *Language-Games* (which in 1971 won her the Leeds Poetry Prize and a small but influential following), and to read and write perceptively on a diverse range of figures in the study of literature and language, from John Ashbery to Ludwig Wittgenstein. In her work, poetic and critical, she never accepts these writers without question and argument, especially in the case of Roland Barthes.

If Forrest-Thomson and Barthes ever met, her papers do not record it. Certainly he visited Cambridge in the 1960s, but there is no evidence she saw him speak. She also seems to have not to have read the translations of his early work from Jonathan Cape discussed in the introduction to this thesis, which is odd given that they were reviewed in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* and especially how well-versed she was in his French essays, often quoting them from obscure journal publications. Then again, Forrest-Thomson's French was good, and she was likely able to read and write it well since her time as a pupil at St Bride's School in Helensburgh.¹ She was brought up in Glasgow and one of her earliest personal encounters with poets was with fellow Glaswegian Edwin Morgan while she was still

¹ Alison Mark, *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), p. x.

a teenager. They kept in touch; it was he and Peter Porter who as judges rescued her work from the ‘slush pile’ of the New Poets Award, unsatisfied with the shortlist they had been given,² and after her death he dedicated the moving sequence ‘Unfinished Poems’ to her, collected in his 1977 book *The New Divan*.³ Her work often resembles his in its formal eclecticism, ranging from the ostentatiously experimental (her ‘Variations on Sappho’, his ‘Lévi-Strauss at the Lie-Detector’ and ‘Wittgenstein on Egdon Heath’) to traditional metrical forms (her ‘Sonnet’ and ‘Canzon’, his ‘Glasgow Sonnets’ and *Sonnets from Scotland*). Morgan, though an enthusiastic participant in the British Poetry Revival, became less associated with the avant-garde in the mind of the reading public as time went on, with his adoption into the mainstream being confirmed with his appointment as the first Scots Makar in 2004. However, he kept abreast of developments in experimental writing and his 1990 Kenneth Allott lecture on ‘Language, Poetry, and Language Poetry’ constituted one of the first coherent introductions to that particular avant-garde movement in Britain. Forrest-Thomson, on the other hand, was associated both before and especially after her death with the loose avant-garde group known as ‘Cambridge poetry’. Its most notable figure was J. H. Prynne, whose work Forrest-Thomson became one of the first to write on academically in *Poetic Artifice*.

Forrest-Thomson had begun her poetry career before arriving in Cambridge, a book of poems (*Identikit*) having been published in 1967. She read with Edward Dorn and Lee Harwood at the Exeter Arts Festival that year, and also published a

² James Sutherland-Smith, Letter in *PN Review* 188 (Jul-Aug 2009) <http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=4831> [accessed 19th March 2014].

³ Edwin Morgan, *Collected Poems 1949-1987* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), pp. 373-80.

pamphlet with another poet, her fiancé at the time, Cavan McCarthy.⁴ However, the most consistently studied, ‘mature’ stage of Forrest-Thomson’s work (although Sara Crangle and Neil Pattison have written persuasively arguing for the interest and value of *Identikit*)⁵ is that reached during her time in Cambridge, and it became heavily inflected by her reading of Pound and Eliot as well as by her theoretical investigations, leading it to take on its ‘difficult’, ‘academic’ character. ‘You must come to terms with T. S. Eliot / If you are doing the twentieth century’, says her ‘Conversation on a Benin Head’, and his early criticism’s treatment of ‘intellectual systems in poetry’ is foundational to her doctoral thesis, ‘Poetry as Knowledge’.⁶ Likewise, her poem ‘In Memoriam Ezra Pound’, which like the *Cantos* is a blend of voices, contains various tributes to that poet (‘This / spectred isle, defying death with gesture’).⁷ Moreover, her ‘Canzon’ (p. 150-1) is based on his translation of Arnaut Daniel, and her theory was informed by Pound too, as demonstrated by her unfinished book on him.⁸ She has been classified as a ‘late modernist’, a poet who, although writing and being read in a ‘postmodern’ context, ‘has stayed in touch with

⁴ Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, pp. x-xi.

⁵ Sara Crangle, ‘Curved Lines: Forrest-Thomson, Klee, and the Smile’, *Kenyon Review Online* <<https://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/index-2/selections/curved-lines-forrest-thomson-klee-the-smile/>> [accessed 18 November 2013]; Neil Pattison, “‘The Mirrors Are Tired of Our Faces’”: Changing the Subject in the Poetry of Veronica Forrest-Thomson’, *Kenyon Review Online* <<https://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/index-2/selections/the-mirrors-are-tired-of-our-faces-changing-the-subject-in-the-poetry-of-veronica-forrest-thomson/>> [accessed 18 November 2013].

⁶ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Poetry as Knowledge: The Use of Science by Twentieth-Century Poets’ (unpublished PhD, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1971), pp. 58-65 *et passim*.

⁷ Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008), pp. 132-3. (Hereafter *CP*.)

⁸ Forrest-Thomson, ‘His True Penelope was Flaubert: Ezra Pound and Nineteenth-Century Poetry’, an excerpt from a condensed version of that project edited by Gareth Farmer and Michael Hansen, was published in *Chicago Review* 56;2/3 (Autumn 2011), pp. 10-35.

the agendas of modernism'.⁹ Also, much criticism has endeavoured to place her in the context of women's writing: Mounic sees her, along with Kathleen Raine and Stevie Smith, as a poetic Persephone;¹⁰ Ian Gregson compares her to Denise Riley;¹¹ and Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle consolidate and expand upon these identifications, adding Forrest-Thomson's posthumous champion, Wendy Mulford, to Smith, Riley, and others.¹² Forrest-Thomson seldom positions herself as a 'woman writer'; she refers to very few women writers and scholars in her criticism. However, her poetry often demonstrates a concern with continuity in women's writing experience, from 'Variations on Sappho' ('a(ll) mi(xed) / te(ll) tongue (me)', *CP*, p. 69) to her long poem 'Cordelia', which explores the role of the woman writer as silent (or silenced) daughter.

Reflecting on the nature of writing experience, whether or not she foregrounds the fact that she is a woman, is always a part of Forrest-Thomson's broader theoretical and philosophical concern with writing and language. The

⁹ Rod Mengham, quoted in Drew Milne, 'Neo-Modernism and Avant-Garde Orientations' in Nigel Alderman and Charles Daniel Blanton, *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 161. Those agendas are diffuse, but include formal innovations ('Modernist poems look different'), and '[m]any poems can be read both as critical interventions and as forward-looking renewals, renewals that reorient perceptions of what remains contemporary'. Mengham, 'Neo-Modernism', p. 162.

¹⁰ The poet/Persephone 'gives rhythm to the human split between earthly life and spiritual aspirations, the inevitability of death and the human spirit'. Mounic, *Les tribulations de persephone* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), p. 11. All quotations from Mounic's text in this thesis appear in my translations from the French.

¹¹ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 192-208. For Gregson, Forrest-Thomson and Riley are alone among the Cambridge poets in having taken on 'recent literary theory and the philosophical and linguistic thinking that lies behind it' and managed to make them 'exciting and moving' (p. 195). Rather than 'Cambridge', he uses the slightly more inclusive term 'Various Art poets' after the 1987 anthology *A Various Art* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987) in which they were collected.

¹² Dowson and Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 153-168.

exploration of this in her first full-length collection *Language-Games* (1971) is dominated by the figure of Wittgenstein, but the posthumously published *On the Periphery* (1976) contains a wider range of intellectual personalities. Suzanne Raitt suggests that Forrest-Thomson turns to other thinkers in order to ‘supply what seemed to be missing in the thought of her favourite philosopher, Wittgenstein’ – Lacan is Raitt’s example.¹³ A far more prominent figure is that of Barthes, whose name appears at the foot of one of the poems, ‘The Aquarium’, and words from his writings in the text of several others – ‘L’effet du réel’, named after his 1968 essay, and ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’ (*CP*, pp. 110, 114). Yet when we read for Barthes in Forrest-Thomson, he is subtly present in many ways, and in this chapter I will explore the various traces of his work that appear throughout her poems. His influence is easiest to track when it comes to her academic work, as he is cited in various texts – her PhD thesis and a number of her published papers – but he is strangely absent from the work many consider her magnum opus, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*.¹⁴ It is on the strength of *Poetic Artifice* that Robert Sheppard and Scott Thurston say that with Forrest-Thomson’s death, British avant-garde poetry in the late twentieth century was ‘robbed [...] of its most accomplished poetic theorist’.¹⁵ *Poetic Artifice* lays out a system of how to read poetry, modern and contemporary poetry in particular, which aims to minimise misreading by promoting what Forrest-Thomson calls ‘good naturalisation’. This

¹³ Raitt, ‘Love in the Time of Lacan: The Poetry of Veronica Forrest-Thomson’, *Fragmente* 8 (1998), pp. 16-26.

¹⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978). (Hereafter *PA*).

¹⁵ Sheppard and Thurston, ‘Editorial’, *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 1;1 (2009), 3-9 (p. 6). Critical treatment of her work has been limited to articles which often treat quite limited themes. The largest collections of these have been those assembled by *Jacket* in 2002 and the *Kenyon Review Online* in 2009.

appears to move away from French (post-)structuralist theorists like Barthes, but they still leave their mark on Forrest-Thomson.

‘S/Z’

The most direct reference to Barthes anywhere in Forrest-Thomson’s poems is ‘S/Z’. This poem, sharing a title with a Barthes text, was first shared with the public at a reading at the Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1975. The *Cambridge Evening News* described Forrest-Thomson as ‘a small, nervous-looking woman, reading from a large book held close to her face’,¹⁶ but on the recordings of the event held in the British Library Sound Archive, the reading is confident, with the ends of some lines in the lighter poems made inaudible by laughter (her own and her audience’s). ‘S/Z’ is the main exception, read less buoyantly than the others; for her, its subject-matter, the purpose of literature, is entirely serious. When it was published in 1977 in the magazine *Meantime*, the poem lacked a title, but in the 1990 *Collected Poems and Translations* it got the one Forrest-Thomson gave it at the reading, ‘S/Z’, which, she told the festival audience ‘is the title of a very well-known book by Roland Barthes’.¹⁷ Doubtless, ‘well-known’ as it was, and the English translation having been published the previous year, many of her audience would have known this, but she mentions it anyway – partly, perhaps, to reproach members of her Cambridge audience who refused to engage with the new French theory. She certainly does not

¹⁶ John Kelleher, ‘Poetry festival off to promising start’, *Cambridge Evening News* (Cambridge, 18 April 1975), p. 1. She probably held the book so close to her face not out of any nervousness but because of the short-sightedness (and refusal to wear glasses) remarked on in posthumous reflections by J. H. Prynne, F. Q. Lawson, and others. Prynne, ‘Veronica Forrest-Thomson: A Personal Memoir’, *Jacket* 20 (December 2002) <http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pryn-vft.html> [accessed 20th November 2014]; Lawson, ‘The Outrageous Friend’, *ADAM International Review* 391-3 (1975), pp. 52-3.

¹⁷ Forrest-Thomson, Cambridge Poetry Festival reading, 1975 (British Library Sound Archive, ref. T6013WR).

need to tell us who wrote it, as she goes on to mention Barthes by name; this is the only place she does this in a poem outside of footnotes, whereas Lévi-Strauss, Godard, Wittgenstein, and even Prynne are all name-checked in earlier texts. It is notable, however, that the opening of the poem, contrary to what is taken for granted in some analyses, does not quote Barthes *per se*; Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson mischaracterise ‘S/Z’ when they say that it ‘begins by quoting Barthes on *Sarrasine* and turns into a meditation on writing’.¹⁸ In fact, it only ever quotes *Sarrasine* and then Barthes’ reduction of Balzac’s ‘rule’; it does not play off a piece of Barthesian wisdom as some of her poems do with Wittgenstein.

Within the poem’s text, Alison Mark finds a biographical statement that life has no meaning outside literature: ‘Just hope the house doesn’t fall down / for I have no insurance’ (*CP*, p. 161). Mark reads this not just in its direct reference to the house Forrest-Thomson bought in Birmingham before she died, but as a statement of Forrest-Thomson’s feeling about ‘the house of literature’.¹⁹ Biography aside, grammar tells us that the speaker is a woman, and the poem explores her place in that ‘house’. The poem opens with the first sentence of *Sarrasine*, and then Barthes’ distillation of it, with both repeated in Forrest-Thomson’s English translation. Line-breaks are inserted in place of Balzac’s commas, which leads to short lines, and this becomes the form of the rest of the poem. It also closes with a similar French passage in which ‘un homme frivole [...] plongé dans...’ is changed to ‘une femme frivole [...] plongée dans...’: a frivolous *woman* sunk in one of those profound daydreams. The French brackets the poem, so that the final stanza carries out that

¹⁸ Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson, *Active Reading: Transformative Writing in Literary Studies* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 68.

¹⁹ Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 135 n. 13.

grammatical gender transformation which Mark sees as ‘a move by which the woman poet appropriates the male novelist’s words’ (p. 59), but it is also the woman poet addressing the male *critic*.

As such, the poem follows the initial quotation and translation with what is phrased as a comment on Barthes’ shortening of the Balzac:

This is one of the rules Balzac uses

and Barthes notices.

There are many other rules,

but I don’t want to mention them. (*CP*, p. 161)

We could read ‘rules’ as the five codes, categories of which all literary signifiers in *Sarrasine* are said in *S/Z* to be terms. The reading that fits better with Barthes’ text, however, is that the ‘rules’ are instances of one particular code, the ‘cultural’ or ‘reference’ code: ‘statements made in a collective and anonymous voice originating in traditional human experience’, as Richard Miller translates Barthes on *la sapience humaine*.²⁰ The creation of false *sapience* is what Barthes exposes in *Mythologies*, and the refusal of poetic language to render *sapience* is one of the qualities that makes it so frustrating and appealing, hence the importing of Barthes into the poem. His prose is repurposed into a poetic questioning of the very *sapience* it risks by its

²⁰ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 18. A more usual translation for *sapience* might be ‘wisdom’, but the English ‘sapience’ would work well here, as it carries a connotation of sophistry and pretension, and Barthes and Forrest-Thomson are both critiquing the application of such ‘insights’. ‘sapience, n.2’, *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/170820>> [accessed 15th July 2014].

authoritative, theoretical, commentary context. In noticing the ‘rule’ and reducing it to a two-phrase motto, Barthes removes grammatical indicators of gender, but at the end of ‘S/Z’ Forrest-Thomson reasserts her own presence with *femme* and *-ée*, determined to undo the work of *sapience* done by the reference code. Yet she would not be rewriting Balzac were he not the focus of ‘a very well-known book by Roland Barthes’; her text uses Barthes’ framing of a social inequality as a semiological expression as a starting point from which to rewrite it. The narrator’s ‘J’étais plongé’, I (masculine) *was* plunged, becoming ‘Je suis plongée’, I (feminine) *am* plunged, the tense also changing, so that the woman speaker is not inserting herself into history but adapting the moment to her own situation. She accesses the position of the fringe observer of society from which the frame-story of *Sarrasine* is written, using it to describe it the moment of poetic composition or recital in which a poem’s speaker is said to speak. The poem leads us toward an understanding that since poems do not give *sapience* – they ‘teach one that much: / to expect no answer’ (*CP*, p. 161) – their speech is in one sense freed from the need to do so but in another constrained, like that observer, knowing that they are locked out of a collective (if illusory) certainty.

The other half of the poem’s own original aphorism or rule tells us that although poems give no answer, the reader should ‘keep on asking questions; / that is important’ (*CP*, p. 161). This describes the way the twentieth-century poetry Forrest-Thomson theorises in *Poetic Artifice* presents its readers with a ‘writerly’ complexity, requiring the reader to engage in ‘questioning’ which is part of the composition of the poem. This is the most important idea taken from Forrest-Thomson’s first reading of Barthes in the late 1960s, when she finds it in the 1968

essay ‘Linguistics and Literature’.²¹ Her knowledge of him develops to the point that she writes an essay, by 1971, explicating Barthes’ ideas with reference to various obscure essays from French journals, many of which were not to be translated until over a decade later.²² The poems she was writing at this time, however, do not show the marked interest in Barthes, semiology, and the writers of *Tel Quel* that were to characterise her second full-length collection, *On the Periphery. Language-Games*, published in 1971, bears many intellectual influences, but chief among them is Ludwig Wittgenstein. As the title suggests, Forrest-Thomson is most interested in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, and while this has had little contact with structuralism, they share a relevance for her poetics.

Language-Games

In the late 1960s, that literary criticism might make use of the distinction between signified and signifier remained a relatively new idea; indeed, Forrest-Thomson often leaves these terms untranslated from the French *signifié* and *signifiant*. The poem ‘Acrostic’ contains various quotations from Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*, largely variations on remarks about a hypothetical child who ‘could at once be taught the doubtfulness of the existence of all things’.²³ There is also a quotation from the

²¹ Barthes, ‘Barthes, ‘Linguistics and Literature’, in *A Very Fine Gift’ and Other Writings on Theory*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull, 2015), pp. 71-84. To be precise, it was not yet the writerly/writable by this point, but the *illisible*, the unreadable, which later developed into the writerly.

²² This essay, ‘After Intelligibility’, is unpublished, but can be found in the archives of Girton College, and will be discussed in detail below. Her signing it ‘Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Girton College, Cambridge’ attests the date; she submitted her doctoral dissertation in November 1971 and took up a post as a Research Fellow at Leicester University in 1972. Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. xi.

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 73, §411.

Oxford English Dictionary, unattributed in the poem, which is the oldest citation of the word ‘symbol’, from *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, a text from between 1450 and 1530 describing the devotional practice of a group of Brigittine nuns: ‘Thys crede is called a Simbolum / that is to say a gatherynge of morselles.’²⁴ The choice of ‘symbol’ over ‘sign’ is not one that sits well with Barthes, who in section II.1 of *Elements of Semiology* argues that ‘symbol’ is a piece of inexact terminology and has for various thinkers an ‘existential’ or ‘analogical’ quality.²⁵ What it can be taken to mean in ‘Acrostic’, however, is simply a signifying operation in literature made up of smaller components, and the notion that ‘[c]hoice of words is the best paradigm / for other choices’ implies great faith in the structuralist project. Signifier and signified – ‘the name’ and ‘its bearer’ in ‘Acrostic’ – and the ‘barre’ or divider/link between them may have relevance to the projects of literature and life, and this ‘barre-work’, as she calls it in ‘Le Signe (Cygne)’ (see below), is a fit subject for a poetic intervention. Despite the title, the poem is no acrostic – the first letters of the lines do not form a word or message – so Anne Mounic suggests that we return to the etymology, the placing together of the two terms *stich*, a line of verse, and the prefix *acro-*, which in this sense means ‘top’, that is, the beginning of a line. Mounic, however, glosses *acros* as ‘extreme, acute’, suggesting we see it as qualifying the ‘disillusionment’ with signification and language evinced in the poem (‘the meaning of a name / is not its bearer’).²⁶ Mounic writes that Forrest-Thomson enjoys these sites (‘I like things this way’) despite this disillusionment, but ‘disillusionment’ is the wrong term. Forrest-Thomson still believes in language’s capacity for rational

²⁴ ‘symbol, n.1’, *OED Online* < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196197> > [accessed 11th January 2016].

²⁵ Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 36.

²⁶ Mounic, *Les tribulations de Persephone*, p. 181.

communication in other spheres, in science and criticism, and does not call her own critical terms into question. It is rather a realisation of the qualities of poetry and its incompatibility with signification and representation. Whether this bears any relationship to Barthes' own 'putting in doubt, radically, the time-honoured aesthetic of "representation"',²⁷ or was about to lead to it, it is clear that at the time of this book's composition, she had already come to believe that '[w]hoever wants to write with exactitude must [...] proceed to the frontiers of language'.²⁸ Forrest-Thomson's theoretical interests lead her to take up an avant-garde project.

One of the most prominent formal devices in *Language-Games*, and an avant-garde staple of the period, is the use of collage. The source of the poems in overheard speech is explicitly stated in the 'Prefatory Note' to Forrest-Thomson's 1970 pamphlet *twelve academic questions (sic)*.²⁹ The note makes reference to 'the many friends and acquaintances whose words have been stolen for inclusion in these poems', and individual poems often signpost their appropriations, as in 'Acrostic'. Another frequent source is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and Forrest-Thomson likes to use the earliest citation she can find and retain the original spelling, bringing out the patchwork nature of all writing. The poem 'Antiquities' ends:

Glue, paper,

scissors, and the library together

paste a mock-up of an individual

²⁷ Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141-8.

²⁸ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. xv.

²⁹ Forrest-Thomson, *twelve academic questions* (Cambridge: privately printed, 1970).

history. The art of English Poesie?

“Such synne is called yronye.” (*CP*, p. 86)

Given the importance to her theory of poetry-specific, ‘non-meaningful levels’ of language,³⁰ lineation and enjambment are often loaded with significance. For instance, the line-break that splits up ‘individual’ and ‘history’ takes away some of the power of ‘history’, which ‘individual’ merely modifies in prose grammar, and allows ‘individual’ to have its own space as, in one temporary reading, a noun. It is the history of the (human) individual, the subject, whose subjectivity is threatened by the collage or ‘mock-up’ nature of writing and literary lineage. The question-mark that ends the penultimate line is itself an ironic gesture linking ‘synne’ and ‘yronye’ to ‘English Poesie’, but not to ‘art’, which does not carry an anachronistic spelling or capital letter. ‘Poesie’ may not be all we thought it was, but it is still ‘art’. This poem questions the relationship between texts and tradition or history (‘antiquity’) in a way

³⁰ Forrest-Thomson outlines a system in *Poetic Artifice* (in particular in her ‘Preface’, pp. ix-xiv) in which elements of a poem should be apprehended to promote the best reading or ‘naturalisation’, beginning with the conventional level: ‘rhyme, rhythm, and stanzaic metre are only the most obvious’ operations on this level (*CP*, p. 167), and lineation and alliteration are also important for Forrest-Thomson; at points she also appears to consider that the themes suggested by the form, e.g. love in a sonnet, belong to this level as well. This is followed by the phonological/visual level, the poem as it is heard or seen (but within the convention of poetry). Then there is the syntactic level, as the way words are arranged in poems can be better understood once we understand conventions like hyperbaton, enjambment, and the way they adapt to metrical and rhyme schemes. Next comes the semantic or ‘meaningful’ level of the poem’s language, perhaps the most important here because Forrest-Thomson is always criticising others for addressing it too soon. Of course, the ‘lower’ levels also contribute to meaning, which Forrest-Thomson sometimes appears to forget even as she advocates for them, and in a 1975 panel discussion with Michel Couturier, ‘Unrealism and Death in Contemporary Poetry’ (British Library Sound Archive, T6023WR-7359W), she uses the slightly more helpful term ‘semi-meaningful’ for those coming before the semantic. This is followed by the ‘image-complex’, a set of ‘hypotheses about a level of coherence’ (*PA*, p. xiv) which determines what aspects from the lower levels are relevant and thus mediates a ‘thematic synthesis’ or general understanding of the poem. In the analysis below, I have not always followed Forrest-Thomson’s scheme to the letter when addressing her own poems, but I have borne it in mind.

that seems primed for the ideas of French structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers about intertextuality.

‘Drinks with a Mythologue’

An understanding of structuralist concepts is developed in *On the Periphery*; however, Forrest-Thomson finds many of these ideas difficult to work with, and she explores this in the poem ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’. Discussions of this poem have chiefly revolved around the play of sound and letters, the phonological/visual level defined by *Poetic Artifice*.³¹ However, Alison Mark also explores the word ‘mythologue’ as the key term in that title, which

tells a tale of drinking with someone who tells
stories. The stories we call myths put a particular
spin on things [...] ‘I’m being told stories’ then
easily becomes ‘I’m being told lies’.³²

That myths ‘put a particular spin on things’ is a mild way of saying what we saw resisted in ‘S/Z’. Myths very often speak out of *la sapience humaine*, the ‘knowledge’ of the collective voice, which those who wish to go unchallenged dip into as a resource. The poem seems to indicate that in the book *S/Z*, however, Barthes

³¹ The variations could be unpacked at extreme length, and a comprehensive analysis of this ‘game of echoes’ is supplied by Mounic, *Tribulations*, pp. 194-6.

³² Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 55.

merely identifies ('notices') that Balzac 'uses' this resource. Mark goes on to insist that 'it would be a mistake to identify Barthes as the interlocutor of the poem: it is the very personal which is the political'.³³ This elliptical comment appears to suggest that the poem's basis is biographical, based on some specific argument ('very personal') Forrest-Thomson had, which we cannot now retrieve. However, I contend that the term 'mythologue' has more nuance than Mark allows. The term can be compared to 'semiologist', which as Gary Genosko suggests hides two critical personalities in a writer such as Barthes; he may be

a *semiologue* who 'reconstitutes laboriously, "scientifically" [...] the codes which rule over communication'; on the other hand, a *sémioclaste* 'criticizes and denounces the ideologies insinuating themselves into codes'.³⁴

'Mythologist' can likewise be broken into *mythologue* and *mythoclaste*, and that opposition turns the mythologue into a kind of passive collaborator with myth because he does not quite 'denounce' the ideologies present in them. (Compare *ideologue*, which also carries derogatory connotations.) Barthes himself writes in 'Myth Today', the essay which closes his *Mythologies*, that the mythologue's 'task always remains ambiguous, hampered by its ethical origin [...] hence the self-

³³ Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 55.

³⁴ Genosko, *Undisciplined Theory* (London: SAGE, 1998), p. 180; the definitions are taken and translated from a piece by Jules Gritti in *Collectif art sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique*, ed. by Hervé Fischer et al. (Paris: Musée Galleria, 1975).

conscious character of his function'.³⁵ What is 'hampered' for Barthes is the task of the mythologist, and the 'ethical origin' is the motivating factor to 'be truthful' and improve society, but this is always theoretical. This leaves plenty of scope for the reader to be disappointed: having come to a writer expecting myths to be broken open and destroyed, we may feel they are in fact *sustained* by being discussed and examined. This is the conflict in 'Drinks with a Mythologue'.

The most prominent formal feature of the poem is in the contrast of two stanzas: the first a series of variations on a phrase from Barthes' essay 'Myth Today', and the second, in inverted commas, a somewhat patronising comment to the speaker of the first stanza, who is addressed as 'my dear'. Forrest-Thomson, whom William Empson called 'a *silly* girl',³⁶ was likely patronised in a male-dominated academic world, and that the speaker is autobiographical is supported by the prominence of plays on the letter 'v' in the first stanza,³⁷ but whether as Mark suggests the poem relates a real conversation is unverifiable by design. The very point of the poem, as we shall see in many of the poems of *On the Periphery*, is to demonstrate the possibility, desirability, and necessity of reading in a multiple way. As such I offer as one possible reading this poem considered as dramatising an imagined dialogue with Barthes. Consider the second and final stanza:

"If you smash that glass, my dear, you know

³⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 156.

³⁶ Regarded as an 'affectionate' appellation by G. S. Fraser, 'Veronica: A Tribute', *ADAM International Review* 391-3 (1975), 43-5 (p. 44); emphasis in the original.

³⁷ Forrest-Thomson inserts her initial in other poems, such as *Language-Games* 'Three Proper': 'V had better mind her p's / and q's' (*CP*, p. 91); see Mark, p. 53.

you'll simply have to sweep it up again afterwards.

And anyway it's a waste of good wine!"

Although it is the more substantial and theoretical essay 'Myth Today' which contains the model phrase, Mark aligns the poem with one of the earlier mythologies, 'Wine and Milk', linking wasted wine and spilt milk as nothing to cry over. 'Wine and Milk' discusses the appeal of the French national beverage for the intellectual: '[w]ine will deliver him from myths, will remove some of his intellectualism, will make him the equal of the proletariat'.³⁸ In England, where beer is the drink of the 'proletarian', this myth does not map, and wine is the after-seminar drink over which academic arguments are exchanged. This poem conjures up that world, where the world of ideas – the *mélange* of theoretical and philosophical concepts, like beauty and objective reality, of the first stanza – is juxtaposed with the injustices of quotidian existence, being patronised then pushed into a 'woman's' role ('sweep it up'). Moreover, these two sentences hinge on their relation, 'anyway' bracketing the anger the speaker of the second stanza detects in the speaker of the first, defraying it by changing the subject away from her threat of outburst in favour of a myth. This is an attempt to preserve a social form which the poem attempts to break open, the politeness of 'drinks', by exposing the speaker's urge to violence against her interlocutor. Visually, the 'slash' created by the spaces moving down the page ends at the break between stanzas, as if the mythologue, who begins to speak after the

³⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 58.

break, was its target, but has not been struck. It uses its momentum in the first, more poem-like stanza and fails to break into the speech of the second.

Mounic connects ‘S/Z’ and ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’ by means of this act of *brisure*,³⁹ reading a violence in both poems: in ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’, ‘the violence which comes up against the *parole* of the other, self-assured and ironical’, and in ‘S/Z’ Forrest-Thomson translates Balzac’s ‘tumultueuses’ (tumultuous) as ‘violent’, which for Mounic represents a break (albeit an *écart*, gap or lapse, rather than *brisure*) in meaning.⁴⁰ It is certainly another odd usage in this deceptively simple poem: the party that opens *Sarrasine* is not ‘violent’, only crowded, but both of these poems figure social situations as contests, sites of violence. This imagined conflict with Barthes co-exists with its suggestion of everyday sexism, supported by Mark’s comment that ‘it is the very personal which is the political’. Forrest-Thomson uncovers that third aspect of the ‘mythologue’ that is a myth-*user*, as Balzac is a code-user, who derives almost in the same breath women’s marginality from the same unquestioned *sapience* that supplies the ‘goodness’ of ‘good wine’, against which the poem then revolts.

The frustration and violence held within the poem’s language does not force a break with Barthes, but accepts at least part of his resolution of the problem. The poem’s original title was ‘Drinks with a Metalogue’,⁴¹ not a term used by Barthes but, given that the poem was always based on this line from ‘Myth Today’, still derived from him. In the passage from which the line is taken, Barthes writes that

³⁹ In using this word, Mounic draws on the senses used by Derrida, where *brisure* – break, but also joint or hinge – is what makes possible the act of articulation. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 65-73.

⁴⁰ Mounic, *Tribulations*, p. 197.

⁴¹ Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems and Translations* (London: Allardyce, Barnett, Publishers, 1990), p. 275.

‘the mythologist is condemned to metalanguage’, thus making him a ‘metalogue’.

The process of ‘metalogy’, study though metalanguage, ‘resolves the contradiction of alienated reality by an amputation, not a synthesis’, of which the sentence about wine’s objective goodness is given as an example. This lack of synthesis demands a choice:

either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or, conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize.⁴²

This is, on the surface, an easy decision for Forrest-Thomson, who regards ideology, at least as far as poetic theory goes, as less relevant a mediation of the external world than developments in linguistics (*PA*, p. 27). Poetry, here defined by Barthes as ‘the search for the inalienable meaning of things’,⁴³ is her subject, and where possible in her theoretical work she treats it as being at a remove from the external world, seeing this as poetry’s ‘strength and its defence’.⁴⁴ Maintaining such a remove is not always possible, nor even desirable. Barthes writes ‘that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings us back to it’,⁴⁵ by which he appears to intend that only once we understand the form of a system, rather than just a few forms that

⁴² Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 158.

⁴³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 159.

⁴⁴ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Preface’ to *On the Periphery* in *CP*, p. 167.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 112.

operate within it, are we equipped to understand how it works both semiologically and ideologically. His example is the ‘total criticism’ of saintliness practiced by Sartre in *Saint-Genet*, and a ‘total formalism’ like Forrest-Thomson’s attempts to clear the way with a full picture of what in a poetic text is accounted for by poetry’s formal activity. This is the part of Barthes’ resolution she accepts, but the extractions of external-world ‘content’, in which we must include any ideology a poetic text might contain, are of secondary importance to her, as we will see in the second half of this chapter with the poems she analyses in *Poetic Artifice*. When Forrest-Thomson ‘poetises’, either in writing a poem or criticism of one, it is thus based not on the assumption of an impermeable reality, for a poem might hold historical and ideological information, but on the primacy of, and preference for, formal concerns. I argued for an ideological (feminist) reading of ‘S/Z’ at the start of this chapter, but it was one that could not have been arrived at except by examining the poem’s form *as a poem*, and Forrest-Thomson’s beliefs about poetry, whether or not they are always true, factor into her use of form. Although the poem’s language suggests violence, this is only held at the level of form and vocabulary, and is not carried thematically complete to the level of ordinary-language comprehensibility. The struggles of form suspend ideology, albeit temporarily, and the story or tableau of the poem thus sits at the safe albeit uncomfortable remove of the mythologue in ‘Myth Today’.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 157.

‘Le Signe (Cygne)’

Similar violence is encountered in another poem, ‘Le Signe (Cygne)’, which also features the meta-/mythologue(s). Alison Mark writes in discussing this slippage that the move from metalogue to mythologue represents a move from structuralism to post-structuralism. However, Forrest-Thomson retained an interest in both movements even as this transformation was taking place. She describes Denis Roche as a ‘structuralist poet’ (*PA*, p. 127), a designation we would be unlikely to use today, but for Forrest-Thomson in the late 1960s and early 1970s ‘structuralism’ covered a wider range of practices, reflecting the attitude (observed but not held by her) that the structuralist project of the time could be expanded to include all areas of study.⁴⁷ The most prominent representative of structuralism and an important reference point for Barthes is Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is referenced in the poem ‘Le Signe (Cygne)’. So important is he that she uses him and anthropology, rather than Barthes and semiological literary and cultural criticism, as bywords for the structural view that is trying to call art towards itself in the poem’s central metaphor. The poem, from *On the Periphery*, begins:

Godard, the anthropological swan

floats on the Cam when day is done.

Lévi-Strauss stands on a bridge and calls:

⁴⁷ François Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. by Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 388. Forrest-Thomson is a few years behind the development of structuralism and its discontents as outlined by Dosse in Chapter 38, ‘Growing Pains’ (pp. 380-393).

Birds love freedom, they build themselves homes;

They often engage in human relations. (*CP*, p. 125)

Although the poem does not obey a particular regular meter throughout, it is closer to a metre (dactyls) than ‘free’ verse usually is.⁴⁸ This allows it to capitalise on an unusual resource for poetry, a six-syllable word, and makes the first line so suitable as a refrain: ‘Gódard the ánthropológical swán’. It and the second line are repeated in a reversed and slightly altered version at the end of the poem, resembling the echo of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘call’. That ‘call’ might encompass much of the text of the poem, making him the speaker, for although it lacks inverted commas, some parts are clearly spoken by him (‘Come, Godard, come, here, Godard, here’). The colon at the end of the third line suggests that the following two lines might be spoken by him too or are a paraphrase of what he says or why he says it. The choice of ‘Godard’ as the swan’s name is both phonologically motivated, because of the sound of the word’s resemblance to the honking call of the swan, and topically relevant. At the time of Forrest-Thomson’s first engagement with French thought, the noted film critic and filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard was hostile to structuralism, preferring a Sartrean, existentialist view of the subject rather than the structuralist view which held that ‘social meaning [was] simply a consequence of structures or systems’.⁴⁹ The poem itself, however, fails to make a judgement either for or against structuralism. If

⁴⁸ Forrest-Thomson subscribes to Eliot’s dictum that ‘no verse is free for the man [*sic*] who wants to do a good job’ (*PA*, pp. 70, 153), and many of her lines are informed by metrical considerations.

⁴⁹ Colin MacCabe, *Godard* (London: Macmillan, 2005), p. 205, and Richard Brody, *Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Macmillan, 2008), p. 190.

Godard stands for the artistic response to these debates, he too is not entirely convinced, as he still ‘floats’, uncertain, ‘when day is done’. Even in Forrest-Thomson’s slightly unpredictable Anglo-Scottish pronunciation, this fails to rhyme with ‘swan’, which could be an allusion to the famous off-rhyme of ‘stone’/‘swans’ in Yeats’ ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’.⁵⁰ The real rhyme with ‘swan’, and the truly significant one, is in line 9: ‘A red gowned don / floats by the swan’, underlined by the done/don resemblance, especially since this don is dead, with a ‘knife in the corpse’. The swan is paired, in terms of line-position and phonological resemblance, with the ‘done don’, gesturing to the idea that semiology and the new human sciences may spell the end of academia as the 1970s knows it. Faced with Forrest-Thomson’s anticipated ‘revolution in our theory and practice of literature in this country’,⁵¹ the don is the ideal personification of the old order of English academia, in which critics ‘murder to dissect’.⁵²

As in ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’, there is an undercurrent of violence towards figures of authority, and dons are definitely *-logues* rather than *-clastes*. These thematic elements are brought together by a three-way pun later in the poem: ‘this is the barre-work / of verbal behaviour’. A ballet barre (fitting with the earlier mention of ‘posturing dancers’) is used to help achieve complex poses; this sense of a railing could also be applied to the structure certain bridges.⁵³ Also, most

⁵⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), p. 149.

⁵¹ Forrest-Thomson, ‘New Novels and New Critics’, review of *The Nouveau Roman*, by Stephen Heath, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 2nd February 1973, p. 17.

⁵² William Wordsworth, ‘The Tables Turned’, *Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), l. 28.

⁵³ Although this does not apply to the many stone bridges crossing the Cam, it fits the iron or wooden bridges, of which Magdalen Bridge and the Mathematical Bridge respectively are the most prominent examples in central Cambridge.

Cambridge colleges have their own bars, and early in the poems the dining-halls of four colleges are evoked, after which the bar would be a likely destination for the ‘don’. Finally, the ‘barre’ is the term used in semiology to describe the line (*la barre*) inside the sign to separate signifier from signified. Barthes himself comments on this in *Elements of Semiology*, one of the few full-length texts of his available in English at the likely time of this poem’s composition. In section II.4 he writes of how for Lacan, in contrast to Saussure’s system, the *barre* has content of its own, ‘represents the repression of the signified’ (which it does not in Saussure).⁵⁴ Thus ‘barre-work’ may also be construed as the work of repression; the earlier poem ‘Acrostic’ has a comment in an ironic parenthesis on ‘(A connection between the concept / of meaning and the concept of teaching.)’ (*CP*, p. 80) Despite being heavily allusive and ‘learned’, her work often adopts a cynical attitude towards academia, as in the following lines from ‘Two Other’: ‘The Examination [...] will take the form of an *essay* on / life (No previous knowledge of the / subject will be assumed.)’⁵⁵ The adoption of the stock language of university administration is a joke in each example, but ‘the concept of meaning’ also appears in Forrest-Thomson’s theory, where she seems to believe with Merleau-Ponty that we are ‘condemned to sense’ (see discussion of ‘After Intelligibility’ below), and that there is a *barre* at the heart of signification and sense-making. Overcoming it requires ‘work’ – at best, labour, and at worst, ‘posturing’, which is why the image of the knife appears, desiring to cut through the ‘university talk’ (*CP*, p. 63) and the signifiers, as in ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’, another idea embodied by the stabbed don.

⁵⁴ Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, p. 49; cf. Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 666.

⁵⁵ Forrest-Thomson, *CP*, p. 93 (emphasis in the original).

‘L’effet du réel’

Forrest-Thomson’s texts’ engagement with its theoretical sources is always combative, and never more so than in the case of Barthes. Perhaps because his ideas are not generally theorised with poetry in mind, it is necessary for them to be wrestled into the applications she has in store for them. One example is the reality effect or ‘l’effet du réel’, the title of an essay published in *Communications* in 1968 and of a poem from *On the Periphery*.⁵⁶ In the essay, Barthes discusses a certain effect, a small and seemingly ‘insignificant’ detail which in fact comes to signify the reality of the situation presented in a realist text. This does not accord with Forrest-Thomson’s usual poetic practice; she insists, as we have seen, that representation is not the business of poetry, but rather formal art and artifice. However, ‘L’effet du réel’ has a metapoetic aspect, a formal feature to which the idea from Barthes may relate. Visually prominent in the poem is a small column of text, indented past the midpoint of the page with blank space on either side, as though indicating that it has a different textual status, that it is an independent poem:

Until the rock

will turn to

air at a ruin-

ed tower

⁵⁶ Although Forrest-Thomson would only have known the French essay published in *Communications*, references here will be to this English version in *The Rustle of Language*.

& we step

over its sill

the doors &

sills of light. (*CP*, p. 110)

Elsewhere in the poem the speaker says ‘I’m / writing a poem about intersections (the doors & sills of light)’. This is valuable information if taken as commentary, since it tells us what the poet considers the internal sub-poem to be ‘about’, but since this occurs inside the poem, which we know is not to the end of giving information, this too must be dealt with as possessing form before it possesses meaning. The non-meaningful attribute most applicable to both of these is lineation: the sub-poem has shorter lines than are found almost anywhere else in Forrest-Thomson, the convention carried to excess, while the sentence in the ‘main’ text that reflects on the mini-poem is broken after ‘I’m’. This demands that when reading it aloud one either read across the enjambment as if it is not there, in which case it is taken as an entirely visual effect, or else that we introduce a pause, a hesitation to discuss what the poem is ‘about’, which by definition cannot be paraphrased.

There are other ‘constructions’ in the poem: ‘We construct an event out of, behind these shutters “people” / are sleeping.’ At first glance, the comma appears nonstandard, and the only way to make syntactic sense of this is to parse it as indicating that the rest of the sentence is a fact or state of affairs ‘out of’ which the event is constructed. The work we do to make sense of a nonstandard construction is a structuration, ‘writerly’ reading, like that described in *S/Z* (p. 20). A nonstandard usage can be considered as a ‘deliberate mistake’, and Andrew Brown aligns the two

kinds of typing error Barthes discusses in 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers' with literary movements. The error that creates nonsense is compared to 'the automatic writing of the surrealists', while the one that creates an alternative meaning is closer to the 'controlled experiments' of the Oulipo group.⁵⁷ The comma after 'of' in 'L'effet du réel' belongs to the latter category, constructing two interpretations to resolve the 'error' at the same time which, since there is no answer, are able to exist in parallel. We can read everything after the comma as happening 'behind these shutters...' as a situation we are supposed to take as one noun, the event reported (behind-shutters-ness). Alternatively, the grammatical ambiguity indicates a double use of the noun 'shutters': 'we construct an event out of these shutters' and 'behind these shutters "people" are sleeping'. This second interpretation is supported by the inverted commas around 'people', which as in 'Le Signe (Cygne)' ironises ways, like structuralism's, which seem to Forrest-Thomson to look at the world as a construction rather than as the product of the agency of people, making them just 'so-called people'. Neither interpretation dominates because neither has the advantage of being the grammatical one. Syntax is flouted so that the line can have both senses: ambiguity here is a poetic device towards the writerly text.

Immediately following this comes the unusually short line, 'are sleeping', which stands in contrast to the rest of the poem except the short line at the end of the previous sentence, 'fracture / of events' (*CP*, p. 110). Short lines could easily be

⁵⁷ Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 201. Brown lists various of these practices which generally involve constraints greater than those usually applied to literary writing. One example is the 'n+7' procedure whereby all verbs and nouns are replaced with the word seven entries later in the dictionary. Rosmarie Waldrop's *Shorter American Memory* (Providence: Paradigm Press, 2001) renders documents from the early history of the United States in this way.

taken to represent fracture but there is a distinction to be drawn between ‘fracture’ and ‘fragmentation’. Barthes writes in *Roland Barthes* about the productive nature of ‘propensity for division’, and gives a list of things thus produced: ‘fragments, miniatures, partitions, glittering details...’⁵⁸ Further down the list is ‘haiku’, so the small, rarefied poem is certainly within its scope. Forrest-Thomson pays a great deal of attention to line-breaks; her poem ‘BBC’, used as an example in *Poetic Artifice*, is a found poem, a sentence from a newspaper only turned into a poem by lineation and punctuation, and the aleatory poems that open *On the Periphery*, chosen from random words from certain books, are arranged across the page in a similar way. Although lineation is placed by Forrest-Thomson among the ‘non-meaningful’ levels of poetry (*PA*, p. 31), we can see that it does have a function in determining meaning: a line-break does not indicate a wholly new semantic unit, but inaugurates a (generally minor) new beginning in a linguistic articulation. It may thus call attention to particular phrasing, as in the ‘fracture / of events’ where it mirrors the ‘fracture’ described (likewise ‘ruin- / ed tower’), or may help in the production of end-rhymes, as in the sing-song pairing of “‘people” / are sleeping’. But when the organisation of a section is determined by a series of enjambments following a few syllables after one another, something else is intended. The means of the poem’s construction may be evoked: written in a ‘café’, there might be limited space (like Jane Austen’s two inches of ivory), so that we think about the poem’s composition, encouraging us to read it as a work-in-progress, that is, in a writerly way.

There is also a subtle joke to be detected at the expense of Romanticism. The poem is set at Maillezais Abbey in the Pays de Loire, which is attached to a much

⁵⁸ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 70. (Hereafter *RB*.) Forrest-Thomson does not need Barthes to teach her lineation, but the first French edition was published in 1975, meaning she might have read it before this poem’s completion.

larger and more notable cathedral, but the poem only ever calls it the ‘abbey’. It thereby recalls British poetry’s most prominent monastic ruin, Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’, which exemplifies and even attempts to define that lynchpin of Romantic poetic philosophy, the ‘sublime’. It is by means of the sublime, ‘that blessed mood’, that ‘the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened’,⁵⁹ which the sub-poem in ‘L’effet du réel’ alludes to: when a solid becomes a gas without passing through the intermediary state of liquid, it is said to have ‘sublimed’ – here, ‘the rock / will turn to / air’.⁶⁰ The abbey ‘sublimes’, its physical manifestation vaporised, leaving behind mere shapes of light. While this is partly a joke, there is also something in the Romantic project which Forrest-Thomson admires and is not ready to abandon. Her essay on Barthes attempted to ally her project to terms which persisted ‘after intelligibility’, like the *scriptible* which freed literary texts from the burden of carrying messages. In this his earlier ideas about writers’ accepting and returning to the artificiality of their work, the *flaubertisation* of writing (*WDZ*, p. 66), are turned out towards the reader. Philip Thody compares that ‘flaubertisation’ to Coleridge’s famous remark about the ‘willing suspension of disbelief [...] that constitutes poetic faith’; by Forrest-Thomson’s scheme, when reading a poem we must suspend not just disbelief but attempts at meaning-production in the manner of ordinary language.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’, in Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Routledge, 2005 [1798]), ll. 40-2

⁶⁰ ‘sublime, v.’, *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/192767>> [accessed 15th July 2014].

⁶¹ Philip Thody, *Roland Barthes: A Conservative Estimate*, p. 10; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 6.

‘An Arbitrary Leaf’

Like a number of other poems in *On the Periphery*, ‘L’effet du réel’ has a companion poem, ‘An Arbitrary Leaf’.⁶² Both refer to French architecture whose very existence is in doubt, on the verge of disappearing. They both enclose phrases which at first seem oddly chosen in quotation marks, and in both cases this usage is confined to the first stanza. In ‘An Arbitrary Leaf’, the proportions of the two stanzas are similar to those of a sonnet, twelve lines to ten rather than eight to six, with a well-defined volta. The speaker and addressee wander through a ruin and find themselves on uneven footing, ‘treads uneven’, and comment: ‘This would never be allowed / in England: such sudden and insouciant lack / of the next step. Give me your hand.’ (*CP*, p. 111) This last sentence, the poem’s shortest, immediately precedes the break, suggesting a step into mid-air as if the stone has ‘sublimed’ as ‘L’effet du réel’ threatened. Here, the end of the stanza on the ruined staircase figures what Forrest-Thomson, and many other thinkers in Britain, saw as the dead end French theory faced: it proceeded to deconstruct established systems of thought, but offered no ‘next step’. The context of the title of its twin poem from Barthes draws us there, but even so, this would be the kind of interpretation Forrest-Thomson would have abhorred, exemplifying ‘bad naturalisation’. Yet the title is one of the formal attributes of a literary text, and in a sense the title of an avant-garde poem often functions like a Brechtian placard over the head of the poem, directing us as to how to see it while, in its inexact correspondence to what it heads, at the same time inviting us to challenge the placard/title itself. It runs parallel to the ‘primary’ text

⁶² Forrest-Thomson, *CP*, p. 111. The most obvious other pairs are ‘Approaching the Library’/‘Leaving the Library’ (pp. 118, 119), ‘The Aquarium’/‘On Reading Mr Melville’s Tales’ (pp. 120, 121), and ‘Pastoral’/‘Not Pastoral Enough’ (pp. 123, 124).

(Genette classifies titles as one of the many kinds of ‘paratext’)⁶³ and in some sense dominates it, keeping it from being fully ‘absorptive’, or, in the poem’s case, preventing us from arriving too quickly at a meaning and ‘strand[ing] poems in the external world’ (*PA*, p. 132).

The ‘arbitrary leaf’ of the title only appears in the second stanza. While the first is full of terms called into question, most seeming to have to do with the “carte-postale de luxe” or the description on the back of the “aerial view”, in the second the status of such terms is theorised. Investigating grammar in a Wittgensteinian way, the speaker says that now she has mentioned ‘the evening walk’, ‘[a]ny next walk must be this one’, and that mentioning becomes ‘our shadowy design to / undermine the objects on our path’. The rhyme of ‘design’/‘undermine’ pairs two linked meanings, the noun denoting the existence of the intention and the verb that describes what is to be done, but the noun also holds the description: to ‘de-sign’ something which signifies on arbitrary, structuralist terms. The following lines give the consequence of that process: ‘So that this dead leaf, in lack of colour and / perfected shape is like fan-vaulting discerned / in the abbey’. The leaf named in the title as ‘arbitrary’ is here ‘dead’, retaining a structure, even if no longer coloured with meaning or retaining ‘perfect’ form. It is like the fan-vaulting, a decaying architectural form that can still be ‘discerned’ in the ruined abbey. In her critical writing, Forrest-Thomson believes that even the aspects of the radical new French theory she agrees with will not cause certain essential aspects of poetry to fall away, that it must still be possible to produce meaning through poetic form, here figured as

⁶³ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 64-103.

home ‘discerned’ even in a foreign environment.⁶⁴ As we have seen, reservations about how much to use theorists such as Barthes in her thinking about writing are explored throughout. I will finish this survey by discussing the pair of poems where that use is most explicit.

Poems with Footnotes

Although there are various thematic connections, ‘The Aquarium’ and ‘On Reading Mr Melville’s *Tales*’ can be grouped most obviously because of their similar layout: both have lists at the bottom of the page directing us to other texts. The note to ‘The Aquarium’ is printed:

Note: see Roland Barthes: *S/Z, L’empire des signes*

Denis Roche: ‘Leçons sur la vacance poétique’ in *Eros énergumène*

Alain Robbe-Grillet: *La Jalousie*

and Nathalie Sarraute: *Le Planetarium* (CP, p. 118)

And the note to ‘On Reading Mr Melville’s *Tales*’:

Note: see Herman Melville: ‘Billy Budd, Sailor, an inside narrative’

Jacques Derrida: ‘L’écriture et la différence’ and *De la grammatologie*

⁶⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *PA*, p. 132; cf. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 135.

Julia Kristeva: *Semiotike: Recherches pour un sémanalyse*

and William Empson: 'Missing Dates', passim. (CP, p. 119)⁶⁵

Both cite five texts, but four authors – the authors with multiple texts are Barthes and Derrida respectively – and most authors are French, their publications from the late 1950s and early 60s. Here recall Forrest-Thomson's assertion in the 'Preface' to *On the Periphery* that her 'concern with French poetry and poetic theory and with ideas associated with "Structuralism" is a manoeuvre of style, of verbal detail, as well as a manoeuvre of theme and social significance' (CP, p. 167). The choice of 'French poetry' is odd, as the only French poetry she mentions explicitly anywhere in the volume is Denis Roche's *Eros énergumène* here. Indeed, it is not even Roche's poems, but his poetic statement about his own work that is referenced. Consider this excerpt from Forrest-Thomson's translation:

Whole sections fall below the level of semantic
 meaning; while others smoothly empty themselves
 of it [...] Many more things could be said, for
 instance, taking some of these poems as surfaces
 offering resistance.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ For the obvious formatting error in the title of *L'écriture et différence*, and the misspelling of *Semiotikè*, see below.

⁶⁶ Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, p. 150.

There are some clear parallels here with *Poetic Artifice*. The operation of poetic texts in a way that does not depend on ‘semantic meaning’, that is, meaning in the ordinary-language sense, is a cornerstone of how Forrest-Thomson understands poetry. Roche’s term is clearer because it shows that there are operations not strictly considered ‘semantic’ which can still be considered ‘meaningful’, as opposed to Forrest-Thomson’s more confusing use of ‘non-meaningful levels of language’.⁶⁷ To be ‘below’ semantic meaning is to depend on conventional, phonological and syntactical form in order for the text to operate as a work of poetic art, such that it is not necessary for the individual semanticity of the words to coalesce directly into the kind of ‘message’ we expect from other kinds of language. This sums up the admiring readings of the Prynne and Ashbery poems in *Poetic Artifice*,⁶⁸ and also describes ‘The Aquarium’; it is clear that in citing ‘Leçons sur la vacance poetique’, Forrest-Thomson suggests that it can be used to describe her own work. Indeed, Anne Mounic has suggested that there is a great ‘vacancy’ at the heart of ‘The Aquarium’, that it is *vide*, empty, that (like the haiku) it ‘resists sense’.⁶⁹

In connection with this, Mounic briefly quotes from a passage from *Empire of Signs* which I wish to examine in more detail: ‘in the Orient,’ writes Barthes,

⁶⁷ *PA*, p. xiv *et passim*; see note 14.

⁶⁸ This primacy of forms that are not semantic (or that are only semantic in poetry) is what she most values in these poets. Prynne’s ‘Of Sanguine Fire’ achieves its great success at ‘restor[ing] the resources of lyric and the resources of thinking in poetry’ because it is ‘free from thematic oppression’ (*PA*, pp. 146, 144), while Ashbery’s line ‘The lake a lilac cube’ ‘asserts the dominance of a formal order, its block-like resistance to empirical contexts’ (*PA*, p. 156).

⁶⁹ Mounic, *Tribulations*, p. 219.

the mirror is empty; it is the symbol of the very
 emptiness of symbols [...] the mirror intercepts only
 other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is
 emptiness itself (which, as we know, is form). Hence
 the haiku reminds us of what has never happened to
 us; in it we *recognize* a repetition without origin [...] a language without moorings.⁷⁰

The idea of the artistic value of emptiness or vacancy bears some similarities to Roche, except that Roche is discussing his own avant-garde work while Barthes is discussing Japanese aesthetics. However, Barthes goes a step further in saying that ‘emptiness itself’ is form, creating a ‘language without’ what we must assume are semantic ‘moorings’. That would be going too far for Forrest-Thomson; a poetic system that would have ‘rejected’ *all* meaning is what Forrest-Thomson fears that the (or any) avant-garde is in danger of becoming. Her *bête noire* is concrete poetry, which she sees as language entirely divorced from its rational function (*PA*, p. 47). A reading of the above passage from *Empire of Signs* as a manifesto for new avant-garde writing would place Barthes among those ‘certain French theorists’ she dismisses in *Poetic Artifice* as prematurely rejecting meaning.⁷¹ There are risks of that in the way Barthes sees the writerly text, and this seems to be part of the anxiety motivating her unpublished essay on Barthes, ‘After Intelligibility’. Forrest-Thomson

⁷⁰ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 79.

⁷¹ This is not Barthes’ own reading, however, as he goes on to discuss how the haiku as the Japanese poet understands it is ‘denied to Western art’ (*Empire of Signs*, p. 81). See also *PA*, p. 132, and the second half of this chapter.

explains in detail those parts of Barthes' theory which appeal to her, but in the end the sticking point is precisely the 'asémie' described in *Empire of Signs*, 'characteristic of a Zen Buddhist Saint' ('AI', p. 10). That essay was probably written three or four years before 'The Aquarium' or *Poetic Artifice*, we cannot say how far her thinking may have moved in that time. However, as will be discussed below, she continues to maintain that without 'some concession to the need for intelligible organisation [...] the interest of art may be lost' (p. 10).

Similar points of disagreement seem to pertain to her reading of Derrida and Kristeva, as expressed in 'On Reading Mr Melville's *Tales*'. Although Barthes is certainly far from the only point of Forrest-Thomson's engagement with French theory, it is likely that her awareness of other thinkers was less developed.⁷² Alison Mark attempts to position Kristeva's writing on intertextuality as an influence on *Poetic Artifice*, linking Forrest-Thomson's interest in Wittgenstein and the crossing of the bounds of different language-games to the essays of *Semeiotikè*.⁷³ There is little to suggest that these ideas are related, but perhaps here in 'Tales' the reference to Kristeva at the bottom of the page is intended to invoke those ideas. We see here a 'classic' text, 'Billy Budd', which performs what Kristeva calls a translative function and 'transfer[s] an utterance from one textual space into another', and thus 'the author refuses to be an objective "witness" [...] in order to inscribe h[er]self as a reader or listener'.⁷⁴ However, 'Tales' does not use Billy Budd in exactly that way,

⁷² As we have seen, she would have had this in common with Culler; Forrest-Thomson, who was married to Culler in the early 1970s, read and commented on the book at various stages between its origins as Culler's DPhil thesis and its first publication. *Structuralist Poetics*, p. xvii.

⁷³ Selections quoted here are in the English of Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, trans. by Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); cf. *Semeiotikè* (Paris: Seuil, 1969) and Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, pp. 67-9.

⁷⁴ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 46.

for unlike 'S/Z' it does not turn a sentence from a novel into lines of poetry.

Elements from 'Billy Budd' appear as similes to explain Kristeva's ideas and *not* as object-lessons. That is, there is a design by which they function other than as ideologemes, 'intersections' between a semiotic practice in one text and an (in this case more straightforward) utterance in another, even if that is what they are according to Kristeva.

de

constructed presences of speech and sense so run
 the traces through our history like scarlet woven in
 a sailor's rope to say it is the King's (was any simile
 more inappropriate)

(*CP*, p. 119)

The red yarn woven into a navy rope was a precaution against theft, and in 'Billy Budd', too, it is a simile, used to describe the 'queer streak of the pedantic' in Captain Vere's personality.⁷⁵ Here it stands for the connection later described as 'inter / textual strands', which with 'de / constructed' establishes a pattern of enjambling the jargon of French theory. Barthes, too, spoke of texts in this way, both

⁷⁵ In *The Portable Melville* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 661. For the 'king's yarn' or 'rogue-yarn', see William Falconer, *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1780), online at South Seas Reference Works <<http://southseas.nla.gov.au/refs/falc/1085.html>> [accessed 17th January 2014].

in *S/Z* ('structures of which the text is woven', p. 13) and in *The Pleasure of the Text* (the 'braided' book/text, p. 59).⁷⁶ Here, however, there is a dilemma in that understanding of text-as-weaving which is not clear. Forrest-Thomson asks the addressee, in quite a complex passage:

Shall I be cold and dead my love shall
 I unweave the thread but we have superseded such banal
 dichotomies as these or shall I join the rest in
 holding off the meaning from the form (*CP*, p. 119)

This is yet another reference to the straw 'French critics' from *Poetic Artifice* who believe in an avant-garde that promotes a harmful 'asémie'. She even suggests that to do this would be to 'hang', her heart 'stop't' like Billy Budd's. Yet the simple extraction of this meaning is troubled, as often in Forrest-Thomson, by the intrusion of levels in the poetic construction 'below' the semantic. Here it is the poetic convention of rhyme, but often placed partway through lines rather than at the end, which brings the rhyming words closer together and gives the sing-song effect of a short-lined rhyming poem within a poem whose actual line-breaks are often doing something else, like the chopping-up of 'de / construction', so that form wins out over content, exposes the fragility of any semantic assertion in a poem. The rhyme

⁷⁶ Here Barthes draws on etymology, as is his wont; the same idea of the woven text also appears in Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Image of Proust', first published in 1929. *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 198, 258.

pairs ‘cold and dead’/‘unweave the thread’, which seems melodramatic and unsubtle, dipping twice into the conceptual well of ‘Billy Budd’, and the consonance and rhyme in ‘dichotomies’/‘as these’, echoed also in ‘superseded’. The exception, which does come at the end of lines, is ‘shall’/‘banal’, where both end-words are achieved by enjambment in the middle of phrases, and the ‘shall’ is one of many in a list of things the speaker is asking the addressee if she should do. The unlikely rhyme suggests an ironic comment on the apparently serious tone of the text: ‘we have superseded such banal / dichotomies’ is the voice of deconstruction, seeking to expose the hidden assumptions in language, which then, on the other side of that caesural ‘or’, becomes the ‘rest’, those who separate meaning and form. She mocks her own attraction to Derrida and Kristeva’s writings, translating *différance* with the precious-sounding ‘differment’, but at the same time expressing what she sees as the danger of irrationality to which this avenue of thought may lead. The unwritten word at the end of the poem’s last line – ‘the differment remains, remains and’ – would be, on the pattern of ‘Missing Dates’, ‘kills’. As we see throughout Forrest-Thomson’s work, problems of the poetic are not just intellectual problems but emotional ones, and violent images often arise when they cannot be resolved, not only here but in the smashing glass of ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’, the collapsing house of ‘S/Z’, and elsewhere.

It seems odd that at no stage in the preparation of the poem for publication was a formatting error corrected: ‘L’écriture et la différence’ should be italicised, as it is the title of a book. This may be a mistake, like Forrest-Thomson’s misspelling of the title of Kristeva’s *Semiotikè*. However, it may be Forrest-Thomson’s intention to refer to possibly the most famous essay from Derrida’s 1967 book, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, which appears to be the text she

is most clearly engaging with in ‘Tales’.⁷⁷ A possible point of contact comes at the end of the essay, with Derrida’s ‘two interpretations of interpretation’. One of these aims at ‘deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile’,⁷⁸ which is not desirable for Forrest-Thomson, but her problem with Derrida is that she is equally uncomfortable with the other, which ‘affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism’.⁷⁹ Forrest-Thomson’s formalism is a humanism, as she makes clear in ‘Unrealism and Death in Contemporary Poetry’, where (apropos of her opposition to concrete poetry) she advances a belief in the value of ‘human nature’ and the importance of ‘rationality’ to that nature, as the ground on which to oppose irrationality in poetry.⁸⁰ However, part of *On the Periphery*’s declared mission is to draw outer boundaries for poetic work.⁸¹ Thus, anticipating with Derrida the possibility of alternative strategies to interpretation, ‘The Aquarium’ is one of Forrest-Thomson’s most resistant poems to a reading for ordinary-language meaning, and we see in it, to some extent, *asémie* in practice.

Forrest-Thomson says herself that it is the poem ‘Pastoral’ in which she is able to put her theoretical awareness that ‘non-meaningful’ formal features are ‘poetry’s strength and its defence’ to the test, so that ‘a tendentious obscurity

⁷⁷ In one of Forrest-Thomson’s notebooks held at Girton College, she copies down a quotation from the proceedings of the conference in which that essay was first delivered as a lecture. In a discussion period, Derrida says to Jean Hippolyte: ‘So, it being understood that I do not know where I am going, that the words which we are using do not satisfy me, with these reservations in mind, I am entirely in agreement with you.’ GCCP 4/2; see *The Structuralist Controversy*, p. 267.

⁷⁸ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 369.

⁷⁹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 370.

⁸⁰ Couturier and Forrest-Thomson, ‘Unrealism and Death in Contemporary Poetry’ panel discussion.

⁸¹ As Forrest-Thomson describes it in her preface, the book starts with ‘a stylistic situation on the periphery of traditional poetry’ (*CP*, p. 167).

becomes a tendentious refusal of meaning, except the minimum needed to create verbal form at all' (*CP*, p. 167). In *Poetic Artifice*, 'tendentious obscurity' is contrasted with 'rational obscurity', where 'appropriate information resolves difficulties and creates a logical structure' (p. 47). Defining tendentious obscurity is more difficult, but the tendency or agenda it expresses is probably one held in that remainder of meaning which Forrest-Thomson discounts, 'non-semantic' meaning. Reading a Forrest-Thomson poem often most productively begins with conventional formal qualities, but these particular texts lack some more traditional poetic structures, apart from their lineation and some sound-echoes. They are not divided into stanzas, no lines are indented, and the relationships between conceptual elements must often be supplied by the reader. What they do have is notes, a convention borrowed from another language-game, academia, and it is here that other readings of the poems have begun. Mark finds that the last line of 'Tales' ('the differment remains, remains and') 'performatively constructs' a Derridean idea, the 'rejection of closure which *différance* implies'.⁸² Mounic goes much further, giving a detailed commentary on the possible applicability of all of the references, but ultimately her attempts to reconcile them into a coherent reading are limited. 'The Aquarium' gets a short paragraph suggesting that all of the texts can be reconciled to 'the bankruptcy or uncertainty of the eye',⁸³ which wraps up the various threads

⁸² Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, pp. 63-4. Mark misses another source for this line, the possible reference to two of Empson's villanelles. One is 'Villanelle', on which the twin poem of 'Pastoral', 'Not Pastoral Enough', is also based: 'It is the pain, it is the pain' can almost be overlaid metrically onto 'The differment remains, remains'; the other is 'Missing Dates', whose second refrain reads: 'The waste remains, the waste remains and kills', which does not have the same metrical correspondence but yields 'remains and' and equates 'differment' with 'waste', which might be read as an acerbic comment against Derrida in the context of *Poetic Artifice* (p. 132). See Empson, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 33, 79.

⁸³ Mounic, *Tribulations*, p. 223.

fairly neatly: the invisible narrator of Robbe-Grillet's text, peeping through the slats of the *jalousie*, while the conceit of *The Planetarium*, an image which had been important to Sarraute long before she wrote the novel, as a theatre of false observations.⁸⁴ What Mounic spends most time on, however, is reconciling Barthes to this theme. As we saw before, she attempts to relate *Empire of Signs* to Forrest-Thomson's poetic practice; here, 'The Aquarium's 'game of prepositions and adverbs' is compared to the bare disposition of the Shikidai gallery or the sparsely furnished Japanese home as described by Barthes, quoting him:

The eyeball reveals itself as the centre of gravity of this space. Everything arranges itself around it in a tissue of assonances and alliterations, of long phrases and enjambments, which give the poem a very associative aspect, evoking the uninterrupted evolution of the fish in the aquarium. Always, as indicated in previous pages, that which inscribes itself defines itself against the void. The sign in its void answers death; the poem exists, but resists sense: '... there is nothing to *grasp*.'⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Sarraute considered this as a title for an earlier book of essays before using it for the 1959 novel. As she put it in a late interview: 'We are always for each other a star like those we see in a planetarium, diminished, reduced.' Nathalie Sarraute, 'The Art of Fiction No. 115', interviewed by Shusha Guppy and Jason Weiss, *Paris Review* 114 (Spring 1990) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/the-art-of-fiction-no-115-nathalie-sarraute>> [accessed 5 December 2014]; cf. Heath, *Nouveau Roman*, p. 50.

⁸⁵ Mounic, *Tribulations*, p. 220; cf. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 110.

Although Mounic does not examine this poem as closely as she does ‘Drinks with the Mythologue’, it is not hard to find evidence for her analysis. The penultimate sentence of the poem runs: ‘Freckled by a glance the glass flickering advanc / es away into greenery untouched by the sun.’ Here are the poetic conventions Mounic lists, the assonances, alliterations, and the sentence is even enjambed in the middle of a word to make the two halves of the first line rhyme, and the pairing of ‘glance’/’advanc[e]’ makes the poem move with the ‘associative’ logic of a gaze. However, what this may refer to in the external world, and the paradox of ‘greenery untouched by the sun’, remains a mystery. This is the kind of poem Roche describes operating not on the level of semantic meaning but as a series of conventional, phonological, and syntactical ‘surfaces offering resistance’.⁸⁶ The passage from *Empire of Signs* Mounic refers to here (‘there is nothing to *grasp*’) is notionally about interior design, but it can also be used to imagine a poetry where, as in the uncentred Japanese domestic life, where the inhabitant does not rule his space with the anxious proprietorship and ‘painful frustration’ of the Western householder:

the content is irretrievably dismissed: whether we pass
by, cross it, or sit down on the floor (or the ceiling, if
you reverse the image), there is nothing to *grasp*.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Roche, ‘Lessons In Poetic Vacuity’, trans. by Forrest-Thomson in Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, p. 150.

⁸⁷ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 110.

The movement of relations can be in any direction, floor or ceiling, and the only gravity is that imposed by our attention, the ‘eyeball’, with no semantic meaning to be ‘grasped’ and thus to direct our ordering of the components. If we refuse to allow that ordering, if we wonder what ‘The Aquarium’ is ‘about’, then we are like the status-obsessed characters in *The Planetarium* scheming to take over Aunt Berthe’s apartment and fill it with fashionable dinner-parties and Louis XVI *bergères*; Berthe simply wants to perfect the system and its internal functioning. For instance, there is the way that the figure of the eyeball works in the poem. Both at the beginning and the end, in the fourth and penultimate lines, the eyeball moves ‘so slowly’, so we have a conventional pattern set up, the beginning and end of the poem calling to one another, which leads us to expect that something has been resolved, a cycle completed, and the phrase echoes pleasingly within itself, and even enacts the semantic meaning it has on its own phonologically, adding to ‘so’ more sounds to *slow* it into ‘slowly’. The word ‘so’ also helps move the poem on – rules at the syntactic level lead us to expect complementary descriptive or explanatory material – and once again there is a call and response, a ‘so’ demanding a ‘that’. But beyond that it breaks down, because after the first ‘so’ the clause of the ‘that’ soon gets lost in a series of parentheses. The apparently unrelated meanings they enclose are enticing, and even seem to offer metapoetic comments on the poem if they can be decoded: ‘([...] read as you may you will find not mention of fish)’, ‘(groping in mud for a sound)’. However, they do not unite into a coherent argument, complicated by other, more resistant elements; it seems finally that this poem is an example of tendentious rather than rational obscurity.

The presence of *Jealousy* at the foot of ‘The Aquarium’ points to Barthes’ numerous essays praising the ‘objective literature’ of Robbe-Grillet, which were

some of the first to receive notice in the English-speaking world.⁸⁸ ‘The minuteness with which Robbe-Grillet describes the object has nothing tendentious about it’, writes Barthes in ‘Objective Literature’; ‘language must withdraw from an encounter which could only be alien to the object, given over to poetry or eloquence’.⁸⁹ Barthes uses ‘poetry’ here in a limited way, understanding it as an attempt to ‘encounter’ the external world with elaborate descriptions which, by the very nature of language, never reach the object. For Forrest-Thomson, however, that is not what poetry is at all. The sin here would be ‘tendentious minuteness’, a kind of description which is at the same time microscopic and holistic, that *luxuriates* – but as the Barthes of only a few years earlier reminded us, ‘luxury is never innocent’ (*WDZ*, p. 87). Forrest-Thomson shows how poetry answers the *nouveau roman*’s observerless eye either with the tendentious *obscurity* of Prynne or Ashbery – refusal of a holistic semantic meaning with the ‘block-like resistance to empirical contexts’ of Ashbery’s ‘the lake a lilac cube’ (*PA*, p. 156) – or else with ‘rational obscurity’, staggering the release of information across the various levels of artifice in order, perhaps, to bridge that gap, to create the meaning that in *Poetic Artifice* she believes Barthes to have abandoned and preserve her ideal of rationality in poetic construction.

This is certainly the case for Mounic, who considers that the poem is like a fishbowl, a different kind of world where movement in all directions is possible for the elements and associations and the reader, or viewer, is the organising force, the ‘gravity’ that acts upon it. In Barthes the type-class of the Shikidai gallery is ‘the

⁸⁸ Barthes is mentioned in the context of the *nouveau roman* as early as 1964 in Ihab Hassan, ‘Beyond a Theory of Literature: Intimations of Apocalypse’, *Comparative Literature Studies* 5, pp. 261-71.

⁸⁹ Barthes, ‘Objective Literature’, *Critical Essays*, p. 15.

cabinet of Signs (which was the Mallarmean habitat)',⁹⁰ the reference to Mallarmé clearly marks it as a comment on poetics. This poem's *écriture* is a 'cabinet of Signs', dismisses context, and no matter how we relate to it, the lack of that organising force or 'gravity' means that 'there is nothing to *grasp*'. Forrest-Thomson seems drawn to explore such arrangements, but at the same time is uncomfortable with the interpretational *aporia* of her own texts, where a sincere poetic system – 'where I realise in practice what I have long known in theory' (*CP*, p. 167) – and a desire for 'comprehensibility' are at odds. This is the point that previous commentators have shied away from: that Forrest-Thomson does not simply appropriate theoretical ideas to decorate her poems. Rather, the poems themselves, as 'surfaces offering resistance' are the stages for the struggle she has with each new idea, poised as it is to topple or save her poetics and thus her world, as in 'On Reading Mr Melville's *Tales*' where deconstruction is the material of a poem which radically problematises its own form and syntax. Keston Sutherland writes that Mallarmé's notion of the *jouissance de poëme* as a 'series of decipherings' would have 'pleased' Forrest-Thomson because she admires Barthes, who went on to use the notion of *jouissance* in his own work.⁹¹ However, this does not take into account the full range of her engagement, and her general ambivalence about the qualities in Barthes that led to his writings about *jouissance*, a term with which she never in fact engaged directly, and whether she ever read *The Pleasure of the Text* remain unclear. In neither her poems nor her theoretical work does Forrest-Thomson ever accept Barthes uncritically; to do so would often have meant to discard her belief in the

⁹⁰ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 106.

⁹¹ Keston Sutherland, 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson for Readers', *Kenyon Review Online* <<http://www.kenyonreview.org/wp-content/uploads/Sutherland.pdf>> [accessed 18 November 2013].

independence of poetic artifice from the external world, which we will see challenged but ultimately upheld in the following examination of her critical writing.

‘After Intelligibility’

Forrest-Thomson’s struggle with Barthes in theoretical prose begins with the essay ‘After Intelligibility: Poetic Sense in the Work of Roland Barthes’. The essay has never been published, and may be found among Forrest-Thomson’s archived papers, signed ‘Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Girton College, Cambridge’ (‘AI’, p. 10). Her PhD thesis was approved in late 1971, and none of the texts referenced in ‘After Intelligibility’ was published after 1970, suggesting the next was produced in that two-year period. The style bears all the hallmarks of Forrest-Thomson’s critical writing: it is dense, complex, and can seem dogmatic. Indeed, at various points the essay appears to lay groundwork for the more complete theory of poetry Forrest-Thomson was to give in her published essays and in *Poetic Artifice*, especially in establishing the diminished role of the semantic in the scheme of poetry’s formal and technical qualities.

‘The world of our experience is irremediably understandable’, Forrest-Thomson begins; ‘it is made up of a clamorous network of intersecting systems of sense’ (‘AI’, p. 1). The sense that the understanding of experience is something for which one might wish a remedy, that meaning ‘clamours’, is found throughout Forrest-Thomson’s poetry, as in the poem ‘Phrase-Book’, roughly contemporaneous with this essay, where both ‘words’ and ‘world’ are ‘a *monstrous* excrescence’ (CP, p. 97). In the later ‘Not Pastoral Enough’, a villanelle, one of the two refrains is: ‘It is

the sense, it is the sense, controls' (*CP*, p. 124), whose clamorous repetition is an echo of a line in Empson's 'Villanelle', which runs, 'It is the pain, it is the pain endures'⁹² – sense itself is painful, and one endures it or is 'condemned' to it, in Merleau-Ponty's phrase.⁹³ Forrest-Thomson worries that literature being produced under a tyranny of sense-systems can only be 'parasitic upon already fixed codes' ('AI', p. 1); clearly her interest is in new poetic strategies, and thus sees Barthes as offering some hope for those following an 'avant-garde' impulse. She quotes from his preface to *Critical Essays*: 'Writing is never anything but a language, a formal system [...] to write is to try to uncover *the most inclusive language*, that which is the form underlying all others',⁹⁴ which will entail, she believes,

examining those structures of the mind that are truly
creative: not, that is, the fixed and constricting
movements that are possible within already established
systems, but those that permit the mind to externalise
and extend itself in new systems. (AI, p. 3)

It is not only that words and terms from other discourses are brought into literary and poetic contexts ('trivial' from a structuralist point of view); the 'formal systems of

⁹² Empson, *Collected Poems*, p. 33.

⁹³ Quoted in Forrest-Thomson, 'AI', p. 1.

⁹⁴ Forrest-Thomson's translation ('AI', p. 11 n. 2) (emphasis in the original). Compare Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 274.

relations' that make the meanings of those terms possible also become relevant. Grammar is as much a part of the challenging of the bounds of given systems of language use (what Forrest-Thomson calls with Wittgenstein 'language-games') as vocabulary, so that a Robbe-Grillet novel may turn its observerless eye on the object in a 'parody [of] classical space'⁹⁵ and a Forrest-Thomson poem may operate two parallel sets of rhymes, one commenting on the content of the other, in the final lines of 'On Reading Mr Melville's *Tales*'. Yet it seems that these grammars operate only on a formal level. Literary relations are, Forrest-Thomson writes, 'free' and 'innocent', and do not have to 'classify, for utilitarian purposes, the phenomena of experience' (AI, p. 4) as the relations in their native language-games do. They allow an alternative linguistic experience that holds inclusion, creativity, and freedom, that is, the freedom to 'externalise and extend' the scope of the mind. In her later theoretical writing, she tends to see the nature of literature less as 'freedom' in the face of sense's oppression than as a system with self-dependent and 'internal' meaning, but under the influence of Barthes, literature is seen as a limited escape from Merleau-Ponty's condemnation-to-sense.

Forrest-Thomson is selective about the Barthes she is interested in, like most of his readers, and writes she is most concerned with 'sense' and 'that part of Barthes' work which deals with literature' (AI, p. 1). However, engagement with the literature Barthes dealt with at the time is also an important part of her analysis. This essay would have been written slightly prior to Heath's *Nouveau Roman*, which Forrest-Thomson reviewed for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1972, saying that it

⁹⁵ Barthes, 'Objective Literature' in *Critical Essays*, p. 19.

was ‘most important as the first detailed presentation in English of the position of Roland Barthes [...] and the writers associated with *Tel Quel*’.⁹⁶ She was speaking from experience, having been an attentive reader of French journals as evidenced by her quoting of Barthes in the original French here, often from quite obscure sources. The ‘Barthesian dispensation’ of ‘After Intelligibility’ puts it rather strongly (see below), but where the writers of the *nouveau roman* take cues from Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* is an important text, and Heath explores in some detail its concept of *écriture* ‘located between *langue* and *style* [...] The writer’s discourse is always what it says, but also that it is literature, and the locus of this second meaning is *écriture*’.⁹⁷ Forrest-Thomson, who does not engage directly with *Writing Degree Zero*, interprets this concept slightly differently. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, in translations of French works (and in those of Barthes’ in particular) both the infinitive *écrire* and the noun *écriture* are routinely rendered as ‘writing’, and a certain subtlety of meaning may be ignored. Forrest-Thomson, however, makes a point of defining the word as she does *lisibilité/readability* and *scriptibilité/writability*, seeing it as one of the new categories created by Barthes:

The most fundamental of these is *Écriture* (Writing) which reconciles writing as an activity with the formal system of language on which writing depends [...] *Écriture* is the class on which the typology of literary texts is founded, the mark of difference between literature and other systems of signs. (AI, p. 6)

⁹⁶ Forrest-Thomson, ‘New Novels and New Critics’, p. 17.

⁹⁷ Heath, *The Nouveau Roman*, p. 207.

This essay was never completed to the stage where it was intended for publication, as it is shorter than a full-length academic article, and as such, some of its sentences require some careful parsing (as we will see again in the case of the posthumously published *Poetic Artifice*). In the first sentence here, there are three uses of the word ‘writing’, each with a slightly different meaning. In the first instance, it is given as an English gloss on *écriture*, but then it is used twice more with no substitution of a pronoun. We can reword the first sentence from the quotation above as follows: what Barthes understands by this special sense of *écriture* reconciles writing-as-activity with language, the formal system(s) on which such writing depends. She seems here *not* to see *écriture* as a formal system in and of itself, after the preface to *Critical Essays*, but is content to theorise it only as something which acts ‘against the imperialism of each separate language’.⁹⁸ Here again non-literary language-games are considered repressive because of their dependence on sense. However, Forrest-Thomson is not willing to give up sense altogether, despite what she suggests ‘certain French theorists’ might wish.⁹⁹ Literary language may *make use of* sense on its own terms (‘as a technical device’) without finally making or ‘giving’ sense – for which she also finds theoretical justification in Barthes.

⁹⁸ See *S/Z*, p. 206.

⁹⁹ Forrest-Thomson *Poetic Artifice*, p. 132. Her dismissal of them here in *Poetic Artifice* is better justified in her essay on Pound:

We shall equally fall into a trap if we try, as did the “New Critics” some thirty years ago or the French Structuralists today, to claim that content and form – the usual names for “beauty of the thing” and “beauty of the means” – are the same thing. [...] They are connected in a variety of different ways and relations of dominance, and it is our job to decipher or decode, as the semiologists say, these connections.’ Forrest-Thomson, ‘His True Penelope was Flaubert’, pp. 14-5.

The 1968 article ‘Linguistics and Literature’, quoted in Forrest-Thomson’s doctoral thesis, outlines Barthes’ concepts of the *lisible* and *illisible*, the latter later revised to the *scriptible* in *S/Z*.¹⁰⁰ Forrest-Thomson calls *scriptibilité* the ‘corollary’ of *écriture*; it ‘allows us to participate in the *system* for giving sense while remaining free from the final stage of actually giving sense’ (AI, p. 7). *Poetic Artifice* isolates phonological and syntactic levels of artifice, and when Forrest-Thomson speaks here of the ‘activity’ of writing, acknowledging this ‘action’ perhaps points us towards the key term ‘artifice’. She uses it again later to declare with Barthes that the roles of writer and critic must be collapsed and to say that they ‘must try to construct [...] an *activity* which will suspend the characteristic *process* of this system’, which is to say, language (p. 7, my emphasis). In the typescript of the essay, an earlier use of the word ‘activity’ has been crossed out, but still visible is the earlier choice, ‘process’. In writing this essay, it seems, she has come to the conclusion about a necessary distinction between the two, perhaps safeguarding of the agency of the writer that she deems to be necessary for her critical construction of artifice to apply. In the following paragraph, she writes:

the recognition of artificiality [...] means that we accept a distance between ourselves and our language [...] this opposition enables language to continue to express that imagination that perceives the world as unreal [and is] therefore a precondition of creative change.

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, ‘Linguistics and Literature’, pp. 81-2; Forrest-Thomson, ‘Poetry as Knowledge’, p. 34; Barthes, *S/Z*, p.5.

This notion of the ‘expression’ in language is not at all in accord with Barthes, who resists the idea, most famously in ‘The Death of the Author’.¹⁰¹ The grammar of the sentence, which could be rearranged to say that ‘language expresses imagination’, suggests rather Heidegger’s pronouncement that ‘language speaks’.¹⁰² Those texts operating under recognition that the author is not the all-powerful bearer of the tool of language are the ones able to effect ‘change’, or innovation, which is always essential for Forrest-Thomson.¹⁰³ The activity of *écriture* is an artifice made possible by the distance between world and words: this gap and the inevitably frustrated impulse to bridge it are what generates literary imagination and innovation. Both Forrest-Thomson and Barthes want to say that the critic engages in *écriture* as well; the critic takes advantage of the ‘free space’ between signifier and signified, where elements of a system have formal relations but not yet semantic meaning (AI, p. 2) and in the eternal frustration of that space, the critic ‘remains condemned to error – to truth’.¹⁰⁴ Thus, Barthes’ critical texts on which Forrest-Thomson draws will be *scriptible*, will dwell in and on those formal systems and create an ‘activity’

¹⁰¹ Did [the writer] wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely’. ‘The Death of the Author’, *IMT*, p. 146.

¹⁰² Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), p. 96.

¹⁰³ The term ‘innovative’ does not appear to have become the shibboleth for experimental writing it is today until after Forrest-Thomson’s time; a prime example of its use is in the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. The first issue of that periodical contains a rare article on Forrest-Thomson, and the opening editorial calls her British ‘innovative’ poetry’s ‘most accomplished poetic theorist’. It is worth mentioning that this editorial attempts to take away in its first paragraph some of the power of the word ‘innovative’, introducing a cloud of synonyms, but this is undercut by the continued use of it throughout the article, not to mention in the title of the journal itself.

¹⁰⁴ Barthes, ‘Preface’ to *Critical Essays*, p. xxi.

(literature) which will ‘suspend the characteristic process’ of language’ (AI, p. 8) and make room for imagination: ‘The blanks and looseness of the analysis will be like footprints marking the escape of the text’.¹⁰⁵

Despite some sympathy with Barthes, Forrest-Thomson is frank about limitations she sees in his texts. She doubts ‘the likelihood of doing justice to any but a small class of works’ (p. 9), conservatively defining this canon as a few *scriptible* classic works and the avant-garde texts ‘written today under the new Barthesian dispensation’.¹⁰⁶ At the end of the essay, Forrest-Thomson refers to an essay by Barthes in which he gives haiku as an example of a situation where an ‘ideal is converted [...] into a system of formal rules’; she infers from this ‘some concession to the need for intelligible organisation’ (p. 10) – sense *within* the poem, as technique, but not ruling it, a point she was later to refine in *Poetic Artifice*. Given the date of this essay, Forrest-Thomson may not have read *Empire of Signs* at the time of its composition, where Barthes elaborates his opinion on haiku, which was doubtless influenced by the trips to Japan which provided the book’s material. Certainly the haiku into which the non-Japanese-speaking Barthes provides most insight is the Western imitation:

¹⁰⁵ *S/Z*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ ‘AI’, p. 7. Forrest-Thomson never attempts a definition of the ‘Barthesian dispensation’, and her reading here seems to ignore (or perhaps is unaware of in the first place) the difference between what Barthes is interested in investigating and the explorations of the *nouveau roman* and the poets of *Tel Quel*, expanded in ‘Literature and Signification’, the final essay in *Critical Essays* (p. 276). Her awareness becomes slightly more sophisticated in the later article ‘Necessary Artifice’, although this remains something of a blind spot for her.

the haiku seems to give the West certain rights which its own literature denies it [...] You are entitled, says the haiku, to be trivial, short, ordinary: enclose what you see, what you feel, in a slender horizon of words, and you will be interesting.¹⁰⁷

There are shades here of the Barthes of *Mythologies*, puncturing Western readers' complacency, as in the essay 'Blind and Dumb Criticism', where he challenges critics' 'right to understand nothing about' the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of a text.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the 'interesting' is a notion long tied to the bourgeoisie, who are the real focus of the scorn Barthes directs towards the West in this passage. Forrest-Thomson, however, is referring to Barthes speaking on the original Japanese haiku; in *Empire of Signs*, he calls it 'an enormous praxis destined to *halt language*, to jam that kind of internal radiophony continually *sending* in us'. In the same passage, he speaks of *satori* as 'the blank which erases in us the reign of the Codes'.¹⁰⁹ This addresses with an almost uncanny correspondence the concerns evinced by Forrest-Thomson at the beginning of her essay. She writes that literature is both cause and solution of a great '*deadlock* between imagination and fixed systems for assigning meanings' ('AI', p. 1; my emphasis), while he uses the milder 'jamming' metaphor, but both are concerned to suspend sense and the operation of 'codes'. These are the fundamental rules by which parts of a text may be explained, described in *S/Z* (first established pp. 18-20), which represent the 'characteristic

¹⁰⁷ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 75. Forrest-Thomson does not use this text theoretically, but does appear to draw from it in practice in her poem 'The Aquarium' (*CP*, p. 118).

process' of meaning-making systems that Forrest-Thomson speaks of suspending (albeit in favour of alternative *kinds* of meaning). In *S/Z* they are considered as applying differently to *lisible* and *scriptible* texts: the former are 'committed to the closure system of the West [...] devoted to the law of the Signified' (*S/Z*, pp. 7-8), but in *scriptible* texts, the influence of the codes is defrayed 'by concentrating [on] that level of the system – the set of its formal relations – that seems most arbitrary and rigid'. Here *S/Z*'s formal categories and its stratifying system (even if, as Scholes told the early Anglophone students of structuralism, it is 'not systematic enough to be applied easily by other analysts to other texts')¹¹⁰ lead to a criticism which allows us to look at literature without privileging its significations over any other element, like the one Forrest-Thomson labours to create in her developing 'theory of twentieth-century poetry' – the subtitle she gives *Poetic Artifice*.

'Necessary Artifice'

Part of the way she lays the groundwork for that theory is in an essay which appears to have followed on the heels of 'After Intelligibility', 'Necessary Artifice: Form and Theory in the Poetry of *Tel Quel*'.¹¹¹ The essay discusses Roche and Pleynet with reference to Kristeva and Barthes. All of the Kristeva is from *Semeiotikè*, while Barthes is quoted from *S/Z, Elements of Semiology*, and the short essay 'Literature and Metalanguage', which she knew from *Essais critiques*.¹¹² Her use of *S/Z* is

¹¹⁰ Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, p. 155.

¹¹¹ Forrest-Thomson, 'Necessary Artifice: Form and Theory in the Poetry of *Tel Quel*', *Language and Style* 6;1 (1973), pp. 3-26.

¹¹² 'Literature and Metalanguage' was originally published in the Belgian surrealist review *Phantomas* in May 1959. Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 365.

typical, seeing the text as a ‘galaxy of *signifiants*, not a structure of *signifiés*’,¹¹³ and she only refers us to *Elements of Semiology* in order to clarify the terms of the Saussurean sign that would still have been unfamiliar to some in an Anglophone audience.¹¹⁴ ‘Literature and Metalanguage’, however, is used to establish one end of the continuum Forrest-Thomson sets up between ‘self-reflexive’ and ‘empirical’ poetic modes, respectively ‘the need to show that a poem is talking about itself’ and ‘the desire to mask this knowledge by incorporating ordinary uses of language’.¹¹⁵ She appears to abandon this system by the time of *Poetic Artifice*, but we see the beginnings of that book in what she calls the ‘rhetorical’ style, which in incorporating both of the two styles ‘relies on a complicity with [...] naturalization’ (*sic*). Forrest-Thomson posits that the literature that appeared alongside *Tel Quel* semiotics considered itself to be a semiological investigation too: ‘the interrogation of the nature of literature, writes Barthes, “takes place ... within literature itself”’, from which she derives the notion that in self-reflexive modes of writing, ‘the object of investigation and the investigation itself are identical’.¹¹⁶ A writing which is both self-reflexive and willing to see itself as the subject of *linguistic* investigation is, thus, ‘language-centred’, one of the names that has been given to the tendency in avant-garde writing which was beginning to emerge in the United States at about this

¹¹³ Quoted in ‘Necessary Artifice’, p. 16. Cf. Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 5.

¹¹⁴ Forrest-Thomson’s quoting of *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology* in ‘After Intelligibility’ and ‘Necessary Artifice’ respectively in her own translation of the French leads me to assume that she never read the 1967/1968 Cape editions of those texts in English, to which she never refers. This seems odd since they were reviewed in national publications (see Chapter 1 of this thesis), but there is no evidence that she knew Lavers and Smith’s translations.

¹¹⁵ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Necessary Artifice’, pp. 6-7.

¹¹⁶ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Necessary Artifice’, p. 14. Cf. Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. 98.

time, most commonly called simply ‘language poetry’ or ‘language writing’, which will be considered in detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

If poetry which requires ‘naturalisation’ (either all poetry, or at least the subset of poetry for which *Poetic Artifice* ‘works’) exists on a continuum between ‘empirical’ and ‘self-reflexive’, and if the function of naturalisation is to establish its position in that continuum, then the project of *Poetic Artifice* is to discover the extent to which poems are metalanguage and to which they are ordinary language, or at least ordinary language framed in a certain way. That frame, indeed, is the crux on which the more sophisticated critical operations of *Poetic Artifice* turn, because before poetic language can be seen as either ordinary language or metalanguage, it must be read in the context of the conventions it either follows or flouts. This is less true for the novels that are the main focus of Barthes’ critical investigation, as no other literary form is bound by as many conventions as poetry. Although Forrest-Thomson ceases to cite Barthes in her later critical work, her use of him in her earlier essays is still relevant to *Poetic Artifice*, and we shall see how in the remainder of this chapter.

Poetry and Knowledge

The subtitle of Forrest-Thomson’s PhD thesis, ‘Poetry as Knowledge: The Use of Science by Twentieth-Century Poets’, does not express the full scope of its ambition, for while it does concern itself with poets’ metaphors drawn from physics and astronomy, the thesis’ greater concern is the epistemological status of poetry. It looks at how poetry, which ‘is not used in the language-game of giving information’¹¹⁷ and

¹¹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §160.

is, at least according to certain of Forrest-Thomson's formulations, 'non-meaningful', is still tasked with transmitting or containing knowledge. She considers for what kinds of knowledge this might be possible in a densely argued critical document, and derives conclusions about 'linguistic' or 'structural' knowledge.¹¹⁸

Her direct use of Barthes in pursuing these goals is not extensive, for even at his most 'philosophical' he seldom turns to epistemology or metaphysics. He appears in a section near the beginning of the thesis entitled 'Criticism and Poetic Sense', and is used to support the argument that 'the way in which critical language maintains itself as distinct from its object is a useful paradigm for the interaction of two, or more, levels of language' (p. 30). She quotes substantial passages, all in French, from 'What is Criticism?', 'Literature Today', *Criticism and Truth*, and 'Linguistics and Literature'. We have already seen the importance of 'Linguistics and Literature', and I will return to it below, but the rest are all from that period of Barthes' which Forrest-Thomson knows best, the early- to mid-1960s.¹¹⁹ The first two are from *Critical Essays* and state strongly the position that criticism and literature are both composed of language, but she appears to differ from Barthes when it comes to the quotation from *Criticism and Truth*, which argues that the consequence of recognising this is that 'the critic confronts an object which is not the work, but his own language'.¹²⁰ It is easy to see why Forrest-Thomson struggles with this; Barthes at one point appears to be saying something with which she would entirely agree: 'if

¹¹⁸ Forrest-Thomson, 'Poetry as Knowledge', p. 321 *et passim*.

¹¹⁹ The essays were originally published in 1963 and 1961 respectively, and *Essais critiques* itself, from which Forrest-Thomson quotes, in 1964.

¹²⁰ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 35.

it were simply a matter of expressing (like the juice from a lemon) subjects and objects which are equally solid wholes by “images”, what would be the point of literature?’ he asks, and as we know Forrest-Thomson believes that most literary operations come prior to imagery. However, this does not allow for the notion that meaning may be held in those prior levels, ‘a context in which the sense of a work can be seen as an aspect of its formal structure’.¹²¹ Barthes holds that criticism cannot ‘reveal’ a signified, ‘but only chains of symbols, homologies of relations: the “meaning” which it is fully entitled to attribute to the work is finally nothing but a new flowering of the symbols which constitute the work’.¹²² Forrest-Thomson gives a picture of the same idea, but not in the language of Barthes that seems to marginalise the achievement of the critic who achieves that ‘new flowering’. For her, the entirety of what can be extracted from a poem is that ‘meaning’ which is held in formal structure, in ‘homologies of relations’. Her view of ‘homologies’, especially ‘scientific’ ones, opposes any ‘idea of the structure of a poem, or the technique employed to link the various language-contexts, as something distinct from the words themselves’.¹²³ She considers that a poem’s words symbolise themselves, ‘fictionalising the linguistic elements, [...] freeing their meanings for the activity of the imagination’.¹²⁴ We can see this at play in her admiring reading of Empson’s ‘Letter V’, where a series of metaphors drawn from mathematics and physics give the notion of a closed universe, but ‘[i]f one attempts to give them meaning outside

¹²¹ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Poetry as Knowledge’, p. 32.

¹²² Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 36.

¹²³ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Poetry as Knowledge’, p. 114.

¹²⁴ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Poetry as Knowledge’, p. 117.

this metaphoric fusion, that is: outside the standards of truth created within the system of poetic language, they become mere fiction'.¹²⁵ 'Fictionalised' elements serve such a high degree of function within the poem that the only 'truth' is the 'activity of the imagination'.

However, this may also be done badly, as in the process of 'mythologising' as taking a source of imagery as 'a formal system of suggestive fictions, the relations of which may be exploited without reference to their factual content for the purposes of poetic metaphor'.¹²⁶ This is not the same as Barthes' definition of mythology in 'Myth Today', but it does bear some structural similarities in practice. For Barthes, myth is political, tool of the Right and the oppressor, whose language aims to externalise myth, and in the section 'Myth on the Left', he writes that the opposite of myth is revolutionary political language. Revolution '*makes* the world; and its language, all of it, is fully absorbed in its making'. Revolutionary language is at all points political, unlike myth which starts out political and ends up natural.¹²⁷ In either case, to grant something the status of myth is to equip it as a privileged formal system; Forrest-Thomson has not yet begun to use the term 'naturalisation' in her thesis, but she does quote from John Casey's *The Language of Criticism* a gloss of a Wittgenstein remark saying that art is 'on one hand, something conventional or artificial – created rather than discovered – but also, on the other hand, something natural, a type of discovery of both formal and emotional possibilities'.¹²⁸ Forrest-

¹²⁵ Forrest-Thomson, 'Poetry as Knowledge', p. 289.

¹²⁶ Forrest-Thomson, 'Poetry as Knowledge', pp. 64-5.

¹²⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 146.

¹²⁸ Forrest-Thomson, 'Poetry as Knowledge', pp. 75-6; cf. Casey, *The Language of Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 107.

Thomson seldom speaks of mythology, or at least not beyond the sense of religious myth, but rather uses the present participle, ‘mythologising’, and thus avoids assigning intention to the activity. Later, she suggests that Empson in his poetry ‘mythologises’ science,¹²⁹ a supposition she would further develop in the essay ‘Rational Artifice: Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson’.¹³⁰ This leads her to conclude that whether we believe an eclipse is caused by a certain alignment of the Earth, sun, and moon or by ‘a wolf’s devouring the sun’, ‘poetic metaphor makes no distinction between the epistemological status of these two viewpoints; it establishes its own standards of knowledge’ (p. 309). Let us remind ourselves Barthes’ definition of poetry in ‘Myth Today’ – ‘in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things’ – and of the (at that point to him irreconcilable) distinction between poetry and ideology: one posits ‘a reality which is entirely permeable to history’, the other a reality ‘ultimately impermeable, irreducible’.¹³¹

Forrest-Thomson goes on to say of Barthes’ position that ‘he has certainly developed it by now’ (p. 34), which is a reference to *S/Z*, published the year before she completed her thesis and listed in the bibliography, although not cited in the text. Following through on some of the strands in Barthes that are not fully explored in the essays and in *Criticism and Truth*, she examines the term ‘plurality of meaning’,

¹²⁹ Empson’s poem ‘High Dive’ uses scientific ideas, like a play on Phoebus as sun above and the initial letter *phi* as the symbol for the potential function in wave theory (linking both to light-waves and to the water a diver will soon reach; Empson, *Collected Poems*, p. 190) which will govern the diver’s descent. However, it also addresses questions of how science has supplanted older mythologies. ‘Poetry as Knowledge’, p. 304; cf. Empson, pp. 22-3.

¹³⁰ Forrest-Thomson, ‘Rational Artifice’, *Yearbook of English Studies* 4 (1974), pp. 225-38. The reliability of ‘truth-seeking kinds of language’ being in question, ‘the only way [for Empson] to articulate identity and experience was (and is) to accept the necessity of fiction and to construct fiction by the use of deliberate artificial devices’ (p. 230).

¹³¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 159, 158.

finding that Barthes' definition of it limits critical interpretations to the structuralist ones he favours. The right 'science of literature' would take as its object 'the very plurality of the meanings of the work', while 'literary criticism' (which is what Forrest-Thomson would want to say she is engaged in) 'adopts the intention of giving a particular meaning to the work'.¹³² This term 'work' was to acquire a greater significance in the light of Barthes' 1971 essay 'From Work to Text', not likely in play here, but influential later. There Barthes drew a distinction between the readerly work and the writerly text. The French word that Heath's 'work' renders here, *oeuvre*, is so central to the critical prose of other writers – Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* could scarcely exist without the word and concept of the work/*oeuvre*, even though over a decade before 'The Death of the Author' he was writing of 'language which speaks itself: language as the work and the work as language'¹³³ – that to read them after having read Barthes and Kristeva on *texte* requires almost an adjustment of values. The distinction between filiated, filiating work and networked, plural text is epoch-making, and would go on to be explored in luxuriant detail in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Despite Barthes' insistence that his readers should not be 'drawing up a crude honours list in the name of modernity' (*IMT*, p. 156), 'From Work to Text' had risked entrenching this binary, but in *The Pleasure of the Text*, textual plurality even extended to that distinction as a textual object: 'the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete' (*PT*, p. 4).

¹³² Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 28.

¹³³ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 41.

The distinction is first born, however, with *S/Z*, for it is there that the readerly and writerly are filled out as concepts. It emerges that texts are not uniform or ‘isotropic’ (*PT*, p. 4), that certain sites are more conducive to certain kinds of reading, enabling *S/Z* to ‘sketch the stereographic space’ of the text. In so doing, this will habilitate it for the writerly, helping to make the reader a *producer* (*S/Z*, pp. 15, 4). Forrest-Thomson keeps up this concern with a plurality of modes throughout the thesis; she writes that Empson in his poems comes, like the later Wittgenstein, to see ‘meaning as an interrelated plurality of language-systems [...] the fact of writing [these poems] is inevitably an escape from the problem of the justification of knowledge’ (‘Poetry as Knowledge’, pp. 269-70). However, also in line with *S/Z*, the idea of a ‘science of literature’ appears to have been dropped, as have many of the suppositions of *Mythologies*. ‘The primary evaluation of all texts can come neither from science, for science does not evaluate, nor from ideology [...] ideology “reflects”, it does not do work’ (*S/Z*, pp. 3-4). As David Silverman has it, *S/Z* rejects ideology, even the analysis of it carried out in Barthes’ own earlier work, ‘as the site of semiotic analysis because ideological analysis [such as that] of the essays in *Mythologies* silences language’.¹³⁴ However, we can moderate those positions somewhat: when Barthes criticises his own ‘ideological critique bearing the language of so-called mass culture’ in his ‘Preface’ to the 1970 (the year of *S/Z*) edition of *Mythologies* (p. 9), he does not entirely abandon it but wishes that such critique, like semiological analysis, must ‘become more sophisticated’, and Julia Kristeva hopes that the way he listens to language and ‘speaks *to* literature’ will in fact return one to

¹³⁴ Silverman, *The Material Word* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 199.

‘an eventual ideological renewal: the awakening of the subject’.¹³⁵ Barthes’ critique of contemporary science in ‘Science versus Literature’¹³⁶ is criticised by Italo Calvino for a mischaracterisation of modern science which ignores its ‘tinkering with its own formulative processes’.¹³⁷ While the article might have done science an injustice, science’s virtues as extolled by Calvino are exactly the ones Barthes hopes for in a critical methodology of this new ideological analysis.

In *Criticism and Truth*, Barthes speaks of different kinds of science with different foundations: criticism, he writes, ‘cannot be a science of the content of works (over which only the most rigorous historical science can have a hold), but a science of the *conditions* of content, that is to say of forms’.¹³⁸ Such a science might thus appear less applicable to Forrest-Thomson’s research, because when she speaks of science she is speaking of the content-based analysis of the empirical world, but when the processes and practices of that science are compared to literature, they come up short, as when she compares the mathematical or scientific model to the poetic metaphor. That view, she writes, ‘is much too simple. It is not the bringing together of two or more different domains of experience – even linguistic experience – that is important about a poetic image, but the new experience that results’ (‘Poetry as Knowledge’, p. 114). We can see this in her own poem ‘The Blue Book’ (*CP*, p. 63), where the central metaphor of language as colour is not undertaken with the intent to help us understand language better once we apply our superior understanding of colour to it. If anything, it is the aporia Wittgenstein often confronts

¹³⁵ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 120-1.

¹³⁶ Barthes, ‘Science versus Literature’, *Times Literary Supplement* (28th September 1967), pp. 897-8.

¹³⁷ Calvino, *The Literature Machine: Essays*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 29.

¹³⁸ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 29 (emphasis added).

when trying to talk about colour which is adapted to Forrest-Thomson's purposes of describing how language changes how we see the world.

Here we see operating the 'conventions which enable us to abandon an actual situation of discourse for an invocational-prophetic mode' and 'remove the poem from an ordinary circuit of communication', as Jonathan Culler puts it in *Structuralist Poetics*.¹³⁹ It is thus possible for 'deictics' – for instance, pronouns and descriptions of time – not to refer to empirical situations outwith the poem but therefore to 'force us to construct a fictional situation of utterance, to bring into being a voice and a force addressed'.¹⁴⁰ As mentioned above, *Structuralist Poetics* and *Poetic Artifice* are closely related texts. Forrest-Thomson is named in the acknowledgements and although her *Poetic Artifice* was not published until 1978 by Manchester University Press, it is listed, with a publication date of 1974 and the publisher Blackwell, in the bibliography of Culler's book, which stands uncorrected in new editions.¹⁴¹ Most of Culler's text does not deal with poetry, but in Chapter 8, 'Poetics of the Lyric' (quoted above), he evinces many of the same attitudes as Forrest-Thomson as regards the relationship of the poem to ordinary language. The difference from prose fiction is that in the sparser manner of poetry – especially 'twentieth-century' or modernist poetry, with its fragmentation of narrative and situational coherence. Culler and Forrest-Thomson both remark on this as part of Ashbery's design – deictics do not always refer to a substitute fictional empirical

¹³⁹ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 194.

¹⁴⁰ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 194; part of this passage is quoted in *PA*, p. 35.

¹⁴¹ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 324.

situation, but sometimes to a ‘situation of utterance’, ‘a voice and a force’.¹⁴² Culler here latches onto one of the rare sites at which Barthes considers poetry, in the essay ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ in *Writing Degree Zero*, where it is called ‘a discourse full of gaps and flashes, full of absences and voracious signs, without a foreseen and fixed intention’.¹⁴³ The ‘voracious signs’ are such because not moored to the same set of situational and narrative strictures even in a poem which tells stories of sorts, like Pound’s *Cantos*, because the story is secondary to the voice, the force, the organising (structural) principles.

Both authors, too, are concerned to housebreak a set of intellectual tendencies which, while widely read and thought about, have not yet been proven in the pursuance of analysis of literary texts. But while Culler is slightly concerned that his analysis will be seen as too tame for the revolution sought in structuralist literary thought by its followers,¹⁴⁴ Forrest-Thomson believes that ‘nothing is to be gained in this enterprise by modest disclaimers’ (*PA*, p. ix). In that, she risks erring the other way, and as Graham Hough points out in his ‘Foreword’, *Poetic Artifice* appears to be at a relatively early stage in its development; if not quite ‘unmodified by second thoughts’, as Hough puts it, the book certainly displays a ‘train of thought pushed to its limits’ (*PA*, p. vii). Forrest-Thomson’s critical prose displays a smugness and a flippancy that other readers and eventually editors might have persuaded her to

¹⁴² Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 197; *PA*, p. 113.

¹⁴³ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 201. I retain Culler’s translation, but Lavers and Smith’s translation renders *signes surnourrissants* (Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 200) rather more accurately as ‘over-nourishing signs’ (*WDZ*, p. 48) for Culler’s ‘voracious’. ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ supplies a surfeit of metaphors for the poetic act which glorify it as a function of the liberated sign. However, it is not analytical about poetry and how it may deliver on the promises it makes and that Barthes makes for it. Ron Silliman in his essay ‘Surprised by Sign’ sees its promises fulfilled with nine American poets of his day, which we will examine in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁴ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 281.

moderate. At one point, assuming she knows what a critic (art historian Stephen Bann) intends by a passage she has just quoted, she tells us she can ‘feel’ the meaning ‘hovering over Mr Bann’s typewriter’ (p. 46), and in reading *Poetic Artifice*, we often have to try to feel what is hovering over Ms Forrest-Thomson’s typewriter too. One example is the spectre of Roland Barthes, on whom the book is strangely mute, given the way she inserts him into ‘Poetry as Knowledge’ in a short but prominent early section. It seems Forrest-Thomson has turned against Barthes since the mostly admiring treatment in ‘After Intelligibility’, for she defines a central concept in her theory in the following way. Setting herself against ‘realism’ in poetry (where, she points out, even Peter Stern in *On Realism* is not arguing for it), she writes that:

anti-realism need not imply, as certain French theorists might claim, a rejection of meaning. All that *Artifice* requires is that unmeaningful levels be taken into account, and that meaning be used as a technical device which makes it impossible as well as wrong to strand poems in the external world. (*PA*, p. 132)

This is the first section quoted in Charles Bernstein in his 1987 verse-essay ‘Artifice of Absorption’, which takes up many of *Poetic Artifice*’s ideas but argues that her designation of ‘rhythmical’ and ‘formal’ levels of a poem (to which we can probably add ‘conventional’, ‘visual/phonological’, and ‘syntactic’) as ‘nonsemantic’ is in

error. Forrest-Thomson can be fairly inconsistent about the way in which she uses the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘meaningful’ (as well as ‘non-meaningful’ and ‘semi-meaningful’, as we saw earlier), but Bernstein argues for what is almost a redefinition of ‘meaning’ compared to what Forrest-Thomson understands by it:

The semantic strata of a poem should not be understood as only those elements to which a relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed, for this would restrict meaning to the exclusively recuperable elements of language – a restriction that if literally applied would make meaning impossible. After all, meaning occurs only in a context of conscious & nonconscious, recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics.¹⁴⁵

Bernstein’s term ‘strata’ has also been used to describe the way Barthes divides up texts in *S/Z*, and always seems to rely on those strata turning out to be unimportant after all. Suman Gupta reaches for ‘strata’ when discussing Barthes, even expanding

¹⁴⁵ Bernstein, *Artifice of Absorption*, p. 8.

the geologic metaphor to speak of the ‘stable deposits’ found in the ‘phenomenal literary work’.¹⁴⁶ However, he finds his own recourse to such a term to be ironic given that it is part of Barthes’ project to ‘release’ the strata to their ‘fluidity, the metamorphic nature’ of the ‘I’.¹⁴⁷ This lines up with Bernstein’s point that ‘meaning’ is often held in unknowable cognitive functions or ‘dynamics’, and that the kind of ‘fixed’ meanings that it is the project of *Poetic Artifice* to regiment. There are, however, indications that this struggle is internal to *Poetic Artifice*. One of the ways Forrest-Thomson first articulates her theory’s problem is by contrasting the issues relating to adopting other ‘specialised languages’ into poetry, as opposed to ‘ordinary language’. When using science or philosophy in poetry, ‘the non-verbal is already highly mediated’. With a specialised vocabulary, what certain words are taken to mean in the world beyond the text is more specific and highly determined. However, since ‘ordinary language’ is used on the basis that it represents an external world of reference, there is a burden on poetics to prove that poetry does not work in this way. But while New Criticism successfully argued for taking biography out of poetry – and this is what Thody and others assumed ‘The Death of the Author’ was designed to do – there are still ‘attitudes and emotions’ in poetry which must be accounted for. Forrest-Thomson asks where ‘feeling’ resides and finds that ‘we cannot locate the emotion in either our minds or the poet’s mind as situations outside the poem’ (*PA*, pp. 18-9). She then comments somewhat sarcastically that if poetry were only a

¹⁴⁶ Gupta, *Two Texts and I: Disciplines of Knowledge and the Literary Subject* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), p. 29. Here Gupta also draws on Roman Ingarden’s *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. by George Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), conceived of as an ontology of the literary work. Ingarden’s ‘strata’ look strikingly like Forrest-Thomson’s ‘levels’ – ‘linguistic sound formations’, ‘meaning units’, ‘represented objects’, ‘schematised aspects’ – but I have been able to find no evidence that she was aware of this work.

¹⁴⁷ Gupta, *Two Texts and I*, p. 30.

‘shorthand’ for transmitting feeling from author to reader, ‘we should all be dying to get rid of the poetry to enter empathetic, kinaesthetic and inarticulate rapture’ (*PA*, p. 19). The use of that word could be an echo of *The Pleasure of the Text*, as Forrest-Thomson was writing before Miller’s translation of ‘bliss’ became standard, and indeed Culler anticipates Mortimer in preferring ‘rapture’.¹⁴⁸ Feeling is rather to be situated ‘in the language of those non-semantic features [which] select and define the thematic synthesis that the reader should insert in the poem’ (*PA*, p. 19). Forrest-Thomson takes as her example an analysis of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 97 from her ‘Introduction’, and describing it writes that the ‘structural solidarity’ present in its phonology, vocabulary, syntax, and so forth ‘acts as a kind of proof of semantic appropriateness’. The whole operation is founded on the conventional level: ‘the fact that we are reading a poem [...] calls us to us to relate the formal pattern to the meaning’. This falls short for Bernstein because it places that formal pattern outside meaning; for him, the pattern is part of the meaning, and not something which merely points to a meaning which is held elsewhere. In that sense, his position is probably closer to that advanced in *S/Z*. Forrest-Thomson often seems on the verge of recognising this, as when she describes the ‘source of pleasure’ in a reading of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and we infer also of twentieth-century poetry, ‘a line to line experience of “the multiplicity of organisations in which [...] the reader’s mind participates.”’¹⁴⁹ As quoted above, Bernstein rhapsodises over the continuous dynamics of reading, but as Mark writes, his ‘absorption’ and Forrest-Thomson’s ‘naturalisation’ are similar but not the same. When as readers we absorb a poem, we

¹⁴⁸ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 224; cf. Mortimer, *The Gentlest Law*, pp. 24-8.

¹⁴⁹ *PA*, p. 4. The quotation is from Stephen Booth’s *An Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. ix.

take on a reading that has been laid out before us, and resisting this is in many contexts desirable for language-centred poetics – it is a political act which Mark links to both Russian Formalism’s *ostranenie* and Romantic poetry’s ‘lifting the veil from the hidden beauty of the world’.¹⁵⁰ Naturalisation, on the other hand, is the desired end of Forrest-Thomson’s system (‘good’ naturalisation, at least) – it is not seen as the insidious tool of a hegemonic order. Mark writes that politics is ‘not a major characteristic of Forrest-Thomson’s poetics’,¹⁵¹ and while her poetry does, as we have seen, chafe against certain institutions and address ‘the textual politics of gender’,¹⁵² her critical work tends to see explicit engagements with politics as an annoyance, as with structuralism and May ’68 above. For the language writers, poetics is often a way to explain and expand on their formal innovations, but Forrest-Thomson’s critical writing is driven by a desire to promote the reader’s proper construction of the text from its assimilable components, which process she calls ‘good’ naturalisation.

We ought to ask, then, how Forrest-Thomson arrives at this value-system. In the first paragraph where she attempts to define ‘naturalisation’, she writes that criticism ‘must ensure that in its desire to produce ultimate meaning it does not purchase *intelligibility at the cost of blindness*’. (*PA*, p. xi, my emphasis.) In ‘After Intelligibility’, intelligibility is seen as the outer bound of the new state of literary existence suggested in ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, as the presence of formal rules ‘suggests some concession to the need for intelligible organisation’ (‘AI’, p.

¹⁵⁰ Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 113-4.

¹⁵¹ Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 115.

¹⁵² Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 115. We have seen this somewhat in ‘S/Z’ and ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’; it is most extensively evident, however, in her long poem ‘Cordelia’ which we will not examine here as Barthes is not among the many thinkers it presses into service.

10). What she is worried we might become blind *to* is harder to identify. In Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*, the blindness is that of critics, who can only carry out their work within literary language by remaining blind to the instability of certain of the propositions on which their activities rely: 'if the act of reading, potential or actual, is indeed a constitutive part of literary language, then it presupposes a confrontation between a text and another entity [...] that, for all its impersonality and anonymity, still tends to be designated by metaphors derived from selfhood', a 'universal but strictly literary subject'.¹⁵³ The idea advanced by De Man is that critics must proceed as if this subject existed, despite the fact of a 'language that destroys the possibility of origin', and that they thus possess a 'blinded vision'.¹⁵⁴ It seems Forrest-Thomson does not share this belief about criticism, although she worries it may *become* true. She thinks that *Poetic Artifice's* scheme for breaking down naturalisation, which provides a way to analyse the mediation that takes place in literary language, is a method which would be able to bypass De Man's double bind. Structuralism had been, for Forrest-Thomson, 'on the right track' as part of the fellowship of 'those who deny the validity of the old dichotomies' (*PA*, p. 135) and thus see beyond the blinkers De Man finds on all critics. Poetry can facilitate this, for which there is even a certain amount of support in De Man, who writes that 'poetic writing [is] the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction' because in its highly visible artifice it both confirms and denies its 'authority'.¹⁵⁵ 'On Reading Mr Melville's *Tales*' is one of Forrest-Thomson's texts which does this, enacting its own deconstruction in the tensions it sets up between its conventional formal attributes

¹⁵³ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 105.

¹⁵⁴ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 106.

¹⁵⁵ 'Semiology and Rhetoric' in Josué V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 139.

and the very radical interpretive strategies that De Man espouses. It is, as we have seen above, the site of a self-mocking flirtation with Derridean thought. It is also, like Barbara Johnson's analysis of 'Billy Budd', an example of the kind of reading that engenders 'painful doubt concerning the adequacy and interrelation of the conceptual frameworks we impose on the text in interpreting it'.¹⁵⁶ Where Johnson persuasively applies the idea of difference to the text, seeing with Derrida how binary oppositions (here, Billy Budd's and Claggart's guilt and innocence)¹⁵⁷ turn out to be 'illusion[s] created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down',¹⁵⁸ Forrest-Thomson holds off, leaving the very question of 'differment' hanging. The interpolation in 'Tales' that 'Claggart is the devil' is a parenthetical comment on the lines 'O take your hands off me in the civilisation of the West / who ruled the evil and the good' (*CP*, p. 119). The lack of punctuation means that this can be parsed in various ways, but it seems that the speaker – marking her lines' vocativity with the archaic poetic 'O' – resists the rule of dichotomies, while not entirely willing to 'unweave the thread' of them entirely. Some of the certainties she sees French theory as trying to 'reject' might still be useful.

Neither French theory nor English criticism 'will explain why the idea that poetry gives us contact with external reality has been so popular in the past. [...] Only an examination of the power of poetic organisation will do that.' (*PA*, p. 135) Yet she finds herself less interested in the *Tel Quel* of her day than in that of the early 1960s,

¹⁵⁶ Christopher Butler, *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 73.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 83ff. Johnson's text 'Melville's Fist' was first published as an essay only in 1979, so the intersection of Derrida and 'Billy Budd' in both her essay and Forrest-Thomson's poem appears to be nothing more than a coincidence.

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, p. x.

which published the experimental poetry of Roche, Pleyne (both of whom she translated), Michaux, and Ponge.¹⁵⁹ ‘Structuralism has now evaporated its initial stress on verbal form in the heavy air of political revolutionism’ (*PA*, p. 134). Here Forrest-Thomson refers to the political stances taken by *Tel Quel*, its involvement in the student protests of May ’68 and sympathy with communist China that led to the writing of Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women* and Barthes’ far less enthusiastic ‘So, How Was China?’¹⁶⁰ Her own lack of impulse to connect poetry to a project of ‘social transformation’ has been noted by Mark in contrast to the language writers,¹⁶¹ and it seems that for Forrest-Thomson that apolitical stance is bound up with the caution about poetry’s referring beyond itself, similar to Barthes’ belief in *S/Z* that ideological analysis silences language. In pursuance of the same idea that Wittgenstein gives, by telling us that poetry ‘is not used in the language-game of giving information’,¹⁶² Forrest-Thomson quotes from De Man: literature ‘is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression’.¹⁶³ Further, De Man sees form as prior to meaning and sees this as an ‘analogue, essential to our understanding of literature, of the priority of fiction over reality’ (*PA*, p. 28). In a statement that aligns well with Forrest-Thomson and Wittgenstein here, ‘readers

¹⁵⁹ Patrick French, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel (1960-1993)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 47, 68-70.

¹⁶⁰ Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. by Anita Barrows (New York: Urizen, 1977); Barthes, ‘So, How Was China?’ in *The “Scandal of Marxism” and Other Writings on Politics*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull, 2015), pp. 94-104.

¹⁶¹ Mark, *VFT and Language Poetry*, p. 115.

¹⁶² Wittgenstein, *Zettel* §160.

¹⁶³ *PA*, p. 28; De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 17.

degrade the fiction by comparing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave'.¹⁶⁴

She takes this idea to its furthest extreme in an essay which draws on Barthes, presenting itself as an attempt to understand a difficult novel: Flaubert's ornately written and painstakingly detailed historical novel *Salammbô*. In fact, the scope of the essay is much greater. 'The Ritual of Reading *Salammbô*' considers 'the reader's narration' by which that reader becomes the 'producer of the text', and in so doing explores 'the reality of our own processes of operating with language'.¹⁶⁵ Bernstein accuses Forrest-Thomson of not accounting for some of those processes when she sees certain formal aspects of poems as 'non-meaningful', and in 'After Intelligibility', she derives from a reading of Barthes on haiku that even literary practices free from direct empirical reference require formal structures. However, we can read the *Salammbô* essay as a Barthesian holiday for Forrest-Thomson where she experiments with disconnected intelligibility; because of the incompatibility of two modes for characters in the novel: what she calls 'speech' – political action 'by manipulating forms of behaviour that derive from a collective consciousness',¹⁶⁶ a code *à la S/Z* – and what she calls 'vision', 'often mediated through religion and ritual', the mode arising in those scenes, as when the identities of *Salammbô* the priestess and Tanit the moon-goddess are blurred, combined,¹⁶⁷ 'which cannot be

¹⁶⁴ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵ Forrest-Thomson, 'The Ritual of Reading *Salammbô*', *Modern Language Review* 67;4 (October 1972), 787-98 (pp. 787, 798).

¹⁶⁶ Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 787.

¹⁶⁷ Flaubert, *Salammbô*, trans. by J. A. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 278-9.

accommodated by any pre-established method of making sense'.¹⁶⁸ The disconnect between these two elements means that 'there is no principle which will make the novel as a whole intelligible'.¹⁶⁹ The reader of *Salammbô*, Forrest-Thomson posits, is so stranded from a firm reality in the novel, so shifting or absent are the truths ('factual element') it offers, that the reader 'is creating a new pattern which includes his processes of understanding', and that this pattern 'now forms part of the world of the text'.¹⁷⁰ Thus: reader-as-producer, but Forrest-Thomson goes further; quoting Barthes' essay 'The Structuralist Activity', she speaks of a simulacrum 'neither real nor rational, but functional'.¹⁷¹ She writes that 'it is our interpretation itself that provides the standard' of reality. As Barthes writes, 'one system describes another' – interpretation, the 'literality' of Flaubert's text (*S/Z*, p. 120).

The essay goes on to discuss 'Flaubertian irony', whereby 'the fictions of the imagination, here represented by religion, do not accord with the facts of the world',¹⁷² but concludes by saying that the irony of *Salammbô* is 'a more profound kind': 'we are deluded into thinking that we can organize the text and are then forced to realize that this organization is only partial'.¹⁷³ In Flaubert there is a 'salutary discomfort of writing [...] *one never knows if he is responsible for what he writes* (if

¹⁶⁸ Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 787.

¹⁶⁹ Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 787.

¹⁷⁰ Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 788.

¹⁷¹ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p 218.

¹⁷² Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 788.

¹⁷³ Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 798.

there is a subject *behind* his language)'.¹⁷⁴ This is that to which De Man believes that critics are blind, and it is also part of the thesis of 'The Death of the Author', which Forrest-Thomson seemingly never read. 'No one, no "person", says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing, which is reading.' (*IMT*, p. 147) Most of her work avoids that extreme, but reading the *Salammbô* essay it becomes possible to see that this 'salutary discomfort' is what motivates naturalisation. She herself writes that what she draws from Barthes is his response to this "'lack of fit" between language and the world' operating in the processes of textual organisation,¹⁷⁵ which are what *Poetic Artifice*'s theories of naturalisation are an attempt to explain, train, and systematise.

Conclusion

What remains to be said of Forrest-Thomson's responses to Barthes are those which she never had, for many of Barthes' ideas that did not reach her before her death in April 1975 would have proved highly amenable to her thought, while others might have jarred with it. Twice in *Poetic Artifice*, she quotes the same line from Francis Ponge, seemingly without realising the duplication: 'the sole medium of action is the medium I have chosen: writing'.¹⁷⁶ Both times, she is discussing the intersection of form and the external world. This is certainly the Barthes that later writers like Hejinian and Bernstein relate to, the Barthes who theorises or aphorises writing, the 'constitutive' 'thickness' or 'texture' of which is the medium of communication

¹⁷⁴ *S/Z*, p. 140. Emphasis in the original; French quoted in Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 798.

¹⁷⁵ Forrest-Thomson, 'Reading *Salammbô*', p. 798.

¹⁷⁶ *PA*, pp. 62, 134. My translation, in which 'writing' renders 'd'écriture', not 'écriture'. This example appears in the introduction to this thesis to illustrate the use of the latter word.

between reader and poem. This 'desire' for connectivity holds the power to make 'the entire motionless chart of language vibrate' (*RB*, p. 129), but it also allows Language writing to bypass and resist imposed structures for reading, as we shall see. This was not Forrest-Thomson's agenda, and perhaps the only way she was able to make common cause with Barthes was because of the still-unformed states of their projects when they intersected.

Chapter Two: Barthes in America

Robert Duncan's 'Kopóltuš'

The importance of the poetry of the San Francisco Renaissance poet Robert Duncan to what became known as language writing has been widely noted.¹ He also anticipates it in his interest in Roland Barthes, although he published about this only once. In 1970, he wrote a short essay entitled 'Kopóltuš: Notes on Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology' (*sic*), which was published in February 1975 in the journal *Credences*. The essay is short, and is structured around two quotations from Barthes' text, each followed by a passage of commentary. However, this does not perform detailed microanalysis of Barthes, the quotations serving only to spur new reflections. There is no movement, for instance, towards a structuralism of poetics, and the name of Barthes is not invoked beyond the title.

The essay revolves around an explication of its title word, *kopóltuš*, which, although Duncan implies otherwise, is a neologism. He defines it as the arrangement of a group of objects which 'reveals that other elements we do not admit to seeing are present in what we see'. The first quotation from *Elements of Semiology* refers to the 'complex associations' of phenomena in the human world as 'systems of signification', and the formation of the *kopóltuš* seems to be a kind of by-product of

¹ For an account of Duncan and other earlier poets in the context of language writing, see Albert Gelpi, 'Poetic Language and Language Poetry: Levertov, Duncan, Creeley', in Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf (eds.), *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 180-198.

such systems. Duncan then draws on Clive Bell's notion of 'significant form', which he brings alongside Barthes as well, defining it as 'the feeling of parts belonging to the whole as a *sign*'.² In this sense, producing emotion is what makes such forms 'significant', but Duncan retools Bell's phrase; the *kopóltuš* is the site at which a combination of elements into forms begins to have a signifying property that is independent of those elements, bringing about the '*other* elements we do not admit to seeing' (my emphasis).

However, Duncan's definition is slightly inconsistent with respect to the concept of the sign. He writes at one point that 'this particular sign is a *kopóltuš*', but then, in the next paragraph, that a '*kopóltuš* is not a sign, it is a feel of an arrangement'.³ What Duncan seems to latch onto in Barthes is that notion of signification at work in cultural experiences: 'images, gestures, musical sounds, objects'.⁴ As the essay progresses, however, it becomes apparent that the *kopóltuš* is an imaginary myth that Duncan invents *around* Barthes' idea: 'some hold the true *kopóltuš* to be beyond or outside of the realm of experience', and it only 'stood for a gnosis beyond any sensation of it'. This is far from Barthes, for whom the prospect of such a reduction would invalidate much of the philosophical project of semiology. Certainly it is very far from Forrest-Thomson's rationalistic, formalistic humanism, which holds that we are only human insofar as we engage in linguistic performances. Here the properly 'linguistic' is delimited by certain boundaries of reason – to which,

² Robert Duncan, 'Kopóltuš' in *Fictive Certainties: Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 106 (emphasis in the original). For 'significant form' see Clive Bell, *Art* (Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 74 *et passim*.

³ Duncan, 'Kopóltuš', pp. 106-7.

⁴ Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 3.

for instance, concrete poetry does not conform. Forrest-Thomson objects to concrete poetry because it is ‘irrational’, but gnosis is independent from reason.

‘Some scientists have identified the first *kopóltuš* as a mousetrap and scholars of that school measure the full life furor of a work of art by the half-life of radioactive cobalt’, Duncan tells us.⁵ The *kopóltuš* is, like Bell’s significant form, an attempt to account for indefinable qualities associated with art, like beauty and genius. Robert J. Bertholf records that Duncan’s library contained copies of both *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology* in Lavers and Smith’s translations.⁶ ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ and ‘Poetry as Utopia’ did not elicit a response in print from the author of *The H.D. Book* and a body of poetry passionately committed to new ways to understand the world through poetry and the imagination. But Duncan’s Borgesian ‘mousetrap school’, and indeed the *kopóltuš* itself, are an imaginative attempt to account for beauty. Barthes’ quasi-scientific delimitation of the workings of signs must have been an attractive text on which to hang these speculations, but this essay is the whole of Duncan’s published engagement with Barthes. Although this essay does represent a clear early point of contact between Barthes and American poetry, an application of Barthes’ theories to the poetic practice of Duncan’s contemporaries was still missing.

⁵ Duncan, ‘Kopóltuš’, p. 109.

⁶ Robert J. Bertholf, ‘Preliminary Checklist of Robert Duncan’s Reference Library’, *Jacket* 28 (October 2005) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/28/dunc-bert-library.html>> [accessed 8th September 2014]. Note: in this document Lavers’ name is mistranscribed as ‘Leaves’.

Ron Silliman's Nine Poets

'Kopóltuš' has remained a relatively obscure document of poetics. Its being written in 1970 and not published until 1975 means that it is unlikely to have been a factor in the interest taken in Barthes by a few poets who were beginning to emerge in the early years of that decade. In any case, many of them were rebelling against the poetics of which Duncan was an avatar, which emphasised 'communion' between author and reader, but was less willing to investigate the power relations in language.⁷ As these younger writers developed their ideas about language, a loose project came together around of understanding and describing the operations of power in language.

There were writers who reacted against both confessional poetry and even the more experimental 'New American Poetry' which encompassed Duncan and Spicer as well as the New York and Black Mountain schools. This response has been said to have 'emphasized the arbitrariness of signification and the constructive character of meaning-making'.⁸ However, they did this in such a variety of ways that the writers grouped under the label are often so dissimilar as to make it close to meaningless. Yet the idea has persisted, especially in commentary on those poets who published in the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews from 1978 to 1981 (the name of the 'movement' sometimes takes this spelling). Alan Davies in his 1980 'Essai à Clef', published three months after Barthes' death, wrote that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine owed 'its existence[,] or if not, the meaning

⁷ Gelpi, 'Poetic Language and Language Poetry', p. 196.

⁸ Oren Izenberg, 'Language Poetry' in Roland Greene et al. (eds.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 784.

of that existence, to the significant desire-producing language mechanisms which Mr. Barthes constantly refurnished with his analyses of/as text'.⁹ However, writers whose work might broadly be considered to be 'language-centred' had been gathering near the San Francisco Bay Area for some time. Many of them arrived already having read Barthes in academic settings, as did their counterparts based in New York City. In this chapter and the next I wish to look at the ways in which Barthes 'gave meaning' to these often revolutionary activities of poetry and poetics.

One of the first places where some of the people now thought of as Language writers were grouped was in the poet Jerome Rothenberg's magazine *Alcheringa*. In 1975, this publication, usually devoted to 'ethnopoetics',¹⁰ published 'The Dwelling-Place', a mini-anthology of 'new poets' along with an essay, 'Surprised by Sign (Notes on Nine)', designed to explain this highly experimental work to its readers.¹¹ The poets were: Bruce Andrews, Barbara Baracks, Clark Coolidge, Lee DeJasu, Robert Grenier, David Melnick, Ray DiPalma, Barrett Watten, and Ron Silliman. The collection had been assembled and the essay authored by the San-Francisco-based Silliman, and the essay is dated 'Christmas, 1973'. Silliman's essay is only three pages long and is divided into two sections, the first consisting of six numbered paragraphs describing the poets' 'community of concern for language'¹² and the second taking each poet and briefly summarising his or her bibliography and poetics.

⁹ Davies, 'Essai à Clef', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 3;12 (June 1980), unpag.

¹⁰ *Alcheringa* was founded in 1970 to publish 'tribal poetries' from around the world. In 1975 the 'New Series' began, which continued the original mission but began to include 'modern experiments': 'songs, chants, prayers, visions and dreams, sacred narratives, fictional narratives, histories, ritual scenarios, praises, namings, word games, riddles, proverbs, sermons'. Dennis Tedlock and Jerome Rothenberg, 'The ways of alcheringa' (*sic*), *Alcheringa* New Series 1;1 (1975), 2-3 (p. 2).

¹¹ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign (Notes on Nine)', *Alcheringa* New Series 1;1 (1975), pp. 118-20.

¹² Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 118.

The essay's sixth paragraph contains its most direct engagement with Barthes, as it aims to explain the title of the anthology taken from Lavers and Smith's translation of *Writing Degree Zero*, and specifically from the essay 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', where Barthes writes that:

it is the word which is 'the dwelling place' [...] it shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate towards innumerable uncertain and possible connections. Fixed connections being abolished, the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections[.]¹³

This idea of the 'word' is central for Silliman and, he argues, for the other eight poets collected here as well. For Robert Grenier (one of the poets collected), he writes, the word is 'the material of writing', 'a point', a seed.¹⁴ Grenier argues in an earlier essay that the patterns and conventions of speech invisibly restrict the possibilities of language because we cannot get away from them 'until a writing clears the air'.¹⁵ In speech, 'words, silences and their common mobility are launched towards a meaning superseded' by the flow and duration of moving time (*WDZ*, p. 11, cf. pp. 19-20),

¹³ *WDZ*, p. 47; quoted in Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 118.

¹⁴ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 119.

¹⁵ Grenier, 'On Speech', in *In The American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), 477-8 (p. 477). The essay was first published in the magazine *This*, edited by Grenier and Watten, in 1971.

and that flow is what Grenier seeks to clear away. Silliman draws attention to the conflict between Grenier's view of writing as a coming from the word as resistive point, or as seed which will germinate, and Clark Coolidge's, which sees it as coming out of the plane of language. Barthes comes close to that idea in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', but it is from Grenier's side, that of the individual word as dwelling-place, which 'contains simultaneously all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose [...] and is reduced to a sort of zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications' (*WDZ*, p. 48). Writing, for Barthes and Grenier both, 'is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating' (*WDZ*, p. 20). This last quotation is from the essay 'Political Modes of Writing', and it encapsulates not only Grenier and Coolidge's arguments for the organic nature of writing but also the political justification for writing this way. This is particularly relevant to Andrews; as Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, even his early texts display the political concerns that characterise his contributions to poetics. The long, list-like forms of the poems Perloff examines, moving diagonally left to right down the page, seek a situation where, as Andrews writes, '[r]eferentiality is diminished by organizing the language around other features or axes [...] their physicality'.¹⁶ 'Our vocabulary, this catalogue implies, is not adequate to what happens around us'.¹⁷ Andrews' use of relationships between words ('crypto-structures'), or lack thereof, is such that 'the

¹⁶ Andrews, 'Text and Context', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, 31-8 (p. 33).

¹⁷ Perloff, 'A Syntax of Contrariety', *Aerial* 9 (1997), pp. 234-8, reproduced at marjorieperloff.com <<http://marjorieperloff.com/stein-duchamp-picasso/andrews-contrariety/>> [accessed 23rd June 2014].

reader ha[s] to do an unusual amount of work in constructing the text'.¹⁸ As Peter Quartermain puts it, 'Forcing the reader's improvisation, it moves to the limits of reading.'¹⁹ In 'The Dwelling-Place', the texts included are more like clouds, spread in a less orderly way across the page, so that Perloff's elaborate reading of the list-like poems as mocking highly codified Renaissance lyric is even harder to apply, and our writerly construction work is increased even more. Two are a mixture of real words with no context and *zaum*, much like David Melnick's *Pcoet*, but without the same impact given that Andrews' are not part of a larger project.²⁰ The middle poem of the three, however, 'Lenin and Philosophy' (p. 105), is composed of phrases which look more like fragments, even fragments of speech, a relationship being established between a 'speaker' and listener ('listen!').²¹ Yet even in this very short poem, that relationship is disrupted, and its creation and disruption become two poles (or two borders, '2 oceans', Atlantic and Pacific) of a poem that tries to examine it. It has to be built, it seems, in order to take it apart – 'talk to interrupt'. In her essay, Perloff begins to examine Andrews' commitment to the notion that 'Author dies, writing begins', which is a quotation from his review of *Image Music Text*. Andrews' own engagement with Barthes sees him adopt an anticapitalist reading of 'The Death of the Author', which I will examine in the next chapter.

¹⁸ Perloff, 'A Syntax of Contrariety'.

¹⁹ Quartermain, *Stubborn Poetries: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), p. 233.

²⁰ *Zaum* is a Russian Futurist poetic technique making use of words which, while denoting nothing, look like the language of the poet and usually appear (almost) pronounceable.

²¹ This title is that of a collection of essays by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, published in English a few years before this poem appeared: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). It is likely also a reference to Althusser's theory of 'interpellation', the idea that subjectivity is created by the institutions of society, and which this poetry which effaces established connections aims to draw attention to and perhaps break down.

Silliman's use of Barthes, however, is rather different. As is the case with *Roland Barthes*, certain language writers are charmed by *Writing Degree Zero*, enough to pick and choose their favourite passages from it, but apparently not enough to want to wrestle with it and try to reconcile its flaws. For instance, this early Barthes' conception of 'modern poetics' is simplistic, apparently under-researched, and not formulated with English-language modernisms in mind. Unlike the boundary between readerly and writerly, over which Barthes admits he may 'stumble' and 'err' (*PT*, p. 4), the classical/modern distinction is a more rigid critical tool:

in classical art, a ready-made thought generates an utterance which 'expresses' or 'translates' it. [...] In modern poetics, on the contrary, words produce a kind of formal continuum from which there gradually emanates an intellectual or emotional density which would have been impossible without them; speech is then the solidified time of a more spiritual gestation, during which the 'thought' is prepared, installed little by little by the contingency of words. (*WDZ*, p. 43)

It is not exactly clear what corpus of poetry Barthes intends by the 'modern', or indeed whether he always means the same thing. Strategies and effects differ so greatly within the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that we cannot imagine that 'modern' is just a time period. Commentators have linked a variety of the values of innovative poetics to the *scriptible* articulated by the future Barthes, but not all of

these poets are going to conform to all of the standards or agree with all of the terms.²² One glaring example here is the idea of ‘speech’ (*parole*, which is also the French replaced by ‘utterance’ in the passage quoted above), with which Grenier took issue in his short 1970 essay ‘On Speech’, which Silliman was later to include in his seminal anthology of language writing *In the American Tree* (1986). There Grenier asks, ‘where are the words most themselves?’²³ He seeks the answer to this question in the very core of modernism which he sees as ‘where words are born’, his two examples being Zukofsky’s ‘azure / as ever / adz aver’ and Stein’s ‘Roast potatoes for’ from *Tender Buttons*.

In this Zukofsky poem, entitled ‘Azure’, the word ‘adz’ could be read as ‘adze’ (an ancient tool) or as ‘ads’, advertisements, spelled phonetically. One of these two things is bearing witness, ‘averring’, to ‘azure as ever’ – the enduring (‘ever’) fact that the sky is blue (‘azure’). The poem functions by a ‘linguistic lapping [...] the rushing and receding of perception’.²⁴ In such a concentrated poem, a small space with such a great plurality of meanings, different ideas present themselves to different readers, or as a single reader’s attention shifts from one element to another. This is a specifically flexible form of the ‘intellectual or emotional density’ that Barthes claims ‘gradually emanates’ (*WDZ*, p. 43) from words, for while the meanings fluctuate, the words function to ‘concretise’ the text. Similarly, Stein demonstrates her belief that by modern poetry’s new treatment of

²² See, for instance, Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 57-8, and Nerys Williams, *Reading Error: The Lyric and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 13.

²³ Grenier, ‘On Speech’, pp. 477-8.

²⁴ Marnie Parsons, *Touch Monkeys* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 101-2.

words, meaning, which has become heavily codified in literature, can be revitalised.²⁵ Apparently Stein once responded to a student's question after giving her lecture 'Poetry as Grammar' by saying that in her famous 'a rose is a a rose is a rose', 'the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years'.²⁶ Silliman writes that '[b]y removal of context, Grenier prevents most leaps beyond the level of grammatic integration'.²⁷ Stein's *Tender Buttons* operates on this basis too: given words with no context to prompt 'leaping' to thematics, we are forced to attend to them ourselves, rather than expecting them to be arranged for us by an author. Certainly Grenier's own poetry does not refuse to refer but rather engages in this 'disruption of context'. His *Sentences* consists of five hundred five-by-eight-inch index cards, each featuring a short poem.²⁸ Although these poems are a kind of 'sequence', the reader is never sure if the whole text has been read, forcing us out of linear reading and, along with the similar compression effects we see in Zukofsky and Stein, into an alternative, reader-directed strategy of production rather than consumption.

²⁵ This process, she believes, has been taking place since the Renaissance, but especially in the nineteenth century to which Stein is most directly reacting. The poet Lew Welch appropriates one of Stein's own phrases (from her 'Portrait' of Bernard Faÿ) to describe her use of words: 'They are found able and edible. And so they are predetermined and trimmed'. Welch, *How I Read Gertrude Stein* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1996).

²⁶ Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. vi.

²⁷ Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), p. 87. (Hereafter *NS*.)

²⁸ The publisher, Whale Cloth Press, has made the work available online <http://www.whalecloth.org/grenier/sentences_.htm> [accessed 11th April 2014]. In 2011, newly-discovered copies retrieved from a forgotten storage unit sold for \$1,000 each. Al Filreis, 'Twenty-six boxes containing Grenier's "Sentences" discovered', *Jacket 2* (31st July 2011) <<https://jacket2.org/commentary/twenty-six-boxes-containing-greniers-sentences-discovered>> [accessed 11th April 2014].

All of the poems in 'The Dwelling-Place', and the later works of these writers, rely on these alternative serialities, like Baracks' paragraphs where phrases and sentences do not build towards an argument or story, DiPalma's columns of words, or Coolidge's lines derived from the dictionary and thus arbitrarily organised from the point of view of meaning. While 'On Speech' is a starting-point, Silliman is trying to define beyond Grenier here, to extract something from Barthes which is more than just better access to an object but a 'frontal', 'simultaneous' journey or wandering through language, the poems 'produced and consumed with a peculiar curiosity, a kind of sacred relish' (*WDZ*, p. 48). Barthes' metaphor of hunger here has to be looked at closely, and we see that Jonathan Culler's translation of 'voracious' for *surmourissant* would be even more misleading in this connection.²⁹ The signs are 'overnourishing', so that the reading strategy that is adopted is on the order of the nibble, the graze. The 'proposed waterpoems of Jim Rosenberg', 'the reader to swim from term to term' (p. 119), are held up in the essay as examples; the reader must direct herself through the texts. Whether it is between small texts of a few lines (Grenier), between phrases within a paragraph (Baracks), or even individual words within a poem (DiPalma's third poem, 'ground waters graced'), what Silliman finds worthy of attention is this relationship which makes it impossible for readers to be mere consumers. As Steve McCaffery writes, these are texts which 'cannot be consumed but only produced.'³⁰ Silliman was to return to theorise this in 'The New Sentence', where he holds up the sentence as the unit of poetry, but he writes there that Coolidge 'resists even that much integrating energy', that his phrases are 'decontextualised [...] readymades' (*NS*, p. 88). I believe this also

²⁹ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 201.

³⁰ McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof, 2000), p. 150.

applies to Melnick's zaum poems in *Pcoet*. Barthes, in theorising only the Word-centred organising principle ('inflexion', *WDZ*, p. 47) of modern poetry, does not identify the 'critical mass' beyond which it is 'impossible for units to continue to integrate beyond grammatical levels' (*NS*, p. 76). Silliman takes this as the point of departure to assert the importance to his poetics of the sentence, and this appears to be where he leaves off with 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?'

In each of the nine poets featured here, Silliman finds something that promotes the idea of 'language as the center of whatever activity poems might be'.³¹ But while some, like Coolidge and Grenier, have gone on to become quasi-canonical, others' work was thought important enough to be included at the time. Barbara Baracks, the only woman selected, was an active member of the poetry community in San Francisco and New York and edited *Big Deal*, an influential magazine published in New York between 1973 and 1977 which Baracks typeset herself to keep down costs.³² However, the last publication I have been able to locate bearing Baracks' name is from 1982.³³ Her other work appears to have retained the qualities in Silliman's selections, 'prose modes where referents shift constantly',³⁴ yet her book *No Sleep*, published by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press in 1977, was a sequence of autobiographical prose pieces which, unlike those included in 'The Dwelling

³¹ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 118.

³² Gwen Allen (ed.), *Artist's Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), p. 244; Ann Vickery, *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 64. For the influence of *Big Deal* on other publishing practice such as Hejinian's Tuumba Press, see Vickery, pp. 72-3.

³³ Barbara Baracks, 'Performance Criticism: Studying Mad Pursuit', *The Flue* 2;1 (1982), unpag. See Toni Sant, *Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-garde: A History of the Future* (Chicago: Intellect, 2011), p. 158.

³⁴ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 119.

Place', follow a relatively linear narrative. Barthes herself shows little sign of ever having been interested in Barthes.

The same can be said of visual poet Lee DeJasu, who is represented by a cartoonish drawing of a train station and a pointillist drawing of a sleeping person. Both images incorporate blocks of handwritten text. The station describes someone ('BARRY') leaving on a train in detached and theoretical language: 'SADNESS WAS / NOW (AN EVOLUTIONARY WORD) WELL / DEVELOPED AGAINST / THE USUAL SUPERFICIAL INVESTIGATION OF PARTING' (p. 108). I see no reason to infer Barthes' involvement, and Silliman is unable to link DeJasu and Barthes either, but rather aligns him with Grenier's 'disruption of context' (p. 118). This is stated as one of the ways to 'diminish the reference', the main one being to create 'non-referring structures' like Coolidge and DiPalma. Grenier disrupts context by using broadside or flashcard form (shown as far as possible in a standard-size magazine by being spread around the page), removing the usual relations that let us know where we are with the classical text. DeJasu does something very similar except that there are drawings surrounding the words, which offer a non-verbal context. This can be seen as bringing to bear the 'second-order memory' Barthes ascribes to words, that memory 'which mysteriously persists in the midst of new meanings' (*WDZ*, p. 16). This is the corollary of the loss of 'vertical' connections: words in that situation reach out towards new ones with those 'innumerable possible connections' because of that mysterious persistence of associations. Even though this Barthes precedes radical poststructuralist queries about authorship, a poetics defined by this conception of the word will be by necessity freed from the confines of intentionality.

As such, readers confronting the texts that make up ‘The Dwelling-Place’ do not expect to come away with thematic interpretations that the poet has put there for us to find. Indeed, if we try to apply them, we end up with the kind of prematurely ‘naturalised’ interpretations on which Forrest-Thomson pours scorn in *Poetic Artifice*. When Gerald Kamber offers a reading of a line (‘Dahlia! dahlia! que Delilia’) by French poet Max Jacob that posits representation of an ‘everyday’ experience (Delila gripping drooping flowers), an ‘empirical’ situation, she calls Kamber’s attempt ‘comical’ because ‘it is poetry’s function to transcend the world’ (*PA*, p. 132). What Delila is doing is not what is of interest. Likewise, when we read Coolidge’s ‘as of district’ and ‘stairs [...] stairs though more and more’, trying to map this imagined location will not yield results. Rather, spatial terms are examined for their nature and descriptive powers beyond any one situation of use.

Forrest-Thomson writes that when we appreciate such works, ‘[o]ur pleasure in the line comes from a realisation that what seems at first a complete surrender of the conscious mind to an impersonal network of meaningless verbal resemblances in fact reveals the latent intentionality of poetic language’: ‘we ourselves dwell on the poet’s conscious skill’ (*PA*, p. 132). She may see this as an argument against Barthes and those ‘certain French theorists’, but it can be reconciled to a Barthesian view of authorship. The word ‘skill’ does not enter into ‘The Death of the Author’, but nor is it entirely ruled out. The writer’s ‘only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them’. This ‘only power’, however, leaves considerable scope for the many practices of modern poetry, and some of these might indeed involve ‘intentionality’ and ‘skill’, if these things can take place in the constant (continuous, *pace* Stein) present of the ‘modern scriptor’ in which ‘language [...] ceaselessly calls into question all origins’ (*IMT*, p. 145-6). It is not Barthes’ contention that all writing is unconscious or automatic, or

that there is no difference between an unpracticed writer and a ‘skilled’ one. Indeed, the experiments and ‘tasks’ of Proust and the Surrealists are explored (p. 144). The difference is that for Barthes, ‘refusing to assign a “secret”, an ultimate meaning, to the text’ (p. 147) is seen in the abstract as something it is desired Barthes’ ideal *scriptor* or else writerly reader will do, whereas for Forrest-Thomson it is an act of skill on the part of a particular poet like Jacob. This is also the case for Coolidge’s critics, who admire him for his ‘concrete detail’³⁵ and the attempt by radical means to access things and the world directly, which is judged to be a virtue in the following terms: ‘We can ask of a person or a work of art, if we feel the authority, nothing more than a wholeness of intention in the willing of one thing – “the very so”’.³⁶ This is a quotation from Coolidge’s 1974 work, *The Maintains*, which is in turn likely a reference to his *The So: Poems 1966* (published in 1971):

very such small

the very so

such a such

lasts even or as means are about the so

said so to say mingles means and maybes³⁷

³⁵ Alan Halsey, ‘From a Diary of Reading Clark Coolidge’, *Jacket* 13 (April 2001) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/13/coolidge-halsey.html>> [accessed 1st May 2014].

³⁶ Charles Bernstein, ‘Maintaining Space: Clark Coolidge’s Early Work’ in *Content’s Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), 259-65 (p. 265).

³⁷ Coolidge, *The So: Poems 1966* (San Francisco: This Press, 1974), p. 98.

Here, at the end of the book, a metapoetic comment is being made which is largely avoided in Coolidge; usually, the avoidance of grammar and ordinary-language meaning is such that we cannot sensibly paraphrase them, and criticism does better when it focusses on formal procedures and techniques, which include that very semantic evasiveness. Although the exact procedure is unclear, we are told that *The Maintains* is a long poem made primarily out of language from the dictionary, a strategy which Barrett Watten reads as a comment on the relationship of the individual word to language as a whole: ‘The dictionary definition of *The Maintains* offers a metonym at another linguistic level: the definiendum is the “part” to the “whole” of the semantic component in language, which is ironically addressed’.³⁸ Coolidge is ironising a view of language that reduces its operations to this metonymic way of accessing semantic correspondences through the dictionary. By contrast, the alternative view of language is that expressed by this metapoetic end comment which considers ‘the so’ to which the poet has drilled down with these procedures. The phrase ‘such a such’ plays on ‘such and such’, emphasising its opposite meaning: so much this very thing, not this vague collection of things. Yet paradoxically it is arrived at by a process which ‘mingles means and maybes’ – combines the dictionary definitions of words with other associations evoked by the procedure of putting them next to one another (and alliterating them to bring them even closer, a procedure not common in the rest of the book; there are exceptions, but not a collection of alliterative words with this density). ‘Fixed connections being abolished’, as we have heard many times before, this is what replaces them.

³⁸ Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 104.

However, Silliman in ‘Surprised by Sign’ would not have been considering *The Maintains*, or at least only incomplete sections of it he might have read in journals. More likely he would have been thinking of *The So*, which Coolidge himself is referencing here, and which Bernstein draws on too, who is unBarthesian in his aligning of ‘the authority’ and ‘the wholeness of intention’.³⁹ What it would mean for ‘the so’ of *The So* to be an ‘authority’ can be refined by comparison with the reading of some of the poems of that collection – which were also included in *Space* (1970) – by Tom Orange. He has it that ‘sound is leading sense’, and Coolidge has in his ‘concentration on sound, relationality, and denotative resistances’ ‘tapped into the kind of verbal energy’ that his own earlier work, and that other poets of the time such as Kenneth Koch and Ted Berrigan, were, writes Orange, unable to reach.⁴⁰ For while some texts of the New York School (an appellation not quite as problematic as ‘language writing’, but close) were uninterested in linguistic innovation and disjunction or in theory and philosophy of language as a resource for poetry, others were important touchstones for the experiments of writers like Bernstein, who cites Koch’s ‘When the Sun tries to Go On’ as a text which works with ‘incapacity and awkwardness and fragmentation as an experimental dimension’.⁴¹ For Orange, Coolidge manages to master that incapacity, to ‘tap into’

³⁹ Bernstein, ‘Maintaining Space’, p. 265. In Bernstein the difference between these ideas seems to be trivial, whereas in Barthes, intention is only part of authority. In ‘From Work to Text’, intention is only part of a broader ‘filiation’, whereby the author is ‘the father and the owner’ of the work. This means attention to that author’s ‘declared intentions’ for ‘literary science’, whereas for society it is a question of legal ownership (*IMT*, p. 160). We might say that for language writing (or at least for Bernstein here, perhaps Andrews and Silliman too), intention is every bit as politically important as the general social notion of ‘authority’.

⁴⁰ Tom Orange, ‘Arrangement and Density: A Context for Early Clark Coolidge’, *Jacket* 13 (April 2001) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/13/coolidge-o-a.html>> [accessed 15th April 2014].

⁴¹ Quoted in Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 191.

the ‘energy’ of these paralinguistic functions which other poets did not know how to control.

This is refined in ‘The Death of the Author’ from the raw material of *Writing Degree Zero*: there, ‘a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author’s personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place’ (*WDZ*, p. 10), but in ‘The Death of the Author’, the ‘subnature of expression’ is replaced by ‘inscription’ and the text becomes ‘a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself’ (*IMT*, p. 146). Forrest-Thomson’s view is turned on its head: what she sees as ‘latent intentionality’ (*PA*, p. 132) is here *ascribed* to the ‘impersonal network of meaningless verbal resemblances’ which she thought was created by that intentionality. The connections of the ‘network’ are writ small in Coolidge’s *Suite V*, which sees each page print two words, one at the centre of the top, one at the centre of the bottom (‘taps / buns’, ‘keys / ohms’, ‘cans / arms’).⁴² Silliman in his essay ‘Ubeity’ (hailed as one of the most important early commentaries on Coolidge)⁴³ writes that ‘content’ in *Space* and *The Maintains* is close to ‘the “coherence” by which Roland Barthes defines reality in a language system’, going on to declare: ‘Coolidge has in fact created both’.⁴⁴ This précis of Barthes on the coherence of reality in a language system is hard to peg to a particular element of Barthes’ writing, but considering the elements of Coolidge being

⁴² Coolidge, *Suite V* (New York: Adventures in Poetry, 1973), pp. 1-3.

⁴³ Adam Maillet, ‘Critical Approaches to Arrangement, Sound, and Syntax in the Poetry of Clark Coolidge: An Annotated Bibliography’, University of Louisiana-Lafayette website, 10th November 2011 <<http://www.ucla.edu/~amm7811/biblio.html>> [accessed 15th April 2014]; Sam Ladkin, ‘Glancing paintings and poems: figuration and abstraction in Clark Coolidge’s *Polaroid* and Willem de Kooning’s *Excavation*’, *Textual Practice* 26:3 (2012), p. 436.

⁴⁴ Silliman, ‘Ubeity’, *Stations* 5, ‘A Symposium on Clark Coolidge’ (Winter 1978), p. 20.

examined here, Silliman has in mind either the systematic, ‘coherent’ establishment of a linguistic system in scientific projects like *Elements of Semiology*, or, what is more likely given his lack of engagement with *Elements* elsewhere in print around this period, it is a drawing on some of Barthes’ earliest movements towards those later views, specifically with regard to writing. In ‘Political Modes of Writing’, Barthes writes that writing is, ‘thanks to the shadow cast by its system of signs, the image of a speech which had a structure even before it came into existence’ (*WDZ*, p. 19). Consider this alongside Grenier’s essentialism of the word: ‘We don’t know the restrictions imposed by speech patterns/conventions [...] won’t until writing clears the air’.⁴⁵

‘Ubeity’ also includes that same quotation from Barthes as ‘Surprised by Sign’ as one of its epigraphs, and defines its titular concept as the ‘horizontal dimension’ of the meaning of a word, which is ‘no longer just the interface of its acoustic form and its aim at the image-track, it is also its location and aim [...] at earlier and later occurrences’.⁴⁶ Barthes speaks of the ‘vertical project’ of modern poetry after fixed connections, so we can see Silliman’s ‘horizontal’ as the new connections which replace the contextual claims of the classical to structure an ethics, a humanism. ‘Modern poetry’, as exemplified for Barthes by Char, ‘is beyond this diffuse tone, this precious aura, which are, indeed, a mode of writing, usually termed poetic feeling’ (*WDZ*, p. 51). As we have seen, Barthes in ‘Myth Today’ sees poetry’s posited reality as something ‘*ultimately* impermeable, irreducible’.⁴⁷ Does this apply to modern poetry as well, in the terms of this opposition to classical

⁴⁵ Grenier, ‘On Speech’, p. 477.

⁴⁶ Silliman, ‘Ubeity’, p. 26.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 158 (emphasis in the original).

poetry? Barthes' 'modern poetry' bears a different relationship to reality than was striven for in 'classical poetry' (*WDZ*, pp. 47-9), but it cannot be entirely conflated with the 'writerly' texts he discusses in his later work. However we account for these discrepancies in Barthes' thought, for Silliman it is not only the theoretical ideas themselves but often the styling of a theorist's expressions that makes them 'so useful, suggestive, and quotable to poets' (*NS*, p. 70). Likewise, at the end of his essay on Coolidge, Bernstein writes: 'Poetry need not win a philosophical argument; it shows, in its purity, what it wants and what it cares about'.⁴⁸ A text that can be engaged with on poetry's terms is more important than scientifically precise definitions.

Critics who nevertheless attempt thematic interpretations often arrive at them by assuming metapoetic allegories, a class of reading worth considering. Michael Golston, in suggesting that Coolidge's work attempts to blend poetry and photography, drafts Barthes into his argument, but I will not examine this here as he (rightly) avoids suggesting Coolidge is making direct use of Barthes' ideas. However, Golston's thesis is that Coolidge's career 'can be read as as an ongoing, allegorical enactment of the process of filmmaking, from its initial phase as a microlevel chemical process of crystal distillation (in *Space* and *The Maintains*)' and on throughout the process of film production in his later books.⁴⁹ The beginning of this singular and I think tenuous argument is the assertion that *Space* 'metaphorically equates words and rocks [...] the first step in allegorically transcoding photography

⁴⁸ Bernstein, 'Maintaining Space', p. 265.

⁴⁹ Golston, 'At Clark Coolidge: Allegory and the Early Works', *American Literary History* 13;2 (Summer 2001), p. 296.

and poetry by writing film's material (crystalline) ground'.⁵⁰ Golston's evidence for this is to select certain phrases from Coolidge's work and see them as metapoetic comments, reading for instance the line 'trilobite trilobites' as describing the poems.⁵¹ Golston's commentary on that passage is problematic:

While the words here resist referring in any obvious manner to a discernible subject, they do point to one another within the form of the poem itself, which can be read as a constellation of words with certain semantic and syntactic possibilities.⁵²

This fails to take into account that the poem itself might be a 'discernible subject', and that metapoetic readings are not 'obvious'. When dealing with poems that are made up of language and concerned with language, poetry becomes a very readily discernible subject, but Golston's formulation is a perfect example of how that can be overly reductive. He sees the poem as being, once we have accounted for 'the obvious peculiarities of such writing', more or less an ordinary-language statement about its own operation. Silliman reads Coolidge very differently. He sees the works as 'non-referring structures' and quotes Tom Clark's description of 'The Clark Coolidge Code Angle': 'words are a surface intended to reveal "Neural activity [...]"

⁵⁰ Golston, 'At Clark Coolidge', p. 298.

⁵¹ Coolidge, *Space* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 68.

⁵² Golston, 'At Clark Coolidge', p. 296.

a multiplicity of simultaneous operations functioning in a continuum.”⁵³ The important difference here is in the words ‘reveal’ and ‘angle’: Silliman and Clark appear to believe that the mind or brain’s internal functions are actually depicted, and not just allegorised, in Coolidge’s work.⁵⁴ This is part of what prompts Silliman to refer to Barthes in the first place, saying that in the passage above quoted from ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, Barthes ‘confronts diminished referentiality as achieved by effacing *connections*’.⁵⁵ Sam Ladkin explores the way in which Coolidge altered his stance on the notion of the non-referential; Coolidge insisted on the possibility of language without reference in one interview with Barrett Watten, but then retracted this years later.⁵⁶ Silliman’s compromise is that non-referentiality can be *worked towards* in this effacement, which reveals the underlying nature of the word. The poems are metapoetic in the sense that they show us something about poetry (as, in a sense, all poems do), but it is possible to extract those discoveries without reading *Space* or *The Maintains* as coded *ars poetica*.

This independence from even metapoetic meaning is yet more evident in a work like David Melnick’s *Pcoet*, and in some ways Melnick an outer bound for Silliman. ‘Even Melnick’s metalanguage is based on its relation to a vocabulary of

⁵³ Silliman, ‘Surprised by Sign’, p. 118; Tom Clark, ‘What if Jimi Hendrix...?’, *Big Sky* 3 (1972) <<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/BIGSKY/html/pictures/003.html>> [accessed 11th April 2014].

⁵⁴ ‘The direct experience of the brain is always invisible’, writes Tom Clark in ‘What if Jimi Hendrix...?’, but there is an implicit suggestion throughout his essay that certain poetic practices provide access to these reading operations. This idea runs the length of language writing, retained in Bernstein’s *Artifice of Absorption*. Moreover, a mutual interest between language writing and cognitive poetics is signalled in George Lakoff’s essays in *Poetics Journal* issues 1 and 6.

⁵⁵ Silliman, ‘Surprised by Sign’, p. 118 (emphasis in the original).

⁵⁶ Ladkin, ‘Glancing paintings and poems’, p. 436.

derived terms'.⁵⁷ We have looked already at Barthes' 'Literature as Metalanguage' with reference to Forrest-Thomson's use of it in 'Poetry as Knowledge'. There he considers that experimental literature (he mentions Robbe-Grillet), in becoming self-reflexive, enters 'that asymptotic zone where literature appears to destroy itself as a language object without destroying itself as a metalanguage'.⁵⁸ This seems to be the boundary we have just been negotiating with Coolidge, but I do not believe 'Surprised by Sign' is drawing on this sense of the term 'metalanguage'. Rather, Silliman applies it to *zaum*: 'not simply neologisms or distortions of existing language, but letters and phonemes structured largely out of [the poet's] sense of sound'.⁵⁹ Melnick's *zaum*-like operations are for Silliman something which by its very nature as sound takes on certain properties and qualities of language, activating meaning-forming impulses which are frustrated, producing a cloud of possible associations gestures beyond, *meta*-, language. In so doing, it comments upon the limitations of what languages makes comprehensible, as meta-physics addresses that which lies beyond the world comprehensible to physics. The title *Pcoet* suggests 'poet' and 'pocket', and highlights the plosive *p*, giving it force and perhaps also playfulness. This also works over the operations of a whole page:

sadd bier

metapoif

⁵⁷ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 118 (emphasis in the original).

⁵⁸ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 120.

lid cift ure,

hid tyer⁶⁰

The first line has an approximate ordinary-language reading which is vaguely comical, which is found elsewhere *Pcoet* – like the unexpected ‘sod you’ in the middle of poem 41 – as here ‘sad beer’ evokes the phrase ‘to cry in one’s beer’, to feel sorry for oneself.⁶¹ The double d in ‘sadd’ suggests a slow, mournful delivery, perhaps to the point of irony. But a ‘bier’ spelled thus is more sincerely solemn as it is also a stand on which a coffin is placed and carried. The next line’s ‘lid’ and ‘cift’ suggest the lid of the coffin, the coffin itself with the c, f, and i of ‘cift’, and the conflation of the two words into ‘lift’. Then, ‘ure’ is close to ‘urn’ but also gives ‘your’ phonetically, giving the vague sense this is all addressed to a companion. When reading *Pcoet*, these strategies that we go through are not arranged in a *Poetic-Artifice*-like programmatic order. Instead, we flick through them almost at random (like the cards of Grenier’s *Sentences* as opposed to Forrest-Thomson’s tidy rolodex of levels). Part of what separates this from another kind of poem is that there is no preferred or ‘right’ thematic reading on which we are likely to agree.

⁶⁰ Melnick, *Pcoet* (San Francisco: G.A.W.K., 1975)
<<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/PCOET/html/pictures/2425.html>> [accessed 24th February 2014], unpag. (Section 11). Silliman refers to this book in his essay dated Christmas 1973, so he likely saw it before publication.

⁶¹ Richard A. Spears, *McGraw-Hill’s Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs* (Chicago: McGraw-Hill, 2005), p. 135.

When these operations are aligned with ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, we can say that these poets’ ‘words’ have ‘abolished’ *fixed* connections, but they generate instead multiple ‘possible’ connections. *Pcoet* takes the examination of language that is possible in Grenier, Coolidge, and Palmer to another level: in ‘modern poetry’, writes Barthes, ‘there lies a sort of existential geology, in which is gathered the total content of the Name’ (*WDZ*, p. 48), but in *Pcoet*, that ‘geology’ (which I take to include striation, distribution over levels) is shown to extend beyond the established Saussurean arbitrary signifier. As in Duncan’s *kopóltuš*, the property of meaning extends even beyond the ‘Name’. Silliman phrases it as if to diminish that quality and reign it in, tying it to Barthes – Melnick’s ‘terms’ are ‘derived’ – and thus to the work of the other eight poets in the collection, who all, Silliman writes, do their best to ‘diminish the reference’ of words and thus ‘redistribute’ the ‘balance’, forcing it over to sound or structure or some other element.⁶² Melnick’s next major work was to be *Men in Aïda* (1983), which takes the sounds of Homer’s *Iliad* and respells them so they can be understood as English.⁶³ Thus, *Menin aeide thea Peleiadeo Achileos* (‘sing, goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus’) becomes ‘Men in Aïda, they appeal, eh? A day, O Achilles!’ Language is put to an extreme test, for as in *Pcoet*, we see that forming words gives no guarantees as to the assumptions of communication and comprehension on which authorship relies.

⁶² Silliman, ‘Surprised by Sign’, p. 118. We see this in Forrest-Thomson, too; many of her poetic strategies force the reader into ‘good naturalisation’ by shifting poetic function away from ordinary-language meaning and reference.

⁶³ This form is known as a homophonic translation; for a thorough treatment of the topic, see Jeff Hilson, ‘Homophonic Translation: Sense and Sound’ in *Music, Text and Translation*, ed. by Helen Julia Minors (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 95-105.

Whatever Silliman means when he says Barthes is a 'source' for DiPalma, certainly we have an obviously Barthesian work in DiPalma's poem *January Zero*.⁶⁴ Michel Delville writes that it 'seem[s] to take Barthes' *degré zéro* literally'.⁶⁵ However, if we see the title as a date, in the absence of a cardinal number for zero (*zeroth* is specialist or nonstandard) it becomes the way to describe a date outside of the year, a timeless time. This is connected to the other meaning that can be inferred from the title: the zero is the zero degree, 'a negative momentum and the inability to maintain it within time's flow' (*WDZ*, p. 5). *January Zero* may be read as an extreme attempt to reach Barthes' degree zero, or even as a parody of the works that approach it, like those of Albert Camus. Where Camus' *Outsider* flatly describes his actions, DiPalma's narrator allows us to get not even this impression. We are not left thinking this character has (even) an outsider's priorities for what is important. The sentences simply report the action of a present moment. Indeed, pronouns like 'it' are seldom used; instead, the object is repeated from the previous sentence. 'I wash the glass. I dry the glass. I give the glass to you'.⁶⁶ This is the very opposite of the highly wrought, 'flaubertised' bourgeois style described in *Writing Degree Zero* (pp. 65-6), because the function of zero-degree writing is to make such a style irrelevant. Take another example of this pattern. 'This is my book. I open my book. I turn the pages. I look at the pictures. I read the book. I close the book'. It sounds like a children's

⁶⁴ First published in the journal *Sun & Moon* 11 (Spring 1981), pp. 149-51, but later appeared as the pamphlet *January Zero*, illustrated by Elisabeth Brandfass (West Branch: Coffee House Press, 1984).

⁶⁵ Delville, *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 94. Susan Sontag rightly points out in her preface that Barthes does not in fact spend much time discussing the notion of 'degree zero writing' itself (*WDZ*, pp. xvii-xviii). The main exception she identifies is his elegant formulation of it in the book's introduction, where he writes that in writing degree zero it is 'as if Literature, having tended for a hundred years now to transmute its surface into a form with no antecedents, could no longer find purity anywhere but in the absence of all signs' (p. 5). However, when Delville formulates 'Barthes' *degré zéro*', he uses 'colourless writing' as well, which is much the same idea; see *WDZ*, p. 78.

⁶⁶ *January Zero*, unpaginated.

book, the writing becoming ‘reduced’ into the language of learners, and the subject matter here reflects that. ‘I look at a picture’ appears on another page, in the paragraph beginning ‘I pick up the letter’. In the Coffee House Press chapbook, each paragraph of *January Zero* has its own page, with the bottom line always in the same position, leaving a wide lower margin and above it a space of varying size between the top line of the paragraph and the running title at the top of every page. In this sense it has the format of a picture book without the pictures, except in this version there are pictures, but they are not colourful children’s-book ones. Elisabeth Brandfass’ three drawings – one of an armchair by a door, one of a teapot, cutlery, and pens, one of a coat and hat hanging up – are stark and simple. All are dark blue, and use thick lines. There is a marked lack of perspective in the teapot drawing, where the teapot is side-on but the utensils and rectangular surface on which they are sitting are drawn as if from above. *January Zero* is a kind of picture-book degree zero: reflecting back on literature its nature as language, its capacity to describe and caption scenes, and the everyday, is called into question.

However, *January Zero* is not only a demonstration of a theory its author may have had some connection to in the past. Indeed, it rebels against the principles on which it appears to be operating. On the first page, if we follow the movement of the glass closely, we read about a glass being washed and dried, then ‘I give the glass to you’. Later: ‘I take a clean glass. I fill the clean glass with milk. I give a glass of milk to you. I drink a glass of milk’. If, as I have suggested, a deliberate attempt to avoid pronouns is being made as an extreme strategy to avoid the hegemonic relations that emerge from classical rhetoric, then the use of the definite or indefinite article breaks that rule. The objects in the world are to be re-inscribed with each new sentence as some extremes of the theory around this suggest they might be. Barthes writes that in ‘objective literature’, ‘language must withdraw from an encounter

which could only be alien to the object'.⁶⁷ In this way, mere 'poetry or eloquence' is avoided, but for Silliman, the space between sentences as lifting-off point in fact contains the revolutionary poetic potential the new sentence exists to realise (*NS*, p. 92). In *January Zero*, however, syntactic relations are being reworked, any hint of 'eloquence' deconstructed by turning the neutral 'a glass' into the determined 'the glass'. Value (the value of definitiveness) has already been assigned, arbitrarily, so the objectivity even of zero-degree inscription is suspect.

Let us look at this passage again. If we are keeping track of things, only one glass has been filled with milk. It has however been passed to you, and is not passed back to the speaker before the speaker drinks. But is it a natural way of reading, to painstakingly follow the minutest movement from sentence to sentence? In material hoping to become a commercial novel this would be declared a clear failure. But the rarefied, sparse text of *January Zero* merely sets itself up as narration, and then gives us reason to read it as a collection of parataxes like Silliman's *Tjanting* and other examples of the 'new sentence' (see below). It would thus break an implied contract of relevance that is not only literary but linguistic. As we saw with Forrest-Thomson, literature does not act like other kinds of language; to use the notion she borrows from Wittgenstein, it does not play the same language-games. An awareness of this may prompt a writer to make decisions which do not attempt to disguise that difference but rather to highlight it.

This is also true of Barrett Watten, who is represented in 'The Dwelling-Place' by two prose pieces, one of which is 'Methodical Descriptive Prose' (p. 117). Here he addresses some of the concerns of Silliman's commentary head-on, in a

⁶⁷ Barthes, 'Objective Literature', *Critical Essays*, p. 15.

‘methodical’, ‘descriptive’, prosaic way when taken sentence by sentence, but the overall design of the piece means that when considered overall into something else, which supports Silliman’s contentions artistically. In this piece from Watten’s *Opera*, prose passages tend to be constructed against the grain of external description.⁶⁸ We read prose looking for the narrative or argument, but here, the frustration of that expectation serves a purpose. Unlike semantically isolated lines, a paragraph of isolated sentences forces integration at the same time as they avoid it, and this tension creates its own effects. Silliman describes ‘Methodical Descriptive Prose’ as ‘self-referring’, with ‘innermost unit (word) pointing out to the sentence(s), outermost unit (paragraph) aimed back in, to the same point’.⁶⁹ The paragraph form is found to ‘redistribute’ balance across words by throwing new importance onto sentences. Take the sentence ‘Then again, again’.⁷⁰ A single word ‘again’ is repeated, enacting itself, but the ‘then’ makes the first ‘again’ into something else, part of an expression which turns an argument around to examine the other side. The second ‘again’ suggests a cycle: this happens over and over. ‘Methodical Descriptive Prose’, in its single-paragraph form, becomes a text where the site of argumentative focus is absent. In that sense it is much like a Stein paragraph. The piece ends: ‘Anyone will do what they can, emigrate to South America, build San Jose, tell any story they can get away with. Until they are stopped’.⁷¹ The word ‘anyone’ is close to the ‘any one’ that appears frequently in Stein, including her description of her own

⁶⁸ ‘Methodical Descriptive Prose’ is excerpted from *Opera – Works* (1975), but it does not appear in the version from his collected volume *Frame (1971-1990)*, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1997).

⁶⁹ Silliman, ‘Surprised by Sign’, p. 118.

⁷⁰ Watten, ‘Methodical Descriptive Prose’ in ‘The Dwelling-Place’, p. 117.

⁷¹ Watten, ‘Methodical Descriptive Prose’, p. 117.

novel *The Making of Americans*, which Watten uses as the epigraph to a 1998 essay on that text: 'I tried in *Making of Americans* to make any one one'.⁷² 'Anyone' is a noun which both refers to any member of the human world but also has the capacity to delimit that world – it refers to 'anyone who's anyone'. The full stop at the end of the penultimate sentence is a pivot between getting away with and being 'stopped', and many of Stein's works have the stated aim of giving subjectivity to a wide range of people. The prose paragraph, here as elsewhere, is a formal answer to the questions of limited subjectivity raised in Barthes' 'classical', and indeed more traditional contemporary, lyric. The 'superficial chain of intentions' of the 'classical flow' (*WDZ*, pp. 44-5) is exposed by a pseudo-chain whose form suggests what its content refuses.

Even when lines are employed in the poems of 'The Dwelling-Place', they take on a new significance. In Grenier's *Sentences*, where the most important poetic unit becomes that of the poem itself, the single flashcard. These may be one-line units, as in the one Silliman quotes, 'I drink rice', which benefits from 'clarity' as 'a consequence of the reduction of context'.⁷³ He advises us to read it as a kernel for 'audio-visual variants'; this is the only reading one can do, its possible readings flattened into Forrest-Thomson's visual-phonological level because the sentence has no self-contained 'meaning' beyond it. It becomes *Writing Degree Zero's* 'monolith', around which can become assembled 'the dense shadow of reflexes', that is, the verbal reflex of the reader towards variance (*WDZ*, p. 47).

⁷² Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America*, quoted in Barrett Watten, 'An Epic of Subjectivation: The Making of Americans', *Modernism/Modernity* 5;2 (1998) 95-121 (p. 95).

⁷³ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 119.

Other poems of Grenier's have more than one sentence, such as 'within the family / there are sweet exchanges'. If there can be said to be 'themes' in *Sentences*, one is family, and the names of Grenier's wife and daughter (Amy and Emily) recur frequently. Silliman's essay 'The New Sentence' posits a kind of sentence which does not depend upon relationships above the level of the sentence, which he says Grenier's free-floating sentences 'anticipate'.⁷⁴ However, they are not judged to be sentences in the sense of those linguistically undefined entities which are nevertheless clearly operating units of language, which Silliman is interested in for their existence beyond speech (*NS*, p. 78). They are 'more properly utterances', the sentences of speech, which still block grammatical 'integration' and move us 'toward the recognition of language' prized in Stein and Zukofsky (*NS*, pp. 87, 82).

The same is true for DiPalma, whose utterances of this kind are assembled in columns – not only in 'Gibbons Gibson' and 'ground waters graced', but in other early poems such as 'Lever' and 'The Wick', whose lines are so short and their syntax so fractured that they take on the character of lists.⁷⁵ Silliman writes: 'As horizontal associations suggest movement, a narration of affect, the vertical proposes paradigms' (p. 119). We can read in this the start of his interest in the sentence rather than the word. 'The New Sentence' criticises Barthes' view of the sentence in *Writing Degree Zero* as 'highly metaphoric' and 'primitive'. There is a moment, writes Silliman, 'not specifically identified by Barthes' beyond that general label of 'modern' poetry, 'when the signifier, freed suddenly from its servitude to an

⁷⁴ *NS*, p. 87. The title essay of that book originally appeared in 1977, with a slightly updated version appearing in this volume of the same name ten years later.

⁷⁵ Ray DiPalma, *Numbers and Tempers: Selected Early Poems 1966-1986* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1993), pp. 45-7, 49-61.

integrating hierarchy of syntactic relations, finds itself drained of any signified' (*NS*, p. 76). Mentions of the signifier and signified are spread throughout Silliman's poems, yet this is not in absolute capitulation to that way of seeing language: 'structuralism, another god'⁷⁶ is one of the sentences towards the end of *Tjanting*. Silliman also contrasts his new sentence with the unit-scheme of the structuralist literary interpretation *par excellence* he finds in *S/Z* – he reads the splitting of the text into the 'arbitrary' lexia as part of evasion of the question of the sentence by linguistic and literary analysis (*NS*, p. 75). However, Silliman's reading, although seeing that *S/Z* wanders from the 'arbitrary' boundaries it sets up, does not address the challenge this poses to structuralism. Barthes himself calls for a new theory of the sentence in 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?': 'Discourse is not simply an adding together of sentences; it is, itself, one great sentence', which is to say, the work is a homology of the sentence.⁷⁷ Silliman draws from Barthes an assertion that writing has moved from being focussed on the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic, which I believe is his parsing of the part of 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' where it is posited that connections may become, if not 'abolished', then 'reserved areas, a parody of themselves, and this void is necessary for the density of the Word to rise' (*WDZ*, p. 47). If, as Silliman contends, poems have moved from 'servitude to an integrating hierarchy' ('The New Sentence') to a duty to 'vertical' paradigms proposed by the newly independent Word ('Surprised by Sign'), then the sentence, homologically linked to discourse, is the ideal formal device.

However, two paragraphs are cut from this section in the later version of the essay. In the earlier, Silliman writes that Barthes was 'wrong' in saying that there has

⁷⁶ Silliman, *Tjanting*, p. 156.

⁷⁷ Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb' in *The Structuralist Controversy*, 134-56 (p. 136).

been an overall shift from syntagm to paradigm, and imposes a specifically class-based distinction on the paradigm-syntagm opposition, saying that these ‘poles [...] have become more and more identified with the limits, respectively, of high and low art’.⁷⁸ He also cites the work of the poet Helen Adam as an instance of ‘high lumpen art’ which also shows how poetry ‘can still aspire to the condition of low art’, enjoyed by those beyond the elite. Adam, whose work explored the ballad tradition as part of the ‘San Francisco Renaissance’, offered Duncan and others ‘the missing link to the tradition’.⁷⁹ Adam’s ‘lumpen art’ brought the once possible phenomenon of non-literary poetry into the present, imagining ballads not as culturally privileged forms but as everyday storytelling which did not require education for access. Silliman is correct that Barthes’ characterisation of the shift is unsubtle, as *Writing Degree Zero* so often is, especially on the subjects of poetry and history. But as we shall see, this desire to get away from literature as such has relevance both to Barthes and to Silliman’s doctrine of the new sentence.

Theories of the sentence are the cornerstone of Silliman’s career-spanning long poem, *Ketjak*. Perhaps the mostly widely discussed instalment is the book *Tjanting* (1981), a prose poem in ever-lengthening paragraphs whose sentences appear unrelated, with movement between them exemplifying the parataxis crucial to his thinking about the paragraph as the vital structure and ‘unit of measure’ (*NS*, p. 238). In another of the *Ketjak* books, Silliman writes: ‘When I return here to ideas

⁷⁸ Silliman, ‘The New Sentence’ in Donald Hall (ed.), *Claims for Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 377-98 (p. 382).

⁷⁹ Duncan, untitled biographical statement, *The New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 435.

previously stated, that's rhyme'.⁸⁰ Ideas, their order, and being 'left out' or not are the formal elements and compositional decisions, and the resulting completeness defines the text.⁸¹ In order to fit with this formalistic strategy, unconnectedness is one of the chief selection criteria for a sentence, if it is to conform to the anti-paradigm. Bob Perelman writes that in fact, 'the new sentence was not that drastic an innovation [...] the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with the surrounding sentences'.⁸² Let us see how that heightening and questioning in particular operates in *Ketjak* (the first and title poem of the great project) with regard to references and citations:

A blue flame. Drop City. All talk. On holiday, I read
Barthes' 'The Writer on Holiday'. Western movies. We
are each of us, somehow, given to a realisation of the
possibility of a disaster [...] it was an image we saw, no
more. I hate speech.⁸³

⁸⁰ Silliman, 'The Chinese Notebook' in *The Age of Huts: Compleat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 147-77 (p. 176).

⁸¹ See remark 143 for 'a question of leaving out' (p. 167), and remark 178: 'If I were to publish only parts of this, sections, it would alter the whole proposition' (p. 172).

⁸² Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 61.

⁸³ Silliman, 'Ketjak' in *The Age of Huts (Compleat)*, 1-101 (pp. 36-7).

'I hate speech' is from the Grenier essay 'On Speech', demonstrating the wide variety of unacknowledged quotations in this work, and its presence also brings up the essay's concerns; Silliman's resistance to syllogism is a resistance to speech, and Grenier writes that the structures 'thought required to "make sense" [...] won't until a writing clears the air'.⁸⁴ The same is true of 'The Writer on Holiday', one of the *Mythologies* which challenges 'the idea which our bourgeoisie maintains about its writers'.⁸⁵ Although we can see that the polyphony of voices between sentences precludes a straightforwardly autobiographical reading, there is an idea of a writer constructed in these works. The writing practice which is depicted in what look like glimpses of the voracious/overnourishing scribbling that is the composition procedure carries with it an idea of a *practitioner*.⁸⁶ Michel Delville talks about how 'readers *experience* [a Silliman text] as if it were being written in front of their eyes'.⁸⁷ Yet in their creditable attention to that dissolution of the author/reader boundary in Silliman's works, they have sometimes de-emphasised the pose that is still being created for the writer/*scriptor* in the author's place. Even that decentred figure, for which 'The Death of the Author' provides, may still be constructed as 'the prey of an inner god who speaks at all times'⁸⁸ described by Barthes in 'The Writer on Holiday', may itself direct the 'undifferentiated eye' of the text (*PT*, p. 18). Frederika Van Elburg writes that 'The unifying assumption of coherence in a text

⁸⁴ Grenier, 'On Speech', p. 477.

⁸⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 29.

⁸⁶ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 201.

⁸⁷ Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Forms and the Boundaries of Genre* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 200. My emphasis.

⁸⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 30.

ascribes that coherence to intentional efforts by the writer',⁸⁹ and that by avoiding this, *Tjanting* pushes more responsibility onto the reader. We can recognise this by now as a consensus about readership and language writing. Rachel Blau DuPlessis finds the idea of coproduction by the reader even earlier in American avant-garde poetry and writes that this 'is close to the way many of us experience writing', yet she is critical of Barthes' formulation of the *scriptor*.⁹⁰ Barthes says that the text's 'tissue of quotations' is 'drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (*IMT*, p. 146), but this 'drawn from', DuPlessis writes, is 'a passive grammatical formulation [...] designed (with interested authorial agency!) to beg the question of agency'.⁹¹ Here the almost impossible task of the writer's de-identification with ego resurfaces again. The *scriptor*/scribe of *Tjanting* is unable to abandon his writership: he still tells us things like the fact that he is on holiday, and the (usually first) names of other writers appear in the text periodically. Van Elburg writes that '[i]n the overall structure of *Tjanting* the emphasis is on the process of interaction between parts of the poem itself, as a formal device that echoes the interaction between economic and social classes of people'.⁹² In the closing paragraph of 'The Writer on Holiday', Barthes sarcastically punctures the idea of the writer's 'celestial habitat',⁹³ but

⁸⁹ Van Elburg, 'Reading on the Bus: Ron Silliman's *Tjanting*', *Ka Mate Ka Ora* 5 (March 2008) <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/kmko/05/ka_mate05_van_elburg.asp> [accessed 31st July 2014].

⁹⁰ DuPlessis, 'Agency, Social Authorship, and the Political Aura of Contemporary Poetry', *Textual Practice* 23;6 (2009), 987-99 (p. 991).

⁹¹ DuPlessis, 'Agency, Social Authorship', p. 992.

⁹² Van Elburg, 'Reading on the Bus'.

⁹³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 31.

Tjanting is still wrestling with it. It is not already completely free of the sense of the authorial, but still in a process of divestment.

However, despite such references and the usefulness of Barthes to describe the texts, none of them focuses on a single text to the degree of Forrest-Thomson's 'S/Z'. Forrest-Thomson's poem organises itself around a response to Barthes. This difference in engagement is down to Silliman's mode, as it does not only apply to Barthes; there are quotations from Walter Benjamin in *Tjanting* that work similarly to the *Ketjak* reference. One is labelled ('WB: "What seems paradoxical about everything that is justly called beautiful is the fact that it appears."')⁹⁴ but then a later quote is not cited or placed in inverted commas, possibly because it is one of his most famous remarks: 'There is no document of civilization wch [*sic*] is not also a document of barbarism'.⁹⁵ Taken from the seventh of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', this, as Maria Boletsi puts it, 'underscores the exploitation of anonymous masses and subjugated others in the name of *Kultur*'.⁹⁶ However, these quotations themselves show that although they can point us towards certain philosophical and political ideas present in the text, they are no more a part of the organising principles of the text than any of the other sentences. Huntsperger writes that in *Tjanting* form and content are bound together intimately, that its sentences 'remain at the level of

⁹⁴ Silliman, *Tjanting*, p. 90. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 18. Although originally from Benjamin's *Schriften*, this is notably quoted in the essay by Hannah Arendt which serves as the introduction to *Illuminations*. This text is taken from Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

⁹⁵ Silliman, *Tjanting*, p. 149. Cf. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248. This widely known remark also appears in another cornerstone of language writing, Bernstein's poem 'The Klupzy Girl' from 1983's *Islets/Irritations*. Bernstein, *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), p. 88. This abbreviated spelling of 'which', although not atypical of *Tjanting* with its 'calld', 'sd', etc., could be a reference to the poetry and poetics magazine *Wch Way* (1975-1985), which we will discuss in Chapter 4.

⁹⁶ Boletsi, *Barbarism and its Discontents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 77.

raw material – the raw material of a writing process that refuses to recede into the background'.⁹⁷ The argument of Huntsperger's book is structured around the responses of 'postmodern poetry' to the changing landscape of American labour, and the status of the writer in that new landscape, but Barthes had identified some of these symptoms years, sometimes decades, before these writers appeared. The 'cunning mystification' examined in 'The Writer on Holiday' is seen as a strategy by which bourgeois *Kultur* or 'civilisation' is made to seem the natural order: 'one is a writer as Louis XIV was king'.⁹⁸ This strategy, which 'the Establishment practices the better to enslave its writers', not only conceals the inequalities that make us consider literary production differently across classes, but also prevents us from considering writing as a form of labour.

In an essay on Benjamin and photography, Silliman writes about modernity's 'decisive moment in which the social basis of reality was transformed'.⁹⁹ The construction by paragraph that 'The New Sentence' insists on necessitates this massive conglomeration of units which are at the same time 'unintegrated [...] each sentence remaining an individual, serial part of the whole poem'.¹⁰⁰ In his *Critical Essays* and in the introduction to *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes showed how with writers like Flaubert, literature became an object, 'promoting literary labour to the status of a value' (*WDZ*, p. 4). That value is denied when writers abandon 'craftsmanship' in favour of an alternative strategy of the construction of the text by accumulation, parataxis, a strategy that directed focus towards language and process

⁹⁷ Huntsperger, *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 130.

⁹⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 30.

⁹⁹ Ron Silliman, 'Benjamin Obscura' in *LB*, 63-5 (p. 63).

¹⁰⁰ Silliman, *Tjanting*, p. 149.

instead of an authoritative literary object. The early Barthes in his ambitious essays tried to theorise and enact an end to the last of the ‘socially privileged’ literary discourse and declared the existence, in Camus and Raymond Queneau, of ‘the writer without Literature’ (*WDZ*, pp. 3, 5). Assuming that this new kind of *scriptor-écrivain* means an *écriture*, *Tjanting* shares in *Writing Degree Zero*’s optimism, saying: ‘This was how we came to free ourselves of literature, that we might resume writing’.¹⁰¹

Bernadette Mayer’s Experiments

While ‘language writing’ was being codified in these terms in California, different but related ideas were being negotiated in New York City. The group of writers around the St Mark’s Poetry Project had begun as Beat poets and members of the New York School, but in the 1970s that began to change. A language-centred tendency began to emerge, influencing writers like Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. Bernstein was one of a number of prominent poets who attended a poetry workshop held by a New York poet who was later to become director of St Mark’s: Bernadette Mayer.¹⁰²

Mayer’s reputation needs more amplifying than Silliman’s, but her workshop (1971-75) also occupies an important place in the history of experimental writing in

¹⁰¹ Silliman, *Tjanting*, p. 50.

¹⁰² Libbie Rifkin, “‘My Little World Goes On St. Mark’s Place’”: Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer and the Gender of an Avant-Garde Institution’, *Jacket* 7 (April 1999) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/07/rifkin07.html>> [accessed 7th September 2014]. Andrews has said he was not present at these workshops, ‘despite Mayer’s published comments indicating otherwise’. Kane, *All Poets*, p. 269 n. 12.

the United States.¹⁰³ Students were encouraged to keep journals, not just of dreams and writing ideas, but also journals of answering machine messages, ‘tenant-landlord situations’, ‘skies’, ‘dangers’, ‘mail’, and ‘coincidences’. Each document created under such circumstances moved one closer to the kind of immersion in memory, and the immediate and total transcription of human experience, at which various projects of Mayer’s aimed. However, perhaps of most interest to us here is the workshop’s reading list, which was ecumenical in the extreme.¹⁰⁴ This befits its St Mark’s context. Serious-minded poet-scholars, especially those concerned with the philosophy of language, would have bent studiously over Wittgenstein, and his juxtaposition with Dr Seuss would have tickled those who thought the ‘congealed surface of contemporary academic poetry’ needed to be broken.¹⁰⁵ However, the item that will concern us most is Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*, which appeared in French in 1973 and in Richard Miller’s English translation at the tail end of the original workshop, in 1975.

Mayer returned to St Mark’s as its director in 1980, and since then her teaching activities have had a by-product which meant that, of the experimental writers considered in this thesis, she may in fact have reached the widest number of people. Her list of ‘writing experiments’, which began as a collaboratively created

¹⁰³ Vickery, *Leaving Lines*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁴ For an (albeit incomplete) account of the list, see Kane, *All Poets*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁵ John Ashbery, ‘Preface’ to Frank O’Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco, City Lights, 2014), p. vii. Ashbery’s preface is new to the 50th anniversary edition of this landmark book, which first emerged in 1964 and quickly became a touchstone for New York School poets. Ted Berrigan’s poem ‘3 pages’, under the heading ‘10 things I do every day’, includes the line ‘read lunch poems’ (*sic*). Berrigan, *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 352. Berrigan collaborated with Mayer and his 1977 volume *Nothing for You* was published by her and her husband’s press, United Artists. Berrigan, *Collected Poems*, p. 716, 697.

teaching tool in the workshop, is popular and much-reproduced on the Internet.¹⁰⁶

Lisa Jarnot writes that the list, ‘a collaborative effort on the part of Mayer and her students, catalogs a variety of exercises that make writing a daily part of life’.¹⁰⁷ This is the strategy writ especially large in *Midwinter Day*, where an attempt is made for daily life to become the text. As Jarnot indicates, for Mayer the direction of the workshop and of her own individual writing are one and the same. For this reason, we shall look first at the possible relationship between the workshop experiments and *The Pleasure of the Text*, before going on to look for its relationship to Mayer’s poetry.

In her book on women and the New York School, Maggie Nelson does not analyse the experiments, but does mention at the close of her chapter on Mayer that she participated in one of the workshops. Nelson writes that Mayer advised her not to write criticism (an instruction Nelson disobeyed), because criticism is more ‘gratuitous’ than the core or essential activities of poetry.¹⁰⁸ Whether or not the ‘experiments list’ draws on *The Pleasure of the Text*, bringing the texts closer

¹⁰⁶ The list appears on the websites of the Electronic Poetry Center (hosted by the University of Pennsylvania), Purdue University, languageisavirus.com, and is part of the material of the extremely large online literature course ‘ModPo’. I will be referring here to the Electronic Poetry Center page <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette_Experiments.html> [accessed 7th August 2014]. Daniel Kane references a version of the list on the St Mark’s website, www.poetryproject.com, but at the time of writing this is no longer available (*All Poets*, p. 270 n. 20). The list was composed over time, and appears in various versions, but its first appearance in print appears to have been on the front page of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1;3 (June 1978). This version is signed ‘Bernadette Mayer & the Members of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project Writing Workshop, 1971-1975’ <<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/LANGUAGEn3/pictures/004.html>>. However, the last experiment on this list, ‘Dream work’, is only twenty-ninth on the Electronic Poetry Center’s list of eighty-two.

¹⁰⁷ Jarnot, ‘Mayer, Bernadette’ in *The Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Eric Haralson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 438-40 (p. 439).

¹⁰⁸ Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 129.

together will show why Mayer, who disapproved of that ‘gratuitous’, ‘garrulous’ (*PA*, p. 4) discipline, considered an arch-critic like Barthes worth reading.

Barthes appears in the section of the workshop’s reading list entitled ‘On Reading’.¹⁰⁹ He was, along with Wittgenstein, one of the writers taught by Mayer to students who included the (soon-to-be) language writers because these were ‘all the things they wanted to know [...] all the things they needed to know’.¹¹⁰ It would be just as appropriate for a different study to consider such a background with an emphasis on one of the other texts on the list, from *Philosophical Investigations* to *The Cat in the Hat*. But what is different about the case of Barthes is that while one may well take on the linguistic playfulness of Seuss or the insights of Wittgenstein into the philosophy of language, it is much easier to read *The Pleasure of the Text* as *ars poetica*. Although poetry is never mentioned by name, literary texts, and not just language, are its subject.

Reading Barthes is, in Mayer’s workshops, part of training on ‘How to Read’, and an imagined community of readers figures prominently in *The Pleasure of the Text*. They are called ‘the Society of Friends of the Text’ (p. 14), and are united only in their opposition to a vitriolic catalogue of ‘fools of all kinds’. Barthes elaborates:

Such a society would have no site, could function only
in total atopia; yet it would be a kind of phalanstery, for
in it contradictions would be acknowledged (and the
risks of ideological imposture thereby restricted),

¹⁰⁹ Kane, *All Poets*, p. 188.

¹¹⁰ Kane, *All Poets*, p. 191.

difference would be observed, and conflict rendered insignificant (being unproductive of pleasure). (*PT*, p. 15)

The *phalanstère* is an idea Barthes takes from Charles Fourier, and in *Sade Fourier Loyola* some of the early ideas of *The Pleasure of the Text* are found. What Barthes likes in Fourier are the ‘voluptuous’, ‘sybaritic themes’ – pleasure-giving, luxurious, like the idea of the ‘cooperative, mainly agricultural community [...] in complete moral and physical harmony’.¹¹¹ Maybe Mayer saw her workshop or St Mark’s as a Society of Friends of the Text, but it is also both a theme and structural principle for her. Her poem ‘Essay’ begins, ‘I guess it’s too late to live on the farm’.¹¹² The first fourteen lines begin ‘I guess’ (in the North American sense of ‘I suppose’), and many are even more repetitious: ‘I guess we’ll never have a farm now / I guess farming is not in the cards now’. As with the isolating colourlessness of *January Zero*, there is dissociation even of sentences or lines that are next to each other, here brought about by how alike they are. They could be versions of the same thought articulated in different conversations – on the pattern of Mayer’s highly specific journals, ‘Essay’ could be a journal of regrets about farming. Around halfway through, the poem turns slightly from the wistful catalogue of practicalities: ‘Too much work and still to be poets / Who are the farmer poets[?]’ Here the ‘essay’ of the title takes hold more, as an idea of farmer-writers is developed, from Flannery

¹¹¹ Mortimer, *The Gentlest Law*, p. 79.

¹¹² Bernadette Mayer, ‘Essay’ in *A Bernadette Mayer Reader* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 51-2 (p. 51).

O'Connor's peacocks to Virgil's bees. 'Perhaps some poets of the past were overseers of farmers', but in the late twentieth century, 'I guess poets tend to live more momentarily / Than life on a farm would allow'.¹¹³ This dips into a truth about modern poets (whether language writers or the kind of poets suggested in *Writing Degree Zero*), who we assume are friends of the text – they are (largely – 'tend to live') creations of metropolitan society. Yet Barthes does make an attempt to draw together 'Community', as that section of the book is titled, and the 'islet within the human' that textual pleasures affect. The intercourses of the phalanstery would be non-dialogic, for 'the text is never a "dialogue"' (PT, p. 16). They would have to be admitting of 'momentary' appreciation, and the comparison with Fourier is as useful for showing the contrast between atopian bliss and utopian harmony as it is for modelling one on the other.

Even so, there remains something of the *form* of the phalanstery about Mayer's project, but outlining texts' correspondences to descriptions in *The Pleasure of the Text* is not the scope of this thesis. The analysis above is intended to show that the workshop and experiments list, which had contact with Barthes, impinges on a poetic text like 'Essay'. Through the community and collaborative aspects of Mayer's overall project, this effect is transmitted to other writers, and the list of poets who studied with Mayer is quite extensive. As well as Nelson, Bernstein and Eileen Myles both spent time in her classes – both major, but very different, experimental poets. As Hélène Aji points out, Bernstein's poetics, as expressed in 'Artifice of Absorption', relies on the notion that 'thought advances in language', Bernstein

¹¹³ Mayer, 'Essay', p. 52.

aspiring to extend the ‘frontiers of the sayable’.¹¹⁴ Myles is far less inclined to engage in the kind of poetics that borders on analytic philosophy. Although she has taught creative writing in universities, much of her work has attempted to engage more public contexts for poetry, and even in her prose nonfiction, she does not share Bernstein’s academic mode.

Yet Myles belongs and has belonged, with Mayer, in a zone where language writing and the New York School overlap and collide. Daniel Kane records how, even as she struggled to carve out an experimental practice which drew criticism from the second-generation New York School poets, Mayer was dealing with the ‘macho’ intellectualism of the editors of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and the ‘Marxists with cars’.¹¹⁵ Myles, as a working-class woman, also came from a background that contrasted with that of many other poets. Whether we think language writers ‘flaunt’ theory or not, in Myles it is not ‘present’, at least not with the conspicuousness of Proust’s price-tag. Even so, links have been drawn between Myles and the concerns of ‘French theory’. Chris Kraus writes that ‘because these [New York School] poets rejected a certain kind of theoretical language, people just assumed they were dumb’.¹¹⁶ Kraus’ assertion is the basis of an argument that finds aspects of the ‘body without organs’ of Deleuze and Guattari desirable, and suggests that ‘poetics, like

¹¹⁴ Aji, “‘Writing (as) (and) thinking’: Charles Bernstein’s Work “in” Language’, *Études Anglaises* 14;3 (July-September 2006), 341-355 (p. 342).

¹¹⁵ For Mayer’s experimentalism (and collaborations with Clark Coolidge), see Kane, *All Poets*, p. 189. As to her conflict with language poetry, Kane summarises, from an interview with Mayer: ‘language writers so politicized and deromanticized poetry that the language was subsumed by dry theory and rigid rules’. Her jibe about cars was originally to the philosopher Edmund Leites, who taught at Mayer’s workshop (p. 269 n. 12).

¹¹⁶ Kraus, ‘Ecceity, Smash and Grab, the Expanded I and Moment’, in Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen (eds.), *French Theory in America* (London: Routledge, 2001), 303-8 (p. 304).

Zen Buddhism, offers us a technology for getting there'. Barthes, too, is attracted to Zen among other means of attaining blissful 'non-profit', the 'loss' offered by *satori* (*PT*, p. 35). Nelson writes that 'like Mayer, Ashbery, and Warhol', Myles is 'unafraid of collapsing into boredom'.¹¹⁷ Indeed, all texts of *jouissance* risk this as they unsettle our 'assumptions', our 'values' (*PT*, p. 14). There is thus a distinction to be drawn here between events as one would find in a novel and Mayer's 'everyday' narrations, which by their nature, deliberately flouting many literary conventions, are often unsettling. Mayer addresses the novel as a form with experiment 44: 'Write a soothing novel in twelve short paragraphs.' 'Novel' in this context is a provocation, because normally such texts depend on plot. They might be relaxing because they provide escape (are absorptive, as Bernstein would put it) or because they come to a satisfying conclusion, but 'soothing' implies a continuous process of calming. Many of Myles' poems are driven by anti-soothing *jouissance*.

Myles began as poet long before books of her work were available. In New York in 1968 John Giorno and William Burroughs started the 'Dial-a-Poem' service, where listeners called up and were read a poem. Some of these poems were later released on records, and Myles appears on *Sugar, Alcohol and Meat* (1980) with her poem 'Lorna and Vicki',¹¹⁸ which thus belongs around the time of Mayer's stints at St Mark's. This poem takes in a variety of scenes and topics, but the two references to the Smith-Corona typewriter with which it is being written shaking the table pin the poem to the circumstances of its composition, like *Midwinter Day*'s shopping,

¹¹⁷ Nelson, *True Abstractions*, p. 197. Other writers, working in conceptual writing and related movements, actively chase boredom as an aesthetic ideal – Jackson Mac Low, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Tan Lin are all examples of this.

¹¹⁸ Later collected in Myles, *Maxfield Parrish: Early and New Poems* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1995), pp. 160-2.

chores, and meals. Just as Mayer's book is a single day, 'Lorna and Vicki' is a set of ideas related in the way that Mayer philosophises in Part Four (see below), in the spirit of non-analytic experimentation. The most obvious thematic reflection of this is the part of the poem where the speaker describes how she begins to feel sexually aroused on a jostling bus, to which her response is ultimately, 'Oh Eileen, / let nature take its course.'¹¹⁹ At the end of the stanza, she says, 'Masturbation will always be my favorite / form of sex, though if I was a tree / I'd just stand there in the breeze.' Without arguing that 'Lorna and Vicki' is *ars poetica*, the non-analytic experience can be found in every event narrated. The speaker's mother soaks the dishes in the sink to make them easier to wash; the recipe for making 'sun tea' is described (leave a teabag in a jar of water in the sun on a hot day); and the idea of wind as 'nature's favorite form of sex' is elaborated in the story of being outdoors in a storm at the end of the poem. This is both the attitude with which new experiences are added to the poem and, paradoxically, the central theme that we would usually say 'ties the poem together'. Here, however, it is not a tie but an arrangement, 'ordering' without epistemic 'law'. It brings to mind New York School poet Barbara Guest's analogy for poetry – arranging rocks on a platter.¹²⁰ Significantly, even the 'dumb' New York School poets who do not display the price-tag of theory in their texts are 'abstract stuff' for Mayer.¹²¹ We can see a distinction between intellectual abstraction, which she actively uses in her experiments, and class-based, institution-based intellectualisation, to which she objects. In abstraction, perhaps we can discover that

¹¹⁹ Myles, *Maxfield Parrish*, p. 160

¹²⁰ Guest, *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999).

¹²¹ From Mayer, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, in *A Bernadette Mayer Reader* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 68.

‘islet within the human’ (*PT*, p. 16) that is aimed at in the lonely sociality of Myles and O’Hara, action of the abstracted poet-subject.

This can also be found in Mayer’s 1971 art piece, *Memory*. It features prominently in critical accounts of her work as the birth of her writing career. The exhibition consisted of 1,200 photographs, shot over the month of July, and the audio of her notes, which was seven hours long. The pictures were meant not to focus on a certain object or be ‘beautiful’, but to ‘reflect what actual vision is, and not romanticize it’.¹²² The opposition to ‘romanticising’ is strange, both because she later censures the language writers’ *deromanticising* of language, and because the abstracted figures of O’Hara, Myles, and to a lesser extent Mayer herself, so resemble the romantic poet. The book of the project was a journal-like adaptation of the pictures and notes, and in a class given at Naropa University in 1978, Mayer says, ‘I was fascinated with the idea, could I get [the audience] to be me?’.¹²³ This is reflected in the experiments – 9, ‘Attempt tape recorder work’; 23, ‘Do experiments with sensory memory’, 49, ‘Attempt to speak for a day only in questions; write only in questions.’¹²⁴ Immersing the audience in specific elements of life would show up those points that were missing, and Mayer describes in the lecture how when *Memory* was exhibited people came in different parts of the day in order to hear the whole seven hours of audio. Above, we saw how DiPalma’s *January Zero* is at times an enactment of zero degree writing and at others exposes its divergence from that

¹²² Quoted in Vickery, *Leaving Lines*, p. 152.

¹²³ Mayer, ‘Class on Memory’, Naropa Poetics Audio Archives <https://archive.org/details/Bernadette_Mayer_class_on_memory_78P084> [accessed 9th September 2014].

¹²⁴ Mayer, ‘Writing Experiments’, Electronic Poetry Center <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette_Experiments.html> [accessed 7th August 2014].

ideal. It is possible to imagine a report of the day which is flat and factual, and this would not in itself be a problem for Mayer, who says that ‘journals do not have to involve “good” writing’. The question is whether zero-degree narration can be ‘made use of’ in the way she wants. The journal, like ‘colourless’ prose, is ‘irretrievably honest’ (*WDZ*, p. 78), but what Barthes fears is that degree zero becomes just another mode, the writer is made ‘prisoner to his [*sic*] own formal myths’. DiPalma’s work exposes that possibility, but there is also the risk that journaling might fall to it. Perhaps in fear of that, Mayer has moved on to more traditional forms in recent years, but one remarkable quality in her journal-like works is their self-questioning, which leads to considerable thematic and even formal variation.

Midwinter Day represents the apotheosis of the journaling or transcription portion of her project. The book purports to have been written in a single day (22nd December 1978), and it embodies ‘everyday’ language in some unusual ways. While there are portions of that text that are apparent transcripts of conversations – about trips to the supermarket and looking after the children – there are also philosophical digressions which demonstrate that there are no firm boundaries between the ‘everyday’ and the profound. The book contains passages reporting what happens in the supermarket or while cooking dinner, but even here, thoughts are depicted as coming in between everyday events. In Part Four, the paragraph will often begin with such an event which will then move, smoothly or not, into a speculation on something more abstract:

Marie’s spilled her milk again, no use crying over
 spilled milk. Wittgenstein says there is no such thing as
 a private language. I think it would be worth trying to

make one. Sol [*sic*] Kripke solved the liar's paradox but

I cannot understand his solution.¹²⁵

Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* was published in 1982, the same year as *Midwinter Day*, suggesting Mayer is following developments in philosophy, but the 'solution' referred to is probably that given in a separate paper, 'An Outline of a Theory of Truth'.¹²⁶ The proximity of these two sentences demonstrates that thought's movement in the poem is associative rather than causal or processual. Mayer's writing has, in Nelson's phrase, 'little to do with the standard goals of analysis', whether psychoanalytic, philosophical, or literary. She defers 'catharsis, diagnosis, desublimation, interpretation', challenging 'both her and her reader's compulsion to know where the writing is going'.¹²⁷ Nelson goes on to quote *The Pleasure of the Text*: 'we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure; Desire has an epistemic dignity, Pleasure does not'.¹²⁸ What Barthes calls 'epistemologies of the law' are in Mayer rejected, or at least deferred. Instead a non-interpretative discovery is pursued, experiments without theories or results, which are in themselves pleasurable. 'Found in awakening to love of rearranging / This world is best at random translated', she writes, 'the titillating knowledge of almost everything / Lost before in the complicated stories of dreams'.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Mayer, *Midwinter Day* (New York: New Directions, 1999 [1982]), p. 68.

¹²⁶ Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Kripke, 'An Outline of a Theory of Truth', *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975), pp. 690-716.

¹²⁷ Nelson, *True Abstractions*, p. 114.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Nelson, *True Abstractions*, p. 115; cf. *PT*, p. 57.

¹²⁹ Mayer, *Midwinter Day*, pp. 118, 117.

The Pleasure of the Text is best known for its typology of pleasures, in particular the split between pleasure (*plaisir*) and bliss or rapture (*jouissance*). Mayer addresses the ways in which texts are meant to please in *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*. The book does for a pregnancy what *Midwinter Day* does for a midwinter day. The possible desire of the writer to give pleasure is in a way refused in *The Pleasure of the Text*. The writer of the text of bliss derives pleasure from writing it, but its function of communicating information is replaced with a ‘dialectics of desire’, and so the writer is not thinking specifically about how to induce bliss in the reader (*PT*, p. 4). For Mayer, the position of mother-writer makes one acutely conscious of the other/reader, but, as with Barthes’ assertion that there are ‘no footlights’ on the stage of the text of bliss, the distinction between them is questioned (p. 16). This is linked to psychoanalytic ideas about the development of subjectivity in early childhood:

there’s space in between during which you feel like yourself again and that is like the book, then when the baby is finally born you don’t know for a moment if you’re thinking of yourself or the other [...] you don’t know the baby is different from you.¹³⁰

That idea becomes a principle of the text. Sentences, even if they lack verbs (like Silliman’s ‘Not this’, the first line of *Tjanting*), are analytical, and even indicatives

¹³⁰ Mayer, *Reader*, p. 71.

and interrogatives become ‘imperatives’.¹³¹ Hejinian, commenting on her own 1988 essay ‘Line’, wrote that the New Sentence had become ‘claustrophobic, oppressive’ – *Writing Degree Zero*’s ‘formal myth’.¹³² The essay re-theorises the poetic line, and as Hejinian writes, ‘it is possible to destabilize the sentence from within – as in Bernadette Mayer’s *The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*’ and thus renew renew experimentation in poetic syntax.¹³³

Lyn Hejinian’s Erotics of Materials

In this quotation, *The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* is mentioned alongside Hejinian’s own later poem-essay ‘Happily’, which we can consider here as Hejinian’s response to the kind of thinking Mayer was doing in this period. In the similar reflective note preceding that text, Barthes is quoted: ‘The word transports me because of the notion that *I am going to do something with it*: it is the thrill of a future praxis, something like an *appetite*. This desire makes the entire motionless chart of language vibrate.’¹³⁴ This quotation from the ‘Color-word’ section of *Roland Barthes* is paired, here and in ‘Chronic Texts’, with one from Paul Valéry which is perhaps less abstracted than the Barthes: ‘I enjoy the act of writing to the point of wishing to go on *writing*.’¹³⁵ Yet it is the abstract, even poetic quality of Barthes’ phrase that is mirrored later in ‘Happily’. Although not a poem (or poem-essay)

¹³¹ Attributed to Robert Grenier in Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 131.

¹³² Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry*, p. 131; *WDZ*, p. 78.

¹³³ Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry*, p. 132.

¹³⁴ Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry*, p. 383, cf. *RB*, p. 129.

¹³⁵ Hejinian, ‘Chronic Texts’, *Totter’s 17* (1978), p. 16
<<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/TOTTELS17/html/pictures/018.html>> [accessed 30th July 2014].

‘about’ writing in the sense of *ars poetica*, it does consider, like *Roland Barthes*, how reading and writing texts fit into a life. The poem is about doing things ‘happily’, or, ‘how we all might actually experience happiness’,¹³⁶ but it also takes as a major concern the relationship of texts to that happiness:

From something launched we extract our sentences

Altogether written, writing everything, writing mockery

(of vague physical complaints, political clichés,

silence) beautifully in a follow-up writing [...] as if

we were ephemeral we are here and we mark out our

place in it (p. 399)

‘[S]omething launched’ is vague enough to encompass a space shuttle or a poetry book, and when the definition is this vague, anything can be a text from which sentences are extracted. This may be read as a defence of intertextuality, but also in a more complex sense of more open boundaries of the text: ‘Once a writing is published as if finally, it ought not to become thereby a forbidden landscape.’¹³⁷ The launch could also be that initial salvo of language that Barthes describes in the ‘Color-word’ passage, a very different metaphor for the word fixed onto like a colour of paint. The generative nature of such a process has two sides: ‘Altogether written,

¹³⁶ Hannah Brooks-Motl, ‘The Smallest Space: Lyric Aphorism in Contemporary Poetry’, *Kenyon Review Online* (Spring 2013) <<http://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2013-spring/selections/hannah-brooks-motl-656342/>> [accessed 22nd October 2014].

¹³⁷ Hejinian, ‘Chronic Texts’, p. 20.

writing everything'. One comes to feel that the material of Language writing is writing all the way through, that is, that there is not (or it hardly matters if there is not) something empirical concealed behind it.

Often, language writers respond to attempts at unmediated expression by making them seem absurd or comical. Bernstein's rewording of the optimistic, spontaneous 'first thought, best thought' philosophy of the Beat poets as 'FIRST BURP, BEST BURP' is a striking example.¹³⁸ In *The Guard*, Hejinian appropriates part of a letter to her musician husband from a European jazz fan in a broken English she compares to jazz – 'mimetic', with a 'syntax derived from his assimilation of rhythms in the music he likes'.¹³⁹ The other side of it, of course, is the belief that 'writing everything' is, if not possible, then at least desirable, and this edict has not altered from Virginia Woolf's modernist commitment to the 'unknown and uncircumscribed' range of human experience over literary 'custom'.¹⁴⁰ What has been altered, after (indeed, post) structuralism, is a teleological approach to language. '[H]appily I'm feeling the wind in its own right rather than as of particular pertinence to *us* at a windy moment,' writes Hejinian in 'Happily', and the wind is then applied as a figure for language: 'I hear its lines leaving in a rumor the silence of which is to catch on quickly to arrange things in preparation for what will come next' (p. 404). Once launched, the text does not have to power itself, but moves along with experience: 'Perhaps it is the role of art to put us in complicity with things

¹³⁸ Bernstein, 'The Simply' in *All the Whiskey*, p. 108. This poem was originally published in 1987's *The Sophist*.

¹³⁹ Hejinian, *The Guard* (Oakland: Tuumba, 1984), unpag.; see also *The Language of Inquiry*, pp. 63-4.

¹⁴⁰ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

as they happen' (p. 391). Kornelia Freitag wonders whether Hejinian is 'a mere reporter [...] or Barthes' "scriptor" who 'subscribes to the "death of the Subject" in accord with the "death of the Author"'.¹⁴¹ Certainly procedural form will bring about new reading experiences. As with Silliman's sentences which 'remain at the level of raw material [...] that refuses to recede into the background', David Huntsperger identifies in Hejinian 'a sense of form as a productive force' rather than a limiting one.¹⁴² *Gesualdo* is a procedural text, because of its collage aspects,¹⁴³ but also because of the marginalia which Hejinian uses elsewhere, as in 'Chronic Texts' and, notably, *My Life*. Huntsperger refers to this as 'parascrption', the word drawn from *My Life* itself: 'the poem is fragmentary not because it is incomplete [...] but because it is composed of fragments'.¹⁴⁴ He provides two readings of this term: 'para-tactic in-scription', or else 'writing beside'.¹⁴⁵ 'Inscription' however, is not just a synonym for writing: it focusses on the material process of writing rather than writing as an abstract intellectual activity, such that when considered with this other reading, 'writing beside', it might mean the physical annotation of a text's margins. This brings us back to how reading is done, its Barthesian grain and pleasures, and with this there is a certain return of the 'dead' author in a new form: 'he is not a (civil moral) person, he is a body'.¹⁴⁶ As Eugen Simion puts it, 'during the act of reading,

¹⁴¹ Freitag, *Cultural Criticism and Women's Experimental Writing: The Poetry of Rosemarie Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2005), p. 233.

¹⁴² Huntsperger, *Procedural Form*, pp. 130, 140. See above, note 96.

¹⁴³ See Freitag, *Cultural Criticism*, pp. 195, 197, 206, and Vickery, *Leaving Lines*, p. 238.

¹⁴⁴ Hejinian, *My Life* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2002), p. 88; Huntsperger, *Procedural Form*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁵ Huntsperger, *Procedural Form*, p. 146; emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁶ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 8.

the author must rise out of self-created ashes. This weird character pieces up its own body out of small disconnected fragments.’¹⁴⁷ As we saw with Silliman, paratactic forms, including the placing of margin notes or the top-left blocks of text that set the tone of the chapters of *My Life*, scatter literary authority throughout the language of a text. Working with procedural forms is about tapping into the ‘vibration’ of language Barthes speaks of without falling into the trap of thinking of writer’s activity as a vocation he exposes in ‘The Writer on Holiday’. Hejinian thus ‘demands a reading almost extreme in its unpredictability, its diversions, its lack of control, but one that also gives its readers the pleasure of, in Roland Barthes’ words, “a sanctioned Babel.”’¹⁴⁸ This permitted chaos stems from a figure Barthes asks us to ‘imagine’: someone capable of enduring ‘contradiction without shame’ (*PT*, p. 3). For Forrest-Thomson, other languages are integrated into poetry insofar as the poem is to ‘assert continuity with the world of other languages without giving in to them’ (*PA*, p. 64). This would be a kind of syncretism, but this opposite number posited by Barthes will not merely alter the role of the author so that it fits the avant-garde poet. The one who ‘mixes every language’ and permits their mutual contradiction and yet their ‘cohabitation’ is the *reader* (*PT*, p. 3). In Hejinian’s parascrived texts, contradictions brought about by the importation of divergent material are ‘sanctioned’, and bring about the *jouissance* of Babel, creating the conditions that Barthes asks us to ‘imagine’ for such a reading to arise.

¹⁴⁷ Eugen Simion, *The Return of the Author*, trans. by James W. Newcomb and Lidia Vianu (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 108.

¹⁴⁸ Juliana Spahr, ‘Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*’, *American Literature* 68:1 (March 1996), 139-59 (p. 149); cf. *PT*, p. 4.

The Barthes and Valéry quotations that head ‘Happily’ in *The Language of Inquiry* come via Hejinian’s personal commonplace books, and were grouped under the heading ‘The Erotics of Materials’.¹⁴⁹ Although the Barthes is the only one of these quotes which speaks about language, it is clear that for Hejinian, language is engaged with in the manner we engaged with pens, paints, a paper. It is not an abstraction, but a material component of writing. Hejinian recalls: ‘[i]t was the material world of writing that first attracted me to it. Because it was material, it was sensual, and despite being material, it was also unpredictable’, and in her essay on translation, she writes that ‘the formal properties of language [...] are its material properties’.¹⁵⁰ Yet Barthes’ analogy with painting earlier in the ‘Color-word’ paragraph perhaps affects the way it is taken up, because there is a continuity between painting and the physical process of writing – both are physical, bodily, and governed by an ‘erotics’. ‘The dot just now adrift on the paper is not the product of the paper dark / Nearly negative but finite it springs from its own shadow and cannot be denied the undeniable world once it is launched’ (p. 397). This idea of a dot of ink as a seed from which writing springs, and the identification of that dot with language rather than just ink, is taken much further in the long poem *Drafts* by Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In ‘Draft 4: In’, finding that ‘even / “palimpsest” is too structured a docket’, the poet-narrator journeys within writing itself, ‘a traveller thru dark holes tunnelling grainy paper’.¹⁵¹ Later, the text cites those ‘overnourishing signs’ that Culler latches onto from *Writing Degree Zero* and calls ‘voracious’, and elaborates:

¹⁴⁹ Email from Lyn Hejinian to me, 27th July 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, pp. 163, 306; emphasis in the original.

¹⁵¹ DuPlessis, *Drafts 1-38, Toll* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 27. The date at the end of the poem tells us it was composed and revised in 1987, 1988, and 1991.

‘She started naming things, places / as she filled them up [...] And in a parallel way / as she emptied them.’¹⁵² Texts are physical spaces which can be filled – ‘nourished’ – and emptied. Figural continuities like these are a mainstay of DuPlessis’ *Drafts* which, like Silliman’s *Ketjak*, is a single decades-long poem, published in instalments, and as such it builds its own symbology. Although Hejinian is not at this time engaged in a single long poem in the way DuPlessis and Silliman are, she does have a continuity of concerns and set of images for language she draws on again and again.¹⁵³ New figurations of language are essential to moving its study on from the mere ‘technocratic specialization’ Barthes criticises in linguistics, and towards ‘the type of practice that allows us to dissolve the image-repertoires of our language’.¹⁵⁴ This is the movement Roman Jakobson effected and for which Barthes and other *Tel Quel* writers admired him, as will be seen in the next chapter of this thesis.

Another quotation Hejinian recorded in her commonplace book is René Char’s ‘The poem is the fulfilled love of desire remaining desire.’¹⁵⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy writes of this sentence that ‘it intends to speak the truth of the poem by grace of the truth of love, this confirming, moreover, that love remains the highest truth for us’.¹⁵⁶ Desire is, by its very nature, separated from its object, but Nancy goes further, saying that ‘all the terms of this contemporary lexicon are foreign to love’, which is in

¹⁵² DuPlessis, *Toll*, p. 248.

¹⁵³ However, from the early 1990s Hejinian began working on a long poem project eventually published as *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* (Richmond: Omnidawn, 2012).

¹⁵⁴ Barthes, ‘Pleasure / Writing / Reading’, in *The Grain of the Voice*, p. 165.

¹⁵⁵ Char, *Hypnos Awakening*, quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 87.

¹⁵⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, pp. 87-8.

contemporary life ‘an entire analytics [...] of the amorous operation as calculation, investment, completion, retribution, and the like’.¹⁵⁷ One of Language writing’s chief aims is to resist the commodifying effects of late capitalism. Hejinian links the founding ‘social consciousness’ of Language writing with resistance to the particular historical instances of ‘capitalist cruelty’ of the 1960s and 1970s, and Huntsperger’s *Procedural Form* features recent in-depth analysis of this.¹⁵⁸ Perhaps this is also referred to in ‘Chronic Texts’: ‘my freedom / of which I write in order to be forgiven’ (p. 16). Thus, Char may be read to suggest that the poem may resist the psychic pressures exerted by consumer capitalism that are powered by desire by returning it with more desire. This fulfilled love is characterised by Nancy as a ‘reconciliation’, but it might better be described as a radical restatement of the issue.¹⁵⁹ A writing might be possible which did not commodify, or trade on, meaning, but could speak to desire, or perhaps just speak it, without answering it and thus participating in the system of desire. It is thus worth stating that what excites the ‘motionless chart of language’ quotation is not an appetite, but only ‘something like’ it, an alternative response.

This much-used Barthes gets its first outing with Hejinian in ‘Chronic Texts’, which appeared in the newsletter *Tottel’s*, edited by Silliman, the early numbers of which were among the sources he drew on to collect the work for ‘The Dwelling-Place’.¹⁶⁰ Hejinian, however, appears in a later issue, and her work does not display

¹⁵⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 98.

¹⁵⁸ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 323; Huntsperger, *Procedural Form*, pp. 3-5, 12-3, *et passim*.

¹⁵⁹ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 88.

¹⁶⁰ Manuel Brito, ‘Two Anthologies Institutionalizing Innovative American Poetry: Ron Silliman’s *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli’s ‘*Language*’ Poetries’, *Revista de Filología* 24 (April

interest in non-referential writing that we saw in the ‘Dwelling-Place’ poets, and she remains outside the centre of the cluster of poetic concerns in the later *Tottel’s* too. Ann Vickery draws a line of concern with life-writing from the poem *Gesualdo* through ‘Chronic Texts’ and *A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking*, all published in 1978, to *My Life* (1980, expanded edition in 1987).¹⁶¹ *Gesualdo* draws on Glenn Watkins’ biographical study of the composer Carlo Gesualdo, subtitled ‘The Man and His Music’, which opens with a complaint that the work of Gesualdo has been neglected due to a fascination with his biography. Watkins tries to address this by including chapters such as his ‘Text and Form’, which engages in what verges on a structural analysis of his works.¹⁶² Yet he cannot help but spend time on Gesualdo’s scandalous life, better known than his music – he famously murdered his wife and her lover. Perhaps it is this which draws Hejinian to the book – a work which tries to tear itself away from the life, but is ultimately unable to do so. Her *Gesualdo* is an assemblage of deliberately fragmented authoritative sources, which purport to narrate ‘Gesualdo, gathered’, ‘a totality convincing’, even as they fail to do so.¹⁶³ However, this very failure is what makes *Gesualdo* valuable as a record of the process of reading the life of another and relating it to one’s own: ‘his life faithful, his, in

2006), 47-56 (p. 49); cf. Brito, *Means Matter: Market Fructification of Innovative American Poetry in the Late 20th Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 3. *Tottel’s* is named after Richard Tottel’s 1557 poetry anthology, often considered to be the first such English-language volume to be printed. Silliman invoked revolutionary nature of this text in defining the programme for his magazine. Brian M. Reed, *Nobody’s Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 44-5.

¹⁶¹ Vickery, *Leaving Lines*, p. 242.

¹⁶² Glenn Watkins, *Gesualdo: The Man and His Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 111-32.

¹⁶³ Hejinian, *Gesualdo* (Oakland: Tuumba, 1978), unpag.
 <<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/GESUALDO/html/pictures/006.html>>,
 <<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/GESUALDO/html/pictures/012.html>> [accessed 18th October 2014]. Both quotations from the marginal ‘titles’ of paragraphs.

pieces, are discontinuous'; 'pairing our voices fundamentally, the two in both'.¹⁶⁴

Then, as Vickery points out, Hejinian moves on to her own life: the other three texts all mention the poet's age at the time of composition (thirty-six/thirty-seven), with the structure of *My Life* even being built around it.¹⁶⁵ There is a movement into a mode of life-writing which does not depend on authorial declaration, but on the reader's 'interrogative' construction of the subject.¹⁶⁶

The 'starting-point' in this movement in *Gesualdo* is one where Hejinian 'remodels an essentializing, hero-worshipping glorification of man and work into a process- and recipient-oriented view of life and works'.¹⁶⁷ Vickery compares the 'textual borrowings' in Hejinian's *Gesualdo* not only to Gesualdo's own 'grafting' – of Tasso's poems onto his madrigals, which take up a large part of Watkins' study, although 'grafting' is Vickery's word – but to Barthes' *S/Z*.¹⁶⁸ This, she points out, had recently appeared in English when *Gesualdo* was composed, and while she offers little extra evidence for its relevance, it is another reconsideration of the nature of the *oeuvre*. *S/Z* more than debunks the idea that 'the man's the work', having shown that even the most orthodox 'classic' texts may be read as 'an iridescent exchange carried on by multiple voices' (pp. 40-1). Hejinian exposes some of that

¹⁶⁴ Hejinian, *Gesualdo*. These are quotations from the main text of the respective paragraphs referenced in the previous footnote.

¹⁶⁵ *My Life*, Hejinian's best-known text, was originally made up of thirty-seven sections each thirty-seven sentences long, written when the author was thirty-seven years old. A second edition followed, written when she was forty-five and adding eight new sentences to each of the existing sections and eight new sections of forty-five sentences each. Each sentence also carries a margin-title, presented in italics in the top corner of each section's first page. Many of the sentences are repeated throughout the book, and the different context given by their new position sets up a complex internal structure.

¹⁶⁶ Freitag, *Cultural Criticism*, p. 215. Freitag's declarative/interrogative opposition is taken from Catherine Belsey, and in this passage she also draws on Spahr, 'Resignifying Autobiography'.

¹⁶⁷ Freitag, p. 196.

¹⁶⁸ Vickery, *Leaving Lines*, p. 238.

multiplicity by turning these authoritative, declarative biographies of *Gesualdo* into a patchwork text.

Both ‘Chronic Texts’ and *Gesualdo* seem like relatively minor works by contrast with *The Guard*, one of the touchstones of Hejinian’s career both by her own estimation and that of other poets and scholars. Tied in with her trips to the USSR, it was notably translated into Russian (see below) and inspired a self-commentary project described in the essay ‘Language and “Paradise”’. However, the concerns evinced in ‘Chronic Texts’ – such as the relationship of text, art, and a language to life – are readily visible in *The Guard*. This is confronted in two principal ways: by taking language itself as an object of scrutiny; and by challenging, and remaking, the authoritative poetic aphorism, which relies on the unmediated nature of skilled, crafted language. In these texts on the border of poetry itself and poetics, Hejinian constantly foregrounds language, making it an object of study and not a transmission medium that can be perfected with sufficient craft. Nerys Williams compares this to the ‘geno-song’ articulated in Barthes’ ‘The Grain of the Voice’: language, like voice, *can* be ‘the mask that significance explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*’.¹⁶⁹ Bernstein’s pugnacious essays in the 1970s and 1980s defend works like Melnick’s *Pcoet* because they are ‘releasing the energy inherent in the referential dimension of language’, bolstering the reading capacity of the subject.¹⁷⁰ However, even if there are poetic innovations capable of ‘releasing’ *jouissance*, which would expand the reader’s experience to the full range described in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hejinian does not believe fully ‘non-referential writing’

¹⁶⁹ *IMT*, p. 183, quoted in Williams, *Reading Error* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 171.

¹⁷⁰ Bernstein, ‘Semblance’ in *Content’s Dream*, 34-9 (p. 35).

is possible. It is only that ‘as a result of proposing it, it was possible to refer farther and farther into unforeseen aspects of the world’.¹⁷¹ Such explorations in her poetry are why she describes the project of *The Guard* as ‘phenomenological’: ‘I assume the reality of everything.’¹⁷²

It is in pursuit of this goal that we find such aphorisms throughout the poem. As Williams writes: ‘*The Guard* not only staggers the poem’s impulse toward phenomenological description but strikes a reminder of the lyric form that Hejinian is working within.’¹⁷³ Yet the didactic, superior tone of the aphorism that is ‘essentially aristocratic’ is not that found in *The Guard*.¹⁷⁴ When it throws out a *sententia* (‘sentence meaning reason’¹⁷⁵), often the empirical meaning itself challenges such empirical meanings. The meanings of the aphorisms extend beyond their face value, especially when they refuse to make ‘sense’, to conform to ‘reason’. What Hannah Brooks-Motl calls ‘Hejinian’s ‘smudged aphorisms’¹⁷⁶ demonstrate their capacity to expand and adapt to a variety of reading experiences. ‘Chronic Texts’ suggests that all texts should be open to this: ‘What is “to understand” except “to make relevant” or “to find relevancy in”?’¹⁷⁷ This is especially true of *The Guard* which is, as Rae Armantrout writes, ‘an extremely difficult work to excerpt from because in it

¹⁷¹ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, pp. 168-9.

¹⁷² Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 61.

¹⁷³ Williams, *Reading Error*, p. 170.

¹⁷⁴ W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, *The Faber Book of Aphorisms* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), pp. vii-viii.

¹⁷⁵ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 388.

¹⁷⁶ Brooks-Motl, ‘The Smallest Space: Lyric Aphorism in Contemporary Poetry’.

¹⁷⁷ Hejinian, ‘Chronic Texts’, p. 21.

meaning is relational. Resonance is inherently pleasurable, as this work shows us, and requires no *raison d'être*'.¹⁷⁸ Barthes, earlier in the passage Hejinian quotes from, writes: 'when I say that a word is beautiful, when I use it because I like it, it is never by virtue of its sonorous charm or of the originality of its meaning, or of a "poetic" combination of the two' (*RB*, p. 129). It is rather because of the relations it sets up within the system of language – a given word might have a sonorous quality or a pleasing meaning, but we are not dealing with single-word poems. The 'beauty', the 'inherent' pleasure here is the writerly pleasure, the freed *jouissance*, that comes from the knowledge that I, the reader of *The Guard*, 'am going to do something with' the word, phrase, or line I am encountering.

Much of this 'resonant' function is present in what Forrest-Thomson would call 'non-meaningful' levels of language, but Bernstein's challenge to that term is supported here. *The Guard* is not 'nonsense' where sound plays freely without meaning, but the meaning is subordinate to an artistic design. *The Guard* resides within poetry, which means convention is in the picture, even if only as something to resist. Williams writes that '*The Guard* proposes that the ardent "jiggling" and "restlessness" is working against the implied "repressive" rules of the genre, suggested by "Spring and convention" and "the fear of finishing".'¹⁷⁹ This is even more true if we trace the resonance of these phrases. 'Spring and convention' suggests William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All*, a landmark work in his career and indeed in American modernist poetry, which both embodies and, because of its modernism, opposes 'convention'. Later in the same stanza, the phrase is answered

¹⁷⁸ Armantrout, review of 'The Guard' in *HOW(ever)* 2;2 (Feb 1985), <http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/archive/print_archive/alerts0285.html> [accessed 1st March 2014].

¹⁷⁹ Williams, *Reading Error*, p. 171.

with ‘the rhapsodic rider-driver, springing / invention’, which reflects *Spring and All*, more directly especially since the title poem ‘Spring and All’ takes place on ‘the road to the contagious hospital’. A ‘rider-driver’ is absent from the poem, but this might be the ‘rhapsodic’ reader experiencing the book as a revelation. The ‘fear of finishing’ is also part of a network of resonances: ‘ringing / in my ears is fear of finishing’, while a fear of literary boundaries, is also the fear of death, which in turn is also literary: ‘The fear of death / is a missprint.’ (*sic*) A miss-print might be something which escapes being printed, or misses the chance, or it might be something printed by a woman: *The Guard* was the fiftieth of the fifty chapbooks printed in the original run (also held in the word: a mis-*sprint*) of Hejinian’s Tuumba Press. These tempting biographical readings can be widened out, however, to the more general application of the idea of limitations, which ‘finish’ the ambitions of texts before they have begun by oppressively ‘ringing / in my ears’.

Yet these small readings can only be integrated by reading across the whole text according to patterns of resonance of words and sounds. If we try to read the text from start to finish in this way, it does not supply a linear narrative. It is hard to make anything of the poem without cross-referencing, which is why Armantrout says it is so difficult to excerpt. Williams calls this *The Guard*’s ‘erring enquiry’, and elaborates it by drawing on Barthes’ distinction between the geno-song and pheno-song, in turn borrowed by him from Julia Kristeva on geno- and pheno-text. The ‘tension’ of this duality ‘reaches its apex in the references to technique and a simultaneity of composition: “(I hear the pen pat as I come to the end / of the phrase and make a comma) in G-minor.”¹⁸⁰ These lines describe the drive of the text to be

¹⁸⁰ Williams, *Reading Error*, p. 171.

articulated, figured as pheno-song, while the overall operation of the poem is the *jouissance* of resonance. Whether purposely derived from Barthes and Kristeva's ideas or not, *The Guard* compares writing to music, and its geno-song 'forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression' (*IMT*, p. 182). Although Hejinian makes clear that she does not consider that a non-referential language is possible, the idea, if even only as an outer limit, is a valuable part of the intellectual vocabulary of her work.

Music is just one way in which the limits of language and communication are explored by experimenting with how they may be opened out or enclosed. Jacob Edmond, in a paper about the 'openness' of Hejinian's texts, writes that *The Guard*

does not contain this Barthesian 'infinity of language' literally, but its metonymic network and aphoristic enclosures at the level of line and sentence, along with the frame of its opening and closing lines, together assert a metaphoric leap [...] to an infinitely extensive and complete paradisaal realm that 'exceeds the dimensions of the discourse'¹⁸¹

Usually, we consider that there are internal borders in a discourse. Here, however, the integration of the 'network' of figural (and, as I have indicated, phonological)

¹⁸¹ Edmond, 'The Closures of the Open Text: Lyn Hejinian's "Paradise Found"', *Contemporary Literature* 50;2 (Summer 2009), 240-72 (p. 268).

resonances and the limitations suggested by aphorisms sets up borders only to exceed them. For instance, the lines ‘Ready frenetics are optative, hot-headed [...] given to reticent outbursts’¹⁸² in section 2 of the poem features not only a sensuous game of sound-echoes, but also plays contradictory meanings of the words off each other, so that while they appear to sit together well they are in fact semantically discordant. Frenetics might be unsteady, unready, or perhaps hyperactive, too ready, while ‘reticent outbursts’ is an outright oxymoron. Similarly, ‘optative’ is the grammatical mood of wish or hope, beyond even the subjunctive, but ‘hot-headed’ pits that Latinate, abstracted idea against an aspirated, Anglo-Saxon alliteration. This is a way of considering ‘Life, like that’, as we see earlier in the stanza, and we are made complicit with the contradictions and forced to get our hands dirty. Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, writing to Hejinian about his Russian translation of *The Guard*, tells her that parts of the poem, ‘not only because they hide “citations”[,] now sound to me as if I had written them’.¹⁸³ The writerly text is accomplished by *implicating* the reader.

Conclusion

Vickery paraphrases *The Pleasure of the Text* when she writes that ‘the subject’s own interval is what is perverse’, and ‘[i]n collaboration, each writer is also a reader [...] doubly perverse’.¹⁸⁴ Engagements with Barthes, some of them relatively

¹⁸² Hejinian, *The Guard*, unpag.

¹⁸³ Dragomoshchenko, letter dated 1 June 1986, quoted in Edmond, *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 49.

¹⁸⁴ Vickery, *Leaving Lines*, p. 251. Vickery does not reference a specific part of *The Pleasure of the Text*, but only the book ‘in general’.

tangential, echo throughout the fuzzily defined space of the ‘Language writing’ tendency, and the tenuous connections drawn often verge on perversity. The attitude Barthes says he takes in reading commentary is to be a voyeur, to spy on the critic’s enjoyment, pleasure at reported pleasure (*PT*, p. 17). But since the critic, especially of already reader-centred work, is considering what the reader’s experience must be, these doubled and tripled pleasures become increasingly self-regarding and ‘perverse’ ‘à l’infini’.¹⁸⁵ From the liberty of language that might be achieved with ‘fixed connections being abolished’ to the resonance through the manipulation of linguistic connections, Barthes became part of the metalanguage of an already ‘language-centred’ writing. It is thus perhaps not surprising that he should also inform the growing body of poetics driven by experimental poets and expanded through their ‘little magazines’, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁸⁵ Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte précédé de Variations sur l’écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 95; Mortimer points out that Miller’s translation moves the final words of the sentence, ‘à l’infini’ (*ad infinitum*) into the middle of the sentence and renders the expression as the adjective ‘infinite’. Mortimer correctly points out that it is the *doubling* (and tripling) of perversity that is infinite, forming an infinite chain between subsequent writers and readers. ‘[I]nfinite perversity’ does not convey the subtlety of Barthes’ expression. *The Gentlest Law*, p. 91; cf. *PT*, p. 17.

Chapter Three: Barthes in Journals

Approaching Poetry Journal Culture

So far, I have been able to isolate certain texts where context and reference tell us that Barthes is relevant. It has been possible to treat an author's works, or an anthology of a group of authors in the case of 'The Dwelling-Place', as a unit, and to draw conclusions about that whole grouping because Barthes is invoked in one part of it. I looked at Forrest-Thomson's series of 'twin poems' on the basis of a Barthes reference in one of two texts, at Silliman's vast work *Ketjak* based on a handful of sentences, at Mayer's work based only on her teaching, and at Hejinian's work based on consistent interest in a single remark by Barthes. These are signals of a greater engagement with Barthes in the culture of poetry as a whole, and the conclusions drawn about texts on this basis are important to reading them, but I have not inferred 'influence' here. No premature conclusions are to be drawn about Barthes' effect on the development of ideas about poetry held by poets themselves. In the sense in which the word is used in the title of *Poetics Journal*, those ideas are the *poetics* of these loose associations of writers. Like the last, this chapter neither aims to 'cover', nor restricts itself to, 'language writing'; it begins with consideration of poets who were also art critics before moving on to journals associated with 'language writing'. Moreover, many prominent writers who are often associated with the 'group' are not discussed in detail, because I have found little detailed evidence of their opinions on Barthes, or in French theory more generally, beyond references to his name in their correspondence with other writers.

The subject of this chapter is a huge and ephemeral text, ‘poetics’. It takes place in conversation, through personal correspondence, during readings, seminars, and formal discussions, and in print journals.¹ The conversations of poets and readers of poetry are not available to me for study, but a few texts, such as *The Grand Piano*, a collaborative autobiography of nine Bay Area writers, can be read and analysed to produce a sense of those conversations. Likewise, those letters and other documents held in archives, and audio recordings of readings and talks, may also help provide a representative sample of what was being said, questioned, and repeated between different poetry communities. However, while all of these sources will be drawn upon, the bulk of this chapter will be concerned with the poetics expressed through journals. As the inheritors of ‘all the little magazines which [...] died to make verse free’² in early twentieth-century modernism, these were usually precarious operations. Thus, in a context where commercial success was impossible, some were able to take on the task of being stages for commercially unpalatable forms of writing. They subsisted on small amounts of arts funding, often undependable subscription lists, and the goodwill and free time of their editors and contributors, which varied in availability as much as any other resource. This makes them partial and irregular records of thought, as they do not have the comparative stability that could be drawn upon in tracing the development of a strictly academic interest or a more mainstream intellectual tendency that made it to the pages of newspapers. But

¹ I am aware that the idea of ‘poetics’ as a ‘text’ potentially stretches the definition of both of these versatile terms to the point of catachresis. However, when we come to discuss *Poetics Journal*, it will be possible to see both what the poets concerned thought ‘poetics’ was, and I take this continuously elaborated, multi-authored discipline as a single ‘text’, as one might take a vast email thread in the decades that followed it. The period of time with which I am concerned precedes, if only by a few years, the movement of much conversation about poetics to poetry email lists and websites, although today poets’ use of the Internet is key for understanding contemporary poetics.

² Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 260.

this variability also illustrates a valuable truth: that given the swift rise and fall of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* or the irregular publishing schedule of *Poetics Journal*, the ‘development’ of such ideas was never assured. Any understanding of a particular thinker is affected by economic decisions by other publishers about what Barthes should be available in English. For instance, *Image Music Text* seems to have courted controversy with ‘The Death of the Author’, while other volumes aimed to meet demand for comment on a particular topic before an interest in Barthes *qua* Barthes has been established, like *On Racine* as a specimen of the French ‘new criticism’ that caused such rumbles of controversy. These concerns have also made some archives more available than others to subsequent scholarship: without anthology volumes such as *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* and *A Guide to Poetics Journal*, they would be read and studied far less widely, and written about less as a result. It is with this in mind that I have attempted to redress the balance by giving attention to other journals where relevant, but as much as the study of the history of poetics is the study of conduits along which information and inspiration may pass, it must also sometimes be the study of dead ends. Barthes has many points of entry to English-language poetry culture, and this chapter follows the evidence to explore which became the most useful and effective.

Poetics and Art Journalism: New York and Paris

In the middle of the twentieth century, New York City began to rival Paris as a centre of the international art scene. Many intellectuals were travelling between the two metropolises, and thanks to air travel they re-crossed more frequently than Stein

and Pound had in the days of high modernism. As such, their publications facilitated transit of ideas between the two cultures and languages.³

It was as part of this trend that in 1964 the journal *Art and Literature*, edited by poet John Ashbery, published an English translation of the essay ‘Le Monde-Objet’ by Roland Barthes.⁴ In it, Barthes finds in Dutch still lives ‘a real transformation of the object, which no longer has an essence but takes refuge entirely within its attributes’.⁵ He goes on to argue that in both still life and portrait in different ways can be found the seeds of European imperialist notions. Simon Schama writes of the essay that ‘like much structuralist writing of its time, it is written in blunt attack mode’ and goes on to say that Barthes finds in the conspicuous consumption in the paintings ‘an early form of commodity fetishism’.⁶ In 1953, when ‘Le Monde-Objet’ was first written, the Barthes of *Combat* was still thought of primarily as a ‘Marxist’ critic, and this fits into that narrative – Schama, as befits the purpose of his essay, takes this Barthes at face value and not in the context of his later work. We encounter this early English Barthes in the same issue of the magazine as Ashbery’s iconic long poem *The Skaters*, which conducts its own challenge to authorship and the lyric ‘I’, as we shall see below. A poem which it is

³ This process in the period prior to that discussed in this thesis is investigated from various angles in Serge Guilbaut (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), which looks at the period’s abstract art in these local contexts as well as the wider international context in which artists found themselves.

⁴ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. 6. The essay was published as ‘The World Become Thing’, trans. by Stanley Geist, *Art and Literature* 3 (1964), pp. 148-61. However, most English-language readers know it through Richard Howard’s rendering, ‘The World as Object’, and it is from this version that I quote here.

⁵ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. 6.

⁶ Schama, ‘Perishable Commodities: Dutch Still-life Painting and the “Empire of Things”’ in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993), 478-88 (p. 478).

said Anne Waldman compared to *The Waste Land*,⁷ and which has marked much American poetry of the last fifty years, is here published alongside one of the first English renderings of Barthes, and so the publication seems to be at the forefront of new intellectual developments. However, when Ashbery featured the essay in *Art and Literature*, Barthes' first book in English, *On Racine*, had recently appeared in America in Richard Howard's translation. Barthes was beginning a slightly different career as author of a polemical body of criticism one of whose chief aims was already changing the way readers saw authorship. While this book did not seek to 'abolish' Racine, it did argue against seeking the meaning of his works in the myth of him as a universal genius: 'if we want to keep Racine, we must keep him at a distance'.⁸ Ben Hickman has written that the 'author-crisis' happening in Paris at this time 'speaks to Ashbery's poetics', but although he was living in Paris while the Barthes-Picard debate was playing out, little beyond these editorial choices survives to tell us exactly what Ashbery thought.⁹

Ashbery, the editor of *Art and Literature*, had worked on the poetry journal *Locus Solus*, 'the first generation of New York School poets['] [...] first shot at editing their own magazine'.¹⁰ He had also reviewed for the venerable monthly *ARTNews*, which published many poets as reviewers, like Barbara Guest, Frank O'Hara, Ted Berrigan, and Kenneth Koch, to name only those who have already

⁷ Reported in Sam Kashner, *When I Was Cool: My Life at the Jack Kerouac School* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

⁸ Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 149.

⁹ Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 7.

¹⁰ Terence Diggory, *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets* (New York: Infobase, 2009), p. 298.

been mentioned in this thesis.¹¹ These poets did not approach art on theoretical terms; ‘they based their conclusions on looking, rather than theory’, and editor Thomas Hess ‘believed in the instinct of poets to define a painting’.¹² There is, however, no *opposition* between poets and theory; Barthes’s essay fits in quite comfortably, and the poets’ ‘instincts’ were not just wild surmises, but led to thoroughly-argued conclusions.¹³ O’Hara feels Cy Twombly bringing ‘as much attention to esthetic tremors as to artistic excitement’,¹⁴ an idea found in Barthes’ view of the ‘artist’, however ‘kitsch’ he now finds that term, as ‘an “operator” of gestures’.¹⁵ Barthes’ notion of the ‘gesture’, ‘movement’ isolated from ‘product’, looks a lot like O’Hara’s ‘esthetic tremor’, and indeed, Richard Howard uses this very word to Barthes’ ‘tremblement’: that isolated gesture of writing makes visible ‘the tremor of time’.¹⁶ Both critics of Twombly see in his work a ‘tremulous’ aesthetic response, like the vibration of the ‘chart of language’ (Hejninian’s Barthes) when one starts to write – a *bodily* response. And Ashbery, who during his time on the editorial staff of *ARTNews* is also a prolific contributor,

¹¹ John Ashbery, ‘The Art of Poetry No. 33’, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, *Paris Review* 90 (Winter 1983) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery>> [accessed 6th November 2014]; Diggory, *Encyclopedia of the New York School*, pp. 223-4.

¹² John Yau, ‘The Poet as Art Critic’, *American Poetry Review* 34;3 (May/June 2005), 45-50 (p. 50 n. 24); Barbara Guest, quoted in Diggory, *New York School*, p. 223.

¹³ Barbara Guest’s essay on Fay Lansner puts a brief but sophisticated case for her paintings’ development towards ‘enjoyment of the senses’ even, and perhaps especially, because of the ‘difficult, ambivalent world’ they describe. Guest, ‘Fay Lansner: Deliberate Contraries’, *ART News* 62;8 (December 1963), 36-7, 67 (p. 67).

¹⁴ O’Hara, ‘What’s With Modern Art?’ ed. by Bill Berkson, *Jacket* 6 (January 1999) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/06/ohara.html>> [accessed 13th November 2014].

¹⁵ Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. by Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1985), p. 164.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 5, p. 709; *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 164.

isn't interested in abstraction as an idealized state, but in something messier and closer to life. He believes in art and writing that are autonomous but not removed from reality. This is why many find it nearly impossible to write about his poetry; it keeps slipping through one's fingers and reconstituting itself just beyond one's grasp.¹⁷

John Yau's discussion here of the problems in interpreting Ashbery's poetry is typified by Forrest-Thomson's dense and difficult account in *Poetic Artifice*. She constructs her complex account of an Ashbery poem on the basis that he uses this 'messiness' and closeness to 'life' – 'discursive image-complexes' and 'implied external context' – and combines them by means of poetic convention in order to force awareness of his artifice, from which point he can create a new poetic structure (*PA*, pp. 157-8). What this yields looks rather different to most 'writing about poetry'. Yau, on the other hand, opts instead to put Ashbery in the context of debates about the lyric 'I', saying that 'Ashbery's use of "I" is unlike that of any other poet' and that whether one 'proclaim[s] the death of the author' with the language writers or not, 'something of the personality' of a poet 'comes through in their work'.¹⁸ We can look here at an 'I'-heavy passage of Section IV of *The Skaters* in this context, and attempt to apply Forrest-Thomson's model to it.

¹⁷ Yau, 'The Poet as Art Critic', p. 49.

¹⁸ Yau, 'The Poet as Art Critic', p. 49.

The Skaters, typically for Ashbery's work, resists the kind of close-reading that relies on the decipherment of metaphors and images. While Forrest-Thomson contends that the poetic syntax of Ashbery's texts is constantly acting to prevent us from creating 'the reading', at times it seems closer to the interim readings created by the language writers. In Hejinian's *My Life* there are internal correspondences which we can draw out, so that although the meaning of a given sentence may be opaque, it becomes significant when its various combinations are compared. By contrast, in Silliman's *Ketjak* sentences have fairly apparent meaning in isolation, but it is more difficult to see patterns in the whole. In Section IV of *The Skaters*, a stanza begins: 'Today I wrote: "The spring is late this year"'.¹⁹ The metapoetic move is compounded a few lines later: 'How far from the usual statement [...] the weather itself had gone.' The 'usual statement' might denote the benchmark set by the convention in which the poem operates; its inadequacy, and the need for alternative strategies, is suggested. The idea of 'anti-lyric' is already enacted by changing the positions of description and described world, and *The Skaters* is part of another alternative to lyric: the modern long poem tradition. When long poems approach 'epic' proportion, there are different conventional expectations, such as narrative; much can be learned from the way such texts deal with these expectations. The next stanza reads:

I mean this. Through the years

you have approached an inventory

¹⁹ Ashbery, 'The Skaters' in *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 76.

And it is now that tomorrow
 Is going to be the climax of your casual
 statement about yourself²⁰

Even by excerpting these lines, I have applied a reading to the text, implicitly assigning importance to the elements prominent in these lines. As with *My Life*, I create connections drawn from throughout a large work in the absence of an evident system for reading based on content. In my selection here, I posit that what is meant by an ‘inventory’ is an account of oneself, that the addressee’s ‘statement’ is the culmination of that process, and that this bears a link to the speaker’s attitude to spring. Alex Blazer calls this a movement ‘from specific narrative event to the dreamy contemplation of subjectivity’,²¹ but, as the language writers discovered and as Hejinian outlines in *The Language of Inquiry*, writing completely empty of narrative is as impossible as writing empty of reference. By experimenting with non-referential writing – that ‘achieved by effacing connections’, as ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ posits – ‘it was possible to refer farther and farther into unforeseen aspects of the world’.²² The suggestion of an analogous non-*narrative* writing ‘reminds us that there are many forms, qualities, and experiences of the time in which things unfold’.²³ Not all experiences of this ‘unfolding’ are what Blazer calls ‘specific’, but are closer to ‘dreamy contemplation’. He argues that Ashbery tries to create a less

²⁰ Ashbery, ‘The Skaters’, p. 76.

²¹ Blazer, *I Am Otherwise: The Romance Between Poetry and Theory After the Death of the Subject* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), p. 83.

²² Silliman, ‘Surprised by Sign’, p. 118; Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, pp. 168-9.

²³ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 169.

reflective and more experiential poetry, calling it a ‘shifting psychological lyric’ in which the *profound* is avoided. Instead, readers are skaters over the top. But this itself is a narrative, pulled out by the attempt to account for the poem’s effects; as we have seen above, these metapoetic points, among others, can be consistently pulled out of the poem, just as similar ones can from *My Life* and *Ketjak*. In response to Fredric Jameson’s essay on postmodern culture, in which language writing is presented as indicative of ‘schizophrenic fragmentation’, Bob Perelman wrote that poets had to understand that ‘narrative is not immanent, but social’.²⁴ What distinguishes the kind of experimental practice we shall see in this chapter is that the practitioners see statements about writing or the culture in which they operate not only (or primarily) as descriptions or theoretical models, but also as challenges and calls to action.

Although he is not identified as a language writer, Ashbery is also often placed into a context of postmodern theory.²⁵ Marjorie Perloff is one of the major critical champions of language writing, but in the 1980s she also authored a number of essays on twentieth-century American literature more generally, one of which goes to great pains to connect him with Barthes. ‘Barthes, Ashbery and the Zero Degree of Genre’, as the version collected in her 1990 book *Poetic License* is entitled, does not suggest Ashbery is taking cues about poetics from Barthes, as

²⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 28; Perelman, ‘Exchangeable Frames’, review of Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, *Poetics Journal* 5 (May 1985), pp. 168-76.

²⁵ See, for example, James McCorkle, ‘Nimbus of Sensations: Eros and Reverie in the Poetry of John Ashbery and Ann Lauterbach’ in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Susan M. Schultz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), pp. 101-25, and Stamatina Dimakopoulou, ‘The Poetics of Vision and the Redemption of the Subject in John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*’, *E-rea: Révue électronique des études sur le monde anglophone* 2.2 (2004) < <http://erea.revues.org/436> > [accessed 18 August 2015].

Silliman and the poets of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* show they are doing when they publish lengthy quotations from *Writing Degree Zero*. Rather, it uses ideas from Barthes, both those he expresses about writing and that he puts into practice in his own texts, to describe Ashbery's work. For example, the idea of 'arthology', Barthes' 'new science' of articulations and connections gestured towards at the end of *Elements of Semiology*, is used to describe both the fissured, scrapbook character of *Roland Barthes*, and then in turn Ashbery's poem 'As We Know'.²⁶ Ashbery's text, in its 'anti-lyric' mode, constructs an environment which engages is (post)modernist fragmentation but at the same time permits a 'loosening', a 'fluidity of consciousness' where the only constant is the reading mind.²⁷ For Perloff, however, Barthes and Ashbery are engaging at the same time in 'two very similar modes of writing', which for her is enough reason to place them alongside one another, but there is no literary-historical evidence to connect them. The one exception to this is the essay's penultimate paragraph, where Perloff articulates (through Barthes) a common simplification of postmodern experimental writing strategies and seemingly applies it to both Barthes and Ashbery. She writes that literature 'can no longer coincide with the function of *mathesis*,' because '[w]e live in a profuse world [...] bombarded by fragmentary, controlled bits of information'.²⁸ Forrest-Thomson finds this argument vexatious because, in many such poems, the easiest interpretation, and the one that can be arrived at without looking too closely

²⁶ Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 271.

²⁷ Perloff, *Poetic License*, pp. 279-80.

²⁸ Perloff, *Poetic License*, p. 284.

at form, is to explain away formal complexity by saying that it is there simply to mirror 'the complexity of modern life'.²⁹

The alignment of Barthes and Ashbery, then, is one of intellectual affinity rather than the adaptation of his ideas deliberately and publicly into his poetics. Without speculating on any causal links, we can identify common intellectual experiences between these two writers. The same is true with Barthes and Frank O'Hara; similarities of feeling along these lines are also what prompt Bob Perelman to write the essay 'A False Account of Talking with Frank O'Hara and Roland Barthes in Philadelphia'.³⁰ The critical ideas of Perelman's mouthpieces are joined by a mistrust of, but also partial seduction by, the mass entertainments handed down by bourgeois culture. Looking at Barthes' mythology on wrestling or O'Hara's 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', we see their emotional investment in the very world they are critiquing. In each case, an intellectual treatment of the 'spectacle of excess' ('may the money of the world glitteringly cover you', O'Hara tells the movie makers) is nevertheless entirely enraptured by the spectacle, the 'euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations' to 'heavenly dimensions and reverberations and iconoclasm'.³¹ O'Hara and Barthes, although they spend much energy defending 'high' culture, both 'like movies too' and make artistic use of their experience of them in a way that, for instance, Forrest-

²⁹ Forrest-Thomson, *PA*, p. 82; see also Couturier and Forrest-Thomson, 'Unrealism and Death in Contemporary Poetry'.

³⁰ Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, pp. 156-66.

³¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 15; O'Hara, 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', *Collected Poems*, 232-3 (p. 232); *Mythologies*, p. 25; 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', p. 232.

Thomson does not.³² It is hard to imagine her expressing in poetry or prose an opinion on Garbo or Turner, and the newspaper headlines she turns into poetry even to prove a theoretical point are about the governance of the BBC, seemingly chosen to be as dry as possible.³³ In Perelman's imaginary conversation, a kind of critical link is articulated which does not belong in literary criticism as such, but the two figures prominent enough in the minds of poets to achieve a kind of intellectual sainthood. This status accrues to them no matter how, in accordance with their critical personalities, they try to swat away their haloes.³⁴ It is an association which has produced a small number of texts but when we take this discourse of 'poetics' as one vast text, in which Perelman, as *The Marginalization of Poetry* attests, has been immersed as a reader and producer, resonances emerge.

Art and Literature published Barthes in a context of French thinkers – Blanchot on German Romanticism, Merleau-Ponty on Cézanne, and *Tel Quel* poets like Roche and Pleynet.³⁵ Barthes' 'The World as Object'/'The World Become Thing' is only a small piece of the history of the links between the New York School and French literary and artistic culture, but its existence is only possible because of this great transatlantic network of artistic and poetic theory, commentary, and self-commentary. I wish now to move on to another American poetry environment where French theory, but particularly poststructuralism, was vital to the production of

³² O'Hara, 'Personism: A Manifesto' in *Collected Poems*, p. 498.

³³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 56-7; Forrest-Thomson, *PA*, p. 22; O'Hara, 'Poem [Lana Turner has collapsed!]' in *Lunch Poems*, p. 64.

³⁴ Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, p. 163.

³⁵ Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', *Art and Literature* 6, pp. 149-60; Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', *Art and Literature* 4, pp. 106-24, both trans. by Sonia Brownell. Roche and Pleynet appear frequently both in *Art and Literature* and in the aforementioned journal *Locus Solus*.

underlying poetic ideas. Tom Clark writes that the typical language writer sounded ‘like an assistant professor who took a wrong turn on his way to the Derrida cookout and ended up at the poetry reading’.³⁶ But part of the all-important turn to language after the 1960s is the turn of poets who, following the example of Derrida, Barthes, or Kristeva, seek to examine and deconstruct the meaning-making processes that surround us.³⁷

Barthes in the ‘Language-Centred’ Poetics Journals

Many of the founding documents of language writing appeared in poetry periodicals with small circulations which came to exist for the purpose of discussing poetry and engaging with theoretical ideas that supported avant-garde practice (although some also included poems). Such journals were not restricted to language writing, but language writing flourished particularly well in such environments and has come to be intimately associated with it – when this tendency is thought of as a ‘movement’, its name is often spelled the same way as the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, as noted at the beginning of Chapter 2. This journal was founded by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein in 1978, and served as an important venue both for poetry and ‘for a deliberate cultivation of critical thinking’.³⁸ *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* came in a context of journals like Silliman’s *Tattel’s*, Bob Perelman’s *Hills* (1973-83), and Watten and Grenier’s *This* (1971-82). Although these others existed more to publish poems themselves, all featured work experimenting with the very foundations of

³⁶ Clark, ‘Stalin as Linguist’, *Partisan Review* 37;2 (1989), 299-304 (p. 301).

³⁷ Barrett Watten, ‘The Turn to Language and the 1960s’, *Critical Inquiry* 29;1 (Autumn 2002), pp. 139-83.

³⁸ Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, p. 16.

language. The primary mode of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was short, bold prose pieces. A more traditionally academic format was provided in 1982 when Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten founded *Poetics Journal*, which sought longer articles and expanded the scope of poetics, attempting to make connections with an even wider theoretical context and practices from other art forms.³⁹

Politics was also important in this context, and Silliman, who by this time had served as the editor of *Socialist Review*, had a high-profile exchange with poet Leslie Scalapino which began in the pages of that publication and then moved *Poetics Journal*. In sum, Silliman thought that the dominant bourgeois culture was the enemy experimental poetry was ideal for fighting against, but Scalapino argued that it could also be used to challenge hegemonic structures of gender, race, and other inequalities as well as class. Silliman held that these concerns were better addressed by an ‘experience’-based, less formally radical mode of writing. These debates drew on specific material, both poetic and theoretical, including poststructuralism; Silliman wrote that an ‘honest poststructuralism’ would require revision of ‘the concept of canonicity itself’, and dethroning the author is a part of this project.⁴⁰ Scalapino, in her response, said that ‘all analysis/theory [...] is a false conception of what is “objective”’, and produces its own reality.⁴¹ This goes beyond even *The Pleasure of the Text*, however fundamental its critique of academic attempts to theorise, because

³⁹ George Lakoff, one of the major figures in cognitive linguistics, was linked to the San Francisco language writers, while Reva Wolf and John Zorn contributed essays on Andy Warhol in Ashbery and the practice of avant-garde musical composition respectively. Lakoff, ‘Continuous Reframing’, pp. 111-8; Wolf, ‘Thinking You Know’, pp. 397-413; Zorn, ‘Memory and Immortality in Musical Composition’, pp. 414-9, all in *A Guide to Poetics Journal*.

⁴⁰ Silliman and Scalapino, ‘What/Person?: from an exchange’ in *A Guide to Poetics Journal*, pp. 388-9.

⁴¹ Scalapino, ‘What/Person?’, p. 391.

when they are found wanting it is simply because they are not ‘subtle’ enough (*PT*, p. 61). However, although Silliman and Scalapino disagree, their argument is only possible because they share an understanding of certain postmodern ideas: that objectivity is an illusion that has been ‘used against the powerless’.⁴² Beginning from there, they are able to present competing points of view on artistic strategies which might combat it, Silliman arguing that it can be exposed, Scalapino arguing that what replaces it is just as constructed. The common ground arrived at through arguing points with those who were of similar mind on many fundamental issues of poetics created a field in which sophisticated models could be developed, rather than arguing the basic premises repeatedly.⁴³

This network of interests carried on outside the specific U.S. context of language writing. Forrest-Thomson’s interest in Barthes did not find expression in such a periodical, but the concerns of ‘After Intelligibility’ – turning contemporary theory to the purposes of poetics – would have been rather at home in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. Essays like Silliman’s ‘Benjamin Obscura’ and Bernstein’s engagement with Stanley Cavell on Wittgenstein worked to formulate an understanding of their subjects that could be useful to poets (which as we have seen is also what Forrest-Thomson was trying to extract from the rapidly developing theories of the Barthes of the late 1960s).⁴⁴ Barthes was the subject of discussion in journals not so closely connected to the language writing tendency – the contributors to the Canadian *Open Letter* were certainly fellow-travellers, but there are important

⁴² Silliman ‘What/Person?’, p. 381.

⁴³ Barrett Watten, ‘Introduction’ in *A Guide to Poetics Journal*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Silliman, ‘Benjamin Obscura’ in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp. 63-5; Bernstein, ‘The Objects of Meaning’ in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp. 60-2.

boundaries between them and the people who wrote for English journals of avant-garde poetry like *Grosseteste Review* and later *Angel Exhaust*. These were dismissive enough of Barthes that Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe could be glossed, in notes to an interview with the poet John Wilkinson in a 1992 issue, as ‘English followers of Barthes’ who ‘[p]romoted the Death of the Artist [*sic*], one of those tedious Sixties things’.⁴⁵ Interviewer Andrew Duncan, at one point in the interview, suggests that the poets of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* ‘are trying to deliver the absence of the poet’, to which Wilkinson responds, ‘And it’s only referable back to the poet, the figure of the Poet’.⁴⁶ We observed in the previous chapter that often, replacement of the author with the *scriptor* who supposedly understands his own lack of objectivity has little effect; this is the stance Scalapino critiques. Barthes seems to have been less relevant to poetry in Britain; a few isolated statements are made, some of which will be discussed below, but America was where the engagements were deepest and most various.

Wch Way

Beginning three years before *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a small poetry magazine called *Wch Way* published six issues in Bloomington, Indiana. Its linked second and third issues (numbered 2¹ and 2²) featured a transcription of a round-table discussion centred, albeit loosely, around Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*. This book, which as we have seen was important to Mayer and other poets for the positions it outlined for pleasure and sensuality in reading, had just been published in English. The

⁴⁵ Andrew Duncan, ‘The John Wilkinson Interview’, *Angel Exhaust* 8 (Autumn 1992), 76-90 (p. 90); ‘Glossary’, p. 101.

⁴⁶ ‘The John Wilkinson Interview’, *Angel Exhaust* 8, p. 88.

contributors to the *Wch Way* ‘Multivocal Moontalk’, the ‘Information Collage and Collate Energy Collective’, are clearly interested, but struggle to adapt it to their own poetic convictions and practices. One contributor complains, ‘I still have trouble imagining an orgasm in which the parts were arranged on the principle of alphabetical order.’⁴⁷ This is a reference to Barthes’ use of the term *jouissance* throughout the book, which can be rendered ‘bliss’ or ‘rapture’ but is also used for the pleasure of orgasm. Another confusion is in the relationships between different phases of Barthes’ career; discussing Barthes ‘new linguistic science’, they wonder, ‘why didn’t he say it was semiology?’ when Barthes here has a broader approach in mind.⁴⁸ This issue was published in the same year as ‘The Dwelling-Place’, in which the sign is a key idea, but with *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes moves on to describing other practices, and the participants notice this. Semiology is all but tossed aside and that other ‘tedious Sixties thing’ of his, ‘The Death of the Author’, is not even mentioned. Far more important here is Barthes’ Seventies Thing of combining his old structuralist urge to index by signifier, and thereby show up its arbitrariness, and its corollary in following the ‘euphoric’ alphabet. Of unmotivated origins and yet non-arbitrary as an organising principle, ‘since everyone agrees on it’, the alphabet partakes of the ‘glory of language’ (*RB*, p. 147), a considerable reframing of the object of study. Since, unlike in *Roland Barthes* and *A Lover’s*

⁴⁷ Information Collage and Collate Energy Collective, ‘Multivocal Moontalk’, *Wch Way* 2¹ (Fall 1975), unpag.

⁴⁸ Like theoretical physics adapting to the strange new character of spacetime in the post-Einsteinian universe, ‘structural analysis (semiology) must recognize the slightest resistances in the text, the irregular pattern of its veins’ (*PT*, pp. 36-7). *The Pleasure of the Text* here presages the 1977 Inaugural Lecture, wherein Barthes comes to see semiology as the ‘debunking of linguistics’ severance of language from discourse’, which there he sees as an ‘imposture’: it must focus instead on the ‘impurity of language’. José Guilherme Merquior, ‘A Hedonist Apostasy: The Later Barthes’, *Portuguese Studies* 1 (1985), 182-92 (p. 183); Barthes, ‘Inaugural Lecture’ in *A Barthes Reader*, p. 462.

Discourse, the titles of the sections are restricted to the table of contents in *The Pleasure of the Text*, this point is not made clear to the *Wch Way* contributors, who puzzle over the nature of the book's 'flow'. 'It's interesting that it takes these avant-garde guys a tremendous amount of nerve to write a list'.⁴⁹ Barthes fits the category of 'avant-garde guy', in that his list-like texts do seem to take 'nerve'; that is, they are composed in the knowledge that this differs from the mainstream academic context in which they are going to be read, and this is done to a definite purpose. If following the alphabet is a 'temptation', then giving in to it is also a sin against logocentric (another word much-discussed here) structures which say that in a book of ideas, the ideas will have a logical pattern. They have to be built up from their foundation, but Barthes goes to some lengths to defy this expectation and build a text which has the form of a hyphology, a web (*PT*, p. 64), and can be used as such ('You can start with any letter', says Rasula). The use of the alphabet to order such a text mocks as well as enacts the *Bouvard et Pécuchet* encyclopaedic urge.

The relevance of all of this for poetry comes sharply into focus when the participants go on to ask themselves, 'why the novel?' They are poets reading an unconventionally ordered text which seems to be saying things more relevant to poetry than the nineteenth-century novel, and wonder why Barthes loves novels and is fascinated by them. Yet they have been surprised to find themselves liking Balzac (the great 'trick' of *S/Z*), and say that Barthes has 'a kind of nostalgia for the 19th [*sic*] century, and other times he was really dumping on it'.⁵⁰ Like Barthes, poets whose idea of modernity is a new approach to the text nevertheless remain fascinated

⁴⁹ Information Collage and Collate Energy Collective, 'Multivocal Moontalk', *Wch Way* 2² (Spring 1976), unpag.

⁵⁰ Information Collage and Collate Energy Collective, 'Multivocal Moontalk', *Wch Way* 2¹, (Fall 1975), unpag.

by ‘classic’ texts and ‘like a good story’ (*S/Z*, p. 15), and these two issues of *Wch Way* also include much of Bruce McClelland’s ‘The Dracula Poems’, a sequence based on Stoker’s novel. McClelland plays with the text and tale of *Dracula* and uses it as material for poetic experimentation, and in this way the poems become commentaries on reading as well: ‘we invented mirrors to see [...] The story is the truth / Vlad is just another symbol.’⁵¹ As well as retelling of the story and application to a range of experiences of life, the poem is a literary-critical tool. Similarly, Robert Kelly’s ‘Texts’, spread across the double issue like the ‘Multivocal Moontalk’, are a reflexive poem-critique: ‘The text is always talking about itself [...] text is belly, eats.’⁵² It also bears a resemblance to parts of Ashbery’s *The Skaters*; in the discussion of that poem above, we saw that the world makes itself strange to the previous, more straightforward report of it. Here, the poetic experience is the experience of reporting, yet a report can in fact bear little reference to the empirical world: ‘the report I bring / is born from no perception / but the yearn of my thought’.⁵³ The writer serves his ‘yearn’, and, as Barthes would say, ‘writes with his desire’ (*RB*, p. 188). Rather than an authorial command originating from an ego, the little-understood desire originates from an obscure place, the ‘belly’ of the text. This close attention to the nature of the pleasures of reading and writing is what these writers value in Barthes. The ‘Multivocal Moontalk’ marvels at the way Barthes engages with a tradition of writers who, like their comparison points of Proust and Augustine, ‘talk about what it really means to sit down with a book and read’. They also see this as having a clear relevance to their own culture, as when one speaker

⁵¹ McClelland, ‘The Dracula Poems: IV’; ‘The Symbology: Identities (The Dracula Poems XI)’, *Wch Way* 2¹ (Fall 1975), unpag.

⁵² Kelly, ‘Text 15’, *Wch Way* 2² (Spring 1976), unpag.

⁵³ Kelly, ‘Text 17’, *Wch Way* 2² (Spring 1976), unpag.

talks about ‘the speed of reading’, another corrects it to ‘the rhythm of reading’, which ‘somehow seems a particularly American mistake’. Intellectual stereotypes about various nations are found elsewhere in the feature – German writers are considered to be less ‘witty’ than the French, for instance – but here, what is targeted in particular is American consumption. An anticapitalist, radical mode like language writing is forced to run more counter to the dominant culture than Barthes does in France. His most ardent admirers, and the ones who want to put his ideas into practice, will be found among those sidelined to mimeographed magazines and hand-stapled pamphlets which operate in defiance of their lack of commercial success.

Michael Palmer’s Barthes

Michael Palmer, although his work predates ‘language writing’, has much in common with those usually grouped under it, not least his links to Barthes.⁵⁴ Two poems with titles that refer to Barthes texts appear in Palmer’s 1984 book *First Figure*, the poems ‘Musica Ficta’ (compare Barthes’ ‘Musica Practica’) and ‘Souvenir of Japan’, which Linda Reinfeld links with *Empire of Signs*.⁵⁵ Palmer also mentions Barthes in published selections from his notebooks; a 1984 publication includes a 1979 entry where Palmer reflects on *S/Z*’s notion of the equivalence of signifier and signified, and how this leads to a relationship of ‘unifying correlation’

⁵⁴ Geoff Ward, *Language Poetry and the American Avant-Garde* (London: British Association for American Studies, 1993), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Palmer, *Codes Appearing: Poems 1979-1988* (New York: New Directions, 2001), pp. 138-9, 150-1; Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1992), p. 86.

rather than ‘sequential ordering’.⁵⁶ Consider here the similarity between this and the way in which, as we saw in the last chapter, Silliman and Hejinian use Barthes to justify how their texts are unconventionally *ordered*. However, in a talk published in 1985, Palmer shrewdly identifies Barthes’ oft-quoted ‘J’aime, je n’aime pas’ section from *Roland Barthes* as making him sound ‘suspiciously like a writer of the so-called New York School’.⁵⁷ This is an early example a shift we see in the late 1980s (see Chapter 4 of this thesis) from the use of Barthes as a technical, formalist theorist to one whose ideas can be used to handle affect and the emotional life. Clearly, Palmer’s ideas about Barthes are developing along with, perhaps even ahead of, those of his peers.

But Palmer’s relevance to Barthes is not only due to his own work, but to the responses it elicits. Barthes appears again in *Wch Way 2*² in a review of Palmer’s *The Circular Gates*.⁵⁸ Palmer, as we have seen, was considered by Silliman for inclusion in ‘The Dwelling-Place’. In the *Wch Way* review, he is called ‘an epitome of Barthes’ description [in ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’] of “modern” poets’.⁵⁹ It also discusses his engagement with new theory more generally, saying that he ‘seems uniquely to occupy the ground where this new knowledge disengages itself from the old.’ The ‘modern study of language’ (Wittgenstein, Saussure, Heidegger) with which Palmer is here considered to be engaged is different from what went before; the review does not elaborate on why, but we might infer its qualities from the sole

⁵⁶ Palmer, ‘From The Notebooks’ in *19 New Poets from The Golden Gate*, ed. Philip Dow (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), pp. 341–50.

⁵⁷ Palmer, *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks* (New York: New Directions, 2008), p. 286.

⁵⁸ Palmer, *The Circular Gates* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974).

⁵⁹ Anonymous, review of Michael Palmer, *The Circular Gates*, *Wch Way 2*² (Spring 1976), unpag.

literary example, Stein. She is the favourite modernist of language writing because, unlike Pound and Eliot, she is not obsessed with the literary past and is oriented towards renewing language, rather than revitalising, or providing the next instantiation of, a literary tradition as such. Marianne DeKoven has shown that Stein in her prose was the only modernist to ‘leave the nineteenth century entirely behind’, and ‘was already beyond modernism, deconstructing its boundaries as she constructed them’.⁶⁰ Therefore, a Stein-inflected postmodernism could be expected to welcome the idea of ‘literature’ replaced with a ‘history of writing’, as suggested in ‘What Is Writing?’.⁶¹ The review in *Wch Way* positions Palmer as this kind of postmodernist. The review sees this ‘modern study of language’, and with it the recognition that poetry contains ‘submerged strata of meaning’, as the new sloughing off the old. This stands in sharp contrast to Forrest-Thomson, who uses Wittgenstein and structuralism to shore up the Eliotic ‘ruins’ of her canon, as she uses the parts of ‘new knowledge’ that suit her the better to explain why existing texts work, whether their authors take them into account or not. But many other poets, as we shall see, want criticism to conclude that new poetry will succeed when poetics collaborates with, and produces, new knowledge.

Connections between Barthes and Palmer are being drawn by those who read and admire both, but unlike the reviewer for *Wch Way*, Steve McCaffery, in his essay on Palmer for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, often seems to be describing him in

⁶⁰ DeKoven, ‘Half In and Half Out of Doors: Gertrude Stein and Literary Tradition’ in *A Gertrude Stein Companion: Content with Example*, ed. by Bruce Kellner (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 73-83 (p. 83).

⁶¹ *WDZ*, p. 16; cf. Barthes’ ‘Introduction’ to the volume, p. 6, and, as we saw in this introduction, Buchan, ‘Writing versus Literature’, p. 18.

Barthesian terms (at least, as language writing understands them) without citing Barthes. ‘There is no place in his work because there largely is no referent incanted’, McCaffery writes, following the search for non-referential writing of the time.⁶² It is couched here, however, in an almost anthropological assessment, which could be linked to Barthes’ being read through, or after, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. The same things make both experimental poetry and (especially structural) anthropology valuable to those who are sceptical of ‘late capitalism’: their interest in alternative ways that language might organise the world.⁶³ In his earlier essay ‘The Death of the Subject’, McCaffery tells us that ‘reference’ is what ‘takes you out of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you seeing what it is you see’.⁶⁴ He is therefore opposed to the kind of poet-as-mystic framework used by Duncan, as we saw briefly in the opening of the last chapter; not language, but what we might call the ‘myth of reference’, is what gets in the way of ‘seeing’. Reference for McCaffery is ‘incanted’, with which word he positions it as an enactment of the previously imagined function of language. Perhaps this grows out of a certain reading of Saussure: if linguistic signs are arbitrary, then anything they point to outside of language would be an illusion. Most of McCaffery’s peers, however, conclude that while a poetics that reflexively considers language is equipped to challenge many of our assumptions about it, and about subjectivity in general, reference still remains

⁶² Steve McCaffery, ‘Michael Palmer: A Language of Language’, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1;5 (October 1978), unpag.

⁶³ This link, which I posit certain poets might make, is drawn in far greater and more subtle detail by George Hartley via the work of Fredric Jameson. Hartley, *The Abyss of Representation: Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 140.

⁶⁴ McCaffery, ‘The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing’, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supplement 1 (June 1980), unpag.

important. For George Hartley, reference is ambiguous, not absent, in most language writing: ‘the point is the fact of qualification, not the object qualified’.⁶⁵

We can expand on this idea by comparing it to another use of Barthes by McCaffery which is even more obvious, although less easy to decipher. His ‘horizontal identity of Palmer’s signifier’ is a somewhat unclear metaphor lifted straight from ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ and quoted repeatedly by Silliman and in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* itself (see below). For Barthes, speech is ‘horizontal’ and style is ‘vertical’ (*WDZ*, p. 11); in the last chapter, I argued that Silliman’s ‘horizontal’, ‘ubeity’, is what *replaces* the ‘fixed connections’ of classical literary language. McCaffery may be playing into this (he refers closely to ‘Surprised by Sign’ in ‘The Death of the Subject’), but using slightly different imagery; his ‘striated nature of a reading and a seeing’ incorporates both vertical and horizontal structures a little like Forrest-Thomson’s levels of integration. The ‘seeing’ and subsequent ‘reading’ of one’s seeing, all really sub-levels of a greater ‘reading’ operation, are informed by the techniques McCaffery praises in Melnick and DiPalma.⁶⁶ Possibly McCaffery is being deliberately catachrestic, refusing to elaborate on an internally consistent horizontal/vertical opposition in order to avoid establishing a binary. Elsewhere he refers to the ‘Klein Worm’, a mathematical shape created by accessing a fourth dimension, but figured in three dimensions as self-intersecting, which is ‘meant only to represent our inability to properly visualise the

⁶⁵ Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 94.

⁶⁶ McCaffery, ‘The Death of the Subject’, unpag.

form'.⁶⁷ This is the critical corollary of the 'zero-methodology' the essay aims to articulate: by its very nature, it cannot be properly figured; it is horizontal in hyperspace. In McCaffrey's account of Palmer, the signifier is imbued with this newly independent 'horizontal' identity given by isolating the 'fact of [its] qualification' (to return to Hartley's phrase) by the other signs around it. Yet this autonomy is still being granted by Palmer's work of 'transforming', 'reinvention', 'writing', again positioning the *scriptor* as a new kind of author, which we saw, and indeed saw self-parodied, in Silliman's use of 'The Writer on Holiday' in the last chapter. In these accounts, writer and reader are not quite the 'equal and simultaneous participants within a language product' that early theory had claimed they would be. Concerns that the death of the author was intended to enthrone the critic are unfounded; rather, these critics are trying to install a new *kind* of writing subject who will be the recipient of a new kind of agency.

McCaffery's review begins by calling Palmer's work 'a splendid poetry of displacement', a value expanded upon later in the paragraph as 'the violated function of the sign: the articulated function of displacement'. For Palmer there is not, as McCaffery polemically states elsewhere, a 'death of the subject'. Rather, it is a mistrust of subjectivity and an acknowledgement of its complexity, its moving parts. Referring to Palmer's 'rewriting' of Rilke's 'Orpheus and Eurydice' in *Sun*, Nerys Williams writes: 'The poem's linguistic instability foregrounds the complex balancing act between recovery and enquiry which the poem depends upon.'⁶⁸ In this

⁶⁷ Robert Tubbs, *Mathematics in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art: Content, Form, Meaning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 67. Like Bruce Morrisette, whose reading of Robbe-Grillet's narrative structures both Tubbs and McCaffery cite, Tubbs uses the Klein form to talk about narrative rather than reference or 'counter-communication'.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 50.

she refers to the repeated negations in this passage – ‘Don’t say things / (You can’t say things)’ – which, if generalised across all saying, becomes self-negation as well. Refusals to say or listen are found throughout the poem, ‘displacing’ the text to act as a troubled intermediary substance rather than a conduit. Each of these displacements is both a connection and a separation between the text and utterance, McCaffery’s ‘articulated function’, which returns us to Perloff’s reading of *Roland Barthes*. In that text’s ‘fissure of the subject’, Perloff finds the operation of *Elements of Semiology*’s arthrology, the ‘science of joints’ and hinges. Conceptually similar to the idea pointed to earlier in this thesis of parataxis-as-*brisure*, there is a difference in practice. Palmer’s ‘displacement’, done so that ‘recovery and enquiry’ can coexist, creates in the text that split in the subject necessary to undermine the myth of its wholeness. ‘Palmer’s most radical displacement’ in McCaffery’s review, however, ‘is the break with transitivity itself’.⁶⁹ This parallels the critical vocabulary of ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb?’, Barthes’ paper at ‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’. Barthes draws a contrast much like that in ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ between the romantic (we might say also, classical) mode whereby ‘the agent is not interior but *anterior* to the process of writing’.⁷⁰ In ‘modern’ writing, ‘to write’ is a verb of middle voice and so is neither active or passive, done nor done-to, and ‘the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it’. Barthes’ example, confusingly for us, is ‘the Proustian narrator’, which only goes to underline how selectively writers like McCaffery have to read him, as the elaborate sentences of *Remembrance of Things Past* are some way from asyntactic ‘Klein Worm texts’. The Proustian narrator is radical because he

⁶⁹ McCaffery, ‘Michael Palmer: A Language of Language’, unpag.

⁷⁰ Barthes, ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb?’, p. 19.

‘exists only by writing, despite the reference to a pseudo-memory’. Indeed, it is precisely the ‘pseudo’ quality of this memory that allows the construction of an intransitive writing, because it frees the writing subject from being tied to any object. Barthes sees an evolution of modern texts whereby ‘the difference between *scriptor* and language diminishes asymptotically’.⁷¹ Williams writes: ‘Palmer suggests that the syntactical indeterminacies in the text may paradoxically perform with a certain “integrity”’.⁷² The idea is that one can say something in the indeterminate text with less of a risk of it being taken as ‘true’ – its indeterminacy is the artifice which for Forrest-Thomson guarantees ‘good naturalisation’. In the final section of *Sun*, we recall the self-refusal of the text in the earlier ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’ section when the practice is abruptly reversed. The possibility of testimony is admitted, but it is done through the command ‘Write this’, which is the beginning of five of the first seven lines.⁷³ Yet again, there is a displacement, onto another, non-author figure. Also in this passage we are repeatedly told what it says ‘in the notebook’, as if there is a hesitation about putting it onto the page. With *Sun*, Palmer constantly refuses any authority we might seek to grant to him, and tries instead to speak ‘the zero code / system of assemblage and separation’.⁷⁴

Although this seems like a fairly direct reference to the assortment of radical textual strategies called for by *Writing Degree Zero*, whether Palmer’s displacements are ‘influenced’ by Barthes is not what I am contending here. However, early readings of his work, like McCaffrey’s and the anonymous one in *Wch Way*, clearly

⁷¹ Barthes, ‘To Write?’, p. 19.

⁷² Williams, *Reading Error*, p. 29.

⁷³ Palmer, *Codes Appearing*, p. 233.

⁷⁴ Palmer, *Codes Appearing*, p. 216.

signal that influence, and they are a fair sample of the thinking about poetry going on in these kinds of publications. Barthes, although not directly references, is important to reading Palmer, as we see in the various interpretations that happens in these journals. As we shall see, when Barthes is mentioned explicitly in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, its contributors themselves identify his importance. The time has now come to turn to consider directly this journal we have been circling for some time, unavoidable as it is in discussions of theoretically engaged poetry of the last third of the twentieth century.

***L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*'s Barthes**

Although the 'mimeograph revolution' was no longer new when *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was founded, this journal is arguably one of its most enduring legacies. The format reduced the barrier to entry that stopped ideas getting into print which we were neither popular enough to be discussed in mainstream intellectual media such as newspapers and on television, nor institutionalised enough that the academy would discuss them in its journals. The latter was to change, as many academic books and articles have been published on *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and on language writing more generally since the 1980s, but at the time the magazine's ideas were sketching a new shape for innovative poetry. The New-York-based journal collected a diverse group of writing practices together and has been inadvertently responsible for concealing that diversity because of its headline concerns: language, and the importance of the 'new knowledge[s]' of it for poetics. There were many little magazines that printed poems, as we shall see, but Bernstein and Andrews set up theirs to provide the absent 'print forum' for intense discussions of new poetic possibilities as well as critical and historical thinking about poetry by

the poets themselves'. As far as $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$'s mission is concerned, this is a strong definition of 'poetics' as a genre: it sees poetics as contributing reciprocally to the 'new knowledge' about language.⁷⁵

There is evidence both within and beyond the pages of the journal that Barthes informed that aesthetic radicalism. Manuel Brito has gone further than most in his support of the link and in gathering evidence to justify it, outlining references to Barthes in texts by Silliman, Steve McCaffrey, and $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$. He even goes so far as to say that the much-problematised label of 'language writing' is 'normally' associated with 'Barthesian zero écriture', the kind of assertion that has prompted this thesis.⁷⁶ Following Brito, we look for the most direct evidence of poets' reading of theory, and find it in the magazine's 'non-poetry' feature, where some of the contributors to $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ listed texts that had 'had a significant influence on their thinking or writing'.⁷⁷ Steve Fraccaro gives Barthes' *S/Z* and *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* alongside Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Henry Miller. Barthes receives the annotation: 'Polytextuality... and a certain amount of delight.' Fraccaro is the only writer to name Barthes, although French theory is widely read (about half of the writers name Derrida). The evidence is even greater if one consults the poets' papers and correspondence from the time. Susan Howe, taken with Wittgenstein, writes that after him she 'find[s] it hard to read Frenchmen like Lacan and Barthes'.⁷⁸ Yet if this is how he is seen in the wider networks of reading,

⁷⁵ Steven Clay and Rodney Philips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980: A Sourcebook of Information* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), p. 235.

⁷⁶ Brito, 'New Considerations', p. 143.

⁷⁷ Various contributors, $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ 7 (March 1979), unpag.

⁷⁸ Letter from Susan Howe to Lyn Hejinian, 26th August 1979, Hejinian Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego (74, 4, 18). To aid future scholars, I will follow all references to items in

recommendation, and the transmission of ideas, in the published pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Barthes is given a more thorough a sympathetic treatment than Derrida or Wittgenstein. Barthes may be one of the theorists the magazine reads most closely.

Barthes' first appearance in the journal is on the front cover of the second issue. Apart from Bee's masthead and the date, all that features is a dense block of text in italics, a quotation from *Writing Degree Zero*, in Lavers and Smith's translation. It continues onto the next page, where the reader is offered the information that it has been reissued as a paperback, the name of the publisher, and the price (but not the translators' names). The section is the same one from which Silliman's key quotations in 'Surprised by Sign' are drawn, the definition of 'modern poetry' in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' There was evidently some discussion about the selection to be excerpted. Among Bernstein's archived papers in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* pre-publication materials is a sheet recording possible options with annotations apparently by Bernstein and Andrews.⁷⁹ These are drawn from throughout the book, and each has relevance to the magazine's belief in the political importance of poetic innovation. The critique of literature designed to be seen 'from afar' in 'Writing and Revolution' and the related comments on unchallenging '[c]raftsmanlike writing' from 'Writing and Silence' describe the means of writing they use to make a more radical challenge to the myth of lyric subjectivity (*WDZ*, p. 74). Meanwhile, Barthes' comments on the false universality

the Mandeville Special Collections Library's New American Poetry collections with the collection number, box number, and item number in parentheses.

⁷⁹ Loose notebook sheets, Charles Bernstein Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego (519, 99, 5).

of language share the concern of Robert Grenier in 'On Speech' from *This* 1.

Grenier, with William Carlos Williams, wants to see poetry freed 'from reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit'.⁸⁰ A similar idea is developed at the end of 'Writing and Speech': the 'entirely committed' writer's 'poetic freedom takes its place within a verbal condition whose limits are those of society and not those of a convention or a public' (*WDZ*, p. 83). Clearly, the editors know *Writing Degree Zero* intimately, and read it as a text or series of texts examining from all angles the myths that comprise literature and which their magazine is determined to expose and challenge.⁸¹

It is all the more puzzling, then, that the note on the second page also calls *Writing Degree Zero* an 'essay', when it is in fact a collection of essays on quite disparate topics. The confusion perhaps results from a desire to lend seriousness of purpose to the source; often read as scattered, others who draw their literary-political inspiration from it have tried to see it as a more cohesive project. Novelist Adam Thirlwell in his introduction to the 2012 Hill & Wang reissue sees it as 'a miniature manual' whose form is 'fractal: the assumptions of its theory run throughout its length, like a slice of *salume*'.⁸² It could also be related to the subtitle of *S/Z: An Essay*, a book not mentioned in the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* but which was part of the context for various readers and contributors to the journal.⁸³

⁸⁰ Silliman, *In the American Tree*, p. 477.

⁸¹ Bernstein's notebooks (particularly the one covering October 1975 to March 1976) and Andrews' correspondence with Silliman show this intimate knowledge especially clearly. Bernstein Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego, (519, 75, 12).

⁸² Thirlwell, 'Introduction' in Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012), pp. xv, x.

⁸³ We have already seen that Mayer recommended *S/Z* to her workshop students, and Susan Howe praises it in a letter to Hejinian dated 'c. 1975'. Mandeville Special Collections Library, MSS 74. The

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E as a publication does not need to understand the whole of a thinker. It cherry-picks, and even when aiming to provide a representative sample, limiting its bibliographic articles to around six hundred words. The single paragraph contributed by Lydia Davis on Maurice Blanchot, which offers ten lines each on ‘Blanchot: critic’ and ‘Blanchot: novelist’, is a case in point, and Silliman gives a similar selective treatment to Walter Benjamin in ‘Benjamin’s Obscura’.⁸⁴ This is not to censure the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* approach, for as we shall see, it affords advantages to the readers and contributors who use it as a marketplace of ideas rather than a shallow theoretical crib sheet. It served as a place to develop ideas which went on to inform prose criticism like the later essays of Silliman’s *The New Sentence* and Bernstein’s *Content’s Dream*, and the *Poetics Journal* project in general, on which more later. Lengthy quotes fit especially the early *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, which is halfway between journal and collaborative commonplace book.

‘Code Words’

We might say that the first time Barthes is truly *discussed* in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is in ‘Code Words’, Bruce Andrews’ review of *Image Music Text*, except that the review avoids using the name Barthes or the title of the book beyond the heading. It is a review that avoids discussing the reviewer’s experience, or indeed any of the qualities of the book. It takes seriously what has

use of the subtitle, ‘An Essay’ or simply ‘essai’ in French, is highly inconsistent across both English and French editions.

⁸⁴ Davis, ‘Blanchot’, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 3;13 (December 1980), unpag.; Silliman, ‘Benjamin Obscura’ in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp. 63-5.

become the commonplace reading of ‘The Death of the Author’ – that, in Andrews’ words, ‘Author dies, writing begins’ – and moreover takes this as a *goal* for poetry.⁸⁵ Interpretations of this essay range from Seán Burke’s repositioning of the death of the author as ‘the closure of representation’ (on which more later) to Philip Thody’s conflation of Barthes and the Anglophone New Critics, and the 2005 essay by the pseudonymous ‘J. C. Carlier’ that posits it is intended as parody.⁸⁶ Andrews, however, uses the essay to adopt a radical position. As we saw with McCaffery and Silliman, even radical critics often give a number of author-like characteristics to the *scriptor* in order to preserve things about the figure of the author/poet that they like – including, we might say, their own identities. Latterly, Perloff has argued persuasively that being a ‘language poet’ involves, whether one admits it or not, life-writing and ‘craft’.⁸⁷ But in this essay, Andrews engages in an apparently genuine attempt to dissolve the writing subject.

‘Code Words’, half thought experiment, half manifesto, investigates what non-authorial writing might look like. The essay expands Barthes’ comment about ‘the Author diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage’ into a long paragraph about the disappearance of the *subject*, describing how it is ‘deconstituted as writing ranges over the surface’.⁸⁸ As with Barthes himself, Andrews’ perceived exclusion of agency and individuality draws critical fire. Perloff writes that

⁸⁵ Andrews, ‘Code Words’, p. 54.

⁸⁶ Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, p. 48; Thody, *Roland Barthes*, p. 19; Carlier, ‘Roland Barthes’s Resurrection of the Author and Redemption of Biography’, *Cambridge Quarterly* 29:4 (2000), pp. 386-93.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, Perloff, ‘The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer: The Case of Ron Silliman’, *Qarry West* 34 (1998), pp. 167-81.

⁸⁸ Andrews, ‘Code Words’, p. 54.

Andrews' 'catalogue' poems (like '37', discussed in the previous chapter), are 'highly personal', and attempts to isolate an 'Andrews signature'. She points out that Andrews likes Anglo-Saxon-looking hybrid neologisms alongside everyday prepositions, while Silliman and Perelman traffic in 'everyday' phrases and Bernstein in 'professional discourses [...] colloquial speech, and citation'.⁸⁹ This is largely accurate, but she seems to treat these selections as primarily a matter of personal preference and does not take into account the place of these features in the scheme of artifice of a given poem: that there might be a teleological reason Silliman needs his everyday speech and Andrews his hybrid words. Hejinian's *My Life* is composed of sentences which, as we have seen, do not form a continuous narrative but relate through parataxis and a network of 'resonances', but moreover, all of the sentences share a character: Proustian nostalgia; fascination with colours, textures, and surfaces; and often semi-opaque apparent metaphor. These are the tracks left behind by the subject who has not succeeded in erasing herself, seeking rather to *redefine* her subjectivity, and these vocabularies are the tools of that project. When Andrews writes that 'some self always seeks to stuff & upholster' a 'system', it is not clear whether that 'always' is the expression of an element of human nature, a critique of all previous poetries, or just poetry of which he does not approve.⁹⁰ 'Stuffed' systems could serve similar purposes, showing (like a mythology) the contingency of the 'live' systems we encounter, as long as the making process is collaborative. The final three paragraphs or lists of imperatives, instructions which, however, apply both to readers and writers, suggesting this notion of the *scriptible*

⁸⁹ 'A Syntax of Contrariety', unpag.

⁹⁰ Andrews, 'Code Words', p. 54.

text in which that category boundary is blurred. Chief among them is the expression of the following desire: ‘Take away the mythic & fetishized character of the words and sentences, their fatedness’, to stop language seeming ‘natural & spontaneous & disintellectualized & ahistorical & essentialist’.⁹¹ When Perloff, participating in these texts as a reader, rebuilds Andrews’ or Bernstein’s subjectivity out of the language poem, she archaeologises the poem’s writing. This process does some of the things Andrews exhorts and ignores others – she contextualises them, not seeing them as ‘ahistorical’, but for her the archaeological site of the poem’s history is in the ‘self’ Andrews is trying to deconstruct. As such, the catalogue-poem, as co-written between Andrews and Perloff, fails to ‘desocialize the ego’.⁹² Perhaps always doomed to failure, the attempt nevertheless persists; ‘Code Words’, Andrews’ polemical commentary on Barthes’ own polemic, articulates an imaginary situation relevant to any subsequent ‘experiment’ in redefining subjectivity. The essay’s commitment to impersonality is refined in a later article by Andrews, ‘Making Social Sense: Poetics and the Political Imaginary’, in which he sketches a ‘politics of personal transformability’, where the death of the author becomes more politically than artistically problematic.⁹³ But both the poetics and politics trouble those who poets who look back at a Barthes indissolubly associated with his readers in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$.

Much as for Barthes and ‘The Death of the Author’ itself, whatever modifications to their position $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ ’s contributors might have

⁹¹ Andrews, ‘Code Words’, p. 56.

⁹² Andrews, ‘Code Words’, p. 56.

⁹³ This connection is drawn by Mark Wallace, ‘The Individual as Social Process: Writer and Self in the Work of Nick Piombino’, *Jacket* 23 (August 2003) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/23/walla-piomb.html#fn1>> [accessed 8th February 2015].

made since, the extreme version has become part of the journal's legacy and the group surrounding it. We have already seen the problems its orthodoxy brings up for people other than 'white male heterosexuals', as Silliman groups them in his correspondence with Scalapino. The somewhat less-discussed issue of race is drawn out in explicit connection with 'Code Words' by Xiaojing Zhou, in a discussion of Asian American poet John Yau. In an interview glossed by Zhou, Yau says that the death of the author denies the right of the Other to speak or write, even if it is intended as a way to challenge cultural hegemony. The conception of the *scriptor* shared by Barthes and language writing ends up taking for granted the already present privileges of those who were already permitted to speak under the dominant social order. Zhou: 'Transforming the lyric I, rather than getting rid of it, constitutes a crucial part of Yau's poetics of resistance.'⁹⁴ Yau's sequence 'Genghis Chan: Private Eye', twenty-eight poems with the same title appearing in different books over a span of eight years, troubles the usual relationship of a single poem given a single voice without abdicating subjectivity altogether. Much as in *My Life*, the subject is redefined by constructing an alternative system, one of constant shifts rather than a consistent structure. While Hejinián's is a set of resonances, Yau's is what Sianne Ngai has called a 'relation of discontinuity'.⁹⁵ For Ngai, a key line in the first poem is: 'A foul lump started making promises in my voice.'⁹⁶ These promises are delivered on in the subsequent poems and 'by the conclusion of the series, we can

⁹⁴ Zhou, *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 199.

⁹⁵ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 123.

⁹⁶ Yau, *Radiant Silhouette: New and Selected Work, 1974-1988* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1989), p. 189.

no longer be certain who is speaking [...] or what is being referred to'.⁹⁷ Each assertion of a subject's move towards subjectivity is part of a whole but not a conventional structure: the sequence 'in its totality is less a portrait of someone named Genghis Chan than a flickerbook-like demonstration of the technique of Genghis Channing'.⁹⁸ Yau does not believe that a project of dispersing the author will work. Rather, he aims to resist the constraints of subjectivity handed down by the dominant culture 'not by transcending these limits from above but by inventing new ways of inhabiting them'.⁹⁹ While he may share some of the motivation behind Andrews' enthusiasm for 'The Death of the Author', the precise terms of which are ultimately rejected.

The other troubling side of 'Code Words' is its politics. Although it does not reference any other writers on Barthes, the essay can be related to the positions of two British critics. He effectively refutes Thody's assertion that the 'death of the author' had already been brought about in Anglo-American New Criticism.¹⁰⁰ It is though 'a *historicism*' (emphasis in the original) that one offers 'a relative autonomy for language'. Another sentence in this paragraph deserves closer scrutiny: 'Texts (tests) like these will do the *denaturalizing*; they problematize reality.' The kind of twentieth-century poetry Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* seeks to define and encourage ought to create 'good' naturalisations and should discourage the bad. Bad naturalisation is only possible if we already think the poem is 'naturally' readable, so to avoid it, a text must be problematic in the right way. Andrews wants a poetics that

⁹⁷ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 123.

⁹⁸ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 124.

⁹⁹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 124.

¹⁰⁰ The New Criticism is explicitly rejected by Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' itself, Thody either overlooks this or is unconvinced; Thody, *A Conservative Estimate*, p. 16.

applies this to the world beyond as well as the poem itself, and thus perhaps avoid ‘just star[ing] through language to wind up trapped in system/culture, in *semantic* artifice’ (emphasis added). For him (as for Silliman, Bernstein, and others) poetics has an instrumental political function: we look at the world through language, and they want to change the way we look at language ‘so that eventually *we* might be resocialized’. This social function of language writing is one Barthes and Forrest-Thomson both want to avoid. As we have seen, it has been argued that ‘The Death of the Author’ is a polemic connected to the political climate of 1968, the year of the essay’s first French publication. However, in *Roland Barthes* (published in English in 1977, the same year as *Image Music Text*), Barthes expresses his distrust of militancy (pp. 47, 104, 175), and Forrest-Thomson is either silent on politics or appears put off by *Tel Quel*’s turning of structuralism to the political (*PA*, p. 134). Yet both Barthes and Forrest-Thomson see a great potential for human experience in language. For her, the ability to engage with texts rationally is the essence of humanity, and texts that produce this kind of reading – by making it necessary if anything is to be extracted from them at all – are of vital importance. For Barthes, comfort is found in what Brecht argues an intellectual should do in non-revolutionary times: ‘liquidate and theorise’.¹⁰¹ But in language writing, these *are* conceived as revolutionary acts: Andrews sees the ‘liquidation’ of literary structures like authorship as the means to the political end of a radical reformation of society.

The essay fixates on authorship above all other structures, and for a review of a book called *Image Music Text*, there is little reference either to the image or to music. Even the widely-quoted notion of the genotext/phenotext opposition is not

¹⁰¹ Barthes, ‘Roland Barthes versus Received Ideas’ in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (Evanston: Illinois University Press, 2009), p. 190.

taken up from ‘The Grain of the Voice’. It is also surprising that the distinctions in ‘From Work to Text’ are not adopted, but it seems Andrews is not interested in admitting of two different kinds of literary works. Instead, he prefers the position of ‘The Death of the Author’ that the author is something we ‘believe in’ or not. There is no possibility in ‘Code Words’ for multiple acceptable reader-writer relationships, which would puzzle us if we thought of the language writers as closed-rank partisans. As Alan Davies writes, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was born and operated ‘under the sign’ of Barthes (see below), but the sign is not the banner of a regiment; rather, it opens the marketplace of ideas. There is no group with ‘The Death of the Author’ as a manifesto. They are closer to a ‘Society of the Friends of the Text’, with nothing in common but their enemies among (to paraphrase Barthes selectively) conformists, rationalists, pragmatists, and other ‘fools’ (*PT*, pp. 14-5). What they failed to do was convince those who, in seeking reasonably and pragmatically to explain why they did not conform, pinned them under that sign. Thanks in large part to ‘Code Words’, we have one picture of what Barthes’ mid-career means for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*: this influential journal participates in the reductive reading that would cause Barthes to be known in the Anglophone world, often solely, as the herald of the ‘death of the author’.¹⁰²

Obituaries?

The next time Barthes is mentioned in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is in 1980, when the editors choose to mark his own death with two essays. Joseph Timko’s ‘Unnature’ draws its method from Barthes and carried an ‘in memoriam’, while the other is

¹⁰² This view is addressed, and reasons why it formed are suggested, in Lucy O’Meara, ‘Killing Joke: Authorship from Barthes to Nothomb’, *L’Esprit Créateur* 55;4 (Winter 2015), 101-117 (pp. 101-4).

something closer to an intellectual obituary, Alan Davies' 'Essai à Clef'. Timko's essay advances the point of view that late-capitalist metaphysics excludes nature. A dominant paradigm tells us that the present state of affairs has been arrived at through 'unconscious' operations, like those of the market. Yet however this 'metaphysics' might seek to convince us that 'accident overrules essence', writes Timko, 'nothing can be safely ignored or assumed to be naturally silent and innocent of intent'. In the light of his correspondence with the editors, we might read this as more closely related to the facts of Barthes' death. He writes to Bernstein: 'The discussion of Barthes is not what might be called direct, especially to someone unfamiliar with his writing; but the tone, the vocabulary palette and the themes are certainly his.'¹⁰³ He hears the voice of Barthes underneath even the public narration of Barthes' death, 'urging us to look into the underlying facts, whose seemingly unambiguous constellation assaults our capacity for judgement'.¹⁰⁴ Timko writes that it does not matter if there *is* a natural world that our way of life has not yet erased, because we are already too far away from it in our thought. There are, he writes, two options in this face of this:

either set out like Kafka's cage that 'went in search of a bird' or else, sensing the possibility of another direction along which thought might agreeably pass, produce and

¹⁰³ Letter from Timko to Bernstein dated 12 April 1980, Bernstein Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego (519, 102, 1).

¹⁰⁴ Timko, 'Unnature', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 3;12 (June 1980), unpag.

exhibit, like the late M. Barthes, renderings of the
zoological gardens we have inherited.¹⁰⁵

The first reference is to Kafka's *Zürkau Aphorisms*; the conventional reading of this particular remark is that the cage will never find a bird by going looking for it. Our human mindset means that to look for nature with the ideas about it we have built up over history means we will never find it: 'to a member of an eikosphere so dense' as ours, 'nothing could be felt to be more unnatural than the unsoliciting experience' of what might otherwise be thought of as 'nature'. What seems natural to us is the way we have been taught to perceive the world, and thinking ourselves into other ways of seeing strikes most of us as 'unnatural', perhaps overly intellectual. In this way it is an implicit defence of language writing, for the Barthesian alternative is to make the principal concern of one's mode of writing to expose the myths and hidden structures of other modes. The editorial decision to include this essay may have had to do with a desire to honour Barthes and pay tribute to his contribution, but it also signals a continuing commitment to even his early methods. In Bernstein's essay on film, 'Frames of Reference', he reflects on the 'world as already/always constituted' they present.¹⁰⁶ The mythologue does take some pleasure from tracking down the myths, exploring them. 'Wine is objectively good, but the goodness of wine is a myth.'¹⁰⁷ Just so, the Cartesian comfort film offers is pernicious, but turning around and looking at that comfort helps us to understand our existence – why is the film so

¹⁰⁵ Timko, 'Unnature', unpag.

¹⁰⁶ Bernstein, 'Frames of Reference', *Content's Dream*, 89-113 (p. 98).

¹⁰⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 158.

absorbing? ‘By totalizing the world – and thereby *mis*representing it’ in film (but we might also add advertising, news media, and literature, too) – we ‘get a handle on it, on our own immersion in it’. We do this even though it is impossible ever to capitalise on that ‘handle’ and turn it into an objectively true account of the world. This attempt, this ‘search for the inalienable meaning of things’ however, is Barthes’ definition in ‘Myth Today’ of poetry.¹⁰⁸ Barthes’ method is credited with having helped acknowledge the presence of the structures of ‘myth’, seeing the highly determined world of postmodernity not as a jungle but as ‘zoological gardens we have inherited’. When Michael Moriarty writes that ‘the mythologist is not a poet’,¹⁰⁹ this ignores the possibility that poets may act as mythologists through their formal and linguistic innovations. What Barthes considers the ultimate aim of poetry is impossible, and we will never uncover the nature behind the garden, but it is the ‘search’ that is key.

But the writing *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* aims to describe and produce is not just more *Mythologies*; it takes up Barthes’ other key texts, too, in its search for a different kind of text. In Davies’ statement, opening ‘Essai à Clef’, that ‘this magazine owes its existence or if not, the meaning of that existence, to the significant desire-producing mechanisms which Mr. Barthes constantly refurnished with his analyses of/as text’.¹¹⁰ As such, let us look closely at what little support he offers for that claim. Barthes, writes Davies, saw that critical writing, by which I suppose he means either literary criticism or a discourse across poetry and poetics which is in some way critical, should take as its task not the reading of the text, but the writing.

¹⁰⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁹ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ Davies, ‘Essai à Clef’, unpag.

This is the status of much of the poetics of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ and after. But then Davies goes on to propose that the writer – author – ‘evaporates facing the sign of a question’, that is, in the face of the investigation posed by the critical reader’s participation in the writing of the text. This is Yau’s objection to ‘The Death of the Author’, and Zhou might have linked it to Davies’ essay just as easily as to ‘Code Words’. A critical discourse whereby all the qualities of the writer evaporate because they are made to do so, in Ngai’s words, ‘from above’ is not possible, and trying to bring this about blocks attempts to make visible those whose experiences remain invisible or marginal to the culture. These alternative subjectivities are still marked, if not determined. The process of ‘Genghis Channing’ as the poem is repeatedly rewritten, like the recurrences of the sentence-elements of *My Life* in new combinations, is a *habitus* used to *in-habit* the inherited structures of identity (which is one kind of ‘zoological garden’). Another principle Davies extracts from Barthes is that ‘language is structure’ and that ‘meaning is articulation’. Language’s components, necessarily broken from one another, recombining as text ‘between the lived elements of life in order to be itself recognized’. The sign ‘stands in the world as form’. From this point on, the article becomes a Barthesian catalogue of what the ‘text’ is and is not, suggesting that Davies has adopted (relatively uncritically) the work/text distinction whereby the latter is the adventurous modern project (text of bliss) and the former is the staid classical volume (text of pleasure). In Barthes, the *jouissance* of the text is found even in parts of a classic work (*IMT*, p. 156-7). If we gloss over this, however, we find ideas being drawn from throughout Barthes’ work: ‘The text loses us, forgets us, from social language’, writes Davies: this is the ‘verbal condition’ aspired towards at the end of ‘Writing and Speech’, not constrained by ‘convention’ or ‘public’ (*WDZ*, p. 83).

Later Davies moves on to love, which may be in reference to *A Lover's Discourse*, which is to be expected given the date of the essay and its stated purpose as a look back over Barthes' career. However, he writes that 'love resembles the warp and woof of textual fabrication', which is not quite the position of Barthes in that book, because although they are compared, love is not said to be like text in its form. Davies perhaps comes closer when he writes that in the 'love-text', there ought to be 'two writing subjects, not synonymous, but coterminous [...] available as a delicacy in the text, but difficult of apprehension'. We can refine this to bring it into line with Barthes; it ought to be impossible of apprehension, or simply unnecessary. '[W]hat would best resemble the loved being as he is, thus and so, would be the Text, to which I can add no adjective: which I delight in without having to decipher it' (*LD*, p. 222). Love is inexpressible, but there is more to writing than expression, than transmission. As Barthes writes earlier, 'I enjoy a text bursting with legibility for the reason that it does not speak' (*LD*, p. 123; emphasis in the original). From the 'birth of the reader' to many of the pleasures of 'text' over 'work', it becomes clear that if any text is legible enough (even, as here, a conversation among friends in a café), it does not need to speak, only to be passively read. Davies twists this into *ars poetica* by considering how the poet, committed to the reader's pleasure, might view the task of construction of such a text, its 'warp and woof', since for him the weaver has not vanished, but has changed his ways. 'In order to remain outside my subject, I speak, and within this suddenly magnified spectacle (a world!) I stop to write.' In the 'world' of conventional, social, literally spoken language, utterances can happen which will create what Grenier seeks to make space for: a poetry in which 'writing clears the air', where an account of oneself is given that refuses to acknowledge the limits of selfhood and subjectivity.

However, the text is still admitted to be giving an account of a certain self. Davies contradicts 'Code Words': 'Obviously the author function is not dead.'¹¹¹ But the *text*, a created site, lets us think that, and behave as though it is: it 'enforces an attitude', writes Davies. That Barthes 'took his life apart, and kept it there' is offered later in the essay, perhaps as evidence of this; Davies believes that there can be a 'structure without systems'. This is the mirror image of Yau's finding new ways to live within limits: playing with the remnants of social language even when the limits are gone. But the problem is that the limits put greater checks on some subjects than others, which is the source of Yau's objections to the kind of adoption of 'The Death of the Author' we find in 'Code Words'. The poetic speaker, under such an erasure, risks becoming a 'lump' which cannot speak for itself any more than it can in the field of a social language that privileges some kinds of utterances (white, male, heterosexual) over others. A violent sexual metaphor arises with Davies' offer of 'necrophiliac pleasure' for those who wish to see the undoing of hegemonic culture: 'the desserts of the dead, or at least constrained, social language are enjoyed in the instance of burgeoning textual assault'.¹¹² This makes us question what is really behind the putative pleasures to be derived from a text like Silliman's *Ketjak*. Timothy Yu finds 'reactionary' elements in Silliman's project, one of which is to do with sexuality: various of the dissociated sentences form 'a case study in the male gaze and in male-dominated sexuality', representing 'an embattled masculinity struggling to reassert itself in the face of changing gender roles'.¹¹³ Conforming to

¹¹¹ Davies, 'Essai à Clef', unpag.

¹¹² Davies, 'Essai à Clef', unpag.

¹¹³ Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 68.

the poetics of ‘The New Sentence’, these sentences aim *not* to form a coherent account, and therefore cannot be said to advocate or oppose a position, but this poetics is not always successful. ‘Silliman’s utopian gamble, and the gamble of all language writing, is that experimental techniques can render the language poem both particular and universal’.¹¹⁴ But this, as David Marriott writes, ‘has a different ring entirely if one’s speech has not been a privileged source of positionality’; when it is the speech of ‘[m]arginalised voices’.¹¹⁵ Barthes does little to remedy this; in fact, it may be said he makes things worse. Marriott and Yu both propose that the effacements of the subject theorised by these poets in the language of Barthes may in fact preserve structural inequalities in discourse – *who may speak?* This remains a troubling part of the legacy of this poetics which its readers, endowed as we are with the responsibility of its texts’ *co-production*, must confront.

¹¹⁴ Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde*, p. 70.

¹¹⁵ Marriott, ‘Signs Taken for Signifiers: Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal’, in Romana Huk (ed.), *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 338-46 (p. 339).

Reading Identity in Barthes and $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$

Many of the most productive reassessments of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ and its associated texts in recent years have been from a feminist standpoint. Critics such as Ann Vickery and Lynn Keller have cast new light on critical and artistic phenomena associated with these writers, by considering what Vickery calls a ‘feminist genealogy’ of writers.¹¹⁶ Even in the magazine itself, the seed was planted by Rae Armantrout’s article entitled ‘Why Don’t Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?’ in the very first issue. Like Vickery and Keller, Armantrout questions the category of the ‘language-oriented writer’, as it is by wondering who qualifies that she explores the contribution of women. Howe, Harryman, and Hejinian are all interested both in structures and in the world; they are what Armantrout calls ‘ambi-centric’, and they have this in common with many male writers too. The one duty she suggests is that ‘women need to talk about their lives’ (not leaving out the possibility that men might, too).¹¹⁷ The argument advanced by Silliman in his correspondence with Scalapino on this score (discussed in the previous chapter) is that white male heterosexuals were better placed to write experimentally and that the stories of marginalised groups could and should be told in more traditional forms. Scalapino’s response put forth a more nuanced view: that such aims were not mutually exclusive, and this is the position much of what developed from the initial language poetics tends to support. Here we can think about subject-position in Barthes’ writing, from which the theory is being adopted, in terms of Robert K. Martin’s suggestion of *écriture gaie*. This would be a writing whereby ‘[h]omosexuality is a style, not a

¹¹⁶ Vickery, *Leaving Lines of Gender*; Keller, *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women’s Exploratory Poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010).

¹¹⁷ Armantrout, *Collected Prose* (San Diego: Singing Horse Press, 2007), p. 13.

subject matter [...] Barthes' notions of connotation and digression amount to a valorisation of sexual play, to a reclamation of the body'.¹¹⁸ By using Barthes as a theoretical cornerstone, that developing language-centred poetics might eventually make possible a 'queering' of language.

But what is *écriture gaie* in practice? D. A. Miller draws on Barthes in his reading of Jane Austen, which hangs on a discussion of style – its insistence on semic control that Miller likens to paranoia, which generates a 'brute intimacy'.¹¹⁹ Miller believes here that style's forcing or tricking us into fellow-feeling and complicity is what Barthes means by his comment that 'style always has something crude about it' (*WDZ*, pp. 10-1). The alternative, however, is 'free' and 'undisciplined [...] associationism of the signifier'. This is mocked by Austen in the 'stupid, automatic affinities' of *Love and Freindship*, Sophia on the sofa, which 'ludicrously flattens the imaginary depth of representation into the literal surface of a linguistic performance'.¹²⁰ It is difficult to imagine a text further from language writing than a Jane Austen novel; her poetics of creation of the imaginary world polices play as vigilantly as Jameson, as if anticipating that postmodern panic. Even so, Miller identifies the Austen Style (as he conceptualises it) with other strategies in the history of gay identity, a discourse that 'stands in the place of [...]

¹¹⁸ Martin, 'Roland Barthes: Toward an "écriture gaie"' in *Roland Barthes: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 4, ed. by Neil Badmington (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 12. The broader notion of the relationship between queer identities and deconstruction is an involved debate to which I cannot do justice here, but one relatively early and provocative flash point can be found in Lee Edelman, 'The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and AIDS', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88;1 (1989), pp. 310-7.

¹¹⁹ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 87, 20.

¹²⁰ Miller, *The Secret of Style*, pp. 86-7.

personhood'.¹²¹ Its 'feminising shame' is brought to bear on male homosexual and on spinster alike, and becomes their 'utopia of those with almost no place to go'.¹²²

Miller carries out a similar project with the writing of Barthes himself in his earlier volume, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*. There that substitution of language for subjectivity – some strategies for which we have seen prominently in Palmer and other language writers – both protects and effaces those who occupy already marginalised subject-positions. On one hand, the Name for Barthes is common to all those genres of writing (which range from the cultural specificity of the whodunnit to something as pervasive as the adjective) 'attempting to immobilize the signifying subject', 'an instrument of domination and death'. By contrast, he writes, 'the Letter is always a good object for Barthes [...] "untouched by any fall"'.¹²³ On the other hand, the Barthesian utopia is complicated by what it lets show of its own genealogy. If the letter-signifier is 'emptied', this is not because it is untouched, but because it 'has been the site and is the result of an *evacuation*', argued by Miller to be 'burning its bridges (or, he gleefully points out, 'vessels' in French) to a thus absented body'.¹²⁴ Yet 'writerly flagrancy [...] glows with the history, the imaginary' of the body which has by no means disappeared.¹²⁵ To pretend it has is to ignore much of what is important about Barthes.

¹²¹ Miller, *The Secret of Style*, p. 92.

¹²² Miller, *The Secret of Style*, pp. 7, 29.

¹²³ Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 18.

¹²⁴ Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, p. 18.

¹²⁵ Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, p. 19.

There is a passage in *Empire of Signs* where Barthes compares the eyes of Japanese people to letters drawn with a brush.¹²⁶ The history of racist attention focussed on the East Asian eye, and the dehumanising effect of comparing those eyes to inanimate objects, mean that this passage makes for uncomfortable reading, even before we reach the sentence when Barthes says that Japanese faces are ‘inexpressive’. However, Miller defends Barthes, saying that ‘the white Western liberal respect for the racially other take the form of denying his body, whose specificities are surrendered without a struggle to [...] racism’ (p. 36). Miller goes on to link this to Barthes’ comments about a paucity of myth on the Left; why should the only beliefs about racially othered bodies be there to damn them? Barthes’ ‘pleasure in Japanese bodies’ (p. 37), put across by his comparisons to the ‘erotics’ of the process of writing he explores in *Roland Barthes*, objectifies and others those bodies. Miller maintains his defence and argues that we should be ‘securing for the discussion of [*Empire of Signs*] a recognition of the extent to which pleasure and power invest every representational project and writing position’ (p. 39). In texts where the intention is to banish the subject entirely, race, gender, and sexual orientation are whitewashed, and the still-contested state of these discourses is erased. No specific struggle is put up against racism, sexism, homophobia. It is not my contention that Barthes here is putting up that struggle, but (later) Barthesian attention to the body at least potentially enables a resistance which seems to be ruled out by Silliman’s earlier poetics derived from *Writing Degree Zero*.

¹²⁶ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 89.

Indeed, if our aim is to put up this kind of struggle, Barthes himself is a poor example; Miller finds that his ‘relation to the act of gay self-nomination proves nothing short of phobic’.¹²⁷ This fear, however, is at least partly a fear of being othered and pinned down himself: ‘To proclaim yourself something is always to speak at the behest of a vengeful other’ which promises, ‘just say “I am”, and you will be socially saved’.¹²⁸ To name oneself is to participate in the system of social language that language writing attempted to destabilise. Kaplan Page Harris explores the failure of much of language writing to provide a space for queer identity, particularly in comparison with their contemporaries in the New Narrative movement. Harris quotes from New Narrative writer Robert Glück who, despite being associated with some of the San Francisco-based writers and publishing in Grenier and Watten’s journal *This*, found language writing irremediably ‘straight male’.¹²⁹ The straight white men editing its journals and dominating its writing might have thought they were freeing the subject from social bonds, but it was their very privilege that allowed them to exercise this freedom. Although the subsequent history of language writing has not addressed these issues satisfactorily, they were to reappear in other journals that published it, and once again Barthes was to be a point of contact and critique.

¹²⁷ Miller, *Bringing Out*, p. 23.

¹²⁸ Barthes, ‘Preface to Renaud Camus’ *Tricks*’ in *The Rustle of Language*, p. 291; quoted in Miller, *Bringing Out*, p. 23.

¹²⁹ Glück, ‘Long Note on the New Narrative’, quoted in Harris, ‘New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry’, *American Literature* 81;4 (2009), 805-32 (p. 807).

Open Letter

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E's fourth volume, a co-publication with Canadian journal *Open Letter*, appeared in 1982. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supplement Number One had reprinted *Open Letter*'s earlier feature on 'The Politics of the Referent', but this was a true collaboration. Bernstein and Andrews opened and closed the issue respectively, and there is an enormous difference from McCaffery's startling statement that '[c]ontext is not important' in 'The Death of the Subject'. Indeed, it seems that having the run of their own magazine did not close any of the questions of theory with which Bernstein and Andrews arrived, and which they used their favourite passages of Barthes to situate. Many of the essays in the *Open Letter* co-publication seem more obsessed than ever with establishing precedents for their theoretical practices. Barrett Watten in his essay 'Method and Surrealism: The Politics of Poetry' fits language writing into a genealogy of radical praxis, as Watten was to continue to do along with Hejinian in *Poetics Journal*.

As we might expect, Barthes plays his part in the issue, appearing in two essays, although neither is by a *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* mainstay. In Bernard Heidsieck's article 'Sound Poetry How?', the notion of 'vocalic writing' is called upon to help define sound poetry. Heidsieck, a pioneering French sound poet, writes that with sound poetry, 'poetry is trying to rediscover, has at last rediscovered, her natural and perennial vehicle, the voice'.¹³⁰ McCaffery claims that sound poetry, like language-centred writing, 'diminishes the profit rate and lowers investment drives'.¹³¹ In the final section of *The Pleasure of the Text*, 'Voix', Barthes proposes a

¹³⁰ Heidsieck, 'Sound Poetry How', trans. by Tom LaFarge, *Open Letter* 5;1 (Winter 1982), 101-6 (p. 104).

¹³¹ McCaffery, 'From the Notebooks' in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, 159-62 (p. 161).

‘vocal writing’ and asks us to ‘speak as though it existed’; it is this comment that Heidsieck quotes, almost offhandedly, at the end of a paragraph about the various ways in which poetry is returning to what he posits as its ultimate source, the voice, ‘beyond all literary intention’. ‘*Writing aloud* is not expressive’, writes Barthes; it is ‘the art of guiding one’s body’ (*PT*, p. 66). Since Heidsieck’s essay is reprinted from his introduction to a 1976 sound poetry exhibition catalogue, it is also an editorial decision on the part of *Open Letter* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and so we can read its inclusion as a renewal of McCaffery’s link between language-centred writing and sound poetry. To refuse the exchange of meaning is to prefer instead the kind of erotic, bodily economy that Barthes suggests in *The Pleasure of the Text*. There was no article in the main run of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* that grasped this, as they preferred to see Barthes as the theorist of ‘writing degree zero’ and a practitioner of ‘semiocriticism’.¹³² Although the possibilities they opened up with Barthes’ help were radical, as Davies’ ‘*Essai à Clef*’ memorialises, this was not what he represented to them.

In reading Bruce Boone’s essay ‘Writing’s Current Impasse and the Possibilities for Renewal’, we can derive some insight as to why. This essay addresses the state of Left writing, and articulates a felt contrast between the Marxism of the 1930s and the ‘objective’ Marxism of Left writers in this North American milieu in the 1980s. However, he writes, that objectivity is illusory, and he begins by articulating the history of this, locating Barthes as the ‘de facto leader of the new structuralist theory and practice’ that replaced the notion of committed

¹³² McCaffery, ‘The Death of the Subject’, unpag.

literature advanced by someone like Sartre. ‘Under Barthes’ influence,’ writes Boone, ‘writers began criticizing their collective past’.¹³³ Left writing after Barthes can no longer only further socialism but must also ‘criticize power’.¹³⁴ It does not enter Boone’s argument that this vocabulary seems incongruous in the late Barthes, as his essay is primarily concerned with Barthes for what writers took *from* him.¹³⁵ However, unlike this thesis, he is willing to suggest cause and effect, and to give prominence to Barthes without citing sources. We have seen how, throughout the run of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Barthes is used to articulate the effacement of an old order, but he does not stand for what replaces it. We find that only elsewhere, in Silliman’s vague notions of new, associative ‘horizontal’ connections between words, in the ‘motionless chart of language’ repeatedly referenced by Hejinian. Boone does not take these moments, where Barthes suggests an *ars poetica* rather than mandating an indiscriminate vandalism of identities, into account. The ‘possibilities for renewal’ that Boone suggests have to do with broadening the scope of left writing, having it address ‘the ongoing relations of subalternity’ in general, which we explored in the previous section. We could compare the ‘left writer’ Boone characterises, implicitly linked with the language writer, with the ‘Western liberal’ who, Miller writes, averts his gaze from the Japanese eye, while Barthes responds instead with a fascination with this physical feature as an example of bodily

¹³³ Boone, ‘Writing’s Current Impasse and the Possibilities for Renewal’, *Open Letter* 5;1 (Winter 1982), 121-8 (p. 122).

¹³⁴ Boone, ‘Writing’s Current Impasse’, p. 122.

¹³⁵ Although Barthes does address questions of power in, for instance, the ‘Inaugural Lecture’ and *The Neutral*, these texts had less prominence than *Writing Degree Zero* and *Image Music Text*. Boone’s omission of this is understandable given that the former was published in English-language periodicals in 1979 but not more widely available until Sontag’s *A Barthes Reader* in 1983, the year after Boone’s essay was published, and that the latter did not appear in English until 2005.

‘writing’.¹³⁶ Although that example from Barthes in particular remains problematic, we need to conflate him with language writing so completely; the bodiliness of writing might provide some future key to a Barthesian approach to identity that could renew left writing in the way Boone wants.¹³⁷

This volume was one of the last outputs of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, but the poets who had been involved were to continue to develop their ideas in other ways. The *Open Letter* co-publication looks very different compared to an issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*: the page layout is cleaner, looking more like an academic journal, and less of a premium is placed on space. In fact, it looks and reads more like an issue of the next publication we will consider, which featured many of the same contributors and in some ways replaced *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* but in others represented a new approach to poetics.

Barthes in *Poetics Journal*

Poetics Journal began in that same year, 1982, to showcase long-form critical responses in the field of poetics which would be of a different form than the ‘newsletter’ bulletin items of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, ‘with a premium on clarity

¹³⁶ Miller, *Bringing Out Barthes*, p. 36.

¹³⁷ Ignoring the body is a charge often levelled against language writing, Silliman writes in *The Grand Piano*, and his response is that sex and the body appear constantly in the constellations of everyday micro-actions that make up works like *Ketjak* and that moreover, reading such works aloud is a bodily experience. Although this is different from sound poetry, it still connects writing and the body in a way that is not just speech. The sheer *quantity* of voice it takes to read all of *Ketjak* aloud in a subway station bears a different relation to the body than the ordinary speaking of conversation or even reading an ordinary poem. *The Grand Piano*, vol. 6 (Detroit: Mode A, 2006-10), pp. 12-20. But this still does not address the notion that the ‘actually existing life’ Silliman’s work claims to embody in this way is not generalisable to all subjects’ experience. Boone’s point is that this flattening-out of history and identity ignores political struggles to which writing still ought to contribute.

and an emphasis on real information'.¹³⁸ That turn to 'real information' seems to have been an attempt to avoid the sense of a series of 'notes-to-self' whose partiality (both in the sense of fragmentariness and of one-sidedness) must have come to seem uninformative and divorced from the 'facts' of the other discourses they were 'ventriloquising'. It was also the product, Hejinian wrote to Alan Davies, of 'a frustration that erupted out of blockaded terms – what does anyone mean by "referential" or "signified" – these are not standardized and do not serve as communicative flags unless they are defined, made useful'.¹³⁹ In their prefatory note to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supplement Number One (see above), the editors wrote that they were not seeking a non-referential language because they were interested in the various ways of producing meaning and 'the (various) measuring and composition of our references is the practice of our craft'.¹⁴⁰ Here they were perhaps falling into the kind of imprecision about which Hejinian reveals herself to be concerned. This desire for greater precision can be seen in the essays of the opening issue: Bernstein's 'Writing and Method', Watten's 'The Politics of Style', and Hejinian's 'The Rejection of Closure', later to become central documents of 'language' poetics. There is no big-name theorist who is picked up in *Poetics Journal's* early issues to serve as a banner; the contributors will be creating their own poetics. On being told that Barrett Watten had said that language writing was 'dead', Hejinian told Rae Armantrout that, although she did not consider the statement to be

¹³⁸ Letter from Hejinian to Clark Coolidge, 1981 (no day or month provided). Hejinian Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego (74, 2, 21).

¹³⁹ Letter from Hejinian to Alan Davies, 16 February 1982, Hejinian Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego (74, 3, 7).

¹⁴⁰ Andrews and Bernstein, 'The Politics of the Referent', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supplement 1 (June 1980), unpag.

straightforwardly true, its articulation ‘fills me with an exhilarating sense of possibility. (“Now we are grownups and the work begins.”)¹⁴¹

The ‘group’ around this journal was different, with Bernstein and Andrews replaced by Watten and Hejinian. Watten’s essays for *Poetics Journal* continued his work of situating language-centred activities in relation to earlier developments in literature and the other arts, and to address issues raised by Silliman and others about language writing’s politics.¹⁴² Meanwhile, Hejinian’s most substantial and widely quoted contribution to poetics, ‘The Rejection of Closure’, first appeared in Issue 4, the ‘Women and Language’ issue. Her preparatory work on French feminist theory, which her correspondence indicates she had not been particularly familiar with before, comes with the contextual understanding that writers like Kristeva and Cixous were ‘in cahoots with or rebellion against (or both) Derrida and Lacan and Barthes’.¹⁴³ The scholarship of the issue seems to enjoy this idea; it is part of language writing’s ethos to challenge orthodoxy, and although many of the language writers admire them, by this point all three of those writers have become part of the critical establishment.

In ‘The Rejection of Closure’ itself, Hejinian develops, like Barthes, a utopian vision of language which combines poststructuralism’s radical questioning

¹⁴¹ Hejinian, ‘Letter to Rae Armantrout’, *Aerial* 10 (2015), 86-8 (p. 86) (emphasis added). This letter, dated 5 January 1984, is part of a small selection of Hejinian’s correspondence published in a new collection of essays on her work and was previously only available through Special Collections & Archives at UC San Diego.

¹⁴² Watten, ‘The Politics of Style’ in *A Guide to Poetics Journal*, pp. 158-68.

¹⁴³ Letter from Hejinian to Susan Howe, 1 June of an unknown year (either 1983 or 1984). Susan Howe Papers, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego (74, 4, 18).

of the projects of the humanities with a humanistic, optimistic impulse towards the universal. Michael Greer finds that it is in

the moments where Hejinian sounds like a traditional ‘humanist’ that the strength of her essay resides. She uses a vocabulary that post-structuralism has worked to critique and supplement, but in her usage, many of the familiar-sounding terms are transformed, rewritten in a largely post-structural mode and context. Thus, while one can clearly demonstrate the importance of Barthes and Bakhtin as intertexts for Hejinian’s essay, it is important to note also that the engagement with them is wholly implicit or inherent, rather than explicit.¹⁴⁴

This coming-together happens most profoundly at the end of the essay, and its implicit Barthesian qualities are easiest to detect there as well. Having shown how American poetry since the 1950s has been characterised by the categories of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ forms, Hejinian concludes her argument in favour of semantic and interpretative openness. We find her in agreement with Forrest-Thomson’s statement that *form* is poetry’s ‘strength and its defence’. ‘In being formal’, Hejinian writes,

¹⁴⁴ Greer, ‘Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing or, the Naming of “Language Poetry”’, *boundary 2* 16;2/3 (Winter-Spring 1989), 335-55 (p. 350).

poetic language ‘opens’: ‘While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things.’¹⁴⁵ Hejinian considers French feminist theorists but finds that the conception of desire and the erotic is too limited in being connected with sexuality. Although Irigaray’s contention that ‘woman has sex organs just about everywhere [and] experiences pleasure everywhere’ situates her idea of the ‘feminine’ order as radically open, Hejinian would rather situate it as the ‘yearning for comprehension’ which language also ‘guards against’.¹⁴⁶ It is for these reasons that closure must be rejected: the striving has to be preserved in order to ‘distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world’.¹⁴⁷ Subjectivity, in fact, is rescued by language’s inadequacy, not destroyed by it. Diana Knight writes that the many variations on utopian thought we find in Barthes take us to the heart of his imaginative processes.¹⁴⁸ His proposed phalanstery, the Society of the Friends of the Text, could never come into existence, it would ‘have no site’ (*PT*, p. 15), but the Barthesian imaginary of the text allows for the conception of impossible ideas and their ‘atopic’ existence. Writing, able to refer to but never achieve these atopic states, can exist ‘on the blind spot of systems’ and operate at a semantic loss with the freedom of *satori*.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Irigaray, ‘The Rejection of Closure’ in *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 56.

¹⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which is Not One’, trans. by Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle De Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 99-106 (p. 101); Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 55. At this time, Hejinian was exploring this notion of language’s ‘guard’ against its own closure, with ‘comprehension’, in her long poem *The Guard*.

¹⁴⁷ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, ‘The Rejection of Closure’, p. 56.

¹⁴⁸ Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 271.

¹⁴⁹ Barthes, *PT*, p. 35; *Empire of Signs*, p. 4.

However, Johanna Drucker, in an essay also called 'Women and Language', is sceptical about the liberation from codes that Barthes believes the *satori* of writing can achieve. A writing practice which 'would question the assumption of syntax, the authoritarianism of codes which force the structure of expression into the categorical distinctions of grammatical absolutes', is sketched by the notion of *écriture féminine*.¹⁵⁰ But Drucker's final conclusion is somewhat abstract. Her final paragraph doubts that 'most' or 'many' of those governed by the social order will ever be affected by a revolution in poetic language and only admits that 'the liberty of choosing a position in the relationship to [that order] formed through writing is affirmed'.¹⁵¹ In other words, understanding poetic language in this way allows a female subject (indeed, she seems to say in this final paragraph, any subject) a greater 'liberty' of self-constitution, but *satori* is not universalised, and the order itself is not changed. She asks whether the revolution in language occasioned by this poetry can ever be brought to bear: 'will it happen?' She does not think that the world will be transformed but that there is 'liberty' in choosing a stance. Irigaray's feminine, however, can be taken to refer to sensitivities beyond the sexual. In her reading of Irigaray's readings of Plato and definition of the anti-phallogocentric 'feminine', Judith Butler writes that a 'future horizon' must always be figured, that the perpetual process of overcoming language's exclusions can never end, and that it must always preserve something outside, 'illuminating the violent and contingent boundaries'.¹⁵² This reading seems sympathetic to 'The Rejection of Closure', and

¹⁵⁰ Drucker, 'Women and Language', *Poetics Journal* 4 (May 1984), 56-67 (pp. 66-7). It should also be noted that Drucker uses 'grammatical' here in an unusually broad sense, as she is referring to possibilities of writing that occur 'in the interstices, space, of very ordinary expression'; it takes on a shade of the sense of Derrida's 'grammatological'.

¹⁵¹ Drucker, 'Women and Language', p. 67.

¹⁵² Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 53.

reconciling these two readings of Irigaray could also answer Bruce Boone's desire for writing to turn its attention towards 'subalternity' and marginalisation. 'The Rejection of Closure', for all its 'sensuous involvement with the materials of language', does universalise in a way that does not take into account bodies' difference. Even if we agree with Hejinian that Irigaray's characterisation of all feeling as sex is crude, her body of decentred pleasures might still be descriptive of a plural experience of language. But instead, Irigaray gets cut off with the following: 'The desire that is stirred by language is located most interestingly within language itself'.¹⁵³ In *The Pleasure of the Text*, sex is used throughout as a metaphor for language; the word *jouissance* gains its importance from the cluster of meanings it has in French, one of which is sexual pleasure. But the 'erotics' of language is not 'genital' in the sense that Hejinian reads Irigaray as arguing, deferring genital feelings throughout the feminine body. Barthes' all-over, siteless (atopic) pleasure is found in writing, which is its own 'Kama Sutra' (*PT*, p. 6). The Barthes here is implicit; it has been absorbed, no longer subject to a case-by-case re-inscription, so we are left unclear as to exactly what the 'erotics' are here.

Even when direct responses to Barthes do appear in *Poetics Journal*, they tend to involve taking issue with him and reassessing his contributions, in contrast to the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* approach of quoting pages verbatim. Poet Tom Mandel's essay 'Codes/Text' is a reassessment of *S/Z* which explores why writers find him an 'unlikely stimulant' for their poetry and poetics. Mandel's essay is critical of *S/Z*, and its argument centres around finding, inside the notoriously close

¹⁵³ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 95.

‘close reading’ of the classic text, ‘like Robin Hood in a crowd of mere archers, Barthes’s true hero [...] the “modern text”’.¹⁵⁴ ‘In his performative notion of reading’, writes Mandel, ‘Barthes obscures the active values of Sarrasine and quite literally denies all meaning to the act of writing’.¹⁵⁵ Here is the problem with Barthes for a language writer: it is perfectly acceptable to deny the notion of the author, for as we have seen, they can habilitate the *scriptor* into something they can see themselves being. Being a *scriptor* is one temporary role of a subject among many others, and (supposedly) does not elevate the author to another level. This is the difference Silliman implies in *Ketjak* between being a (habitual or even professional) writer who happens to be on holiday and Barthes’ ‘The Writer on Holiday’, as discussed in Chapter 2. If, like Mark and Bernstein, we consider Forrest-Thomson a proto-language-writer, her objection to Barthes’ theory from *Poetic Artifice* comes into play here as well. One need not reject meaning, but only avoid ‘stranding’ the text in the external world. Mandel, too, objects to the idea that the text is ‘raw data’ and insists that there is something to which readers are responding. For him both Barthes and Balzac are guilty of different kinds of rhodomontade, of overstating their task. Both poststructuralist criticism and realism go too far; Mandel tries to pull Barthes back to structuralism by saying that ‘Writing means through its structure’, and *S/Z*’s writerly reader, a soothsayer tracing the pattern of birds on the sky (*S/Z*, p. 14), is found to be too far away from a prime ‘text’.¹⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Mandel is more indulgent with Balzac. A 1991 prose and poetry book of his (on which he had been

¹⁵⁴ Mandel, ‘Codes/Text: Reading *S/Z*’, *Poetics Journal* 2 (September 1982), 49-53 (p. 49).

¹⁵⁵ Mandel, ‘Codes/Text’, p. 50.

¹⁵⁶ Mandel, ‘Codes/Text’, p. 51.

working since the early 1970s) is entitled *Realism*, and elsewhere he writes of Balzac that he has ‘felt the pull of his realism all [his] writing life’.¹⁵⁷ To a language writer, ‘realism’ might mean something beyond the novelistic ambition to attain fidelity of representation. In Balzac, Mandel finds that it is the result of a generalising tendency, going ‘beyond technique [...] a powerfully melded rhyme of social and aesthetic force’.¹⁵⁸ In identifying this, Mandel turns Balzac into a language writer as well, ‘realism’ brought into the fold of a writing whose processes aim to replace a dominant order by fostering alternative ‘horizontal’ connections. The generalised notion of the real replaces over-determined elements of the novel as order-enforcing machine: author-given plot, motivation, and message.

Even so, an affinity for Balzac in this context is far from obvious, and yet Mandel is not alone in it. In the ‘Women and Language’ issue, Larry Price’s short essay ‘Harryman’s Balzac’ offers a brief but useful study of how poet Carla Harryman uses Balzac and turns him into an acceptable context for language-centred writing. Price does not bring up *S/Z*, but Mandel quotes Harryman in his text, using her phrase ‘instant apprehension of reality’,¹⁵⁹ and she joins his opinion of Balzac by saying that his characters are ‘gestural, material’.¹⁶⁰ Discussing a talk given during Harryman’s residency at 80 Langton Street in San Francisco (quotations from which soon dominate his short essay), Price writes that Harryman had once accepted Robbe-Grillet’s critique of Balzac but now (1983) found that Balzac and the *nouveau*

¹⁵⁷ Mandel, *The Grand Piano*, vol. 9, p. 73.

¹⁵⁸ Mandel, ‘Codes/Text’, p. 52.

¹⁵⁹ Mandel, ‘Codes/Text’, p. 52 n. 4. One wonders what either Mandel or Harryman thinks of Barthes’ ‘The Reality-Effect’, although this essay did not appear in English until *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard, in 1986.

¹⁶⁰ Harryman quoted in Larry Price, ‘Harryman’s Balzac’, *Poetics Journal* 4 (May 1984), 83-7 (p. 83).

roman actually had much in common. We can line up the *nouveau roman* with a kind of writing that aims to subvert codes that dominate, even if they still make claims to representation that most language-centred writing would eschew. Harryman's, and Mandel's, argument is that Balzac also serves this function, his 'rhyme' of the social and aesthetic, of world and text, doing representative work that is more like modernism's and less like the realist tradition's. Price closes his essay with Harryman's response to a question, although what she was answering is not included: 'I would vote aesthetically for the impurity of the actual Balzacian text rather than for the ideal that is never attained.'¹⁶¹ Perhaps the question was about *S/Z* and perhaps not, but we can read this remark in dialogue with Barthes anyway. She describes *S/Z* in *The Grand Piano* as 'exhaustive (or exhausting) poststructuralist treatment' of *Sarrasine* which 'wasn't asking me to to foreswear any [...] enjoyment' of Balzac, but perhaps this is a view Harryman came to late, as she also names *S/Z* as the text popular with 'young eggheads', students she would hear discussing it on the bus.¹⁶² She also writes here that 'Barthes' advocacy of the reader-produced text was taken up by Language writing in some general way' which was 'variously useful, and not, in my opinion'.¹⁶³ She finds that the conceptualisation of reading and writing as (co)production and exchange, in the way that McCaffery describes it, can be 'limited', suggesting how Barthes came to be seen as less useful over time. *S/Z* is a text that privileges reader-production over what Balzac might have wanted to say, but what Barthes releases will not be what other writer-readers want to say. As we have already touched upon, *S/Z* is not an exhibition of a method

¹⁶¹ Harryman, quoted in 'Harryman's Balzac', p. 87.

¹⁶² Harryman, *The Grand Piano*, vol. 7, p. 44.

¹⁶³ Harryman, *The Grand Piano*, vol. 7, p. 44.

that can be applied to any text. *Sarrasine* was carefully chosen because, among other reasons, it is a text that is rich in codes and *meets* the codes head-on as well as being subject to them. We see in *Poetics Journal* that Barthes' techniques and flights of rhetoric come under greater scrutiny, and is now the object of scepticism and no longer describes ideals.¹⁶⁴

It may be different when we come to the late Barthes, however, for while there are fewer references to him, there is a recognition that the post-*S/Z* Barthes develops into a very different writer. In the eighth issue, entitled 'Elsewhere', Mikhail Dziubenko develops an idea based on Barthes' text 'Drama, Poem, Novel' from *Sollers Writer* (1979): that 'discourse remunerates language, it makes up for what is missing'.¹⁶⁵ Dziubenko extrapolates from here to make the point that '[a]rtistic creativity [...] involves a breakthrough into another language, which uses the characteristics and lacunae of the original'.¹⁶⁶ In *A Lover's Discourse*, published two years earlier than *Sollers Writer*, Barthes seeks the *lapsus*, the slippage, and as Hejinian writes in 'The Rejection of Closure' and as we shall see in the next chapter, for many poets the gap between system and reality, language and world, is what poetry seeks to locate, and perhaps reconcile. In the same issue, Bruce Campbell compares Artaud's *The Peyote Dance* to Barthes' *Empire of Signs*. For Artaud, art

¹⁶⁴ This situation is not entirely universal, and the old use of Barthes is still on contributors' minds. Another essay by Price, focussing on the work of Peter Seaton and its resistance to the language-game as contract, quotes Barthes on writing as 'the imposition of something beyond language, which is both history and the stand we take in it'. From this, Price posits a utopian future situation: 'a public of mutually motivated individuals, whose relations are the means of production'. Price, 'Aggressively Private: Contingency as Explanation', *Poetics Journal* 6 (1986), 80-6 (p. 86). Barthes is, however, a minor point of reference here.

¹⁶⁵ Dziubenko, "'New Poetry' and Perspectives for Philology', trans. by Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova, *Poetics Journal* 8 (June 1989), 24-31 (p. 26).

¹⁶⁶ Dziubenko, 'Perspectives for Philology', p. 27.

should seek to return to a lost ‘ur-consciousness’, but ‘meaning is not recovery for Barthes’.¹⁶⁷ Rather, it is the *satori*-like *loss* of meaning that ‘is the point of writing’; recall that the exploration of this very idea in Forrest-Thomson’s poem ‘The Aquarium’, as discussed in Chapter 2, is what motivates the citation of *Empire of Signs* in its paratext. Poetry may once have dreamed of reaching universal truth (certainly this is how Barthes defines it in ‘Myth Today’), but for those working ‘beside’ Barthes, as Campbell has it, letting go of the chase after meaning is the only thing that ‘erases in us the reign of the codes’.¹⁶⁸ Barthes, even when poets are not grappling with his ideas and re-interpreting them, is a touchstone for those who, with Hejinian, ‘reject closure’. It would be false to try to bring together all of the references to Barthes in *Poetics Journal*, and as Harryman writes, Barthes can be ‘variously useful, and not’. Taken as a body of work, *Poetics Journal* presents a nuanced if partial response to Barthes.

In their 2014 anthology of essays from *Poetics Journal*, Hejinian and Watten create what they call three ‘constellations’, attempts to draw together various writings as expressions of the same concerns. In some ways, this resembles the project of this chapter and indeed this thesis; it puts diverse texts of poetics next to one another, which necessarily highlights some of their concerns while effacing others. In the same way, this chapter has solidified the nebulous idea of ‘language writing’ because there is a well-documented, if not always well-examined, relationship between it and Barthes. Barthes only appears as an organising principle here because he is the focus of an investigation, and he continues to serve that

¹⁶⁷ Campbell, “‘Elsewhere’?: ‘Beyond’ Artaud, ‘Beside’ Barthes”, *Poetics Journal* 8 (June 1989), 55-60 (p. 58).

¹⁶⁸ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, quoted in Campbell, p. 59.

function as we unpick the construction of the category of ‘language writing’. Delving into these writers’ theoretical reading, we find that they read collaboratively with members of other ‘groups’, forming what Kaplan Harris has called the ‘Small Press Traffic school’. Small Press Traffic was a literary arts centre in San Francisco that hosted a poetry reading series and theoretical reading group which drew together writers from the New Narrative tendency and from left-wing grassroots political movements.¹⁶⁹ An advertisement for the group in October 1978, reproduced in Harris’ article, listed authors whose relevance has already been touched upon in this thesis, including Marx, Brecht, Benjamin, Sartre, Althusser, and Barthes. Barthes seems to have been of minor importance as a Marxist voice, despite, as we have seen, early descriptions in English of *Writing Degree Zero* having named it as a Marxist text. Barthes is mentioned in this context, however, in *The Grand Piano*. He appears intermittently throughout this text, in a manner that confirms what we have already seen: Harryman and Watten both name him as a theoretical touchstone.¹⁷⁰ He also appears without being credited in Harryman’s contribution to Volume 5; discussing Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘Myth, Interrupted’, she writes that ‘structuralism’ and ‘myth’ ‘were certainly sites of interrogation for some of us in the 1970s’.¹⁷¹ The English translation of the Nancy is too early for the 1970s, and while some of them might have read it in French, and Harryman references Lévi Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques*, the absence here of Barthes’ *Mythologies*, which appeared in English in 1972, is striking, for it surely must have been an easier source for a structuralist on

¹⁶⁹ Kaplan Page Harris, ‘The Small Press Traffic school of dissimulation: New Narrative, New Sentence, New Left’, *Jacket 2* (7th April 2011) <<http://jacket2.org/article/small-press-traffic-school-dissimulation#18>> [accessed 22nd April 2015].

¹⁷⁰ Watten, *The Grand Piano*, vol. 7, pp. 76-7.

¹⁷¹ Harryman, *The Grand Piano*, vol. 5, p. 114. Nancy’s ‘Myth, Interrupted’, trans. by Peter Connor, is Chapter 2 of *The Inoperative Community*.

myth. (As we have seen, 'Myth Today' even offers a rare Barthes comment on poetry.) What we may learn from it is that poetics as practiced by experimental poets in the little magazines that are the house organs of their putative schools is not systematic. Although we have been using 'language writing' as a test case due to the large corpus of material on it, we can now address two other contexts briefly to see how universal this partiality was and is.

UK Poetics

Even beyond the core groups of reader-contributors to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and related publications, many Anglophone poets who were interested in Barthes accessed him through those journals. This extends to poets in Canada and Britain – both McCaffery and Tom Raworth, who would become major avant-garde writers from their respective countries, contributed to the magazine. However, the little magazines produced by and for British poets, for the most part, absent the kinds of obvious engagement with Barthes we see in the American ones. British poetry which founded its poetics explicitly on philosophical and theoretical ideas, and which might therefore have constituted a response to Barthes, did not put Barthes in such a position of prominence.

This makes it difficult to assess Barthes' relevance to British poets' writing by the same methods we have used in most of this chapter to track his ideas' travels through North American poetry circles. However, for some evidence of how the British poets were thinking, we can turn to sparse evidence scattered throughout the run of the magazine *Reality Studios*. Founded in 1978 by English poet Ken Edwards, *Reality Studios* was contemporaneous with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and had a similar genesis: it was produced by mimeograph and placed a premium on timeliness

and distribution. One such timely article was a review of the 1979 Cambridge Poetry Festival, an event which brought Allen Ginsberg and Hélène Cixous to Cambridge but was ultimately seen by Edwards as one of the poetry world's 'pleasant social irrelevances that cannot touch on the reality of [...] constant struggle, constant flux'.¹⁷² What has been called 'Cambridge' writing, while never bearing Barthes as a standard as various groupings that have attracted the name 'language writing' have done, has always cultivated a broad base of intellectual sources. Also like language writing, it is difficult to define; it even lacks as vague a rubric as 'language-centred'. However, Forrest-Thomson's theory and practice have already been explored in depth, and her work demonstrates its openness to languages beyond poetry and use of complex, innovative kinds of poetic artifice and goes some way towards suggesting what is meant by the term. In terms of surface identification, however, the Cambridge writers are more likely to gather under the standard of J. H. Prynne. Robert Sheppard, in his article on 'Prynne and Others', refers to Peter Ackroyd's *Notes for a New Culture*. That book, Sheppard writes, 'tends to joy in Prynne's meaninglessness rather than the skill Prynne demonstrates in his handling of non-meaningful devices'. This skill is what Forrest-Thomson celebrates, Sheppard having situated her reading of Prynne earlier in his article, but between Ackroyd and Forrest-Thomson, Sheppard argues, there are 'other ways of reading Prynne', and the question he ends his article with is whether we have 'thrown the baby out with the

¹⁷² Ken Edwards, 'A Review of Part of the Cambridge Poetry Festival', *Reality Studios* 2;1 (July-September 1979), 2-4 (p. 4).

bathwater' in seeing the death of the author, 'the lyric voice replaced by text' in Barthes.¹⁷³

Allen Fisher's article on the 1987 anthology *A Various Art* in the final issue of *Reality Studios* suggests a more favourable takeaway from Barthes. *A Various Art* was published by Paladin Poetry, a press which emerged from a temporary ascendancy of aesthetically radical poets after a campaign in the Poetry Society.¹⁷⁴ Although Forrest-Thomson's work is all but ignored and no close-readings of her poems are offered, Fisher deals with the poems by Prynne included in the anthology, falling more on the Forrest-Thomson than Ackroyd side and locating Prynne's success in an 'intense patterning [...] allowing the potential reader a constant production triumph'.¹⁷⁵ He also, therefore, has fewer compunctions about 'the birth of the reader' and the replacement, or at any rate the restructuring that occurs in Prynne, of the 'lyric voice'. Where he explicitly marks out the echoes of Barthes, however, is in the romantic 'innocence' of John James. He posits a Barthes echo in the title of James' 1975 book *Striking the Pavilion of Zero*, and finds the notion of zero (degree) as innocence in both Charles Olson's and Barthes' texts on Cy Twombly. Unlike Silliman and McCaffery, Fisher does not draw directly and technically on *Writing Degree Zero* as a source for what this might mean. As we began to see with *Poetics Journal*, as the 1980s drew to a close, familiarity with Barthes was such that to name him in an article meant to draw on a shared idea of

¹⁷³ Robert Sheppard, 'Reading Prynne and Others', *Reality Studios* 2;2 (October-December 1979), 25-7 (p. 27).

¹⁷⁴ This remarkable period in the recent history of British poetry is documented in Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

¹⁷⁵ Fisher, 'Towards Civic Production', review of Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville (eds.), *A Various Art*, *Reality Studios* 10 (1988), 66-85 (p. 79).

who 'Barthes' was. The work of defining him, which we saw Forrest-Thomson and Silliman doing, however partially, had already been done when people came to use him.

Edwards, too, uses Barthes, in an essay on Freud and a brief review of John Vernon's *Poetry and the Body*.¹⁷⁶ Finding fault with the notion of words as 'transparent gestures', he warns with Barthes' notion of the text's 'reluctance to declare its codes', and in both of these essays speaks of the need for the structural analysis of 'bourgeois society and mass culture' that characterised Barthes' work, particularly up to the 1960s.¹⁷⁷ Although these essays feature no particular reference to poets of the time, they demonstrate that for Edwards at least, Barthes's essays are a touchstone in thinking about literature and interpretation. Responses to Barthes in other British journals, such as *Angel Exhaust* and the *English Intelligencer*, tend not to be direct but rather to embody a 'constant struggle, constant flux' in which Barthes is not regarded as the stable point of reference he is for many North American poets of the period.

Barthes' theory came to those poets through publishers of theoretical works, and to those magazines we have been looking at here who curated and made legible certain theoretical writers. North American poetry journals developed that enthusiasm communally, while British ones, for whatever reason, did not. However, there is one more group who access him in a different way, and who merit a brief digression: Anglophone writers who take their cues from a French literary movement

¹⁷⁶ Edwards, Review of Vernon, *Poetry and the Body*, *Reality Studios* 2;2 (Oct-Dec 1979), p. 35; 'Narrative structure of "The Interpretation of Dreams": A Late Review of a Viennese Novel', *Reality Studios* 2;2, pp. 32-3.

¹⁷⁷ Edwards, Review of Vernon, *Poetry and the Body*, p. 35.

which arose in Paris at the same time as Barthes was formulating his own ideas about avant-garde writing.

Barthes and Oulipo

There is another literary movement which flourished far from language writing to which Barthes is relevant. This is the Oulipo (sometimes styled OULIPO), or *ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, the ‘potential literature workshop’. Far more of a deliberate ‘movement’ than the much-debated label of language writing, this was a writing workshop whose members collaborated to apply mathematical structures to literature, such as the N+7 works discussed previously, where each noun is replaced by the word seven entries after it in the dictionary. These constraints may be extreme, as in Georges Perec’s lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition*, written entirely without using the letter ‘e’; that ‘The Disappearance’, in order to *avoid* an ‘e’, had to appear in English as *A Void* gives some idea of the difficulties but also the felicitous discoveries that may be made.¹⁷⁸ Hervé Le Tellier has applied Barthes’ work on textual pleasure to the Oulipo: the ‘pleasure of the text, specifically as it applies to Oulipan texts, is linked to the knowledge or recognition of coded or common referents’.¹⁷⁹ Perec, however, stood at a remove from the *Tel Quel* group and wrote a scathing response to Barthes’ *The Fashion System* which, although it remained

¹⁷⁸ Perec, *La Disparition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Perec, *A Void*, trans. by Gilbert Adair (London: Harvill, 1994).

¹⁷⁹ Le Tellier, *Esthétique de l’OULIPO* (Bordeaux: Le Castor Astral, 2006), p. 9. My translation.

unpublished, seems to have driven a wedge between the two writers.¹⁸⁰ However, Barthes remains a theoretical touchstone for those working with Oulipo techniques and modes.

There are many Anglophone practitioners of constraint-based writing.¹⁸¹ Both Silliman's *Tjanting* and Hejinian's *My Life* operate under mathematical constraint, their numbers of sentences per paragraph dictated by the Fibonacci sequence and the author's age in years at the time of composition respectively. However, the more elaborate constraints are harder to find, and belong more to the realm of conceptual than language-centred writing.¹⁸² The only American who was an 'official' member of the original Oulipo group was Harry Mathews, an expatriate living in Paris. Mathews says in a *Chicago Review* interview that in the 1960s and 1970s in Paris, theory was 'all anyone talked about' but that he did not make it a serious, holistic object of study, saying instead that 'it confirms things I've discovered in my hunt-and-peck way'.¹⁸³ In his text *Twenty Lines a Day* (composed as the title suggests), there is a reference to 'St. Barthes', a conflation of the theorist and the island St Bart's in the Caribbean (where, Mathews says in the interview, he was at the time).

¹⁸⁰ David Bellos, *George Perec: A Life in Words* (London: Harvill, 1995), p. 355; for a selection of the letters between Barthes and Perec, see Barthes, *Album: inédits, correspondences et varia* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), pp. 315-21.

¹⁸¹ It could be argued that these kinds of restraint replace conventional rhyme and meter and that, for instance, a sonnet or sestina is 'constraint-based'. Here, however, I use this term to refer to 'new' constraint in the avant-garde.

¹⁸² For one discussion of the relationship of conceptual writing to the language-centred tendency, see Judith Goldman, 'Re-thinking "Non-retinal Literature": Citation, "Radical Mimesis," and Phenomenologies of Reading in Conceptual Writing', *Postmodern Culture* 22;1 (September 2011) <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v022/22.1.goldman.html> [accessed 28th April 2015].

¹⁸³ Lytle Shaw, 'An Interview with Harry Mathews', *Chicago Review* 43;2 (Spring 1997), 36-52 (p. 50).

In a work composed in this programmatic fashion, using all material that comes to mind, the name of Barthes is perhaps just grist for the mill; alternatively, it might suggest a more general intellectual idea that goes beyond Barthes but for which Barthes stands, as in English quasi-language-writer Tom Raworth's blue limerick about 'a semiotic gorilla named koko' which rhymes 'barthes' and 'farthes'.¹⁸⁴ However, if it is Barthes himself who is 'saintly' for Mathews, it is because 'he did not disregard his responsibility as a writer. He rarely wrote anything that wasn't a literary work in its own right.'¹⁸⁵ This, as we saw in the last chapter, was the position taken by Bernstein and others, but we could also read into the *Twenty Lines a Day* reference that Barthes is a saint of bourgeois leisure, as in the elite island holiday destination with which he is made to share his name. Read it alongside *Ketjak's* 'The Writer on Holiday' and we have a picture of Barthes being read in leisure time, separate from the work-activity of writing. Often, in Oulipo and conceptual writing, a writer's reading does not make its way into the work as much as in other innovative poetry traditions, and the work of writing is more separate from theory. They may still bear the marks of theoretical intervention, but in a less explicit way, and cannot so easily be said to be a 'response' to Barthes in the way that concerns this thesis.

One exception in English is Michael Klauke's 1988 *Ad Infinitum*. This text is created by a process, so we cannot interrogate the semantic sense of the words for the author's adoption of Barthes' ideas, but in a sense, a conceptual work like this is nothing *but* evidence of what texts the author thought were interesting and important

¹⁸⁴ Raworth, 'Catacoustics' in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 328. Raworth spent time with the American and Canadian language writers, published in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and even living in San Francisco for a time.

¹⁸⁵ Shaw, 'Interview with Mathews', p. 50.

enough to feed in to one end of the literary ‘machine’. *Ad Infinitum* takes ‘Sarrasine’ and replaces each word with ‘vocabulary randomly drawn from ten other texts in rotating sequence’.¹⁸⁶ Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, introducing an excerpt from *Ad Infinitum* into their anthology of conceptual writing, relate this Oulipian form, the *chimère*, to its cousin, the N+7. One of Klauke’s ten source texts is Barthes’ *Mythologies*. This and the choice of ‘Sarrasine’ place the project in clear contact with Barthes, but, as the introductory note, both are also ‘methodical’ approaches to the source text. Where Forrest-Thomson in her ‘S/Z’ turns ‘I was deep in one of those daydreams which overtake even the most frivolous of men in the middle of the most tumultuous parties’ into the similar experience of the ‘*femme frivole*’, in Klauke it becomes: ‘Her was much of far in twilight the little from world, of the sky to several plump sister.’¹⁸⁷ The note suggests that there is a common intellectual motivation between Barthes and Klauke, as the latter ‘deconstruct[s] the form of Balzac’s text’.¹⁸⁸ So, what they have in common is their desire to show how a text is made up of smaller components, and both are concerned to watch something disappear from it. Although *Mythologies*, like *Alice in Wonderland* and J. L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia*, is quoted every ten words, nothing of its form or method remains. This is a pattern extracted from texts, and if we project any meaning onto it in our reading, it will truly be independent of them – what Mandel accuses *S/Z* of being, taken to the furthest extreme. Barthes’ texts, although they shed light on

¹⁸⁶ Introductory note to Klauke, ‘from *Ad Infinitum*’ in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 321.

¹⁸⁷ Klauke, ‘from *Ad Infinitum*’ in *Against Expression*, pp. 321-6 (p. 322).

¹⁸⁸ Introductory note to Klauke, ‘from *Ad Infinitum*’, p. 321.

textuality, are finally texts themselves like anything else, and just as subject to use and deformation, a process which continues *ad infinitum*.

Conclusion

Where texts that have been placed into archives and anthologies because of their endurance and continuing relevance contain no visible sign of their engagement with Barthes, we can connect them to him by means of the text of ‘poetics’. This is, at best, poetry in its most analytic and self-investigative mode, but often, it is not even that, and never moves beyond ancillary commentary, or in Barry Schwabsky’s words, ‘diaristic notes-to-self’ and ‘ventriloquism’.¹⁸⁹ The notes show us the poets working out a relationship to Barthes – Forrest-Thomson’s ‘After Intelligibility’ would have fitted nicely in the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*; indeed, it would have looked heavily-researched next to other contributions which draw on a single text only for the ideas they want to try on. Meanwhile, her ‘The Ritual of Reading *Salammbô*’ is a prime example of the ‘ventriloquism’ Schwabsky sees in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*; compare this to Timko’s ‘Unnature’, where Barthes’ style is adopted as a tribute. When the language poetics ‘grows up’ with Hejinian, however, Barthes is undermined, already part of an old guard of theory whose work, while admirable, exists to be improved upon by the practitioner. Investigating poetics proves the difficulty of finding work that is sincerely ‘Barthesian’, because the

¹⁸⁹ Schwabsky, ‘Vanishing Points: Language Poetry Remembered’, *The Nation*, 31st January 2011 <<http://www.thenation.com/article/157693/vanishing-points-language-poetry-remembered>> [accessed 22nd April 2015].

Barthesian mask is just part of the dressing-up and voice-throwing that the poet-theorist has to do.

Having arrived at this general statement, however, I acknowledge that many poets who read Barthes were not involved in small-press magazines that have survived in forms that allow them to be studied and commented upon. Even when full runs survive in archives, as with *Reality Studios*, they have not had the good fortune to be anthologised so that the new critic approaching them has a context for them, as with *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* and, recently, *A Guide to Poetics Journal*. The lack of such volumes leads to a paucity of essays, which means that when we try to treat them in relative isolation, as I have done with some of the journals above, we do not have the kind of contextualising commentary on the journal itself I have used here. In some ways, this is an advantage to the new reader today, who is unfettered with received wisdoms about what the journal's agenda was, but it also makes it harder to say whether an article where Barthes appears is anomalous in other ways or quite in keeping with the journal's practice, drawing in sources from wherever necessary as the poetics demands. As such, what I have argued here is not that Barthes 'influenced' this poet or that journal editor, but the general path of his thought throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate this in a different way, by showing how theory may come to be a crucial tool in doing a job which much of the poetry we have been discussing here, in being 'language-centred', sidelines: dealing with the emotional life.

Chapter Four: Barthes and Love

Reading *A Lover's Discourse*

In his biography of Barthes, Louis-Jean Calvet asserts that *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* was a 'bestseller' when it was first published in France as *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, and its readership in English has also been wide and varied.¹ As such, this chapter will take in a broader field of poets and texts, but will still attempt to describe why they take Barthes, particularly, as a point of reference. Describing the text's great virtue as 'nuance', Wayne Koestenbaum writes of the 'bliss – atypical, beside the point – that [Barthes] showers upon anyone willing to take him at his word'.² As we have seen, various experimental poets interested in the pleasures and 'erotics' of writing turn to Barthes to describe them. So far we have looked at it in texts such as *The Pleasure of the Text* and *Writing Degree Zero* which are more obviously devoted to the study of literature. But when the love poem survives postmodernism and takes on new and diverse forms, *A Lover's Discourse* becomes an important source for a few.

This is not to say that the poets drawn on in this chapter are not engaged with philosophy, criticism, and ideas. Indeed, the use of Barthes in each of the three main texts under consideration is reflected in overlaps with genres other than poetry: Anne

¹ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 221-2. Raw sales figures support the more cultural, subjective meaning of the 'bestseller' label: *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* sold 70,000 copies in its first year in France (Samoyault, *Barthes*, p. 618).

² Koestenbaum, 'In Defence of Nuance' in *My 1980s & Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013), p. 64.

Carson is also a classicist; Kristjana Gunnars is also a novelist and has written a memoir, *Zero Hour*, on which more later; and Deborah Levy is best known as a playwright and novelist. All write about Barthes when they write about love, not of poetry and poetics. Their texts about love seek to understand it as a set of conventions even as they conceive of it as a *numen*. This is adequately explained in *A Lover's Discourse* itself, for like the theory of poetry, the literature of love is, to borrow a phrase from Forrest-Thomson, a 'garrulous study' in the extreme (*PA*, p. 4), and like poetry, this is because it is so difficult to talk about. Catherine Belsey, in her history of the love story, *Desire*, tells us that love is 'cannot speak, and yet it seems that it never ceases to speak', but the other side of this is that it is 'at once endlessly pursued and ceaselessly suspected'.³ Not only does the 'author' of the love-writing overproduce, trying to talk about something which cannot be captured in language, but so does the reader, looking in and with language for something that will not be found. 'The signs of love feed an enormous reactive literature', but even in text as simple as 'I love you', 'language itself [...] recognizes that it is without backing or guarantee, working without a net' (*LD*, p. 154). Koestenbaum calls the text 'a jar of nuances: trapped fireflies'.⁴ But the study of nuances is not the analysis of baubles, even living baubles; it is rather the study of slight differences, even of Derridean *différences*, the discontinuities that appear at the *brisure*, the hinge. There is no 'full speech', only the trace or 'question of its meaning and origin'.⁵ In this way Barthes' method, like poetry, lends itself to discussions of love. Poetry's artifice is always a discussion of itself, a comment on that artifice. In the same way, it is almost

³ Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 74.

⁴ Koestenbaum, 'In Defence of Nuance', p. 52.

⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 69.

intrinsic to Barthes' discussions of the minutiae of the lover's experience that they are reflexive, self-questioning, even self-doubting. In the section on 'waiting' (*attente*), he writes: 'The being I am waiting for is not real.' (*LD*, p. 39) The form of Barthes' text enacts this too: the fragments can avoid analysing the waiting in the context of the rest of the encounter, and we search the section in vain for an analysis of what happens to the waiting lover when the beloved arrives. The closest we get it being told that the 'amorous relation is *allayed*' (emphasis added), like a fear or a suspicion; this is Howard's rendering of French *s'apaiser*, which also means to be appeased or humoured. There is no fulfilment, but rather a putting-off or -aside. Even closer to completely thwarting it is the story at the close of the section of the mandarin who waits ninety-nine nights for his courtesan, but on the last night picks up his stool and walks away (p. 40).

In response to this, Méira Cook comments that 'for Barthes, writing and the body do not intersect', and that 'Barthes writes to cure the absence of the beloved'.⁶ Can this be the case? Even writing cannot 'allay' the lover's absence; rather, the text of nuance, becomes a *différent* body, the lover and/or absence of same pushed away with each new nuance discovered. *A Lover's Discourse* is part of Cook's survey of alternatives to the 'passionless study of passion', but the passion of Barthes' text is located in its very writing. Having established 'the simultaneously erotic and critical value of textual practice', 'significance [...] is the site of bliss' (*PT*, p. 64). Anne Carson contends that the great Greek invention is the 'deferred, denied' eros, 'eros as lack'.⁷ We will return to Cook, and the question of whether the beloved in love-

⁶ Cook, *Writing Lovers: Reading Canadian Love Poetry by Women* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 22.

⁷ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 18; quoted in Cook, *Writing Lovers*, p. 4.

writing can truly be called an ‘absence’, later in this chapter. Before that, however, let us look in the other direction, and examine the other phenomenon present here, that of the lover, or love-writer.

‘Lonely Girl Phenomenology’

The ways in which literary and critical theory are applied to everyday life and the emotional complexes which make up lyric and confessional writing remain underexplored. I thus turn for a methodological framework to Chris Kraus’s 1997 novel *I Love Dick*, which Naomi Pearce has described as ‘ficto-criticism’. The narrator (also called Chris Kraus) of this novel articulates what she calls a ‘Lonely Girl Phenomenology’, which Pearce aligns with *A Lover’s Discourse*.⁸ Barthes’ text provides ‘a portrait – but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site’ (*LD*, p. 3). During a period of emotional distress and illness after her film has been rejected, the Kraus-character asks ‘a phenomenological question: at what point should we still say “crying” or instead describe the moments of “not-crying” as punctuation marks in a constant state of tears?’⁹ This wry, detached comment, made looking back on a dark moment, is another expression of a more generalised concept a few pages earlier: ‘there’s no fixed point of self but it exists & somehow by writing you can somehow chart that

⁸ Kraus, Chris, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), p. 137; Pearce, ‘Preliminaries’, Cargo Collective <<http://www.cargocollective.com/workout/PRELIMINARIES>> [accessed 3rd September 2014]. This latter text is the artists’ statement from a mixed-media collaboration, and cites a range of other theoretically engaged writers such as Myles and J. G. Ballard.

⁹ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 141.

movement'.¹⁰ Rather than thinking of the unchanging self going through 'dark times' or 'ups and downs', the emotional logic of *I Love Dick* considers that it is the way we divide up the world that changes. This is related to the self-effacement of the *scriptor* that we have seen carried out, with varying success, by poets in the previous two chapters, and which also stands at the heart of Kraus's political strategies of feminism and Marxism. As Barthes writes of his own ambitions to combine the novelistic and the intellectual strategies of theory in the section 'Fiction' from *Roland Barthes*, 'we produce simultaneously theory, critical combat, and pleasure' (*RB*, p. 90). The feminism of *I Love Dick* is rooted in the way it plays off the masculine personality of Dick and the masculinist form of cultural critique he represents, and finally 'turns female abjection inside out and aims it at a man'.¹¹ As Anna Watkins Fisher puts it: 'Kraus positions herself as a kind of deconstructive poster girl, who in the name of feminism is willing to (death) drive her banner right off a cliff.'¹² In another passage Kraus describes herself as a political 'Pollyanna', '[r]eading constantly and wanting something else so fiercely that you want it for the world'.¹³ The novel's central character is 'talk[ing] about ideas because I need to, not just to amuse or entertain'.¹⁴ The 'lonely girl' is in this sense a highly specific subject determined by the conditions around her, unlike the effaced quasi-*scriptor*

¹⁰ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 138-9. Kraus goes on to explore this idea in her later novels, such as that achieved by her engagement with Simone Weil in *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013).

¹¹ The novel's 'philosophical' achievement, according to Eileen Myles, 'Foreword' in *I Love Dick*, p. 15.

¹² Fisher, 'Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 40;1&2 (Spring/Summer 2012), 223-35 (p. 233).

¹³ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 154.

¹⁴ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 192.

McCaffrey or Silliman sought to claim from the mid-1970s. Eileen Myles, in her 2006 introduction to *I Love Dick*, writes that Kraus's 'living is the subject of the book', not, as a simple summary of its 'plot' would have it, her (non-)relationship with Dick. The book drew fire even before its creation from the person who is the basis for the character of Dick, for violating his privacy for the sake of Kraus's project.¹⁵ When Bernadette Mayer includes prompts like a journal of 'tenant-landlord situations' in her 'Experiments' list, she is not thinking of the landlords' privacy. Their tenants, lacking their own property, appropriate the text of this lack almost in lieu of self-expression, just as Kraus does in turning women's abjection 'inside out'.

Kraus' book post-dates the scope of this thesis, coming as it does from the centre of a world not only literate in, but somewhat obsessed with, literary theory, continental philosophy, and deconstruction. Yet apart from its methodological relevance, that literacy and obsession was built up in the period under study here. The characters in *I Love Dick* pick up a volume of Heidegger and manipulate one another with its emotional resonances, or wonder at the low points in a gruelling cross-country road-trip whether the philosophical truism that has popped into their minds is 'Marx or Wittgenstein'.¹⁶ By then the basics of continental theory were well-understood by a given audience, in no small part thanks to Sylvère Lotringer, Kraus' ex-husband, and the press he founded and for which she now works. Semiotext(e)'s 'Foreign Agents' series published the first English translations of various texts by Foucault, Virilio, Deleuze, and Lyotard.¹⁷ They also provided an

¹⁵ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 260.

¹⁶ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, pp. 260, 151.

¹⁷ The history of the press is described in Henry Schwarz and Anne Balsamo, 'Under the Sign of Semiotext(e): The Story according to Sylvère Lotringer and Chris Kraus', *Critique* 37;3 (1996), pp. 205-220.

outlet for experimental first-person writing by women through the Native Agents series, which includes Myles' *Not Me*, punk writer Kathy Acker's *Hannibal Lecter My Father* (both published in 1991), and *I Love Dick*. For Acker and Myles, however, this activity was established long before Native Agents. A young Acker was mentioned by Silliman in 'Surprised by Sign' under her pseudonym 'The Black Tarantula'. Her 1973 book *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* is a gory and pornographic picaresque, but formally, Silliman might have aligned it with Barbara Baracks' prose works, 'where referents shift constantly, often from word to word'.¹⁸ Like the 'modern' poem, it avoids poetry's 'superficial chain of intentions' (*WDZ*, p. 44) and 'refuse[s] to follow the order of an ancient ritual' (p. 45). Although it would be difficult to describe these texts as novels, they are certainly prose narratives, and Acker, despite resisting the label of 'experimental', invites us to view her work as a challenge to the novel. In particular, it attacks the fallacy of the novel as transparent conduit of experiences, on which the Lonely Girl Phenomenologist knows she cannot rely. 'I'm trying to become other people', the Black Tarantula says, 'I'm trying to get away from self-expression.'¹⁹ Acker often appropriates titles and identities for her books (*Great Expectations*, *Don Quixote*), always suspicious that 'originality' is the product of culture. She associated with some of the language writers, and (as 'The Black Tarantula') is included in the additional writers Silliman lists at the end of 'Surprised by Sign'. However, having been asked to contribute to *Poetics Journal* in the 1980s, she commented:

¹⁸ Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 119.

¹⁹ Acker, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* (New York: TVRT Press, 1975), p. 145; see also Ellen G. Friedman and Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English' in Friedman and Fuchs (eds.), *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3-54 (p. 39).

I don't see that [the language writers have] ever worked from the Roland Barthes side which would be about the meaning of signs – you know, the whole culture coming out of signs [...] I wrote to Lyn that I was questioning theory of any kind that wasn't as mobile or precise to the moment or to the thing in itself as the novel.²⁰

One poetic response to the revelations of poststructuralism (Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs even describe Acker's method as 'deconstruction') is to try to create texts which exist outside of the codes of cultural order outlined in *S/Z*, for instance, but Acker's response is to study them by testing their limits.²¹ Her picaresque metafictional engagements with signs and question them by applying them where they seem not to belong, as in *Don Quixote* where the protagonist, a woman we only ever know as 'Don Quixote', narrates her abortion as a knight's vigil.²² Adopted not only by the narration but the paratexts such as sub-chapter titles, her 'delusion' becomes the text's main narrative and transformatively misuses the literary sign-system it inhabits. For both Acker and Kraus, the experimental novel is an investigative tool that looks at lived emotional experience the way Barthes' earlier work looks at semiological systems. For Forrest-Thomson, it is often impossible to separate the

²⁰ Acker, interview in *Angel Exhaust* 6 (1986), 28-35 (p. 34).

²¹ 'To reach an authentic space, the "self" must be deconstructed and emptied.' Friedman and Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities', p. 40.

²² Acker, *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker* (New York: Grove Press, 2002), p. 204.

questions posed by emotion and by poetic language, as we saw in ‘S/Z’, ‘Drinks with a Mythologue’, and ‘On Reading Mr Melville’s *Tales*’: these theoretical questions bleed into and taint life. However, Acker and Kraus reimagine the methods of theory as part of an experimental practice to which neither the novel nor theory as it is currently constituted is adequate.

If, as Wayne Koestenbaum writes, *A Lover’s Discourse* ‘comes close’ to being Barthes’ novel,²³ it is because it is able to occupy a similarly innovative middle ground. The seminar courses led by Barthes at the Collège de France – including the final one, since published as *The Preparation of the Novel* – all seemed to be rehearsals for this project, even if Barthes never would have reached it. However, Antoine Compagnon writes that the project Barthes was working towards would have been, not a novel or a ‘Text’ (and therefore very far from language writing), but a poem: the ‘well-made sentence’, ‘simple, obedient, desirable’, governed by ‘the antimodernist poetic of presence’.²⁴ We have seen already how Barthes acts as a resource and support for those who try to delineate fully and thus to expand the possibilities of the poem’s form, but in this chapter, he will be our reference point for an investigation of the novelistic forms of the love-story and love-letter as they are put across in poems. Yet these texts are neither simple nor obedient; the poets who practice them are anxious, like *A Lover’s Discourse*, about the political and social implications of their work. Indeed, if they are, or think like, readers of *Mythologies*, they may worry that they are taking on too many of the assumptions and expectations

²³ Koestenbaum, ‘In Defence of Nuance’, p. 60.

²⁴ Compagnon, ‘Roland Barthes’s Novel’, trans. by Rosalind Krauss, in *Roland Barthes: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Badmington, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2010), 351-61 (p. 360).

of the dominant culture. Is it *bourgeois*, to care so much about love? Kraus has a character voice this very concern to her narrator.²⁵ Barthes protests strongly that he rejects jealousy, which is bourgeois, because of its *zeal*, the ‘unworthy fuss’ it makes, but elsewhere he writes that bourgeois culture infects the totality of culture.²⁶ This chapter, in examining these bourgeois expressions, is an investigation into genre. To think with Barthes is to ‘stumble’ and ‘err’ at the boundaries of category, especially literary category, and all of the writers here stumble, perhaps wilfully, at the generic borders of love-writing.

Anne Carson: Nuance and Eros

A principal border in Anne Carson’s work is that between the worlds of classical and contemporary thought. She has translated Sappho and a range of Greek drama, but perhaps her most effective work of what we might call ‘boundary error’ is done in 1986’s *Eros the Bittersweet*. The themes established in *Eros* reverberate throughout Carson’s work, though perhaps nowhere more than in her 1998 long poem *Autobiography of Red*, which we will address at the end of the section. But the book also bears a number of remarkable resemblances to *A Lover’s Discourse*: dedicated to the analysis of the different components of erotic love, saturated both in literary references and in the concerns of language, dedicated to projects of nuance. As we saw with Kraus and Acker, great notice is taken of the apparently insignificant linguistic and social phenomena on which one’s experience of life nevertheless turn. However, with Carson and Barthes, the ‘lonely’ voice is detached in a different way:

²⁵ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 115.

²⁶ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 100.

it is studious and grave rather than raised in protest. Carson's *Eros* may be 'nonfiction' rather than poetry, but it is still informed by this experimentalist's desire to question received wisdom through form. This work of scholarship is also touched by empathy with her readers and subjects – the book ends by saying that Socrates 'was in love with the wooing itself. And who is not?' (p. 173) – while at the same time taking advantage of its scholarly form. A poem might be as thoroughly researched and as deeply classical, like Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, but privileging artifice may mean it is not in the same position to anatomise conceptual nuance as the fragmentary essay. Having said that, we shall see shortly how the experimental poetic strategies of Lyn Hejinian and Rachel Blau DuPlessis have been used to ends similar to those accomplished in *Eros*, sometimes in accord with but sometimes contrasting *A Lover's Discourse*.

It is first worth mentioning the similar connections Barthes and Carson draw about the Greek alphabet, although it is extremely unlikely that Carson could have been directly influenced by this in Barthes, as it comes from 'Variations sur l'écriture' ('Variations on Writing'). This text was published posthumously in Barthes' *Oeuvres complètes* when it was rediscovered after having been lost on a train in Italy in 1973, and remains untranslated from the French.²⁷ Yet Barthes' comments in the section 'Voyelle' are strikingly similar to Carson's in 'Alphabetic Edge'. She describes the Greeks' 'conceptual leap' made towards their 'unique activity of symbolisation'.²⁸ Barthes feels similarly: while the Middle Eastern abjads

²⁷ Carlo Ossola, 'L'instrument subtil' in Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte précédé de Variations sur l'écriture*, 7-22 (p. 16).

²⁸ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 53.

that preceded it provide a ‘skeleton’ of consonants, the Greek and derived writing systems are a ‘fleshy, mucous, liquid body, the musical body’.²⁹ Writing as conceptualised in the ‘Variations’ is both bodily and social, but Carson, coming from the opposite direction hits decisively upon an ‘ancient analogy between language and love’.³⁰ The recurring phrases in Hejinian’s *My Life*, as we have seen, create the ‘resonance’ that produces the experience of that text, the plurality of meanings. One of the most notable of these is ‘the perpetual Latin of love’. Latin is both a common language across nations, and a secret one accessible only to initiates (lovers are members of an imaginary Barthesian ‘Society of the Friends of Love’). The repetitions in Hejinian’s work allow her to take such phrases from all angles, although it is still never definitely, separated as they are by the ends of sentences. Sometimes the adjacent sentences serve as an expansion of the meaning of the phrase, such as in this from the paragraph with the margin-title ‘It was only a coincidence’:

The old fragmentary texts, early Egyptian and Persian writings, say, or the works of Sappho, were intriguing and lovely, a mystery adhering to the lost lines. At the time, the perpetual Latin of love kept things hidden.³¹

²⁹ Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte précédé de Variations sur l’écriture*, p. 78. All translations from this text are my own.

³⁰ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 55.

³¹ Hejinian, *My Life*, p. 64.

If we were to take the ‘Latin of love’ sentence as a metaphor here, it would be inadequate, as the earlier and less-studied pre-Roman texts are more ‘intriguing’ at this moment. In the sentence that follows, its subject ‘wrote my name in every one of his books’. ‘His’ identity is not offered; he is defined only in relationship to the subject, the ‘I’, with this act of inscription. The analogy between language and love is not only ancient in origin, as Carson proves repeatedly, but its trappings in the modern mind are ancient. We see love as something originating in our collective past, and as Barthes’ text proves, lovers see themselves as enacting something carried out by generations before, compare themselves to the great lovers of literature. The idea of the inscription is bound up in this: it turns one’s own name into a historical artefact. In another passage Hejinian calls the name written in books ‘[a] name trimmed with colored ribbons’.³² This sentence has another appearance earlier in this ‘It was only a coincidence’ passage too, following the sentence ‘What were Caesar’s battles but Caesar’s prose.’ (p. 64) Our classicism of words extends beyond love, for classical language founds modern literature. Ancient commentaries are the oldest Western literary criticism, and Plato’s comments on the dangers of writing in the ‘Phaedrus’ and *Republic* are part of the genetic code of theory. His Socrates becomes the straw man crucial to Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, whose proof in turn that writing is mistrusted in favour of spoken, ‘direct’ experience is foundational to the widespread understanding of deconstruction.³³ Just so, Caesar’s

³² Hejinian, *My Life*, p. 73. The phrase is a transposition of part of the description of ‘a pony [...] his mane trimmed with colored ribbons’, p. 17.

³³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 84. Henry Sussman’s work gestures towards a similar connection in looking at various links between critical theory and language writing, and deserves fuller consideration than can be given here. See *The Task of the Critic: Poetics, Philosophy, Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), particularly Chapter 2, ‘Prolegomena to Any Future Language Poetry’, and pp. 47-8.

battles are with prose or in prose, and are denied an existence beyond prose. They have become ‘great works’ instead of human events, and what is more, they have acquired class associations and the trappings of the academic establishment, becoming ‘trimmed with colored ribbons’. The ‘Latin of love’, the equation between love’s mysteries and those of language, is both classical and contemporary, but the weight of their history, the ‘trimmings’, vexes the contemporary appearances of this figure even more than the standard metaphor. In Carson’s chapter ‘Symbolon’, she quotes Paul Ricoeur on the ‘mental tension’ created by holding both senses of the words of a metaphor in one’s head (p. 73). ‘Such warfare marks the landscape of all human thought’ (p. 74), but in this case it marks it even deeper, and the older a text is the more it becomes blended into the history of love. Once *Romeo and Juliet* or *Werther and Charlotte* become absorbed into our expectations of life, intertextual processes have made love itself into a text.

Processes like these are part of what is being explored in *My Life*’s dense intratextual network of resonances, showing how the texts of ideas recur at different points in a life of language. What is discussed in the paragraph above is only a small sample of this, so let us return to ‘Latin of love’. The flowering of correspondences stemming from just one such instance of the phrase is traced by Hilary Clark:

‘Latin’ in ‘Latin of love’ yields Segovia (the precise Spanish guitarist), while ‘love’ in ‘Latin of love’ creates a context in which to fit [another] repeating sentence, ‘I wrote my name...’

From loving to naming: one's name is linked
to one's personal 'history', a life shaped by and
enmeshed in language.³⁴

This is how *My Life*'s version of parataxis presents nuances, and comparing where we read the phrase before, or where we know it will come later, allows us to see the various inflections of Hejinian's 'literary-erotic sympathies'.³⁵ As Réda Bensmaïa glosses Barthes' definition ('without judgement') of poetry in *Roland Barthes*, 'it is not only "parataxis" (the rupture of composition and subordination), but also a sort of generalised metonymy: [...] words constantly are added to each other without finality having precedence over them'.³⁶ For example, we consider a different meaning for the phrase 'Latin of love' when it precedes the sentence, 'Then love perpetuates one's interest in an old-fashioned medium, the printed page.' (p. 142) Here the Latin is something 'old-fashioned', which love always is, its codifications arcane and classical.³⁷ The revised edition of *My Life* having been published in 1987, this connection may be drawn between the 'Latin of love' and the growth at the time of computerised communication. Elsewhere, however, the same phrase follows on from 'the mistaken notion that science was hostile to the imagination' (p. 87), while another sentence earlier asks, with no question mark, 'I became interested in science.

³⁴ Clark, 'The Mnemonics of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 14;4 (Fall 1991), 315-35 (pp. 322-3).

³⁵ Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, p. 72.

³⁶ Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. by Pat Fedkiew (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 29.

³⁷ Here 'classical' might mean the Barthesian sense of the 'classic text', if we are considering the codification of love in *A Lover's Discourse*, more often than Greek or Roman.

Is that a basis for descriptive sincerity.’ (p. 71) Wanting to unite imagination with a theoretical basis for the ‘simple’ or ‘honest’ speech that writing often takes for granted is part of what Henry Sussman calls the ‘political and ethical dimension’ shared by deconstruction and language writing with its ‘poetics of explicitness’.³⁸ Even when ‘the word leads the idea’, poetry may be regarded as *honest* and *explicit*, because of its faithfulness to the word (*RB*, p. 152).

Physical writing, the ‘old-fashioned medium’ to which love leads us (trumping the telephone), is related both to Carson’s project and to Hejinian’s ‘erotics of materials’, which cherishes the sensory experience of pen and paper. It can also be read as standing in opposition to the telephone that is the *bête noire* of Barthes-the-lover: in ‘Fade-out’, he writes that ‘the telephone wire is not a good transitional object, it is not an inert string; it is charged with a meaning, which is not that of junction but that of distance’ (*LD*, p. 115). As a medium, its erotics are inadequate to the nuance with which his and Carson’s descriptions imbue writing. ‘Like desire, the love letter waits for an answer’ (*LD*, p. 158), and it is thus in Barthes’ mind more a part of the experience of love than the ‘inert’ telephone cable. This ‘inertia’ (or the contrasting dynamism) of different forms of language is borne out in Carson’s use of the story of the Greek hero Bellerophon. One of the few times in Homer where writing of any kind is mentioned, it shows that, like Plato, the epic poet is suspicious of writing. Bellerophon carries his own death-warrant in the form of a folded tablet, but unlike Hamlet heading to England in the same situation, he does not read it. He instead goes on to ‘discredit its contents’ by his deeds, which dismiss the written orders from consideration (p. 104). Here, Carson writes, ‘eros

³⁸ Sussman, *The Task of the Critic*, p. 48.

acts from a folded text' but it can be said that all erotic texts (whether love-writing or the 'text' of a relationship) have 'two terms' until they are complicated by the 'third angle' (p. 105). In the story of Bellerophon, this angle is created by the 'blind point' of the tablet he does not read, but for a wider definition of the erotic text, the angle is an inevitable part of this kind of relation. Barthes claims that 'love is blind' is a false proverb (*LD*, p. 229), but he also quotes Sappho saying that love, and in particular jealousy, robs her of her senses (pp. 155-6). Barthes may claim that jealousy is bourgeois, but as Carson explores, any narrative of love – or in the absence of a true narrative, a nuance, a text – is a story of the introduction of a third term, be it time, circumstance, text, or another person. This third term, this 'fold', is crucial to the poetics of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, mentioned briefly in Chapter 2 of this thesis.³⁹ Like Hejinian's, DuPlessis' poetics owes much to its ideas of the erotics of materials, and sees, as Harriet Tarlo writes, '[t]he space of the enfolded page [as] a site of erotic joy'.⁴⁰ The fold in DuPlessis is where one constituent instalment of her long poem *Drafts* refers back to another, a constant redrafting, self-commentary project, and it is that fold where we find (after the phrasing of *The Pleasure of the Text*) the gap where the text 'gapes'. But there is a slippage of meaning here. Seeing the space of a text like a body is not the same as seeing love like a text, or vice versa. With the writerly text of *jouissance*, the fold may be the site of a thrill, but with the text of love, the fold is the enemy, object of constant analysis and self-debate, and it cannot be banished by deeds.

³⁹ DuPlessis calls the method of *Drafts*, a sequence of poems constantly reassessing the earlier members, 'composition by fold'. *Toll*, p. 252.

⁴⁰ Tarlo, "'Origami Foldits": Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Drafts 1-38*, *Toll*, *How2* 1;8 (Fall 2002) <http://www.asu.edu/piperewcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_8_2002/current/forum/tarlo.htm> [accessed 12th December 2014].

In accordance with my methodology, such comparisons as these are motivated by the direct references to Barthes' text in Carson's, and so that overlap must be the crux of this section. A paragraph of Barthes serves as the epigraph to the chapter 'Now Then':

Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved's absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of insupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and that of the allocution: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you). Whereupon I know what the present, that difficult tense, is: a pure portion of anxiety.⁴¹

This is taken from Barthes' chapter on 'absence'. Like 'Waiting', the chapter on 'The Absent One' is deliberately partial, in all senses of the word: it does not consider the absence of the lover from a position of being with him. Both are written as if he never arrives, and Barthes admits this: 'to speak this absence is from the start to propose the the subject's place and the lover's place cannot permute' (*LD*, p. 13). There is no rescuing statement of the form 'once the lover has arrived, that absence

⁴¹ Barthes, *LD*, p. 15; quoted in Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 117.

seems...’ Carson’s survey is similarly focussed on absent lovers, and in fact even when the lover is present, they are still sought after. This is because of the collapse of time created by love. Carson describes the ‘untranslatable’ Greek adverb *deute* which combines two words and ends up meaning both ‘now’ and ‘over and over again’.⁴² One gloss she offers is ‘here it goes again’, but this too is inadequate, and in the grammar of this word she seeks to explore the *time* of love. The reader or writer, interacting with the text, gains what the lover ‘*craves*’ (my emphasis): ‘a vantage point from which the dilemmas of “now” and “then” may be viewed with detachment’.⁴³ In another parallel with the ‘Waiting’ chapter, Barthes ends this one with a koan too: a master almost drowns his student and then says that real truth is that craved ‘as you crave air’. To this Barthes adds that the beloved’s ‘absence holds my head underwater [...] it is by this asphyxia that I reconstitute my “truth”’ (*LD*, p. 17). The study of love is only possible with the lover placed at a certain remove, out of time and place. Both writers agree that when the beloved is present, love cannot be studied, and love proceeds without allowing alternatives – the lover is ‘like a gambler whose luck cannot fail’, or else is travelling down ‘a dazzling tunnel’, with no forking paths in sight.

Much analysis of love, however, is of precisely those forking paths, of potentialities. This situation is derived from the fact already addressed that ‘eros is lack’: ‘The ideal is presented on a screen of the actual’.⁴⁴ Nuance can be seen as the analysis of all possible factors or of the one improbable path through them. As well as being something under analysis, though, this idea is also an important one in the

⁴² Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 118.

⁴³ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 17.

poetics of writing about love. ‘When desire is the subject of a text you are reading, you can open it anywhere and end where you like.’ (p. 121) Pinning love down gives a certain limited control over it, but writing love still deforms it in a sense. Carson’s chapter ‘What a Difference a Wing Makes’ is about a pun put by Plato into the mouth of Socrates. Eros, the god of love, has wings, so he is turned into Pteros, ‘winged’. Yet this change, as Socrates admits, spoils the meter of the line of verse he is quoting; the two consonants ‘pt’ turn the vowel of the particle *dē* that precedes (Pt)eros from a short vowel into a long one. The wings of love, its divinity, disrupt the form of its writing – the *numen* trumps language. This can be seen in Carson’s 1998 verse-novel *Autobiography of Red*, in part of what Ian Rae calls ‘the theory of the lyric novel presented by Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet* and put into practice in *Autobiography of Red*’.⁴⁵ Even if it seems an overstatement, Rae’s comment runs parallel to Koestenbaum’s that *A Lover’s Discourse* is Barthes’ ‘novel’. In both cases a systematic exploration of love is seen as the groundwork for the totalising narrative treatment of emotional themes that the novel represents for these writers. Carson devotes a chapter to the ‘novel sense’, ‘that blind but lively point where your reason is viewing itself’ as a place to ‘play out’ the scenarios which obsess the lyric poet.⁴⁶ Barthes too sees the novel as the ‘serious mediation’ that lets one talk about something as ‘stupid’ as love (*LD*, p. 177), although he deliberately opposes the actual experience of love to the novelistic pursuit of it. Unlike the Proust he mentions

⁴⁵ Rae, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet’s Novel in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), p. 253.

⁴⁶ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, pp. 81-2, 79. Chris Jennings suggests that Carson’s ‘verse-novel’ texts like *Autobiography of Red* binds together not just lyric intensity and narrative but also the interpretative essay form, perhaps accounting for some of the work of the linkage Rae identifies. ‘The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70;4 (Fall 2001), 923-36 (p. 932).

in his margins, he writes, ‘I do not shut myself up in order to write the enormous novel of time recaptured.’ (p. 217) Instead, speaking ‘always in the first degree’, he bares his soul, ‘banalized’ as its discourse may be.⁴⁷ But there is a self-righteousness to this, as the lover feels that even if he is banal, stupid, or speaks in cliché, he is still ‘telling the truth’. This idea of love as objective truth makes reconciling this work with deconstruction problematic, but Barthes and his poet-readers persist. In *Autobiography of Red*, the philosopher who Geryon meets in Argentina says he will study ‘*the erotics of doubt*’, which is for him ‘*a precondition [...] of the proper search for truth*’.⁴⁸ This formation, ‘an erotics’, recalls Hejinian’s Barthesian ‘erotics of materials’; the pursuit of any understanding must be rooted in how its foundations answer desire. *A Lover’s Discourse* becomes our guide in this pursuit.

Deborah Levy: The Suburbs of Hell

In 1990, British novelist and playwright Deborah Levy published a book-length poem, *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell*.⁴⁹ Although this work is not as formally or linguistically innovative as most of the work we have considered so far, I agree with Catherine Belsey when she rejects the idea ‘that only the avant-garde is capable of precipitating a crisis in the relationship between the subject and

⁴⁷ Barthes, *LD*, p. 177 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁸ Note that Carson describes this character as having ‘a pink mouth small as a nipple’; when he speaks, he does so from an erotic site. Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), p. 86. Italics in the original.

⁴⁹ Levy, *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990). An updated edition has appeared recently – Levy, *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell* (London: And Other Stories, 2014) – and this is the text (hereafter *Suburbs*), to which references will refer unless otherwise stated.

language'.⁵⁰ Some of the time, Levy engages in experimental methods to achieve her aims, and sometimes they are more conventional, character- or plot-driven. In a variety of ways, *Suburbs* precipitates moments of crisis without the radical strategies of a language poem. Moreover, the poem signals Barthes with its title and epigraph, and thus it constitutes a response to Barthes' 'fragmentary and synchronic' strategies in *A Lover's Discourse*.⁵¹ At times this response is to reflect that fragmentation, and at others to connect it up again by providing two sides to the 'discourse'.

The poem takes the form of a dialogue, with short, lyric-like poems alternating between the voices of 'He', a male human accountant, and 'She', a female angel. The poem carries an epigraph from *A Lover's Discourse*: 'In order to show you where your desire is, it is enough to forbid it to you a little [...] a little prohibition, a good deal of play'.⁵² I have reformatted Levy's use of the quotation here; she lays the final two phrases out like short lines of verse, emphasising their parallelism which Howard's translation preserves from the French: 'un peu d'interdit, beaucoup de jeu'.⁵³ This comes from the chapter 'Induction', where Barthes describes how, even before a love begins, a lover is inducted into the ways of loving. Prohibition and play are what locate desire. In *Suburbs*, the lovers are star-crossed, separated because one is human and the other an angel. This distinction heightens the power of desire, giving a grand scale for the 'play' between them in the poem, which (in the 1990 edition at least) foregrounds itself as a drama through its epigraphs, as we shall see.

⁵⁰ Belsey, *Desire*, p. 38.

⁵¹ Belsey, *Desire*, p. 18.

⁵² Barthes, *LD*, p. 137; cf. Levy, *Suburbs*, p. [7].

⁵³ Barthes *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 5, p.176.

Like *A Lover's Discourse*, *Suburbs* is highly intertextual, and its sources are not limited to the Barthesian. A prominent one is suggested by the second epigraph of the 1990 edition which is first in the 2014, and is taken from the early twentieth-century comic newspaper column 'archy and mehitabel' (*sic*). Written by Don Marquis for the New York *Evening Sun* and *Tribune*, the column starred 'archy', a poet reincarnated as a cockroach. The satirical stories featured 'mehitabel', a cat and archy's companion. They took on political targets throughout the 1910s and 1920s, as well as attacking cultural phenomena like free-verse poetry and belief in reincarnation. Levy's epigraph comes from the poem 'mehitabel dances with boreas':

i will not eat tomorrow
 and i did not eat today
 but wotthehell i ask you
 the word is toujours gai⁵⁴

The behaviour of mehitabel in the poem recalls 'she', the angel. Boreas, the north wind, picks up mehitabel and forcibly carries her. The lines 'spin mehitabel spin' and 'whirl mehitabel whirl' are two variants on the refrain that opens many of the quatrains of the poem. The word 'wotthehell', a parody of deliberately misspelled and run-together phrases in the writings of E. E. Cummings, occurs throughout the

⁵⁴ Levy, *Suburbs*, p. 7; cf. Don Marquis, *Archy and Mehitabel* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 145.

work of ‘archy’, as does ‘toujours gai’. Although Marquis’ writing is billed as ‘light’ verse and mocks the experiments with typography undertaken by Cummings and others, there is still meaning in the ways it uses those techniques. The doubling of ‘tt’ and ‘hehe’ created by running these words together suggests laughter, but also the stutter-step of archy jumping from key to key. This happens in *Suburbs* too (‘helluvit’, p. 48; ‘outta’, p. 46). As in Marquis, these represent what is happening to the speaking/writing character (typing with difficulty/running her words together in speech) rather than a desire to disrupt the normal functioning of language. However, both engagements with this tradition of mutable typography indicate otherworldliness, especially from someone speaking/writing from outside humanity, whether cockroach or angel.

Even ignoring occasional typographical lapses, Levy’s poem has a clear modernist context. The dullness of ‘He’ and the positioning of his hopeless romance in the suburbs recalls the ‘typist home at teatime’ and the ‘young man carbuncular’ from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.⁵⁵ John Carey has written that these characters were part of a deep panic among modernist writers about the lower middle classes – junior office workers like clerks and typists – and their suburban existences.⁵⁶ What is relevant about this connection, however, is the heterosexuality of this and other appropriations of *A Lover’s Discourse*. The lovers in Barthes’ own life are other men, as we learn, if not from *A Lover’s Discourse*, then from the seminar it is based on and the posthumously published *Incidents*.⁵⁷ Carson’s text admits of non-

⁵⁵ Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 1. 231.

⁵⁶ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), pp. 18, 60.

⁵⁷ Barthes, *Le discours amoureux: Séminaire à l’école pratique des hautes études 1974-1976*, ed. by Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil, 2007); *Incidents*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

heterosexual contexts of love when it considers the Athenian one. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, many of the insoluble problems of love are intrinsically related to the fact that it takes place between an older man and the desired boy, not considered from the boy's perspective. This one-sided approach is even used as a metaphor for how the *Phaedrus* regards a written text: 'in love with a text [...] on the subject of love', 'as if it were his *paidika* or beloved boy'.⁵⁸ This structural inequality, between man adoring and boy adored, maps onto male-female relations too; the history of love poetry is dominated by the lyric female, the woman as love-object. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has shown how this persists into modern poetry, with a 'cluster' consisting of the male poet, the male audience made implicit, and the observed, female object of the poem. Writing about H. D., in whose work the lyric value of 'beauty' is assigned to figures on the rugged and often violent border of land and sea, like the 'Sea Rose' and 'Sea Violet' in their storms, DuPlessis writes that '[i]t is an ideologically motivated protest against the foundational lyric cluster to make harsh "beauty" substitute for loveliness'.⁵⁹ DuPlessis even references Barthes' *Mythologies* when discussing the lyric's construction of its female object through 'ideologies, myths and implicit narratives' in poetry as a genre, although she does not reference a specific passage.⁶⁰ Levy challenges these two crucial modernist ideas – the horror of the suburbs and the compulsory one-directional heterosexuality of poetry – by having 'He' speak up for the suburbs and 'she' speak back for women. The challenges are not radical changes from the ground up, but they do trouble the orthodoxies. 'He', for instance, can find fulfilment and contentment in the suburbs,

⁵⁸ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 123.

⁵⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 31.

⁶⁰ DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures*, p. 29.

and they are not coupled with their trademark dissatisfaction. In response to her desire to save him, he ultimately shows that he does not need to be saved: 'Grateful / For small pleasures / We can share' as 'dusk settles over this suburb', 'I / Am fond of myself' (*Suburbs*, pp. 71, 49). Meanwhile, 'she' arrives as the manic, angelic 'dream girl', but through this same dialogic process negotiates her way out of the cultural myth of what women are supposed to provide their men. Although it is not H.D.'s 'wind-tortured' variety, she exhibits an alternative to lyric beauty in her 'starry tattoos' and 'incandescent cleavage' (pp. 13, 27). Her beauty is otherworldly, and not only in a hyperbolic sense; most of the imagery used to describe her physicality compares her to aspects of the cosmos. This opposes the 'containment' of women not by means of a 'futurist explosion', but by denying that it is possible, something affirmed by the departure of 'she' at the end of the poem. *Suburbs* is not radically anarchic like language writing or Barthes in its critique of social norms, and does not even shake off the anxieties of modernism, but it does show characters reframing these norms and adapting them, challenging the ways in which they must be subject to them.

The figure of 'she' is also derived from contexts beyond poetry. Levy told the *Irish Times*, speaking of the character of 'she', the angel: 'I did ask myself if she was just points of light [...] but I decided that she was a cross between Tina Turner and Walter Benjamin, or Baudelaire'.⁶¹ To Benjamin, Baudelaire, and Turner, we then add Barthes. But if 'she' is to be identified with the speaker of *A Lover's Discourse*, there is a gender issue, as while the genders of the lovers are avoided in Barthes'

⁶¹ 'Deborah Levy on her poem *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell*', *The Irish Times* online (12 December 2014) <<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/deborah-levy-on-her-poem-an-amorous-discourse-in-the-suburbs-of-hell-1.2035955>> [accessed 30th January 2015]. Levy also goes on to compare the angel to the aerialist, Fevvers, from Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006).

description, *A Lover's Discourse* does not represent women who desire. The most prominent figures of the lover in the text are men: Goethe's Werther, Proust's Charlus, Phaedrus and the other Socratic lovers in the *Symposium*, and Barthes himself. Women are loved objects, like Werther's Charlotte, and although she 'has her problems too' (*LD*, p. 140), they are always seen through their relationship to a man. Yet there are marginal cases of women taking active roles in the love affair: for instance, there is Zoé in Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*, who in Freud's account of the novel is a love object who becomes, in essence, the hero's psychoanalyst. Even when she has agency, she is still an auxiliary of the male hero. The other issue of gender in *A Lover's Discourse* is that of the feminised lover: loving is concluded to be necessarily feminine, and insofar as one manages to love, one feminises oneself (p. 126). How can this be reconciled in the characters of *Suburbs*? 'Each time a subject "falls" in love, he revives a fragment of the archaic time when men were supposed to carry off women' (p. 188). But then, there is the turn between ancient and modern myth: the lover, having been 'ravished' by love, 'is always implicitly feminized'. (p. 189) Just so, in *Suburbs* 'He' is the one 'she' has (literally) fallen for, and he is the one 'ravished'. Mapping this onto another of Levy's points of comparison, the Baudelaire of *Paris Spleen*, we would wonder who is the Bénédicte, the ideal lover, and who is the corrupted double of what the lover wants.⁶² The roles change at different moments, but the lovers ultimately disappoint one another because they fail to find a common ground, each seeing the other as an outsider, and this is true both of angels, living in heaven, and suburbanites, at the fringes of the city.

⁶² Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. by Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 79, 81, 82-3

So much depends, for Barthes, upon a basic category of the ‘human subject’ (*LD*, p. 42), where any ‘successful’ couple who could perfectly balance prohibition and play would have to find that balance. Yet Levy’s ‘she’ is non-human, with different boundaries, and this heightens her humanity because it makes it all the more remarkable when we find it. In fact, she is so effective precisely because of those sites in which that category is troubled. The ‘amorous subject’ has to be human, but is also a deviant, thus ‘suspended *a humanis*, far from human things, by a tacit decree of insignificance: I belong to no repertoire, participate in no asylum’ (*LD*, pp. 212-3). Here, Levy’s ‘she’ is seen rather as non-human, allowing conflicts between she and ‘He’ to play out as differences between humans and angels. This serves to amplify human relations into cosmic ones, and also to show that systems of interaction and ideas of the ‘human’ – for instance, that romantic love as we experience it in the late twentieth century is part of ‘human nature’ – are not universal. In his essay ‘The Great Family of Man’, Barthes discusses a travelling exhibition of photographs designed to show the universality of human experience. However, Barthes argues that the focus on the human essence conceals historical injustice and inequality, and that its ‘modes’ are what ‘we should be told about’.⁶³ This is the same with the human subject in *A Lover’s Discourse*, whom the text struggles to historicise, as in the paragraph glossing the title of the section ‘*seul* / alone’:

The figure refers, not to what the human solitude
of the amorous subject may be, but to his
‘philosophical’ solitude, love-as-passion being

⁶³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 102.

accounted for today by no major system of
 thought (of discourse). (*LD*, p. 210)

The lover is lonely not because he is alone – he may well be surrounded by people – but because he feels as though there is no discourse in which he can participate. The meaning of love will be revealed in its modes rather than its essence. *Suburbs* seems to posit such a human essence at points, but also reveals that it is constructed; ‘she’, parting from ‘He’, tells him: ‘you are a human subject / living and furious’ (p. 72). However, in the final poem of the 1990 edition, she puts it differently, saying that love (‘multiplied’ ‘passion’) is

the theatre

of the living and the furious

the task

to keep on becoming

more of a human being⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Levy, *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell* (London: Cape, 1990), p. 75.

‘Theatre’ recalls the epigraphs on Greek drama, and the view of ‘she’ that her presence on earth is a performance of humanity. ‘The theatre’ and ‘the task’ seem to be in apposition, so we can read that the task of continuous becoming is to act out, as though through theatre, this ‘living and furious’ existence that is essential to being human. Indeed, that acting out makes one ‘more’ human, develops humanity. We see this in Barthes’ chapter ‘Making Scenes’, where he writes that ever since ‘dialogue (the joust of two actors) [...] corrupted tragedy’, monologue has been ‘pushed back to the very limits of humanity: in archaic tragedy, in certain forms of schizophrenia, in amorous soliloquy’ (*LD*, pp. 204-5). Recall that, when suffering from the gap between Aristotle and reality, ‘she’ describes herself as ‘skitzo’ in the 1990 text. Her failure to find or form the kind of self-contained dramatic situation Aristotle suggests means she feels as if she is on the edge of society, but it is only in this final poem that she realises that humans are doing this for themselves as well. Both versions of the lines quoted above are followed with the line ‘architecture of yr [*sic*] own paradise’. The complaint about the complacency of ‘He’ is recalled, the complacent world compared with the paradise of angels.

This final poem, whose critique is blunted by the exclusion of the ‘prison in eden’ and ‘theatre of the furious’ (*Suburbs*, p. 72), is only one of many featuring significant differences between the 1990 and 2014 editions. In both, the parts spoken by ‘she’ avoid capital letters while ‘He’ sometimes uses them. In the 1990 edition neither pronoun is capitalised in the page headings indicating which character is speaking, but in the 2014, ‘He’ is capitalised while ‘she’ is not. This reflects the nature of the characters – otherworldly anarchist and suburban professional – but also suggests an amplification of the subjective experience of love. The ‘angel’ character is an extreme and literalised version of this idea; as an angel, with wings and a cosmological body (‘starry’, ‘incandescent’), she embodies the otherworldly.

What *Suburbs* does not do, however, is show how literal or otherwise these attributes are, since ‘she’ has no human encounters that are not with her lover. Everything known about ‘she’ is subjective, because we are robbed of other contexts for perceiving her, whereas ‘he’ has other interactions – friends in the 1990 text, the postman Shivadhar in the 2014 – which lead us to assume his suburban life is ‘real’.⁶⁵ A boundary is being negotiated here between the real and imaginary which is also the boundary between prohibition and play outlined by Barthes. In the passage in *A Lover’s Discourse* from which Levy’s epigraph is drawn, he writes of the “‘successful’ couple’ that they would ‘designate desire and then [...] leave it alone, like those obliging natives who show you the path but don’t insist on accompanying you on your way’ (*LD*, p. 137). Although their relationship ends at the end of the book, and therefore they are not ultimately ‘successful’, ‘she’ and ‘He’ do relate in this way. ‘How your ragged wings / Open and close / And tell me what to dream’, he tells her (*Suburbs*, p. 18); her presence sparks fantasies, and this is seemingly more important than any ‘real’ experience she offers him. Her response is similar when he briefly offers to help her cope with the absence of God. He suggests that they ‘[s]queeze into the motor’ (p. 45) and take a spontaneous trip, in a mode (car) away from the ‘commuter train’, but when she pauses to pick her teeth, he rescinds the offer, becomes ‘himself again’ (p. 47). Like the lovers we see in *A Lover’s Discourse*, most of their interactions result in frustration, and the (mere) maintenance of desire. But this is the driving force of the poem, the frustration of narrative and water-treading of the ‘amorous discourse’ replacing the ‘love story’.

⁶⁵ Levy, *Suburbs* (2014), pp. 70-1; *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell* (1990), p. 74.

The anarchic qualities of ‘she’ here align her with Barthes, whose view of the process of reception of a narrative Catherine Belsey characterises as ‘anarchism’.⁶⁶ For him, suspense is at most an ‘immature eroticism’, and certainly more intellectual than erotic; the real conflict in reading is not between what we know and are yet to know, but the modes of pleasure. Belsey compares this with Brecht’s Marxism, which sees audience members under the spell of realist theatre as occupying a ‘detached state, where they seem to be given over to vague but profound sensations’.⁶⁷ What is happening to us when we experience a text is of clear concern to *Suburbs*, whether for its own sake or as an implicit figure for love. The 1990 edition bore two additional epigraphs to those already discussed, both drawn from Greek authors but, the precise selection and translations used suggests that they come via the first page of Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The opinions are diametrically opposed: Aristophanes says the dramatist should be a moral and political teacher, while Eratosthenes says that the poet should ‘charm the spirit of his listeners’ rather than offering instruction.⁶⁸ Boal’s analysis is a Brechtian Marxism, which sees conventional theatre, television, and movies as united in their objective of ‘repression of the people’.⁶⁹ Both views can contribute to ‘repression’: didacticism can enforce a particular view on an audience, while mere entertainment pacifies them. The Barthes epigraph can be seen as the final, most modern response to conflicting views on drama or storytelling, and one which Levy uses as her synthesis:

⁶⁶ Belsey, *Desire*, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Brecht, ‘A Short Organum for the Theatre’, quoted in Belsey, *Desire*, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. xiii. First English translation 1979.

⁶⁹ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. xiii.

on the pattern of the epigraph, a little didaxis is followed by a good deal of charm. Rather than articulating a political or moral debate and advocating a side, *Suburbs* opts for an anarchic Barthesian challenge to this idea itself. In this way, he suggests, ‘prophetic love’ (Greek *hypar*, dream-vision, as opposed to *onar*, the vulgar dream) might be our ‘human future’ (*LD*, pp. 60-1). For Barthes, *S/Z*’s ‘childish pleasure of classic realism’⁷⁰ is an anarchism because it overthrows an order and puts no replacement determining system in its place, besides the *plaisir/jouissance* opposition, which is non-hierarchical and full of slippages. But what is more deeply anarchic about Barthes, and the attitudes borrowed from him, is the style of the investigations, which are particular and partial. He reads ‘affectionately’ in *Sollers Writer* because ‘life is textual’; the attachments are contingent and found by feel.⁷¹ The investigation of love is therefore the same – we feel around for the *lapsus* that exists in the process of looking for *lapsi*. It is in an affective, felt, *amorous* process of discovery that these new possibilities for life reveal themselves.

The prosaic English title of the book, *A Lover’s Discourse*, hides the complexity of the project. *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* is a Barthesian endeavour, a system of responses after an (amorous) theme rather than a monologue, which is why it is such an apt borrowing for Levy’s title. It also troubles, more than its English version, the idea of the ‘lover’ or author of love; it is the discourse itself that is *amorous*, investigating the inner life philosophically and emotionally and

⁷⁰ Belsey, *Desire*, p. 37.

⁷¹ Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, trans. by Philip Thody (London: Athlone, 1987), p. 92. The idea of textual life is also found in the ‘Fragments inédits’ of Roland Barthes. Barthes, *Le lexique de l’auteur: Séminaire à l’École pratique des hautes études 1973-1974*, ed. by Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Seuil, 2010), pp. 324-5.

merging those concerns.⁷² These strands are blended both in *Eros the Bittersweet* and *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell*, but no one figure in either text corresponds precisely to the ‘lonely girl phenomenologist’ of Kraus’ *I Love Dick*. I now want to apply that idea to the poetry of Kristjana Gunnars, and investigate the theoretical genesis of its emotional life.

Kristjana Gunnars: Roland Barthes in Winnipeg

Icelandic-born Kristjana Gunnars settled in Canada as an adult, and became a member of an Icelandic Canadian (and, more broadly, Nordic Canadian) community of writers and artists.⁷³ Like the other writers we have looked at in this chapter, her writing troubles the boundaries of genre, and concerns with the act and limits of writing resonate throughout her career. That alone might have been enough to interest her in the work of Roland Barthes, but like Levy and Carson, Gunnars also draws on Barthes’ work for its relevance to the emotional life. In her book-length poem-cycle *Carnival of Longing*, recourse is made to a theoretical understanding of the emotional life which I will relate to the pattern of *A Lover’s Discourse*. Although it falls outside of the range of dates of concern to this thesis, her memoir of the death of her father, *Zero Hour*, bears enough similarities to Barthes’ work to be worth considering, and also makes detailed use of his *Writing Degree Zero*, in a manner

⁷² Mortimer suggests that ‘passionate love can be rapture’, as ‘this well-thought-of emotion’ becoming perverted by *jouissance* (*The Gentlest Law*, p. 112). Mortimer’s commentary on *The Pleasure of the Text* shows throughout that defining the meaning of this complex word that the better we understand it, the better we understand Barthes’ fugitive ‘text’. Barthes himself proves in the ‘emotion’ section where this comment emerges, which posits *jouissance* ‘as wisdom (when it manages to understand itself *outside its own prejudices*)’ (*PT*, p. 25; emphasis in the original) – as aspiration which prefigures the project of *A Lover’s Discourse*.

⁷³ For instance, in the same year that *Carnival of Longing* was published, she edited the anthology *Unexpected Fictions: New Icelandic Canadian Writing* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1989).

running contrary to how his texts have been used by other writers, like the language writers, more self-conscious in their formal radicalism. As we saw with Carson's *Autobiography of Red* and Levy's 2014 rewriting of her 1990 text, Barthesian concerns these writers developed in the late 1980s continued to have resonance afterwards, becoming absorbed into the body of theory writers use to understand their own emotional lives. Gunnars is a 'perverse' reader of theory, using it for purposes other than that which it was intended and using it in new and innovative ways. She comments on her disorderly reading practices in *The Rose Garden* (1996), eschewing 'orderly' reading practice for contrary and even hostile ones, irrespective of whether the author – in that case, Marcel Proust – would have 'approved'.⁷⁴ Her experimentalism is of this affective variety, as is most clearly demonstrated in 1989's *Carnival of Longing* and the texts written around it.

Carnival of Longing contains five cycles of poems. Within each cycle the poems are not numbered or marked out from one another except by page breaks. This conforms to an organising principle: the poems, except the few which are laid out in prose, avoid full stops and capital letters at the beginnings of lines or sentences (although not in the pronoun 'I' and proper nouns). In a minor way, the text avoids some grammatical determinacy and signals a desire not to privilege some textual elements over others, a strategy of modern poetry that Marquis both mocks and exploits in the poems of *archy and mehitabel*. This caution about her own authority as a writer is mirrored in the distrust of the reader's determinate practices in metapoetic passages, as in the first cycle, 'Dimmalimm':

⁷⁴ Gunnars, *The Rose Garden: Reading Marcel Proust* (Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1996), p. 6

all my words may speak another story

depending on the reading

a Freudian story, Jungian

Lacanian, Barthesian, auto-

biographical story

when I had not intended to tell

any story⁷⁵

In this passage, Gunnars asks not to be read in any way that would pin her down to an overly determined meaning or ‘story’, seeing the proliferation of theoretical modes not as offering a range of options but as the growth of different means by which to pin down meaning. The list of these modes of reading, however, comes in a particular order: the three most prominent voices in psychoanalysis are followed by Barthes, who is in turn followed by ‘auto-/biographical’. A more typical list, expressing the academic notion of ‘theory’ as a proliferation of modes, would include ‘feminist’ or ‘Marxist’. This one, however, focusses on the psychoanalytic mode and the autobiographical, as if what it is resisting is the reading of the text as a personal ‘story’. This would mean taking the text not as literature (Forrest-Thomson’s ‘bad naturalisation’) but as ‘ordinary’ language, the report of a real-life event. Barthes is sandwiched between psychoanalysis and autobiography. Psychoanalysis recalls the early days of his reception in English when he was seen as

⁷⁵ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1989), p. 19.

an ‘existentialist’ and ‘Freudian’ critic as well as a structuralist and Marxist (as we saw in the introduction). Autobiography, however, invokes his high-profile rejection of it ‘The Death of the Author’, as well perhaps as its redefinition with *Roland Barthes* and *Camera Lucida*. In this way it combines the desire of psychoanalysis to identify the structures of the human mind and question those structures, with the Barthesian response, which is to view life through texts and as a text. To Gunnars, even this seems like too much of a demand; her ‘telling’ may not be a story at all, but simply an expression ‘the words I use attempt / no meaning [...] it is a non-writing’.⁷⁶ It claims to be almost the inverse of those early language poems of ‘The Dwelling-Place’: expression without agenda rather than agenda without expression. However, Gunnars’ attempt ‘to keep the persistent / influx of you / out of my thoughts’⁷⁷ is doomed to failure, and she knows this. The book is a carnival of longing, an outlet for the desire not to work through and live with it responsibly. Any work of ‘lonely girl phenomenology’ might be described in a similar way. The ‘carnavalesque’ as Mikhail Bakhtin describes it offers ‘temporary liberation from the prevailing truth’, but in *Carnival of Longing*, what is being escaped from is the notion of prevalence itself.⁷⁸ The ‘Barthesian’ is one of the orders being flouted: even in a reader-focussed mode, the ‘reader’ prevails, and even in a pleasure- or desire-centred work, as we have seen Barthes’ readings characterised, pleasure and desire come first. *Carnival of Longing* is not only a carnival composed of longing, but a burlesque of longing; it flouts longing.

⁷⁶ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 11.

⁷⁷ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 11.

⁷⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10.

This can be seen where psychoanalysis comes back in the fourth cycle, ‘Sunlamp’. It describes the childhood experience of being treated for a skin condition by being shut in a room with an ultraviolet light, and the psychoanalytic consequences unravel throughout the section. The narrator speaks about ‘my parents, attempting to take over the work of God’ (p. 50), through which ‘I have discovered there are no degrees of love’ (p. 55). Like Barthes and van Rouysbroek, Gunnars has erased the internal structuring of love, refusing to ‘long’ in the prescribed ways, her longing overflowing phenomenological categories. Yet we can see that the radicalism of her punctuation is limited; although ‘my’ is the first word of the ‘poem’-paragraph on page 50, it is not capitalised, but both ‘God’ and ‘I’ are. Form is retained, indicating that some categories survive the overflow. Longing never completely eclipses language, instead variously trying on different relationships to it. In the fifth cycle, ‘Cheekey’, she writes, ‘if it is love to give your speech to another / then it is love i feel’.⁷⁹ This can be read as meaning both speech about another and the abdication of speech in favour of the experience of unspeakable love. The speaker then turns away from speech or writing, wanting only to ‘listen to you say these things / knowing the sun is descending’.⁸⁰ This second line recalls ‘Sunlamp’, where prose blocks about the absence of the sun are interspersed with poems meditating on the nature of love. In one, Gunnars lists a series of metaphors for love – mountains, cavern, ocean – and finds none of them accurate, saying that ‘there are no degrees of love’. Instead, it is ‘an existence apart’, ‘gone through [...] without

⁷⁹ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 69.

⁸⁰ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 69.

comprehension’.⁸¹ The loss of the sun is implicitly linked to this deformation of longing, pushing the limits of the emotions.

As ‘no degrees’ suggests, these limits are often cast in the Barthesian ‘zero’ term. Returning to the passage we looked at before in ‘Dimmalimm’, the next stanza after the one quoted above elaborates on the desire to avoid particular ‘readings’ and instead to obtain ‘zero’, neutrality. As we shall see, Gunnars believes that anti-interpretative avoidance strategies are taken up especially by women writers fighting their societal marginalisation. One of the weaknesses we observed in the previous chapter with the ‘mainstream’ of language poetics is its failure to account for particular problems with interpretation in the avant-garde practice of writers of colour and women. We can see here how a focus on language could be seen as impersonal: unlike Hejinian, who embraces it in potentially sensuous terms – the ‘motionless chart of language vibrate[s]’ – Gunnars sees, in the kind of language-centred approach that produces, ‘zero writing’ the exact opposite:

only to voice an unhappy
utterance of no import
using matte language, *without*
reverberation, a flat language
of concern to no one

⁸¹ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 55.

that I desire you⁸²

Identify the term ‘matte’ with zero here; Barthes himself uses the term ‘matte’ to describe autobiography, both in *Roland Barthes* and in his ‘review’ of that text, ‘Barthes to the Third Power’. The anamnesis, ‘tenuity of memory’, is ‘matte’, ‘exempt of meaning’: ‘The more one succeeds in making [anamneses] *matte*, the better one escapes the image-system’ (*RB*, pp. 109, 110). In ‘Barthes to the Third Power’, he somewhat predictably turns on himself: the book, he writes, is ‘written in a somewhat distant and *matte* way (without *brio*) [...] a little more and this or that would perhaps have become an *avant-garde* idea’.⁸³ For *brio*, we can look back at *The Pleasure of the Text*: its ‘will to bliss’ allows one to avoid the ‘ideological and the imaginary’ (*PT*, pp. 13-4). We can only reconcile two contrary positions both derived from Barthes by considering what reverberates here. Gunnars’ attraction is to what Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* calls the absence of horizontal connections between words. Silliman in ‘Surprised by Sign’ replaces these connections and it is implied in ‘Chronic Texts’ that Hejinian takes a similar position, although she relates that replacement with desire, ‘the erotics of materials’; we have already seen in this chapter the resonant, ‘desire-producing mechanisms’ of *My Life*. What is missing in Gunnars’ view of this, then, is the notion that resonance can be undirected, that the ‘new’ horizontal of language-centred writing is possible. The paradoxical

⁸² Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 19 (emphasis mine).

⁸³ Barthes, ‘Barthes to the Third Power’ in *On Signs*, ed. by Marshall Blonsky (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 189-91 (pp. 189-90). Emphasis in the original.

juxtaposition of the lines ‘of concern to no one / that I desire you’ fits well with the idea of material, matte erotics, not determined by a love story, only a part of desire.

This flattening-out of the emotions continues when *Carnival of Longing* is followed by Gunnars’ 1991 memoir *Zero Hour*, written after her father’s death in 1989. There are a number of direct references to Barthes, and no other theorist is used in this way in the memoir. Tanis McDonald calls it ‘[t]he major literary allusion’ in the book.⁸⁴ Zeroes appear throughout, sometimes juxtaposed with quotations from Barthes; when contemplating her father’s movement towards silence and ‘zero’, Gunnars resolves to write the book, and quotes Barthes: ‘It is precisely because I forget that I read.’⁸⁵ Although Barthes is taken out of context here, the identification of reading with writing is much in the spirit of the source text, *S/Z*. Gunnars often misreads Barthes or refers to him vaguely, from a distance; early in *Zero Hour*, she says, ‘I have heard of *ground zero* writing.’⁸⁶ Tying this text in with *Carnival of Longing*, we can also investigate the way Gunnars has, like Silliman, selectively but productively read and reappropriated *Writing Degree Zero*. Silliman’s particular interpretation of the notion of the new ‘horizontal’, which we have looked at in detail in the last two chapters, uses the terms of Barthes’ own conception of modern poetry differently – for Barthes, the effacement of connections results in a ‘vertical project’, not horizontal freedom. Silliman’s Barthes-derived ideas offer a useful way to think about paratactic writing, but it is hard to reconcile it in a

⁸⁴ McDonald, *The Daughter’s Way: Canadian Women Poets’ Paternal Elegies* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), p. 176 (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ Gunnars, *Zero Hour* (Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1991), p. 37; *S/Z*, p. 11.

⁸⁶ Gunnars, *Zero Hour*, p. 10.

thorough way with *Writing Degree Zero*. Gunnars, too, builds her own idea of the ‘zero degree’. She speaks first of ‘ground zero writing’, which Stephen Scobie reads as merely another way of phrasing Barthes’ idea, but it also highlights a certain aspect of it.⁸⁷ Gunnars conflates the ‘ground zero’ of a bomb dropping, which is a metonymy for trauma, with its response, which is writing at zero degree. This conflation produces the sense of one of Barthes’ few actual formulations of the idea, the ‘Orphean dream’ of the ‘writer without Literature’.⁸⁸ It is Orphean in a primitivistic sense of returning to a basic, mythic level of writing that came before Literature, but Orpheus was also suffering a loss, and used his skill as a singer (poet and, by analogy, writer) to attempt to reverse his loss, winning Eurydice back from the underworld. In the end, however, this was not possible, as his ‘neutrality’ was compromised – he was unable to attain ‘degree zero’ because he could not resist looking back at her. We might see the fragmentary text as a response to trauma, which robs life of the apparent meaningfulness and purpose that allow one to write the orderly, classic text.

In an interview with Monique Tschofen, Gunnars says that ‘[r]eading the mixture of poetry, prose and theory of Barthes, for example, gave me a kind of permission to allow my prose to be as disconnected as my thinking actually was’.⁸⁹ She links this to her first novel, *The Prowler*, saying that while ‘[w]e do not feel quite complete if we cannot tell the whole story of our lives’, in fact memory does

⁸⁷ Scobie, ‘Away from Zero’ in Monique Tschofen (ed.), *Kristjana Gunnars: Essays on Her Works* (Toronto: Guernica, 2004), 119-24 (pp. 120-1).

⁸⁸ Barthes, *WDZ*, p. 5. The connection of this passage with Gunnars is made in Deborah Keahey, *Making It Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1998), p. 47.

⁸⁹ Gunnars, ‘Interview’ in Tschofen, *Kristjana Gunnars*, p. 39.

not work in this way.⁹⁰ Gunnars responds to this in a different way than, say, Silliman, who feels that the cost of naïve literary realism is the ‘disappearance of the word’;⁹¹ her objection is more like William Carlos Williams’ that ‘[t]here is not life in the stuff because it tries to be “like” life’.⁹² Williams’ solution: to counter the ‘lifelike’ in poetry with the imagination. Gunnars writes that, in *The Prowler*, she decided to ‘see what would emerge if I let go of all sense of duty and obligation to things like genre, style, and appropriacy’.⁹³ In response to a question from Tschofen about gender, Gunnars has further recourse to Barthes, saying that the ‘fragmentary novel’ as a genre (or refusal of a genre) ‘lends itself to the memory and lives of women because many women struggle with issues of insignificance, of lack of authority, of silencing, all of which break up the authoritative voice of a confident and assertive (in Barthes’s words, “militant”) speaker’.⁹⁴ Citing cultural critic Rey Chow, she says that ‘some of the best post-modernists are also multi-cultural writers. Think for example of Fred Wah.’⁹⁵ Gunnars sees herself as a ‘multi-cultural’ writer, with her Icelandic/Nordic heritage and her experiences in both American and Canadian culture as an adult. But Wah’s ‘multiculturalism’ is differently inflected. In a 2004

⁹⁰ Gunnars, ‘Interview’, p. 39.

⁹¹ This is to be distinguished from the realism of language writers like Mandel and Harryman, who try to address the very problems Gunnars raises.

⁹² William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 129. See also Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 127.

⁹³ Gunnars, ‘Interview’, p. 39.

⁹⁴ Gunnars, ‘Interview’, p. 40.

⁹⁵ Gunnars, ‘Interview’, p. 41. Given the date of the interview’s publication, I think it probable that Gunnars is here thinking of a passage in Chow’s essay ‘The Interruption of Referentiality: Poststructuralism and the Conundrum of Critical Multiculturalism’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101;1 (2002), 171-86 (p. 172).

article for *Open Letter*, the Canadian poetry journal we looked at in the last chapter, Colin Browne imagines a visit by Barthes to Canada, which unlike visits to many other countries which resonate in Barthes's writings and literary afterlife, did not in fact take place. Browne's article 'Roland Barthes in the Kootenays' apologises internally to Fred Wah for not bringing Barthes to speak to him. The fictionalised Barthes asks if Wah, with 'that name', is an 'Indian', a member of one of Canada's First Nations.⁹⁶ In fact, Wah is of Chinese and European ancestry, but Browne, knowing this, puts this question in Barthes' mouth anyway, highlighting Wah's 'multicultural' status. This article is taken in a special issue about Wah's long poem *Alley Alley Home Free*, and frequently concerns itself with Wah's perennial theme, the difficulty of finding a stable identity. This is also relevant to Gunnars' work, yet Gunnars' 'multiculturalism' utilises the fragment quite differently from Wah's. With Wah, 'all the moments of his writing encounter one another, connected by a complex system of subterranean rhizomes'.⁹⁷ This is much like the 'horizontal' associative logic of Silliman's *New Sentence*, even if the practice is somewhat different. However, in Gunnars' poem-cycles and prose paragraphs, the organisation is more like a Barthes text. In *Zero Hour*, she divides the text into one- or two-paragraph units as in *Roland Barthes* (although Gunnars' are untitled). Although they do not follow one another in chronological narrative order, a kind of narrative order does gradually emerge, or rather multiple orders, progressing in parallel sequence. This allows Gunnars to elaborate the cultural background of her family members' responses to situations without dipping into obvious explanations or 'flashbacks' –

⁹⁶ Browne, 'Roland Barthes in the Kootenays', *Open Letter* 12;2 (Spring 2004), 74-86 (p. 82).

⁹⁷ Charlene Diehl-Jones, 'Fred Wah and the Radical Long Poem', in *Bolder Flights: Essays on the Canadian Long Poem*, ed. by Angela Robbeson and Frank M. Tierney (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998), 139-50 (p. 140).

every transition between the brief sections is a flashback or -forward. In *Carnival of Longing*, the poems in each of the five cycles do not feature titles, numbers, or obvious divisions. Since we are given no other prompting about where to make divisions, the turned page is the only one that survives, and we start afresh with each poem. This can have radical effects on a potential reading (or naturalisation).

Barthes' texts do not use the turned page in this way, but there is a progression of narrative and/or argument within the fragments of a text that bears a certain similarity to it. In the 'fragment' of *Roland Barthes* that D. A. Miller calls attention to as a site where the queer Barthes makes himself visible, Barthes experiences a feeling of exclusion when he chances upon a small wedding ceremony, heteronormative performance *par excellence* (in 1975, at least). In the face of the homogeneous in any time and place, however, exclusion seems inevitable. This is countered with a desire for Fourier's utopia of differences 'in which there would no longer be anything but differences, so that to be differentiated would no longer mean to be excluded' (*RB*, p. 85). In a small way, the fragmentary text enacts this textual utopia. As we know, the text is not isotropic (*PT*, p. 36), but uneven in its permeability and resistance, like a piece of wood. But all of this, gestured towards by Barthes, is the *utopian* version of this text; the text as produced tends to evolve a form of organisation so that some fragments are more relevant to the 'progression' than others, but this does not make the 'others' unimportant. Certainly this happens in *Zero Hour* and *Carnival of Longing*; although the poems in the 'Sunlamp' cycle, unnamed and unnumbered but each a single page, alternate between prose narrative and verse reflection, they also supply each other with almost paratactic support, not serving as illustration or theoretical justification but as companion pieces that in refusing a hierarchy allow for a kind of 'theorising'. As the subject matter demands, however, this theory does not impose a definite answer. It also happens in *Roland*

Barthes, where it appears that that in the third-person fragments the self-parodying argument about Barthesian style is being advanced, and in the first-person ones a sincere story of a life is being told. These fragmentary progressions, however, are always the result of the intrusive influences of the reader. The texts themselves disclaim this, Barthes by adoption of the alphabet's 'unmotivated order [...] outside of any imitation' (*RB*, p. 147), Gunnars by speaking against it repeatedly (including by reference to Barthes), so that any settled 'reading' we do arrive at is turned back towards its own illegitimacy. This is how the 'lonely girl phenomenologist' avoids 'bad naturalisation': by foregrounding that very avoidance with her formal strategies. This may not guarantee rational artifice on all Forrest-Thomson's levels, but it does resemble the paradox of the 'Barthesian', an adjective named after an author famous for advocating the death of that institution.

Gunnars' Transition: Longing to Zero

At precisely the endpoint of this thesis, in 1990, the year between the publications of *Carnival of Longing* and *Zero Hour*, we witness an evolution of desire whereby *A Lover's Discourse* is found to be inadequate. In the latter texts, Gunnars describes the feeling of grief for the writer:

The decline and fall of my father is a story. *On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other what it is no longer possible to write*, Roland Barthes said. My father's final story is no longer possible to write. [...] All the

meters instantly go down. All the arrows
suddenly point to zero. You are left with a story
that is not a story. A novel that is not a novel, a
poem no longer a poem.⁹⁸

The quotation in italics comes from *S/Z*, and as we have seen when Gunnars uses this text elsewhere, it is taken entirely out of context. This is the moment in which Barthes is explaining the difference between the readerly and writerly in print for the first time, discounting his 1968 article ‘Linguistics and Literature’, which rehearses the concepts as *lisible/illisible*, readable/readerly and ‘unreadable’.⁹⁹ He draws a comparison in a way that recalls, more than most sites of the ‘readerly’/‘writerly’ distinction is created, his pseudo-binary of modern and classic texts: it would no longer be possible (which we must take as hyperbole for useful, or responsible) to write the novels of Balzac or Flaubert. But Gunnars takes this epochal statement about writing in modernity, which is not so different from the ‘classic’/‘modern’ distinction in *Writing Degree Zero* that we saw the language writers wrestling with and mangling in the last two chapters, and reappropriates it entirely, turns it into something simpler and more true, or at least, less contestable. One *could* write like Flaubert, produce a Flaubert impersonation, and it would only be culturally irrelevant, but when faced with profound grief, the subject becomes ‘unwritable’ in

⁹⁸ Gunnars, *Zero Hour*, p. 29; emphasis Gunnars’.

⁹⁹ Barthes, ‘Linguistics and Literature’, in *A Very Fine Gift and Other Writings on Theory*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull, 2015), 71-84 (pp. 81-2 *et passim*). He also uses the term *scriptible* in the Sarrasine de Balzac seminar, but this was only published posthumously. See Barthes, *Sarrasine de Balzac: Séminaires à l'École pratique des hautes études 1967-1968 et 1968-1969*, ed. by Claude Coste and Andy Stafford (Paris: Seuil, 2011), pp. 487-8.

the sense that the manipulation of emotions that is necessary in writing, for instance, a love story becomes impossible. ‘It cannot keep its emotive qualities’, Gunnars writes. ‘It cannot be told *as a story*.’¹⁰⁰

But if the text is not a story, what is it? A partial answer to this is suggested in *Carnival of Longing*, where the ‘condition of waiting for what must never be showed’, as ‘Sunlamp’ has it, is the state of being that must be described.¹⁰¹ Méira Cook identifies this as the ‘lover’s discourse’, founded upon a ‘construction of abjection’.¹⁰² This is found in Barthes, too: ‘Isn’t the object *always* absent?’¹⁰³ ‘Sunlamp’ offers biographical episodes that refuse to be read psychoanalytically, despite its easy relevance: parents forcing their child into the dark. Instead, Gunnars, like Forrest-Thomson, writes this as a poem in order to insist on ‘good naturalisation’. We take her story as work towards a limit of what can be said, and not a saying in itself. In this way it becomes, like much of the ‘language writing’ we have looked at, a work of theory as well as poetry. A verbal echo connects *Zero Hour* and *Carnival*: ‘I have heard of ground zero writing’, discussed above, is prefigured in ‘I have heard of the end of writing’, the opening lines of a poem in the untitled third cycle in the book. These two sentences have the same structure and a similar meaning: Gunnars presents an awareness that she is working her way towards a limit-case of writing, but with caution (‘I have heard’). Critics like Cook are keen to align Gunnars’ responses with *A Lover’s Discourse*, but the evidence suggests that

¹⁰⁰ Gunnars, *Zero Hour*, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 49.

¹⁰² Cook, ‘Kristjana Gunnars’ *Carnival of Longing*: A Passionate Reading’ in Robbeson and Tierney (eds.), *Bolder Flights*, pp. 169-70.

¹⁰³ *LD*, p. 15; emphasis in the original.

her Barthes is the Barthes of degree zero. That abjection, however, is the closest she comes to a lover's discourse, as in 'Dimmalimm', where 'feelings' are pronounced 'ridiculous'.¹⁰⁴ She locates this epiphany in her 'private study', and Cook calls it 'passionate subjectivity, unrequited by writing'.¹⁰⁵ This is one of the sites where poetry discovers sympathies between early and late Barthes that Barthes scholarship neglects, an overlap between *A Lover's Discourse* and *Writing Degree Zero*. A truly innovative love-writing will, in the manner *Writing Degree Zero* exhorts of the writer, locate the end of writing in the face of the deceptiveness of classical realism. It is impossible to write with 'realism' about the distortions in perception created by, for instance, the radical abjection presented in 'Sunlamp'.¹⁰⁶ As Barthes writes, the lover's analysis of love's imaginary is destined always to fail: 'I am in love's wrong place, which is its dazzling place: "The darkest place, according to a Chinese proverb, is always underneath the lamp."' ¹⁰⁷ The interventions of theory may not be able to move the writer-lover out from underneath the lamp, but it makes her conscious of that position.

Conclusion

At the start of this chapter I proposed using Kraus' idea of 'lonely girl phenomenology' to assess the way poets assimilated Barthes into their emotional

¹⁰⁴ Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ Cook, *Writing Lovers*, p. xi.

¹⁰⁶ '[W]hat I thought of as my hours of darkness were only minutes'. Gunnars, *Carnival of Longing*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ *LD*, p. 59. The margin note reveals the proverb comes via Theodor Reik's *Fragments of a Great Confession: A Psychoanalytic Autobiography*.

worlds, but, in fact, it is Barthes who is more of a ‘lonely girl phenomenologist’ than any of them. As Diana Knight points out, one of the most cited figures in *A Lover’s Discourse* is Jan van Ruysbroek, a Flemish mystic who, she writes, is responsible for Barthes’ conflation of *agape* and *eros* in the book.¹⁰⁸ That conflation, though, is actually part of what makes Barthes’ notion of love recuperable for the poets who read him: in Carson’s *Eros*, Levy’s *Suburbs*, and Gunnars’ *Carnival*, love is deformed by its examination, being run through historical and cosmic extremes that serve as a ‘carnavalesque’ funhouse mirror. Yet Barthes habitates these wild ideas into his inner life and uses them to help categorise and understand feelings.

The ‘girlishness’ of this mode comes from exclusion, just like Proust and Barthes’ ‘boyishness’. They are excluded in their childhood, a marginalisation which stays with them throughout their lives. Carol Mavor, in her book *Reading Boyishly*, advances a theory of the ‘boyishness’ of writers such as Proust and Barthes, which she defines in part by placing it alongside girlish reading. For her, she writes, girlish reading was ‘a place to play “out” those girl-things disavowed by the culture that I call home’.¹⁰⁹ The ‘boyish’ reading ‘is to embrace effeminophobia [and] articulate the effeminizing relation between a boy and his mother’.¹¹⁰ It is a relation which, when it holds on to childhood, continues to ‘plot for kisses’ even when the boy is too old, ‘childishly holding on to what adulthood insists we put away’; Barthes’ search for the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*, Mavor argues, is a kind of ‘plotting for kisses’.¹¹¹ We could extrapolate from this a ‘lonely boy phenomenology’ too, a kind of

¹⁰⁸ Knight, *Barthes and Utopia*, p. 255.

¹⁰⁹ Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 28.

¹¹⁰ Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, p. 30.

¹¹¹ Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, pp. 371-2.

Proustian-Barthesian theory, the subject of whose investigations are directed by affections and obsessions one is ‘childishly’ unwilling to relinquish (*Camera Lucida* and *A Lover’s Discourse* would be founding texts). In Kraus, meanwhile, a ‘lonely girl’ is placed on the margins of her own intellectual world, and she uses theory inappropriately, applying it to her life of ‘girlish things disavowed’ and turning her life into theory. She is the theorising exotic dancer (‘I was investigating the rift between thought and sex [...] letting lawyers smell my pussy while I talked’¹¹²), or theory derived from tears: ‘girlish’ experiences disavowed by the culture – no matter who they happen to, making the experiences of the lover in *A Lover’s Discourse* ‘girlish’ too. Just as Barthes in that text shows how theory and emotion interact, Levy, in her myth of the angel, brings a theoretical ideal or illustration to earth. Gunnars refuses to render her life as a story, insisting on a ground zero, but this in itself is a ‘lonely’ theoretical act, a defiant misapplication of Barthes’ idea. Forrest-Thomson opens her ‘After Intelligibility’, her early, solitary struggle with bringing Barthes into the British context of a New Critical, post-Wittgenstein Cambridge, with that quotation from Merleau-Ponty: ‘Man is condemned to sense.’¹¹³ Yet that condemnation is felt even more keenly by the writers I have discussed in this chapter, who feel they cannot escape sense by dissociating words the way the language writers do. Bruce Boone argues that under the sign of Barthes language writing questioned history, but it is also under that sign that Gunnars chooses to reject history for another reason: because the anti-historicism of degree zero correctly described her feelings of love and grief. Poststructuralist ‘play’ peeks through gaps in traditional order in Levy’s suburbs, and the prohibition it erases is

¹¹² Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 174.

¹¹³ Quoted in Forrest-Thomson, ‘AI’, p. 1.

what is finally her subject. Likewise, Carson, with *Eros* and with Geryon, searches with Barthes for the *lapsi* of love. Things are darkest underneath the lamp, when the totalising demand for 'man' to make sense of the world is met only with an *unwritability* quite different from the writerly, language-centred 'horizontal' we saw before. Under the 'sunlamp' of desire, we 'enter into the night of non-meaning; desire continues to vibrate (the darkness is transluminous), but there is nothing I want to grasp' (*LD*, p. 171).

Conclusion: Nothing Better Than A Theory

Oh, theory

Yes

There is nothing better

Than a theory

[...]

An unrealizable theory

Has just been realized

I am happier than I thought I was going to be when we started

– Carla Harryman,

‘There Is Nothing Better Than A Theory’¹

‘Oh, theory’, writes Carla Harryman in a 1984 verse-play, a line to be read perhaps offhandedly, perhaps exasperatedly, perhaps affectionately: ‘Oh, theory’, in the same tones as ‘Oh, you.’ For those who engage with the humanities, ‘theory’ is at the same

¹ Carla Harryman, *Animal Instincts: Prose, Plays, Essays* (San Francisco: This Press, 1989), pp. 94-5, 101.

time strange and familiar, difficult and *passé*. So her ironic statement that ‘[t]here is nothing better / [t]han a theory’ exposes both the ideal that theory is supposed to solve problems and the practical upshot that it never does. Barthes’ writings are full of theories which can never be realised, but that fact is what makes them useful to writers and to active, writerly readers. ‘The theory of the Text’, Barthes’ ‘From Work to Text’ concludes, ‘can coincide only with the practice of writing’ (*IMT*, p. 164). The theory that is not theory *of* anything, but just Theory, is the only kind of theory that has no practical application, but just goes on to make more of itself. This is only true for a given value of ‘practical’, however; as we have seen, ‘the practice of writing’ with and after Barthes transformed the way we think about authorship, readership, and our relationship to a text between 1970 and 1990.

Engagements with Barthes are specific to a given time and place. For Forrest-Thomson, the mid-to-late Barthes goes too far, but we will never know what Forrest-Thomson thought of the very late Barthes, contritely returning to the ‘opposite view’ from the greatest extremes of structuralism, as it was about to become post-structuralism. For Silliman in 1975, the early Barthes of *Writing Degree Zero* provides a few key ideas which are extracted to form a system which in fact has very little to do with what Barthes was developing at the time. Some of the language writers and similar avant-garde thinkers tried to move closer to the text of Barthes, but they likewise found he conflicted with their ideas: his focus on the novel was old-fashioned, and surely poetry was what offered true textual freedom and bliss? But Barthes’ focus on the novel may have helped him to appeal to authors of poetry *and* novels, or genre-crossing poet-novelists, like Carson, Levy, and Gunnars, as it is the *novelistic*, not the novel itself, that forms the basis of the writerly text (*S/Z*, p. 5). When ‘Nature’ in a mode of writing has been questioned to the point that only styles remain (*WDZ*, p. 51-2), the novel is replaced by the novelistic, as the later fugitive

texts seek it out, while the Barthes who was writing them began to contemplate writing a novel. ‘It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel’ (*RB*, p. 1): the novel itself was to remain absent, but he wants us to produce the novelistic as we read his texts.

Today, Barthes still occasionally appears in novels and poems, although in the most prominent engagements he tends to be on the order of subject matter rather than poetics. In France, his place in the pantheon of theory keeps him in the cultural lexicon; Laurent Binet’s 2015 comic novel *La septième fonction du langage* places him at the centre of an elaborate literary conspiracy.² In English, he has not (yet) inspired that level of attention, but his theory does feature majorly in Jeffrey Eugenides’ 2012 novel *The Marriage Plot*, in which *A Lover’s Discourse* shapes the relationships and character development of a student at Brown University in the 1980s, and Christina Pugh’s 2013 poetry collection *The Grain of the Voice*, a series of lyric meditations on the meaning and forms of sound.³ Neither work is very formally experimental, relying on well-established modes, although with variations connected to that use of Barthes. Eugenides’ novel may hint at metafiction with its highly genre-conscious characters (hence their fondness for Barthes), but ultimately it assumes the forms of the campus novel and love story. Meanwhile, Pugh’s poems share none of the high experimentalism of language writing, although in the middle section of the book, each poem comes with a small ‘verso’ twin overleaf, analogous to thought and sound in the Saussurean speech sign. Saussure is one epigraph to the

² Binet, *La septième fonction du langage: roman* (Paris: Grasset, 2015).

³ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Pugh, *Grains of the Voice: Poems* (Evanston: TriQuarterly, 2013).

section, and the other is Barthes asking whether he is alone in hearing ‘voices within the voice’ (*IMT*, p. 184); each ‘verso’ poem considers an aspect, often vocalic, of the poem on the recto. for instance, there is the poem between ‘Mountain Time’ and ‘Lilac Garden’: ‘vowels the Greeks mouthed / before the quiet / stamp of print’.⁴ As we saw in the discussion of *Eros the Bittersweet* in Chapter 4, Barthes writes about the great ‘favour’ the Greeks did for writing by inventing the vowel when they were adapting the Phoenician abjad, which uses only consonants; the Greeks ‘fantasised about’ turning their voices into writing.⁵ This same fantasy of the voice is the one in which Pugh participates through Barthes, and the ‘verso’ poems are vocalic fables, but not experiments in the borders of the possibility of voice. Barthes does not demand this. Indeed, much of Barthes’ ‘The Grain of the Voice’ and *The Pleasure of the Text* are largely about finding these qualities within works we already experience, not creating new ones to put them across. This subtler and more artistically conservative side of Barthes received little attention in the ‘poetry wars’ of the seventies and eighties, when the only people who took him up as a flag were those, like the language writers, who were arguing for radical experimentation, and now that he is a known quantity, it is safe for others to adopt him.

As such, the critic or theorist from almost any area of the humanities can be expected to call up a bit of Barthes when needed, and poetry studies is no exception. Despite his early interest in the *nouveau roman*, Barthes eventually turned his back on experimental writing, which has done little to diminish the popularity of his work with poetry critics. The problem has rather been a superficiality in the way they use Barthes to read such texts. Jonathan Monroe has described Harryette Mullen’s poem

⁴ Pugh, p. 36.

⁵ Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte précédé de Variations sur l’écriture*, p. 78.

sequences *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* as a cross between Barthes' *Mythologies* and Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and by combining Barthes and Stein, Monroe thinks to work Mullen into both traditions: radical modernist writing, and postmodern, theory-inflected critique.⁶ However, this ignores the complexity of the relationship between Mullen and Stein, which is outlined in detail by Deborah Mix: Mullen's texts, in their 'inclusion of race in the welter of discourses of femininity and sexuality', engage in a complex project of 'redecorating' modernist history, which has 'trimmed away' Stein from the history of high modernism and of racism.⁷ Monroe's citation of Barthes here is equally superficial, and for similar reasons; although *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* target those sites in domestic life where contemporary culture is transformed 'into universal nature', the *Mythologies* have a specific place in history.⁸ Barthes writes about bourgeois foibles as a materially comfortable, educated white French man in Paris, but Mullen writes about domestic life, whose representation in culture is dominated by white women, as a woman of colour. Michel Delville shares Monroe's reading of Mullen, but also quotes a later and more obviously structuralist, scientific text, 1961's 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', where Barthes calls food 'a system of communication, a body of systems, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior'.⁹ Delville chooses the quotation from this essay carefully: this description could be applied equally to *S*PeRM**K*T*, or indeed to *Trimmings* on fashion. Both Barthes and Mullen

⁶ Monroe, 'Syntextural Investigations', *Diacritics* 26;3-4 (1996), 126-141 (p. 137).

⁷ Mix, *A Vocabulary of Thinking*, pp. 45, 46.

⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 7.

⁹ Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 20-7 (p. 22), quoted in Delville, *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption*, p. 58.

confront the way essentials of life, food and clothing, are turned into complex social systems, but while Barthes stands at a remove from it, Mullen's texts investigate the intersections of the 'body of systems' with the marginalised bodies of women of colour. Like Mullen's later work *Muse & Drudge*, *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* use wordplay to explore ideas that are not discussed directly: 'the pun's referential excess becomes the ideal tool for such sensitive acts of representation'.¹⁰ In *Muse & Drudge*, the pun is used to deal with the memory of slavery, but in the earlier two books, it has a similar function when describing the lived experience of women. Take the last line of *Trimmings*: 'A veiled, unavailable body makes an available space.'¹¹ The closeness of 'veil' and 'available' helps put forward the point about how women's bodies function as discursive spaces for discourses of which they are not the authors. We could advance a deeply Barthes-informed reading of this which might draw upon discourses of authorship, as suggested by Mullen's engagement with the category of the 'writerly' and the discourse of race in her 1996 article 'Poetry and Identity'.¹² However, we cannot rely on Barthes to outline everything necessary for inquiry: instead, we ought to let him outline the terrain, the 'body of systems', and then invest it with our own concerns. In this way, reading through her engagement with Barthes might precipitate an intersectional reading of Mullen's project as a whole and how ongoing poetic work is refining problems with the application of Barthes, such as those discussed in Chapter 3 with the reading of 'Code Words'. As this shows, the idea that a text or strategy is 'Barthesian' often

¹⁰ Mitchum Muehls, 'Spun Puns (and Anagrams): Exchange Economies, Subjectivity, and History in Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*', *Contemporary Literature* 44;1 (Spring 2003), 19-46 (p. 30).

¹¹ Mullen, *Recyclopedica: Trimmings, S*PeRM**K*T, and Muse & Drudge* (San Francisco: Graywolf Press, 2006), p. 62.

¹² Mullen, 'Poetry and Identity', in *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetries of the 1990s*, ed. by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 27-32 (p. 29).

functions to sideline a poem's experimental qualities and transformative potential, explaining them away with a vague sense of *jouissance* instead of investigating what creates it. Virtually every book on contemporary innovative poetry in English includes an entry for 'Barthes, Roland' in its index; usually, however, this directs us to a single footnote referencing 'The Death of the Author' or the readerly/writerly distinction from *S/Z*. Anglophone literary studies learned a vague lesson from Barthes at some point and remembers enough to pay lip service to it, but engagement with and critique of Barthes must not end there.

As recent scholarship has emphasised, Barthes himself did not much care for poetry.¹³ In her 2015 biography, Tiphaine Samoyault quotes a fragment from Barthes' unpublished papers where he describes himself as a gourmand of the word but prefers to indulge indirectly with 'gourmand prose', or a 'prosaic poetry' like that of Baudelaire.¹⁴ This implies that other poetry is a more 'direct' consumption and sensuous enjoyment of language. This could be true of flowery sonnets or Romantic idylls, but it might equally be said of poems like Andrews' and Hejinian's, where the existing connections of language are laid bare. Barthes never returns to the terrain of 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', despite having acknowledged its radical potential; the concluding view is that the avant-garde poet 'turns his back on society' (*WDZ*, p. 52). Barthes has no stomach for linguistic innovation as avant-garde poets conceive of it, nor does he share their conviction that such rejection of the relationship

¹³ See, for instance, Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Hatred of Poetry: Barthes and Bataille', *Barthes Studies 2* (forthcoming November 2016). This special issue, edited by me and based on the 'Barthes and Poetry' conference at Leeds University in March 2015, will bring together the most recent work on Barthes and poetry.

¹⁴ Samoyault, *Barthes*, p. 581.

between language and the social is transformative for either, or that this transformation is desirable.

The relationship between Barthes and poetry, then, is always going to be awkward and lopsided. He does not offer poetry the generous, teacherly depth he offers the novel in the *Sarrasine de Balzac* seminars and then *S/Z*. As a poetry critic, he is more like the most withholding image of the lover in *A Lover's Discourse*, the one who seems not to be listening (*LD*, pp. 167-8). Kraus' 'fictive criticism' is so relevant here because, like the kind of reading Barthes describes himself doing in *Sollers Writer*, it is affective: we relate to criticism emotionally, experientially, and affectionately. The New Criticism rejected this idea as the 'affective fallacy', but the overlapping 'lonely girl' and 'lonely boy' critical modes suggest a range of affective modes of response to literature and theory. Indeed, they allow for the idea of reading and responding to theory in the way we respond to literature. This has something to say to the idea of 'low theory' expounded by thinkers like McKenzie Wark and Jack Halberstam, a way of thinking that innovates critically by examining subjects and structures that are not usually the grounds of this kind of reflection.¹⁵ Barthes might not seem a natural fit here, as his chief interests lie with canonical authors: Racine, Balzac, Proust, and the many citations in *A Lover's Discourse*. However, the sections of *Roland Barthes* on his own likes and dislikes, can be read as works of proto-low theory, using insignificant personal detail to speak to a 'high' concern: the understanding that 'my body is not the same as yours' (*RB*, p. 117). Even Proust is a kind of low theoretician: theory is dismissed as 'indelicate' or tacky because his

¹⁵ Halberstam: 'Low theory tries to locate all of the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop'. As Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2. Wark: 'Low theory is born of boredom [...] a spirited invention of new forms within the space of everyday life'. *The Beach beneath the Street: The Life and Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 143.

project is interested in experiences rather than explanations, the gift rather than the price tag. The feeling is mutual: Proust focusses on affect, which ‘high’ theory finds tacky. If writers want to think critically about their practice without abandoning affect, Barthes can provide strategies to mediate between these modes.

What we find by 1990 that Forrest-Thomson did not have in 1970 is a sense of the shape of Barthes’ *oeuvre*. Poets respond differently when they feel they know who Barthes is and what he cares about, but this also involves ignoring the large part of a fragmentary, contradictory, and contrary body of work. It is the nature of the text we know as ‘Barthes’ that it should change, with the appearance of new publications and new critical appraisals linking tendencies in different ways. A recent major addition has been the Collège de France lecture courses, now all available in published English translations; they may provide the next stage of poetry’s engagement with Barthes. Perhaps it is to be found in *How to Live Together* (despite the ‘novelistic’ in its subtitle), in its attention to the social role of speech and syntax have in avant-garde work after language writing.¹⁶ Likewise, experimental poetry has long been a repository of the paradoxical desire for the ‘unmarketable’ that characterises *The Neutral* – study of ‘the neutral’ as a thread running through Barthes’ entire career is becoming more prominent in Barthes scholarship, a trend likely to continue and permeate into the broader intellectual consciousness.¹⁷ Most unlikely of all, given its title, *The Preparation of the Novel* draws on the haiku, and

¹⁶ Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 160.

¹⁷ Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 13. See, for instance, ‘Neutral Life’, a special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*, forthcoming 2016.

works towards a theory of how it represents while being at the same time ‘anti-interpretative’.¹⁸ Any of these texts could serve as the catalyst for innovative new developments in poetry and poetics, but it would be a mistake to expect to find something ‘about’ poetry waiting in Barthes. What poets and readers of poetry have to do is coproduce the ‘Barthes on poetry’ we want.

¹⁸ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 78.

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