

## Repeatable Evanescence

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So I was trudging on the elliptical trainer at my gym, listening to a mix-tape of New Orleans classics, when out of Labelle's 'Lady Marmalade' a line estranged itself, whirled out and struck my ear as a line of lyric poetry, unmistakably so if a little too mellifluous: 'May the saddest beast inside roar into the crowd'. As I suspected, this was a case of so-called mondegreen, of creative mishearing, since the line in the song's published lyric is 'Made the savage beast inside roar until it cried'.<sup>1</sup>

What is the nature of the line, 'May the saddest beast inside roar into the crowd', a line not sung but misheard in a popular song? It is no piece of text, or

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<sup>1</sup> The lyric by Patti Labelle can readily be discovered on-line, for instance at <http://www.lyricstime.com/patti-labelle-lady-marmalade-lyrics.html>.

I am grateful to members of the Poetry and Poetics graduate seminar at the University of Chicago, where a first draft of this paper was discussed in May 2012. Lauren Berlant, Beth Helsing, Josh Scodell and Richard Strier were welcome additions to the core membership. My thanks to Beth Helsing for telling me about puritan headstones. I also benefitted from individual communications from Yoo Chung, Joel Duncan, Judith Goldman, Michael Hansen, Richard Strier, Neil Reeve and Chalcey Wilding. Thanks to Stephanie Anderson and Chalcey Wilding for organising the seminar. The paper was commissioned as a Plenary Lecture for 'The Shape of Song Conference: A Conference on Lyric Poetry' at the Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, July 7th-8th 2012. My thanks to Ryan Dobran and his committee for the invitation.

not until I transcribed my mishearing. With its adventitious production an event was recognised, an event long-prepared. The force of its iambics and its strong caesura had gathered through the extended history of English poetry; and the intensity of Patti Labelle's vocal performance intersecting with my body's rhythmic trudging, launched this event. A poem is being written: am I with the saddest beast or with the crowd? Surely with neither and both; I am composed in the exchange and as soon dissolved. A line of a possible poem leans forward into life—it anticipates a fulfilment (or its negative) through its subjunctive form. Its promise does not need to be fulfilled, the saddest lion may stay mangy and torpid; for unacknowledged legislation of the poetic kind works through rhythm's bounds colliding and stirring eddies in time. Rhythm must both bind and unbind, since rhythm that is binding withdraws into its object and in its conclusiveness leaves its object powerless to influence futurity. If a poem were to start with the misheard line, develop a narrative of the crowd withering in the blast of the poet's arraignment, then assert that the crowd had indeed been troubled, while held to a rhythmic force comparable to 'Lady Marmalade', a fixation would be completed in four ways, first by referring to evidence outside the poem, second by its rhetoric tying together, third through its rhythmic completion, and fourth through the reader's regard for a finished poem—an object of admiration.

What is amiss with admiration? Admiring an object may evoke the mental/corporeal, organic/inorganic and subject/object divisions characteristic of Cartesian thinking, but it was Petrarch who wrote the book for admiring poets. Deeply felt by Petrarch, the problem lies in the risk of petrification. The central exhibit here is Petrarch's Poem 51, 'Poco era ad appressarsi agli occhi miei'. In a bravura reading of this poem and of its modern critical reception, Martina Lauster comments that 'the durability and fixity afforded by sculpted stone are not necessarily an achievement in poetry.'<sup>2</sup> The second half of the poem, in prose translation, reads:

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<sup>2</sup> Martina Lauster, 'Stone Imagery and the Sonnet Form: Petrarch, Michelangelo, Baudelaire, Rilke', *Comparative Literature*, 45.2 (1993), 146-174 (p. 150).

I would be today whatever stone is hardest to cut,  
either diamond, or fair marble white for fear perhaps, or a crystal later prized by  
the greedy and ignorant mob;  
and I would be free of my heavy, harsh yoke, because of which I envy that tired  
old man who with his shoulders makes a shade for Morocco.<sup>3</sup>

Lauster's reading concludes that the 'human burden of unfulfilled love is replaced by the gigantic task of petrification, of annihilating life in form.' Atlas, 'that tired old man', is a byword for endurance, so Petrarch's envy is rendered exorbitant; the shade Atlas casts foreshadows a later history of the sonnet, where the fate of annihilation in form is made more explicit.<sup>4</sup> In a chain of substitutions, the Medusa haunting Petrarch's poems and threatening to turn him to stone is herself petrified within the poem that casts a Medusa stare on the reader. There are dangers in mirroring, in admiration, summoned also in allusions to Narcissus. To admire a poem as an object reduces its energy, situating reader and poem in a space already symbolic, rather than engaging them in creating meaning. Positions become frozen—and in this respect, a lover admiring a woman can be as disobliging to both parties as a reader admiring a poem. Successful lyric poetry performs a binding and unbinding; the poem and its reader engage in the event as comprising, however briefly, however tentatively, both a unifying and a freeing. Should binding be perceived as excessive, in what might be called a fixation, no event can unfold—no subsequent position is available from which an event can be perceived. If, on the contrary, the unbound character of the poem is such that hope is lost of any binding, however deferred, nothing eventuates. Lyric fails if

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<sup>3</sup> *Petrarch's Lyric Poems. The rime sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Lauster, p. 150. Lauster has an agenda, which is to reject as anachronistic an influential account of Petrarch's poetics as 'autoreflexive', leading her to resist the chain of substitutions that ends in the sonnet as stone casket. She considers Baudelaire to be the originator of the 'autoreflexive' sonnet. This push-back must account for her otherwise baffling omission of Shakespeare from a fine set of readings – see my discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnet 17 below.

incoherent, but fails also if bound into object inertia.<sup>5</sup> Robert Kaufman's question re-echoes: 'How—with language alone as medium—to build a solid, convincing artistic structure out of something as evanescent as subjective song and how, in the bargain, to delineate or objectivate the impressively fluid contents of capitalist modernity? How, spontaneously yet rigorously, to make thought sing and to make song think?'<sup>6</sup>

The Labelle mishearing was a lyric catch. You cannot step twice into the same river, neither can a river receive the same you twice, but the conditions for this event were so adventitious that the song could never repeat the effect. What a lyric poet seeks to contrive is repeatable evanescence, exemplified in the elegy and anti-elegy which is Frank O'Hara's 'The Day Lady Died' – a restorative performing of song and life as evanescent, a repeatable lyric event supervenient on a printed poem.<sup>7</sup> This lyric event entails the binding of particulars into the course of self, for O'Hara makes himself up in the course of the poem and the poem makes the reader up too; then the self configured by what it loves suffers an almost imperceptible dissolve into a work of art and death, Billie Holliday's, Frank O'Hara's, mine and yours. O'Hara's poem has the paradoxical effect of reconciling a reader to contingency, to the evanescent, *time and again*. To make an event recur, not as a memorial of a moment past, a song dying, a day fading, a lover gone, but to recur in its particularity so a reader's subjectivity can be endued with quotidian details of 1950s Manhattan—this is a great lyric achievement. The technical panoply of rhythm, rhyme, assonance, consonance and so forth, generates reliably

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<sup>5</sup> This account depends on Freud: '[We] have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, *Eros* and *the destructive instinct*.... The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus, in short, to bind together; the aim of the second is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things'. Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940a) [1938], *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XXIII, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kaufman, 'Sociopolitical (i.e., *Romantic*) Difficulty in Modern Poetry and Poetics', *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (July 2003), <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/poetics/kaufman/kaufman.html>> [accessed 28 September 2014].

<sup>7</sup> Frank O'Hara, 'The Day Lady Died' in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 325. The poem is much anthologised.

the kind of experience that engrossed me in the gym; and yet prediction dissolves in the poem's re-reading, time and again.

The misheard line is where this paper starts, then touching on pieces of poetry setting their course through time and stone, lyric experience and objectification: a song by Robert Herrick, a sonnet by Shakespeare, a stanza of poetry by John Berryman, poems by Baudelaire and Frank O'Hara, and a carved stone text designed and sited by Ian Hamilton Finlay.

Through a slight lyric, death can become optional. Here is Robert Herrick's 'To Daisies, not to shut so soone':

Shut not so soon; the dull-ey'd night  
Ha's not as yet begunne  
To make a seisure on the light,  
Or to seale up the Sun.

No Marigolds yet closed are;  
No shadowes great appeare;  
Nor doth the early Shepheards Starre  
Shine like a spangle here.

Stay but till my *Julia* close  
Her life-begetting eye;  
And let the whole world then dispose  
It selfe to live or dye.<sup>8</sup>

Night figures as a bailiff approaching the house of light in this beautiful nocturne. Resistance to the watchman or bailiff entails resistance to the division between sentient and non-sentient beings, imbuing flowers, stars and shadows with a restorative animation. The poem resists the categorical line between night and day, death and life. Such a delicate detail as the stress on 'up' in the fourth line anticipates the sun's re-arising. From the titular daisies to *Julia* to *I* to the whole world *It selfe*, all things live or die as they dispose themselves. The diurnal petal

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Herrick, *Hesperides: or, The works both humane and divine of Robert Herrick, Volume 1* (London: William Pickering, 1846), p. 220. There exists no modern critical edition of Herrick's poems, although a two-volume annotated edition is in preparation with Oxford University Press.

closure of daisies and marigolds is hardly a matter of choice any more than human sleep or death's last curfew. Flowers and humans share this fate, but as flowers fold and Julia falls asleep, shadows and stars appear, to the bailiff's confounding. Julia's eye may be life-begetting like the sun, but when Julia's eyes seal up the Shepherd's Star shines, shedding a lesser light, like the poet's eye as he watches his Julia. It would be more than two hundred years after Herrick's death that the Shepherd's Star, Capella, was discovered to be a dyad, and later still before its companion star was described. This further enriches the lyric event supervening on this poem's text, spiralling between night and light, eye and die. Not to neglect the category-crossing rhyme of 'Life-begetting eye' and 'dye', bearing a promise of sexual contentment.

But a poem, as it contrives to make a complex event repeatable, may succumb to seizure and turn into a memorial. Poets struggle against this tendency of the material as they work to capture what capture will destroy. Shakespeare's Sonnet 17 embodies this fate of a poem to petrify its contents and itself petrify in a reader's eyes—also in its author's eyes in being written. Reading this poem causes me to feel a collapse in its final couplet even as that anticipated flourish wraps it up. What might condition such an event, in the encounter rather than a subsequent teasing out? Did I respond to the poem's demeanour, its rhythmic temporality, falling into step then stumbling? Demeanour can be treacherous, compromising experience by obtruding a swiftly-apprehended, mesmerising unity. This peril is addressed by Sonnet 17 directly: the sonnet may objectify as a casket, the endpoint of human rhythm, the end of its negotiation between a Petrarchan love of the beautiful object—risking both the object's petrification and its Medusa stare—and the quick-blooded love of a living creature.

The philosopher Isabelle Stengers writes: 'at every step artists know they are exposed to the risk of betrayal, particularly when, through laziness, ease, impatience, or fear, they believe they can decide on the path, instead of capturing, step by step, the question posed to them at that step'.<sup>9</sup> Surely she demands here a private experience, approaching art as a spiritual exercise. When talking of lyric it

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<sup>9</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. by Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 216.

seems inadequate to reduce the genre to a drama of the self exposed to the risk of self-betrayal. Lyric poetry then shrinks to a dance of the split self about its caesura. That's one reason to begin with Shakespeare and a conventional, a social poetic practice. For it is not only yourself who can be betrayed in a work of art. Stengers' compelling discourse disregards the sociality of lyric performance: far from facing questions, listeners may be caught up in a collective affirmation through rhythm, whether or not in others' company—in 'The Defence of Poetry' Shelley identifies the origins of poetic experience in 'social sympathies'.<sup>10</sup> Even recital can become a temporal site whose structure is linked, step-by-step, to an audience, and through rhythm to wider social sympathies, past and future. A poem calling restlessly to its own dissolution can become an anthology piece, only to be unsettled again in the particular time and place of its performance. Shelley's rhythmic sociality has been linked to such individual performance by Henri Meschonnic, restating in his different terms the binding-unbinding structure of an event:

For rhythm is a subject-form(er). The subject-form(er). That it renews the meaning of things, that it is through rhythm that we reach the sense that we have of our being undone [*défaire*], that everything around us happens as it undoes itself [*défaire*], and that, approaching this sensation of the movement of everything, we ourselves are part of this movement.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 'The social sympathies, or those laws from which, as from its elements, society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist; the future is contained within the present, as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social; and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind'. Shelley opens his subsequent paragraph: 'In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order, in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects'. P.B. Shelley, 'The Defence of Poetry' (written 1821), in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, ed. by Mary Shelley, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840), II, pp. 26-62 (pp. 26-27). So rhythm starts from coexistence in this Edenic fable and fosters social order, including those virtues Shelley names.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Meschonnic, 'The Rhythm Party Manifesto', trans. by David Nowell Smith, *Thinking Verse*, 1 (2011), 161-173 (p. 165).

Rhythm is indeed ‘a subject-form(er)’ since as Mutlu Konuk Blasing notes, ‘[l]earning language depends on a rhythmic training that precedes and enables meaningful speech. The stage of babbling, where the infant can produce the phonemes of all possible languages, entails recognizing aural sensations and reproducing them orally’.<sup>12</sup> For Meschonnic as for Blasing rhythm subtends linguistic embodiment; he attributes to rhythm a quickening and thickening of the real, such that subjectivity starts to pulse within all that is concrescent and prepares for the event of its emergence. Rhythm gives birth to new forms out of people conjoined with it historically and also people disposed to respond to it in the future—to child in this way is to believe that a poem will have been read by those longing for its rhythm.

So even where lyric art foregrounds individual risk, any step-by-step movement catching the reader in its concatenation must have been prepared for, although unrecognised until a beat later, *in* the event, or through longer retrospection. Here ‘step-by-step’ evokes the turnings of poetic line. In present-day prosodic theory, recognising the work lyric can mean attending to line-breaks as though searching for handholds in a rock-face. Such searching counts among the phenomenal data brought into relation when reading a short lyric poem. Formal unity can be held in abeyance during an encounter which joins a poem’s demeanour, keeping edges in view, step-by-step. Through demeanour the object of attachment moves with you. Sonnet 17 lends itself to such rhyming, rupture and resumption, and rhythm, since the binding and unbinding I remarked in the misheard line from ‘Lady Marmalade’ are here situated prominently in line ending and not-ending. When reading step-by-step, Shakespeare’s rhyming of ‘time’ and ‘rhyme’ in his final couplet illustrates the contradictory workings of prosody, this rhyme of rhymes binding and unbinding in one gesture.

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Who will believe my verse in time to come,  
If it were filled with your most high deserts?

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<sup>12</sup> Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry. The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 53.

Though yet, heaven knows, it is but as a tomb,  
Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts:  
If I could write the beauty of your eyes,  
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,  
The age to come would say, 'This poet lies;  
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.'  
So should my papers (yellowed with their age)  
Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,  
And your true rights be termed a poet's rage,  
And stretched metre of an antique song;  
But were some child of yours alive that time,  
You should live twice: in it, and in my rhyme.<sup>13</sup>

'Who will believe my verse in time to come', opens a temporal horizon beyond the time of reading while putting in doubt the event that opens such a horizon. We might believe this verse in our present, but a gap opens between present and future readings. In time the poem may become discredited. Contrariwise, the poem might discredit the future—and as it emerges in the poem, the future may lack the conditions needed to make the poem credible. The performative drama of this poem brings temporalities into alignment—the poem's enduring, its subject's present being, its subject's perpetuation, the moment of a reader's recognising a sonnet and knowing its sonic shape, the sonnet read as contemporaneous with its writing, the sonnet read in a conditional future which is ours in 'time to come'. The poet knows that readers know that belief in this poem is not contingent on testing its truth-claims against a pattern in the admired lover; its temporalities can be brought into alignment, bound together through poetic devices calling attention to their own performance.

The rhyming of 'time' and 'rhyme' might sound like a fixational clincher. Whilst 'my verse in time to come' threatened to entomb, 'tomb' is not a resolving rhyme for 'time to come'. The sonnet is Shakespeare's child ('it') and also *your* child (the beloved's), the lover is its true begetter, and the sonnet as a whole must rhyme with the lover's visible pattern of beauty (outside the poem in the present, and reproduced in time to come). But the lover remains elusive since to rhyme 'rhyme'

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<sup>13</sup> *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2010), pp. 144-145.

with 'time' is tautological. Here you are, lover, in time to come, back where you started in a not very tomb-like tomb—indeed at the end you *live* 'in my rhyme', breathing even when immured. But you can never live in my verse because the condition for that is your living outside it, in a child reproducing your pattern. The time to come, 'that time', is the horizon this sonnet promises to extend, while snapping back into alignment, supplementary to the child.

Formally a Shakespearian sonnet seems to desire fixation: 'it is but as a tomb', this poem, if 'filled with your most high deserts', and its prescribed form always risks sepulture.<sup>14</sup> Your parts, or some of them, might make this tomb ornate, but its outline will be made all too secure. A reading may work between step-by-step line-endings and formal unity, but line-endings are not enough; there must be more to life than enjambement. An analytical language fixated on edges and the contradiction mobilised by enjambement can lead to a feeling of always crashing in the same car. Reading a lyric poem must stay open to its eventuation, a rhythmic coming together that includes the reader's contingent subjectivity. Sonnet 17 can be a fascinating thing freezing its reader in admiration; or the text for an experience of repeated capture and loss; or an event felt as social, supervening on a lyric poem liable to objectify despite the weak rhyme of 'time to come' and 'tomb'. Thus all of these at once.

A stronger reading of the relationship between casket and death, and lyric and life, may emerge if the dissonant rhyme of 'tomb' and 'rhyme' is heard semantically. Rhyme then becomes a temporal edge, an aspect of the body's demeanour as it moves forward in time, anything but forgetfully; and rhyme's doubling becomes the sonnet's triumph—it does not merely represent but it child, a childing which will reveal the pattern of its parenthood. Rhyme accomplishes the state of what will have been. 'If I could write' anticipates 'your true rights' which will have re-written the incredible number of your graces, and will have unbound a binding which threatens to petrify the heart of the poem—"in fresh numbers number' and 'touches ne'er touched'. Such creeping petrification is

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<sup>14</sup> Duncan-Jones notes regarding "filled": "Q's 'fild' has been modernized as *filled*, but the possibility of a play on 'filed', = polished, rhetorically refined, cannot be excluded [...]" *Shakespeare's Sonnets* p. 144, n. 2.

not unusual in the Sonnets; for instance, Sonnet 43 has ‘whose shadow shadows’ (l.5) and ‘shadow’s form form happy show’ (l.6), and offers another kind of release in its final line, into the mobility of a dream visitation.<sup>15</sup> More optimistically Sonnet 17 anticipates it will have childed its reader, through its rhythmic call conceiving an embodiment in a chorus which neither dissolves like a mishearing nor petrifies into a tomb.<sup>16</sup> That is, the last couplet accepts and celebrates the condition of this sonnet extending the ‘stretched metre of an antique song’.<sup>17</sup> ‘No subject can easily be conceived as extinguished’ writes Denise Riley. ‘Language doesn’t want to allow that thought; its trajectory is always to lean forward into life, to push it along, to propel the dead onward among the living’.<sup>18</sup>

Petrification stills time and makes a poem a material entity rather than a temporal performance. The contents of a casket may however continue to be heard out and propelled among the living through the attention of future readers and speakers; in this prospect the immured being never dies. Shakespeare brings forward an assertive corollary to Sonnet 17 in Sonnet 81:

Your monument shall be my gentle verse,  
Which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read,  
And tongues-to-be your being shall rehearse,  
When all the breathers of this world are dead.<sup>19</sup>

‘And tongues to be your being shall rehearse’ asserts the supervening of performance over a monument thereby made ‘gentle’, living because lines of verse rehearse (a verb which derives from harrowing, lineating the earth before seeding).

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<sup>15</sup> *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 466-467. Characteristically Burrow furnishes a comprehension exercise without comment on the doublings of ‘form’ and ‘shadow’.

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to my student Yoo Chung for insisting on a positive reading of the final couplet.

<sup>17</sup> Even if this reading is thought a stretch, Burrow’s contention that ‘the term [i.e. stretched] alludes to perceived metrical defects in earlier versification’ cannot clinch the matter. *Complete Sonnets and Poems* p. 415.

<sup>18</sup> Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions 2012), p. 56. Riley’s short book also contains on pp. 63-66 a wonderful reading of Emily Dickinson’s ‘I felt a cleaving in my mind’ with special regard to sound, sequence, and the poem’s temporality.

<sup>19</sup> The hyphenation of ‘tongues-to-be’ is Colin Burrow’s, in the interests of an unambiguous clarity that destroys the possibility that future tongues might be your continued being. Therefore read this without the hyphens. *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, p. 543.

A more iconoclastic alternative would demand a monument's destruction. The power exercised by Shelley's sonnet 'Ozymandias' stems from the interplay between object, eternity and the poem's opening to spatial rhythm. 'Round the decay | Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare | The lone and level sands stretch far away.'<sup>20</sup> The represented and petrified has been subjected to dismemberment, whose energy invests an undifferentiated eternity, 'lone and level', with a regular rhythmic pulse. The rhyming of 'away' with 'decay' adjusts 'away' to a musical decay, a resonant fade-out signifying an event that never ceases. So 'the lone and level sands stretch far away' produces an affirmative pulse by contrast with a decay which here is categorically inorganic. The poet's spatial and temporal distance from the decayed monument is no bar to its continuing half-life.<sup>21</sup>

Verse feeds on decay, wriggling through calcified memories and the emotions turning to bric-a-brac. In Baudelaire's 'Spleen II' 'vers' denotes at once poetic verse and earthworms, alike feeding in the charnel house of the poet's brain. But in the second part of 'Spleen II' even the energy of decay wanes. There remains nothing on which to feed; living matter becomes obdurate, a block of granite.

This block however is open to imaginative shaping, surrounded as it is by an overwhelming wave ('une vague épouvante') and seen indistinctly through fog in its desert place. The poem performs two parallel sequences of transfiguration, with emotions objectifying into a lumber room of useless memories in the first part, then entering a productive decay as a charnel house where verse can feed; while in the second part emptiness becomes boredom prefiguring the stupidity of immortality, striving for the absolute which converts living matter into a granite block rather than a miscellany of objectified emotions. Hereafter the obelisk, despite its installation in the Sahara, can also become a medium for representation, a work of art which sings even if remote and inaccessible.

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<sup>20</sup> Eds. M.H. Abram and Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 2, 7th edn. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), p. 726.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this last insight to Judith Goldman, as well as many other helpful observations.

Spleen II (*Les Fleurs du Mal* LXXVI)<sup>22</sup>

J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans.

Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,  
De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,  
Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances,  
Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau.  
C'est une pyramide, un immense caveau,  
Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune.  
— Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune,  
Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers  
Qui s'acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers.  
Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées,  
Où gît tout un fouillis de modes surannées,  
Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher,  
Seuls, respirent l'odeur d'un flacon débouché.

Rien n'égale en longueur les boîteuses journées,  
Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années  
L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,  
Prend les proportions de l'immortalité.  
— Désormais tu n'es plus, ô matière vivante!  
Qu'un granit entouré d'une vague épouvante,  
Assoupi dans le fond d'un Sahara brumeux;  
Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux,  
Oublié sur la carte, et dont l'humeur farouche  
Ne chante qu'aux rayons du soleil qui se couche.

Edna St. Vincent Millay's brilliant translation of this poem coaxes forward a relationship with 'Ozymandias' through what is effectively an intertext—an intertext which in one direction visits on Baudelaire's sphinx a 'rude and sullen frown' more Shelleyan than Baudelairian, but in the other resonates with alexandrines ('Assumes the shape and size of immortality').<sup>23</sup> Millay is more

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ed. Jacques Crépet et Georges Blin, refondue par Georges Blin et Claude Pichois (Paris: Librairie José Corti 1968), pp. 143-144.

<sup>23</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay supplies an extensive introduction to the translation, discussing the metrical principles guiding the work jointly undertaken by her and George Dillon. The following paragraph summarises the ambition: 'Being thus handicapped from the outset in our enterprise of

expansive than Baudelaire, but her expansions are illuminating: ‘fruit de la morne incuriosité’ becomes “fruit of the mind’s inert, incurious tree” playing not only with an echo of *Paradise Lost* but also lodging the mind in the bracteate, physical brain. Her text, a distinguished poem in its own right, makes the echo of ‘Ozymandias’ in the final couplet’s sonic decay unmistakable, while linking Baudelaire to Shelley as poets of energetic decay:

The Sphinx

I swear to you that if I lived a thousand years  
I could not be more crammed with dubious souvenirs.

There’s no old chest of drawers bulging with deeds and bills,  
Love-letters, locks of hair, novels, bad verses, wills,  
That hides so many secrets as my wretched head; —  
It’s like a mausoleum, like a pyramid,  
Holding more heaped unpleasant bones than Potter’s Field;  
I am a graveyard hated by the moon; revealed  
Never by her blue light are those long worms that force  
Into my dearest dead their blunt snouts of remorse.  
— am an old boudoir, where roses dried and brown  
Have given their dusty odor to the faded gown,  
To the ridiculous hat, doubtless in other days  
So fine, among the wan pastels and pale Bouchers.

Time has gone lame, and limps; and under a thick pall  
Of snow the endless years efface and muffle all;  
Till boredom, fruit of the mind’s inert, incurious tree,  
Assumes the shape and size of immortality.

Henceforth, O living matter, you are nothing more  
Than the fixed heart of chaos, soft horror’s granite core,

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making English verse sound like French verse, being obliged to force English words into a metrical scheme where they had not so far been signally happy, we soon found that we often came closer to the effect we wanted by importing into the twelve-syllable line—wherever, due to certain unavoidably accented words, it seemed bumpy and unbalanced—one or two (infrequently three) extra syllables, still always keeping the line, however, a line of six feet’. George Dillon and Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Flowers of Evil. From the French of Charles Baudelaire* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), p. xx.

Than a forgotten Sphinx that in some desert stands,  
Drowsing beneath the heat, half-hidden by the sands,  
Unmarked on any map, — whose rude and sullen frown  
Lights up a moment only when the sun goes down.<sup>24</sup>

Entanglement in this poem endangers its reader, who may also light up ‘a moment only when the sun goes down’, as the poem closes. But this forgotten Sphinx is lit up time and again by a reader’s attentions and by release from her attentions—neglected, forgotten, mere words awaiting revival, a block of text. Millay’s translation weakens the transition in Baudelaire’s verses between the abstraction of a granite block, the dead form of the necessary shape of a universal, and its counterpart in the bric-a-brac of dead particulars. Nonetheless, through casting their attentive light the moon and the sun become parallel counterparts, reviving the dialectic of universal and particular and generating both the long worms of verse amidst memory’s stuff, and the manifestation of a Sphinx out of the mists or haze surrounding the obelisk.<sup>25</sup> This revival occurs in the event of the poem as the reader too disperses into the text and pulls back to survey it; as the reader is absorbed into its particularities and contemplates simultaneously its intrication with the greater unity and disparity of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

According to Alain Badiou, ‘[t]he poem presents itself as a thing of language, encountered—each and every time—as an event’.<sup>26</sup> But if the world unifies as an event about a subjectivity itself realised through this particular shaping by time-space, I must find a way to register the effect of these encounters on my subjectivity. The bathos I feel at the end of Sonnet 17 releases me into appraisal, whereas ‘Ozymandias’ produces an expansiveness which dissolves subject/object positions and divisions between subjectivities, in a conjoining and potentially

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<sup>24</sup> Dillon and Millay, *Flowers of Evil*, pp. 150-153 (parallel French: English text). The translation of this poem is attributed to Millay alone.

<sup>25</sup> ‘The poet takes his metaphors from the city and transforms them into abstractions [...]]; but he also works from the inside out, cathecting his gloom (in the Spleen poems) onto things’ writes Françoise Meltzer, referring to this poem specifically. My point however is that these are two moments in a dialectic evident in ‘Spleen II’. See Meltzer, *Seeing Double. Baudelaire’s Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘Language, Thought, Poetry’ in Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 233.

collective rhythm. Granted that to contemplate a poem does not merely serve accountancy; metrical and etymological analysis can connect a poem to a cultural and affective history enriching its embodiment and its continuing eventuation, prompting Allen Grossman's questions: 'What does the poem intend to follow after – what can be thought that could not be thought by the reader before the poem was known to the reader?'<sup>27</sup> How though is it possible to distinguish the poem from its interpretation, to resist binding the poem to its interpretation? Grossman seems to imagine the poem not so much as an object but as a transitional object which might at last be abandoned, however reluctantly, as the thought it sponsors accedes to fulness. For the poem to still accompany a reader and not be used up, it may need to remain to a degree unassimilable, unmistakably alien to the reader's creativity.

2

Romantic aesthetics are obsessed with dynamism, preferring dissolution as experienced in time to either transcendence or petrification. Horror of the dead object haunts romantic and post-romantic prosody. All eventuates under the sign of contingency and as fast unbinds.

This distinguishes Romantic poetics from a modern but anti-Modernist tendency where fleetingness leads to capture, a snapshot that makes an object of the moment; leading to an insistence on language's materiality in Objectivism, whether mobile or transfixed. With Language poetry this will be complicated by linguistic constructivism, but the descent is clear enough—from the Cartesian Modern to New Criticism, and on to Language and conceptualist poetry. One strange and estranged feature of such vaunted materialism is a contempt for the material world's failure to be quite concrete and hard-edged enough.

Appalled by temporality, poetry that courts its own objectification associates the passage of time with death and decay but also with viscera, maternity and the

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<sup>27</sup> Allen Grossman, 'On Communicative Difficulty', in *True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), pp. 147-162 (p. 160).

female, whereas Romantic poetics associates objectification with the corpse.<sup>28</sup> Shelley's post-Lucretian organicist philosophy conceives decay as creative, releasing energy – the collapse of despotisms energises a frozen, adamant world, burning and rotting becoming the preconditions for growth. The affirmative pulse of “the lone and level sands” is challenged by desert aridity; the despotism of Ozymandias has been so absolute that the power of decay dissipates across an infertile emptiness, its potential felt distantly rather than realised.

By contrast, nowhere is disgust at decay and fear of the failure of petrification more vividly performed than in a poem which like Sonnet 17 rhymes ‘time’ with ‘rhyme’, John Berryman’s ‘Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’.<sup>29</sup> Where this rhyme occurs in stanza 55, an undead organicism infects objects with a radioactive half-life, a continuous particulate dissolution. Attempts to memorialise are confounded by time’s depredations. Most frighteningly the categorical division between organic and inorganic is confounded. This stanza may start on a *grand guignol* note but it gathers great force; and after 54 stanzas of a seventeenth-century idiom consistent with the teleporting of the poet to a Puritan New England, linguistic anachronism delivers a jarring shock:

Headstones stagger under great draughts of time  
after heads pass out, and their world must reel  
speechless, blind in the end  
about its chilling star: thrift tuft,  
whin cushion – nothing. Already with the wounded flying  
dark air fills, I am a closet of secrets dying,  
races murder, foxholes hold men,

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<sup>28</sup> This is not a general claim about a period in American poetry; for instance, William Carlos Williams’ poetry is compelled by a tension between event and objectification (see ‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus’ as a specimen). Rather it identifies a tendency in Zukofsky’s and Oppen’s lyric that was to make their work exemplary for Ian Hamilton Finlay among others – consistently with the description of Finlay’s work later in this essay.

<sup>29</sup> John Berryman, ‘Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’ [1953] in *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, ed. by Charles Thornbury (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), pp. 131-148. In the first book publication of this poem, illustrated by Ben Shahn, the numbered stanzas are divided by bold lines crossing the full width of the print area, legitimating a narrow focus of attention on a particular stanza, as here on stanza 55. See John Berryman, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1956).

reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime.

The world reels and becomes real again in its historical distance, but ‘distance’ should be in the plural since the poem oscillates between contemporary and early America. ‘Headstones stagger’ announces a grotesque resurrection that animates commemorative stones, their names and texts passed off for bodies. ‘After heads pass out’ makes of time a kind of birth canal and the identity of headstones and heads is strongly asserted.

The reduction of grave-mounds to ‘thrift tuft, | whin cushion’ is followed by a specifically anti-Wordsworthian reduction to ‘nothing’—that is, *not* ‘Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, | With rocks, and stones, and trees...’ But then thrift and whin make living pillows of grave-mounds. The human and the animal collapse too, for ‘foxholes hold men’. This phrase is anachronistic for early America; it harks back to ‘wounded flying’ which begins to sound like body-parts filling the air after a shelling. The ‘wounded flying’ may also pertain to aerial battles. ‘I am a closet of secrets dying’ collapses subjectivity and the external world; these secrets seem to be ugly flat truths about recent American history: ‘races murder, foxholes hold men’. ‘Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’ was written at the end of the Korean War where the experience of American troops in foxholes in bitter cold had been horribly traumatic, and at the start of the Civil Rights Movement. ‘Great draughts of time’ then are staggering the headstones of generations of Americans. The enclosure of ‘a closet of secrets dying’ becomes hard to distinguish from ‘dark air fills’. A histrionic dismissal of the early Americans back into a speechless world, an inrush of contemporary horror and barbarism, may seem to divide the stanza at the caesura of ‘nothing’, but ‘time’ and ‘rime’ bind the temporal confusion together.

The final line moves like sludge. How is this impassable line to be parsed? ‘Rime’ may have hoarfrost for a primary dictionary meaning, but not primary here. The flaunting of ‘rime’ in the position of the most insistent rhymes of this poem, as the last word of the stanza, strikes the ear as scornful, disgusted with the demands of poetic form in conditions where ‘reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain’. ‘Rime’ by this token gestures impatiently towards the formal

closing/closeting of the stanza in its rhyme with 'time', comparable to 'reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain *full stop*.' The line could suggest these very verses 'wage rime' upon the wet brain, that is, immobilise the brain so it swells, sealing it with its pressure of secrets.<sup>30</sup> But the word 'piles' although belonging chiefly to the noun phrase 'reactor piles' could also be read as a verb, rime piled upon the wet brain in waging war against it. This attack on rhyme vandalises the stanza in both its interior and formal circumference.

On first reading the shock came from the phrase 'reactor piles', so extreme, so unprepared-for, that it felt like a breach not only in the poem's temporal organisation, but also in the contract between poet and reader—a contract based on the poem's object status. Hitherto the poem as object had kept its temporal domains and formal procedures clearly demarcated, through a repeated enjambement of Puritan America with the temporality of the poem's composition, an unsituated present. Now the brutality of this stanza's first and last lines performs a headlock; these lines resemble linguistic slabs, unmarked by commas and unmitigated by caesuras. Collapsed headstones become radioactive as 'reactor piles', the ledgers of the dead dealing death down to the present, insidious and 'slow', releasing negative energy into the swelling brain through a kind of shale impaction of syntax.

'Reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime' is driven by a basic fear of annihilation, and its formation by such fear risks damaging the poem's formal edifice. The line scorns its stanzaic matrix through violence on 'rime'—a violence that both summons and turns away from 'war'. For the verb 'wage' is used mostly in contemporary English as part of the compound verb 'wage war', and given Berryman's habitual deferral of syntactical completion, the verb-component 'war' continues to be awaited even while a rhyme for 'time' is expected; moreover, the anticipation of war is reinforced by the powerful stress on 'star' before a colon and the wrenching caesura in the middle of the stanza's fourth line. 'Star' receives more stress than any rhyme word in the stanza, to the point that stanzaic form threatens to buckle about the caesura. 'Reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime'

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<sup>30</sup> Berryman glosses 'wet brain' as 'edema' in a footnote.

attacks the conventions of syntactical linking through its rhythmical crush; it could be interpreted as a psychotic attack on linking determined to reduce words to lumps, thereby threatening the basis of communication.<sup>31</sup> Berryman is a [water] “closet” and while ‘foxholes hold men’, what ‘wage slow upon the wet brain’ have emerged from foxholes as excremental ‘reactor piles’. Dead words, departing from men’s speech, or worse yet, intimating men too may be shit—in the next stanza ‘those myriads’ have become ‘fire-ash, fossils, burlled’. ‘Burlled’ is a Berryman invention since in earlier usage the verb meant to *remove* burls while Berryman’s twist produces the image of fossils floating ‘in the open river-drifts’ surrounded by water-swirls as though knots in wood. Charming, except that Berryman would have known the obsolete meaning of ‘burl’ as a pustule; and hence the line passingly recollects an earlier line, ‘a manic stench | of pustules snapping’. Closets and foxholes, outraged wombs, fill with the dying in the wake of the murderous necrophiliac orgasm of the previous stanza: ‘Moisture shoots. | Hungry throngs collect. They sword into the carcass.’ ‘Sword’ wields the word ‘word’.

The attack on linking is an attack on the poem’s containment function.<sup>32</sup> No wonder there follows a retreat from dead words and words representing the dead in speechless but textually-inscribed reactor piles and headstones. Berryman’s future practice would outrage the conception of the poem as aesthetic object, quarrelling insistently with the textuality of words: for Berryman, text was no bulwark against the workings of time, but excremental and deathly. The drama of this stanza from a literary-historical perspective lies in its assault on the poem as object, on the poem as studied by New Criticism. I believe Berryman was disgusted by his own uncontainable Romanticism. The stakes are shown with extraordinary vividness: collapsing the categorical divisions between subjectivity

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Attacks on linking’ refers ‘to that state of mind in which the patient’s psyche contains an internal object which is opposed to, and destructive of, all links whatsoever from the most primitive [ ...] to the most sophisticated forms of verbal; communication and the arts. In this state of mind emotion is hated; it is felt to be too powerful to be contained by the immature psyche, it is felt to link objects which are not self and therefore inimical to primary narcissism’. See W.R. Bion, ‘Attacks on Linking’, *Second Thoughts* (London: H. Karnac, 1984), pp. 93-109 (p. 108).

<sup>32</sup> The discussion draws on Bion, ‘Attacks on Linking’.

and object, between human, animal and inanimate material produces an overwhelming disgust and terror. Yet it holds the possibility of recovery. The room that this stanza comprises is a closet, not a tomb. Secrets may die in being exposed, but the death of secrecy may lead to life; the tomb slowly transform into habitable architecture.

In 1953 people in the United States lived in a state of apprehension, a Cold War nuclear stand-off engendering a 'climate of fear'. Berryman's line 'reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime' is at once explosive and insidious, an explosion that would go on slowly without stopping. The rime that coats the wet brain is cracking up, but held in place as rhyme. In the event the line is a stopped explosion, beyond which lies return to ordinary life, 'the rain of pain and departure'—as though ordinary life were being necessarily propitiated, since it continues under the threat of annihilation. Following the 'time | rime' insult, the penultimate stanza 56 simply abandons rhyming its first and last lines for the offensive anti-rhyme 'draw off | nothing', and the last stanza, trying to ingratiate, to head off retaliation with the self-cancelling 'love | love', reduces sexual love to a cynical jingle. John Berryman was writing 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' as Willem de Kooning was painting the first versions of 'Woman', the embodiment of a nurturing and persecutory muse.

In 'Woman' we encounter the Medusa face to face. Petrarch feared that to pour his vitality into a poem would reduce him to a husk.<sup>33</sup> When a poet contemplates female beauty, he courts the Medusa and so faces a double penalty:

ed ella ne l'usata sua figura  
tosto tornando fecemi, oimè lasso!  
d'un quasi vivo et sbigottito sasso.

(and she to her accustomed form quickly returning made me, alas, an almost living and terrified stone.)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Petrarch's canzone 'Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade' may have provided Shakespeare with his sonnet's pen, ink and stone.

<sup>34</sup> *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 62-63.

If his poem's beauty does justice to his beloved, he betrays her through his narcissistic investment in the poem. Its admirable polish encapsulates and stills feeling, while its beauty delivers the *coup de grâce* to whatever is left of the poet. 'The instituting act – the artisan boast of the poet, perpetualization—illustrates the Horatian logic in which human value is produced by human sacrifice—no middle term.'<sup>35</sup> But the logic summarised by Allen Grossman was unacceptable to Shelley and repellent after the first world war; the more so after disclosure of Nazi death camps, the disclosure of what Stalinist sacrifice entailed, and after the Korean and Vietnam wars justified as sustaining human value. A vital development from sacrificial 'instituting', linked by Shelley to authoritarianism, lies in rhythm—rhythm that is historical, social, generative and embodying. This is poetry's central task, 'as the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language, on the other' (in Jonathan Culler's words).<sup>36</sup>

The relationship of rhythm with embodiment derives from the baby suckling at the breast. In its origins rhythm is dyadic, preceding and managing the infant's individual embodiment during a transition from the dyadic to the formation of joint attention, the baby emerging as a subject through rhythm while protected from separation anxiety by rhythm's familiar rupture and resumption. Therefore the rhythmic 'we' precedes 'I'. Rhythm is not mechanical; there must be "an element of transition in its periodicity", a continuous adjustment as with the feeding dyad.<sup>37</sup> From the start rhythm entails a kind of dressage, somehow you've got to get into it, and if you can't, you become vulnerable to feelings of abandonment, rage or superiority. This applies not only to dance, music and

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Grossman, 'Hard Problems in Poetry', in *True-Love*, pp. 15-38 (p. 33).

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Culler, 'Why Lyric?', *PMLA*, 123.1 (2008), pp. 201–206, (p. 206).

<sup>37</sup> I borrow this summary phrase from a review by Paul D. Myers of Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, in *MLN*, 111.5 (1996), p. 1040. Myers furthers comments 'Perhaps one of the most compelling insights of the book is the explanation the author gives for the human tendency to sing while engaged in repetitive labor. The assembly line worker sings in order to free himself from the objective periodicity of the machine'.

poetry, but to intimate sociality from sex to joining a conversation.<sup>38</sup> Rhythm has the potential then to re-embodiment responsively, or to spark reaction into defensive rigidity and impasse. Neither sneer of cold command nor obsessional workmanship can animate; neither the syllable uttered into emptiness, nor the jewelled casket. In Frank O'Hara's poem 'In Memory of My Feelings', Medusa is Unbound as a bucket of writhing snakes.<sup>39</sup> It took a different serpent to bring God's creation to life, as the close of O'Hara's poem reminds us—a serpent whose characteristic method is poetic rhythm: 'When you turn your head | can you feel your heels, undulating?'. As these articulating heels show, step-by-step does not necessitate the fiction of uncontaminated encounter; the event of the poem mobilises a plurality. Even the lone and level sands can be sculpted by wind into waves.

For rhythm can be joined in stone, demonstrably in the following passage of prose and of architecture:

Footfalls remark the tomb. Architecture reigns also in utter silence. The Redentore interior by Palladio, supreme architectural attainment, magnifies the poignancy of cut-into surfaces. Engaged columns, apertures in those significant walls, the run of the drum, the cupola, the semi-circle of disengaged columns at the end of the nave, the heavy creamy lines above the knotted capitals, the corners with both rectangular and cylindrical engaged shafts, all these and any other volumes or any section of details even without the chapels, can be read in terms of the smoothness of shafts and the rough sprouting of capitals; in terms of the smooth tribune archivolt and the deeply cut archivolt behind, over the altar; or even more simply, in terms of the smooth square feet of the cornice with dark rough gaps.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Conflating rhythm with 'the work of art' Nicolas Abraham insists 'the work of art *does not act* like a physical force or an electric charge. We can even say that it does not act at all. It is up to us to interrogate it. Even then, it *does not act* on us: it only *responds* to us according to our capacities'. Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 69. I disagree with these alternatives. As we adapt to a rhythm, a rhythm adapts to us (more or less).

<sup>39</sup> *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, pp. 252-257.

<sup>40</sup> Adrian Stokes, 'Smooth and Rough', in *The Critical Writing of Adrian Stokes Vol. II, 1937-1958* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 245.

Can you feel your heels, undulating? Adrian Stokes' prose rebuffs the Medusa. Architectural writing from as long ago as Vitruvius' first book finds rhythm in stone, but Stokes' peculiar animation links Ruskin and Pound into a Romantic lineage.<sup>41</sup> For these writers, as for Baudelaire writing during the rebuilding of Paris in the *Seconde Empire*, stone lives.

But treading a *via negativa* I want briefly to draw attention to a dissenting aesthetic which insists on the Cartesian mind/body duality. Here the *cogito* is celebrated as the founding moment of revolutionary violence productive of a truly modern art, whereby alienated subjectivity can stand before objects of human artifice unashamedly repudiating the natural world. No event can supervene on the archetypal situations this art commemorates. I refer to the art of Ian Hamilton Finlay, identified on his tombstone as Poet, in an act of intractable, unnegotiable naming. Finlay's art assents to Bruno Latour's proclamation that we have never been modern, and insists on correcting that failure, albeit in a remote Scottish garden and in works of humorously domestic scale appropriate to the human diminution following the Jacobin Terror. Correcting that failure would entail separating the work of translation and the work of purification, and this is precisely Finlay's strategy—to translate the classical era or the French revolutionary era into objects reminiscent of a military board game, while ensuring that categories remain rigorously distinct.<sup>42</sup> Finlay's stone battleships, birdbaths from which little flocks take off to dump their lime bombs, belong in a garden acknowledging the violence of enlightenment reason, amidst a collection of weaponry that might be fall-out from the Medusa's counter-attack. In a virtuoso reading of Homer's Shield of Achilles passage, Bill Brown commandeers the shield for the Western cultural prototype of Latour's hybrid object, or what Brown calls a thing—alive, organic,

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<sup>41</sup> As Jennifer Scappettone's forthcoming book on Venice shows.

<sup>42</sup> 'So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern – that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being modern [...].' Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1993), p. 11.

metal, indissociable and rhythmic.<sup>43</sup> Finlay's weaponry clatters to the ground when the Medusa stares at the Shield of Achilles, rendering it useless for war. Nothing to do but contemplate the shield and crossed swords on the wall and the military glory for which they serve as metonyms.

Installed in Finlay's garden, named Little Sparta in antipathy to the democratic mess of Athens, is his sculpture-poem 'The Present Order', whose text reads 'THE | PRESENT | ORDER || IS | THE | DISORDER || OF | THE | FUTURE|| SAINT- | JUST'.<sup>44</sup> 'Nothing beside remains.' The disorder of the future turns out to be artfully displayed, lent to contemplation: Why is this phrase here? Where does it come from? How did it get here? Is it a metonym? – responses thoroughly alienated from the aesthetics of the event.<sup>45</sup> In contemplating this work Gray's elegiac verses may resound, and visiting through different seasons would allow its setting's trained natural cycles to be appreciated. Loss however is prevalent, the breakdown of Enlightenment rationalism against the horizon of the Pentland hills, the struggle to make a garden behave despite pests, drought, canker and exhaustion. The point of this work is that nothing eventuates, and a visitor walks about and through its sepulchral arrangement, relishing what Drew Milne calls 'the elegiac pathos of distance', enjoying his own path even as the stones keep their fixed order.<sup>46</sup> Stokes' passage also relies on ambulation, as its opening phrase 'footfalls remark the tomb' declares: but 'footfalls remark the tomb' denotes the opening of an event, architectural rhythms reshaping the subject as they are launched by the sonic rhythm of the subject's

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<sup>43</sup> Bill Brown, 'Martial Art', *PMLA*, 124.5 (2009), pp. 1787–1793.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'The Present Order'. Photograph by Michael Loudon. Creative Commons Licensing. [www.thinkingverse.com/issue04a/IHFPresentOrder.pdf](http://www.thinkingverse.com/issue04a/IHFPresentOrder.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> See for instance Finlay's brief exposition of 'The Boat's Blueprint' cited in Alec Finlay's excellent introductory essay to Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Selections* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Drew Milne, 'Adorno's Hut: Ian Hamilton Finlay's neoclassical rearmament programme', *Jacket*, 15 (Dec. 2001), <<http://jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-milne.html>> [accessed 28 September 2014]. I disagree with Milne's intricate and pioneering interpretation of Finlay's work, chiefly on account of my inability to discover in it the irony which Milne regards as a dominant attribute.

footfalls. Walking about Ian Hamilton Finlay's 'The Present Order' the subject is referred to his own resources.

Contemplating 'The Present Order' engages an experience familiar from curatorial labels, the urge to formulate situational questions about conceptualist art, except where accidental sublimity overwhelms its programme. Fascination and engrossment, being amused and 'getting it' are all possibilities of this art, but for all the integrity and logic of Finlay's work it leaves me cold and externalised. What I miss is the imagining of the real, or as Winnicott suggests more strongly, the hallucination of the real, by way of its continuous destruction: 'The object is always being destroyed. This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object; that is, an object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control'.<sup>47</sup> The object being destroyed is an internal object, crossing the barrier between an unconscious inner world and the external world in an hallucinatory migration, it being understood that 'hallucinations are dream phenomena that have come forward into the waking life and that hallucinating is no more of an illness in itself than the corresponding fact that the day's events and the memories of real happenings are drawn across the barrier into sleep and into dream-formation'. Reality requires the continuous cancellation of the hallucinatory ego-investments as well as the social preconceptions fabricating its solid-seeming simulacrum. As Shelley wrote in 'The Defence of Poetry', 'we want the creative faculty to imagine what we know'; the real lies inaccessible behind its simulacra which must be strongly imagined and destroyed, making the real compelling, densifying it through re-eventuation so that relations with other human beings, with other species and with the earth can be felt rather than conceived or asserted.<sup>48</sup> Densifying and then dissipating, binding and unbinding: such is lyric's main work. Reality needs to be eventuated time and again.

Consider another work by Finlay, quite properly situated in a museum, a marble plaque whose text reads MARBLE THE REVOLUTION. Why so? Because the French Revolution was born in blood, as the marble asserts through monumentalising the metaphor of marbled meat, and the marble butcher's slab on

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<sup>47</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> P.B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', p. 54.

which marbled meat is laid. Finlay celebrates the death-dealing of art. This plaque belongs to a group of works, both sculptural and book works, titled ‘Clay the life, plaster the death, marble the revolution’. Clay reduces the body to a corpse. Plaster shapes a death mask. Marble ends all human activity.

However, Finlay’s marble is spectacularly veined. To deface this memorial while honouring Finlay’s mock militaristic spirit, I wish to launch a contra-Medusan attack, the Galatean event of Frank O’Hara’s ‘Ode on Causality’.<sup>49</sup> The Ode’s opening passage offers the lines: ‘suddenly everyone’s supposed to be veined, like marble | it isn’t that simple but it’s simple enough | the rock is the least living of the forms man has fucked’. Rock may be the least living, but it is living at least, as differentiated from stone polished to a mirror finish. O’Hara’s poem was inspired by his visiting a memorial consisting of a hunk of rock, not a marble cenotaph; its association with living rock proclaims a rough-hewn architecture that holds life, and poetry breaks it out, ‘seizing a grave by throat’. Such is the rock’s irregularity that the name of the deceased has to be mounted on an unpolished bronze plate. That name is Jackson Pollock, an artist round whose works an influential discourse of eventuation was to accrue. The veined marble of the Ode’s opening lines has returned to rock and rock is brought to life in art’s event. This is too solemn for O’Hara, so rock becomes a phallus which is also ‘the pillar of our deaths’ and ends the poem in a vast orgasm, a *jouissance* which could never be thought to ‘sword into the carcass’ in Berryman’s phrase. Be stone no more!<sup>50</sup> Quite an event to end on, and it must be left up in the air.

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<sup>49</sup> *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, pp. 302-303.

<sup>50</sup> As Paulina cries in *The Winter’s Tale*, Act V, Scene III. My thanks to Nausicaa Renner for reminding me of this scene.