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Ambiguity Now

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Abstract: In his article "Ambiguity Now" Martin Harrison focuses on the pivotal place which modernist critical theory ascribed to ambiguity in the definition of meaning and structure in poetry. In particular, Harrison considers the way in which the category of experience is deployed in the discourse of ambiguity but is limited to only certain narratives of so-called experience. Harrison argues for a contemporary practice less focused on ambiguity and more on notation and provisional structure, demonstrating key elements of such practice in the work of modern poets Leslie Scalapino and Frank Bidart and the poet-artist Alex Selenitsch.

Martin HARRISON

Ambiguity Now

"Few of us are prepared to accept the statement that the language of poetry is the language of paradox" (Brooks 3). The surprise value of this statement — the opening sentence of Cleanth Brooks's 1947 critical study *The Well Wrought Urn* — had by that date already been diminished by a growing orthodoxy about displacement, irony, ambivalence, and ambiguity as central values in modernist poetic practice. For instance, William Empson's work (which he quotes) had been around for a decade and a half. Brooks is perhaps pretending something much more outrageous than in fact some of his readers, or at least those sympathetic to modern poetry, would have believed it to be. Yet among its many agendas, Brooks's book ably demonstrated to those readers not only how paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity are central to the work of his contemporaries, but that they are central too to understanding the way ancient poems are composed, poems from the canon like Gray's "Elegy," Donne's "The Canonisation," or Herrick's "Corinna's Going a-Maying." They are central, that is, to the experiences we have when we read, central to a capacity to recreate a play of meanings and feelings across the text when it is felt as a totality. For Brooks, irony, paradox, and ambiguity are also part and parcel of those means which characterize the poet as a creative artificer and not just as a communicator or edifier — characteristics such as the preference for symbol over abstraction, the preference for suggestion rather than explicit statement, the preference for metaphor over judgement. Where the modernist critic is concerned, paradoxes: "spring from the very nature of the poet's language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations" (Brooks 8). And later he reinforces the importance of this claim about the connotative range of poetic language — and the play of contradiction and ambiguity at work in it — by stating: "the poet has no one term. Even if he had a polysyllabic technical term, the term would not provide the solution to his problem. [The poet] must work by contradiction and qualification" (Brooks 9). Ambiguity is the order of the day.

As inheritors of modernist critical approaches, we have become familiar with the close symbiosis between the stress given to ambiguity and a comparable stress given to textual autonomy in modernist reading. The concept of "textual autonomy" — the idea that poems are somehow unique, untranslatable acts of meaning and experience — is another way, indeed, of establishing an important logistical emphasis on behalf of the importance of ambiguity and contradiction in a poem's imagery and in its narrative complexity. The contrariety of a poem is what ultimately prevents it being reduced to prose. The play of ambiguous pressures across the poem's language is what ultimately obliges the reader to see a poem as different from a simple statement or a simple idea. In short, caught in the force field of ambiguity and paradox, what poems say is ultimately irreducible to fully communicable truths, largely because they cannot be successfully paraphrased. For Brooks, paraphrase is a destructive distortion not just of the content of the poem but also of its bearing towards the reader — that is, of the ways in which the reader has to handle and respond to its language. A poem communicates richly, with nuance, with delicacy in the structuring of its meanings, and with qualifications — so much so that "the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself" (Brooks 73). Taken quite literally, this would mean that the only way to elucidate a poem is to keep repeating it — or to keep re-reading it — and not to seek to re-tell it or paraphrase it or look up its words in a dictionary. In practice, however, what Brooks means is that, given that the structure of poetry is a structuring of contradictions and ambivalences, it seems that a poem's internal pattern of communication is much more important than its external pattern: it speaks to itself — it resonates internally across its ambiguities — long before it speaks to us. To borrow another modernist's formulation, it sets up the conditions for "being" as the precondition for "meaning." Indeed, a poem is "well wrought" — namely it is an artefact — precisely because the poet can dramatically manage and emotionally manipulate shapeless (meaningless) materials which are heterogeneous and ambiguous into a singular formal (experiential) shape.

When we turn to the other side of the process — the literary experience of reading — emphasis falls again on the contrasting and comparing of contrarieties and paradoxes. The reader's ability to work within not directly communicable areas of ambiguous meaning becomes a paramount require-

ment of reading poetry. The modernist poetry reader whom Brooks admires must suspend a commitment to the notion that language operates primarily in order to communicate and accept that poems are, as he puts it, objects: "If we are willing to use imaginative understanding, we can come to know the poem as an object — we can share in the experience … the poet is most truthfully described as a *poietes* or maker, not as an expositor or communicator" (75). Typically, poems can make meaning because they utilize a medium which is tense with paradox and ambiguity; no less typically, given that there can be no play between contraries without ambiguity, there can be no other process in the way meaning evolves. Indeed, the implicit claim is that poetry never exceeds this status of being an expanding and contracting medium, a contradiction-filled building material, viscous with linguistic paradox and equivocation. This is what Brooks means by calling the poem an "object." In its own way ambiguity brings about a type of definiteness in the play of forces in poetic language, ensuring that poetic utterance is never seen transparently or understood in an unconsciously direct way.

The claim is that the fine poem withdraws its interest in proposition making and conclusiveness: these are not the sorts of things we take away from reading poems. Here Brooks talks approvingly of what he terms a method of "rich indirection," an indirectness at work within even the most seemingly direct and simple poetry. Tracing the play of images and the ambiguous meanings associated with them, readers come to know the poem as a material, emotional object, an object in whose overall, interwoven stories and images which each reader (to signal that word which Brooks prefers) "shares" (73). In the final analysis it is this sharing — effectively an engagement with a variety of meanings, associations, and affects — on which the relationship of poet and creative reader is pivoted. This is a schema which sets up homologies between experience on the one side and not fully communicable truths on the other, while engineering the concept "experience" tightly inside the claim that poems work in a self-subsistent way via the use of paradox and ambiguity. Thus, as Brooks phrases it: "if we are to speak exactly, the poem itself is the *only* medium that communicates the particular 'what' that is communicated. The conventional theories of communication offer no easy solution to our problem of meanings: we emerge with nothing more enlightening than this graceless bit of tautology: the poem says what the poem says" (74). An only partly communicable play of meanings, contained expressively in the poem conceived as an object, is what the reader imaginatively and experientially shares.

I do not want to trundle out this modernist model from the garage of critical aesthetics merely to take it apart. It is clear, however, that the claim about shared experience disguises a hidden factor lying behind the idea that somehow paradox is central to poetic structure — namely, that it is just as much a claim about language as it is about experience. Brooks may want to believe that a poet has to "'come to terms' with his experience" in what he calls "the unified poem," thereby seeking to identify the process of overcoming and holding together contrarieties as a primary element of this "experience." But this is also a claim about certain narrative structures, certain figures of speech, and the recreative outcome of their deployment in a poem (Brooks 207). The compositional matter is not just to do with any sort of engagement, affect, and experience. The claim about the connection between ambiguity and experience is a doctrine about particular narratives of experience, not a universal linguistico-cognitive structuring on which experience is founded.

Where those who continue to doubt whether the language of poetry is the language of paradox are concerned, one problem with this approach is that it selects in certain types of experience and not others. Indeed, what sorts of emotion fit well with the narrative of ambiguousness, hesitation, qualification, and contrariety? Not all experience and emotion — and their portrayal — work well in such a context. Not all experiences are felt to be ambiguous — particularly experiences of impulse, anger, grief, pain. For another, the uncertainty or indirection of much experience may not be to do with ambiguity as much as it is to do with liminality, or with part-conscious states of mind. In other words, it may be less a case that we are Hamlet-like torn in two directions, caught in ambivalent desires, than that the consequences of our experiences are unclear to us, or that the nature of our experience defies definition or that we are not aware of how an experience consumes us and overwhelms us. Intuitive experience might be one example of this; neurotic predisposition might be another. But so too might deeply tragic forms of emotion, in other words experiences which respond to the intractability of fate and nature. Ambiguity, a figure to do with semantics and the contrary play of propositional structure, does not naturally fit there. One is tempted to add that ambiguity and paradox are, in fact, se-

lectively literary, rather than broadly experiential, figures.

Nor are complex experiences necessarily ambiguous ones. Instead, complexity may be to do primarily with statistical richness of information and the many-sided nature of perception and not at all to do with the play of contradictions and ambiguities. Phenomenological accounts of experience, namely those accounts which seek to describe the situatedness and the latent boundaries of states of consciousness, are certainly complex, but they leave little room for ambiguity or paradox. When, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the multi-faceted aspect of his gaze he describes it as a form of "inhabitation" and unhiddenness: "to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision" (68). This experiential "grasp" is hugely complex, composed of a multiple sense of how a thing might look from a potentially limitless number of angles. The psychological account of experience is complex and many-sided, but it is not paradoxical. Rather than opening up a field of ambiguous perceptions, the multiple moments involved in constructing a sense of the object flow, as it were, in the same direction, all confirming the other, all allowing for an equidistant tracking around the latent horizon of perception involved in "taking in" a thing. Multiplicity produces a wholeness in the way an object is accounted for. Thus when Merleau-Ponty comes to focus on a large, complex object, redolent with emotional associations — a house — this sense of the overlapping, many-timed way in which we see it, leads him to assert a sort of topographical wholeness in the way we encounter the house. This house, as he puts it, "is not the house seen from nowhere but the house seen from everywhere" (69).

Complexity resides in the necessarily multiple relationships between perceiving subject and thing: it is a feature of cognition. In fact, figures such as paradox and ambiguity start to look like the tools of a reductive, though perhaps sometimes necessary, linguistic simplification of such complexity. Ambiguity, paradox, amphiboly may all have powerful functions within the interwoven play of meanings which are part of connoted and conative meanings in language, but they have no particular privilege in relation to rendering those experiences in which inhabitation, liminal awareness, impulse, tonality, holistic sensory awareness, and atmospheric awarenesses play a key part. Outside the domain of literary criticism, ambiguity is normally treated negatively as a long-lived philosophical problem in the construction of reliable, truthful language. According to this view, word and thing do not match, or rather the whole array of things-in-the-world does not match the whole scope of utterance. Aristotle offers the clearest definition of the difficulty which linguistic ambiguity introduces into discourse when he complains of how the fact that there is, theoretically, an infinity of things in the world means that words will constantly have to double up and overlap if we are to begin to account for what is going on around us. There are so many things and so few words that we have no choice but to rely on connotations, homonyms, synonyms, metaphors, symbols, and the like. Mathematical relations between words and things break down because: "it is impossible … to bring in the actual things discussed: we use their names as symbols instead of them; and therefore we suppose that what follows in the names, follows in the things themselves, just as people who calculate suppose in regard to their counters. But the two cases (names and things) are not alike. For names are finite and so are the sum-total of formulae, while things are infinite in number" (Aristotle 165: 5-2). For Aristotle such ambiguity presents a major problem because it affects how we manage the proper description of things and the degree to which arguments can be well conducted. If we are to be certain about what we know, ambiguity must be dispelled by setting up proper classifications about identity and sameness. Aristotle offers three forms of sameness — sameness in number, in species, and in genus. Once this basic classification is in place, ambiguity-free philosophical discourse requires, further, the recognition of a host of improper forms of argument which either make use of ambiguity sophistically or which seek to exploit unimportant, superficial forms of ambiguity in the philosophical positions under attack.

This is what Brooks will have nothing of — in poetry, that is. It is precisely this concern to protect the central role of ambiguity in poetic experience which leads Brooks to another highly problematic distinction, this time between connotation (the poet's natural semantic medium) and notation (what scientists and classifiers and mathematicians do). A classical approach to ambiguity situates the figure negatively in relation to the concept of clear, or proper, discourse — which then of course allows for

the poetic to seem something different from such discourse. This hostile portrayal of ambiguity also positions ambiguity no less negatively in relation to traditional definitions both of the purpose of scientific discourse but also of its forms. These are of course those forms of discourse which work with clearly defined categorical divisions and clearly argued types of evidence. For Brooks, however, poetry countermands all these sorts of activities. For the modernist: "the tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings" (Brooks 9). Further, poetry eschews the clarificatory pro and contra of argument and classification: the woven fabric of ambiguously shared connotation is all-important and, in this sense, cannot be said to offer any form of "notation" equivalent to the scientist's. "I mean," says Brooks, "the poet does not use a notation at all — as the scientist may properly be said to do so" (Brooks 9). Again the stress here is on the complexifying nature of creative process and on individualistic composition. For Brooks, unlike the fabricator of scientific knowledge, the poet has, within limits, "to make up his language as he goes," implying, that is, that somehow scientists (unlike poets) do not use maths in a "made up" and improvisatory way. Brooks's cliché-ridden view of science disguises a deep level of difficulty. For the same may be said about this distinction between notation and connotation as was said about the claim that the language of paradox and ambiguity is somehow specifically poetic: the distinction selects in certain types of experience and emotion as being poetic and works against the inclusion of others. The divide between connotation and notation disguises the way in which some experiences are indeed best done when "notated," i.e., when not subjected to the method of indirection. It may disguise too the degree to which poems make use of direct, discursive forms of utterance, often of an argued, philosophical nature — which is to say similarly, a form of notation.

Critical traditions fixate on these sorts of antinomies. The history of critical methods indeed often reads like a history of such fixations, the most recent of them being the postmodernist obsession with the incommensurability of written texts in relation to ontologically grounded truths. Historically the modernist period obsessed on the differences between creative and scientific practice, between poetic and non-poetic forms of discourse. There seems indeed an inevitability that what is at heart an Aristotelian definition of the *poietes* terminates in some such assertion of the contrast between certainties arrived at through the complex ambiguities of experience, on the one side, and the demonstrable certainty of syllogistic, anti-poetic logic, on the other. Within the modernist framework the poet, the critic, and often the scientist agreed that, unlike science, poetry was creative truth-bearing paradox. This view, however, was the consequence of a set of assumptions which are linguistic in nature, not just the result of what inexorably forms when we want to capture an experience. Hence too the ground was prepared for the postmodernist fixation on the discrepancies between truths and texts. For the recognition that we are talking about texts — in short, the requirement for an ever deeper emphasis on what the modernist termed the work's "autonomy" as a piece of language — is one of the tenets that a postmodernist is likely to hold to. Yet there is a peculiar outcome from such a view which starts to upset the antinomy between connotation and notation. To the postmodernist the distinction between connotation (texts which make use of connotative rhetorical figures) and notation (texts which do not foreground such devices) starts to look wobbly, less clear: after all, both are equally "texts" in the postmodern sense. Broadly conceived, each of these forms of written text is no less artificial, no less strategic than the other and, possibly, no less metaphorical, no less potentially poetic.

Practically, too, a further consequence of the setting up of divisions between connotation and notation — a division at work in how a poet is supposed to handle language — is that it puts a fire-wall at the heart of poetic expression: what I might term the abundance, the sheer variousness, of utterance — its directness, its wandering way, its divagations and its energy, its talk and its transparency — are de-emphasized in favour of writing which concentrates on tropes and metaphors which work connotatively. Materiality, the poem-as-object, a sense that language and metaphor must be opaque get selected in — it has become an *idée fixe* of latter day negativity. Yet the fact is that much poetry carries with it unambiguous, non-paradoxical properties — which are nonetheless formal, material properties; and this reading and compositional experience gets selected out. A poem is story, narration, expostulation, symptom, outcry, evidence. It is also material, visual, prosodic. In this sense — a quite practical sense — it seems to me that poetry does have a notation, a notation variously prac-

tised but a notation nonetheless.

Why does it matter, however, to go back to these earlier modernist celebrations of ambiguity? The conviction that the object-status of the poem is founded in deep-level forms of irony and ambiguity still influences contemporary reading practices (postmodern "textuality" is irony taken to a unending degree). The critics of the middle of the last century did an extremely good job in establishing the case for ambiguity, and the assumptions and methods of "rich indirection." This close conjoining of the idea of what is poetic and the role of ambiguity needs to be prised apart if other features of poems are to be properly acknowledged; nor do we need to feel embarrassment if discourse, content, prosodic form, biography, pathos, impact, or narrative ingenuity become the starting points for thinking about a poem. Indeed the problem with the modernist fascination with ambiguity is that it operated an overly insistent stress on lexical elements — on meaning, on the meaning of images, on word choice. Then there is that matter of "experience," or rather the way in which a reading experience is made to do substitute duty for an ill-defined, more generic concept of a broad cross-section of life experience. A prevailing sense starts to build — a sense that still clings on in contemporary discussion — that somehow we read poetry primarily to have these narrowly aestheticised sorts of reading experience; and not to be informed, or to be entertained, or to be entranced, or to be fascinated by patterning and structure, or to be pleasurably frightened, or to be seduced, or to be talked to, or to be argued with. These sorts of pleasures of the text — in my own experience, basic to why I read poetry and imaginative prose — tend to get sidelined or even to be seen as slightly unworthy.

Ambiguity, instead, requires a balancing out, or cancellation, of differences in affect. Brooks himself, in fairness, acknowledges a problem in the potentially reductive impact of his own critical language — in particular, the frequency with which terms like ambiguity, paradox, complex of attitudes, and "perhaps most annoying to the reader," irony occur in his text (195 and *passim*). It is as if recreative reading is largely valued because it traces out, sympathetically and intuitively, the creative act of writerly composition by which the *poietes* brought into existence the specific poem-object. An aesthetic neutrality becomes the readerly state of mind which such poetry aims towards. Placing such stress on lexical elements in a poem, there is a similar oversight in relation to thinking of reading as a more or less direct form of response to initial processes of composition, namely, issues to do with the nature of expression, structuring and gesture. What, too, of poetry which works in a more immanent way offering subliminal forms of emotion or directly manipulating singular types of pathos and feeling? Or which seeks to define an idea? Or which replicates thinking aloud? Sixty years after Brooks, the need to undo the close linkage of the concept of ambiguity from the experience of complexity has not gone away, especially when the issue of a close, or detailed, reading of a poem is in question. This is what the following three examples seek to demonstrate. They are all directly concerned with how we notate experience. Each example stresses to differing degrees the materiality of the formal means used. For all those differences of emphasis, however, the materials of each poem are paramount — the phonemes and the visual transcription, the segmented phrases which reconstruct a moment of perception in time, the unwinding of a half-thought which is part fantasy and part remembered dream.

Far from setting up the ambiguous internal communication structure of the modernist poem, each of these pieces externalises structural issues, including engaging in explicit discussion of structure. They treat the medium, and the structural mode, which they are written in with a great degree of consciousness as to how the medium works and of what its limits are. Hence, for instance, Leslie Scalapino's line: "if there's no overriding structure, 'There is no character-simulacrum for it to reside in'" (14; the layout of the original book places text spaciously across facing pages, enhancing a sense that we are reading "bursts" of fragmentary moments). Here, the line does not attempt to ironise the compositional process or isolate the creative act of the poem in a self-conscious space. Rather it is a comment about the implications of a particular compositional approach: in this sense, it is an instruction for reading, much like a direction for playing written into a musical score. It is an instruction about how to view the links between a fragmentary way of writing and a specific, philosophical sense of time, of transformation and the transforming object. Frank Bidart's lines "But no — ; as I / watch, the style is / *not* quite right" (172) has a similar effect. A comment about whether or not the account he is giving of a dream is accurate, the statement — "the style is / *not* quite right" — does not voice an ambiguity in the way the poem has proceeded, but rather calls into play a renewal of concern about

getting it right, about being close to how it was. In both examples, there is a pressure towards an accurate kind of evidencing. If the medium can in any sense be said to be reflected upon — if, in other words, the notation of the utterance is called into question — then this moment of hesitation is similar to a scientific concern about the accuracy of measurement in the assemblage of data, or about the amount of distortion introduced by the experiment. It is about recognizing the limited but effective way that language works, and about accepting that provisionality into the fabric of poetry.

What is this provisional quality? It is a quality closely associated, it seems to me, to how the poems stress how they are modes of enactment. It has to do, in other words, with allowing into the poems a conscious sense of how each is a kind of performance. This feature is less about "an indecision as to what you mean or an intention to mean several things" (Empson 6) than it is about the recognition that the composition of an utterance in a poem launches meaning on a particular vector — a specific, limited, yet calibrated track which responds to impulse and intention. This recognition of the provisional nature of the record comes not from equivocation, but from a sense that all utterances stand in a relative position to each other and all make use of different forms of illusion in order to maintain their energy and purpose. Hence, the conscious attentiveness to melodic contour in speech and word value in the works chosen in my examples — and the sense that the language cannot only track and de-track but is permanently in a state of having just been caught as part of a moment of elucidation. In fact, a sense of both the utter absoluteness of their linguistic form and, at the same, of the artificial flimsiness of that form is what gives these works the highly effective form of arbitrariness which each possesses. It is as if each poem is saying: it could have been different, but once composed it has to be this way. This way of composing is information-rich, vectorial, impactful.

As these factors might suggest, the poems exhibit unconventional prosodies but they are prosodies nonetheless. Indeed, prosody — the discovery of a material form for voice and line — is the medium through which the struggle for an exact notation can, so to speak, be worked through. Interestingly each poem seeks to show mind states and emotions not controlled by the figure of ironic hesitancy, nor the sort of "internalised" moment of creative focus which the narrative of ambiguity imposes on experience. Notation — getting it right as a score — matters just as much as connotation. Significantly, each poem, far from being an internally communicative recreation of an experience, constructs an experience out of fragments, out of questions about experience, out of glimpses and enactments of those partial glimpses. The experience is externalised, transposed, enacted.

My first example is Alex Selenitsch's poem "monotone." In the first page, the letter "m" is reiterated — literally reprinted again and again (Selenitsch n. p.). There are multiple ways to imagine the sound — for instance, as an extended mmmm-mmmmmmm (a sort of humming) or as a repeated, almost stammering "m." Or one can decide that the sound is ultimately unpronounceable and, in this regard, soundless. Yet the visual layout strongly suggests a sense of a recurrent beat, a recurrent pulse in the way the sound is formed; the stress remains on a sound's coming into form and the expansion and stabilization of time, there being little to suggest cadence or the traditional poetic line's habit of rising and waning away in time. There is much to suggest emergence, or the breakthrough moment where the liminal experience of thought-becoming-concept occurs. At the same time, the whole page has a further patterning "scored" into it — scored, that is, in the sense of notation and also in the sense of a series of scratches. This patterning of doubled circumflexes (^^) offers another rhythmic breaker, shifting the sound texture of repeated mmmm's. Each page carries some similar overlay (double dots, stars, underscores) which score seemingly arbitrary patterns, like creek beds or flight paths or geometrical designs, across the writing. In fact, as the work's brief running text at the bottom of each page points out, these striations are overlays from an earlier text and graphic work which portrayed the movement of electric lightning. One form of notation is transposed to another, creating a sense of multiple explosion, whether of thunderbolts, ribbon lightning, or a network lightning flashes. This sense of several levels of emergent patterning becomes stronger and stronger as we turn over the pages and recognize how each page treats the next letter of the word m-o-n-o-t-o-n-e, concluding with the supposedly silent "e." As the word emerges, so does the sense that a monotone is not a single sound but a complex, extended vibration. We can, for instance, imagine some form of implied silence preceding the annunciation of this "m" sound; we can build imaginary rhythmic pauses into the realization of the extended sound at the circumflex score marks. We can imagine it as sudden

strong thunder-burst. But it is the extended nature of consonant, the potential rather than the actuality of the sound on its way to become a phoneme, plus the literal difficulty encountered in pronouncing the whole page of text (what is a repeated "m" sound?), plus the marking out of the time dimension in which this transformation takes place — it is these elements which primarily stick in the mind. Simultaneously, the text asks us to revise our sense of scale: the phonological event being depicted is immensely small. As weather, however, it is immensely large. The page, however, is not small, the information on it is complex, the performance (reading) of the whole work is extended. Is, then, our sense of size paradoxical? It seems to me that a merely paradoxical contrast of dimensions is not how an understanding of the scale of the image works. Rather there is a sense that we have zoomed in, cinematically or via page design, upon the consonant and its potential development into a phoneme. The primary variable in dimension is less a figure of paradoxical contrast than a figure of modifiable (it can be longer or shorter) vectorial movement. We can expand and contract the sound, we can speed up or slow it down. We can hold the dimension of the sound on many different sliding scales.

My second example is two pages, about a fifth of the way in, of Leslie Scalapino's "New Time." Here, the spacing out of fragmentary perceptions and the way Scalapino includes not fully narrated fragments of other moments of thought and back-of-the-mind recollections offers a construction of poetic thought not unlike Merleau-Ponty's sense that the house (or in this case, flowers sewn on a dress) is not seen from nowhere but is seen from everywhere. Merleau-Ponty's is a densified, overlapping instant of perception; for Scalapino, it is as if she is involved in a rapid, fragmentary annotation of that moment in the single level dimension that recorded language permits. In this regard, the writing seems to trace less a pattern of ambiguity than a random pattern of less and more meaning, of less and more intention, of passages brought fully into consciousness and passages left half thought and partly recognized. Again, proximity and scale are important to consider here: the poem reads very intimately, very upfront. In a curious way there is a kind of "ambiguity" in all of this, but it is one to do with the other meanings of ambiguous — the meanings which etymologically connect the word with ambience, with ambit, with going about and around. Semantic equivocation is less important than this sense that we are witnesses to a composition in the process of its performance and, in this regard, are witnessing a thought occurring in a sort of hyper-real time-phase. Each verse paragraph seems to offer a fragment or trace of ambience made of samples of perceptions, samples of the scene, samples of the man's thoughts, samples of the poet's: in structuring the beginnings of a complex event, a series of microscopic increments compose the action.

My third example is Frank Bidart's "Another Life." In many ways, I find Bidart's poem the most intriguing example — partly because it looks at first sight the most conventional. First published in his 1973 volume *Golden State,* it is a poem about a dream he never exactly dreamed — or, rather, a poem which results from attempting to offer an exact rendition of a dream. (The example gives the opening part of a spaciously laid-out poem nearly four pages long.) From the start, the poem proceeds from a state which post-dates any moment of hesitancy, of paradox and contradiction, since it is the *post hoc* consciously semi-fictional rendition of a dream sequence partly lost, partly remembered. The poem's fiction — its performance — is to do with how it manages a conscious symbolization of the action — a rapid, flickering notation which may not be fully accurate. The very telling of the tale is itself a testing out of ontological depth, of truth telling. Hence, too, there is even a suggestion, carried in the way that the whole text is framed in speech marks, that the teller of the poem is not the poet: there is potentially another, more generalized space of performance in which the poem is taking place, whether that space is a place in the mind, a transcript of a spoken report to one's analyst, or a direct, dramatic address to the reader. Potentiality — a possible direction and referencing in the utterance — is important to the performance. So, for example, characters who are part of the narration need re-identifying ("Kennedy is *too* orange"); and, later, parts of the dream are clearly areas transposed from waking conscious thoughts ("when I saw / Grief, avenging Care, pale / Disease, Insanity, Age and Fear / — all the raging desolations"). Such points are clearly highly conscious literary reconstructions which stand for otherwise "lost" parts of the narrative, relating to an absent text in a fragmentary, metonymic fashion.

Insistent, cool, there is no deeper undercutting or ironisation of the voice beyond the matter in hand, beyond how the speaker goes about inside the material of the dreamlike, partly public and "po-

litical" world of the fiction. Beyond the figure that the poem proposes — namely, dream memory as symptom, narrative as a conscious dream whose original narrative is held in abeyance in the mind on awakening — a reader is not asked to suppose any deeper, ambiguously phrased purpose. Likewise, it would be pointless to say of this poem that, in it, the poet has somehow come to terms with his experience. For it is exactly the processes by which the speakers endeavour to locate where the terms are — where are the words and the limits and the exactnesses — which are the fabric of the poem. Later, for example, we encounter (as we might in a dream) a figure who seems to come out of Dante's *Inferno*. But to identify the figure precisely is not the point: he is a dream figure, a potential creation from Dante's text no less than a potential creation from the sort of typical literary debris which lies about in the writer's mind. Here, the wandering line between connotation and denotation is never fully expressed: they merge and the poem is as much a notation as any journal entry might be. It has the same directness, the same spontaneity, as a journal entry; and while it is musically a sustained, assured poem, there is a remarkable lack of distance between the poem's voice and the sort of reading space it addresses. The voice seems almost transparent, as if doing no more than thinking aloud. As Bidart has remarked: "If a poem is 'the mind in action,' I had to learn to *use* the materials of a poem to *think* … I needed a way to get 'the world' onto the page" (232). Even in a poem where the unreadability of a dream is a key theme, transparent communication is at the heart of the poetic matter.

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