

Université de Montréal

**A Poetics of Apprehension**  
**Indeterminacy in Gertrude Stein, Emily Dickinson and Caroline**  
**Bergvall**

par  
Bronwyn Haslam

Département d'études anglaises  
Arts et Sciences

Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des arts et des sciences  
en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise  
en études anglaises

septembre, 2013

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## RESUME

Ce mémoire examine les poétiques de trois poètes très différentes, mais dont les œuvres peuvent être qualifiées d'indéterminées et de radicales : Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) et Caroline Bergvall (née en 1962). Dickinson et Stein sont anglo-américaines, tandis que Bergvall est d'origine franco-norvégienne, bien qu'elle choisisse d'écrire en anglais. Toutes les trois rompent la structure syntaxique conventionnelle de l'anglais par leurs poétiques, ce qui comporte des implications esthétiques et politiques. Dans ce qui suit, j'analyse l'indétermination de leurs poétiques à partir de la notion, décrite par Lyn Hejinian, de la description comme appréhension qui présente l'écriture comme un mode de connaissance plutôt qu'un moyen d'enregistrer ce que le poète sait déjà. La temporalité de cette activité épistémologique est donc celle du présent de l'écriture, elle lui est concomitante. J'affirme que c'est cette temporalité qui, en ouvrant l'écriture aux événements imprévus, aux vicissitudes, aux hésitations, aux erreurs et torsions de l'affect, cause l'indétermination de la poésie.

Dans le premier chapitre, j'envisage l'appréhension chez Gertrude Stein à travers son engagement, tout au long de sa carrière, envers « le présent continu » de l'écriture. Le deuxième chapitre porte sur le sens angoissé de l'appréhension dans la poésie de Dickinson, où le malaise, en empêchant ou en refoulant une pensée, suspend la connaissance. Le langage, sollicité par une expérience qu'il ne peut lui-même exprimer, donne forme à l'indétermination. Un dernier chapitre considère l'indétermination linguistique du texte et de l'exposition *Say Parsley*, dans lesquels Bergvall met en scène l'appréhension du langage : une appréhension qui survient plutôt chez le lecteur ou spectateur que chez la poète.

**MOTS-CLES:** appréhension, indétermination, Gertrude Stein, Emily Dickinson, Caroline Bergvall, poésie américaine, poésie postmoderne, poésie moderniste

## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the poetics of three very different female poets, whose works nevertheless are characterized as both indeterminate and radical: Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), and Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962). Dickinson and Stein are Anglo-American, while Bergvall is of French-Norwegian descent yet writes in English, but all three fracture the conventional syntactic structures of the English language in their poetics. This move bears both aesthetic and political implications. In this thesis, I read the indeterminacies of their poetics through Lyn Hejinian's notion of description as apprehension, which figures writing as a mode of knowing rather than a means of recording something the poet already knows. The temporality of epistemology in their work is thus the present tense of writing; thinking is concomitant with it. Following Hejinian, I contend that it is this temporality that, in making writing open to the vicissitudes, hesitations, reprisals, unexpected events, errors, and the torsions of affect, perturbs determination.

The first chapter explores apprehension in Gertrude Stein's work through her career-long commitment to the present tense of writing: perception occurs concurrently with composition. The second chapter, on Dickinson, hinges on the anxious dimension of *apprehension*, in which unease, in thwarting or repressing a thought, suspends its understanding. Indeterminacy figures as language claimed by an experience it can't itself claim. Finally, the last chapter considers the linguistic indeterminacies of *Say Parsley*, where Bergvall stages the apprehension of language itself in using indeterminacy as a poetic strategy to determinate ends, placing the possibilities, uncertainties and responsibilities of apprehension onto the reader or spectator.

KEYWORDS: apprehension, indeterminacy, Gertrude Stein, Emily Dickinson, Caroline Bergvall, American poetry, post-modern poetry, modern poetry

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: INDETERMINACY AND APPREHENSION.....	1
2. GERTRUDE STEIN AND THE TIME OF COMPOSITION.....	14
3. SCALPED: READING A POETICS OF APPREHENSION IN EMILY DICKINSON.....	47
4. “SAY : ‘MORTAL’ / SAY : ‘PORTAL’ ”: THE PRESENT IMPERATIVE IN CAROLINE BERGVALL’S <i>SAY PARSLEY</i> .....	69
5. CONCLUSION.....	84

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. <i>FROM LINE</i> (LEE UFAN 1977).....	16
2. <i>SAY PARSLEY</i> (BERGVALL AND MAHER, 2008) PHOTO BY CAROLINE BERGVALL.....	78
3. <i>SAY PARSLEY</i> (BERGVALL AND MAHER, 2001). PHOTO BY GARY WINTERS.....	80

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, deep gratitude to Professor Eric Savoy for his role in supervising this thesis. Professor Savoy's attentive readings of these writers and of my drafts and papers, always given in discerning and gracefully written commentaries, contributed greatly to the thesis here (however flawed it remains, and however much more it might have benefited from his guidance had my time management allowed it). Thank you for not totally losing patience with this student or this project.

Deep gratitude to Professor Lianne Moyes, who first invited me to apply to this singular department—études anglaises à l'université de Montréal. I have greatly appreciated its idiosyncrasies as privileges, and have been enriched by living and learning in this linguistic flux. I'm indebted to Lianne Moyes for not only this instrumental aid (the invitation and encouragement to apply and various forms of support throughout, including a research assistant position) but also for her model of ethically rigorous and insightful scholarship.

If the thesis is necessary to being granted the degree, it is also a fraction of the learning that happens over the process of an MA; much of what I learned came from professors I was lucky to study under: Gail Scott, Professor Amaryll Chanady, Professor Najat Rahman, and Professor Savoy.

An early version of the text on Caroline Bergvall was presented at Congress 2013 in Victoria as part of a panel titled "Politicking the Line," organized by Drs. Erin Wunker and Kit Dobson for ACCUTE. Thanks to them both, and to Erin in particular. Another conference paper, this one on Stein and Dickinson, was presented in March, 2012 at the graduate student conference of the département de littérature comparée, *Le piédestal et ses médiations*; thank you to the organizers Catherine Lemieux and Mathilde Savard-Corbeil.

Thank you to Caroline Bergvall and Lee Ufan (and his assistant, Esra Joo) who graciously allowed me to include images of their work free of charge.

Thanks also to all the critics cited here or not, whose scholarship enabled my own, even in disagreement. Thanks to Connor Willumsen for pointing me in the direction of David Hockney and his conversation with Paul Joyce. Grateful thanks to Clara Dupuis-Morency for admirable work correcting my French in the résumé and to Elsa Bert and Anne-Laure Jeanson for unexpected and touching offers of help with the final stages of formatting.

Lastly, heartfelt thanks to the others whose friendship kept me buoyed through this process: Mark Stephen, Kelly Pleau, Ed Kwong, Connor Willumsen, Angela Carr & Kate Eichhorn, Erin Moure, Sara Smith, Marina Dupasquier, William Burton, Marion Van Stayaen, Samuel Garrigó Meza, and Raphaël Poujol. Thank you Krzysztof Welfeld for being unexpectedly there in the end, and to my co-workers at Fitz and Follwell for financially and emotionally keeping me afloat (Annie, Charles, Justin, Krzysztof, Shea, Liz and Dan). Thank you to Gillian Sze in particular, for three years of friendship and her reassuring words that always came at crucial times.



# 1. INTRODUCTION: INDETERMINACY AND APPREHENSION

*Perception of an object costs  
Precise the Object's loss*

—Emily Dickinson

This thesis on Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), and Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962) stems, paradoxically enough, from an interest in contemporary experimental poetics. More specifically, a kind of radical poetics that Marjorie Perloff has called the poetics of indeterminacy (1981): broadly put, poetics that, while they may be very conceptual or crafted, actively resist *saying something*; that is to say, they resist a communicative model of poetry. The attention is less on comprehensibility or clarity than it is on the functioning or materiality of language itself. The curious effect is that in attempting to not mean one thing, the poetry ends up not meaningless but with more meanings than can be assembled or assimilated into a coherent, comprehensive reading. The poets this thesis focuses on are not primarily contemporary, and while it attempts to reach back into the past, its emphasis is not to trace influences but rather to expand what the notion of poetic indeterminacy might mean such that it can be read not only contemporarily but also historically.

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981), Perloff distinguishes two strains in the modernist and post-modernist American literary canon: one whose aesthetics are descendent from those of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and the Symbolists; the other whose aesthetics are the more indeterminate and derive primarily from Rimbaud's. If the former group comprises many writers with highly complex and difficult poetics, Perloff argues that their difficulty stems primarily from a difficulty of allusion; their work may be dense, intricate, and

philosophical, but however convoluted the poem may seem it is buttressed by a contextual coherency and a referential determinacy. As Todorov writes of Nerval: “la vérité existe, seulement la voie y conduisant est difficile à suivre” (Todorov 78) [Truth exists, only the path leading to it is difficult to follow]. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is exemplary: while the long poem is collage-like, dense with erudite allusions, including many in foreign or classical languages, Eliot’s long poem is nevertheless grounded in a redemption narrative and its references, however obscure, are determinate and traceable.

In the latter group, influenced by Rimbaud, Perloff places William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, Samuel Beckett and John Cage; it is this group that is the focus of her book. Here, indeterminacies are not referential, or not simply referential, but also discursive: the undecideability of the poem is of an entirely different order. Perloff quotes from the first part of this citation from Todorov’s “Indétermination du sens?” continued here:

Or, le processus interprétatif est radicalement changé lorsque les évocations symboliques, aussi ingénieuses soient-elles, se trouvent privées de piédestal...elles flottent proprement dans l’air... Le résultat n’est pas, comme on aurait pu l’imaginer, l’impossibilité de suppléer aux rapports discursifs par des rapports symboliques, mais plutôt, au contraire, la surabondance d’associations symboliques; parmi lesquelles l’absence de fondations discursives ne permet pas de choisir. (Todorov 81)

A poetics of indeterminacy, as defined by Perloff, is without a coherent symbolic structure or system; it lacks a discursive ground (or pedestal) that grounds symbolic evocations. Its difficulty is not the interpretation of a difficult symbol but perhaps the absence of symbolic structure, as well as discursive structure. Rimbaud’s sentences themselves are comprehensible, but placed next to each other, they do not cohere narratively nor descriptively. And surprisingly, as Todorov also points out, the difficulty of such a poetics—that is, their indeterminacy—is an excess of meanings rather than a lack of them.

While Perloff and Todorov's distinctions seem both apposite and useful, I have been interested in looking at indeterminacy somewhat less categorically, and more thematically, if for no other reason than that such taxonomies fall silent on those writings or writers that do not fit into the available options. This may be why no female poets are discussed by Todorov, and only one, Gertrude Stein, is discussed by Perloff, in these seminal works on poetic indeterminacy. It is worth noting that Stein, strongly influenced by Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character (Geschlecht und Charakter)*, consciously adhered to and created a model of male genius; Weininger believed that only men could be geniuses with the exception of lesbian women, whom he considered primarily male (Retallack 23-24). Stein's own complicity in this system of canon-formation is fascinating. Thankfully, it can no longer be argued that insufficient critical attention has been paid to Dickinson or Stein, but the question of who is included in such theoretical canons is pertinent. Indeed, Perloff even defends, albeit tepidly, the *exclusion* of Dickinson from a canon of poets favoured by theorists in "The Fascination of What's Difficult: Emily Dickinson and the Theory Canon." Without asserting that the indeterminacies of these poets' work is tied to their gender—that is, without making a gender essentialist argument—this thesis builds off the work of Todorov and Perloff in part by addressing the want of poetry by women in their treatment of poetic indeterminacy.

Rae Armantrout takes up a related question in her essay, "Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity," by returning to a question that Charles Bernstein asked her in 1978: "Why don't more women do language-oriented writing?" (qtd in Armantrout 287). The obvious but facile answer is that, at the time when psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theory undid the notion of the centered subject, women (and with time, other racial and sexual minorities) were only just coming to have access to the subject position that male writers had

long taken for granted. As Armantrout puts it, “as an oppressed group, women have a more urgent need to describe the conditions of their lives” (287). Armantrout posits then rejects this reasoning, as do I. It begs several questions: what does it mean to write clearly? How would one measure the gendering of clarity, however defined? And, as an end-of-the 20<sup>th</sup> century American experimental writer influenced by Marxist, post-structuralist and Lacanian theory, Armantrout herself dismisses poetic forms that “convey an impression of closure and wholeness” and the “poetic convention of a unified Voice” as inadequate and even unethical (288). The clarity found in a lyric poem is suspect for Armantrout. But she argues that clarity might be understood otherwise, in another form than a communicative precision and transparency: “There is another kind of clarity that does not have to do with control but with attention, one in which the sensorium of the world can enter as it presents itself” (Armantrout 290).

This clarity in attentiveness is what Lyn Hejinian theorizes through her account of description as apprehension, detailed in her essay, “Strangeness.” Hejinian there describes writing as a form of apprehending the world. What makes this writing attentive, and what helps it elide authorial control, has to do with William James’ radical empiricism and the temporality of apprehension. Hejinian explains her idea of description as apprehension:

I propose description as a method of invention and of composition. Description, in my understanding of the term, is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency towards effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that is described and making it strange.

Description should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative. Description, in the examples here, is a particular and complicated process of thinking, being highly intentional, while at the same time, because it is simultaneous with and equivalent to perception, remaining open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears. Or one might say that it is at once improvisational and purposive. It is motivated thus by simultaneous but different logics, oscillating inferentially between induction and deduction. (“Strangeness” 138-39)

To come to the point about authorial control, it is useful to first consider the notion here of description as making things strange, and making the processes of perceiving strange. Hejinian's "Making it strange" should be understood here in the Russian formalist sense of defamiliarization; in the sense of making us see again what, through language, we have stopped seeing by habit, through the assumption that we already know what's there. As Shklovsky writes, "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 50). This is close to what Dickinson evokes, around 50 years prior, through "Perception of an object costs/ Precise the Object's loss" (Jn 1073). While these might seem like contradictory statements, it is for the precise reason the English word *perception* can mean the process of perceiving (*OED* def 1; def 3) as well as the result of such a process (def 5):<sup>1</sup> in my reading, Dickinson uses *perception* in the latter sense; Shklovsky (in translation) clearly means it in the former. What Dickinson then means is that a perception, a knowledge of an object, replaces that object itself, costs the object its *thingness*. And if the poem goes on to say, "Perception in itself a Gain / Replying to its Price—," where "perception" more obviously evokes a poetic perception, a written description, Dickinson's poetics are devoted to making familiar things unfamiliar—to distancing, indeterminacy and in this a Shklovskian defamiliarization.

In "Strangeness," Hejinian implicitly connects Shklovsky's literary theory with William James' scientific philosophy, radical empiricism, that knowledge should be derived

only from senses and experiences: “To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from it any element that is not directly experienced” (James 42). This emphasis on alert perception is aesthetic, as Shklovsky and Hejinian so eloquently indicate, and it is also political. Intense attention to the world around us is the most effective way to see what’s there and not what one had been told is there; it threatens ideology.

But this strangeness is not just a deliberate aestheticization; it is also a product of the temporality of Hejinian’s specific “description.” As description, writing is “*simultaneous* with and equivalent to perception” (my italics). This simultaneity exceeds or thwarts determination by the chanceness of what happens: description “remain[s] open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears” (Hejinian 138). In describing the past, one can attempt to control it:<sup>2</sup> the present eludes cognitive control—one often doesn’t understand what has happened until after it has happened, and often, not even then. A description simultaneous to perception, a description as apprehension, involves both indeterminacy and improvisation. This is not to say that the process is without intent or craft, but that the form of writing Hejinian describes is predicated upon uncertainty of what will transpire and how it will transpire: “Poetic language is also a language of improvisation and intention. The intention provides the field for inquiry and improvisation is the means of inquiring” (Hejinian 3). A writing of the future is speculative or conjectural; it is the present, and a writing in the present, that is constitutively indeterminate. Poetry, or more generally writing, is a mode of knowing rather than a mode of communicating knowledge: “Apprehension is [...] expectant

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<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps precisely for this very reason that Hejinian uses the term *apprehension* over *perception*.

knowledge,” writes Hejinian, and as such while it is anticipated it is not yet known or established. And because such a poetics is less interested in the already-known than it is in knowing, its temporality is the present.

It would be a mistake to understand this present as a fixed moment. *Now* is at once slender and expansive: the second one is conscious of it, it’s elapsed and yet it is also always *now*. The technique of art, as Shklovsky writes, is to extend the moment of perception, “to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky 50). The British-American painter and photographer David Hockney has argued that the idea of the moment as a fixed unit is a Renaissance idea—and a specifically European one—linked to innovation of perspective in drawing and painting. Perspective, of course, is given from a fixed point at a fixed point in time.

Perspective is a theoretical abstraction that was worked out in the fifteenth century. It suddenly altered pictures: it gained a strong illusion of depth; it lost something and gained something. At first the gain was thrilling, but slowly, very slowly, we became aware of what had been lost. That loss was the depiction of the passing time. We thought this way of looking was so true that when the photograph came along it seemed to confirm perspective. Of course, it was going to confirm perspective because it was exactly the same way of looking from one central point with one eye fixed in time. (Hockney 34)

In this, photography is less realistic than painting, Hockney asserts, because “we don’t know what a fraction of a second is, stopped, isolated. We can’t isolate a second in our lives” (31-32). “The experience of art is more real, the moment is longer and we can feel that moment” (Hockney 31). The legacy of Renaissance perspective and its temporality have stagnated art, and Hockney points to Picasso’s cubism as the only Western aesthetic intervention that has

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<sup>2</sup> The past is finished, but if one confronts past events through inquiry, that activity is, in my definition

shaken perspective. Hockney is also fascinated by Chinese scrolls, for their surface quality—their lack of perspective—and for their prolonged temporality. He ventures that a Renaissance European “scholar-artist” painting a garden landscape would sit down at a window (or as though he were at a window), and paint the view in front of him. Hockney ventures that the Chinese scholar-artist of the same era would, on the contrary, walk through his garden; the painting of the garden, however it may be composed seated, would be of the experience of walking through it. This scroll perspective takes into account the fact that when we see, we don’t see from a fixed point—our eye moves, our head moves, our body moves and wind moves over and through the greenery.<sup>3</sup> The perspective in a scroll painting is a prolonged perspective and incorporates the very experience of perceiving, that is, multiple points of view, and the passage of time. This theory of perspective is felt in Hockney’s own works, particularly his composite Polaroids and photographic collages. In these, Hockney produces a large-scale painting by collaging 5x7 photos or Polaroids, all of the same larger scene, in their straightforward order. Each photo covers a small section of the larger image and they are placed together such that they form, with small overlaps and variations in light and exposure, what a larger image would have captured. Hockney’s photographic collage *Walking in the Zen Garden at Ryoanji Temple* (1983) is a direct treatment of his imagined performance of a

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for the purposes of this thesis, a present tense description too.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Robertson, in her essay collection *Nilling*, theorizes this phenomenon in a slightly different but pertinent way: “If the subject is the size of a lens, then the world has edges and a frame, like a proposition concerning the human. The perspectival event is a play of scale, where subject and world mutually engage in a representational dynamic. [...] The study of proportion is the contemplation of this figured field: each tracing relates systematically to the human body. The study is pricked through by the social or metaphysical—the third system—in indeterminate patterns. I say pricked through, but I also mean entwined, festooned, infiltrated. By ‘the social’ what I mean is that in spite of the fiction of the static subject, the eye is multiple and moves. Any other supposition is fabular or theological. For example, with the addition of the lens, the human eye is doubled. Likewise, with the addition of desire to the eyes, or grief, or any other emotional rhetoric. By affect, seeing is convivial. And by metaphysical, I mean that contingency is larger than knowledge. Seeing must attempt to recognize itself; the field of this recognition falls beyond, which is an uncertain no-place” (Robertson 49-50).



Chinese scroll painting: the rocks in the Japanese rock garden appear planar, as though one is seeing them from multiple points at once and Hockney makes his process explicit through the photographs of feet following the perimeter of the garden. But other work, such as *Sun on the Pool* (1982), captures the extension of perception better: for example, in the variations of light and the shifting reflections of branches' shadows on the bright aqua blue of a California pool.<sup>4</sup>

Just as Hockney refuses the fixed moment of Renaissance perspective and expands it, capturing the passing of time but also, partly, tracing the temporality and the experience of the composition, the poetic moment in Dickinson's, Stein's and Bergvall's work is an extended present. And it is precisely for this reason, due to the extension of a poetic moment, that indeterminacy—as in contradictions, tangents, and shifts, not as in imprecision—enters the poem. These indeterminacies are analogous to the glitches in a Hockney collage—the repetition of the same bit of branch in two photo-tiles, the shifting of the sandy coloured stones of the terrace between beige, orange and butter yellow. The present this thesis insists on is not an instant—not the epiphany nor the lyric moment—but the experience of apprehension as it happens, and as it happens in writing, the apprehension of apprehension.

The initial impetus for this thesis was the potential for this nexus of a present-tense temporality with poetic indeterminacy, via Lyn Hejinian's poetics of apprehension, to offer a *literary* point of comparison between two radical poets whose work would only exceptionally be compared and whose work is all too often discussed biographically. Stein and Dickinson are two of the best known American women poets. Their births and writing careers are

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<sup>4</sup> While the inclusion of these images makes Hockney's technique immediately apparent, it is unfortunately not possible. David Hockney strictly prohibits all reproduction of his work through a different source and the fee per digital file is beyond my means at this time. I refer the interested reader to David Hockney's website to see the two images. *Walking in the Zen Garden at Ryoanji Temple* can currently be viewed at

separated by only 50 years. Both spent time in the American northeast: Stein was born in Pennsylvania and spent her early adulthood in Baltimore and at Harvard; Dickinson lived her full life in Amherst, Massachusetts. The absence of comparative critical analyses seems unremarkable on the surface: Dickinson is most often discussed as a lyric poet; her poems are written in verse, however subverted; and they treat for the large part metaphysical concepts—death, immortality, the psyche. Stein, on the other hand, consciously modelled herself as anti-lyric and avant-garde; she wrote both poetry and prose inflected by the patterns of actual speech, rarely verse, and in a deliberately simple diction. Furthermore, in all probability, neither poet read the other: Dickinson died before Stein wrote, let alone published and however a wide-ranging reader she was, Stein does not mention Dickinson in any of her papers (Spahr 281). Moreover, the unbowdlerized editions of Dickinson were not available until after Stein's death. A conventional study of influence is thus precluded from the outset. Spahr ventures however that an act of "reading against," as in against temporality, might be the option for feminist reading: the study of connections not contingent on genealogies of influence.

It is interesting then that contemporary radical American women poets sense a link between Dickinson and Stein. Susan Howe opens *My Emily Dickinson* with a comparison of the two, noting that "In the college library I use there are two writers whose work refuses to conform to the Anglo-American literary traditions these institutions perpetuate. Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein are clearly among the most innovative precursors of modernist poetry and prose [...]" (11). Howe goes on to note the subversive power of both writers, their

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[http://www.hockneypictures.com/photos/photos\\_collages\\_06.php](http://www.hockneypictures.com/photos/photos_collages_06.php) and *Sun on the Pool* at [http://www.hockneypictures.com/photos/photos\\_polaroid\\_05.php](http://www.hockneypictures.com/photos/photos_polaroid_05.php).

radical grammars, and the astonishing extent to which each made writing her world.<sup>5</sup> And Juliana Spahr writes a brief but brilliant comparison of Stein and Dickinson, “A,B,C: Reading Against Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein,” in which she explores how both Stein and Dickinson’s poetics command a “response of creation” and reads them as not hermetic poets (as both are sometimes read) but on the contrary, as poets that invite the reader to participate in meaning-creation to an exceptional degree (287). Spahr’s essay is thus an important first step in a comparison between the two poets that is grounded in their poetics.

This thesis attempts to read Stein and Dickinson comparatively, alongside Caroline Bergvall, on the basis of their strikingly indeterminate poetics. Following this introduction, the second section explores these themes in the work of Gertrude Stein, whose own poetics indirectly inform Lyn Hejinian’s poetics of description. While Hejinian mentions Stein only once in “Strangeness,” William James’s radical empiricism informs the entire essay and Hejinian is not only one of Stein’s most astute commentators (see “Two Stein Talks”) but also cites Stein as an influence on her own writing and thinking. As Stein’s professor at Radcliffe, James’ thinking impacts much of her work, just as it subtends Hejinian’s essay. This chapter looks specifically at how the present tense manifests in Stein’s early poetic works: first in relation to cubism and its modes of apprehending the world; second, in relation to the temporality of perception; and finally, in the uniquely present tense activity of speech, looking at the inflection of Stein’s grammar by phrasal patterns.

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<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that Howe’s comparison also serves to ballast Dickinson in an experimentalist context. While Stein is accepted by Howe’s peers as an important forerunner, discussed and lauded and included in the canon of American and European experimentalist and modernist writers, at the time of the writing of *My Emily Dickinson* (published in 1985), appreciations of Dickinson by Howe’s language writer peers was far rarer.

The third section reads apprehension in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, particularly in her gothic poems. In these poems, indeterminacy manifests through her speaker's anxiety or unease about an object or experience not yet fully comprehended, where apprehension (fear) subverts apprehension (understanding). The temporality of such a poem is the present even if the event is past because the poem's structuring tensions—between comprehension and incomprehension and the sayable and the unsayable—occur in the concurrency of the poem's composition, whether one attributes the act of comprehending to the speaker or to the writer herself. Its writing explores a thought perpetually thwarted. Its process is perpetual and its failure to arrive at full apprehension relates to the peculiar temporality of trauma.

The fourth section focuses on Caroline Bergvall, a sound-text performer-writer of French-Norwegian origins who has lived in England since the 90s. She works mainly in the English language but at its borders, both in regional diversities of English and in its historical linguistic limits, like her "Shorter Chaucer Tales" inflected with French (the language of the court in Chaucer's time) (*Meddle English* 2011). Her writing practice traverses both languages and different media (text, sound, installation) and is as often presented in gallery contexts as it is in books. The main piece will that will be discussed, *Say Parsley*, stages a confrontation of linguistic limits first in its evocation of Shibboleth, the moment at which a voice determines its linguistically based identity with devastating consequences, and in the reader/viewer's apprehension of English. We close then, with an investigation of how an aesthetics of indeterminacy might intersect with ethical potential, at which the experience of apprehension is thrown onto the reader or spectator rather than the poet.

Like the work of Stein and Dickinson, Bergvall's poems too plumb language's indeterminacies, but the edges of irresolution where she mines her poems are above all

interlinguistic, before they are referential or discursive (though they may be these as well). The inclusion of Bergvall's work disrupts the institutional cohesiveness of the project in terms of areas of specialisation (i.e. American poetry by women at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). But as this is a project written in English on Anglophone poetics at a Francophone institution in a multilingual city, the inclusion of Bergvall to me seems relevant precisely for its disruption of borders. While I argue that Dickinson and Stein write through a poetics of apprehension, thus producing the indeterminacies inherent in their work, Bergvall on the other hand makes use of indeterminacies to determinate, even didactic ends, in *Say Parsley*. She does so by producing a scene of apprehension in the reader/spectator, who is immersed in a process of perceiving rather than a resulting perception.

## 2. GERTRUDE STEIN AND THE TIME OF COMPOSITION

### 2.1 TIME FROM LINE

*“The time of the composition is the time of the composition.”*

Lee Ufan’s *From Line* (1972-1984) was recently displayed at the Guggenheim museum in New York, as part of the artist’s first North American retrospective (*Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*, June 24-September 28, 2011 curated by Alexandra Monroe). The work consists of a series of large, unframed white canvasses on which Ufan has painted blue lines with a mixture of ground mineral pigment and animal glue—a traditional East Asian medium. Each line is made with a single brushstroke, extending from the top of the canvas where the mineral paint is thick, glittering, and opaque, thinning to the bottom where the cobalt blue paint fades to a transparent glaze. The hairs of the paintbrush become visible between the line’s start and end, rendering the material paintbrush evident—and in so doing, occasioning the work’s temporal project. Next to one brushstroke is another brushstroke, then another, and another, repeated along the full width of the canvas. Each painting in *From Line* consists of such a series of nearly indistinguishable brushstrokes, creating a series of nearly indistinguishable paintings that nevertheless spans twelve years of Lee’s practice.

This is one way in which the reiterations of Lee’s work create a sense of temporal infinitude.<sup>6</sup> The *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson comments in his review of the

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<sup>6</sup> Lee’s *Marking Infinity* explores the infinite spatially as well as temporally; though the focus of my discussion is the latter the former nevertheless bears mention. Lee creates spatial unboundedness in how the fading brushstrokes seem to extend beyond the canvas, an effect heightened by the fact that both wall and (unframed) canvas are white; the gallery’s spotlights reflect brightly, almost blindingly off both, blurring the borders between them. Fittingly, Lee’s paintings and sculptural works were

Guggenheim's retrospective: "Mr. Lee has made the brush stroke his primary device, often to optically gripping and lyrical effect" ("A Fine Line" C33). The organic and gestural quality of the lines renders their lyricism; these are not the crisp lines of minimalism or conceptualism.<sup>7</sup> The brushstrokes are, after all, rather variable—variations in the amount of paint taken up by the brush affect the overall intensity of the brushstrokes, which fade at varying points down the canvas. Fluid and contiguous, variable rather than mathematical or mechanically precise, there is an imperfect, gestural and indeed, lyrical quality to these lines. The work's force comes from its durational affect in the viewer, what Johnson describes as the "optically gripping" quality of the work, a formulation that articulates *From Line's* curious, indeed performative, suspension of time and perception. Its temporal affect, created by the insistence on the process of the lines, comes from its compositional temporality: the lines chart lived time. The mark of the brushstroke does not record time but represents it—it records its own time rather than a unit of time—its depicted temporality durational not mathematical. That is to say, the stroke does not measure instants, but marks its very instance: the passage of its composition is the composition itself. In this, Lee's work visualizes one of Gertrude Stein's best-known—and arguably most relevant—dictums about her writing: "The time of the composition is the time of the composition" (1: 528).

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exhibited in the Guggenheim's Rotunda, the continuous central curve of Frank Lloyd Wright's inverted-Ziggurat-shaped building, a symbol of infinity.

<sup>7</sup> Lee's use of monochrome paint, the seriality of his work and its abandonment of traditional representation evoke minimalism. But Lee's work differs from the aesthetics and philosophy of minimalist works in important ways. The audio guide to the Guggenheim's exhibition cites Lee Ufan: "The advance of minimalist art liberated art from being a lump of matter with meaning attached. I was personally greatly influenced by minimal art but I reacted against the reductive simplicity of it. I learned from the paintings of Barnett Newman but the sense of confidence they emit is too much like outrageous male chauvinism or the expansion of a new religion. Both doubt and empathy are extinguished by these overwhelming paintings. There is no choice but to obey or be silent or cut them

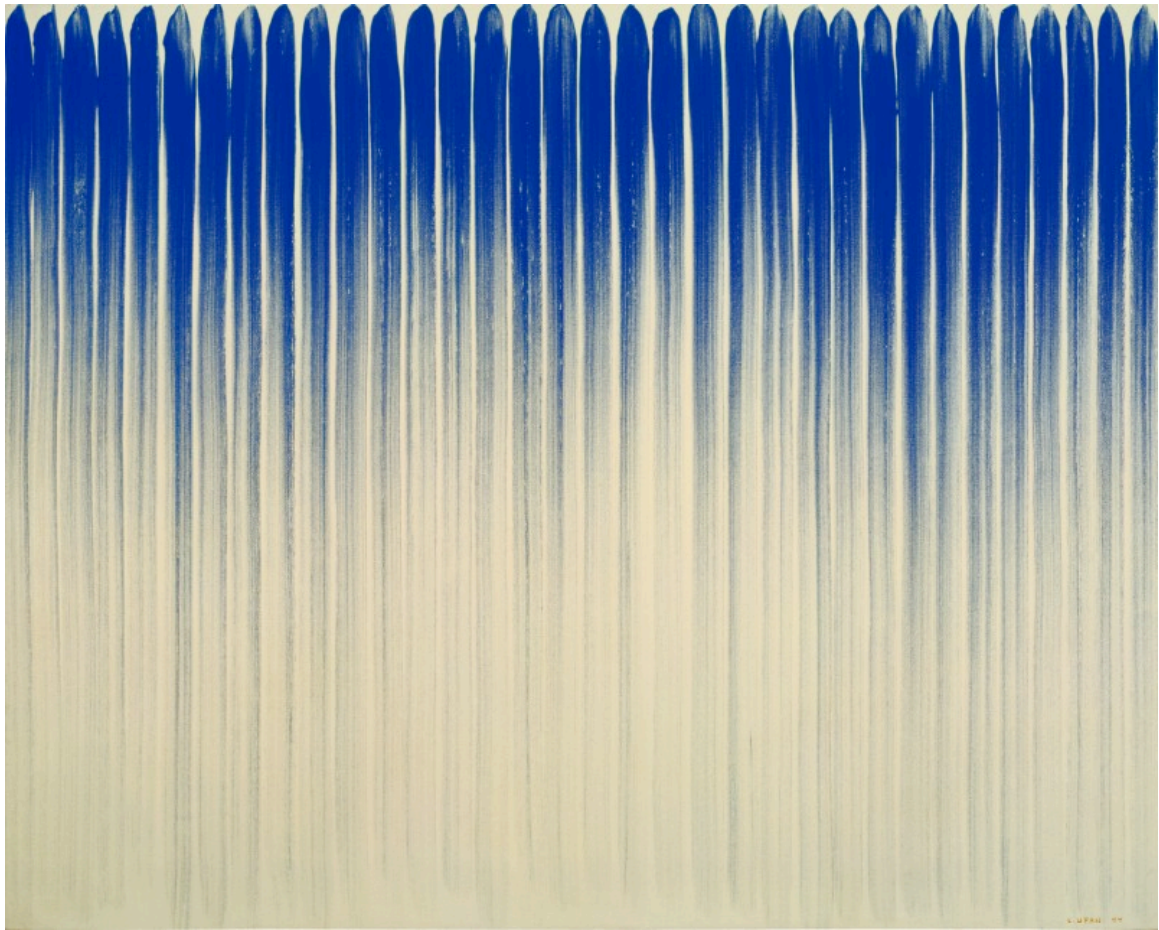


FIGURE 1. *FROM LINE* (LEE UFAN 1977).

The temporal link between Lee and Stein's practice is apparent in other of Lee's works. In *Relatum*,<sup>8</sup> for instance, consisting of a boulder dropped on a glass plane exactly cut to the steel sheet on which it rests; the glass is cracked in the moment Lee drops the boulder on it, thus the moment of the sculpture's composition is permanently recorded. *From line* engages with writing in its motif. While the paintings are presented vertically (in the direction

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up with a knife." Lee's work is restrained rather than reductive, and its restraint opens up spaces of interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> From 1968 onwards, Lee named all his sculptures *Relatum*, often giving them subtitles – these stone-on-glass works are also called *phenomenon and perception b*. Lee went so far as to rename all his previous sculptures "relatum" as well.



of many Asian writing systems), Lee paints these lines from left to right, that is, in the direction of Western writing. Lee is known as a writer (specifically of philosophy) as well as a painter, and the Korean-born artist-philosopher has divided his time between the spaces of Japan and France since the 1970s. Given this confluence of traditions, it's worth recalling that a brush is traditionally used in East Asian cultures for both writing (calligraphy) and painting: the brushstroke functions as the basic unit of both. *From line* meditates on the temporality of composition generally, but also specifically on a temporality of writing.

Our experience of time is often affective, be that anticipatory and anxious or nostalgic—a fact that will pertain particularly to the discussion of Dickinson in the next chapter—though the affect of reading Stein is at worst irritation,<sup>9</sup> at best confusion. But whatever its effects, her investigation of the present tense approaches the scientific in its systemization and rigour. In a century of diverse Stein criticism, Stein's theory of the continuous present has recurred as a critical focus that helps to explain what happens in her difficult work. Bob Perelman has argued that, despite the wide variety of genres that Stein explored, what makes her writing “so provocative” is “[her] lifelong commitment to the present moment of writing” (“Seeing” Perelman 130). And Joan Retallack defends Stein's swaggering claim that she was the great creative mind of her century and Einstein the great philosophic mind through the assertion that “both Einstein and Stein changed something fundamental about the understanding of space-time in their respective fields” (Retallack 6). Steve McCaffery in turn describes *Tender Buttons* as the “germination” of Stein's theory of the continuous present, “where a seeming metaphysics of presence manifests linguistically as

an exquisite deferral of meaning among the interplay of local and not immediately apparent significations” (x).

Despite the importance of the continuous present to Stein’s work, it is often simply identified as a formalist reliance on present participles and abundant use of repetition. This chapter will explore how Stein’s investment in the present moment of writing makes itself felt through three different lenses on her work: cubism, Jamesian perception, and the real-time of speech, focusing chiefly on poetical works by Stein from her mid-early career (1910s-1920s). If the signature phrase from “Composition as Explanation” is “the time of the composition is the time of the composition,” the seemingly tautological phrase is embedded in an essay that makes similar to identical statements about the time *in* the composition: “The time of the composition is a natural thing and the time in the composition is a natural thing it is a natural thing and it is a contemporary thing” (1: 528). Stein’s interest, it seems to me, is where the time in the composition coincides with the time of the composition, where the time of the act of writing coincides with the time (temporality and tense) in the writing.

## 2.2 THE TIME OF CUBISM IS THE TIME OF COMPOSITION: *TENDER BUTTONS*

If analogies with the visual arts have long helped to explain Stein to her readers, the analogies have largely been with cubism, unsurprisingly; Stein’s friendship with Picasso and their exchange of portraits, her association with other cubists (Braque, Duchamp) and her collection of modernist and cubist art at her *27 rue de Fleurus* salon are all extraordinarily well documented and much famed. Stein herself declared that everything she had done had been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, the latter widely recognized as the Impressionist

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<sup>9</sup> See Sianne Ngai’s chapter “Stuplimity” in *Ugly Feelings* or Helen Hajnoczky’s chapbook *A Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, a Steinian portrait of Stein, which consists of the (repetitious) expressions of

precursor to Cubism (“A Transatlantic Interview 1946” 15). Cézanne, she says, “gave [her] a new feeling about composition” and Stein frequently compared her work to Picasso’s (“Transatlantic” 15, 17). There is then ample reason to consider the dialogue between Stein’s work and the cubists.’

But while the comparison of Stein’s work to cubism has often been made, it poses at least two problems that I would like to acknowledge before proceeding with this discussion of the temporality of Stein’s poetics and cubism. The first problem is the reduction of Stein’s own innovation and inventiveness. The parallel between Stein’s work and Picasso’s in particular often places Picasso as Stein’s inspiration, implying a chronology of influence that places her as derivative of Picasso. Given Stein’s role as critic of several other writers and visual artists, as well as her role as patron of Modern art (implying not only aesthetic judiciousness but also alluding to the fact that, in curating her salon at the *rue de Fleurus*, Stein was also curating Modern European art), it stands to reason that inspiration and influence did not flow unidirectionally. The explorations of perspective that Cubists made in visual arts are not unrelated to Stein’s own innovations in her writing nor to her early investigations in psychology.

Secondly, within the analogical matrix, it is necessary to acknowledge and to explore the inherent differences between the media of art and writing. Doing something with paint is different than doing something with words, as words are intrinsically referential in a way that a daub of paint is not. Stein learned through her own writing, particularly the very attempt to treat language as material, that language would always signify. As she explains in “A

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irritations of an undergraduate class upon a first reading of Stein.

Transatlantic Interview” with Robert Hass in 1946<sup>10</sup>, the word portraits of *Tender Buttons* were the “apex” of this experience:

While during that middle period I had these two things that were working back to the compositional idea, the idea of portraiture and the idea of the recreation of the word. I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. (“A Transatlantic Interview” 18)

Stein’s consideration of individual words is marked by an attention to their physical qualities, “weight” and “volume,” measurements of physical properties one rarely associates with words. She manifests a material interest in the metaphorical and abstract. And yet, it is in this process, “at this same time,” that Stein learns that it is impossible to put words together without sense. As Megan Simpson argues, “the point is that even when words are manifest as objects in themselves, they still *do* inevitably mean. Stein’s writing is neither ‘about’ anything, nor is it nonsensically about ‘nothing’; it is a direct encounter *with* language, language *as* language, both material and meaningful” (Simpson 42).

We can see Simpson’s point clearly when we consider some of Stein’s more explicit investigations of words-as-material: for example, the passages in *Tender Buttons* that work

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, Robert Hass’s very mediated interview with Stein. From his introduction: “Since conversation was, in my opinion, one of Stein’s great forms, I believed a substantial sample of her oral pyrotechnics should be included in the *Primer*. This was before the time of the tape recorder, and so it was arranged that one of our friends, William S. Sutton, lucky enough to be on military assignment in France, agreed to secure an interview for me. My questions would be mailed to him in Paris, [...] he would put them to her, and her answers would be recorded in shorthand and sent to me for the chapter to be called ‘Gertrude Stein Talking’” (*Primer* 13). Sutton writes: “it is a pity this material could not have been put on a voice recorder, for no one can know Miss Stein without having sat with her and listened to her positive, almost masculine tone informed with an almost mocking note when it is not charged with an earnest seriousness.” Stein seems to have read and approved, and possibly revised, the

words like paint. Though this manifests in several less direct ways – in the logic, or lack thereof, of words and phrases—Stein emphasizes colour throughout the text, which in some cases reads as an allusion to paint. The text of “A substance in a cushion” from the “Objects” section is illustrative:

The change of colour is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared.  
Sugar is not a vegetable.

[ . . . . . ]  
Light blue and the same red with purple makes a change. It shows that there is no mistake. Any pink shows that and very likely it is reasonable. Very likely there should not be a finer fancy present. Some increase means a calamity and this is the best preparation for three and more being together. A little calm is so ordinary and in any case there is sweetness and some of that. (1: 313-14)

The placing of red and blue together here does not function allusively (say to a French or American flag). The colours even mimic the combinations of paint: light blue and red make purple; light blue and “the same red with purple” together “makes a change” (1: 314)—presumably a mauve-ish change. Though the words of course function referentially (red refers to a colour we can imagine the referent of), they seem to allude to processes of painting. The prose poem opens with “the change of colour is likely” and “a very little difference is prepared,” suggestive of the preparation of a colour, as in with paint on a palette. “Some increase means a calamity” might allude to mixing too much of one pigment in, a catastrophe in colour preparation or to the addition of another colour on the canvas, overcrowding the painting. The poem titled “A substance in a cushion” more explicitly points to the art of sewing than to the art of painting, and it’s possible to read this poem as a juxtaposition of the traditionally masculine art of painting (master-painter) and the traditionally feminine art of sewing (Toklas would later stitch some of Picasso’s paintings onto cushions, as Stein relates in

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resulting typescript because she inscribed it “To Bobby Haas and his progeny forever. You got a

*The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*), to which there are ample references in the poem, possibly even to feminist ends. Stein asks, in the “Callous is something that hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men. Does this change.” (1: 313). The question is cheekily followed up with a challenge: “Supposing you do not like to change” (1: 313).

This reading of this stanza importantly overrides details, including some logical incongruities and gaps—in the line, “light blue with the same red and purple makes a change” what does “the same red” mean? In what sense is a red the same as a “light blue” (is it also light?), or can be the same as a previous red in the poem (read in the poem?) when there has been no previous mention of red? Stein insists on what this colour *shows*: “It shows that there is no mistake” and “Any pink shows that” but how a colour can show that there is no mistake, if indeed the antecedent of “It” is the colour of the previous phrase, is left unspecified. The construction of this reading requires the selective focussing on elements of the text while neglecting, if not ignoring, others. A reading of these lines as paint on a palette leaves one with little to say about its neighbouring sentences: what can “sugar is not a vegetable” mean in this context?

This selective highlighting and repressing is a feature of reading Stein in general. Consider, for example, how Marjorie Perloff reads “A substance in a cushion” while not a “literal description of the sewing process” to be “a sequence of synecdochic images which refer to the making of a new ‘costume,’ evidently a fashionable ladies’ suit and hat, on the sewing machine” (*Indeterminacy* 104): “Someone—we cannot say who—is considering the desirability of investing in a new fashionable outfit. She may be discussing it with someone

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scoop! Always, Gertrude Stein” (*Primer* 13-14).

else (Gertrude talking to Alice as the latter sews?) or simply talking to herself” (*Indeterminacy* 104). While Perloff’s reading opens some interesting avenues of exploration—the last poem of the *Objects* section is titled, “this is this dress, aider”<sup>11</sup>—it also torques some phrases into distortion, such as the notion that “sugar is not a vegetable” means “It [the costume] will be something new” (104).

In juxtaposing my hesitant feminist reading of “A Substance in a Cushion” with Marjorie Perloff’s reading of the poem as a meditation, perhaps dialogic—as a discussion between Stein and Toklas, of the construction of a ladies’ suit, I am in no way attempting to compete with Perloff’s reading nor to debunk it. But rather to point out the myriad different possibilities of reading that Stein’s writing, in her attempt to write without sense, invites. Perloff points to this inherent multiplicity in her discussion of “Susie Asado,” arguing that Stein makes several frames of reading operative at once: a Japanese tea ceremony, flamenco dancing, a valentine from Gertrude Stein to Alice Toklas, among others (76-77). These attempts to closely read Stein are essential—if we do not try to closely read her we do not ask the questions that open up the text, even provisionally, to us—but in the attempt to posit a narrative or philosophical through-line, the reader inevitably produces what Perelman calls “lush supplements” (“Seeing” 136). And such close reading attempts can differ greatly from one reader to another, or even, for the careful reader, within a reading. To closely read a Stein poem—to find some “sense” in it, which as Stein herself argues, it is impossible *to not do*—is

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<sup>11</sup> The poem is titled “This is this dress, aider.” in the two-volume *Writings* edited by Stimpson and Chessman, very frequently used by critics (I: 326). Bookthug’s department of reissue edition titles it “THIS IS *THE DRESS, AIDER*.” (40, my emphasis). This is one of a few discrepancies between the two editions I have alternately used as reference. Given the irregularities in the first publication of *Tender Buttons*—notably the fact that the work, despite Stein’s request, was not copy-edited—it is difficult to say which version is correct. I have referred to and deferred to Stimpson and Chessman’s edition throughout as this is the most commonly used edition.

to be aware of the contingency of that reading, to be aware that such a reading requires the repression of other phrases, or outright ignoring those one can't make sense of. Any reading of Stein's *content* is radically provisional.

Stein's word compositions invite us to look at them the way one looks at a cubist painting: first close up, then from further away, continually oscillating between the two views over time as possible images momentarily cohere then dissipate. Viewing Stein's work is to focus on a clause, perhaps even a sentence, that one can bring into a certain clarity, then rereading the stanza or passage as a whole, where one is distracted by a contrasting, or even incompatible figure, image or phrase. The viewing process is constantly in process: "a finer fancy present." Stein's language in this passage figures an erotics of viewing, proceeding from a *change*, and *increase* which "means a calamity" followed by *calm* and *sweetness*. There's a seduction of the eye: the preceding stanza offers "the chance to see a tassel" and these lines emphasize *showing* – from the more seemingly analytical "it shows that there is no mistake" to the more suggestive "any pink shows that." (1: 313, 314). This ripple of viewing, of apprehension, repeats—sense seems to appear, then fade, new meanings appear and fade. The erotics of viewing a poem from *Tender Buttons*, as figured by Stein here, are Barthes' *plaisir* rather than a *dévoilement*, pleasure of a flickering of revealing and concealing—where what precisely is revealed or concealed seems unfixed, itself a flickering—rather than an uncovering of meaning.

L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps n'est-il pas *là où le vêtement bâille*? Dans la perversion (qui est le régime du plaisir textuel) il n'y a pas de « zones érogènes » (expression au reste assez casse-pieds) ; c'est l'intermittence, comme l'a bien dit la psychanalyse, qui est érotique : celle de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche) ; c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore : la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition. (Barthes 19; italics in original)



What frustrates in Stein's writing is also what seduces: its suspensions and discontinuities. The phrases themselves are at the very least suggestive—of meanings, of sense, of readings—and at the most, only suggestive, failing to resolve into any one reading. Barthes juxtaposes the erotics of the fabric's gap to those of the striptease, equated to narrative suspense and also to full knowledge. The fabric that gapes refuses to give the full picture, narrative or epistemological: "Paradoxalement (puisqu'il est de consommation massive) c'est un plaisir bien plus intellectuel que l'autre : plaisir œdipéen (dénuder, savoir, connaître l'origine et la fin)" (Barthes 20). Stein's work forecloses the possibility of a narrative sense, of the logic of beginning, middle and end. The narrative temporality of the striptease is traditional novel time and the temporality of logical argument. The sense that one finds in Stein is intermittent, flashing, fading; as Steve McCaffery writes in his introduction to Bookthug's reissue of *Tender Buttons*, Stein's continuous presence "manifests linguistically as an exquisite deferral of meaning amongst the interplay of local and not immediately apparent significations" (McCaffery x). Stein's "finer fancy present" is this prolonged present of making sense, an exquisite deferral. As she asks in this same poem, "What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it" (1: 314). If the striptease lays bare the body (meaning, narrative) once covered by clothes, the flashes (of flesh, of sense, of story or intimacy) that the clothed body/text gives up are uncertain; the question is not only *what* is under the fabric, if it is any one thing, but also where the fabric ends and the body begins. That is, speaking literally, the border of material and meaning.

About Stein's plays and novels, Lyn Hejinian writes that "the activity, or characteristic movement ... is patterned rather than plotted" and this holds true for Stein's grammar ("Two Stein Talks" 111). A sentence's plot could be thought of as its narrative or explanatory

progression but *sense* in Stein's sentences does not develop sequentially in a consecutive or progressive way. The sentences function based on repetitions in structure and sound often impervious to sense, however inevitable a making sense of words may be. This is well evidenced in another colour-intense passage near the end of "A substance in a cushion" where the visual erotics of reading are rendered aurally, in the peculiar vibrettos of Stein's phrasal prosody.

A closet, a closet does not connect under the bed. The band of it is white and black,  
the band has a green string. A sight a whole sight and a little groan grinding  
makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round  
thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing. (1: 314)

The passage begins slowly, with a statement that seems vacuous in its obviousness: closets are not, after all, generally under beds, let alone connecting under a bed, so what is this meant to tell us? The doubling of the noun, "A closet, a closet" particularly slows the opening to a stumble. The next phrase proceeds similarly, with the doubling of the first noun "the band of it... the band has a little green string" though the inclusion of a phrase within this doubling and its iambic scansion builds this rhythm. The third phrase picks up speed, beginning however with a similar doubling to the first phrase "A sight a whole sight" but without the comma between the repeated noun and with the addition of the adjective "whole," the score accelerates with the pace of verbal revision, an orality emphasized in the "groan grinding" and the "sweet singing" that follow. The stanza is indeed structured on repetitions: in addition to the three above, "trimming" "red thing" and "white thing" are explicitly doubled in the poem, while minor key echoes are found in pairs like "groan grinding" with "sweet singing" and "red thing" with "round thing." The stanza moves from the iambic feet that have developed by the second phrase to a trochaic beat after the doubling of "A sight a whole sight" with the ringing of "trimming/ singing/ grinding."

The pattern of Stein's sentences is not verse, however much prosody one can find in them, but the repetition of phrasal patterns (discussed at a greater length in the last section of this chapter) is not unlike the repetition of shapes in a cubist painting. This, to an extent, seems to explain the fractal sentence structure and the seemingly arbitrary or unsystematic directionality of the sentences exemplified in the divergences of this sequence from the poem under consideration. It is as though these clauses part from different angles, following different possible tangents at a point, and from different possible points, in a given composition. Stein uses phrases (i.e. clauses, parts of sentences), as much as words, as material.

The first of two poems called "A box" in *Objects* speaks to structures of meaning:

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question,  
out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then  
the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin  
and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a  
fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but  
to point again. (1: 314)

It *is* disappointing to many readers at first: pins point, like arrows point and like words point, and they generally point *to* something. But green points not to red (not to its opposite on the colour wheel) "but to point again" (1: 314) that is to say to the pointing itself, the structure of reference; Stein's box is "an arrangement in a system to pointing" ("A carafe, that is a blind glass" 19). From "A Box"—a structure of containment, the way one hopes a poem will contain its meaning—Stein's poetry morphs into "a white way of being round," a seemingly blank circling, to "something suggesting a pin," to the disappointing (or not) but "earnest" pointing to the structure of pointing itself: to see "a fine substance strangely" is to look at language in the strange way Stein's work commands us to.

It is in looking carefully at the fine but strange substance of Stein's work that one sees that there are at least two qualities that differentiate language from paint: the first is reference, as discussed above, and the second is time. If words are inherently referential, grammar is inherently temporal. The consequences of planarity, of a flattening of surfaces and multiple perspectives are radically different in writing than in visual arts. To disrupt temporal structures in writing is more unsettling than it is in painting, which operates primarily (though not exclusively) on spatial axes. This seems to answer, at least in part, the question implied in McCaffery's observation that, "[a]t a time when the synthetics and analytic Cubism of Picasso and Braque is thoroughly domesticated, reproduced on mouse pads and T-shirts, the text of *Tender Buttons* remains dauntingly challenging" (xi).

This commitment of language to information-giving is not unrelated to time. While cubism is often explained as the portrayal of several perspectives at once, it is precisely this feature that obfuscates many explanations of Stein. The temporality of explanation is disrupted by the "at once;" a continuous present is incommensurate with the narrative temporality of explanation. Showing multiple perspectives "at once" on a canvas does not significantly interfere with the normal time of painting, which is already primarily synchronic. We are used to diachronic time in writing, whether that progression is narrative, explanatory, logical, or simply grammatical. Stein's planarization of time/space, that is to say, her rendering of the time of the poem to the present and to a present that is continuous, disrupts the conventional time of writing but also, radically, of reading.

If the effects of cubism are different in writing than they are in painting, the impetus is at least somewhat shared. In her 1938 monograph on Picasso, Stein details the three reasons for cubism, which in turn offer insight into her work, particularly with respect to time:

First. The composition, because the way of living had changed, the composition of living had extended and each thing was as important as any other thing. Secondly, the faith in what the eyes were seeing, that is to say the belief in the reality of science, commenced to diminish. To be sure science had discovered many things, she would continue to discover many things, but the principle which was the basis of all this was completely understood, the joy of discovery was almost over.

Thirdly, the framing of life, the need that a picture exist in its frame, remain in its frame was over. A picture remaining in its frame was a thing that had always existed and now pictures commenced to want to leave their frames and this also created the necessity for cubism. (2: 505)

Stein's first point is not irrelevant; she introduces it by saying that, "at present another composition is commencing, each generation has its composition, people do not change from one generation to another generation but the composition that surrounds them changes" (2: 505), a declaration that repeats almost verbatim her commentaries on her own work elsewhere. The earliest is "Composition as Explanation," an address given at Cambridge in 1926 (1: 520-29),<sup>12</sup> which Stein summarizes in "Portraits and Repetition" (2: 287-312): "In Composition as Explanation I said nothing changes from generation to generation except the composition in which we live and the composition in which we live makes the art we see and hear" (2: 287). Stein and Picasso of course share this space-time composition (Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century) through which Stein frames the reasons for cubism. This points to a different reading of the famous statement "The time of composition is the time of the composition" (1: 528), that the composition is always in some way *of* the time in which it was made: "the time of the composition is a natural thing and the time in the composition is a natural thing it is a natural thing and it is a contemporary thing" (1: 528). And in the

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<sup>12</sup> "There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of

“composition” which is the time of contemporaries Stein and Picasso, things are “extended:” “each thing was as important as any other thing.” Stein demonstrates this over and over in *Tender Buttons*, where seemingly disparate statements are linked by the coordinating conjunction *and* or by commas—a phrase as simple as “A seal and matches and a swan and ivy and a suit” from “A substance in a cushion” stands as a simple example (1: 314). Two stanzas above in the same poem:

What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness **if** there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it. The question does not come before there is a quotation. In any kind of place there is a top to covering **and** it is a pleasure at any rate there is some venturing in refusing to believe nonsense. It shows what use there is in a whole piece **if** one uses it **and** it is extreme **and** very likely the little things could be dearer **but** in any case there is a bargain **and** if there is the best thing to do is to take it away **and** wear it **and** be reckless be reckless **and** resolved on returning gratitude. (1: 314)

The excessive coordinating conjunctions of the last sentence stretch it out such that one is always waiting to get to the “point,” the conclusion the conjoined clauses are building up to. But the conditional conjunctions (if) and the coordinating junctions (and) link up clauses that seem always on the verge of connecting into coherence. One can imagine a case in which it could show the use of a whole piece of something (*if* one uses it, of course) but also if it is extreme (?) and then the speaker states that “very likely little things could be dearer” so now we are presumably discussing something other than a whole piece, *but* there is a bargain and if there is a bargain (and we were just told that there is) then the best thing to do is to take it away and be reckless and resolved on returning gratitude. The phrase oscillates between something of which it is possible to make sense and something which resists it—it is a text “where a seeming metaphysics of presence manifests linguistically as an exquisite deferral of

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them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they

meaning among the interplay of local and not immediately apparent significations,” as Steve McCaffery puts it (x). This is *Tender Buttons*’ “exquisite deferral of meaning;” a question Stein seems to beg in the first sentence of this stanza: “What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness *if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it*” (emphasis added). It is the pleasure of extension, of the interplay of signifiers, in the prolonging of the moment of reading in the deferral of arriving at any Transcendental signified that would make sense of these signifiers. The deferral of the moment of arrival, if literary and linguistic, also bears erotic overtones, in Stein’s formulation of it if not in McCaffery’s – “what is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it.” And this comes in part through the flattening of perspective the equating of disparate clauses through “and” and “if.” As Lyn Hejinian writes, “the vanishing point might be on every word” (“Two Stein Talks” 106).

Stein’s second point is a question of perspective: the development of perspective in art taught artists to capture what they saw, not what they knew, such that a table was painted such that its nearest edge was longer than its furthest edge, or that the two tracks of a railway or the two sides of a street narrow and meet. This is the realism in art that reached its apogee in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which took the form of an applied mathematics to transform (in the mathematical sense) what the eye sees in the world onto canvas. Knowing both sides of the table were the same size, an amateur artist might have drawn them such; a well-trained artist would find the vanishing point, draw the table such that the nearer side was longer than the far side. The perspectival artists drew what one saw, not what one knew. Picasso and the other cubists moved art in the opposite direction, away from what one truly saw to what one knew.

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are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it.” (1: 520).

The cubist artist could, for example, draw all sides of an object, whether the artist could see all those sides from a single perspective or not. Joan Retallack's comments on Cubism and Picasso are apposite:

The fragmentation and stylization of key details constructed a multi-perspectival object with equal value given to its constituent parts; all became foreground. This created a new geometry of attention that, contrary to clichés about the cold remove of the modernist, highlighted the subjectivity of the artist's investigation through gestural motifs. The cubist portrait is a record of the painter's imaginative relation to the model rather than an 'objective' depiction of it. (Retallack 42)

If one changes the emphasis from what one sees to what one knows, the work loses its objectivity and its claim to the scientific: as Stein writes, "the faith in what the eyes were seeing, that is to say the belief in the reality of science, commenced to diminish" (2: 505). Her comments pertain particularly to art: "the principle which was the basis of all this was completely understood, the joy of discovery was almost over." With the advent of photography, which could capture "what the eyes were seeing" so much more efficiently, and with hundreds of years of European painting which had mastered the art of realism, the joy in painting exactly what the eyes saw, was over.

In fact, while *Tender Buttons* is often discussed as Stein's first foray into the continuous present—as in Steve McCaffery's description of it as the germination of her theory of the continuous present (McCaffery x)—the majority of the verbs in *Tender Buttons* are conjugated in the simple present, with the occasional foray into the simple past, present progressive or conditional modes. Thus the "continuous present" in *Tender Buttons* is rarely given in the continuous present tense (i.e. the present progressive).

A studied look at the verbs in Stein is nevertheless instructive. Contrast this passage from the portrait "Orta or one dancing" to nearly any passage in *Tender Buttons*:



This one is one who is that one, who is one dancing who is one being one doing that thing, who is one being one believing in meaning. This one is one being one believing in thinking having meaning. This one is one being one believing that meaning is existing. This one is one meaning to be thinking in believing. This one is one believing in meaning (1: 289)

One might compare the present participles of this passage (also rich in noun-verb forms, i.e. “thinking” and “meaning”) to those of the previously cited “A Substance in a Cushion,” for instance, in which there are considerably few present participles. All of the –ing words are in fact are participial nouns or nouns denoting a verbal action:

What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not **getting** tired of it. The question does not come before there is a quotation. In any kind of place there is a top to **covering** and it is a pleasure at any rate there is some **venturing** in **refusing** to believe nonsense. It shows what use there is in a whole piece if one uses it and it is extreme and very likely the little things could be dearer but in any case there is a bargain and if there is the best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and be reckless be reckless and resolved on **returning** gratitude. (1: 314)

Choosing an extract at random undoubtedly has its flaws, so we might consider instead the opening poem of *food*, “Roast beef” often precisely used to demonstrate the continuous present in *Tender Buttons*.

In the inside there is **sleeping**, in the outside there is **reddening**, in the morning there is **meaning**, in the evening there is **feeling**. In the evening there is **feeling**. In **feeling** anything is resting, in **feeling** anything is **mounting**, in **feeling** there is resignation, in **feeling** there is recognition, in **feeling** there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is **pinching**. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has **circling**. This makes sand. (2: 327)

In fact, there is not one single instance of the present progressive here. The majority of the –ing words are gerunds, not the participles that, in compound verbs, form the progressive tenses. Gerunds, though derived from verbs, function as nouns. “There is sleeping” like *there is a cat* or *there is silence*. The –ing suffix in English adds an ambiguity: it can denote a verbal action, a gerund, or a material associated with a process (i.e. piping, scaffolding). Consider

“all the circle has circling,” which might be read as a circle made out of the made out of circles, or rather read as though the circle is in the making: if the gerund is a noun form acting as a verb, Stein puts the noun back into action; not a thing made but in the making.

The repeated suffix planarizes these words, lending an element of leveling, of evenness in sound and rhythm to the prose-poem phrase. This leveling makes the phrase no easier to understand, the sameness of syllable at variance with the indeterminacy of these words’ functioning. Increasing the level of ambiguity is the fact that, while these actions are oriented in time or space (in the inside, in the outside, in the morning, in the evening), we are given a doing without a doer: who is sleeping? What is reddening? What is meaning what? What or who is feeling what or how? Stein almost gives us an answer, “anything,” but that pronoun might be either the subject or the object of the action “feeling:” in feeling anything (subject) is resting (i.e. anything feeling is at rest); in feeling anything (object) is resting (i.e. in the act of feeling anything, any object or emotion, there is an element of resting). Repeat this pattern with “mounting.” Then Stein slips us back into the subjectless “there is.” The emphasis over and over is on the action-noun; the repetition of the definite article (*the* inside, *the* evening, *the* circle) further contributes to the opacity of these sentences in suggesting that a definite evening is being described.

The grammar of these phrases creates a sense of both movement and stasis; the idea of action not oriented in time except for the present of writing. The present progressive subverts teleology: it is the tense we use to say that *right now* something is happening, right now, something is progressing—something is in progress. It suggests that before now, this was happening and that it will continue for some time after, but it does not posit itself an origin or an end. Stein makes much of this in other works and in her reliance on the present progressive

tense she posits a challenge to teleological logocentrism, as by now most readers of Stein take for granted. But the verb tense *there is* is the simple present, not the present progressive.

I point this out not to argue that Stein's continuous present is not a continuous present but to argue that the present of *Tender Buttons* has a particular quality. One of the distinctions between the simple and progressive tenses of the present is that while the present progressive describes *what is happening* (what is in progress) *at this moment of enunciation*, the simple present is used for general statements, facts, and truths. Consider again "In the evening there is feeling:" this suggests that Stein is describing a general quality of "the evening" as though the evening were a defined or definite thing (not accounting for variability in place or time or experience).

### 2.3 THE TIME OF INSISTENCE: SPEECH AND REPETITION

*“Now I say again. I say now again.”*

(1: 417)

The play—and the pleasure—in this line from *Lifting Belly* manifests when one reads it out loud. That is, the play turns on the enunciation rather than the enunciated, in the speaking of the sentences as much as in their content. “Now I say again.” Now, at this moment when you are speaking this sentence, you say this word, “again.” *Again’s* function in this first sentence is in one sense as an exemplar, the meaning of the word doesn’t matter (Now I say: dog. Now I say: Stein. Now I say: writing. Now I say: again.) In the second phrase, “I say ‘now’ again”—and indeed, having just said “now” (in saying “Now I say again”), you are saying “now” *again*; the “again” is both specific and performative. Indeed, The “again” and the “now” function performatively, but the performativity is evident in their orality: the words must be spoken aloud or imagined in their utterance for their performativity to be felt. This section of this chapter will focus on the oral dimension of Stein’s work.

For the present tense manifests in Stein’s writing in another form than the “at once” of cubism; this is the time of speech, or as Stein calls it in “Portraits and Repetition,” the time of “talking and listening” (2: 287-312). In this lecture from *Lectures in America*, Stein again explains her present tense but this time she places the emphasis on speech. The lecture turns on the terms in the very bare bones lexicon of the line from *Lifting Belly*: *saying now* and *saying again*, the continuous present (now), and repetition (again), as well as the very fact of *saying*. Speech will serve two purposes in Stein’s narrative of her writing career in “Portraits and Repetition:” first, it is speech that teaches her that there is no such thing as repetition; second, Stein will provide “talking and listening” as a counter-model to description,

representation and resemblance—that is, to conceptions of creation that entail memory and thus the past.

Stein begins “Portraits and Repetition” with an echo of “Composition as Explanation,” re-stating that “nothing changes from generation to generation except the composition in which we live and the composition in which we live makes the art which we see and hear” (2: 287); in other words, the time in which the work is composed informs the composition of the piece—another interpretation of the famous line “the time of the composition is the time of the composition.” Stein argues here that people do not change from one generation to the next so much as the situation that they find themselves in changes; in short, that there is no inherent difference between generations (2: 287). But, Stein explains, how we know one generation from another is by their difference, by the fact that one generation is moving against the previous; like the way we know a train is moving by the fact that the things around it are not (2: 287). Counter to this model, Stein offers the way of her generation, which is also a way that Stein describes as “American:” to make movement “lively enough” such that one sees that movement without the contrast of a static backdrop. In contrast to the train, Stein imagines this self-evident movement as a motor in car: “a motor goes inside of an automobile and the car goes.” Though Stein’s analogy is scientifically fraught,<sup>13</sup> her point has to do with innovation and with memory. What makes something *new*<sup>14</sup> for Stein is what makes something present; it

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<sup>13</sup> A car moves by the friction of wheels against the ground, like a train moves by the friction of its wheels against the rails, and in both cases, the force on the wheels comes from the propulsion of an engine.

<sup>14</sup> I have bothered to detail Stein’s first point in her lecture about generations, though it is a reiteration of other lectures and seemingly has little to do with speech, because it establishes the importance of *newness* to Stein’s writing: Stein believes in genius and in innovation. Yet it also presents her as a relativist (and so more moderate, it seems to me, in her expounding of the new than say the Futurists or Pound—indeed she is perhaps *defending* the new rather than *calling* for it); one must be interested in one’s time yet one is also by necessity of one’s time.

is new on its own terms, its own “intensity of movement” not in contrast with the past. Over and over in “Portraits and Repetition” Stein will use speech as a model of liveliness, of the present, and so of newness.

The first point—essential to the second—that Stein makes with respect to speech has to do with repetition, or rather its absence. Speech taught Stein that there is no such thing as repetition. Stein claims that she learned this from listening to her eleven little Baltimore aunts, who were always telling the same story (because each aunt had to hear it) and yet the teller never told it exactly the same way; her emphasis always differed slightly. Each time one says something, or tells the same story, the emphasis changes slightly; true repetition is impossible: “It is very like a frog hopping he cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop. A bird’s singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence” (2: 288). The point is both that repetition is impossible—variation always exists—but even in word-for-word repetition there is no repetition because the second time, the nature of the statement is insistence. Saying the same thing a second, third, or twenty-fourth time changes its signification. Stein explains that this realization “... was not yet the beginning of writing but it was the beginning of knowing what there was that made there be no repetition. No matter how often what happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition” (2: 289).

One of Stein’s more famous and more controversial—because it is either interpreted as obtuse or as genius—lines of poetry, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” might be used to exemplify her thesis of emphasis; said with as even an emphasis as possible, the tenor of each

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There are certain parallels between Stein and Pound that can be made; ironically, both Americans lived mostly outside of the United States and propounded an explicitly Anglophonic and American form of

“is a rose” differs. Add to this that the very same line appears in at least two poems, in “Sacred Emily” as well as in *Lifting Belly*.

Color mahogany.  
Color mahogany center.  
Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.  
Loveliness extreme.  
Extra gaiters.  
Loveliness extreme.  
Sweetest ice cream. (Sacred Emily SW I. 395)

Why can lifting belly please me.  
Lifting belly can please me because it is an occupation I enjoy.  
Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.  
In print on top. (*Lifting Belly* SW I. 439)

The line appears once in the context of “sweet” things: reddish colours (mahogany, rose), flowers, loveliness, and luxuries (ice cream and mahogany wood). The mahogany centre might refer to the centre of a flower and the inclusion of a reddish brown wood seems to anticipate Stein’s later description of this line of poetry as the first time a rose was red in 100 years). The second context is more dialogic, there seem to be two voices speaking, because the phrase became a motto, and one that Toklas stitched on to daisies or had put onto their stationary.

Despite the fact that “Now I say again. I say now again” seems to say the same thing twice, something changes in the variation on the same four words. The two phrases are of course not true repetition. But one could consider the repetition of the exact same phrase (“I say now again”). Emphasized differently, it expresses something different: it’s possible, for example, to read “I say now again” as “I say [now]: again.” That is, “I say *at this moment* ‘again’ ”—rather than “I say ‘now’ again.” (“I say now ‘again’ ” rather than “I say ‘now’

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“make it new,” but Stein seems to me though perhaps no less arrogant at least the less militant.

again”). Indeed, read this way, it is nearly a repetition of the first phrase (Now I say again). The line illustrates Stein’s point about the role of insistence and infinite variability of emphasis; even more so because *now* is also an adverb used for emphasis (I say, now! Run along now. Does she now?), not only a temporal adverb. In fact, it’s possible to read the entire sentence as an emphatic introduction to whatever would follow it: Now, I say again: [declarative statement such as *this will not do*; *A rose is a rose*; *Rose is a rose is a rose*; *sugar is not a vegetable*]. It is thus performatively ironic that what follows can be read as more or less the same thing. “Now I say again. I say now again”

The notion that there can be no repetition in speaking confers a context important to Stein’s description of her work as “talking and listening.” If Stein learns these things from speech, if it is in speech that she argues there can be no repetition, she applies this tactic to her writing, insisting that when she writes she never repeats (2: 295). But about what *does* constitute repetition, Stein is categorical: remembering, resemblance and description are repetition while speech, movement and “actually existing” are not. And it is because Stein is against repetition, the not-new, that Stein argues against what for her are repetitive modes of creation (description) in favour of the non-repetitive mode of “talking and listening” through which she defines her portraits.

If this existence is actually this thing is actually existing there can be no repetition. There is only repetition when there are descriptions being given not when the things themselves are actually existing and this is therefore how my portrait writing began.  
(2: 290)

Remembering is repetition anybody can know that. [...] this is the important thing, there is no repetition in hearing and saying the things he hears and says when he is hearing and saying them. And so in doing a portrait of him if it were possible to make that portrait a portrait of him saying and hearing what he says and hears while he is saying and hearing it there is then in so doing neither memory nor repetition no matter how often that which he says and hears is heard and said. (2: 294)



Stein's point seems to be not terribly complex. A description is a repetition because it is not the thing itself; moreover, it is a resemblance to a thing and is founded on remembrance of that thing (in either one's writing of it or one's reading of it)<sup>15</sup>. As memory, its temporality is the past. Dialogue or rather "saying and hearing" exist in the present; they are happenings not descriptions: "Listening and talking did not presuppose resemblance and as they do not presuppose resemblance they do not necessitate remembering" (2: 293).

To follow Stein's taxonomy it is necessary to temporarily suspend one's critical analysis—certainly, much of what Derrida writes about presence and absence, and speech and writing, would undercut her theorizing here (despite the fact that in so many other ways, Stein anticipates the writings of late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century poets heavily influenced by Derrida). The key here, for the purposes of reading subtlety into a distinction that seems simplistically absolute and categorical, is the shift to the subjunctive: *if it were possible*. It is very likely impossible to write without memory: How could one write of only things present at the present? With no memory of what came before? Would this preclude a memory of language itself? If impossible, Stein writes towards this possibility: "But and I kept wondering as I talked and listened all at once, I wondered is there any way of making what I know come out as I know it, come out not as remembering. I found this exciting. And I began to make portraits" (II. 297). Stein's categories are most useful to us when taken as her trajectory, as ideals (always fraught) that her writing strives for, "if it were possible" or not. To repeat in

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<sup>15</sup> To make something come out as one knows it, as one apprehends it, to write it as one knows it and to view even this process of writing as a mode of knowing it (or he, or she, or whatever) is as much influenced by Stein's learnings from William James as from speech.

order to re-emphasize Ashbery's praise of Stein, "if, on laying the book aside, we feel that it is still impossible to accomplish the impossible, we are also left with the conviction that it is the only thing worth trying to do" (Ashbery 14-15). Stein is more emphatic at other points in the lecture, insisting on the uniqueness of the time of "listening and talking," and on her genius:

I say I never repeat while I am writing because while I am writing I am most completely, and that is if you like being a genius, I am most entirely and completely listening and talking, the two in one and the one in two and that is having completely its own time and it has in it no element of remembering. Therefore there is in it no element of confusion, therefore there is no element of repetition. Do you do you really understand. (2: 296)

To look at how "talking and listening" exists in writing, it is helpful to turn to Northrop Frye's re-analysis of prosody in *The Well-Tempered Critic* (1963), a typology I come to via Marjorie Perloff's introductory chapters in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (see 39-44). Frye classifies prose, verse, and speech as the "three primary rhythms of verbal expression" (qtd in Perloff 39), in contrast to the typical distinction of poetry versus prose.

The irregular rhythm of ordinary speech may be conventionalized in two ways. One way is to impose a pattern of recurrence on it; the other is to impose the logical and semantic pattern of the sentence. We have verse when the arrangement of words is dominated by recurrent rhythm and sound, prose when it is dominated by the syntactical relations of subject and predicate. (Frye 24 qtd in Perloff 40)

Importantly, Frye points out that this system leaves "poetry" uncategorized: "however indispensable a word in literary criticism, [poetry] can hardly be used in the technical sense of a verbal structure possessing a regular, recurrent and in general predictable rhythm" (24 qtd in Perloff 40). Poetry can be verse or prose or some combination of the two: not all verse is poetry, nor is all poetry verse. And just as there is such thing as "free verse" (i.e. poetry which is not strictly verse), there is also such a thing as "free prose," that is, prose which is not dominated by conventions of grammar but rather bears the inflections of the rhythms of

speech. Following Frye, Perloff suggests that a more effective way to look at texts is not as poetry versus prose but as various combinations of one, two or three of these rhythms (Perloff 40). The associative rhythms of speech, with their repetitions, trailing offs, hesitancies and doublings are immediately palpable in Stein's writings; the opening extract from "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso" below serves as an example.

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.  
Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.  
If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him  
if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told  
him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he  
like it would he like it if I told him.  
Now.  
Not now.  
And now.  
Now. (1: 506)

The repetitions of the opening stanza are hardly verse, and while their construction is "prosaic," that is to say it is grammatical and syntactical—the words fall into place as sentences following the rules of subject-verb-predicate and the repeated clauses constitute a typical conditional phrase—the rhythm that predominates is arguably that of speech. One feels speech in the doubled "would" like a stammer ("would Napoleon would would he like it"). The repetitiveness of a sentence (however itself straightforward) is characteristic of someone thinking out loud—because one often thinks *through* something as one speaks, whereas in writing prose one writes ideally what one has already thought through. The repetitions of a hypothetical conditional (Would he like it if I told him?) might sound like someone worrying to himself or herself out loud. Though taken literally voiced worrying, the line is maudlin and trite, almost comical in its insecurity and search for approval; though perhaps the insecurity that is being parodied is not the speakers' than but a projected security onto "he" or

“Napoleon” or “Picasso” (or where these three intersect) who might not like to hear “it”. Yet despite the banality of the line, under the pressure of its repetitions and inversions it becomes remarkably beautiful—the beauty lies in the rhythms exerted by the repetitions and inversions of the phrase rather than in its content.

The phrasal patterns of Stein’s writings take on their full significance in the context of her argument in “Portraits and Repetition” that “talking and listening” or “hearing and saying” are not a form of remembering but of “being existing,”<sup>16</sup> that is, of being in the present. The repetitions of “If I told him” give way to a staccato pulse of the present: “Now. / Not now. / And now. / Now.” “Now” is a peculiar word, a “shifter” in Agamben’s terminology, in that its reference is contained in the event of its utterance, in the enunciation rather than in the enunciated (Agamben 115). Its effect is also in a way performative, in that in saying *now*, I am creating a reference to the exact moment at which I speak it. There are other temporal markers that are also shifters, certainly; the referent of “yesterday” changes each different day one says it. But *now* creates an awareness of the present, of *now*; in a sense, creates a *nowness* when it is uttered.

The present tense of speech occurs in Stein’s work not only in manipulated speech rhythms as in “If I Told Him,” but also in the recurrent dialogism of her work. Joan Retallack has commented that “Stein loved the temporal immediacy of plays” (39). While Stein’s enthusiasm for plays and their temporal immediacy in particular—their present-ness—bears

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<sup>16</sup> Allegra Stewart glosses this term, which recurs throughout Stein’s writing, as emerging from Stein’s distinction between *being* and *existence*; as such, *being existing* is a “locution [that] seems to express fullness of being, clarity of perception, and detachment from egocentric claims. [...] Here again her theory of the moment of discontinuity between being and existence is crucial. For at any level ‘being existing’ unites past and future—but at its highest level is the product of this moment, not of causal forces” (30). Though Stewart’s description at times verges on the new-agey, the final sentence contains the kernel of Stein’s theory—“being existing” “is the product of this moment.”

out of course in her writing of plays, it is also evidenced in her non-theatrical work. *Lifting Belly* and “Sacred Emily” are scattered with passages that read like dialogue, or more exactly, conversation. Consider the following passage from *Lifting Belly*:

Lifting belly is exacting. You mean exact. I mean exacting. Lifting belly is exacting.  
Can you say see me.  
Lifting belly is exciting.  
Can you explain a mistake.  
You have mentioned the flour.  
Lifting belly is full of charm.  
They are very nice candles.  
Lifting belly is resourceful. (2: 441)

This is not the dialogue of a typical play—nor were any of Stein’s plays typical, for that matter—but seems to mimic the way people actually talk. There are the social niceties and banalities of actual conversation, as in the trite politeness of “They are very nice candles.” It demonstrates too conversation’s actual disjunctions, the way in ordinary dialogue one notices (if one listens) that people often don’t actually listen to each other: “You mean exact. I mean exacting.” or “Can you explain a mistake. / You have mentioned the flour.” These snippets of what might almost be captured dialogue, for which with only minimal imaginative strain, one could envision a situation, are punctuated by the repetitions of “Lifting belly is \_\_\_\_\_,” which interrupt the dialogue and remind us that what we are reading is, to an extent, formally contrived.

There is of course also a dialogic element to the very process of composition, in that Toklas typed Stein’s nightly handwritings for her. Others have suggested that Toklas may have played a greater role than mere secretary and also that Toklas is to an extent the addressee of the work (love notes), perhaps especially so in explicitly erotic and lesbian pieces such as *Lifting Belly*, or in the domesticity (and occasional eroticism) of *Tender Buttons*. In the

context of speech we might understand this rather as a rendering or adaptation of private and domestic language.

Lifting belly exactly.  
Why can lifting belly please me.  
Lifting belly can please me because it is an occupation I enjoy.  
Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.  
In print on top.  
What can you do.  
I can answer my question.  
Very well answer this.  
Who is Mr. Mc Bride.  
In the way of laughing.  
Lifting Belly is an intention.  
You are sure you know the meaning of any word.  
Leave me to see. (1: 439)

### 3. SCALPED: A POETICS OF APPREHENSION IN EMILY

#### DICKINSON

*'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—  
So over horror, it half captivates—  
The Soul stares after it, secure—  
A Sepulchre, fears frost, no more—*

*To scan a Ghost, is faint—  
But grappling, conquers it—  
How easy, Torment, now—  
Suspense kept sawing so—*

*The Truth, is Bald, and Cold—  
But will that hold—  
If any are not sure—  
We show them—prayer—  
But we, who know,  
Stop hoping, now*

[ . . . . . ]

Jn281 ll. 1-9

At their only meeting, Emily Dickinson famously defined poetry to Thomas Wentworth Higginson as that which makes her “feel physically, as if the top of my head were taken off” (*Atlantic Online*). This is the unsettling exhilaration one sometimes feels when reading Dickinson. At least partly because of her startling images, disjunctive grammar and her radically ambiguous poetics—tendencies privileged by contemporary experimental poetics—and in part also, the shock of finding them in a nineteenth-century lyric poet. In an essay on the difficulty and necessity of close reading avant-garde writing, Marjorie Perloff asks, “what happens when [...] there is no ‘aura around a bright clear center,’ no ‘balance’

between given ‘tensions,’ no ‘resolution’ of opposites?” (*Differentials* xix).<sup>17</sup> While Perloff is referring to the challenges of reading Language poetry, her words could just as easily be applied to the poems of Emily Dickinson as to that far more contemporary group of writers. Indeed, Susan Howe and Rae Armantrout’s tributes to Dickinson attest to this surprising poetic affinity (*My Emily Dickinson*; “Looking For Trouble”). Citing Dickinson’s ambivalences, paradoxes and defamiliarizing diction, Armantrout asserts that “both linguistically and conceptually, Dickinson makes radical, breathtaking leaps” (4). Take, for example, the almost post-modern use of parataxis in this essay’s opening quote, “How easy, Torment, now / Suspense kept sawing, so / The Truth is Bald and Cold—” (Jn281 ll. 7-9); the poem’s choppy rhythms; and its ambivalent and ambiguous grammar (“To scan a Ghost, is faint—”: what here is faint? A ghost is faint (barely perceptible) but the comma suggests that is not what Dickinson means; to scan a ghost *is* to faint (lose consciousness?). But the poem also illustrates some of the obvious limitations to comparisons with contemporary innovative poetics: the metaphysical concepts of “Truth” and “Soul;” its emphatic and almost garish end-rhyme between “exhilarates” and “captivates;” its verse structure. But these differences are unsurprising and less interesting than the similarities, and it is in her radical breaks from the traditions of her time that Dickinson’s power as a poet lies. Her strongest poems strain the representational function of language.

This strain in Dickinson reaches its pitch when the poetic subject’s relationship to the poetic object is one of apprehensiveness. I begin with this not very well known, somewhat immoderate and cumbersome poem, in small part for a superficial link to Stein: Both poets

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<sup>17</sup> Perloff’s quoted text comes from Reuben Brower’s description of a ‘key design’ and Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well-Wrought Urn*, and her quotation of them is intended to demonstrate that particular



wrote extensively, perhaps excessively, and inevitably, not all of what they wrote was brilliant. But “writing was the world of each woman,” as Susan Howe insists (*My Emily Dickinson* 11), and a breadth of work that runs the gamut of themes but also of quality, might be a product of that. Perhaps a better reason to begin with this poem is that its theme is precisely the ecstatic experience of apprehension that so often forms the perceptual narrative of Dickinson’s poems. “’Tis so appalling—it exhilarates” makes explicit the affect of the speaker’s perceiving process, the affect of apprehension, in both senses of the word of something the speaker fears. Initially, the indeterminate pronoun “it” of “’Tis so appalling—it exhilarates” seems like it may be “a Ghost,” despite some grammatical ambiguity (To scan a Ghost, is faint—/ But grappling, conquers it,” perhaps functioning metonymically for death generally. Or perhaps “it” is the “Truth,” “Bald, and Cold”—oddly resonant with her definition of poetry as scalping: *it* too is exhilarating, appalling, captivating. By the end of the poem, the most obvious antecedent of “it” is death—specifically one’s own death: the poem continues, “Looking at Death, is Dying—” then goes on to advise “Others, Can wrestle—/Yours, is done—” (ll. 15; 19-20). If in this poem, the “it” takes form, the techniques that Dickinson uses in the opening stanzas to render her topic ambiguous recur throughout her poems, namely, an inherent referential ambiguity (here, the ambiguous pronoun “it”) and her unique, fragmented and most often conflating grammar<sup>18</sup>: the rupturing of the poetic phrase by paratactic prosody, extreme compression, doublings and deletions that undermine coherent readings. And if the poem’s main referent is death, its main affect and arguably its subject is

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kinds of close reading select for particular texts.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout this chapter, where citation is appropriate and not, my reading is influenced by Cristanne Miller’s excellent study of Dickinson’s poetics, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar*.

the experience of apprehension, which I argue is a useful lens through which to read the mixture of precision and indeterminacy characteristic of Dickinson's poetics.

The verb "to apprehend" bears a rich set of definitions all the more poetic for their intersections and contradictions. Originally from the Latin, *adprehendere*, "to lay hold of, seize," this sense of capture is retained in its current English meaning of "to seize a person in the name of law, to arrest" (*OED* def. 2). It also once meant *to seize in writing*, though this usage is now obscure (def. 1.b). *Apprehend* entered English via the French *apprendre*, to learn, which is its earliest usage in English. This sense of seizing cognitively is retained in the current and familiar definition as to seize with the intellect, to perceive or understand (def. 8 a-b). It also once meant to seize emotionally, "to feel emotionally, to be sensible of or feel the force of" (*OED* def 7). Affect and intellect intersect in the current definition of "to anticipate with fear or dread" (def 11.a); apprehension is the anticipation of knowledge that, while anticipated and thus not yet realized, curiously involves enough knowledge of that thing to know to fear it. In this, apprehension (a foreboding feeling) sabotages apprehension (cognition, seizure): anxiety about anticipated knowledge thwarts its comprehension, distancing that which is dreaded.

This is the scene of Dickinson's poem "It was not Death" (Jn 510): precisely where a fear of knowledge sabotages a desire for knowledge.

It was not Death, for I stood up,  
And all the Dead, lie down—  
It was not Night, for all the Bells  
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh  
I felt Siroccos—crawl—  
Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet  
Could keep a Chancel, cool—

And yet it tasted, like them all,  
The Figures I have seen  
Set orderly, for Burial,  
Reminded me, of mine—

As if my life were shaven,  
And fitted to a frame,  
And could not breathe without a key,  
And 'twas like Midnight, some—

When everything that ticked, has stopped—  
And Space stares all around—  
Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,  
Repeal the Beating Ground—

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—  
Without a Chance or Spar—  
Or even a Report of Land—  
To justify—Despair.

Dickinson wrote many poems of definition in which the trajectory of the poem is to detail the character of an ambiguous object, person or experience; if the precision required of a definition is often not only met, but exceeded, the exact referent often remains ambiguous, something like a riddle. “It was not Death,” however riddling, operates in the reverse manner; it is one of Dickinson’s few poems of negative definition. The poem proceeds from clear statements about what *It* is not, through modulated comparisons (first “some,” then “Most”) of what *it* is like. Its progression is of logical thought, as though the speaker is figuring out what *it* is in the process of speaking the poem (or in writing it): indeed the initial negations (“It was not death, for I stood up...” “It was not Night” “It was not Frost ... Nor Fire”) belie of course the common-sense method of reasoning called *process of elimination*, after which the speaker moves to increasingly confident comparisons, if not arriving at a referent, arriving at least at a strong comparison. “It” is “most like Chaos—Stopless—cool” (l. 21). But while the rhetorical

structure of the poem suggests that the speaker approaches an apprehension (understanding) of *it*, *its* various tenors become increasingly ambiguous. The things that it is *not* are relatively concrete: it is not death, night, frost nor fire (yet it *tastes* like them!). But it is “some” or somewhat like midnight (so after all, something like night as well), but “most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool” (cool, like frost is as well). If the rhetorical structure promises a definition, the closest we get is a simile and its object of comparison is a formless void.

Such tensions between nearing and distancing structure the poem. The nearing and distancing are psychological not physical, and thus might be figured rather as *apprehending* and *avoiding* or even as *repression* and *the return of the repressed*, a point we will return to below. The moment depicted in “It was not death” is both epistemological and psychological: it is as though at the moment the speaker begins to understand what *it* might be, she also understands subconsciously that she does not wish to understand it at all and begins to push *it* further from her mind and understanding.

This turn arguably happens with the “And yet” of the third stanza, in which the speaker acknowledges that if it is not death, not night, not frost, nor fire, it nevertheless “tasted” like them all—a surreal synaesthesia. Yet there is a typically Dickinsonian syntactic doubling here, in that the “all” initially seems to refer back to these objects of comparison of the first stanza, but the following line suggests that “them all” in fact is “The figures I have seen / Set orderly for Burial.” This doubling throws into question a reading of the “all” as death/night/frost/fire, as “figures” suggests a bodily shape, or at least a shape, and the two possibilities cannot be conflated. Importantly, it is equally impossible to disprove either, as both read grammatically and logically.

And yet it tasted, like them all,

The Figures I have seen  
Set orderly, for Burial,  
Reminded me, of mine—

Unlike the first two stanzas, it would be difficult to extract these lines into the order of a sentence. The stanza is a paragon of Dickinson's condensed grammar, particularly of "syntactic doublings," "The figures" links back to "them all" and they are also what reminds the speaker of her own figure.

At this reminder, the tone of the poem shifts; the first three stanzas are declarative, and the mood changes with the conjecture that opens the fourth stanza, informing the following two: "as if my life were shaven." The comparison is remarkably attenuated and strange: A is like B, but B when B is in under specific, highly metaphorical or imaginative conditions. That is, the figures reminded me of my figure (implied in "mine") as if my life were shaven, and fitted to a frame, and was unable to breathe without a key... The complexity of the comparison, its (imaginative) conditions and additions are enough to make one ask why the comparison is being made at all, if it requires such modulation. It is also attenuated by multiple deferrals: the reader must trace back from "my life" (l.13) back through "mine" (l.12) signifying either "my life" or "My figure" linking back through "Figures I have seen / Set orderly for Burial," possibly back through "them all" (l.9) to "It" (l.9).

This fourth stanza, reading from the "reminded me of mine" from the third may be the complex reminder just discussed (a reminder, as something that causes one to think of something else because of a likeness or a similarity, has the structure of a comparison). Or, it might extend the logical comparisons begun in the first line. "It was not death," "It was not Night," "It was not Frost," "Nor Fire," "[It was] as if my life were shaven," "And 'twas like Midnight, some" "But, most, like Chaos." The difference between these two options might not

seem very pertinent: either it is an attenuated comparison or a direct comparison, but in either case, it is a comparison and “as if my life were shaven” remains a part of it. The second option also requires a major intervention on the part of the reader, the addition of an “It was” where there is not an “it was.” But this turn of the third and fourth stanzas, marked by a shift in grammatical mood, is also marked by an elision of the “it” or “it was.” After the *it* of “And yet, it tasted, like them all” the *it* is elided in the ‘twas of “And ‘twas like Midnight, some” and omitted in the comparison “But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—.” In *Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar*, Miller distinguishes between two kinds of deletions in Dickinson’s work: recoverable and nonrecoverable (Miller 28). The obvious distinction between the two is that in the case of the former, the reader can logically and with a fair degree of certainty replace the omitted word; in the latter case, the what is omitted is not obvious and remains ultimately irresolvable. “And ‘twas like Midnight, some” and “But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—” would be considered recoverable deletions: the *it* is still half present in the first; the “it was” is clearly implied in the second. The temptation to read an omitted “It was” or “’Twas” into the beginning of the thirteenth line (“[’Twas] As if my life were shaven”) is supported in part by the fact that it is the only line in this otherwise formally tight poem to metrically differ from Dickinson’s ballad stanza: that it is seven syllables instead of eight almost points to an omitted *’twas*. In this possible deletion and the other two evident ones, it is almost as if, in the comparison to the speaker’s life—or to the experience the speaker describes having, of a life shaved and stretched like a canvas on a frame the “it” comes too close, to apprehension in language or to her self, and it must be turned away. The turning away in Dickinson’s poem is the disappearance of the “It.”

The prosody of the poem reflects this apprehensive shift at the third and fourth stanzas. There is an extraordinary formal rigour in the opening two stanzas. The logic of the opening two stanzas is mirrored in their patterns of contrast: the oppositions of *night* and *noon* and *frost* and *fire*, both linked alliteratively, as well as *stood up* and *lie down*. Their meter is exact and further tightened by their punctuation, which neatly breaks each line after the fourth syllable, such that the lines scan 4,4/4,2/4,4/4,2. The form loosens only slightly in the second stanza, when the now thrice-repeated “It was not \_\_\_\_\_” simplifies to “Nor” in the seventh line and the lines cease to pause at their fourth syllable. The tightness of this prosody makes the rhythms of the fourth stanza more obvious, from the small shift in meter (7/6/8/6) potentially pointing to the omitted *it* or *'twas* to the anaphora of the *and* that, in its repetition at the start of each line adds a stress to the first syllable, shifting the iambs to trochees. This initial stress adds a quality of breathlessness to the lines, as though the speaker, in relating the experience, is still experiencing the breathlessness she describes (“and could not breathe without a key”). The experience of apprehension is in many ways what is depicted in the poem.

Nevertheless, the poem is formulated as an attempt to describe some *it*. And the general nature of this *it* is worth considering, and leads to a conflation of these two themes (the poetic object and the affect of apprehension in the poetic subject). *It* as a pronoun can of course stand in for an object (“Your wallet? It’s over there”); a being, either of unspecified sex as in an animal or a baby (She sang to the baby as she cradled it) or of a specified sex (“It’s me,” or, “It’s a boy!”); finally *it* can also refer to a fact or a situation previously mentioned, known, or happening (“Stop it, that hurts”).<sup>19</sup> The *it* of poem 510 is clearly of this last order. In

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<sup>19</sup> *It* of course has many other functions as well, most notably the impersonal 3<sup>rd</sup> pronoun used in statements about time, distance, and the weather; this list is limited.

working through the process of elimination, the speaker eliminates possibilities on the basis of what she experienced: “It was not Death *for I stood up;*” “It was not Frost, *for on my Flesh / I felt Siroccos—crawl—*” (ll. 1, 5-6; emphasis added). And the descriptions of what it *is* like, though they veer into imaginative environments and circumstances, is also put in experiential terms: first in the indicative, “it *tasted* like them all/ The Figures *I have seen*” (ll. 9-10, emphases added); and again, after the conjectural turn, “As if my life were shaven” (ll.13). What follows are small scene-scapes—scene, not land, because they are also temporal and not only spatial, and indeed part of their eeriness comes from the moment time pauses—of a fantastic and gothic quality. “It” is an experience, not an object. If the precise nature of the event is unknown it is clearly awful; the speaker offers a series of richly gothic images: from the chancel and marble feet; to bells sticking out tongues, evoking gargoyles on a church; to figures set out for burial; to “grisly” frosts. Perhaps most devastatingly the closing image: Chaos—Stopless—cool—/Without a Chance or Spar—/Or even a Report of Land—/To justify—Despair” (ll. 21-24). The situation is not hopeless; it is beyond despair, beyond the negation of hope.

Cathy Caruth deals with the issue of un-accepted or un-seized experience and the turns, distortions and dissociations of language in descriptions of it in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth suggests that trauma is as much the experience of living on after a traumatic event as it is the experience of that event itself; her interest is in the epistemological disjunction between these the time of the event and the time that follows. Trauma belies an initial failure of apprehension: it is not a wound of the body but an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions



of the survivor” (Caruth 4). Trauma is then the recurrence of the experience in the present: she writes, “the experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (Caruth 17). It was *not known* in the first place. The potential for it to become known, for it to be apprehended, lies in its repetitions in the present, which both demand to be known and defy our knowledge.

This is the scene of Dickinson’s poem. The speaker confronts an experience that exceeded comprehension when it occurred and which the speaker struggles over the course of the poem to understand. The event is past but the experience of confronting it, of apprehending it, occurs in the present. The poem reads as though a *literal* speaker is sounding out the possible options (Was it death? Was it night?), attempting to come to an understanding of what happened. Its language is tortuous—in its not sayings, and half-sayings—partly because it is at once known (it was experienced) and unknown. Caruth says that trauma must also “be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5). Trauma offers one way of reading the indeterminacies of Dickinson’s work: the poem is devoted to a description of *it*, but the language that describes *it* is a language of negation and modulated comparisons from which the *it* itself eventually slips (first into a contraction, then from the poem entirely). This is the double movement of Dickinson’s poem: a cognitive approach and the distancing of traumatic repression.

Caruth and Hejinian intersect in the temporality of trauma and the temporality of apprehension. In (fearful) apprehension, in the tension between arriving at a thought and pushing it from consciousness, understanding is in limbo—an uncertain period of time of waiting—a suspended present. If trauma is a repetition of the past in the present, the

experience of confronting the past occurs in the present moment. In Caruth's literary analysis and Hejinian's poetics, these cognitive processes happen in writing. That is, the particular sense that writing is thinking, not thought. Hejinian states, "the process of writing, like the process of dreaming, is a primary thinking process. Thinking explores rather than records, prior knowledge or an expression of it" (143). As such, the encounter with a past thought or with a past experience, happens in the present, in that it is not the conclusion of a thinking process but is open to interruptions of new thoughts and events, in this case of the repressions and displacements of trauma.

Description [...] is a particular and complicated process of thinking, being highly intentional, while at the same time, because it is simultaneous with and equivalent to perception, remaining open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears. Or one might say that it is at once improvisational and purposive. (138-139)

In a near echo of Hejinian's improvisation within a purposive framework, Howe writes that "Emily Dickinson's writing is a premeditated immersion in immediacy" ("These Flames" N. pag.). The framework of the poem is set as a meditation on or definition of it, but the speaking moment of the poem is that act of meditation, and as such is inflected by the vicissitudes of the moment: the torsions of errors, second thoughts, and psychic and emotive deflections.

This conflation of an indeterminate poetic object that is the subject of apprehension and the apprehensiveness of the speaker found in "It was not Death" recurs in several of Dickinson's poems. It lies at the centre of poem 315:

He fumbles at your Soul  
As Players at the Keys  
Before they drop full Music on—  
He stuns you by degrees—  
Prepares your brittle Nature  
For the Ethereal Blow  
By fainter Hammers—further heard—

Then nearer—then so slow  
Your breath has time to straighten—  
Your brain—to bubble Cool—  
Deals—One—imperial—Thunderbolt  
That scalps your naked Soul—

When Winds take Forests in their Paws—  
The Universe—is still— (Jn 315)

The source of fear in the poem is not an *it* but a *He*. But who or what he is remains ambiguous in the poem. Dickinson defines him through both sides of a series of dichotomies: animal/human; physical/spiritual; clumsy/expertly dexterous. The poem opens with a simile that compares his fumbling at your soul to that of pianists at their instrument. The point of the comparison is human, but it is an image of masterly and polished skill. What makes this *he* ominous from the outset is this conjunction of this adept effortless of the pianist and the more carelessly sinister effortless suggested by the clumsiness of “fumbles.” A toying indolence of the skilled is more chilling than the clumsiness of the incapable, precisely for the lack of concern it suggests. In its resonance with the concluding couplet, “When Winds take Forests in their Paws—/ The Universe—is still—,” “fumbles” has an animal or carnal quality. Taken with the concluding couplet, there’s a temptation to read this “fumbles” as a pawing, evoking a handling that is both clumsy and lascivious.

However, there is as much to suggest a spiritual nature of the “he” as there is to suggest a physical one. There is the bizarre pluralisation of the comparison: He is compared to “Players at the keys” not *a* player at the keys. Because a piano player typically plays alone rather than with other pianists and their pianos, unlike a violinist for example, the pluralisation is exceptional; it might be explained as a means of emphasizing his power. The word *He* always appears, as the first word of the line such that it is always capitalized. Because of its

initial position, it is not possible to conclude whether this capitalization is significant, though if were intentional, it might evoke a supreme spirit in the Christian religion. This reading is further encouraged in Johnson's edition, in which it is placed almost next to Dickinson's poem about Jesus rapping tirelessly at a door.

Just so—Jesus—raps—  
He—doesn't weary—  
Last—at the Knocker—  
And first—at the Bell.  
Then—on divinest tiptoe—standing—  
Might He but spy the lady's soul—  
When He—retires—  
Chilled—or weary—  
It will be ample time for—me—  
Patient—upon the steps—*until* then—  
Heart! I am knocking—low at thee. (Jn 317)

His hammering is echoed by Jesus's rapping, and the poem is riddled with dashes that punctuate the poem like a knocking at the door. The image of Jesus on tiptoes peering into see "the lady's soul," while it figures as an invasion of privacy and almost suggests the act of peeping, also echoes the opening of "He fumbles at your Soul." The spiritual reading of the poem's *He* is reinforced by the Thor-like image "Deals—One—Imperial—Thunderbolt—" which, while it attributes a godly power to the *He*, figures that power as insidious and vengeful: a pagan god, not a Christian one. Or perhaps Dickinson argues through this parallel that the Christian God is a pagan one or a malicious one (this, in connection with poem #317, seems entirely plausible but lies beyond the concerns of my argument). Moreover, the thunderbolt is not just thunder, but one "that scalps your naked soul" and one for which he has "prepare[d] your brittle Nature." Clearly, the thunderbolt is not merely a storm: it is imperial,

its preparations strategic and manipulated, and its target and touch are not only horrible but also intimate: it “scalps your naked Soul” (ll. 12).

Part of what makes the “He” difficult to define is Dickinson’s extraordinary compression, particularly through what Miller calls, in *A Poet’s Grammar*, “syntactic doublings.” Miller exemplifies a syntactic doubling by the phrase “John eats the apple was large,” in which “the apple” is the direct object of one phrase (John eats the apple) and the subject of another (the apple was large) but both phrases have been compressed into one syntactic structure (Miller 37). These doublings and the lack of conventional connectors in Dickinson’s poems produces ambiguous phrases or paratactic ones, often combining different metaphorical contexts or producing confluences between narrative and metaphorical phrases. The result is often that it is impossible, on grammatical or logical terms, to extract one from the other and the associations between narrative contexts and metaphorical contexts must sometimes be read intuitively. An example of context-conflating compression occurs in the first lines of the poem, in the slippages between He, the players and He again:

He fumbles at your Soul  
As Players at the Keys  
Before they drop full Music on—  
He stuns you by degrees— (ll. 1-4)

The disjunction in agreement between “He” and the players has already been pointed out, but the full simile is in fact, grammatically, “He fumbles at your Soul / As players at the Keys / Before they drop full Music on” (ll.1-3). The next phrase exits the simile and returns to the narrative context of the poem (though this narrative context may be easily read as metaphorical): He fumbles at your Soul...He stuns you by degrees. But there’s a syntactic and plausible pull to read the third line as functioning doubly as both part of the simile (he fumbles

as players at the keys before they drop full music on) and as a new time clause: before they drop [he drops] full music on, he stuns you by degrees. These compressions render Him omnipotently indefinite, in the way he exceeds and confuses the dichotomies that structure the tensions of the poem—in much the same way that the “it” of “it was not death” confuses its structuring opposites.

Like “It was not Death” the poem oscillates between definition and description of affect. A precise moment of transference occurs in the middle of the poem with “By fainter Hammers—further heard” (ll. 7). The slippage happens at the “hammers,” a word which occupies a key place in the poem both in its deflection from the attention on him to an attentiveness to the speaker’s affect and in how it links the poem’s metaphorical contexts, a hinge between the pianist simile (pressing a piano key causes a padded hammer to strike a steel string inside the instrument) and the celestial thunderbolt-throwing image of him as Thor or Ares:

Prepares your brittle Nature  
For the Ethereal Blow  
By fainter Hammers—further heard—  
Then nearer—then so slow  
Your breath has time to straighten—  
Your brain—to bubble Cool—  
Deals—One—imperial—Thunderbolt  
That scalps your naked Soul—

“Hammers” shifts the attention from His actions (he prepares your brittle nature with fainter hammers) to the speaker’s perception of them: they are “further heard / then nearer,” both referring to the speaker’s point of view, further emphasized with the explicit turn to the speaker’s reaction: “then so slow / [that] Your breath has time to straighten—/ Your brain to bubble Cool,” before the final blow. The poem depicts an interaction between the He and the

You in which He is the active part and the you is passive and expectant: He fumbles at your soul, he stuns you, prepares your brittle nature for a blow, hammers, then deals a thunderbolt. The scene, from the point of view of the “you,” is one of apprehensive expectation in which one is being acted upon, prepared, and anticipates the final blow.

This anticipation is created by first, the narrative suspense of the poem, which moves from the readying at the opening to a brief calm before the blow, but also by the unsettling temporality of the poem. “He fumbles at your soul” is written in the simple present tense, which does not mean that it is happening now (this would read, “he is fumbling at your soul”) but that suggests either that the poem recounts a general fact and truth or that the experience is recurrent and habitual. These readings are not mutually exclusive. The verb tense confirms the sense of anticipation of the poem: the “you” knows what to expect, and fears it. And this curious use of the pronoun “you”—rare in Dickinson’s poetry—reflects the two possible readings of the simple present tense. Either this is the colloquial English *you* used as an impersonal pronoun in generalizing statements (this happens perhaps not only to one person), or it is used as a distancing technique, deflecting what the “I” experiences away from herself (or himself). Its purpose is in any case narrative, giving testimony to a disturbing experience. Indeed, more than disturbing, the experience is traumatic. The poem’s tension builds towards an impact, a strike that is lofty and commanding (“imperial”) but also intimate (“that scalps your naked Soul”). The touch is also the touch of the real.

In the final chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*, “Traumatic Awakenings,” Caruth examines a dream from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that of the child burning, re-reading both Freud’s interpretations of it as well as Lacan’s. In the story, the father who had been keeping vigil over his dead son goes across the hall to get some rest, leaving an old man

to keep vigil. A candle topples over and the swathes around his son catch fire. Across the hall, the father dreams of his son standing beside his bed, grabbing his arm and whispering reproachfully, “Father don’t you see I’m burning?” The father wakes up and puts out the fire; the wrappings and one of the dead son’s arms are burned (Caruth 93). Freud initially reads this dream through his main thesis of *The Interpretation of dreams* as wish fulfilment: instead of waking up immediately from the light of the fire across the hall, the father dreams for a few crucial moments, a dream in which his son is alive. Caruth points out that while Freud focuses on what it means to sleep, when Lacan turns to this dream he finds a different question: what does it mean to awaken (97-99)? Lacan and Caruth through him examine this question through Freud’s late work on trauma. Caruth argues that “the relation between the burning within and the burning without is thus neither a fiction (as in Freud’s interpretation) nor a direct representation but a *repetition*,” specifically, a traumatic repetition (100, emphasis in original). The son calls the father to the real, in the Lacanian sense. Caruth reads the call of traumatic repetition as a call to bear witness.

There is no other in Dickinson’s poem, whose death the speaker is called to bear witness to; to speak of responsibility in this case does not make sense. But the speaker is rather compelled to an encounter with an event, past or ongoing: “For what we have in the discovery of psychoanalysis is an encounter, an essential encounter—an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us” (Lacan 53, qtd in Caruth 105). In “It was not Death,” the speaker does not so much recall a past event *is* recalled to a past event precisely for the way it initially eluded her comprehension, that is to say, recalled to a real that has eluded her, its fundamental traumatic structure. The simple present of “He fumbles at your soul” belies repetition as much as the simple past of “It was not Death.” The encounter the “you” is



compelled to is the writing of the poem; but it is also embedded in the repetitive nature suggested in the present tense: the you is compelled to encounter the poem's He and the touch of the real that is the poem's final intimate and cataclysmic impact. "Repetition demands the new," writes Lacan (qtd in Caruth 107). Traumatic repetitions, in their sameness, are a call for difference (one could also here say "change"). The difference is epistemic: "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). The compulsion towards this unknown is a call to know; a knowledge that can occur in writing—which for writers, and poets, of the sort that Hejinian describes and that this thesis is interested in, *does* occur in writing.

Here it should be noted that Hejinian's notion of description is not organized around a perceiving subject apprehending an object. On this point she is emphatic, stating from the outset of the essay that she does not want to "focus on an organizing subjectivity (that of the perceiver-viewer)" (138). In "Strangeness" Hejinian chooses curiously non-poetic examples to articulate a poetics: 17<sup>th</sup> century explorer narratives, including theorizations of their style in the drive for 'scientific' writing (in particular, Francis Bacon and Thomas Spratt); and secondly, dream descriptions. The latter is of particular interest for the way it obfuscates the relationship between subject and object; Hejinian asserts that, "in dreams, the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one" (140). The acting or perceiving "I" of a dream is not the same as the dreaming subject, who may be displaced onto other objects or other people in the dream. In dreams, "deliberate and complex disintegration, dispersal, and elaboration occur, in some instances with terrifying effect" (Hejinian 140-141). In this, dreams are like writing. And the terrifying effect that Hejinian describes occurring in some instances

of such complex disintegration and dispersal of the subject/object opposition is the very instance of these two Dickinson poems.

In her analysis of the father's dream (and Freud and Lacan's readings of it), Caruth suggests that what the father cannot grasp in the death of his son becomes the basis of his identity as subject (92). In trauma, one's existence becomes incessantly inflected by that which escapes one's comprehension. As a persistent experience, it constitutes the subject as well as constituting what repeatedly undoes the subject. Without wishing to conflate shame and trauma, I contend that there is a parallel between shame<sup>20</sup> as Agamben defines it in *Remnants of Auschwitz* and the touch of the real as it occurs in Dickinson, as a moment of simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification.

In his chapter, "Shame, or on the Subject," Agamben builds on Levinas's insight that shame is our being's incapacity to move away and break from itself simultaneous with a desire to flee from oneself:

If we experience shame in nudity it is because we cannot hide what we would like to remove from the field of vision; it is because the unrestrainable impulse to flee from oneself is confronted by an equally uncertain impossibility of evasion. [...] The I is overcome by its own passivity yet this expropriation and desubjectification is also an extreme and irreducible presence of the 'I' to itself. (Agamben 105-6).

As Agamben describes it, shame is at once desubjectification and subjectification: it is both being subjected and being a subject and is produced in their temporal concomitance. There are immediate parallels between Agamben's language and the two Dickinson poems considered

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<sup>20</sup> Agamben's analysis of the feeling of shame as an ontological sentiment is extraordinarily interesting. Lisa Guenther has raised the possibility that it is incorrect, however, arguing convincingly, at least to me, that shame is the basic structure of *intersubjectivity* rather than *subjectivity*. For the purposes of my argument here, the aptness of the term "shame" to the movement of desubjectification and

here. Both poems figure a subject “overcome by its own passivity.” The experience recounted in “It was not Death” is clearly one that happened to the speaker and is defined in comparison and in contrast to her experience of it (for I stood up, for just my marble feet could keep a chancel cool, and so on). One of its most striking images is that of the speaker’s life as shaved and stretched onto a frame: a blank canvas, an emblem of passivity. As discussed above, “He fumbles at your Soul” describes an utter laying bare of the subject “you” whose position in the poem is expectant and passive. Agamben distinguishes passivity from “mere receptivity.” A soft wax receiving the imprint of a stamp is receptive; passivity, on the other hand, is unique to a subject (rather than material objects) in that he or she “actively feels its [their] own being passive” (Agamben 110). What is passive is “what is affected by its own receptivity” (Agamben 110). In her reading of “He fumbles at your Soul,” Miller reads the you’s passivity as active:

‘you’ seem to meet the blow, to have made your own preparations, to have cleared your soul of its debris in just the time He allots you so that it awaits ‘naked’ what will befall. The climax is as ecstatic as it is devastating; the tension of the poem resides in its perfect commingling of the sensations of breathless anticipation and terror. [...] The poem does not distinguish between the feelings and effects of ecstasy from those of terror. (Miller 116)

From his analysis of shame, Agamben moves on to discuss the case in which the double movement of shame is pleasurable: the case of sadomasochism, the echoes of which are evident in “He fumbles at your soul.” Approached as an affective framework of being subjected to and becoming subject in which the seemingly contradictory process is pleasurable (that is, if we don’t restrict ourselves to a strictly sexual context), this tension is evident in

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subjectification that Agamben describes is not too important; I use the term *shame* then here with some hesitation but fully intending the complex movement Agamben details in “Shame, or on the Subject.”

many of Dickinson's poems, including the well-known "My life had stood a loaded gun" and the much discussed Master letters. Susan Howe has convincingly argued, in contrasting Dickinson's master letters to her reading material, that these were exercises in writing, not letters written from Dickinson to a lover. It is clear that Dickinson, as a poet, was fascinated by the experience of a subject being utterly overcome at the same time that that subject constitutes itself in writing. Is this not also the compulsion of death for her, or the other metaphysical concepts, like immortality, that contemporary readers find unforgivable in her? The pleasurable experience of desubjectification and its concurrent subjectification is the precise subject of poem 379:

Rehearsal to Ourselves  
Of a Withdrawn Delight—  
Affords a Bliss like Murder—  
Omnipotent—Acute—

We will not drop the Dirk—  
Because We love the Wound  
The Dirk Commemorate—Itself  
Reminds us that we died

(Jn 379)

In his analysis of Keats' letter to John Woodhouse (of October 27, 1818), Agamben reads that this is the very structure of the writing subject: what he called the "poetic I" (not the "lyric I") is a desubjectification, citing Keats' theses, including "The poetic 'I' is not an 'I'; it is not identical to itself" (Agamben 112). But as Agamben argues, the poet feels a "secret beauty" in this shame, as he returns and vows to continue returning to writing poetry (113). The Dirk in the Dickinson poems analyzed here is the poem itself.

#### 4. “SAY : ‘MORTAL’ / SAY : ‘PORTAL’ ”: THE PRESENT IMPERATIVE IN CAROLINE BERGVALL’S *SAY PARSLEY*

If a comparison between Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein remains surprising, it has well-known precedents—the opening of Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* and Juliana Spahr’s “A,B,C: Reading Against Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein”—and it also has a certain institutional and biographical coherency. Both writers are American women, Stein’s writing career follows relatively shortly after Dickinson’s, both lived in forms of exile and both poets were, in certain ways, resolutely American. The work of Caroline Bergvall complicates this comparison. But it also offers some solutions to the problems present in this thesis and presented by this thesis, which is being written in English in an English department at a Francophone university: why one might write in English today, how one can write ethically in English today, and a critical reading of the present tense. Bergvall, born in 1962, is a sound-text artist of French and Norwegian descent who has made England her home since the 90s. She works mainly in and with the English language, though her investigations of it are plurilingual and interrogate the idea of linguistic borders. Her writing practice traverses different media (text, sound, installation) and languages; engages in performative and site-specific practices and is presented in galleries or public installation spaces as well as collected in book form. These books include *Goan Atom* (2001), *Éclat* (1996, 2002), *Fig* (2005) and *Meddle English* (2011).

“Say: Parsley,” a poem from *Fig*, is composed entirely in the present tense and addresses questions of linguistic purity, the materiality of language, subjectivity and voice. The text published in *Fig* is preceded by two gallery presentations created in collaboration with Ciarán Maher, at Spacex Gallery (November 2001, Exeter, UK with Samta Benyia and Zineb Sedira) and at the Liverpool Biennial in 2004; following *Fig*’s publication, a version was presented at the Arnolfini gallery (Bristol, UK; 2010) Bergvall herself considers the three gallery presentations as forming together one long poem, as she states in an interview with Susan Rudy. This chapter necessarily considers the text of the poem alongside its gallery palimpsests, which enrich its indeterminacies and make its politics more evident. We will begin with the text. Aside from a more obviously poetic introduction, the text of “Say: Parsley” consists of a word-chain mutating by small syllabic shifts. Given the relative shortness of the text and the depth in which it will be considered, it bears reproduction in full.

Say this language heels  
 language keals  
 over  
 S wallow in it  
 F hollow hollow fall low  
 S peak s low ly lie low  
 Say this feels c loose  
 the big mous th chokes  
 has a bong st r uck  
 in the throat  
 Spooks lulls angage anguage  
 Pulls teeth out  
 for the dogs  
 Keep watch r at s the gate  
 of the law  
 Say: “pig”  
 Say this  
 enflamed  
 gorge d  
 Say: “pig”  
 Say: “fig”

Say: “fag”  
Say: “fog”  
Say: “frog”  
Say: “frig”  
Say: “trig”  
Say: “trim”  
Say: “tram”  
Say: “tramp”  
Say: “trump”  
Say: “trumpet”  
Say: “crumpet”  
Say: “crumple”  
Say: “rumple”  
Say: “rubble”  
Say: “bubble”  
Say: “puddle”  
Say: “cuddle”  
Say: “curdle”  
Say: “girdle”  
Say: “gurgle”  
Say: “turgle”  
Say: “turtle”  
Say: “myrtle”  
Say : “mortal”  
Say : “portal”  
Say : “portly”  
Say : “partly”  
Say : “parsley”

One might begin to look at this poem from its end, from the final five lines that could be read aloud as: say mortal say portal say portly say partly say parsley. They could also be read as follows: mortal, portal, portly, partly, parsley. The reading chosen depends on whether one reads the *say* as a command to say, like a stage or musical direction not intended to be voiced or whether it is read as part of the text of the poem. How one voices this *say* is crucial to the politics of this piece, but to commence, I’d like to consider the content of these final five syllabic shifts, with the juxtaposition of the weighted words *mortal* and *portal* with the anodyne terms *portly*, *partly*, and *parsley*. The word chain bears the traces of the Parsley

Massacre of 1937, when, under Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship, the Dominican military murdered Haitians living in the country's borderlands, a border had been very poorly defined for centuries and that had only recently been clearly marked out, *de facto*, by Trujillo himself. To distinguish Creole-speaking Haitians from Spanish-speaking Dominicans, soldiers carried a sprig of parsley and asked inhabitants to speak the greenery's name. The inability to roll the Spanish *r* of *perejil* was sufficient criteria to identify a non-Dominican. The mispronouncers, presumed as Haitians, were killed by bayonet; historians now estimate the death toll to be between 20,000 to 30,000 people. The event is a modern example of a Shibboleth<sup>21</sup>, in which the pronunciation of a single word, in fact, of a single syllable, is used to identify one group from another, to mark them out. In which voice is taken as a marker of identity. Bergvall's *Say Parsley* is subtended by this event, particularly this concluding word-chain.

**Mortal**, subject to death; or, causing or liable to cause death. Origin late Middle English, from Old French, *mors mort*, death. **Portal**, a gate, a place permitting entry and the site of its control. Also late Middle English, from Old French, from Latin *porta* door or gate. **Portly**, having a stout body, somewhat fat; a word relating to carriage, and originating from Anglo Norman, and Old French *port*, in the sense of carriage and comportment, from the verb *porter*, to carry. What weight does this word carry? What does this portly word *portend*? **Partly**: meaning to some extent, not completely. From **part**, originally classical Latin, reinforced by Anglo-Norman and by Old French: meaning side, direction, camp, party,

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<sup>21</sup> "Shibboleth" refers to the event recounted in *Judges* 12:6 of the Bible, in which the pronunciation of the word Shibboleth was used to distinguish the Ephramites from the Gileadites (Ephramites were not permitted to cross the river and thereby escape and were murdered). *Shibboleth* is Hebrew for "ear of corn." The word has entered English usage to mean a custom, principle or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people, esp. a long-standing one regarded as outmoded or no longer important. It is almost uncanny that the shibboleth word in both contexts should be an anodyne edible plant.



faction, share, portion, etc. The terror of the parsley massacre is amongst other things how its parting of a population into two groups blots out the adverb *partly*; there is no partial belonging, there is no way to be partly a part of in the case of enforced identification. **Parsley**. (Origin Old English *petersile* influenced in Middle English by Old French *peresil*). There is value in *parsing* these etymologies firstly because Bergvall's poetic project here as well as beyond this poem involves excavational work into the English language. It also renders evident the fact that this word chain is not merely a chain of sliding signifiers or the supposedly avant-garde insistence on the materiality of language: the words in the poem's word chain are rich with signifying resonances. The poem's word-chain moves from "pig," a candidate word or fractured version of the initiating "sprig" of all the way through to "parsley." In what follows, I will discuss Caroline Bergvall's language play as an enactment of Deleuze and Guattari's minoritizing literature, with particular attention to the way Bergvall renders evident that language is always-already deterritorialized, before probing how Bergvall's troubling of a conflation of voice and identity intersects with debates in contemporary writing practices, particularly as these concern the subject: the parsley massacre demonstrates how much it does matter *who is speaking*, but is not founded on a simplistic notion of who speaks when one speaks.

As described by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka : pour une littérature mineure* a minor literature is not a literary work written in a minor tongue, but one that a minority writes in a major language (29). As a literature written by a minority in a major language, the minor is distinguished from the major by the three following characteristics. Firstly, the language in a minor literature is highly deterritorialized, a term which will be detailed below. Secondly, the narrow context of a minority renders even the situation of the individual political; the

individual's situation translates to the social and political situation at large. Thirdly, the writer takes on a collective dimension; in a minor literature, there is a "collective assemblage of enunciation" such that the work of art is not the achievement of a master but rather is an expression of the community. The difference between points two and three might be thought of as the difference between the politicization of the individual in the work of art, and the politicization of the writer as individual into a "collective assemblage of enunciation."

These three characteristics typify the situation of a linguistic minority writing in a major language. They are the situation of Franz Kafka, around whose work their read their theory of a minor literature, as German-speaking Jew living in Prague who chose to write in the German spoken by the urban German-Jewish minority, rather than Czech, "standard" [German] German, or literary German. There is an obvious parallel to Bergvall, or indeed any writer who chooses to write in a second language, and all the more so when that language is a major one. But while Kafka serves as both origin and paragon for the minor literatures Deleuze and Guattari theorize, their theorization aims not to describe a particular category of minority writers but to suggest a particular attitude to writing, adoptable by anyone. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, the category of "minority" has become quite large, perhaps so much so that it alone loses its significance as designation.

Combien de gens aujourd'hui vivent dans une langue qui n'est pas la leur? Ou bien, ne connaissent même pas la leur, ou pas encore, et connaissent mal la langue majeure dont ils sont forcés de servir? Problème des minorités. Problème d'une littérature mineure, mais aussi pour nous tous: comment arracher à sa propre langue une littérature mineure, capable de creuser le langage, et de le faire filer suivant une ligne révolutionnaire sobre? Comment devenir le nomade et l'immigré et le tzigane de sa propre langue?

(Deleuze and Guattari 35)

This is not hermeneutical nor categorical analysis, but a positing of a particular political and aesthetic problem for anyone writing. The problem is how to write as a minority, how to explore our language as though it were foreign to us, indeed, how to make the familiar foreign: to be deterritorialized as a nomad, as an immigrant, as a wandering gypsy.

The problem of how to be a minority in one's own language can most concretely be addressed through the concept of "deterritorialization," the first of the three characteristics Deleuze and Guattari outline. Deterritorialization can initially be thought of in an extremely literal way: the example in *Kafka* is the displaced German-speaking Jewish population of urban Czechoslovakia. Distribution of a language across space allows the development and change of the language within its particular context: site-specific developments (such as new vocabulary for objects and events peculiar to that environment), crossings with other linguistic groups, as well as the simple fact of distance; as languages change over time and the separation of linguistic communities inevitably leads to different evolutionary trajectories. Deterritorialized language is most often thought of as impoverished language, bastardized, creolized, subaltern to the language of the cultural centre; Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization has obvious implications for postcolonial studies, which indeed, have made much of use of it (see for example, Delaney). In a minoritizing literature, these displaced or regionalized aspects of the language are heightened, accentuated, brought forth rather than suppressed into proper (major) usage. The perceived impoverishment of the language is exacerbated. Deterritorialization is in tension with reterritorialization; reterritorialization seeks to "artificially enrich" the language; Deleuze and Guattari exemplify it through the cabbalism of the Prague school (including Max Brod, among others). But Kafka chooses to work on and in the perceived indiosyncracies of the German specific to Czechoslovakia:

Kafka prendra vite l'autre manière, ou plutôt l'inventera. Opter pour la langue allemande de Prague, telle qu'elle est, dans sa pauvreté même. Aller toujours plus loin dans la déterritorialisation... à force de sobriété. Puisque le vocabulaire est desséché, le faire vibrer en intensité. Opposer un usage purement intensif de la langue à tout usage symbolique, ou même significatif, ou simplement signifiant. Arriver à une expression parfaite et non formée, une expression matérielle intense. (35)

Beyond the context of postcolonialism, deterritorialization is that which diverges from standard usage. Thus in whatever context, it operates by intensifying tensions within a language. This is why deterritorialization or minoritization is not simply a celebration of difference; its ethics can be located in a resistance to mastery and a potentialization of change. In the foreword (“*Avant-propos*”) to *Essais Critique et Clinique*, in which Deleuze’s essay “Bégaya-t-il...” appears (and takes up the theme of the minor literature with important differences), Deleuze cites Proust, French master of French literature, who claimed in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* that “Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère” (qtd in Deleuze 7). Deleuze goes on to argue that the great writer creates a foreign language in one’s own language (9). As Brian Massumi points out, “‘Agrammaticality’ brings out the tensile dimension of language by stretching its elements beyond the limit of their known forms and conventional functions. The atypical expression pulls language into a direct contact with its own futurity” (xxiii). An aesthetics that privileges “agrammaticality” and a stretching of language towards its extremes (Deleuze and Guattari 41) privileges the process of expression over its comprehensibility. Sense is subordinate: “On abandonnera le sens, on le sous-entendra, on n’en retiendra qu’un squelette ou une silhouette de papier” (37). The metamorphosis of language strains its metaphorical function.

The word-chain of “Say: Parsley” minoritizes English in clear, concrete ways: firstly, it is itself a mutating word-chain, metamorphosing by syllabic shifts. The terms chosen

emphasize regional English uses in the Britishisms *fag*, *tram*, and *crumpet*; slang pejorative terms *pig*, *fag*, *frog*, *tramp*; and the tendency towards nonsense manifests in the exceptionally onomatopoeic words *crumple*, *rumple*, *rumble*, *bubble*, *curdle*, *girdle*, *gurgle*, just as Deleuze and Guattari call for the barking of a dog, the monkey's cough, the buzzing of a mayfly to be extracted from language (*Kafka* 48). Placed in a chain, the words are deterritorialized in their displacement from context, especially when one considers that these words are *said* (in the gallery context) or that Bergvall asks her reader to *say* these words (in the *on the page* context). After all, one typically discerns a word, especially a spoken word, based on its context: consider the difference between cap, cop, cup—or rather, fig, fag, fog, frog, (Canadian accent)—then the difference between those words as spoken by someone with a British accent, then say, a Southern US accent or the flat vowels of a New Zealander accent. In the gallery presentations of *Say Parsley*, one hears Bergvall's idiosyncratically accented English reading the text of the poem; the difficulty of discerning a spoken word outside of the context of a sentence is put into play in the gallery versions.

This auditory confusion is present in all three of the exhibition versions in a polyacoustic set up; the gallery presentations were created in collaboration between Bergvall and Ciaran Maher, an Irish composer. Here, recorded word pairs were played through two loudspeakers placed on different walls, each carrying only one word per channel an octave apart. Bergvall and Maher's chosen word pairs were at once stereotypically English and tricky for many non-Anglophones to pronounce, such as "rolling hills" with its Rs and Ls. In Bergvall's introduction to the poem version (the title is punctuated differently as "Say: Parsley") in her book *Fig*, she writes that some gallery-goers reported hearing Hungarian or Italian words (53).



FIGURE 2. *SAY PARSLEY* (BERGVALL AND MAHER, MUKHA %) PHOTO BY CAROLINE BERGVALL.

This auditory indeterminacy features in a new way in the most recent presentation of *Say Parsley* (at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol, 2010), taking on this indeterminacy through excavation. Here, the listener hears this word-chain pronounced by standing under a set of speakers while at the same time, on the wall, these words are projected in Dutch and French, “two of the languages that have influenced the development of English,” as the Arnolfini gallery guide informs us.<sup>22</sup> The divergences and similarities between the English word heard

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<sup>22</sup> While the influence of French in the development of Middle and Modern English is well-known, the influence of Dutch is less well accounted for. Old English originated from the Anglo-Frisian dialects (a West Germanic language) that were spoken by invaders and settlers who came to what is now England from the Netherlands and North-West Germany; presumably, this is what is referred to as “Dutch” in the gallery guide.

and the French or Dutch word seen encourages mishearings and misattributions, further accentuated by the accent the words are spoken in. The fact that the auditory encounter with English is simultaneous with a visual encounter with French and Dutch, brings the history, or a history, of English into simultaneity, into the moment of viewing. If “the atypical expression pulls language into a direct contact with its own futurity,” (xxiii), as Massumi reads Deleuze and Guattari’s argument in *Kafka*, then Bergvall pulls English towards its future through its past, or at least on the past in the present. The point is also a simple if often forgotten one: that linguistic purity is a phantasy, one founded on forgetting the historicity of English, that languages are always-already a pulp, having developed from contact with other languages.

The tendency to forget this, the real political context of this forgetting and thus the urgency of the piece are reinforced in the gallery version of *Say Parsley* for the Liverpool Biennial (2004) where Bergvall copied out onto the wall a speech made by the British Home Secretary in 2002 that urges bicultural and bilingual families to “speak English at home.” The context of the speech was the escalating xenophobia of America and Britain after the Al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Centre in September 2001. More generally, *Say Parsley* implies the conceptual connections between the Shibboleth and quotidian British English use through *Alpabet*, an installation of twenty-five plumb lines with a single letter in white vinyl on each. The missing letter is the *H*, the crucial letter in the Biblical Shibboleth (Sibboleth), and moreover, a letter which to this day functions as a marker of region and class in Britain. Whether one drops the “aitch” or not marks one out socially in Britain—one thinks of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* practising “In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire Hurricanes hardly ever happen.” In translating from the absolute Shibboleth of the Parsley massacre to contemporary quotidian, even mundane, interactions, Bergvall encourages us to think through

similar translations on our own. One might also consider here the role of the *R* as social marker in English, and in so doing, be faced with the contingency of the shibboleth: to drop the *R* of Parsley (“Pahsley”) in Britain is more a marker of upper class; on the other hand, dropping the *R* (Pah-sley) is taken as a sign of lower classes in Boston.



*FIGURE 3. SAY PARSLEY (BERGVALL AND MAHER, 2001) PHOTO BY GARY WINTERS.*

Accent is where language and identity overlap in speech; in writing, this conflation is also referred to as “voice.” “Say: Parsley,” in its allusion to the parsley massacre and even in its translations of the Shibboleth into more quotidian and contemporary events, insists on the violence of identification. “Middling English,” a variant of which appears in Bergvall’s following book, *Meddle English* (2011), was first presented as part of *Say Parsley* (the



“Ampersands” section) of the 2010 show at the Arnolfini and addresses the question of voice and identity head-on. It reads:

More often than not, we each use a voice that speaks for us before we even get to speak. This is part of the reason we spend so much of our lives and imaginations chasing the undoing of a voice or identity we never wished to be tagged as. To dissociate from given identity is crucial to generate new kinds of connector channels and allegiances between people.

In *Say Parsley*, Bergvall thus activates language in the opposite direction of the moment of identification that is “peregil” in the Parsley massacre: dissociation over forced identification. Both, to an extent, are embedded in the “say” of the poem. As an imperative, “say” interpellates a you, as the English imperative exists only in the second person. The “say” as an imperative repeats in English the imperative of a historical trauma, the 1937 Shibboleth of the Parsley Massacre—an effect almost alluded to by the visual rhyme of “s peak s” and “spooks” in the initial positions of lines six and eleven. The imperative *say* repeats *di perejil* in its translation and reminds us of it, but it also asks the reader to speak, to take an active, experiential and even authorial role in the work.

Bergvall is often discussed as a conceptual or experimental poet, and the idea of *experiment* recalls the origins of the word, which came from the French. The French word for an *experiment* is “une expérience” and “to experiment” (as a verb) is either *experimenter* or *faire des expériences*, such that the notions of experience and experiment are deeply linked. Bergvall’s work in this sense is a thought experiment; in that it asks us who read or who view it to think through Shibboleth to contemporary confluences of voice and identity. And that it invites us to an experience, be that in the gallery or by continually reading “say.” The *say* of

*Say Parsley* functions doubly: it's an imperative, and an imperative that serves as a reminder of a horrendous imperative (of forced speech and forced identification) but the say is also the hypothetical. The first two *says* of the poem can be read as the hypothetical, the first in particular, accentuated by the fact that unlike the *says* come after, they are not followed by a colon.

Say this language heels  
language keals  
over  
S wallow in it  
F hollow hollow fall low  
S peak s low ly lie low  
Say this feels c loose  
the big mous th chokes  
has a bong st r uck  
in the throat  
Spooks lulls angage anguage  
(“Say: Parsley” 1-11)

This *say* is the hypothetical *say* that asks us to assume something in order to work out its consequences. Let's say you were born in Haiti; let's say you were born in the Dominican; let's say your first language isn't English; let's say it is; let's say you stutter. Let's say language heals, h-e-a-l or can heal; let's say language *heels* h-e-e-l-s, which is, for a dog, to back off, follow the heels of its owner. Or let's say language keals, obvious homonym *kills* in the context of the parsley massacre, or let's say it's language that loses, that keels over.

Of the myriad manifestations of the work *Say Parsley*, the one in which the complexities of the work are rendered most evident is in the above discussed piece from the Arnolfini exhibition (2010) in which the French and Dutch words are projected onto the wall as one hears Bergvall read the text of “Say: Parsley.” It sets up an encounter with language in

both its historicity and its contemporaneity. Bergvall seems to draw on this encounter and the heightened attention it invites in a passage from her most recent book, *Meddle English*.

The apprenticeship of dialogue as encounter is necessarily a meddling of boundary, a heightening of points of internalized resistance or ideological differences. One's comprehension is meddled with. Then, let us imagine it as a point of contact, a point of uncovering. Rather than retaliation, a point of sharpened attention. Transitive directionality, transitive awareness. (*Meddle English* 19)

## CONCLUSION

*You're asking about fear. To feel fear is not unusual at any point in one's life. It can even illuminate necessity. I try in my life to go towards the things I fear, to approach difficulty and complexity as closely as I can. [...] To claim a discursive right you have to engage intimately, and repeatedly, with that right's potential at the most intimate sites of your relationship to language. A right is not only given by a community or institution. It must be psychologically and intellectually confronted, even invented, in the privacy of cognition and composition. [...]*

*I write from the position of someone trying to open her thinking in language. For me this can be an extraordinarily difficult process. I'm plunged into a solitude that is both imagined and actual. I have to invent how to think at each step of the process, even within the moment. I often feel that I don't know how to think, I don't know how to write. I try to seize this experience of not-knowing and let it become sentences.*

*--Lisa Robertson, Interview with CWILA*

*HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking. 'He may pause but he must not hesitate' --Ruskin.*

*--Susan Howe, My Emily Dickinson (All emphases Howe's)*

In this thesis, I try to describe poetry as the tracks of apprehension, in firstly the epistemic sense but also in the affective one. A poetics of apprehension implies a specific temporality: that of the present tense in that apprehension is concomitant with writing. This poetics is above all evident in the work of Gertrude Stein, discussed in the first chapter, in which apprehension figures as the act of perception, which Stein examined rigorously and systematically through her work as both a science and an art. Stein structured her early to mid career poetical works on the notion that “the time of the composition is the time of composition,” in which there is no outside represented temporality but a concentrated meditation that occurs in, through and with writing itself. The poems track processes of perception and are themselves perception's tracks.

In the work of Emily Dickinson, the notion of apprehension takes on an anxious and trepidatious order. In poems we could call gothic, Dickinson's writing documents the complex

and dynamic interplay between apprehension as an attuned and perspicacious comprehension and apprehension as a fearful dreading. The poem is structured by the tensions between the desire to know precisely and the desire not to know at all. I read this dread as anticipatory in a general sense, but specifically as the resurgence of a past that was not fully known at the moment it occurred, via Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience*. Apprehension occurs in the present precisely because it failed in the past. Dickinson's fascination with this experience of being overcome, of a concomitant subjectification and desubjectification, is also her fascination with writing.

The final chapter looks at Caroline Bergvall's *Say Parsley* as a contemporary poet who engages with the complexities of indeterminacy and apprehension, specifically linguistic, in the political context of global English. As a conceptual work, *Say Parsley* resists *saying* something in the content of the piece—with the exception of its introduction—but compels its reader to *say*, as both the imperative to speak and the invitation to imagine. Apprehension is set off in the spectator who confronts linguistic indeterminacy and possibility.

This thesis presupposes knowledge does not imply certainty; that if knowledge and writing are concomitant processes, hesitations in either one impact the other. The three poets discussed, however vastly different their poems may be, all enact a poetics of indeterminacy that relates to the temporality of the poem and the temporality of apprehension. As Howe reminds us, the word *hesitate* relates etymologically to the stutter: in Stein's doublings of phrases and cubist grammar; in the ambiguities of Dickinson's extreme compression, doublings and parataxis; and in the glossolalia of *Say Parsley*'s word chain and recordings, language and thought stutter. This is, as Deleuze reads the stutter, the extension of language

itself. It is also, as Robertson puts it above, simply an intimate and honest engagement with writing.

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