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Ph.D.(English Literature)

GRADE - DEGREE

ENGLISH

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT - FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

TITRE DE LA THÈSE - TITLE OF THE THESIS

TAKING THE REPEATS: MODERN AMERICAN POETRY IN IMITATION  
OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MUSICAL FORMS

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Poet, be seated at the piano.

. . . . .

We may return to Mozart.

Wallace Stevens (“Mozart, 1935”)

## Abstract

This dissertation surveys the various efforts by modern American poets to imitate the repetitive structures of eighteenth-century instrumental music, setting in a wider historical context some of the central achievements of the twentieth-century long poem, as well as offering readings of some lesser-known but interesting works that draw on musical structures and processes as their formal models.

The introduction examines why such disparate poets have wished to organize their work through some analogue to musical form. Taking their cues from western instrumental composition, writers have let the shapes of their poems be determined not by the demands of narrative for succession or the demands of discursive argument for progressive development but instead by music's repetitive imperative. In musical structures such as the variation set, the fugue, and the sonata, poets found constructive techniques congenial to the twentieth-century mind. Eighteenth-century musical genres can be seen as anticipating in a remarkable manner modern ideas concerning the circular patterns of thought and experience.

The first chapter examines poetry modeled on the variation set, surveying works by Randall Jarrell, Wallace Stevens, Harry Mathews, Charles Olson, and Frank O'Hara. The second chapter deals with poetic fugues, including works by May Sarton, William Bronk, Weldon Kees, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath. It also examines the validity of fugal analogies at both the macro- and micro-level of analysis in two key modern long poems, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Louis Zukofsky's "A". The final chapter examines poetic versions of sonata forms, including the sonata-based genres of symphony and quartet. It deals with works by Donald Justice, Conrad Aiken, John Gould Fletcher, Stevens, W.C. Williams, and John Ashbery. T.S. Eliot is central to

the discussion: the chapter reexamines the validity of musical analogy in relation to *Four Quartets* and places Eliot's achievement in historical context, as a culmination of earlier currents and as a dominant presence in later musically-patterned poetry.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the readers of this dissertation for undertaking a task that, given the wide scope of this survey and the interdisciplinary nature of the project, undoubtedly involved a larger-than-usual investment of time and energy. Thank you also to the faculty and students of the University of Ottawa English Department, especially those colleagues who read and critiqued a draft of several pages from the initial chapter. In particular, I would like to thank Angela Woollam for her help and friendship: she sets an example of consistent dedication to scholarship that necessarily inspires those around her to greater efforts.

Professor Paul Merkley of the U. of O. Music Department helped shape the initial plan for the dissertation with some timely warnings and suggestions, as did Professor David Jarraway of the English Department. I owe a great debt to Professor David Rampton for his supervision over the past few years. His enthusiasm for the task was unflagging. I thank him for his generosity, for the latitude he allowed me to develop and focus my own ideas, and for his editorial precision and thoroughness. I especially appreciated his frequent expressions of faith both in the validity of the work and in my capacity to carry through a project that, in its scope, was fraught with unforeseen pitfalls. Finally, for reading 120 pages of uneven drafts while heroically ignoring the sights of Tuscany, Prof. Rampton deserves a special thank you.

I owe a great deal to my grandfather, Fred MacKinnon, for his generosity over the past years, which helped make our family balancing act less difficult. Thank you to Kelly for her patience with a project that involved countless small beginnings and endings and therefore no end of attendant turmoil. As for turmoil: thank you, Ian, for setting me your own strict deadlines. Now that it is all done, you can go ahead and walk.

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## A note on method: some problems of musical/poetic criticism

In reaction against the excesses of the preceding age, musical/literary criticism in our time has become a remarkably sober enterprise. Those engaged in such projects almost invariably begin by sounding a cautionary note concerning the need to respect the differences between musical and literary forms of expression, to avoid pushing analogies between the arts too far. Criticism remains on a strict diet after a nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century binge of inter-art comparisons. Although thinkers of the late nineteenth century frequently described poetry and music as incommensurate forms of expression, they nevertheless united them in a single aesthetic order, with poetry as mere mimesis aspiring toward those spiritual realms touched solely by music. Sidney Lanier, the author of what is probably the first poetic “Symphony,” could write in 1876 that “as Shakspeare is, so far, our king of conventional tones, so is Beethoven our king of unconventional tones. And as music takes up the thread which language drops, so it is where Shakspeare ends that Beethoven begins” (290). For Lanier and his contemporaries, poetry and music may be at different points on a continuum, but their very presence together on that continuum makes them liable to comparison. The early twentieth century, having largely absorbed such thinking, saw a flourishing of casual inter-art analogies, stretching far beyond the proverbial and quite innocuous use of such phrases as the ‘music of poetry.’<sup>1</sup> In a 1931 article on Pound’s *XXX Cantos*, for instance (reprinted in *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*), Dudley Fitts could confidently refer to a concept of the “harmony of the image” in Pound’s work, wherein “the poet uses each image, or each detail of the image, precisely as the musician employs a note,

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Scher suggests, however, that such commonplace phrases are far from innocuous, lending “a deceptively axiomatic aura of legitimacy to comparisons of the two arts. Indeed, by their cumulative presence alone, these clichés seem to authenticate what has been traditionally viewed in aesthetic speculation as a relation of mutual dependency” (225).

or single pitch” (Homberger 248), and thus could say of a certain passage, “Here the chord is exceptionally rich. It is a harmonization of several daringly dissident tones” (249). As late as 1965, Herbert Howarth can be found referring to Eliot’s “trilling scherzo form” (281) and saying casually of “Burnt Norton” that “the texture is comparable with that of a string quartet” (279). It is not surprising that critics of recent times have been circumspect in proposing such inter-art analogies when, in the words of Steven Scher, “All too many potentially promising interart comparisons by literary scholars have been severely flawed by a lack of sophistication in musical matters” (241).<sup>2</sup>

Poets, in the meantime, have been as promiscuous as their critics have been cautious. In the study that follows, I will examine a large number of twentieth-century English-language poems, all by American-born writers, which draw upon Baroque and Classical musical structures as formal models. While always keeping in view the slippery nature of musical/literary analogy, I intend to maintain a more open ear than has been fashionable recently to the correspondences between word-structures and music-structures, correspondences that modern and contemporary poets have repeatedly discovered and exploited, despite critics’ well-founded discomfort.

The hesitation with which critics have approached “verbal music” (to borrow Scher’s term) is understandable. Its basis is threefold: 1) A musical structure built out of tones and periods and a literary structure built out of words and phrases will not be perfectly congruent, and

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<sup>2</sup> That is not to say, however, that current musical/literary criticism is free of doubtful analogies and impressionistic uses of musical terminology. A recent book on Stevens speaks of the final canto of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” as operating through “an inner music that causes the entire poem to undulate in the reader’s mind from beginning to end, and finally terminate with that exquisite last tercet whose perceptual nuances could only be expressed in musical terms” (Sampson 132). Another recent study of Stevens, by William Bevis—on the face of it more sophisticated from the musical point of view—tries to yoke together Emerson’s essays, Beethoven’s Opus 130 Quartet, Art Tatum’s recording of “Willow Weep for Me,” and “An Ordinary Evening,” the only tangible point of connection being the synchronicity of Stevens’s writing his poem in 1949, the same year in which Tatum cut his record. Bevis’s theorizing about artistic form is often promising enough but his arbitrary analogies undercut his work. Some recent work on Eliot shows a similar tendency toward unapologetically loose inter-art comparison (see the final chapter of this survey); perhaps the critical pendulum is swinging back again.

such congruence, even if it were approximately possible, would not necessarily be desirable. A healthy respect for the problems of imposing an alien musical form on poetic material has been a welcome addition to present-day musical-literary criticism. 2) Questions of the possibility or impossibility of meaning in music and the extent to which words can ever divest themselves of their socially-determined significance in order to function as 'tones' have been closely examined and argued. Semiotics has taught critics to be more circumspect about calling music a language, and equally, to be careful when they point to the proverbial 'music of language.' 3) Biographical criticism has of late become more exhaustive, revealing in certain cases that the polymath poet who took music as his model knew embarrassingly little about the methods of musical expression, or in certain other cases, knew enough to use the musical analogy only in its broadest, most tractable sense.

To take one case as an example: the young Frank O'Hara was a pianist of some promise and studied for a semester at the New England Conservatory. His biographer describes him playing "such accessible works as Gershwin's First Prelude, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Debussy's 'Rêverie,' and Dvorák's 'Humoresque'" (Gooch 55). That is, O'Hara, if we take these statements literally, apparently made his way through only one of the three Gershwin Preludes (not the easier Second Prelude, but the First) yet learned all of the Rachmaninoff Concerto and the *entire* forty-eight Preludes and Fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. I do not mean to ridicule the biographer's efforts—helpful and quixotic—to discover the favourite repertoire of a teen-aged pianist who made his mark in another field entirely.<sup>3</sup> The important point is this: it is difficult to establish with any degree of certainty the level of musical understanding possessed by O'Hara. Perhaps he studied closely a

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<sup>3</sup> The biographer's grasp of the subject is suspect in other particulars: in cataloguing the contemporary works which O'Hara learned at the time, Gooch turns César Franck (1822-90) into a Modern.

great number of Preludes and Fugues and the entire Rachmaninoff Second, as Gooch suggests, or, more likely, perhaps O'Hara played only a handful of selections from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and one movement of the Rachmaninoff. Did he study and analyze these works or merely 'get them under his fingers?' Short of an explicit statement on O'Hara's part, one must be content with partial information.

A second example: Ted Hughes claims that Sylvia Plath "never showed more than a general interest in music" until about the beginning of April 1962, and then "became keenly interested in Beethoven's late quartets" (Plath *Collected* 292). Yet Plath approximates fugal procedure quite cleverly in her "Little Fugue": without precise knowledge of compositional process, how could the poet manage this feat? My answer to this question has obliged me to adopt a certain critical approach. I maintain that the casual but alert listener—a description that fits most of the poets studied in the following chapters—understands musical structure more profoundly than one usually imagines. This understanding is largely intuitive and lacks the analytic precision which would make a one-to-one mapping of a poem to its musical model possible. It may involve, however, a valid and relatively sensitive engagement with the materials of music. Plath may or may not have known the plan for constructing a fugue, but she was clearly able to divine the crucial structural elements through her amateur listening and playing. Until the critic finds decisive internal or external proof to the contrary, he or she may assume that a poet who takes the trouble to call her work a fugue knows what a fugue is, if only in its broadest outline, its most popular conception. Such an amateur understanding is necessarily short on detail, but the analogy between musical structure and poetic form is highly abstract even in its most thoughtful and careful manifestations. Robert Musil states the case well:

For the distinction between a trained musician... and a musically uneducated

person may be enormous in the moment when they hear the same music  
But one should not overlook that the bad artist, the dilettante, or the  
sentimental spectator can have, in many cases, an experience that is  
sensitively articulated and emotionally quite powerful (204-5)

It is essential for the musical-literary critic to be well-versed in musical analysis, but the poet is under no such obligation. He or she is first and foremost a word-shaper: if the final shape of the poem is inappropriate to its content and word-rhythm then the musical analogue is a failure, however closely it approximates musical form. Poets have never been reluctant to step 'outside the game' of a musical rule-framework when the movement of the language has demanded such a step. Perfect musical analogues are not necessarily perfect poems. On the other hand, a writer who gives enough careful attention to the transformation of musical organization into poetic organization is likely to produce successful verse. The ability to translate one medium into another presupposes a lively sympathy with the former field, but most of all it presupposes a thorough knowledge of and facility in the latter. A poet who can effectively translate musical organization into poetic form is at least a supreme artisan, if not necessarily a profound artist.

In the following study, I have chosen—or have had to choose—to give the poets the benefit of the doubt. Few poets have been as articulate as Donald Justice in describing the process by which they settled on a borrowed musical structure as the proper shape for a certain poetic utterance.<sup>4</sup> Even Ezra Pound, himself a music critic of considerable ability, left few useful clues for the musically-minded student of his work: the statements he—and others on his behalf—did make have, as Pound recognized, largely muddied the waters. Yet the critic's task is not automatically to disallow musical-literary analogies which are imperfect or abstract in the extreme, but to speculate on the poet's motives in labeling a not-especially-fugal poem 'fugue.'

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<sup>4</sup> In a very helpful published interview, Justice reveals some of his intentions in writing his poetic "Sonatinas" and discusses his compositional method. See the final chapter of this study.

or calling a piece which has no obvious point of connection with sonata-allegro structure a 'sonata.' Often a detailed analysis will discover the inapplicability of the label, but this in itself is a useful discovery. More important, however, is the effort to read the poem on its own terms, to appreciate the structural necessity of a repetition which, from another angle of approach, appears gratuitous—to understand the serious intention of design behind the poet's apparently innocent wordplay or her conceptual juggling act, illogical in one light but profoundly necessary in another. At one point in his wide-ranging survey of the relations between poetry and music, James Winn speculates provocatively that "the great danger for poets and composers in our time may be the tendency to respond to our recognition of the gap between music and poetry by exaggerating it, by withdrawing into isolation" (298). Winn in turn admonishes critics that

The healthy and accurate recognition by modern theorists of the fundamental gap between the two arts—the fact that music has by nature greater constructive resources, and poetry greater expressive resources—need not mean that analogies between musical and poetic procedures are pointless. The pursuit of such analogies, whether true or false, has been a factor in the making of great works in both arts, and may in turn enrich our understanding of them. (299)

One would not wish to turn the clock back; however, despite its over-readiness to stretch an analogy past its justifiable limits, the older mode of criticism still offers some useful insights. Pater's famous aphorism is often quoted as the epitome of a certain dangerous form of romantic confusion amongst the arts. The passage in which it appears deserves, however, to be quoted at greater length. Pater in fact comprehends both the common impulse of the artist to exceed the boundaries of his or her chosen art-form and the practical impossibility of such a project:

But although each art has thus its own specific order of impressions, and an untranslatable charm, while a just apprehension of the ultimate differences of the arts is the beginning of aesthetic criticism; yet it is noticeable that, in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what the German critics term an

*Andersstreben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces. (105)

“All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music,” Pater writes; it is music’s supposedly inseparable union of matter and form that all other arts strive to achieve: “For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it” (106). The poet who envies music’s particular powers constantly tries to adapt musical techniques to the medium of his own art. The process is not one of simple point-to-point imitation. A writer never imports the structures of music into the domain of language without working some transformation. Even the most apparently literal-minded effort to map language elements onto musical elements involves making fundamental choices and settling for certain crucial infidelities to the musical model. As Louis MacNeice once remarked, “The pure music poet is hardly ever found in practice, though some little time ago one met him frequently in theory” (*Modern Poetry* 155).

The scarcity of single-mindedly ‘musical’ poets—sound-addicts who would utterly deny words their primary identity as linguistic signifiers<sup>5</sup>—and the large number of poets who have tried the impossible—to map silent words on a page onto music moving through the air in real time—suggests that Pater’s analysis is still relevant. No one should be surprised when modern

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<sup>5</sup> The addiction metaphor is inspired by some remarks by Musil. He suggests that if one thinks of a poet from whose chalice of words all ideas that had been firmly knotted together by concepts spill forth in a disorderly way, or of the musician for whom the slightest clinker is a metaphysical convulsion then one quickly comes to the limit on the other side. All of these hypersensitive types leave the impression of debilitated drug addicts or old drunks, who have nothing to hang on to when they are sober. In this way art frees itself from the formulaic limitation of sensation and concept, but this condition cannot be “stretched” to totality. (202)

Pound uses a similar image. “That is the whole flaw of impressionist or ‘emotional’ music as opposed to pattern music. It is like a drug, you must have more drug, and more noise each time, or this effect, this impression which works from the outside, in from the nerves and sensorium upon the self—is no use, its effect is constantly weaker and weaker” (*Ezra Pound and Music* 38)

poets fail to do what they promise, to recreate musical forms in the medium of language. The arts may aspire to the “condition of music,” but they actually achieve that condition only through the loss of their specific “untranslatable charm[s].” Modern poets have been, on the whole, unable or unwilling to utterly sacrifice the special signifying powers of the word in order to attain the dubious goal of an entirely musical verse, that hypothetically-complete union of matter and form in which the symbolic meaning of the matter is unimportant and the form is perfected without regard to the forward-moving, signifying demands of everyday syntax.

## The scope of this survey

This study makes no pretense to be exhaustive. It is, however, intended to be comprehensive within fairly narrow bounds. The poets of the early and middle twentieth century could model their works on any number of contemporary forms of musical expression. That they frequently chose to look back to Beethoven's sonatas or Bach's fugal technique calls for an explanation. Among modern composers, both Stravinsky and Prokofiev at certain points in their careers made similar choices to engage with the art of the past, but musical neoclassicism and the corresponding contemporary poetic phenomenon were very different in their motivation.

Musical neoclassicism and the so-called 'mythical method' make a better parallel. The musical neoclassicists were engaging with the forms of the past in a witty and playful manner: they were rewriting the Classics, just as Joyce was contemporaneously rewriting Homer. In general, those poets who turned to eighteenth-century music were not making ironic commentary on the forms they adopted but were engaged in a rather more earnest pursuit. They were looking for a method of organization which allowed them to approach more closely the abstract qualities of music while retaining some significant, albeit nonlinear, form. Interestingly, poets never did adopt serial technique, the predominant contemporary development in musical organization. Instead, they frequently turned to musical procedures and structures that were over one hundred years old, and although in theory still influential, comprised a dead language for contemporary composers, a musical Greek or Latin.

The desire to produce symphonies, fugues, or other Baroque and Classical forms in words is a variant of a mindset familiar to students of Modernist writing. In order to 'make it new,' the poet paradoxically returns to the structures of the past, re-envisioning or rewriting those past

artifacts but also tacitly confirming their monumental status. The following survey deals, in individual chapters, with three of these monuments: the theme-and-variations, the fugue, and the sonata (often apprehended by poets as 'symphonic form'). I have made a somewhat arbitrary choice in focusing on only three of the many musical forms that have been adapted by poets. Certainly, that initial limitation will also limit the force of any generalizations I shall make in the following pages. These particular forms, however, forcefully suggested themselves early in my research, through frequency of appearance above all else. Sonatas, fugues, and variation sets have held the greatest prestige among western instrumental concert music. The perceived formal rigour of these musical genres attracted poets; the structural freedom of, say, a rhapsody apparently held less interest. All of the works examined in this survey are reactions, of various types, against the dizzying freedom of the twentieth century's freer verse structures. A wholesale return to traditional verse forms was not an option for these poets, but some reinvention of formal constraint was desperately desired. Western instrumental music possessed a repertoire of conventional structures with obvious coherence, yet coherence that was not simply linear, that shared little with traditional literary means of organizing materials.

I have also limited this study's scope to American poets. Such a limitation, like my narrowed musical focus, forced itself upon me early in my research. British poets, although often more musically knowledgeable than their American counterparts, have been less ready to jettison traditional verse-forms, less interested in imitating musical compositions than in registering music's effects. Canadian writers have hovered between these two poles: Robert Bringhurst, Jan Zwicky, and Ralph Gustafson are three poets who have followed, more or less, the American path, and who deserve at least this brief acknowledgment.

A truly comprehensive treatment of the English-language musical poetry of our century

would have to take into account the all-pervasive and thus almost-invisible influence of jazz.<sup>6</sup> This study necessarily ignores the many American poets who turned for inspiration not to the monuments of western musical culture but to the indigenous American forms of twentieth-century music. To turn in such a manner to the music of one's own time for literary inspiration is to do that which is expected, natural, and sanctioned by long tradition from at least the Elizabethans onward. This study is concerned, by contrast, with what might well seem an utterly unnatural movement: a turn to the exhausted musical forms of a period over one hundred years in the past.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, a comprehensive selection edited by Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, gives some idea of the size of that task.

## **Introduction: hearing the rhythms of contemporary thought in music's monuments**

The very words sonata, theme-and-variations, and fugue serve to silence the concert hall. Today more than ever these musical genre-labels also serve as markers of serious intent, of monumentality. They are also often a guarantee of vintage. These labels assure the waiting listener that the composer will remain in firm command of the work's architecture. A modern composer could conceivably—and often will—appropriate an eighteenth-century musical descriptor to make a clear contract with a present-day audience, no matter the work's actual shape. The terms sonata and fugue purport to describe the structure of certain pieces, but the connotations the words have picked up over their history overwhelm that original significance. These labels today seem eminently substantial and respectable.

Poets have, it is true, traded on that respectability, that air of seriousness. To style a poem a 'quartet' or a 'fugue' is to disarm all doubts of coherence in advance. A set of variations *must* have coherence, we assume, must contain a substantial theme at its heart. A suite of poems clearly belongs together: the name alone is a sort of guarantee. It is up to the reader to discover the method by which they cohere, but the name reassures. If that were all that lay behind writers' decisions to borrow musical descriptors for their works, one could dismiss these works as so many attempts to capture the reflected glory of a 'great tradition.' At worst such eighteenth-century musical labels would be evidence of an artist's reactionary nostalgia for old, stable forms.

Certainly there is some truth in that accusation. As Donald Justice puts it in relation to his own generation of poets, even as, ironically, he adopts a musical form for his "Sonatina in Green": "And we, / We few with the old instruments, / Obstinate, sounding the one string— / For

us, what music?" (*Selected* 106). Verse sonatas, fugues, and variations are undoubtedly in some cases the products of a classicism merely skin-deep, a desire to hold on to vanished notions of universal order and canons of artistic form. Yet every student of musical analysis knows that these musical labels are porous categories, though useful ones. They do not prescribe what should or must happen. A fugue is something between a compositional method and a concrete structure: it is emphatically not a finished form. The variation set is an open-ended structure in which the underlying constant elements are made monotonously explicit in order that the surface of the work may be embellished with a greater flamboyance.

The poets whose works are surveyed in the following chapters all recognize that there is a wide gulf between traditional literary means of organization and traditional techniques of musical coherence. With varying degrees of conscious intent, they use eighteenth-century musical forms not to guarantee in advance a rational stability but [1] to replace straightforward narrative with a circular, recursive texture, [2] to invite destabilizing returns, both formal and emotional, [3] to critique language and perception, [4] to explore obsession, the unforeseen repetitions that grip an obsessed psyche (and that intrude themselves, moreover, upon every mind in its normal functioning), and above all, [5] to order a multiplicity of speech without imposing a falsifying conceptual unity.

Modern authors influenced by musical form have responded to an imperative that is common to western musical structures, the imperative to organize through the circularity of repetition, rather than through the incremental forward steps of logical argument or unfolding plot. Poets have been attracted to so-called 'Classical' musical forms not for their popularly-supposed solidity and logic, but for their nonlinear qualities, for their licensing of recursion and restatement as organizing tools. Musical forms of course recognize strict

conventions governing the proper next step. Those conventions are commonly described as musical ‘logic’ Such procedures, however, are better described as ‘tautological’ in the words of theorist David Burrows, “music’s reasoning is essentially circular” (69). Whereas “repeating words or phrases in conversation always has something ignominious about it,” music, “free of the need to make discursive sense can drag verse along with it” and, far from degrading speech, can exalt selected words by forcing language to double back upon itself<sup>1</sup> Burrows highlights the derivation of the word prose from “the Latin ‘prorsus,’ meaning ‘straight on,’” and goes on to make clear the challenge that repetition presents to everyday language that is “engaged in the serious practical business of keeping up with events, or better still of getting ahead of them” (70).

Modern poets have responded sensitively to the suggestion implicit in eighteenth-century musical structures that artistic time is not necessarily that of traditional narrative continuing inexorably in one direction but may take the form of a period to be revisited or replayed, its events reviewed and reinterpreted In his *Four Quartets*, the epitome of such musically-patterned verse, T S Eliot makes the transcendence of time through repetition both his formal method and his explicit subject-matter “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (“Burnt Norton” I)<sup>2</sup> One goes beyond by going back (and forward), by breaking the inexorable succession of present moments<sup>3</sup> John Ashbery, in his “Blue Sonata”—itself a rewriting of “Burnt Norton”—writes that

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<sup>1</sup> Burrows is actually discussing the way vocal music so often forces its text into superfluous reiteration

<sup>2</sup> As an example of this convergence of formal method and subject matter, the passage of “Burnt Norton” in which Eliot makes this claim is reminiscent of a fugal exposition, consisting of a series of varied re-commencements (See the final chapter of this study)

<sup>3</sup> In his wide-ranging *Telling it Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film* Bruce Kawin argues that repetition in art teaches us to transcend time, yet he arrives at this conclusion from another direction

The present does not remember the past By beginning again, our art-time is always present It is not doing things over that is the key to life in the present, but abandoning the illusions of past and future attention to that timelessness which is the time of our consciousness and of reality (184)

Steven Connor offers a perceptive critique of Kawin’s theory in his *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (12-13)

...progress occurs through re-inventing  
These words from a dim recollection of them,  
In violating that space in such a way as  
To leave it intact. (*Selected* 244)

It should come as no surprise that many of the poems examined in the following survey are poems about the workings of memory or explorations of consciousness, works concerned with the border territory between perception and conception.

This modern understanding of the value of repetition was given an early and influential formulation by Kierkegaard. He makes repetition an essentially religious, transcendent category: “If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise” (*Repetition* 149).<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard laments (in the voice of his ironic persona Constantin Constantius) that if modern philosophy “makes any motion at all it is within immanence, whereas repetition is and remains a transcendence” (186). He argues that

In reality as such, there is no repetition. This is not because everything is different, not at all. If everything in the world were completely identical, in reality there would be no repetition, because reality is only in the moment.... In ideality alone there is no repetition, for the idea is and remains the same and as such cannot be repeated. When ideality and reality touch each other, then repetition occurs. When, for example, I see something in the moment, ideality enters in and will explain that it is a repetition. (275)

This framework could be applied to almost any of the poems discussed in the following pages. In his “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” for instance, Wallace Stevens begins each variation by locating himself very specifically in reality, in a precise time and place—“that November off Tehuantepec” and on “one night” (*Collected* 98)—yet the variation structure of the poem “enters in” to explain that each set of fresh perceptions comprises not a discrete instant in a succession of

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<sup>4</sup>Although the two are obviously related, Kierkegaard distinguishes sharply between recollection, a crucial category for the ancient Greeks, and repetition, its modern equivalent: “Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (131).

similarly unique moments but another repetition with variation. In Sylvia Plath's "Little Fugue," the poet tries to overcome inertia by playing at describing her stifling domestic surroundings. From this initial tentative movement in the present, painful memory-images are called up. Ideality breaks in upon reality and the present is identified as simply another repetition of ancient, inexorable patterns.

Repetition is, of course, a term susceptible of much narrower discrimination. Different musical structures have inspired very different species of poetic reiteration. The past, whether the recent moment or the distant stretch of time, may reappear either with an insistent sameness, an eternal recurrence—as in the fugue—an imaginative, perhaps playful difference—as in the variation set—or with a reassuring sense of patterned, balanced recapitulation—as in the sonata.<sup>5</sup> Yet in all these cases, repetition breaks in upon the ordinary sequence of logical thought and well-formed syntax, and the orderly succession of discrete, irrecoverable moments. Musical repetition is not a recollection, an *echo*, in the usual literary sense of a latent conceptual correspondence, but a *reenactment* of an original,<sup>6</sup> an initial verbal/conceptual unit.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth-Century and After*, Lawrence Kramer identifies another species, Romantic repetition (27), a fully developed version of disruptive uncodified repetition. Kramer argues that "In a work with this structural rhythm the 'unnecessary' repetition of a phrase, a gesture, a narrative unit, a sectional unit, or the like has the status of a mental stammer: a sign that the normal operations of consciousness have been thwarted." There is some overlap here with my theorization of literary fugue and variation structures, since such poetry frequently approximates hysterical obsession. In Kramer's terms, some of the works I examine would have to be seen as exhibiting 'disruptive codified repetition,' a rather paradoxical category that is exactly what I suggest below.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth addressing in this connection Jacques Derrida's notion of a repetition—which for him comprises writing itself—that makes its original vanish (though it does not, it is important to understand, make that original simply go away). In "Ellipsis," Derrida writes: "Pure repetition, were it to change neither thing nor sign, carries with it an unlimited power of perversion and subversion. This repetition is writing because what disappears in it is the self-identity of the origin: the self-presence of so-called living speech" (296). In the variation sets I will examine in the following survey, the identity of the theme's 'original form' is frequently difficult or even impossible to isolate. The 'original' is often already embedded in the initial repetition. That ideal theme has no separate existence, is always 'absent' yet throughout it has, paradoxically, a distinct and felt identity, a real 'presence.' Interestingly, musical variation sets frequently display their original at the outset. Derrida observes that "The first book, the mythic book, the eve prior to all repetition, has lived on the deception that the center was sheltered from play: irreplaceable, withdrawn from metaphor and metonymy, a kind of *invariable first name* that could be invoked, but not repeated." By contrast, the theme of a theme-and-variations is in these terms profoundly unsheltered. The centre is deliberately not protected from play: on the contrary, it is set out nakedly at first, appealing for its own repetitive subversion. Derrida is, however, equally insistent that "the desire for a center, as a function of play itself" is "the

Such poetic transcendence through reiteration is not to be regarded, however, as something necessarily pleasurable. Even where it falls into a pattern of periodic returns, even where it is rationalized and expected, the temporal repetition is often a disturbing event: in that lies both its renovating power and its danger. Quite a number of the poems discussed below operate in a manner that recalls Freud's description of the 'transference' in "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through": "We render the compulsion [to repeat] harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field. We admit it into the transference as a playground" (154). It is striking that so many musical-poetic works are deeply concerned with unmastered compulsions and the darkest of subject matter, this in works that often approach the limit at which poetry becomes a weightless game with words. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the following introduction draws freely on psychoanalytic theories, although this, I should emphasize, is not to read Freudian *Wiederholung* backward into Mozartian variation technique. Although the repetitive structures of eighteenth-century musical composition serve as the explicit models for the poems I will be examining, those forms are interpreted by modern writers working very much in Freud's shadow. My interest is in the way modern poets found their own contemporary concerns reflected in eighteenth-century musical techniques, the way those musical structures popularly supposed to be eminently rational were used by modern writers to organize otherwise than logically, otherwise than prosaically.

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indestructible itself"; "in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us?" (297). Likewise, the theme of the variation set is never entirely subsumed: it is that which guarantees identity in difference as well as that which loses its status as 'the original' through a process of imaginative transformations. Poets have generally refused, interestingly enough, the musical option of an initial announcement of the original theme. It seems writers have, indeed, wanted more strongly than musicians to obliterate "the self-identity of the origin."

## **Reiteration: the variation set**

The essence of the variation set, which I take in chapter one as my point of departure, is uninterrupted, periodic repetition made absolutely plain to the ear yet paradoxically disguised as imaginatively as possible. The variation has been the most common borrowing by modern poets from concert music. Some of the reasons for this are easily perceived. In variation form, structure is made the obvious foreground and not the imperceptible skeleton of the piece. Poets who would have difficulty dissecting a sonata or fugue could grasp the formal principle of the variation set without great difficulty. Recurrence or recursion alternating with episodic continuation is at the heart of fugal procedure. Dialectic—or, as we shall see, the illusion of dialectic—is at the heart of sonata form: repetition with significant modification and accommodation. The variation set, by contrast with either of these, is based on perpetual and obvious reiteration. Although the work's point of interest is the skill with which the theme is embellished or altered, such attention to surface elaboration presupposes a solid, readily-recognizable core. The pleasure of perceiving variation is bound up with the necessity of perceiving a regularly-repeated background. Against an unrelieved sameness, often a sameness to the point of monotony, the composer juxtaposes imaginative transformations.

It should not come as a surprise that such a process has held a strong appeal for modern poets. The variation set can serve to foreground the workings of the creative imagination, highlighting its transforming powers. In many of the works examined below, imagination plays upon the surface of a monotonous, disenchanting reality and produces a means of transcending that eternal sameness. As Northrop Frye has shown convincingly, Wallace Stevens uses variation procedure as an analogue to the mind's productive encounter with external, immovable

actuality, as a dramatization of an aesthetic philosophy set out more discursively in *The Necessary Angel*. Frank O'Hara produces a similar something out of nothing: it is hardly a coincidence that the majority of his variation sets are, atypically, poems of place, views of unpeopled landscapes—or at any rate, landscapes sparsely populated in comparison to those of O'Hara's other works—waiting for an infusion of imagination to bring them alive. The poets who choose this particular musical model are well aware of the degree to which the variation set valorizes that which is invented over that which is given. Vivid poetic utterance is called forth, often to the surprise of the poet, through his or her repeated encounters with an apparently unyielding environment.

Such surprises of the imagination are not always welcome, of course: in this way, the variation set is a perfect form for representing obsession. A period of time repeats without any necessary conclusion, any organic requirement to break the morbid loop. This may seem to contradict the claim that repetition is supposed to break up or transcend the succession of moments, but it is merely a different way of saying with Kierkegaard that any repetition produces variation of necessity: “the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (149).<sup>7</sup> The periodic return, despite being an expected and familiar event—as it is to an extreme in the variation set—is nonetheless always disruptive and renewing.<sup>8</sup> When Randall Jarrell subtitles his “Hohensalzburg” a set of “Fantastic Variations,” he is exploiting this congruence between variation form and a psychoanalytic conception of repetition, using variation form as an analogue to the uncanny and disturbing varied repetitions of the dream.

Our thinking about musical repetition is perhaps coloured by our familiarity with the

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<sup>7</sup> To cite a contemporary formulation of this thought: Derrida observes that “Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has exactly the same center, *the origin has played*” (“Ellipsis” 296).

<sup>8</sup> In the words of Jacques Lacan, “What is repeated, in fact, is always something that occurs... *as if by chance*” (*Four Fundamental* 54).

works of minimalist composers, or with the even more powerfully minimalist impulse of contemporary popular music. The minimalist aesthetic prizes reiteration for its own sake, for its power to preoccupy the conscious mind and induce trance-like states, or for its power to appeal directly to the unthinking body.<sup>9</sup> Such mantra-style repetition has its place in histories of both twentieth-century poetry and music, but it does not have its roots in the eighteenth-century musical imagination, nor did it greatly appeal to the poets who were inspired by that imagination.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, that which the prime representative of the ‘mantric’ aesthetic, Allen Ginsberg, calls a “Fugue” (*Kaddish* V) belies its own title with its incessant repetitiveness.<sup>11</sup> Its unvarying reiterations are explicitly intended to short-circuit temporality and subsume the poet’s earthly grief in a transcendent religious vision of serenity and unity: “caw caw all years my birth a dream caw caw New York the bus the broken shoe the vast highschool caw caw all Visions of the Lord / Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord” (*Selected* 111).

By contrast, for the disparate group of writers we are discussing, repetition is dynamic, not static. Its purpose is not to short-circuit consciousness; rather, it calls at all times for an increased concentration, a heightened awareness of the passing moment and its relation to nearly identical past moments. Particularly in the case of the variation set, imaginative revision of the theme, a saving change that breaks in upon the scene with each return, provides a means of transcending monotony of thought and vision. Variation form is therefore a vehicle by which the

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<sup>9</sup> In *Telling it Again and Again* Bruce Kavin tries to argue the superiority of the latter form of repetition, that which short-circuits our sense of temporal succession, over the former, that which is employed in “building time” (34). Kavin’s whole project, however, rests on certain presuppositions about the essential unity of being—his book takes on a certain ‘sixties’ character—in places becoming almost a parody of itself—as it draws toward its conclusion. His ideology, the unexamined philosophical assumptions of the ‘beat generation,’ frequently forces him into highly reductive readings of modern writings. Kavin illustrates, though in a way he surely never intended, his own thesis concerning the wide gap between the two prevalent twentieth-century attitudes toward repetition.

<sup>10</sup> Eliot, even at his most incantatory, usually breaks off his reiterative sequences after three repeats, echoing Baroque musical style.

<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, a trivial criticism: the poem is undeniably effective on its own terms. The title, like that of May Sarton’s “A Fugue of Wings” (see below), is primarily suggested by the etymology of the word ‘fugue.’

poet may speak about the difficult subject—difficult because it naturally inhibits creation itself—of emotional paralysis. Through formalized repetition-with-variation he or she may discover variety in an indifferent and unchanging landscape. A poet who uses repetition as Ginsberg does in *Kaddish* is searching for something very different: an essential unity, a transcendent meaning, beyond the variety of appearances.

Variation structure is also a means by which the hidden potential of an apparently integral, simple-seeming musical theme may be realized, often in virtuoso style. Poets have understood such a technique as ideally suited to projects of literary deconstruction or redefinition. It is necessary, however, to be on guard against a possible misconception concerning the character of variation form. One may mistake the variation set for a series of preliminary sketches, whereas in reality its parts refuse to be so easily subordinated. In the following survey, for instance, Harry Mathews subjects a deceptively straightforward Elizabethan love song to violent attack in his *Trial Impressions*, with his end being the re-composition of the song in thoughts and language that will suit an age of radical questioning. Charles Olson likewise makes his poetic variation set an exercise in translation, both across language barriers and from perceived reality to literary artifact. Mathews's theme is gradually worn down and then reshaped into a new artifact, whereas Olson's final statement emerges from a more complicated two-part procedure: its literary original (in Rimbaud) is broken down and then mated with the poet's own fragmentary perceptions to create a new whole. Nevertheless, despite the differing strategies of the two poets, the final variation of each set seems to be the outcome of a process of revision and refinement.

In each case, however, this appearance of progress is undermined by the poem's own musical form. The final artifact is ultimately denied any particular status as an 'ideal form' or

'definitive version' by the poem's variation structure. Variation procedure largely resists attempts to read it as an ascending hierarchy, a progression from the germ of an idea, through intermediate stages, toward a final, considered statement of the theme. Although the variation set is not characterized by reiteration alone, neither can its particular type of repetition be diagrammed as an expanding spiral. It is true that the poem may move toward a final destination, an ultimate statement of the theme complicated by its position at the end of the series, and having implicit within it all of the preceding variations; this whether the final variation is simply an exact repetition of the theme or an inventive, newly-composed finale. Yet the structure of the work simultaneously denies ideas of progress and development. Although a variation set may resemble a series of successive revisions superseded by 'the' ultimate version of the work, there is in fact a profound difference between the two.

The American poet Diane Wakoski's poem/essay "Theme and Variations: An Essay on Revision" purports to be modeled on the musical form—at one point it had seemed an obvious choice for inclusion in the following study—but in light of the previous discussion, we can see better why its title is a misnomer. Wakoski is most concerned to explain the intangible 'rightness' of her final artifact: "I see the process as leading to the metaphysical *and* rhetorical form the last draft holds" (*Toward* 124). She describes the series of dissatisfactions that led her to revise the initial poem again and again. Variation technique, however, does not entail a search for the perfect form, a process of incremental improvements toward an ideal shape. Wakoski's accompanying commentary forces the work into a traditional literary mold: to revisit a theme is to make it better, to more closely realize an ideal of form. The theme-and-variations, by contrast, is a set of revisions made not for the sake of perfection but for the sake of invention itself. Its repetitions are not stages along the path to a final goal: repetition is its own justification.

Composing variations involves, then, the production of multiplicity from a singular thematic kernel rather than the successive refinement of disparate parts into a unity. This fact is wittily demonstrated in Kenneth Koch's "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams," in which the ultimate minimalist masterpiece is expanded to the point of bursting. Williams's epigrammatic "This Is Just to Say" becomes the starting point for a series of wild take-offs:

1

I chopped down the house that you had been saving to live in next summer.  
I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do  
and its wooden beams were so inviting.

2

We laughed at the hollyhocks together  
and then I sprayed them with lye.  
Forgive me. I simply do not know what I am doing.

3

I gave away the money that you had been saving to live on for the next ten  
years.  
The man who asked for it was shabby  
and the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and cold.

4

Last evening we went dancing and I broke your leg.  
Forgive me. I was clumsy and  
I wanted you here in the wards, where I am the doctor! (51)

In the light of the previous discussion, we can see why Koch is absolutely correct in calling his parodies a set of variations. The spirit of the variation form is profoundly opposed to the spirit of the epigram. Of course no serious variation set is purely a showcase for invention: there always will be, especially in a literary adaptation of the genre, some element of progress toward a definitive statement, some desire on the part of the author to refine instead of elaborate. Yet insistent repetition undercuts the claim of the last to be first.

## Recurrence: the fugue

Like the variation set, the fugue allows a composer to work through the full implications of a single, often fragmentary musical gesture. Fugal technique, like variation technique, has been used by poets as a means of rebuilding bits of language from the inside out, for realizing a multiplicity of possibilities from a single image or phrase. Words spin out indefinitely from a central hub, the subject; the only limit to this spinning-out is the subject's somewhat arbitrary return. The fugue is based upon a dynamic opposition between the centrifugal force of continuation and the centripetal force of repetition. This dynamic makes the fugue, even more than the variation set, a site where language may criticize itself. This involves, however, no rational, distanced meta-critique, but an ambiguous moment of self-contradiction. For example, Delmore Schwartz's set of fugal analogues, *The Repetitive Heart*, consists of such self-critiquing—and indeed often self-contradictory—structures.

Whereas variation form calls for one repetition after another, each following on the heels of the previous one, and each introducing an element of novelty, the fugue consists of a series of unpredictably timed returns, each reprising the initial subject more-or-less identically. Novelty consists in the continuation of each fugal exposition—the episode—and not in the repetition itself. Variation form calls for the disguised return of the theme, whereas fugue requires unambiguous identity. Perhaps it is in this particular that the spirit of the fugue is most antithetical to that of language. Indeed, many of the fugal poems examined below are located at the point where the natural variety of speech is most desiccated, where poetry approaches pure abstraction.

Fugue is primarily a scheme for beginning a work. Just as variation technique has been

used by poets to generate an imaginative response to a stifling reality, the formulaic opening moves of the fugue have been used by writers to fight inertia, to wrest poetry out of unpromising material. Sylvia Plath is one such author who uses the musical procedure to summon meaningful, personal utterance from a void. The fugue is, however, not only an opening gambit. Fugue also suggests a method for continuing a work, or more precisely, for bringing it back to its sources of inspiration. The term denotes a texture of periodic returns interspersed with free flights, a form built upon repeated intrusions of a central thematic kernel, a repeated starting-over.

This procedure, standard practice for composers in the eighteenth century, anticipates remarkably twentieth-century models of the mind's functioning: we do not understand in an orderly, linear progression but double back upon old ideas, or else those old themes return surprisingly in new situations. Whether the mind wills or not, it finds its forward momentum, its discursive movement, checked, redirected, and renewed by the return of old ideas, memories, and obsessions. The fugue has had an obvious appeal for modern writers raised on such notions. Of the works examined in the following study, Plath's "Little Fugue" marks the most explicit identification of fugal technique with the return of the real as conceived by psychoanalytic theory.<sup>12</sup> Other literary fugues, however, can be viewed in a similar light. William Bronk's "The Arts and Death: A Fugue for Sidney Cox" is constructed, for instance, around the phrase "I think always how we always miss it."<sup>13</sup>

Because, however, a cursory engagement with psychoanalytic theory might lead us to over-stress the disruptive and disastrous character of repetition, it is necessary—especially in the context of this study, in which we are discussing techniques of literary construction and not

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<sup>12</sup> 'Fugue' is, moreover, the psychological term for a dissociative episode.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Bronk's fugal subject with any number of Jacques Lacan's pronouncements, for instance: "the real is that which always comes back to the same place—to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it" (*Four Fundamental* 49).

symptoms of illness—to emphasize the dual nature of repetition. Slavoj Žižek writes that “The role of the Lacanian real is... radically ambiguous: true, it erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but it serves at the same time as a support of this very balance” (29). Fugal technique—once again in harmony with modern ideas concerning the mind’s functioning—is paradoxically both a series of rude interruptions to continuity and a means by which a work achieves some unity of sensibility and a certain balance. Louis Zukofsky and Ezra Pound use the recursive structure of fugue as a means of constructing open-ended long poems, of renewing and unifying literary works that threaten in their subjective meandering to become shapeless and decentred. The *Pisan Cantos*, which contain the clearest example of fugal technique in Pound’s poem, appear, significantly, at a point of traumatic rupture for the poet. The Greek characters ΟΥ ΤΙΣ repeatedly intrude on the English-language text, an obsessive and unmistakable return to an unbearable reality—that the poet has all at once become a pariah, caged like an animal: ‘no man.’ Yet those characters are also a support to the work’s continuity, being a recollection of the very first *Canto*, and a re-inscription of the *Odyssey*, a central text of the western civilization that has come to such a spectacular crisis in the aftermath of an unspeakable war.

One might diagram fugal repetition as a circle returning upon itself (or a better image perhaps would be a ray emitted from a central hub, and returning repeatedly to that point of origin only to be shot out in new directions). Not surprisingly, imagery of endless circulation turns up in several of the fugal poems we will examine. In “Abraham and Orpheus, Be With Me Now,” Delmore Schwartz laments that “Time circles in its idiot defeat, / And that which circles falls, falls endlessly” (*Summer Knowledge* 73).<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Plath’s “Three Women” opens with an

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<sup>14</sup> Weldon Kees, whose “Fugue” is discussed below, also employs the image of an eternal ‘falling.’ Kees, however, focuses on the fall, on the inevitability of decay, and, in contrast with Schwartz, lets the ‘fugal’ structure of his poem

image of the moon, which in its cycle “passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse” (176).

Zukofsky’s “A”-1 begins with a telling pun that is developed throughout the poem (it is prominently re-inscribed at the start of “A”-23, the penultimate section). Stressing the article as it does, the opening line—

A  
Round of fiddles playing Bach

—seems to emphasize particularity, the fixed circular seating arrangement of the musicians, and the fixed form of the canon (in its simplest form, the ‘round’), fugue’s precursor. As the poem unfolds, however, its focus shifts from particularity to recurrence, with key motives (such as Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*) coming *Around* and around.

A few pages back, I silently evoked Nietzsche in referring to the quality of fugal repetition as ‘eternal recurrence.’ Whether or not any of the poets discussed in the following survey may be classed as true ‘Nietzscheans,’ notions of world-as-recurrence such as Nietzsche’s are part of the twentieth-century intellectual landscape, and it is the widespread currency of such ideas that makes the recursive structure of fugue seem an appropriate, even necessary shape for a modern artwork. Nietzsche’s description of the eternal recurrence, drawn from section 1067 of *The Will to Power*, could serve, with slight alterations, as an impressionistic program note for a performance of Bach’s *The Art of the Fugue*:

a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many...; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and flood of its forms; out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning home to the simple out of this abundance, out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord, still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and its years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally.... (550)

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imply circularity.

In the fugue, 'rigid,' perhaps even commonplace, thematic material is delivered first in the clarity of a single voice, elaborates itself into a turbulent counterpoint ("at the same time one and many"), then returns to the initial simple state, only to begin the process all over again an indefinite number of times.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps a microcosm of the world as it is understood by modern men and women (or as they fear it must be conceived), fugue is neither the unfolding of a pre-determined order nor a free play of forces without form. It is a process of elaborations and abrupt returns rather than a stable structure of patterned repetitions or a smooth progress into novelty. To borrow Nietzsche's words once more, the fugue is "without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal"—yet it is by no means an unfocused drifting.

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, however, emphasizes that the world, a "monster of energy," is "without beginning, without end" (550). Although it is true that fugal technique specifies no ending formula, fugue is above all else a method of beginning a work.

## Recapitulation: The sonata

The writer of a sonata uses repetition not to *guarantee* a similarity underlying difference, as does the writer of a variation set or fugue, but to create the impression of a dynamic synthesis, to *produce* similarity from difference. In this way, the sonata superficially seems to move, unlike the variation set, toward the traditional artistic goal of a perfected form, an initial contrast ultimately resolved. Repetition does not provide a security against change but itself brings about change. This impression leads one to see the sonata as an eminently logical structure, the ultimate musical reflection of an Enlightenment faith in progress.

Sonata form is on the surface much closer than variation form or fugal technique to traditional models of narrative. Poems based upon sonata forms, as may be expected, appear to follow the standard arc of a literary plot. A conflict is initially exposed, then intensified, and finally resolved (in a reconciliation of the opposing parties). Donald Justice's "Sonatinas" are both about fathers and sons—actual and metaphorical—first divided then reconciled. John Ashbery's "Blue Sonata" begins in the language of the storyteller relating a sometime conflict ("Long ago") and ends on a satisfied note of completion, of goals attained and efforts vindicated: "But our understanding of it is justified" (*Selected* 244). Eliot's "Little Gidding" ends with an image of symbolic union, of "tongues of flames" significantly "in-folded" into a "crowned knot of fire": conflict works itself out, all is tranquilly 'tied up' at the close.

Variation form calls for perpetual reiteration, a theoretically infinite—and thus in practice arbitrarily delimited—series of repetitions. Fugal technique calls for intermittent and more or less arbitrary repetitions, which blend seamlessly into the relatively uneventful 'episodes' that follow. Sonata-allegro form—the first-movement plan at the heart of the Classical sonata—

involves, by contrast, a conventional, symmetrical, and finite pattern of predetermined returns. Repetition seems a necessity, an organic development, in a sonata-allegro movement, as it never quite does in fugue or variation procedures. A sonata-allegro recapitulation seems fully implied in the movement's exposition, the reappearance of the initial material relieving a built-up structural tension, whereas a variation theme stands essentially apart from its embellished versions (it does not by itself imply the finished structure) and a fugal exposition is often no more than an opening formula (in fact, the subject does a certain calculated violence to the work's unfolding texture whenever it reappears).

By repeatedly using the term 'recapitulation' to describe the sonata form's characteristic structural repetitions, we convince ourselves that this repetition differs in some fundamental way from that of other musical forms. Rather than a conservative tendency, musical repetition here seems a force directed toward a comic end, toward a final marriage of opposed elements, an overcoming of an initial state of disunion. The nature of sonata-form recapitulation is, however, much more ambiguous than might at first appear. The initial contrast of themes is not absolute: they must be closely related from the beginning in order that a final transposition be possible. Moreover, that transposition is a matter of convention, not of true logical necessity. The final coming-together of parts in a sonata-allegro movement is an aesthetic harmonization, not a truly rational synthesis. Those parts are never really subsumed in a larger whole: the juxtaposed themes are brought into harmony but not merged. Their separate identities are maintained in the face of our overwhelming impression—if the composer has been successful—that some satisfying unity has been achieved. The poets dealt with in the final chapter of this survey make discerning use of these ambiguities, creating structures that seem to follow the pattern of dialectic yet on closer inspection reveal—or in the case of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, openly proclaim—the

arbitrary nature of their final equilibrium.

Sonata-allegro repetition nevertheless does, despite these crucial qualifications, involve the transformation, the *development*, of musical material that presents itself on its first hearing as two fully realized themes—or at least two polarized tonalities. Recapitulation entails a realignment of two terms that initially stood in opposition. Verse sonatas, correspondingly, often turn on questions of the reinterpretation of lived experience in the mind and in memory, the harmonization of conflict not through negotiations in the present moment but through the work of recollection and retrospective theorizing. The initial tension in Justice’s “Sonatina in Yellow” is resolved in the imagination, and the tension in “Sonatina in Green” is rather understood and accepted as necessary than resolved or transcended. Stevens’s “Peter Quince at the Clavier” achieves harmonization of opposites through the invocation of the ‘immortality of beauty’ in the flesh, a paradoxical theory that defies both rationality and temporality.

In “The Dry Salvages” II, Eliot explores the way we invest our experiences with meaning. For Eliot, this occurs not through a simple one-way process, with the mind refining the raw material of experience into a significant shape; the process is, rather, an interaction between the lived moment and its later reinterpretation: “We had the experience but missed the meaning, / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form.” Eliot’s sentence almost strikes one as a truism; it is important to remind oneself that the refusal to privilege a transcendent ‘truth’ over the actuality of living is a modern innovation that has over time become one of our standard assumptions. The widespread acceptance of this mental model goes a long way toward explaining the attractiveness of sonata-allegro as a formal vehicle for modern writers. The hero of Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* arrives—a hundred year earlier—at a similar insight to Eliot’s, but expresses it in terms not of objective understanding but of self-identity and

self-possession: “Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning?” (220). A sentence before, Kierkegaard’s young man claims that “The split that was in my being is healed; I am unified again”: this suturing happens not through simple progress but through a recapitulation, through the regaining of that which was in the beginning, now newly conceived and integrated.

Some such dynamic, with a characteristic double structure of development and return, underlies our most basic assumptions about the way we understand our environment and the way we construct our identities. That which has already been is not superseded by a new synthesis, a fresh exposition: rather, it is *recapitulated*, both reconceived and repeated. It is significant that in the passage immediately preceding the one already cited, Eliot denies the notion of historical development:

It seems, as one becomes older,  
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—  
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy  
Encouraged by superficial notion of evolution....

The word ‘development’ is of course practically synonymous with sonata technique. A complementary principle, however, that of repetition, provides a critical counterbalance. Sonata-allegro form moves forward toward resolution and harmony only by turning back upon itself. Thus, in going back to eighteenth-century sonata forms and re-deploying them to reflect modern philosophical assumptions, the poets surveyed herein are being altogether faithful to the sonata’s dual nature.

## **The imperative to pattern: “first of all, music... after that, many things”**

In an age that has thoroughly domesticated the art music canon, an age when Mozart is made over into lullabies and opera recordings are marketed as ideal background music for a candlelight dinner, it is hard to overemphasize the original dynamic qualities of that repertoire. Music may be either a series of attractive or arresting sounds employed for the sake of momentary sensation or a dynamic structure based on dissonance, on tension and resolution: eighteenth-century composition is the flowering of the latter conception; nineteenth-century music is a union of these two strands; much of the best of twentieth-century music has been of the former variety, or else has valued insistent beat, immediate and physically affecting, above the cooler pleasures of structural rhythm. The variation form is a structure based on clear congruence of parts, but not on stasis: the theme is subjected to constant transformation, a dynamic reiteration as the theme moves from identity to difference. In the fugue, centrifugal forces alternate with centripetal forces: a dynamic tension is generated between periodic returns and episodic continuations. The sonata is based on initial tonal oppositions that are eventually brought into agreement, if not full synthesis. These three musical forms are the sites for three very different types of structural dynamism. There are of course other musical shapes that minimize structural dynamics, but this study focuses on examples of music and poetry that place organization and directionality above sensual immediacy. The three selected musical genres are the products of a certain imperative at a certain point in western cultural history.

In focusing upon extended musical form instead of sensuous word-sound, I am employing the word ‘music’ in a manner precisely opposite to the literary critic’s common usage. There are undoubtedly modern poets who treat music as an immediate sensual phenomenon more akin to

taste than to architecture. William Carlos Williams distinguishes himself from his friend Zukofsky on precisely these grounds: “The contrapuntal music of Bach in particular I knew engaged his attention. It was never a simple song as it was, for instance, in my case”<sup>16</sup> (“Zukofsky” 264); “He uses words in more or less sentence formation if not strictly in formal sentence patterns, in a wider relationship to the composition as musical entity” (265). To designate one’s poem as belonging to a musical genre, however, is to align oneself already with the structuralist camp. In his essays on Arnold Dolmetsch, Pound writes what amounts to a manifesto for a structural school of thought about music: “The old way of music, teaching a man that a piece of music was a structure, certain main forms filled in with certain decorations, stimulated his intelligence, spurred on his constructive faculty” (*Ezra Pound and Music* 48);

I do not mean that Bach is not emotional, but the early music starts with the mystery of pattern; if you like, with the vortex of pattern; with something which is, first of all, music, and which is capable of being, after that, many things. What I call emotional, or impressionist music, starts with being emotion or impression and then becomes only approximately music. (38)

The poets studied in the following chapters have likewise chosen to begin with “the mystery of pattern” and have trusted that subjective expression or even the most basic of content will arise secondarily. Of primary importance is the organization of language in new sorts of dynamic patterns—that does not mean, of course, that the expressive and communicative qualities of language may be ignored. Yet for the sorts of poets studied in the following chapters, of whom Pound is representative and upon whose aesthetics Pound exerted a profound force, the poem must be first of all music, meaning cohesive sound-structure: after that it may be many things.

I will not speculate at length as to whether this valuation of large-scale structural dynamism over sonic immediacy should be read in part as a gendered distinction, but it seems

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<sup>16</sup> Williams’s statement is disingenuous. To take only one example, “The Clouds” will be analyzed in the final chapter of this survey as a work inspired by sonata or ‘symphonic’ form.

significant that I found, despite my efforts, so few American women who had attempted to create poetic analogues to these musical forms. As I suggested at the outset, the project of creating poetic fugues and sonatas partakes to some degree of the desire to align oneself with the largely masculine musical ‘great tradition.’ As if in conscious dismissal of such masculine ambitions, Sylvia Plath’s response to Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* is not a rival “Great Fugue” of equal density and formal ambition, but a defiant “Little Fugue” in which she confronts the terrors of the father-figure and attempts to make private music out of a paralyzing domestic situation.<sup>17</sup> One is tempted to read Anne Sexton’s assertion in “Music Swims Back to Me” (*Complete* 6-7) that “Music pours over the sense / and in a funny way / music sees more than I” as a valuation of immanent, uncontrolled sensuous experience, perhaps an alternative feminine vision to that of the mostly male poets examined in the following pages. Sexton’s very next line, however, links music with memory and repetition—and consequently with structure—and thereby brings her understanding of music in line with that of the poets studied herein: “I mean it remembers better.” Moreover, the form of “Music Swims Back to Me” is repetitive, indeed circular: Sexton’s poem self-reflexively describes itself as having “danced a circle.” It ends capriciously with the return of its initial statement—the poem could conceivably continue for another round—suggesting not only the pop song on her radio but also fugal technique. To take another example: the poetic sequences of Lorine Niedecker are built up in ways comparable to the overtly musical formal techniques of her friend and mentor Zukofsky. Yet in her work the musical model, if there is one, is not made explicit. Although the supposed prestige of musical labels, their value as cultural capital, seems a matter of indifference to most women poets, there are

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<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Delmore Schwartz enlists Beethoven as one of his presiding father-deities in his autobiographical fantasy *Genesis*, and John Berryman very explicitly identifies himself with the composer in his “Beethoven.” These works fall outside the scope of this study, and will not be taken up further.

crucial exceptions making any such generalization problematic: for instance, Amy Lowell's musical titles, which openly angle for artistic prestige; or Amy Clampitt's "Opus 111."<sup>18</sup>

I discern the outlines of a distinction between male and female understandings of musical form but am also persuaded that a wider investigation would reveal more areas of agreement than difference. By concerning itself solely with explicitly or patently musical verse forms, the following study gains in focus but of necessity leaves some of these interesting questions unanswered.

If I have emphasized repetition in the preceding pages at the expense of other possible lines of inquiry, it is because repetition seems to me the crucial element which immediately marks any literary work as being modeled on musical technique. Melody has its rough equivalent in the pitch of vowel sounds. Musical rhythm corresponds best to poetic meter, or where meter is fluid, to shifting patterns of word-accentuation. Harmony and counterpoint may well be poetic impossibilities, given the necessarily monophonic character of intelligible speech; poets have, however, with some success used the quick alternation of voices as a substitute for a true speaking-together—this technique has in fact become almost a conventional poetic equivalent for counterpoint. Alone among the elements of style of western instrumental music, it is that music's characteristic types of repetition that seem to have no corresponding element in traditional poetic style. A refrain is not a full equivalent to a musical repeat, because it stands apart from the rest of the poem: a fugal subject announces each of its appearances somewhat similarly, but is in fact woven inextricably into the fabric of the composition. A poem with a refrain is a repeatedly interrupted narrative, but a narrative nonetheless. The kind of musical repetition particular to western art music is profoundly opposed to linearity. Even where such a

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<sup>18</sup> A poem, however, that is discursive and biographical, not formally imitative.

repetitive structure seems to draw securely toward closure, as in the sonata, convention insists that the identity of each repeated theme be preserved, not merged, and thus the form implicitly resists literary notions of progress

This characteristic resistance to forward motion is tempered in a musical work by the fact that the composition unfolds in time. The piece may turn back upon itself and call for long stretches of verbatim repetition, but the work is also an embodiment of duration, having the appearance of inexorable forward motion: it is above all a *movement*. At one point in his “Vivaldi”—a work in a very loosely ‘musical’ form, complete with tempo markings<sup>19</sup>—Delmore Schwartz addresses the paradox of an impulse toward repetition at play within an art of continuation: “The processional / / Is uttered fully and yet freshly newly and uniquely / Uniquely and newly, freshly yet fully repeated then” (*Summer Knowledge* 177)

Our engagement with modern poetry is, by contrast, largely a matter of silent study rather than declamation. Musical repetition becomes more radically disruptive of forward motion when taken over by modern poets than it ever could be in a concert-hall setting, as a result of its being transferred from a time-bound art to one that is freer of real duration. Not surprisingly, then, questions of relative tempo of reading, and of eye-poetry versus ear-poetry, surface frequently in the following study (particularly in connection with Harry Mathews’s *Trial Impressions*, Randall Jarrell’s “Variations,” the ‘fugal exposition’ at the beginning of Eliot’s “Bunt Norton,” and, most problematically, the “Masque” that ends Zukofsky’s *A’*). Is a dense modern poem lying flat before one on a page, a complex word-structure that requires patient mental unraveling, more akin to a piece of music or to the music’s blueprint, the score? Each poem calls for its own answer. After studying Stevens’s “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” for some time I had the

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<sup>19</sup> A question is raised, however, concerning the state of Schwartz’s musical knowledge by his conflation of the tempo markings *Allegro con moto* and *Molto allegro* in the absurd formula “*Allegro con molto*” (176)

opportunity of reading it aloud to an attentive audience. The exercise was a revelation: only then did I fully experience the poem's subtle play of monotonous returns against wild imaginative flights, the way it not only comes back relentlessly to the same point—evident enough on the page—but does in fact move brilliantly forward into each new variation, each new mood.

Perhaps eighteenth-century techniques of musical repetition have appealed to such a range of modern poets because they give license to continue speaking despite one's profound contemporary skepticism concerning notions of progress and overarching narratives. One can go on by repeatedly going back; or, conversely, to go on *is* only to go back if one sees existence as an eternal series of returns. Eliot, in "East Coker," plays upon this paradox, relishing the strange freedom that comes with awareness and exploitation of one's inclination to repeat:

You say I am repeating  
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.  
Shall I say it again? (III)

In the above sentence, I used the word 'exploitation' very deliberately. The process of composing such a poem is not, finally, an analogue to the psychoanalytic work of remembering, repeating, and working-through, no matter what parallels we have been able to draw; here repetition is not a symptom to be 'cured' or mastered. Working toward an aesthetic that will encompass the type of repetition characteristic of western art music, philosopher Peter Kivy demonstrates that in our experience of that music any drive toward problem-solving or pattern-*grasping* is always secondary to the central goal—if something so purposeless can in fact be labeled a goal—of pattern-*following*. Kivy writes that

There is no denying that musical repeats are an aid in grasping patterns, but they are, at the same time, part of what constitutes musical patterns in the first place. Or, in other words, quite generally, repetition is the means of grasping pattern; but, by definition, pattern is that very repetition, and to dispense with the remainder after it has been grasped would be to dispense with *it*, whereas *it*,

the *pattern*, is the whole point of the exercise. (*Fine Art* 353)

Likewise, for poets inspired by musical forms, delivering a grasp-able message is not the function of the poem; it primarily traces a coherent aesthetic pattern. Musical repetitions are not there to help the poem communicate, by adding emphasis or developing an argument, for example—though they often accomplish that goal by the way. They are there because they *pattern* the poem, because they are “the whole point of the exercise.”

Repetition is a very serious matter for contemporary poets. For them, reiteration is not the sign of a lack of imagination but testimony to, in a negative vein, significant compulsions and, in a positive, meaningful unities that the multiplicity of experience obscures. Western musical form, by contrast, handles repetition as something to be played with, as its primary constructive element. At their best, the poems examined in the following chapters are productive collisions between these two modes of treating repetition. Intellectual earnestness meets with structural play. Unthinkable and unspeakable realities are made almost speakable through the apparently unpromising route of cool formal manipulation. Ultimately, trivial repetition in a poetic structure is made to stand for crucial structural repetition on a much grander scale: as implied in the title of Delmore Schwartz’s collection, the ‘repetitive heart’ operates ‘in imitation of the fugue.’

Chapter I

# **The variation set**

## The appeal of the variation set for modern poets

Although the variation set ranked rather low in the hierarchy of Classical instrumental forms, its modern prestige has been considerable. This may be because we are more inclined today to value the evidences of making in art—nowhere among Classical musical forms are the labours of the composer more foregrounded in a virtuosic display of invention, nowhere is the process of creation more transparent, than in variation form. It must also be acknowledged that nowhere else is the non-musician or amateur musician more likely to perceive correctly musical structure—the variation set wears its skeleton on the outside. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many more writers have attempted to devise poetic analogues to variation form than have attempted to parody other, more sophisticated musical structures. Judging by their creative responses to the musical model, modern poets have been most intrigued by the balance of a malleable surface against a solid core. The music—or the text—rewrites itself again and again in a profusion of gestures, or even of styles, yet retains an unmistakable unifying theme just below the surface throughout all its transformations. Poets, through their encounters with variation form, absorbed the lesson that language, like music, could be understood as a field for transformational, syntactical games,<sup>1</sup> such games, however, need not take place in an environment of incoherence, need not become meaningless manipulations of empty speech-cells. For those writers who have taken up the formal challenge, the variation set provides one model of a structure in which the centre *can* hold despite the fluidity of verbal expression, the multiplicity of word-sound at the periphery.

In one important sense, variation procedure as practiced in the western musical tradition

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<sup>1</sup> I am not suggesting, of course, that poets learned this solely through experiments in variation form.

has always been central to traditional metrical poetry. A recognizable rhythmic ground, or perhaps a standard stanzaic plan, is invariably reiterated beneath an ever-changing textual surface. Yet true variation technique requires something more than or other than a consistency of rhythmic pulse. Some elements of harmony, melody, accompanying bass line, or texture must remain recognizably consistent while other of those elements are varied.<sup>2</sup> The following study of musical variation structure as adopted by twentieth-century poets will begin with a self-consciously modern yet formally conventional approach to the traditional rhythmic ground, that of Randall Jarrell in his "Variations," in which the author foregrounds metric, structure, and poetic refrain as constant elements among four otherwise very different verses. Such traditional strophic patterning is not, however, what most twentieth-century poets have intended when they have attached the label of 'variations' to their works.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the chapter will follow a trajectory loosely patterned on music history. I will first deal with some sets of variations in which the constant elements are easily recognizable, the sections discrete, and the transformations easily traced and appreciated. As for the poems dealt with in the latter part of this survey, the constant elements are generally on an abstract plane: one ought to look for resemblances among the variations rather than for transformations of an underlying theme. Indeed, in Jarrell's "Hohensalzburg," the last poem examined (we begin and end with Jarrell), discrete sections cannot be distinguished, only points of unmistakable repetition in a freely-developed structure and pseudo-narrative. In music-historical terms, this chapter will move from that which may be labeled the Classical variation to a verse-form that, by Jarrell's

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<sup>2</sup> The variation procedures of later-twentieth-century western music—especially of minimalist composers—and those of many non-western traditions, involve taking rhythm as the object of variation: melody and harmony are demoted to the status of invariable constants.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'theme and variations' is attractive in that it highlights the two requirements of the form: constant elements and successive transformations. Unfortunately, the term is structurally prescriptive—suggesting a stand-alone theme followed by its variations—and is a misleading description of most of the poetry discussed herein (see below). I have opted where possible to use the more inclusive terms 'variations' or 'variation set.'

own suggestion, should be related to the freer Romantic version of variation structure, in which variation, strictly speaking, gives way to motivic transformation and the Classical notion of discrete yet recognizably related sections yields to continuous organic development. The method of organization I have settled upon, it must be pointed out, is rather arbitrary and obliterates all sense of historical sequence among the poems examined. The shape of the study is instead a progression from straightforward poetic/musical analogies to much looser borrowings from musical precedents, from clear literary examples of variation structure—which, interestingly, seldom reveal such imitative intention in their titles—to more obscure examples in which the musical structure has been entirely recreated as a new and unique form, a specifically literary, unrepeatable experiment in formal organization: here, perhaps not surprisingly, the title of the poem often offers the only initial clue to the work's organizational principle.

Varied repetition for rhetorical purposes has always been common in literature. As a method by which to critique an idea, however, or as a playful means by which to reveal hidden facets of apparently familiar words and phrases, a technique for making language itself strange, variation is a distinctly modern technique. Only with the moderns was variation adopted as a method of literary invention. Elaine Sisman, in her recent study of the Classical variation, makes a case that variation technique, if it did not precisely grow out of contemporary conceptions of rhetoric, was at least extremely congenial to Classical composers such as Haydn and Mozart because of their prior schooling in rhetorical methods. One might say, then, that modern poets, in adapting the musical structure to their own art, completed a kind of circle and returned the variation set to its roots in notions of verbal copiousness.<sup>4</sup> Among the poets of the twentieth century, the constructive and deconstructive potential of the Classical variation set was newly

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<sup>4</sup> I will not press this claim further, but merely acknowledge Sisman's argument that the musical impulse that produced the variation set was always bound up with the rhetorical ideal of variety of utterance.

appreciated. Modern American poets have recognized in musical variation form a method by which words and ideas may not only be combined but recombined in any number of ways in order to defamiliarize a common verbal formula.

## About musical variation structures

The imagined reader of this survey is not a musicologist. For those to whom variation, fugue, and sonata are foreign concepts, some initial definition of these processes is required. This chapter and the one that follows dealing with fugue begin, therefore, with primers on musical structure (in the chapter on the sonata, this initial definition will be approached through an analysis of an especially clear literary adaptation of the form by Donald Justice). These brief sketches are not intended to be exhaustive. In the following discussion, I will pass over by design some of the more complex variation structures, just as the primer at the beginning of the following chapter will leave aside the broad range of imitative techniques that approximate fugue. I must ignore the great range of mixed forms in which the variation is annexed to another structure—often rondo, and will say little about such refinements of the form as Haydn's double variations.<sup>5</sup> This is entirely appropriate, since for most of the writers being studied, the common understanding holds sway. Where necessary in the case of a given poet, I will, as the argument unfolds, broaden my skeleton definition to embrace other understandings of the term. Those with an intimate grasp of variation form may either skip the following pages or use them to become acquainted with my particular perspective on the variation set, which is certainly not presented as ground-breaking musicology. In these brief primers, I aim at very general working definitions for the purposes of a literary study.

There is no single musical structure corresponding to the terms 'set of variations' or 'theme and variations.' Unlike the term 'fugue,' however, which describes a structure that falls somewhere between a definite formal plan and an open-ended compositional process, the musical

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<sup>5</sup> The double variation is discussed below in connection with Charles Olson's "Variations Done for Gerald van de Wiele."

label 'variation' does prescribe certain formal limits. Fugue and fugal technique are nearly synonymous, whereas variation set and variation technique are not. The process of varying certain musical elements while retaining certain others is part of the basic language of western composition. Nevertheless, variation form, despite its increasing slipperiness as a concept the more one enlarges one's historical perspective, remains a relatively consistent and recognizable compositional genre.

The variation set generally begins with a statement of the theme to be varied. Already the critic examining poetic adaptations of the musical method runs into a difficulty here. The musical theme is not a 'theme' in the literary usage, in which the term is identical with 'central idea.' A musical theme that will successfully submit to transformation and decoration likely will be simple and unadorned, a musical abstraction of sorts which requires elaboration to reach its full expressive potential.<sup>6</sup> Yet however devoid of interest it may be when it is thus nakedly presented, the theme is nevertheless a melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, textural, and tonal unit that makes its appeal to the ear and not merely to the intellect. The theme is not the motivating idea behind the work, but the central *motive* of the work in the musical sense of the word.<sup>7</sup> A theme is a musical unit meant to be heard on its own as well as provide the skeleton of the ensuing variations. Variation form, at least in its Classical guise, is not simply a set of variations playing *around* a central theme, but variations *on* a theme, encrusted on a recognizable aural unit with its own existence independent—at least initially and potentially—of later, more complicated versions. Poets, however, have always heard overtones of the literary conception of 'theme' in the words 'theme and variations.'

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<sup>6</sup> However, the ornamented and sophisticated Sarabande which opens and closes the *Goldberg Variations* is the most obvious proof that banality and naive simplicity are not essential to a theme's suitability for variation.

<sup>7</sup> A similar distinction is drawn in my discussion of fugue in Pound's *Cantos*: see the following chapter.

As long as the poet deals primarily with identities of sound and diction, the musical option of the pre-stated theme is viable. The more one relies, however, upon ideas as invariable elements, the less one's theme will bear bald initial statement. Many of the poets whose work we will be examining in this chapter therefore dispense with the clear initial statement of a theme in their variation sets, making the first section of their poem both an introduction and an initial variation. Such structural elision has its own musical antecedents: in Haydn, above all. Few modern imaginative writers have chosen to state their intended meaning at the beginning of the work in an abstracted argument or invocation, a move that seemed natural to the authors of *Paradise Lost* and *The Fairie Queene*. The modern poet's intent is to create, rather, an autonomous verbal artifact the meaning of which is inherent in every word but nowhere susceptible to precise paraphrase. To state one's meaning or project at the outset is contrary to several articles of modern poetic faith.

Poetic variation sets may be characterized as either *ground* or—for lack of a standard term—*melodic* variations. The poet approaches the first ideal when he or she lets one organizing idea replay itself behind an ever-changing surface of varied language. The second category applies to the poet who maintains the initial language-elements but employs them in new combinations or with small telling alterations. By making such a distinction I do not mean to suggest that those poets whose work falls into the former category were necessarily influenced by the *Goldberg Variations* or the latter by Haydn and Mozart. As in music, however, the two approaches result in very different types of composition, which nevertheless are both considered variations. No writer is able to produce a pure example of ground or of verbally-ornamented variation. Words, unlike musical pitches, have both sound-identity and signifying functions. The poet who attempts to write variations on a concept must employ repeatedly certain key

words, certain necessary sounds. The poet who merely sets out to play with verbal patterns and word order will inevitably involve him or herself—or at least involve the bewildered reader faced with making sense of the resulting hermetic poetic artifact—in conceptual transformation. A continuum of approaches must be recognized, from that of pure wordplay to the re-clothing of a single deeply-buried idea in a variety of linguistic guises.

The composer of variations on a ground repeats a given harmonic framework, varying everything but the bass line (and in its more sophisticated forms, varying even the bass contour), leaving only an abstract harmonic skeleton intact from section to section. A more radical degree of melodic and textural transformation is obviously possible using this scheme. The Classical melodic variation, on the other hand, at least in its most basic form, requires closer correspondence between the theme and its subsequent transformations. In the first few variations, the composer must maintain recognizable harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic connections. A few interpolated notes, added ornamentation, or superimposed instrumental figurations are the extent of the variation. As the set progresses and the structure becomes increasingly clear to the listener, the composer may transform the theme contrapuntally. Several of the poets we will examine, especially Harry Mathews in his long poem *Trial Impressions*, follow the Classical formula of gradual listener-induction.

A transformation of a major-key theme into a relative- or tonic-minor version of itself is a common step in variation composition. The shift of mode provides an emotional contrast otherwise difficult to bring about in such a strictly repetitive structure. Wallace Stevens, in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” makes such a move. Often the work will end with a relatively unadorned or identical return of the theme. The number of variations is not stereotyped, although a set with less than two variations can obviously not be recognized as such: the piece would then

be considered a simple binary form. It usually follows that the greater the number of variations, the greater the complexity of variation technique—although that is certainly no guarantee of artistic quality or meaningful organization.

## **Rhythm as *ground* in a modern context: Randall Jarrell's "Variations"**

All four sections of Randall Jarrell's "Variations" (*Complete* 121-22) are clearly based on one common rhythmic and conceptual unit, but however obvious their commonality may be to the reader, it is difficult for a critic to describe concisely the poem's underlying theme. The theme is never stated in an unelaborated version, and in fact can never be stated that way. Jarrell's theme is highly abstract: it consists of a formal and rhythmic pattern which has no life independent of its embodiment in the four particular lyrics. "Variations" may be viewed on first reading as a simple prosodic game played with the possibilities of a certain stanzaic pattern, but the poem's purely formal repetitions seem to dictate in turn a more profound conceptual congruence. The variation form among modern poets is often a means by which disparate imagery and fragments of narrative can be welded into an aesthetic whole. Obvious verbal repetitions guarantee the less-than-obvious relations among the poem's nonverbal elements, its fragmentary images, its ideas which fail to connect according to everyday logic, and the emotional states it evokes—sentiments which, no matter how congruent in the abstract, are occasioned by a confusing and contradictory array of concrete objects. The conceptual and emotional links among the variations are not the first connections the reader notices: these deeper similarities emerge only after reflection, guaranteed by the more obvious surface resemblances. Jarrell's final variation comes closest to making explicit the conceptual basis of the set—its unifying concern with unwarranted suffering and the sacrifice of the scapegoat—although the four lyrics cannot in fact be said to be 'about' that one idea; rather, the four variations hover around a central, unstated core of ideas. Given the clear formal congruity of the variations, a congruity sometimes very precise and at other times rather less exact, one is driven to find

matching conceptual correspondences.

In discrete styles, the four variations relate four different vignettes, each with an entirely new cast of characters: the mutually-abusive Punch and Judy, the son of God, two children threatened by their evil fairy-tale Nurse, and a universal figure of human suffering. When listed in this way, the diverse group reveals some of its underlying unity. In the first variation, Judy suffers at Punch's hands, fulfilling her absurd role in the puppet show. Punch then suffers himself—is executed in fact—merely for doing "his duty." In the second variation, discrete images largely predominate over continuous story. If we must abstract a narrative, we may say that the son of God gives divine nourishment to the "wives and wise," yet himself suffers exclusion from the warmth of human affection. He too suffers for doing his duty. The children of the third stanza<sup>8</sup> suffer a mother's death and then bear punishment at the hands of the fairy-tale witch figure of Nurse, apparently as expiation of an original sin which first claimed the mother. Nurse cackles in the child's dream that she will "stew your ears all day, little hare, / Just as God ate your mother, for you are bad, / Are bad, are bad—": the child suffers because of unwarranted unconscious guilt. In the fourth variation, the theme of unmerited suffering takes on universal proportions through a dialogue between an emblematic victim of violence and the loftily unconcerned figure of "world."

It is helpful to start by making the congruities among the variations explicit. Each section begins with a similar statement. "I lived," begins the first variation; this becomes "I lay" in the next. The third narrative returns to the initial "I lived," and the fourth variation begins: "I was born." The stand-alone sixth line in each section plays upon the word "said," reiterating the

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<sup>8</sup> Or maybe child: the logic of this verse is a polymorphous dream-logic, and the boy and girl seem to collapse into one psyche. Variation becomes a part of the story itself, not merely a formal principle. This development culminates in the flexible identity of the fourth variation's narrator.

word three times in each case. Initially the three-part repetition is a purely rhetorical move: "Said Judy, said the Judy, said poor Judy...." In the second variation, the identity of the speaker does not change although three names are used to invoke him: "Said Grace, said Good, O said the son of God." Variation three invokes three personae instead of three names. The final variation identifies the spoken words not as the monologue of an individual, but as common words spoken by Everyman, universal words "The white, the yellow, the black man" might have said.

Jarrell's scheme is, however, more complicated than I have suggested. The first five lines in each variation present a monologue, the speaker of which is then identified in the stand-alone sixth line. In each case, the second full stanza introduces a new voice. In variation one, it is the voice of the string, superseded by the voice of the narrator, who tells us that "the string and Judy, they said no more." The third variation places this transition in the stand-alone line, collapsing the formal distinction between the stanzas: "and Nurse she said." In variation four, the original plan is restored: line seven announces the response of "the world" to the previous story of suffering. The second variation, however, does not conform to the plan. An unidentified narrator's voice begins responding to the initial monologue without prior introduction. Despite the varied realizations of his underlying formal scheme, Jarrell nevertheless in each variation respects certain conventions: the first stanza offers reported speech from one character, the sixth line identifies the first speaker, and the second stanza offers another voice or voices, generally preceded by an identification of the new voice.

In one important aspect, "Variations" must be approached as a poem primarily intended for the eye in space and not for the ear in time. The second variation in Classical musical models must not differ too radically from the theme. A sound-composition revealing itself in real-time must gradually teach the listener which elements are common and which variable. Counterpoint,

for instance, would be reserved for later sections in which the identity of the theme can be more or less assumed. The listener cannot perceive the invariable elements of the work if the theme's fundamental character or form changes upon its very first varied repetition. Jarrell, however, is not much concerned with such a process of reader-induction. In fact, in certain respects Jarrell's third and fourth variations are closer formally to the initial statement than is the pivotal second variation. The common framework of Jarrell's "Variations" emerges from a consideration of the whole and not, as in a Classical variation set, through a gradual induction from closely-related variants to more distant and complex transformations. One needs to know all of Jarrell's variations before the theme fully emerges. Yet on some level, even at a first reading, the structural ground makes itself known. The repetitive chant-like quality of "said Judy, said the Judy" and "Said Grace, said Good" alerts us to the profound identity of the variants despite their surface incongruity.

What interconnections do the four dream-narratives which make up "Variations" truly possess? Next to none, it must be acknowledged, when they are abstracted from their rhythmic and stanzaic ground. The ground assures our ears and eyes that the four poems share an identity, long before our intellect abstracts a 'theme' in the literary sense of the term. Constant elements eventually emerge on a conceptual level, but only because the repetitive verbal and stanzaic form has forced us to see the four poems as a single musical period replayed with various content. It is impossible to determine whether Jarrell first devised a certain formal pattern and then recognized suggestions of nursery-rhyme and scripture implicit in its shape and rhythm, or whether the poet devised the structure organically through writing a single poem, and, recognizing further potential in the structure, went on to exhaust the pattern. Did the theme precede the variations or did the theme grow out of the first variation? A similar question presents itself concerning many

of the poems examined below. Both are possibilities in musical composition—the pre-existing idea versus the newly-composed theme that inspires further variants even as it is being created. It is not crucial to decide the matter in Jarrell's case. His ground is certainly reminiscent of folk-poetry patterns as well as scriptural cadences (or is that merely a suggestion planted by the content of variation two?). One is also reminded of Yeats, especially such experiments in literary balladry as "Three Songs to the One Burden"<sup>9</sup>. If Jarrell had a specific model in mind, a borrowed theme in the musical sense of the term, I cannot identify it. Within the poem as it stands, no such theme announces itself. Jarrell's structural ground is nevertheless always present, promising the reader that the poetic fragments possess some unity of meaning, if only he or she is willing to do the necessary work of abstracting the surface detail. That detail, however the poem's variable element, provides the most immediate interest. In musical variation, the ground provides an assurance of meaning and the complications of texture provide the pleasure in listening. No one listens to perceive the underlying unity; indeed, the composer of the Classical variation works to make that unity immediately perceptible. Jarrell's delight in the burlesque Punch-and-Judy patter and grotesque nursery-rhyme rhetoric of the first and third variations respectively, his rapid modulation to the prophetic tone of the second variation, and his exploitation of the self-imposed structural limitations to soften the didacticism of the final variation—these are the elements that make the poem worthwhile. The repetitive identity provided by the ground is a unity intended to be recognized and then immediately ignored in favour of delight in the process of variation itself. Without the ground there would be simply

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<sup>9</sup> Yeats uses a common stanzaic pattern, repeated three times in each case, as a ground for three very different songs. The common burden "From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen" forces the reader to relate the verses to each other: at first the burden is a fairly straight commentary, then an ironic reply, and finally a prophecy. Yeats's technique is similar to that of Jarrell, but Yeats forces identity on the songs by imposing a burden and otherwise lets each song vary completely from the others (shared and unremarkable rhyme-scheme notwithstanding), whereas Jarrell here operates at a deeper structural level.

virtuosity of language. With its felt presence there is the assurance of buried, singular meaning. We are granted license to enjoy the game of transformation, feeling that the play of words is shaped toward some end, although that end may not emerge on a first or even second reading.

Jarrell's use of a single more-or-less common stanzaic structure to accommodate various poetic material is, of course, very traditional. His foregrounding of the ground, however, is very modern. The stanzaic pattern is not intended, as it would be in traditional metered verse, to continue along in the distance while our attention focuses upon the images and individual rhythms of the text. This particular structural pattern *makes* the poem out of fragmentary narratives. Jarrell's technique is very much in keeping with the character of variation form. In sonata structures, by comparison, individual periods build up large-scale patterns; the periods are subordinated to the overall structure and only large-scale points of articulation are highlighted. Likewise in traditional prosody, the individual stanza is subordinated to a larger unity. Classical variation form operates in a rather different manner: the composer foregrounds the small section as the most important building block.<sup>10</sup> Discrete sections do not necessarily assemble themselves into an overarching whole. Jarrell's "Variations" likewise emphasizes its disjunctive character. The poet calls attention to the failure of the parts to be subsumed in a whole, or rather, alerts us that such is not his intention. As in musical variation form, the repetitive nature of the material is made obvious in order that the differences among the parts be made equally obvious. We perceive structural commonality and, reassured by that sameness, we allow ourselves to enjoy the variations of tone and the rhetorical bravado of each variation.

Lest the final word on Jarrell's "Variations" be one of untroubled delight in the poet's

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<sup>10</sup> The untrained listener might easily fail to discern recapitulative structure, the formal principle of the sonata, but he or she can hardly fail to recognize the structure of a variation set, if only through a vague perception of a—perhaps irritating—sameness

linguistic playfulness and resourcefulness, let us return for a moment to the content of the poem. Beatings; shooting; a hanging; the loneliness of the rejected “son of God”; the “pass to Hell”; dead mothers; horrid nurses; stewing ears; the world as dream; dead sisters and fathers; hunger; and indifference: this is the subject matter of Jarrell’s playful stanzas. Jarrell is not without musical precedents for such paradoxical union of extremes. In a minor-key variation, such as Haydn’s pianoforte Variations in F Minor (Hob. XVII/6), play and pathos may coexist quite comfortably. Jarrell’s “Variations” mix play, both elegant and grotesque, with the extremes of misery and horror. Unity of tone and emotion is simply not part of the poet’s project. The explicit model for “Variations” was, after all, not the elegant variation structure of the eighteenth century: Jarrell writes that the poem “is a result of all the late Beethoven I’ve got; the variation form is too good not to steal” (qtd. in Wright 232). The final movement of the Opus 111 Sonata is exactly such a set of wild stylistic departures underwritten by a harmonic ground. That Jarrell could, if he desired to, produce a more homogeneous set of variations is proven by his “Hohensalzburg,” which I will examine at the conclusion of this chapter. The variation form can comprehend both unity of affect and diversity of texture and tone.

In the following pages I will turn to a poem which subscribes much more closely than Jarrell’s “Variations” to the Classical variation aesthetic, Wallace Stevens’s “Sea Surface Full of Clouds.” There the poet places severe structural constraints on himself and tells not four stories in one form but one story in one form five times, each time making small but significant variations. The insistently repetitive form is not designed, like Jarrell’s stringing-together of disjunctive narratives, to underwrite apparent variety of content with formal unity; rather, it is a study in the way the imagination may create variety despite a seeming sameness of content and a circumscribed structure.

## **The variation set as evolving perception: Wallace Stevens's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"**

In his 1973 essay "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form," the first discussion of the subject in the literature, Northrop Frye already pronounces what could be taken as the final word on the matter. Stevens's favourite opposites, reality and imagination, are set alongside the variation form, with its own antagonism between the theme, given and constant, and its variations, which transform but do not negate the recurring core of the work. Frye treats as self-evident Stevens's use of poetic structures which resemble or actively mimic variation form, and moves immediately from musical-literary criticism to analysis of Stevens's philosophy, the poet's aesthetic of a transforming imagination operating on "things as they are" and revealing otherwise neglected potentialities.

The generalizations made in the 1973 article inform the discussion that follows, although my purpose is not to deduce Stevens's poetics starting from his fondness for variation sets; rather, I intend to make explicit that which Frye passes over lightly, the extent of Stevens's fascination with the musical genre. Frye assumed that his readers not only understood what the particular musical form was but could move immediately from recognition of variation structures in Stevens's poetry to an appreciation of their significance to the poet's philosophy. Yet despite Frye's assumption that all informed readers could recognize Stevens's affinity for variation procedures and judge the poetic results accordingly, some passages from a 1991 book on Stevens suggest how little appreciation there is of this important structural imperative in the poet's oeuvre: "If surety claims at all resemble poems because they offer a refreshing variety within a framework of similarity, then 'Sea Surface' is a bridge game in which all the tricks are the same"; "This is a poem written by a claims man, late one night, filling in the standard forms with

different names, and having trouble isolating any life beyond this sheet of paper” (Longenbach 114). Paradoxically, the variation set has been—and often still is—under-appreciated not solely for its ‘frivolous’ variety of surface but for its static qualities, just as “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (*Collected* 98-102), Stevens’s most relentlessly repetitive example of a variation structure, has been consistently underestimated. Variation form does not rely upon variation and invention alone for its effect: rather, the composer makes obvious its sameness, its elements of exact repetition, in order to make equally perceptible the nature of the thematic transformations. The Classical variation set is art that heightens the listener’s awareness of its artificiality and its characteristic gestures instead of making that artifice and those tropes disappear in a seamless structure. Paradoxically, one runs the risk of structural monotony to achieve greater textural heterogeneity and focus attention on variety of affect. Stevens’s “Sea Surface,” an early poem from *Harmonium*, betrays an influence from variation technique that elsewhere in the poet’s opus is somewhat harder to distinguish but certainly no less present (in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” or *The Man With the Blue Guitar*, for example).

The variations of “Sea Surface” can be viewed either as observations on successive mornings, as they sometimes have been understood (Gross 235, for instance), or as successive observations made on one November morning. It is significant, however, that the “slopping of the sea grew still *one night*” [italics added]: the night is singular and the variations in the scene are derived by the action of the poet’s imagination or soul. Stevens opens a window of time in his recurring first line, situating the events of the poem anywhere in November, perhaps on successive days—although the precision of “that November” reinforces the reader’s sense of a very circumscribed period replaying itself. In the second line, he discards successive repetition *in time* in favour of a recurrence *of time*: the variations are merely different ways of perceiving a

single event. In listening to a Classical variation set we experience a similarly split perception of transformation and recurrence, textural and motivic alteration over the course of the work versus the reiteration of a single period. Stevens translates this ambiguity not only into the form of his poem but also into its setting. It is easier to interpret the variations as snapshots taken on successive mornings, but Stevens's monotonously repeated opening lines assure us that all these days are really one.

The exact repetition of the initial lines—at least until the pattern has been established—is Stevens's unique response to the requirement that a variation set present some sort of undecorated theme as a preamble. Precise repetition does not continue beyond the opening; it has done its job already. The second variation is instantly perceived as a restatement of the first and the initial lines of the first variation retrospectively take on the character of a theme statement. Stevens interrupts the forward movement of the narrative and directs our attention to the repetitive structure of the poem by restating exactly the initial verbal formula. In a later chapter we shall see this same recursive technique used by poets in their attempts to emulate fugal writing. The use of exact repetition to initiate each variation makes a bald statement of the theme unnecessary.

Initial presentation of a naked theme was, of course, never an absolute musical imperative. In sophisticated examples of the genre—many of Haydn's keyboard variation movements, for instance—the initial elaboration of the theme is intimately tied to its conception. Its return later in the work gives a sole, belated guarantee that the theme's first realization is its essential form and not merely one more variant among many equals. Stevens finds a way both to begin with an undecorated initial statement and to avoid stating that theme in full. The first two lines set up an expectation of exact recurrence yet lead into an already-elaborated first variation.

Thus, “Sea Surface” is constructed on what might be termed very loosely a rondo-variation plan, with an exact return preceding a period of transformation, then merging with the ensuing section.

It is difficult to state with precision the mood that rules each variation. Each one evolves through an accretion of adjectives and adverbs, some obviously complementary, others suggestive non-sequiturs. The first variation, however, might be described, using one of the poet’s own adjectives, as “Paradisal”; the second “sham-like”; the fourth “musky”; and the fifth “droll.” The basic modality of Stevens’s poem is distinctly major: he begins with images of “rosy chocolate” and “brilliant iris” and ends by addressing the day as a “Good clown,” describing the way the sea and heaven combine to produce “fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.” The menace and disenchantment of the second variation and the sluggishness of the fourth provide tonal contrast, but the setting remains unchanged. The third variation, however, resists broad characterization. It differs from the other sections in that its setting may not even be morning on board the ship; rather, it seems to be a moonlit scene.<sup>11</sup> The positioning of this section at the heart of the set corresponds to the usual placement of a minor-key or adagio variation in a musical variation structure. The poem moves from assurance and charm, through disillusion and malice, to a delicate, “uncertain” centre—with a shift to possibly nocturnal imagery—on through fatigue, finally arriving at burlesque and an ultimate transfiguration, a return to the initial key.

It is not fanciful to see this progression as a ‘seven ages of man’ allegory—albeit one reduced to only five, or possibly six, ages. A “Paradisal” childhood of evolving perceptions (“*C’était mon enfant*”) is succeeded by an adolescence or early adulthood of heroic unmasking and disillusionment. Early middle-age brings routine (“tranced”; “as a prelude holds and holds”)

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<sup>11</sup> Every other variation makes reference to morning, breakfast, or day in the first triad, but the third variation makes no such mention.

and greying hair (“a pale silver patterned on the deck”) and later middle-age brings frailty, fatigue and self-questioning. The final variation is comic, but the comedy is not absolutely reassuring: it is “*l’ignominie*” of near-senility that conjures the “droll” scene. The variations end with an apocalyptic trumpeting and a transfiguration. Stevens was in mid-life—forty-four years old—when he wrote this poem in 1924. If one pursues the possibility that “Sea Surface” is in part a metaphor for the life-cycle, then the poet himself would be situated in the delicate and nocturnal third variation, the most uncertain of the sections (this would support Longenbach’s analysis). Yet one cannot make such a tidy allegory of the poem, however tempting the evidence. A chronological progression is exactly what the poem denies through its repetitive structure. For Stevens, each age would seem to be as much a re-staging of the previous one as it is an entirely new period. At its heart, variation form contains such a paradox: we may perceive either repetition or variation to predominate depending upon our predisposition. A life can be perceived as both forward-moving narrative and disheartening repetition.

Although “Sea Surface” may, with proper reservations, be interpreted as an analogue to a life narrative, the sequence of variations is not generated by the requirements of narrative momentum. The variations may also be read as exercises in repeated observation, a work of nautical impressionism, similar to Monet’s many versions of a single garden scene. Yet such a reading is similarly problematic. The variations are explicitly *not* initiated by meteorological conditions. Steven’s repetition of the first two lines ensures that each vignette begins with the same stilling of the waters, the same blank slate upon which the mind will inscribe its perceptions. “And made one think of... chocolate” implies causality but the relation of the scenery to the observing consciousness is in fact exactly opposite. The mind of the observer brings its own set of impressions to the monotonous view of the sea-surface. It is significant that

each variation proper (once the initial *ritornello* is out of the way) begins with a conjunction of images, not an explicit statement of the poet's interpretation of the scene. The imagination makes of a blank, motionless seascape a setting that corresponds to its own predominant imagery, its own mood. The somewhat innocuous "Jelly-yellow" could lead in any number of directions. "Jelly-yellow" then gives way to the more gritty but still emotionally ambiguous "chop-house chocolate." Finally, we arrive at the image of "sham umbrellas" which carries a clear negative charge and connotations of shattered illusion. In retrospect "chop-house chocolate" is plainly inferior chocolate and "Jelly-yellow" is a faintly repulsive shade. In each variation, the initial act of speech generates a train of imagery which in turn creates a seascape—and an emotional response to that vista—where none was before. Stevens, it could be said, dramatizes a process of perception described by Oscar Wilde in relation to the visual arts: it is the provocative opinion of Wilde's Vivian that London fogs "did not exist till Art had invented them" (312), just as for Stevens the variety of views at sea do not exist until the poet has evolved them from reality.

Stevens's seascape is merely a stillness and potentiality: a fatigued waiting in a circumscribed time and place, until art and mind through metaphor and language create variation and interest. The shape of each section is rigorously consistent with the structure that the poet has devised in writing his first variation.<sup>12</sup> Longenbach likens Stevens's procedure to that of a "claims man . . . filling in the standard forms with different names," and he is correct to note that the form remains almost monotonously regular.<sup>13</sup> Yet the undisguised similarity of each section focuses attention on the elements that do vary, the poet's choices of metaphor and the shifting

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<sup>12</sup> Stevens may have designed the verse-form prior to writing the first variation, but the formal conception seems to me to be too tied to its verbal realization to make such an idea plausible. His "standard claims form" is not a preexisting document, but a form devised and completed simultaneously.

<sup>13</sup> Stevens does, however, recognize the reader's need for more substantial verbal variety after three identical

moods of a mind acting on unchanging externals. Observable reality, so often taken to be protean, is here assumed to be a site of mindless repetition. That which the observer brings to the scene is much more interesting than the scene itself, and the imagination in fact derives the seascape by its own power of perception.

Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude  
Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds  
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?  
*C'était mon enfant mon bijou mon âme*

The musical variation set can be simply a vehicle by which the performer dazzles his or her listeners through a display of technical facility. Given a simple, repetitive structure that is easily assimilated and does not cost much attentive listening, the auditor is free to admire the busy surface of the music and the grand gesture of the virtuoso. At its best, however, the variation set—once again perhaps because the listener's engagement is not with the work's large-scale transformations but with the textural minutia—provides a complex pleasure in which the auditor delights in the handling of a single musical kernel with a copiousness of rhetorical gesture. It is impossible to draw a clear line between these two types of pleasure: the second type of more sophisticated enjoyment certainly shares some of the easy sense of athletic 'thrill' that is associated with the virtuoso variation set. The achievement of Stevens's "Sea-Surface" is likewise twofold. The poet's dexterity as a manipulator of language is enjoyable in its own right, at least for a certain type of reader (and undoubtedly for every reader in certain moments) at the shallowest level of engagement. This simplest type of pleasure is not to be dismissed: it is this naive pride in verbal invention that most often drives the writer in the midst of the creative act. Without it we would have plenty of dry conception and very little poetic realization. We enjoy

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openings: in variations four and five, the second line is reversed and contracted

watching the poet insert new and unanticipated words into the blanks, especially those of rigidly “standard forms,” demonstrating his verbal ingenuity. It is a smaller step than we usually acknowledge from that naive enjoyment of various speech to our more sophisticated enjoyment of Stevens’s rhetorical command, his ability to use, for instance, the simple word “jelly” to invest an already-delineated morning scene with an entirely new set of associations, or the word “chop-house” to turn an earlier image of health and luxury (“rosy chocolate”) into a new image of staleness and pretense.

Harvey Gross calls “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” “Mozartean” (speaking particularly of Mozart’s piano variations) in its “combination of gaiety and formal perfection: an almost otherworldly joy carried by a technique at once astonishing and effortless” (235). Gross captures the dual delight we may take in the work, but his praise requires one major qualifier. Like Randall Jarrell’s “Variations,” “Sea Surface” exploits a dichotomy between the pleasure of invention and the pain of content. Although Stevens certainly begins and ends on a note of “otherworldly joy,” his second through fourth variations exhibit in turn moods of bitterness, malevolence, uncertainty (“An uncertain green”, and the self-questioning “Like blooms?”), hypnotic fascination (“tranced machine / Of ocean”), and frailty. Once again, the variation form seems able to encompass simultaneously opposite extremes of emotion.

In Harry Mathews’s *Trial Impressions*, the subject of the next part of this study, there is a similar duality of intention, a duality made more explicit by Mathews than by either Jarrell or Stevens. A graceful Elizabethan love poem is wrenched through a book-length set of irreverent variations, many of grotesque shape and some corroding the original with a brutal cynicism. Mathews stands the initial sentiment on its head and utterly denies the theme in the name of faithful translation across the centuries. The pleasure of variation may derive from both the

naive thrill of invention and the more purposeful and anarchic excitement of breaking down that which is given and stable.

## Trial by variation: Harry Mathews's *Trial Impressions*

Wallace Stevens devised an original theme for literary variation. In the case of Randall Jarrell, it is impossible to point to a single preexisting model that the poet has subjected to musical technique, although Jarrell's ground does recall folk-poetry and nursery-rhyme. With Harry Mathews's *Trial Impressions*, we turn for the first time to a literary variation set based on a given non-original theme. The technique of employing another's preexisting melody as one's core material is so common a procedure in music that it comes as a surprise to discover how seldom poets have adopted this potentially promising approach.<sup>14</sup>

Composers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced a great number of virtuoso variation sets on forgettable popular melodies and dances.<sup>15</sup> Occasionally a set rises above the workmanlike level of this type of production and bears witness to its composer's highly serious effort at affectionate salute or eulogy. The theme and variation form becomes a means of paying tribute to an illustrious artistic ancestor or respected contemporary (or perhaps, in the very same cases, a means of publicly proclaiming one's destined place among the great figures of the musical canon). Mozart pays tribute to Gluck in his set of Variations on "Unser dummer Pobel meint" (K. 455).<sup>16</sup> Brahms composes his Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel (Op. 24). Harry Mathews pays double homage through his *Trial Impressions*: the entire set is based on a song by Renaissance poet/musician John Dowland, but the concept of the book

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Duncan's efforts in variation form deserve mention in this connection, especially his "From Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* Using the Words" (23-24) and "Variations Upon Phrases from Milton's *The Reason of Church Government*" (25-27).

<sup>15</sup> Frank O'Hara hits on an interesting twentieth-century literary equivalent to these popular melodies subjected to variation: he composes variations on a commercial (see below).

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Sisman writes that "in a concert at the Burgtheater, Mozart varied a theme by Gluck, who, having recently praised him, was probably in the audience" (199). In the published work, "the simplicities of the theme are turned on their head in a display of compositional skill likely to be appreciated by the older composer" (200).

is a nod toward French author Raymond Queneau and his *Exercices de Style*—itself inspired by a performance of the *Goldberg Variations* (Hofstadter 224).

Like many variation structures, even some of the finest examples, Mathews's work is uneven, mixing interesting conceits with dull ones, and setting powerful reinterpretations or re-creations of the original theme alongside tiresome word-games.<sup>17</sup> In several of his variations, however, and despite his lapses, in the overall impact of his set of poems, Mathews does manage to balance the contradictory claims of his multiple objectives. The poet violates his Renaissance theme, gives it an exhaustive reading by setting it against his own verbal and conceptual variations, subjects it to parody, takes it to the extremes of inexpressive banality, mates it with irrelevant content and incongruous modern styles, and utterly negates its premises; then, most remarkably, taking fully into account the philosophical distance between Dowland's world and ours, Mathews poignantly reproduces the sentiment of the theme in a contemporary mode.

One could even argue that the poet's missteps in terms of craft and taste are essential to his larger project. Mathews mutilates Dowland's poem beyond recognition in order to prove its ideas (faith and love, and the dependence of an orderly universe upon these principles) against their antitheses (faithlessness and hatred/ambivalence, and the radical contingency of our current models of our world). He tests the formal qualities of his modest theme (elegance, balance, and obvious symmetry) against their opposites, seemingly the very stuff of modern poetry (the imbalance of variation VI, "Unequal Odds," or the incoherent pseudo-sonnet of variation VII). The poet, through the process of destruction and poetic reconstitution, finds new ways of talking about love and faith, especially in the final four variations. The language that results is less

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<sup>17</sup> One of Glenn Gould's comments on the *Goldberg Variations* seems worth quoting here: "There are in the Goldbergs, I think, some of the very best moments in Bach, which is saying an awful lot, but I do think there are also some of the silliest" (Friedrich 312). This may be a provocative overstatement, but variation structure, with its discrete sections and toleration of—indeed, demand for—virtuosic display, does seem to make the goal of uniform quality elusive if not irrelevant, even among the major composers and however serious the work's intention.

balanced and certain than that of Dowland, but is more able to reflect a specifically modern understanding. That which the modern poet does share with the Renaissance songwriter only becomes clear through an extended and irreverent exploration of that which can successfully be varied.

Mathews is more interested in the process of variation than in any one successful poetic result. Fortunately for the reader, the writer manages along the way to produce some interesting and effective lines and segments. Even when his variations descend into the realm of mere verbal and formal game-playing, Mathews manages to create unexpected stylistic conjunctions or, at the very least, humorous effects: sometimes very cheaply humorous, unquestionably. Whatever the poet's miscalculations, no part of the set is dispensable, even its least effective variations or most strained episodes of literary wisecracking. Dowland must be ironically honoured in every manner possible and exposed to every childish indignity before Mathews can truly rewrite the anachronistic theme in a fitting twentieth-century form.

The first variation plays two complementary roles: "Up to Date" announces Mathews's intention to rewrite the Jacobean song in a modern context, yet it is also formally congruent with the theme. The "if... I'll" structure of the original's first stanza is preserved, signaling to the reader that a variation structure is beginning to unfold. The recapitulation of the opening material in the fifth line ("A date, a freak, a truck"), following Dowland's model, cements that impression. Here Mathews follows very closely the tradition of the Classical variation, not to mention a real pedagogical imperative: one cannot begin a variation set with one's freest treatments of the theme. The initial variations ease the listener into a recognition of the repetitive structure and condition his or her response to the following, less obviously related sections. Mathews handles the updating of Dowland's counterfactuals concerning the physical universe (in

the second stanza) with greater freedom, but the connection between theme and variation remains transparent. In his first stanza, the poet previews his playful approach, but here in the second verse he warns the reader that he also has serious intentions. The claim that “When today is tomorrow, and the elections rejoin each other, / Only then will my unreasonableness fail to invest you” is both prosy and clinical in tone and awkwardly charming in its earnestness. Mathews’s first variation modulates from silliness to a mode of speech more akin to Dowland’s earnest original. The poet uses the variation set’s usual inductive techniques to set up expectations of a repetitive form, indicate the sort of elaboration to which he will subject his material, and sketch out the range of variation from the theme that one can expect in the ensuing work. The alert reader settles in for a continuing series of variations, an expectation that is confirmed by the close formal congruence of the following section. He or she either looks forward to the poet’s witty transformations of image and language or despairs of the work immediately. It is clear from the ham-acting of the first stanza that the author intends to use poetic decorum as another variable element.<sup>18</sup> Broadway lyrical formulas and country-music clichés are set against the seriousness of Dowland’s address to the beloved. Dowland’s declarations are undoubtedly naive overstatements—studiedly naive—but their modern equivalents are merely empty line-fillers. Those who like their poetry uniformly earnest in sentiment and elevated in tone are warned away from *Trial Impressions* by the initial stanza, although the second verse perhaps belies the impression of the poet as wise-guy.

The second variation, “Keep Talking,” is closer to the theme than the first, at least in its

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<sup>18</sup> While preparing to write these lines, I have been rehearsing a selection of the Introduction and Variations on “Trockne Blumen” (D 802), Schubert’s own virtuoso reworking of a song from his *Die Schöne Müllerin*. The emotional intensity of the original is largely discarded in favour of a fantastically inappropriate pyrotechnic display. Some variations retain the melancholy spirit of the original, whereas others violate that spirit quite tastelessly. Mathews is not without respectable musical precedents for his alternately sensitive and indecorous handling of the Jacobean song.

broad outline: the crucial words of each of Dowland's lines are preserved. Between each word or phrase, however, a series of apparently improvised metaphors is inserted, some entirely inappropriate and others merely superfluous interpolations from modern life. The tempo of reading is intended to be much faster: although the theme is necessarily augmented (in the musical sense of lengthened note-values), it remains a recognizable verbal unit, disturbed but not essentially transformed by the interpolations. Renaissance musicians called such variation technique *division*: the addition of shorter, non-essential notes and passages of figuration between the longer notes of a pre-existing melody. The harmonic and melodic contour ostensibly remains, but often the musical fabric is stretched to such an extent that the initial tune becomes unrecognizable. Such internal additions require no manipulation of the theme per se but only a filling-in of musical spaces. Mathews is at this point still holding the reader's hand and keeping his variations relatively close to the theme. The third variation,<sup>19</sup> however, which severely abstracts from the theme, signals a new degree of inventive freedom.

The terseness of section IV is an appropriate follow-up to the chattiness of III. Whereas "Keep Talking" opens up spaces in the tightly-constructed original and then fills in those new holes with decorative verbiage, "The Wang Way" compresses the thought of the theme into almost the smallest compass imaginable. Almost: the formal properties of the theme have given way to new structural constants, and in order to respect his own new rules, the poet must still resort to a minimum of verbal repetition. The predominant five-stress line of Dowland's poem is replaced by a five-word line. The two balanced six-line stanzas of the original become an unmatched pair of five- and six-line stanzas. White space between the words signals that this variation must be read excruciatingly slowly, just as its precursor needs to be read at a gallop.

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<sup>19</sup> N.B.: variation three is the *fourth* section, the theme being Roman numeral I; hereafter I will use the Roman numeral headings.



translation. He refers to translation not of

the text's nominal sense but [of] other of its components; and we may call these components "forms," taking "form" simply to mean a material element of written language that can be isolated and manipulated..... The second pair [of examples] are replacements of forms—not only the words but a form of the original has been replaced, in one instance a lexical context, in the other the choice of vowels. These strange dislocations of the original may seem cavalier, but they are useful in drawing attention precisely to elements of language that normally pass us by, concerned as we naturally are with making sense of what we read. Nominal sense becomes implicitly no more than a part of overall meaning. (“Translation”)

Mathews makes such transformation sound like a didactic exercise, and indeed, Mathews's OuLiPo workshop claims that it produces not art but merely ideas for future artworks. In “Random Harvest,” however, the supposedly mechanical method of dictionary substitution results in a strange sequence of truly apposite new metaphors. Enough relevant definitions are included that the variation appears to share the Jacobean song's essential meaning. Enough extraneous material is imported that the poem becomes something utterly new. The shape of the original is entirely transformed. Each line of the theme is subjected to several lines of new redefinition, and before the first stanza has been completely digested, the second stanza begins to receive its treatment. Very loosely speaking, one might call this variation a contrapuntal transformation of the theme, with the two periods of the poem overlapping (after a first, relatively straightforward stanza) and multiple meanings of each original word returning upon themselves. “Random Harvest” is the most over-determined variation thus far, yet it is also the most freely inventive. Mathews submits to one dire constraint, the reliance upon that which his dictionary provides, but he allows himself a greater compensatory freedom. The final section of the variation achieves a surprising emotional intensity, with its breathless overlapping voice entries copiously redefining each term. The “nominal sense” of the original is questioned in the

most trivial manner, by denying the 'right' definition any signifying priority. Yet the sum of the variation's effect is, oddly, to re-inscribe and intensify the basic meaning of the Dowland song. Mathews's poem still says, and with more imagistic precision than the original, that the poet would be lost, his world made alien, if the beloved were changeable and he unfaithful. The phrase "if your voice ever sank" (referring to a boy's 'change' of voice) is from the point of view of common sense a ridiculous misinterpretation of "if you change," yet it is easily assimilated by the ongoing argument of the poem. The theme has been made strange but not at all unrecognizable.

"Random Harvest" introduces a secondary theme for variation: the beloved's powers of discernment and her knowledge of the natural world. Dowland's address of the beloved as "Wise" suggests this idea in only the most rudimentary fashion. Often in a musical variation set a new idea introduced in an early section will itself become fodder for transformation. In a similar manner, Mathews draws on this suggestive new element, an element of his own creation, as he writes the successive sections. The variation form loops back time and time again, replaying the theme. The simple shape of that loop in time is, however, complicated by accretions of new material developed from earlier variants. "Unequal Odds," the following variation, develops the new suggestion in two directions, with talk of "Efficient gardeners" and "an untrained eye." "Passamezzo"'s entire second stanza is a meditation on the various things "She" knew or knows. The poet becomes attached, at least for a time, to a certain deformation of his theme, and the variant material becomes part of the theme itself. As new variations are made, the composer does not start each time anew: the preceding alterations may be ignored or built upon, or may, as in Mathews's case, subtly insinuate themselves into the very shape of the theme.

"Unequal Odds" takes the balanced structure of the Dowland song and turns it on its

head. The first thirteen lines of this very long-lined sonnet set up images of seasonal inevitability, none of which will remain inevitable if the beloved changes her mind. The theme's key images of flowers, heat and freezing, and stars are all retained, but are fleshed out in a very free fashion, made much more concrete. The "flowers" are flowering weeds, specified through naming, giving way to one another in a seasonal round. "Flowers" also becomes the chronologically-ordered flowering of the cultivated garden. Fire loses not precisely its heat, but its "brief winter charm," and that not by a change in the constitution of the universe, but by the natural alternation of the seasons. Mathews has made a subtle change to his theme at the conceptual level, one which comes more and more to dominate the trajectory of the following variations. Natural transformation is not solely something that comes about through an alteration in the quality of the poet's love. Expected change is itself, paradoxically, the constant element. "All these things will be as we know them, as they can only be" not in stasis but in change. This signal modernization of the theme is made more explicit in "Passamezzo" with its "repetitions of time." This tendency becomes still more evident much later, in section XXVII, where all is change, a flux indifferent to humanity, and the poem's addressee is advised simply to "choose your doom, and be sweet about it," to make an existentialist's arbitrary choice. Finally, in section XXVIII, Dowland's hymn to constancy is wittily transposed into an apostrophe "To Change."

In "Unequal Odds," the beloved can still cause natural order to become disorder. Section VI is still part of the preparatory induction of the reader into the set of variations. Mathews here treats the theme's structure and diction with the greatest freedom yet: he does not add or subtract words, but alters. The theme's characteristic symmetry is undermined. Dowland's form consists of two opposed but balanced halves, one of repeated apostrophe, marked by intra-linear balance,

and the other based on physical metaphors, marked by a line-by-line accumulation of image: Mathews reverses the halves and makes their proportions uneven. Yet despite his liberties both with the concept of change and the shape of the theme, the poet says in “Unequal Odds” very much what Dowland says in his song. If the beloved changes, all will be dislocated. Sections V and VI comprise the first phase of modulation in the set. The sentiment of the original remains, but the method of statement is radically altered.

The variations between VII and XIV put the theme through linguistic tortures, some of them more amusing and inspired than others. Three sections seem to me especially ill-advised: the nearly senseless mock-sonnet of VII,<sup>20</sup> the mock-Mallarmé of X (with its obscene puns, the most strained and least interesting experiment of all), and the mechanical substitutions of XII (complete with a set of alternate substitutions, no more nor less valid). Mathews’s wit, however strained at times, often saves a variation from utter failure. If in these instances wit fails him, even these three variants can be justified as demonstrations of the ultimate brutality that must be done to the theme before it may be recreated from the ground up. Certain comments by Mathews himself endorse such a view: he says he proceeds somewhat similarly in his translation work. His goal is to move as far from the original in the direction of his own speech as possible with his first draft and then, through the revision process, inch back toward the translated work (“Translation”).

Although it is finally a matter of taste, “Of Course” and “Multiple Choice” seem to me the most successful of this group. Perhaps not coincidentally, the poet returns in “Of Course” to a simpler structure modified relatively little from the theme. The two stanzas have been shorn of their recapitulating final lines, and the form of address has been altered, but the basic movement

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<sup>20</sup> The obscure sense that may be distinguished is, however, apparently faithful to the sense of the theme.

from personal relations out toward the physical universe is preserved, and certain recognizable constructions—the balanced clauses in each line, the familiar “If ”—are maintained. The poet works with more precise imagery than Dowland. He makes tenderly concrete Dowland’s vague conceit of malfunctioning heat and cold with the line “Who takes icicles to bed in winter? Who likes his ice cream boiled?” The explicit mode of the variation is unassailable statement by a domineering subject, a strongly masculine-gendered voice that makes ever-more-frequent appearances in the following variations. An antecedent/consequent relation between the pronouns you and I (“if you , He ”) is replaced by an “I” that reiterates its presence.

“Multiple Choice” draws, presumably, on the multiple-choice stories so popular around the time of the poem’s publication in 1977.<sup>21</sup> The “ifs” of the theme are multiplied to the point of absurdity, and the game-playing quality of the entire poetic project has its logical outcome in an actual game, complete with arguments over its rules of conduct. The question of “John”’s behaviour towards women, raised by the poet’s imaginary interlocutor, is one Mathews cannot evade by joking. Is the poet merely exposing the ambivalence of Dowland and his Renaissance world concerning the proper status of the beloved woman? the female controls all natural process, yet she is denied freedom of action. Or, on the other hand, is Mathews sharing in this ambivalence, as witness X, XV, XVI, XIX, XX, XXI, XXII, XXV, and of course XIV, “Male Chauvinist”? A set of variations cannot step back and criticize its theme unambiguously. Every variant is shot through with the thematic material, whatever else the composer may bring of his own to the subsequent sections. If Dowland’s theme evinces a certain type of traditional and characteristic either/or attitude concerning women, then Mathews’s variations on that theme are also implicated, however critically self-aware the poet may be.

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<sup>21</sup> This writer remembers *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, which Mathews’s variation perfectly parodies.

Exactly midway through the set, presumably by design, is "Equivoque," a variation that either contradicts or endorses the assertions of its theme depending on the manner of reading. If one reads across the page, one meets with a loose paraphrase of the original. If one reads the two columns separately, the poem's message turns into its own opposite: the poet's love is now doomed and maddening, not a guarantee of universal order. Mathews has gone as far as possible in undermining the theme's sentiment with "Male Chauvinist." He now underlines the distance he has traveled from Dowland's original by designing a variation that juxtaposes the theme with its absolute negation. The certainty and earnestness of the Jacobean song gives way to equivocal speech and duplicity of structure. This new note of ambiguity becomes steadily more important in the second half of the set.

Mathews's new subsidiary theme may be ambiguity, but his techniques are often, unfortunately, entirely unambiguous. In XIX, the poet didactically informs us that "concepts are ambiguous." The obscure but effective section XVI maintains the abstract shape of the theme but deals in private meanings, perhaps playing on the names of the poet's lovers. It is not, as in Dowland's song, the faithlessness of the beloved that causes reality to become limited and corrupted; it is, rather, the ambiguity of our signs, such as the lovers' "we," signs at once centrally important to our understanding and ultimately unreadable. "Small Change" takes up the problem of linguistic ambiguity in a more ordinary fashion: the poet plays on multiple meanings of the theme's key words. "Anecdote" is a tiresome study in the open-ended mixed-media (poem/prose) style of certain John Ashbery poems such as Ashbery's more successful "Variations, Calypso and Fugue."

The following three variations deal with emotionally and sexually ambiguous relations. The poet vacillates confusedly between extreme positions toward the beloved, moving between

sublimated love and raw physical desire, mouthing slogans of free love then lapsing into old-fashioned jealousy, promising tender understanding while threatening sexual violence, and turning from willful blindness to avid voyeurism. The solid twosome of Dowland's poem becomes a fraught and familiar triangle. That possibility is latent in the theme, with its talk of failing, broken faith, and change, but the Dowland song disguises its roots in common sexual anxiety. Mathews makes explicit that which Dowland leaves unarticulated, and in so doing he both deconstructs the sentiment of the theme and violates its norms of language use. Can such a violation be considered variation, or has the poet moved into the territory of response and criticism? It is necessary once more, in light of Mathews's discoveries thus far, to catalogue that which is essential to the form, in its widest sense, of the Dowland song. Aside from its poetic-structural properties—six lines per stanza, two stanzas, an initial stanza of balanced clauses, etc.—the Dowland poem is characterized by a verbal quality difficult to define or label, but that we may call sweetness, gracefulness, and tenderness, or, if we are less impressed by the original, commonplace love-sentiment and formal and conceptual cliché. If section XV turned the theme's sentiment on its head, these later variations utterly break with the original in their sexual frankness and violence of expression.

Oddly, the conceptual negation of the theme seems more acceptable in a poetic variation set than the intrusion of an intolerably alien verbal quality. If form and style are consistent enough with that of the theme, meaning can be reversed without damage to the coherence of the set. To propose a potential generalization: if the style of the variation exceeds certain bounds relative to the theme, the sequence loses consistency, however stable its content. "The Threat" is closer in meaning to Dowland's original than most of the other variations: if the beloved is to "change" (and here the latent jealousy of the theme is made brutally explicit) then the lover faces

an overwhelming threat to any normal existence and must thus fall back on a masochistic surrender and complete dependence. Yet the first stanza of the variation, which replaces Dowland's fundamental intolerance of change with a contemporary laissez-faire tolerance, seems acceptable in tone, while the second stanza, actually more consistent with the attitudes of the theme, is unacceptable. That is not to say that Mathews may not exercise the option to break with the original in tone or violate its codes of poetic decorum. The project of making explicit that which Dowland's language hides is nowhere advanced more forcefully. *As a variation set*, however, the poem breaks down as it introduces verbal vulgarity. The theme not only has been augmented with new accretions of meaning and verbiage but has been grotesquely defaced. Perhaps only after such complete destruction through contemporary brutality of expression can the poet see his way clear to write a modern version that is not superficially "Up to Date" but profoundly in keeping with modern sensibility. From this vantage, Mathews's overwrought variations in the second half of the set are absolutely necessary to his project. Violent obscenity helps the poet work himself free of the final imperious tonal demands of the theme.

In the next sequence of variations, change itself takes on more of a defining role. Love gives way to indifference and powerlessness in the face of constantly shifting realities. In section XXII change is defined as "refusal of choice," in XXIII "change obliterates choice," and in XXV the now-hated beloved remains "in falseness true": utterly changeable. "To and Fro" is a palindrome, a syntactically cryptic structure operating on "reverse voltage." Section XXVI loses itself in impenetrable symbols and surrealist negation of apparent fact. Nothing is stable.

The final four variations make Mathews's previous lapses seem both forgivable and essential. XXVII is the work of an existentialist who has subjected love to the tests of frivolity, hatred, and brutality and returns to his initial beliefs to find them still active but philosophically

groundless. The “one true faith is simply to choose what we choose. / Now choose your doom and be sweet about it. Your knowledge / Will never again be uselessly sundered, and your pain will at last be your own.” Nature is seen not as a mirror of human affections but as both a depressing example of universal indifference and an inspiring example of secure self-possession: “The unbelligerent faith of the stars is to be not otherwise.” Having arrived at these conclusions beyond despair and hope, the poet is free to recreate the theme in three more remarkable shapes: first, Mathews writes a witty pseudo-Jacobean hymn “To Change”: next, he scrambles the theme’s phrases to create a meaningless variant that is nevertheless both strangely uplifting and profoundly melancholy:

Black heaven  
adorns the weak earth  
it almost moves to lose: so like  
a world that is born upon you  
shining, proven, transformed,  
like viewing someone, and a strange faith. (“The Ghost of King James”)

Finally, he rewrites Dowland in a contemporary, self-aware, yet tender idiom. Change has been shown to be all, yet love remains a paradoxical anchor amidst absolute flux: Mathews adopts the form of a sestina, rigid in its constraints, yet those constraints involving the poet in a constant reordering of statements. Heaven is now explicitly a metaphor, yet it takes on a fresh reality in its new usage, as a description of physical, provisional love, a love that must be chosen by the lover despite its external appearance as “hallucinatory fire.” The final variation, as so often in musical variation sets, is both a return to the naive form of the theme and its reinterpretation in light of the preceding transformations. The listener cannot forget the possibilities that the composer has shown to have been inherent in his initially unassuming theme. Its final repetition may be as unadorned as its first performance, but the tune carries with it a new web of possible

connotations. Mathews could conceivably have repeated the Dowland song at the end, but his replacement of it by a contemporary love poem makes abundantly clear the distance the theme has traveled through the variation process. The poet has succeeded in his project of bringing the Renaissance original as close as possible to his own contemporary speech and thought. The theme is radically alienated from itself and then reconstituted in what amounts to a new language. Variation form turns out to be a translation project across the centuries, as it often is among instrumental composers: Brahms varies and updates Handel; Hindemith transforms and updates Weber.<sup>22</sup> Mathews's important successes more than justify his experiment, and it is of course useless to imagine a hypothetically more consistent poem along the lines of the existing one.

In its truly inventive and moving moments, and equally in each section where invention fails, Mathews's poem is true to its musical model. *Trial Impressions* is very much an intertextual game in which language is encrusted upon a core of language, just as musical variation involves the encrusting of musical figures around a preexisting core of melody and harmony. The set of poems functions first and foremost as a dialogue between literary works, old and new, just as its musical model often functions as a dialogue between existing theme and invention-in-process.

In turning to Charles Olson's much shorter "Variations Done for Gerald van de Wiele," we are able to contrast Mathews's risky work with a more tightly-controlled variation set that enters into a more respectful dialogue with its preexisting literary theme. We see by contrast both what a profound reinterpretation Mathews has made of his subject by completely disassembling and reconstructing it, and what sort of unified structure is possible when the

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<sup>22</sup> In the *Symphonic Metamorphoses*. This impulse is alive and well among contemporary composers. John Corigliano, to take one recent example, has composed a Fantasia on an Ostinato in which a fragment of the slow movement from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is varied and mated with minimalist techniques

impulse to tear apart old language is tempered by a desire to preserve its outward forms. Each poem corresponds to a valid musical model, but not to the same one. Mathews basks in the variation's freedom of invention, whereas Olson is more interested, like Stevens, in the variation form's valuation of small incremental change, the way it focuses our attention upon the variety at the heart of apparent sameness, even when—or especially when—we confine our perception within the narrowest bounds.

## **The variation as simultaneous translation: Charles Olson's double variation form**

The form of Charles Olson's "Variations Done for Gerald van de Wiele" (*Selected* 213-16) is that of the double variation, a musical structure that poets have seldom attempted to reproduce in language. The scarcity of poetic double variations is surprising, given the greater contrast made possible by the use of two themes instead of one.<sup>23</sup> One of Olson's themes is original, but the other is a more-or-less faithful translation, albeit with significant and progressively more extensive variations, of Rimbaud's "Ô saisons, ô châteaux" from *Une Saison en Enfer*. Direct observation and literary paraphrase alternate in an orderly succession. The division between the two parts is strongly marked out in the initial variation but becomes progressively less clear, although Olson does scrupulously maintain his two-part division even in the much freer third variation. Separate acts of observation and translation are finally fused into a new verbal structure. Not only does Rimbaud's verse increasingly influence the way the poet perceives his immediate surroundings, but the borrowed verse is itself changed in turn. In the end, it is impossible to say precisely who speaks the final few words, to label them purely 'Rimbaud' or 'Olson.' The borrowed, varied lines are no longer connected to a scene distant in time and place: they are presented as the response of a single mind to its experience of springtime in the here-and-now. Olson, like Mathews, uses the variation form as a means of translating another's words across time and also as a way of translating across a linguistic divide. In this he is more explicit than Mathews, who works within what is ostensibly a single tongue.

Olson's variations are formally transparent and modest in scope. Neither the landscape nor the borrowed verse is wrenched far from its initial shape in the interest of poetic

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<sup>23</sup> James Merrill has tried a similar experiment in his "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear," although Merrill lets his two themes blend in a manner foreign to the musical form.

invention. Each successive translation of Rimbaud's poem is the result of a different approach, but none wanders too far from the original. Taken together, the three variations make up a sort of cubist image of the French poem, a new English-language artifact synthesized from three valid copies of the original work, copies made, however, from somewhat different viewpoints. We watch the translator at work, moving through a process that could conceivably continue beyond Olson's three variations, a process that would end only when all the possible connotations of the theme had been truly exhausted.

The poetic imagination performs the same type of operations upon the landscape, attempting to get it down in as many forms as the initial perception will bear. Certain key nouns and verbs introduced in the first variation become the building blocks of the second and third. They return unaltered yet are used in new combinations that occasionally contradict the original meaning. Variation one is looser in syntax than the later variations, as if it were an open-air sketch in which the poet tries to capture his immediate sense of landscape regardless of opacities of speech and fragmentary phrases that have not yet developed into articulate language. I do not want to make too much of this observation: Olson seems not to follow a conscious plan at this point. The first variation does employ standard syntax where it can; elsewhere, it settles for such notations as "iris and lilac, birds, / birds, yellow flowers / white flowers." The first half of the variation is, then, a perfect illustration of Olson's famous formulation from the essay "Projective Verse": "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (*Selected* 17). Yet Olson's rough sketch of his immediate perceptions<sup>24</sup> is itself interrupted in mid-line by the voice of Rimbaud. To alter Olson's dictum, *one's* perceptions must immediately and directly lead to *another's* perceptions. The most honest

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<sup>24</sup> The sketch gives the impression of rapidity, but that is not to say that the poet worked so quickly in reality. The first variation as it stands is undoubtedly the product of many purposeful revisions, including sharp excisions to

effort to contain reality in language is overdetermined by the mere fact of consciousness, the fact that ‘clear’ transcription is nonetheless transcription in words, which have belonged to so many other minds, so many other times, places, and subjects. An open parenthesis and Rimbaud’s refrain, left jarringly untranslated, are all that mark the sudden leap across time and place, from scene to scene but also from landscape to language. This initial translation of “Ô saisons, ô châteaux” seems to be, like the first half of the variation, a set of quick sketches—often a mere pony of the French—made in preparation for a later, more careful adaptation of the verse. Olson’s use of the untranslated title and haphazard parenthesis underlines this notebook quality.

The second variation immediately signals to the reader that the initial sequence of images is about to repeat itself: Olson makes certain of our recognition by starting over with the striking line “dogwood flakes,” with its unmistakably odd use of “flakes” as a verb. In revisiting his initial perceptions, the poet generally streamlines his language. Here dogwood ‘flakes’ “the green” instead of the more complicated “what is green.” Unspecified birds now “are so many they are / loud, in the afternoon / they distract,” whereas before precisely-identified “mourning doves” marked “the sway / of the afternoon.” Simplicity seems the aim. Purple passages are excised. Yet some equally convoluted passages of self-conscious moralization are introduced in their place. Verbose meditations slow the initial variation’s rapid pace. Whereas the poet was content before to leave his jump-cuts and scribbled images undeveloped, now meaning is made explicit:

With spring one knows today to see  
that in the morning each thing

is separate but by noon  
they have melted into each other

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produce exactly the effect of the roving eye.

and by night only crazy things  
like the full moon and the whippoorwill

and us, are busy.

Whereas the first variation is the record of an impressionistic and imagistic attempt to get the landscape down on paper, the second variation is an attempt to make explicit the impact of the spring scene on a human consciousness. The first variation is entitled “Le Bonheur,” as if to emphasize the poet’s unthinking, contented delight in his surroundings, and the second is entitled “The Charge,” emphasizing a movement from simple delight to intelligent awareness and active response. The vivid images and striking intuitive connections between perceptions that make the first variation so appealing—i.e. the “whippoorwill, / the night’s tractor”—are lost. In their place, however, Olson gives us a more explicit connection between the landscape and its human observers.

Whereas the first variation changes direction with the abrupt intrusion of Rimbaud into the scene, the binary structure of the second variation is obscured by a seamless, mid-sentence transition. The translated lines of “Ô saisons, ô châteaux” become the moon’s speeches in an imagined conversation between her and the poet. Here Olson lets ‘transliteration’ take the place of translation. He sometimes brings out new overtones belonging to the original French, but he more frequently imposes his own arbitrary connotations on the verse. Rimbaud’s “Quelle âme est sans défauts?” is rendered faithfully in the first variation as “What soul / is without fault?,” although even here, it is important to note, the poet alters singular to plural. In the second variation, the line is rendered as the transliterated “What soul / isn’t in default?” The original “envie” becomes “envy” and “chargé” is misread as “the charge.” This naively-Anglicized version of Rimbaud creates its own new stock of meanings, ones suggested yet unanticipated by

the French poet Faithful translation gives way to a style of creative misreading, ruthless yet potentially revitalizing, akin to the type of strictly formal 'translation' that Mathews proposes in the essay "Translation" and in his "Random Harvest" <sup>5</sup>

The final variation is simply entitled 'Spring,' and consists of a single integrated lyric, of which Olson's perceptions make up the former half and a very freely-adapted Rimbaud makes up the latter. The two halves now read as the work of a single poetic intelligence rather than that of two distinct personae, an intelligence making its way from direct perception toward the lyrical interpretation and formal ordering of those initial observations. It is a mistake, however, to read the three variations as an inevitable, logical progression from observation and passive reading through interpretation and active play toward a final personal integration. The path from 'Le Bonheur' to "Spring" is not straightforward. Some imagery is rejected in the second variation (the plow) only to be retrieved and refined in the final poem. By the third variation the poem's recurring words and phrases have ceased to have any necessary connection to the original landscape or to the Rimbaud poem. They combine freely at the dictates of rhythm and structure. Above all, they serve the poet's own impulse to say something of his own about the spring as it is experienced by the observing intelligence and the feeling creature, to salute his springtime sense of well-being and frenetic activity. Faithfulness to the landscape as it exists 'out there' is in this context unimportant, as is faithfulness to Rimbaud's language. The striking verb "flakes" vacates its prominent place in favour of the unanticipated 'lights up the day.' 'Flakes' now refers obscurely to the "April moon" that phrase has also been dislocated in this strictly verbal rearrangement of the poem's now-familiar building blocks. "Envy" is no longer a mistake for

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<sup>25</sup> A few years before Olson wrote his Rimbaud variations, Delmore Schwartz published a translation of *Une Saison en Enfer* that was praised for its style but roundly condemned for certain naive misreadings of the French: bad transliterations very much in Olson's manner. Olson's second variation is possibly intended as a parody of Schwartz's *A Season in Hell* or at least owes its conception in part to memories of Schwartz's Rimbaud fiasco.

“envie” but is an integral part of the variation’s verbal fabric. Rimbaud’s key word “saisons” is something radically other when it makes its first appearance in Olson’s poem, an invader from another language. Here at the end of “Spring,” it is finally translated, made singular and specific (“Spring”), and appropriated by the contemporary poet: “we salute you / season of no bungling.”

Taken alone, the third variation seems a coherent meditation on spring, one that moves from direct observation captured in vibrant imagery, such as an “April moon” that “flakes the night,” toward less particularized speculations on “The fault of the body and soul / —that they are not one.” The movement from vision to metaphysics is gradual and the transition seamless. Placed in its context as the third of a set of variations, however, “Spring” loses its appearance of naturalness and simplicity. It is revealed to be a complex amalgam of stolen ideas and cunningly altered imagery. “Spring” no longer seems to be the inevitable form for the poem’s content but merely one more version of something falsely labeled the poet’s inspiration—albeit a privileged, provisionally-final, and especially well-crafted version. Much that is vivid and remarkable in the first two variations has been lost as the poet refined his material. It has been plausibly suggested by Thomas Merrill in his *Primer* on Olson’s work that the first theme of “Variations” is a “prosodic retort to William Carlos Williams, which a cursory comparison to ‘Portrait of a Lady’ will instantly reveal” (125). Olson, like Williams in “Portrait of a Lady” (*Collected* I 129) is concerned to lay bare the process of composition, with its collision between fresh perception and the preconceptions of artistic tradition. The immanent scene calls for response, but that response is shaped by the pressures of several hundred years of convention. The double-variation form, with its dialogue of two themes in metamorphosis, lets Olson act out this collision, just as Williams’s poem acts out its own struggle to be born:

Your thighs are appletrees

whose blossoms touch the sky  
Which sky? The sky  
where Watteau hung a lady's  
slipper

“Le Bonheur” is from one point of view the most accurate transcription possible both of immediate reality and of Rimbaud’s thought. Yet an open-air sketch is not to be mistaken for an unmediated record of the immanent, nor is the safest, most utilitarian translation to be taken as an assimilation of another’s language. “The Charge” records the efforts of the mind both to order perception and to harmonize individual perception with poetic tradition. This variation proves no more valid than the poet’s initial crabbed notations, yet it has its own justification and its own value. “Spring” is the deceptive and seamless product of the poetic process, but its placement at the end of a set of like artifacts undercuts its claim to be a simple and unified inspiration. Yet it retains its status as the end-result of Olson’s struggles. The variation form allows the poet to present the end of his labours as a finished artifact yet at the same time acknowledge that there are indeed other, perhaps equally valid ways of mediating between reality and thought, between the claims of the poet’s present environment and poetry’s over-determining past. Olson has in the end rewritten the teeming landscape to suit his own aesthetic sense, much as Stevens inscribes his own imagination on a more passive sea surface. He has also made another’s language his own, not through a private process of assimilation but through a public process of making repeated variations on the original. These assaults upon the literary original are less violent than Mathews’s assaults upon Dowland, but are undertaken for a similar purpose.

Having examined Stevens’s strictly repetitive approach, Olson’s more flexible but still essentially Classical structure, and Mathews’s looser yet nevertheless careful re-creation of variation form in terms of the word, I would like now to turn to some freer uses of the musical

model. Frank O'Hara's variation sets achieve a confident union of linguistic playfulness with tonal consistency. Like Stevens's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" and Olson's "Variations," most of O'Hara's variations are landscapes—atypical material for this poet—in which the play of the mind upon the scene turns a frightening and paralyzing sameness into variety of image and language.

## Coaxing variety out of monotony: Frank O'Hara's landscape variations

In his biography of Frank O'Hara, Brad Gooch identifies a key motivation behind the poet's several efforts in variation form, although he does not expand further upon his observation. Gooch writes: "It was as if he needed to ground himself in particular locations in certain poems to be sure he belonged there and could go on working, like an artist preparing his canvas with gesso" (249). The biographer is correct to call O'Hara's variation sets attempts to "ground himself." Like Stevens's "Sea Surface," O'Hara's variation sets are nearly all repeated views of a single place at a certain time. Gooch is wrong, however, to suggest that this process of grounding is primarily a technique by which the poet settles into a new location. The variation set is more profoundly associated in O'Hara's oeuvre with physical departures. Olson's "Variations" charts a transferal of energy from the mind, which responds to the call of a definite place and time, to the poem, which responds to its own strictly verbal imperative; Mathews's *Trial Impressions* is a celebration of anarchic change and revision largely disconnected from place or calendar time; O'Hara's much shorter works tend to foreground, by contrast, the repetitive, static element of variation form: playful verbal transformation is subordinated to an elegiac project, the attempt to preserve passing joys and vanishing locales. Place is viewed variously, so variously in fact that unity of location is often obscured: we need the title to ground us in Sneden's Landing or Southampton. The multiplicity of imagery and incident is, however, overridden by an uncanny sense of revisiting a place to which one has never been. On subsequent readings, we abstract the changeable details and the repetitive core of the poem becomes more apparent.

The initial variation of each landscape poem is already an abstraction from nature, a

verbal artifact created to match and preserve a living experience. O'Hara then transforms the transformation, often beyond recognition. At the end of the set, the poet usually returns to a more transparent version of the theme. A disappearing time and place is preserved fairly faithfully in poetic rhythm, reimagined through irreverent play and detached poetic technique, and then brought back to life in new and equally valid terms, as if the poet were demonstrating the indestructibility of the scene once he has assimilated it through the force of his memory and imagination.

Like Mathews, O'Hara's project in his variation poems is one of verbal deconstruction followed by emotional reconstruction. In its middle phases, such a project is always in danger of giving way to word-games, clever but ultimately empty. Stevens's "Sea Surface" and Olson's "Variations" subordinate such verbal display to their tightly controlled structures. Jarrell's "Variations" are independent vignettes with a great deal of content packed into a small space: there is no room for excessive virtuoso display. O'Hara, however, is not always successful in avoiding tediousness: again like Mathews, his pleasure in verbal game-playing does on occasion stand in for potentially more witty and affecting transformations of language and image. Fortunately, O'Hara usually has the sense to cut short such unpromising experiments, as in "Sneden's Landing Variations," in which humorous wordplay in fact becomes a refreshing interlude in a generally serious effort. The less successful third section of "Southampton Variations" is an example of the aesthetic risks the poet runs in undertaking such a project.

Each of O'Hara's early variation sets is very much focused on a certain season. "Ann Arbor Variations" is set in the stifling heat and humidity of a Midwestern summer, "Sneden's Landing Variations" is O'Hara's autumn variation, and "Southampton Variations" is a winter scene. It is hard to believe O'Hara was unaware that his three variations named for specific

locales made up a seasonal cycle of poems. The earliest, "Ann Arbor," is dated July 1951, and the latest, "Southampton," is dated February 1954: all three were composed within a relatively short span of time. Although it is tempting to read these poems as O'Hara's *Four Quartets*,<sup>26</sup> we cannot confidently make such an assumption: above all, there is no spring poem to complete the set. Several possibilities suggest themselves: O'Hara may not have realized what he had done, which seems highly unlikely, given the insistence on time and meteorology in each of the three poems; more likely, a fourth variation set was completed and then lost; or perhaps the poet never finished, or never intended to finish, such a cycle: the variations seem, if they were indeed a unified project, to have been written without a preexisting plan. I would like to advance, however, another theory. In the middle of this period (April 1952) O'Hara wrote "Commercial Variations," a poem strongly localized in New York, with themes of renewal and rising/resurrection, of travel and fever for change. Perhaps it should be considered the fourth poem in this occasional series of seasonal landscapes. Such speculation must remain tentative, since "Commercial Variations," as we shall see, differs from the three other poems in so many ways.

"Sneden's Landing Variations" (*Collected* 161-63) demonstrates in an exceptionally clear manner almost all of the techniques O'Hara uses in his other variation sets, and its elegiac tone is quite representative. The poem begins with an exclamation of wide-eyed wonder at the natural surroundings expressed in intentionally ludicrous fashion: "What an oak!" O'Hara sets out the tonality of the poem in the third stanza: "The trees" and the poetic voice "are thoughtful. / poor butterfly locusts! but not unbendingly serious." Variation is the matter of the poem as well as its technique. The leaf becomes a "Russian farmhouse," a foot "hanging in whitewashed air," and a

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<sup>26</sup> The allusions to Eliot in "Ann Arbor Variations" (not very common for O'Hara) are further evidence for such speculation; granted, the allusions are not to *Four Quartets*, but to Eliot's earlier works.

cigar. O'Hara suggests in fact that "All things are something else, aren't they?," giving as an example of this constant metamorphosis the picnic basket into which "the ants have paraded and become lunch... / and of their passionate nourishment become the casket." The poet's cat has become "something new" upon her return to the city: variations in one's surroundings create changes in one's personality. "Snedden's Landing Variations" memorializes several departures, real departures of the body and metaphorical departures of love. Stated thus, the theme, using the term in the literary sense, is very straightforwardly elegiac. It is O'Hara's evocative non-sequiturs, his bold transformations of one image into another and juxtapositions of poetic tone, that make the poem more than a standard lament for passing affection and passing time. On its own, the first variation stands as an often effective, if somewhat obscure, memorial to a vanished moment.

In his second variation, O'Hara carries on from his description of the cat's dissatisfaction with "the sooty air" of the city. This variation is a bitter commentary on the emptiness and ugliness ("We ate manure") of the poet's present life after his return to New York: it is a complete inversion of the first variation. O'Hara isolates the non-rhymed line-ending words (from lines one and three) of the first variation's final quatrains. Those four nouns now become the concluding words of four terse, flat phrases. The four-line invention is mercifully short, making its point through those qualities which it lacks. It has none of the first variation's word-music, its inventive and fantastic diction; it lacks the initial variation's expansive, long-lined freedom of rhythm; it is brutally concise; and it lacks the vivid natural imagery of the first section. Variation two is a bitter joke at the expense of the romantic verse that precedes it: fortunately, O'Hara has the sense to quit once the joke has been made. His employment of abstracted line-endings, however, also serves to prepare the reader for the next variation, a more

serious word-game in which the rhymes of the first variation are rearranged and allowed to suggest new approaches to the initial landscape. Isolating the four unrhymed final words highlights, in retrospect, the traditional ABCB rhyme scheme of the initial variation, a scheme perhaps obscured by the variable meter, the approximate nature of some of the rhymes, O'Hara's non-capitalized initial words, and the verse's constant enjambment.

In the third of the "Snedden's Landing Variations," the rhymes from two quatrains of the initial variation become the backbone of a single quatrain in the third. [To make this more clear: the structure of the first two stanzas of variation one—ABCB DEFE—is compressed in variation three to the stanzaic form EBBE. 'Spare parts' from this process of recombination—ACDF—make up the first four line-endings of stanza five (silver, night, disease, air). Only four line-endings are not used, the four that the poet has already employed as the basis for his second variation]. O'Hara works out these transformations mechanically, taking a mathematical or musical pleasure in pattern-manipulation, yet the repeated material is not so extensive as to over-determine the character of the resulting new arrangement. One repeated word from each line is enough to make the new composition seem familiar, but not enough to call undue attention to the formal plan of the work. One has a sense of revisiting a landscape, but one does not get the impression of rereading lines seen before. Some of the recombined final words are so abstract that they have the potential to suggest an entirely different narrative, but such a radical change of scene is never a real possibility: several of the reused nouns firmly anchor the new section in the same landscape that inspired the theme. The fox and coyotes, the rushes and leaf, and perhaps the "haunter," serve to connect the two narratives. The silver fox, who makes only a brief appearance in variation one, now becomes the focus of an entire variation. Whereas the first section alternated between a somewhat facetious tone and an earnest one, this variation is

unabashedly romantic. It begins with the wistful desire “That the world might be bigger!,” an immediate response to the narrow horizons, the confining qualities of the second variation, but also a recollection of the “immense expanses” which opened variation one. Besides employing purely formal transformations, which work almost subliminally, O’Hara in his variation sets usually reinforces one’s sense of repetition by repeating certain images with transparent verbal alteration. In “Sneden’s Landing Variations,” he makes sparing use of the technique since all of his variations are so obviously related to a given landscape. There are, however, a few representative examples: a “Russian farmhouse at night” is mutated into “the flesh of dawn in Irkutsk.”

The brief fourth variation provides a certain structural symmetry in relation to the second. The poet gathers the initial word from each line of the first variation and runs them together as two “sentences.” Because most of the initial words are pronouns and prepositions, the variation is little more than a string of insignificant monosyllables. In the second couplet, however, the formal game does result in a line of accidental poetry. From the chaos of incommunicative, syntactically-unrelated words, an expressive phrase briefly emerges: “Of he alas he of when and since.” This string of syllables, although assembled by an inflexible rule, seems to express directly the poem’s predominant emotion of regret over a vanished period of passion. The “he alas he” seems to refer—and especially so when one recalls the poem’s biographical context—to the beloved whose country house has been the setting of the poem.<sup>27</sup> O’Hara’s “Sneden’s

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<sup>27</sup> “Sneden’s Landing Variations” commemorates O’Hara’s late-summer (August-September) romance with pianist Robert Fizdale and the poet’s stay at a house rented by Fizdale just outside New York City. Fizdale left on a European tour in September. See Gooch’s biography of O’Hara, pages 241 to 245, in which Gooch also suggests reasonably, that other poems of that period had their genesis in the affair and memories of the musical environment of the Sneden’s Landing house. Gooch’s description of “Sneden’s Landing Variations” as consisting of “five different kinds of rhymed stanzas” (244) is, however, inaccurate, and it is hard to accept some of Gooch’s examples of poems written under the spell of the romance as musically-inspired in any extraordinary sense. Why, for instance, are sestinas especially to be considered “poetic versions of musical forms”?

Landing Variations” is indeed a poem “of when and since,” about an idyllic time and the poet’s subsequent nostalgia for that period. The remarkable thing about this line is its complete serendipity. ‘He’ refers in the first variation to “The haunter / of the Hudson,” whomever or whatever “beautiful creature” that might denote (the fox?; the poet?) and not to the beloved, whose gender is elsewhere obscured. ‘Alas’ is an expression of sympathy “for the mothers of those telephone calls” and not a lament at the loved-one’s departure. ‘Since’ is used in the first variation as a conjunction and not as an adverb. Nonetheless, the random word-gathering produces a meaningful lamentation.

In the final variation, O’Hara dispenses with prescriptive rules of augmentation or diminution and freely varies the initial verbal material, producing a substantial rewriting of the original poem. Images are recognizably repeated, images of blushing, autumn, leaves, air, mountains (initially “the Adirondacks,” now “these mountainous shores”), the Hudson (Henry Hudson this time, as well as his river), a wren, and the silver fox (now a metaphor describing the river). Most tellingly, the cat reappears, as before, at the end of the stanza, emphasizing the formal congruence of the two variations. The cat is now “in the car,” departing the landscape in the present-tense, instead of “in the city” looking back with regret. The variation has not only replayed the same stretch of time, but has looped back upon itself and ended up at a point prior to the opening of the poem. Whereas the first variation remembers Sneden’s Landing with uncomplicated nostalgia, the final variation suggests that we are always at that point of departure, leaving places in the present tense that have already vanished for all intents and purposes. We try to recreate places and moments in the past tense and only succeed in taking leave of them a second—or in this case fifth—time. The last line of the poem reaffirms that which the poet has already suggested through his variation of grammatical tense: “you were always kissing summer

goodbye.” The “haunter” of the landscape, having been a mysterious presence in the initial variation, then having been identified with the fox in the third, is finally revealed in the last variation (the masks here are intentionally flimsy) to be the poet himself:

Once a traveler landed in a creek  
of these mountainous shores from his ark  
and it was called “Discovery of Autumn.”  
Aren’t you sorry the leaves are falling  
round your huge nostalgic vessel? O haunter.

The poet returns to the landscape as a ghost, through obsessive repetitions.

As the organizing principle of a covert love note to a musician, the form of the variation set is obviously appropriate. The musical structure is, however, even more appropriate to the poet’s overt concern with the painful repetitions of a nostalgic imagination. Such imagination forces one not simply to remember a love that has vanished, which could be a melancholy yet pleasurable experience, but to actually relive in all their agony the disappearances of beloved spaces and individuals. O’Hara’s variation form mirrors the working of a mind in the grip of obsessive recollection. The past is recalled, then compared with the present, which is found wanting; it is reimagined and mythologized (“It was longer, / somehow, that summer, like a basket / of interminable spices”), then lamented (“he alas he”); finally, the past is relived as a present, but as a present made up of constantly disappearing moments that cannot be held except through their repetition and variation in memory and in poetic imagination.

“Ann Arbor Variations” (64-66), like “Snedden’s Landing,” anchors itself firmly in the title landscape. The relation among poem, place, and the poet’s sense of loss is rather different, however: O’Hara is not simply memorializing his surroundings; rather, he is both recording his environment and protesting against his unsettled life in Ann Arbor. In “Snedden’s Landing,” the constant elements among the five sections of the poem are easily identified, and the nature of

each transformation readily perceived. It is much more difficult to describe that which makes “Ann Arbor” a variation structure, as opposed to a straightforward sectional poem set in one locale. In order to tally those things which are common to every variation, one must first ruthlessly abstract the details and treat the poem schematically. Each variation is spun out of a small group of general concepts, words susceptible of employment in several different contexts. Whereas the common terms of “Sneden’s Landing” serve to reinforce the poem’s connection to its landscape (fox, coyotes, the Hudson), the repeated concepts of “Ann Arbor” are blandly universal and therefore the poet must exercise greater conscious control over his material, anchoring his variations more explicitly in the same place. ‘Leaves,’ as in “Sneden’s Landing,” is a common term. So are ‘children,’ and ‘sight’ or ‘the gaze.’ All of these common, non-variable elements are obviously broad enough in their possible references that the poet would not find himself limited in his scope of potential variation. Their open-ended character, however, does not inspire O’Hara to freedom of speech. He apparently understands the musical form and its requirement for recognizable congruence as well as interesting transformation, and therefore strictly limits himself. O’Hara did, after all, study for a time at the New England Conservatory.<sup>28</sup>

The sea makes an appearance in each variation, indicating that the poem is in truth as much about a frustrated desire for places where the poet is not as it is a record of his immediate surroundings. The poet is nostalgic for the eastern landscape: “We are sick of living and afraid / that death will not be by water, o sea.” This expression of fear and nausea corresponds to the second variation’s more cryptic “the sea’s misery / is progenitor of the dark moss which hides /

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<sup>28</sup> Despite the sometimes misleading claims that Gooch makes in his biography about the poet’s musical background, it is nevertheless clear from the text, and more importantly from O’Hara’s surviving pieces of music criticism (see *Standing Still and Walking*), that O’Hara possessed a sound understanding of musical structure

on the north side of trees and cries.” In the third variation this is transposed into “And in the morning we whimper as we cook / an egg, so far from fluttering sands and azure!” In the final variation, the ocean is referred to by other circumlocutions. It is represented by a god and by an inland sea: “It’s as if Poseidon left off counting / his waters for a moment”; “Sand fleas arrive from Salt Lake.”

The relation between leaves and eyesight is a constant throughout, although the means of connecting these elements varies. In the first variation, the leaves are eyelashes, “those lashes of our / thinking and dreaming and drinking sight.” Variation two takes a surrealist angle of approach: “pregnant women look snidely at children. / Two weeks ago they were told... / ... ‘chlorophyll / shines in your eyes.’” The “dread and bright eyes” of the women is later juxtaposed with “The leaves, wrinkled or shiny like apples.” In the final variation, “The leaves roll into cigars.” a juxtaposition of images familiar from the later “Snedden’s Landing,” and similarly, “eyes stick together / in sleep.” O’Hara omits the leaves and eyes in his third variation, but the theme of sight is nevertheless present in the line “Workmen loiter before urinals, stare / out windows.” The “cool gaze of strangers” in the fourth variation seems to echo this image, perhaps memorializing the same episode of anonymous cruising.

O’Hara’s variation technique in “Ann Arbor” is not systematic, nor is it based, as it is in “Snedden’s Landing,” on rigorous pattern-manipulation. Certain key images or concepts repeat throughout in different combinations and contexts, but these recurrences are not predictable, nor are they consistent. The description of a stage-work by “Yeats danced in a theatre of polite music” appears in variation three; the line “most of the theatres close” promptly answers or negates this image in the following variation. Yet the first half of the poem says nothing about theatres. To take another example: we “drown in a fountain of myriads” in part one, the

children's "hides are pearly with days of swimming" in part two, and the poet remembers "fainting into skies from a diving board" in part three, but in the final section of the poem, there is no swimming scene. Variation form involves the composer in a series of decisions concerning which elements he will retain and which ones he will transform. Certain qualities of the theme may not prove interesting or susceptible to reinterpretation. Some of those characteristics will be lost as the variations become less and less congruent with the theme and require a greater degree of freedom in their realization. Frequently, the composer will become attached to one of his own deformations of the theme and will continue in later sections to incorporate this new element as if it belonged to the central material of the set: we have seen this in Mathews's *Trial Impressions*. O'Hara is relatively constant in his repetition of certain imagery, certain nouns or conceptual categories, but he is open to new feedback from the writing process. If the idea of a theatre appears, and writing that line suggests a further transformation of that idea, the poet is willing to follow such suggestions.

Certain unusual words and images echo at intervals throughout O'Hara's variation sets to make their reiterative character clear even to the casual reader, the reader who does not spend time abstracting the constant elements as I have in the preceding paragraphs. The word trefoil especially stands out in "Ann Arbor." On its first appearance it is connected with the imagery of leaves and on its varied recurrence near the end of the poem it describes a lamp design. This dual attention to structural cohesion and heard repetition demonstrates a solid understanding on O'Hara's part of the nature of variation form. The poet's usual structuring elements are common words of general significance, especially in the case of "Ann Arbor," yet it is crucial to see them as distinctive reiterated sounds, and not merely as abstract ordering principles. They are thematic motives in the concrete musical sense and not merely in the abstract literary sense of the word

'theme.'

The variation form of "Snedden's Landing" mirrors its content: it dramatizes the obsessively repetitious character of a certain type of memory. "Ann Arbor"'s structure likewise reflects an obsessive state of mind. The poet's nostalgia for a land that would not be "sick of us and our tanned flesh" sets his mind working in circles. More important, however, to the poet's state of mind than obsessive memory is the effect of meteorology. Variation form mirrors O'Hara's sense that the oppressive and monotonous Midwestern heat and humidity dulls the distinctions between days. In that landscape, repetition predominates and variation only occurs against a background of panic-inducing sameness. "O infinite / our siestas!," he laments. The pregnant women "a void temperature" (sic): the omnipresent heat paradoxically induces a sense of terrifying absence. The sun speaks a "violent No!" to the land and its inhabitants. Elsewhere in O'Hara's work, the sun is imagined as a life principle, disinterested but benign precisely because of that disinterest; for instance, in "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" (306-7). Here, however, the sun is a constant, an unvarying and unwelcome theme, and variation not merely an accumulation of pleasing surface detail but a survival strategy. In the third variation, the poet despairs that "The alternatives of summer do not remove / us from this place." He goes on to list some of those alternatives, his attempts to vary the monotony of the summer scene. All are escapes from the heat, including a very literal "fire escape"; they are not serious efforts to confront the oppression of the present moment. The poem itself could be seen as such an effort, although its therapeutic value is limited. The fortuitous "cool gaze of strangers," a chance effect of the nighttime breeze ("a trefoil lamp / of the streets tosses luckily"), and the involuntary approach of autumn: these are the true sources of the poem's final sense of relief and exhilaration. With the approach of day, the inhabitants once more "die upon the sun." It is hard

to judge whether the final line describes a definite break in the oppressive cycle or a return to routine after a successful escape. "The leaves, finally, love us! and moonrise!" clearly signals a change in the poet's relation to the landscape, but whether the succeeding line negates or consummates this change is an open question.

"Ann Arbor," like "Snedden's Landing," is not cast as a variation set by accident. It is not important to decide whether O'Hara consciously chose the variation form as an appropriate mirror of his mental restlessness in a monotonous landscape. The musical form, however the poet came to attempt its re-creation in verse, proved useful as a means of representing the play of an active imagination upon a stagnant environment. To write about boredom and monotony without being boring or monotonous has posed a repeated challenge for modern poets. Variation form seems to have been a way around the difficulty for O'Hara. In attempting to reproduce the reiterative musical structure, the poet turns a basic sameness of language, thought, and imagery from a liability to a strength. Through his formal game of imitating the variation set, the poet is able to speak about and even represent his feeling of being imprisoned in monotonous repetition without creating a tiresome complaint. Just as Stevens in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" coaxes variety out of the empty seascape, O'Hara finds in the reinvention of musical structure a means by which to create variety out of stifling regularity. We shall see similar processes at work in the later chapter on fugue. In "Little Fugue," for example, Sylvia Plath uses a formal game to spin memory and verbal variety out of an empty present, a simple landscape, and a monotonous domestic situation.

"Southampton Variations" (178-80), like "Ann Arbor," is a poem about painful paralysis of the will. The "warm metallic languor" of the "monotonous sea" reflects the poet's feeling of being trapped in useless repetition. In the second variation, O'Hara is more explicit

And the sea's insatiable ease keeps moaning  
its smoky morning-in-a-roundhouse message  
of relaxation and contempt, and pain.

In the final variation, the poet is

...on the sand, in the snow,  
knee-deep in the paralyzing sea of numbness  
which is excessive passion, foolish, unnecessary, despicable....

The air, much like the oppressive summer atmosphere of "Ann Arbor," "is stuck upon the dire, the barren trees." It gives birth, not to a new and invigorating season, but only to more of its own monotony, "not to summer but to itself, inside out and backwards." It is interesting that variation form, which so often in music history has been treated as a frivolous, playful structure, is employed by poets to such ultra-serious ends. Frequently, it has been used as a means of dealing with pain and spiritual inertia, and not only by writers one usually thinks of as earnest: O'Hara's variations are among his most solemn poems. Variation form would seem to be an excellent strategy for confronting natural indifference and the repetitious passions of human existence. It provides evidence of human beings' contrary imaginative power to vary the landscape.

"Southampton Variations," like the other two seasonal variation sets, repeats a number of common words with small transformations. The "fighting boys" of the first variation turn into the fetishized "snarl of a boy" in the second, the dangerous and "handsome youth in the gutter" of the third, and the child of the fourth variation who dreams "he's stabbed" rather than stabbing. Dogs howl in the first variation, then are multiplied and particularized in the second as a procession of "boxers, the / beagles, an Afghan hound and a schipperke, / and a lame man with his cane and mutt." O'Hara is not dogmatic about maintaining congruence among the sections of his poem: the third variation leaves out the dogs altogether. They reappear in the final variation: "Along Toylesome Lane came five dogs, four masters." A bloody heel in the first variation—

that of the poet, apparently—becomes the maimed foot of the “lame man” in the second, the “red shoes” of the maiden in the fantastic third variation, and in the fourth inspires the obscure phrase “the path / to his heel becomes crowded with Secret Police.”

In the second variation, the scene and the poet’s meditations are suddenly described as being “all so German”: this reverberates, picking up more specific World War II overtones in the “Yes, I do need a lift / though I’m not necessarily Aryan” of the third variation and the “German General” of the fourth. One may well ask why. Whereas “Ann Arbor” and “Snedden’s Landing” are solidly rooted in certain places and seasons, “Southampton” more often uses the real landscape as a springboard to fantastic imagery. Yet the essence of the poem is, like that of the two earlier sets, a straightforward piece of observation made interesting by its interaction with the repetitive musical form. The real theme of “Southampton” is the snow, the sea, and the life of the seaside community passing in front of the poet’s window. One may describe the first variation as the ‘theme’ of the set in the musical sense, something one cannot do in the cases of “Ann Arbor” and “Snedden’s Landing”: the opening version of this landscape is, like most themes for variation, highly abstract and vaguely universal. The variations proper begin with the second section. Place-names and possessives referring to geography govern the second variation: “African,” “Arabia,” “German,” and “Afghan.” Along with this focus on geography, there is in the second variation an increasing specificity of description, with its list of dogs and its focus on “*these / particular* pieces of driftwood and *these / irreprovably beautiful* stones and shells” [italics added]. The third variation is a fantastic and melodramatic intermezzo in doggerel, which abandons the constant elements of the landscape. It is perhaps not proper to speak of this fantasy as a variation at all: it is more of a tangentially-related interlude. Aside from a few interesting lines such as “his wet knuckles bite,” this section seems ill-conceived. In a poem of

only seventy-four lines, one hardly needs an interlude. The final variation brings together the fantasy of the third variation, the particularity of the second, and the abstraction of the first in a fitting conclusion to the set.

The three sets of seasonal landscape variations are not among O'Hara's most characteristic works. It is not merely a question of their being early poems, apprentice pieces only. "Ann Arbor" perhaps fits into that category, and it is arguably more successful than the much later "Southampton." Never known as a poet of close natural observation, O'Hara in these poems is exceptionally preoccupied with weather and non-urban landscapes.<sup>29</sup> O'Hara's usual element of campy humour is strictly excluded, and when it does make its way into the poems, it comes as a vitalizing disruption, as in "Sneden's Landing," or incongruous lapse of tone, as in "Southampton." Away from his eventful urban life, the poet must make use of that which lies around him in nature. Such a project would be simple for a poet contented to record the minute variations in the landscape, but O'Hara is not such a writer. His trees tend to be Platonic trees. It comes as a pleasant surprise in "Sneden's Landing" to discover that the poet at least recognizes an oak. His leaves are twice described as cigar-like, in both "Ann Arbor" and "Sneden's Landing." O'Hara's imprecise botany is hardly felt as a lack in his work, since his interest lies elsewhere. Gooch's biography rightly describes him as a *City Poet*. Left alone outside the urban environment, the poet is somewhat at a loss, cut off from the true source of his invention: city life and his circle of artists. It is therefore significant that in these three anomalous poems of place and natural cycle in which O'Hara attempts to trace the daily variations in non-urban landscapes, he chooses to set his observations within the preexisting framework of an art form, seeing nature

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<sup>29</sup> The settings of O'Hara's variations are, of course, not exactly wilderness locales, consisting of the college-town environment of Ann Arbor and the artistic retreats of the Hamptons and Sneden's Landing, well within New York's shadow.

as a theme upon which one may elaborate verbal variations, and not as a source in itself of varied detail and spontaneous invention. Close observation is not enough. It must become the catalyst for purely artistic transformations.

The variation set takes its inspiration from the poet's surroundings, but it develops as a self-contained artifact, an internally-coherent structure that to a great extent turns its back on the landscape. This process, however, results in a poetry surprisingly rooted in place and time. The variation form demands repetition as well as varied elaboration and thereby forces the poet to return again and again to the initial landscape. O'Hara lavishes sustained attention on the scene, not because he expects to find new inspiration in nature but because the musical form requires a revisiting, a reliving of the initial experience and the original impression. However monotonous the poet may find his natural environment—and in "Southampton" and "Ann Arbor" the sense of nature's essential emptiness and oppressive indifference is everywhere palpable—he is forced by the exigencies of variation form to notice minute changes or, most often, to bring a new manner of seeing to his surroundings. In all three cases, the progress of the musical form parallels the working of the poet's consciousness. Each musical variation is a revisitation of a given period, each time with a new focus. O'Hara's variations are re-encounters with a given time and place: variation is a function of the mind's repeated encounter with the unvarying scene; or rather, if there are variations in the landscape, they emerge only through the poet's act of returning to the scene, his re-description with new attention of that which lies apparently stable and monolithic before his gaze.

One might describe the three variation sets examined thus far as variations on existing themes, the three natural landscapes along with their animal and human inhabitants. In the same period of his career, O'Hara also attempts variations on strictly verbal themes, free-floating

phrases and ideas without the same degree of connection to a given place or season. Even here, however, the variation form seems to oblige the poet to anchor himself in space instead of allowing the imagination free reign. “Commercial Variations” (85-87) comes with a sense of place built into its theme, the words of a radio commercial which are, as in Mathews’s *Trial Impressions*, and as in most musical variation sets, stated baldly at the outset: “When you’re ready to sell your diamonds / it’s time to go to the Empire State Building.” This statement segues into the initial variation, making the identity of the theme ambiguous: in fact, the entire first variation becomes the effective theme of the poem. Thus, the ‘theme’ proper is only a small portion of the repeated material. It sets the poem in motion, but it does not, as in musical variation sets, structure the entire work. The excerpt from the radio commercial is more of a theme in the literary sense, the poem’s conceptual centrepiece.

The shape of “Commercial Variation” should by now be very familiar. As in the other O’Hara poems we have examined, the first and last variations are quite closely related: in this case, the final variation ends with a varied restatement of the theme, explicitly recalling the advertising copy that initiated the poem.<sup>30</sup> In the middle of the set, a shorter variation provides contrast of mood and content, a counterpart to the gathering-together of line-beginnings (variation four) in “Snedden’s Landing,” the doggerel murder fantasy in “Southampton,” and, to a lesser degree, the catalogue of “alternatives of summer” in “Ann Arbor.” The structure of each of these four sets is strikingly congruent, further evidence that O’Hara intended them to comprise a loose cycle of poems. My earlier parallel with *Four Quartets* is strengthened when the formal scheme common to all four sets is abstracted. Eliot bookends each of his Quartets with movements of similar tone involving varied reiteration. Although O’Hara’s poems are in four

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<sup>30</sup> In fact, the final variation breaks into two stanzas, and the stanza after the break functions as a nearly independent coda.

sections and Eliot's in five, both poets consistently place a shorter section of great stylistic contrast in the penultimate position.<sup>31</sup> It seems clear that O'Hara was responding to Eliot's example. Variation form itself, however, also suggests such a plan, with initial statement and final restatement, and a central section of modal contrast, a *minore* variation: we have seen a similar structure in Stevens's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Having noted its formal congruence with O'Hara's other three sets and its firm grounding in place, this time that of New York City and specifically Manhattan, one is more tempted than ever to label "Commercial Variations" the fourth of O'Hara's *Four Variations*.

The differences between "Commercial Variations" and the other three landscapes are, however, significant. To set a poem in New York is, of course, to focus on social life and not on the natural environment. "Commercial Variations" is in O'Hara's more familiar and mature voice, that of the conversationalist rather than the introspective solitary observer. Its theme is an overheard phrase, and the texture of the poem is spun out of similarly overheard scraps of breathless, witty, often campy conversation. The common elements among the variations are readily abstracted. To take the clearest examples: O'Hara weaves variations on things operatic ("coloratura"; "Metropolitan Opera"; "Carmen"; "the dampness was operatic"; "*Erwartung*"; and "*La Forza del Destino*"); on diamonds and other precious minerals ("diamonds"; "gold"; "silver mine"; "Jewel Song"; "dazzling"; "shining"; and once again, "diamonds"); and on days, meaning 'eras,' both in the poet's life and the city's history ("it's time to go... / and jump into the 30s like they did in 1929. / Those were desperate days too"; "I'm expected to spend the rest of my days in a north-state greenhouse"; "I like it when the days are ducal"; "it being sweet times, in Tammany in the 90s"; and "New Year's Eve in 1940, thirty days / before I ditched the stable

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<sup>31</sup> Eliot's *The Waste Land* follows the same plan.

boy”). The above scheme almost entirely ignores the third variation, which indeed differs quite considerably from the others, and is something of a lapse in invention. This section is not entirely without interesting transformations: the Empire State Building becomes the Trojan Horse, which in turn inspires further variations on an erotic/equestrian theme: “One thought a good deal then of riding for pleasures”; and the “stable boy” who brings the set back around to its opening. Of the four sets examined thus far, “Commercial” is the most flamboyant in its manipulation of words and concepts, the one that calls most attention to the ongoing process of transformation instead of emphasizing the constant return of the theme. Of the four, it consequently seems most successful in capturing the dual focus of the variation form, its easily perceived repetitions set against a pleasing copiousness of surface invention. The poem’s predominant tone is one of breezy speech—reflecting the advertising copy that inspired the work—and an elated sense of new freedom, despite its ostensible concern with forced separation, desperation, persecution, selfishness, and violence both excruciating and salutary (fistfights; “artillery”; “listening to *Erwartung* hanging by your thumbs”). Yet again, variation form is seen to inspire contradiction of content and style. The playful manner in which O’Hara works out his poetic material, his delight in verbal game-playing and the energy of invention, counterbalances the dark content of the piece. That balance is more perfect in “Commercial Variations” than in O’Hara’s other landscapes, in which the predominant mood, despite their playfulness of execution, remains basically sombre.

For his “Variations on Pasternak’s ‘Mein Liebchen, Was Willst du Noch Mehr?’” (*Collected* 339), O’Hara dispenses with the numbered sections that make his other sets relatively easy to dissect. The variation amounts to a free improvisation on selected words and ideas from the Pasternak poem (*Selected* 11-12). Like Mathews’s *Trial Impressions*, this poem is intended

to imitate a literary as well as a musical model. Pasternak's own 1918 *Variations* on a theme from Pushkin is another free composition based on existing verse. O'Hara's poem roughly parallels Pasternak's, beginning with an image of walls, progressing through imagery of fingers (in Pasternak it is hands), time moving yet standing still (P. "The hour is scuttling like a beetle"), country and houses, luck, and rain pouring over lintels (P. "the waterspout of grief"). O'Hara's "Variations" ends, as does Pasternak's, with "a centenarian" (whom Pasternak refers to scornfully as a "poor old half-wit"). O'Hara repeatedly uses a technique of substituting new definitions for old somewhat like that of Mathews in "Random Harvest." The "cloud dries and jabbars off" is altered to "the clouds are imitating Diana Adams"<sup>32</sup> For "the burdock stands there, grey and dismal, O'Hara offers "the brassiness of weeds becomes sculptural and bridal." Although the poem that results from O'Hara's alternately respectful and playful parody of the original is a success on its own terms, its relation to variation form is tangential. Within the poem, images repeat with variation, but not in any systematic fashion. "Diana Adams" and "George Balanchine" are variations on the theme of American ballet.<sup>33</sup> The opening image of the wall reappears midway through, as if to begin the poem again, to start a new discrete variation on the Pasternak work.

O'Hara does not produce a translation or paraphrase of "Mein Liebchen," nor a series of views of a single theme, yet the work is not merely a free rhapsody upon the imagery of the original. He makes a new poem that echoes certain lines of the Pasternak poem but ignores others entirely, and follows the structure of the theme closely but not without digressions, without doubling back upon itself repeatedly. Most importantly, O'Hara preserves Pasternak's

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<sup>32</sup> The transposition is indeed obscure, at least to this reader. It would perhaps help to know more about Adams's performing style.

<sup>33</sup> The poem is, as well as a tribute to Pasternak, a love note to dancer Vincent Warren.

sentiment while expressing that sentiment in the poet's own, more casual American voice, with its concrete topical allusions and calculated irrelevancies. Pasternak's "The year's in tears, but you are lovely, / like day all over, like impatience" is well reconstituted as:

a centenarian goes down the street and sees  
George Balanchine, that makes the day for him  
just as the sight of you, no wall, no moon, no world, makes  
everything day to me [.]

One cannot call "Variations on Pasternak's 'Mein Liebchen'" a variation set, strictly or even loosely speaking, yet O'Hara here manages to create a unique, organic poetic structure that accomplishes all one could wish of a theme-and-variations. The content and much of the material of the borrowed theme remains plainly and audibly present in the new poem. The internal repetitions of the O'Hara version suggest large-scale sectional reiteration without actually delivering on that promise. O'Hara chooses to keep certain elements constant, such as the moon and the walls, and vary others, especially by the introduction of personal nouns. The poet is faithful to the spirit of the musical genre, if not to its specific formal requirements. With this poem, we move closer to the Romantic conception of variations without discrete sections, without clearly reiterated periods, and that dispense with articulated boundaries between those periods. O'Hara creates a unique literary form analogous to the musical form, yet with a stronger sense of forward narrative motion. Such a *through-composed* variation is arguably more appropriate to language than the standard recursive musical model: in a later chapter, we shall see Delmore Schwartz approaching fugue in much the same way, suggesting its structure without fully appropriating its circular shape. Here, as in Schwartz's *The Repetitive Heart*, the new structure is at bottom discursive and linguistic, not recursive and musical, yet in alluding to the form of the musical variation, the poet complicates the basically straightforward thrust of his





we waited too”), providing a transition that blurs the border between the apparently discrete sections. The theme of waiting is addressed obliquely in the third variation (“when you’re not here I pet / the giraffe”) and again directly in the fourth (“wait for me / I’m staying with you”) and fifth (“wait / till the *Liebeslieder Walzer* are all / over”).

The variation label sets up an expectation that a stretch of time will replay itself. O’Hara fulfills this expectation, yet his six discrete sections and his temporal loops do not align precisely. Some of the sections do commence, however, with clear recursions in time. Variation five is easily perceived as a varied reiteration of variation two. Both are narrated in the past tense, and the fifth variation reintroduces the central image of the tree as if we have never encountered it before: “In a crevice in the rocks / there’s a little tree we noticed.” Variation six opens as if it is about to narrate a repeated action, but that action turns out to be something entirely new to the poem: “I went to the *same strange* passport office” [italics added]. Yet the ultimate destination is the now-familiar waterfall scene: he intends “to get to the woods the wet.” The poet creates an impression of time replaying itself without systematically following the variation plan.

Complicating the already loosely-handled theme-and-variation structure is the introduction in the second variation of new material, a second theme, as in those Haydn double variations that introduce two themes and vary them in alternating sections: we have seen this sort of structure in Olson’s “Variations.” Unlike Olson, however, O’Hara lets his two themes blend freely. The memory of an excursion to a waterfall alternates and mixes with the poet’s observations of his Saturday coffee-drinking and music-listening. The repeated eruption of this pastoral memory into the present-day city scene becomes the main preoccupation of the poem. Like “Snedden’s Landing,” “Variations on Saturday” is a poem of regret and departure, both the

departure of the beloved and the departure of the poet from a place that is charged with his traces and with intense emotion. The waterfall memory intrudes on the present, colouring the poet's metaphors, especially in variation three, and making the temporally-grounded title "Variations on Saturday" a misnomer. Memory is not an unwelcome haunting, however, as in "Sneden's Landing." O'Hara now seems to suggest that sad, nostalgic repetition is preferable to the freedom of mere oblivion. Reliving the experience of loss provides a paradoxical comfort:

wait  
till the *Liebeslieder Walzer* are all  
over  
and we'll have that regret too  
to hold us and cheer us....

Variation four facetiously rewrites absence as presence: "I'm staying with you / fuck Canada" In variation five, the lovers not only watch the tree racing towards the falls but race with it toward an erotic consummation. In the final section, the green landscape of the past becomes, at the hands of the poet, a protective cave for the future.

As in "Sneden's Landing," O'Hara is saying something very traditional about the value of memory. Memory is not simply a notation of dead events, but a living force, not in this case dragging the poet endlessly back to the instant of loss, but granting future security and healing past injuries: "the light broke" of its own accord, but "then it got put together again" through the ordering action of language. It is not O'Hara's message, which is very standard and has a respectable pedigree, that makes the poem a very modern type of elegy: rather, it is his repetitive musical structure. The poet makes transparent every step of the process by which a regretful backward glance is transmuted into a comforting memorial. One look at the past landscape brings regret, but repeated viewings of the scene and poetic transformations of the original experience produce in turn the tranquil acceptance of variation three, the humourous defiance of

variation four, and the distanced perspective of variation five (“I guess it was like us”), and result finally in O’Hara’s closing artistic gesture of blessing

O’Hara is not explicit about this process nor is he systematic in setting it down. As in the musical model of the variation, the composer is interested primarily in handling a small thematic kernel in a variety of manners. The surface of the poem—the poem as witty speech—is most important, and any didactic scheme such as the one described above is covert or largely unconscious. For a poem about loss and regret, “Variations on Saturday” is, indeed, remarkably high-spirited. The purely formal game of finding new ways to reuse old material takes precedence over the complaint at the heart of the poem. In fact, variation process seems to call up that painful content in the first place. The first variation, far from being a theme, seems to be a long stretch of throat-clearing. O’Hara plays with lines until the words “you will wait a long time” finally inspire personal engagement. Sheer pleasure in verbal manipulation precedes any more conscious effort to communicate meaning. Yet wordplay and formal games never overwhelm O’Hara’s variations. The same poet who when he wishes can indulge in wild flights of surreal fantasy or extravagant private wordplay also understands the challenge of variation form to be more than the achievement of multiplicity of speech. Variation demands the poet produce the widest variety of language and perception within the most narrow of bounds. O’Hara’s variations are, contrary to the apparent connotations of the ‘variation’ label, some of his leanest productions.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Several other times throughout his career, O’Hara made explicit his intention to recreate variation form. “Two Variations” (134-35) is a very free and fragmentary approach to the project (which originally had a different title). “The Mike Goldberg Variations” (*Poems Retrieved* 134-35) might be termed a rondo-variation—the recurrent “O golden mountain” functions as a *ritornello*—yet the refrain does not announce the arrival of a new repetition, rather, it breaks each variation into three or four sections. With only two variations, enough merely to suggest the musical structure, “Mike Goldberg” seems to owe its designation more to the wordplay of the title than to any serious effort at musical imitation.

## Variation as recurring dream: Randall Jarrell's "Hohensalzburg"

Randall Jarrell's "Hohensalzburg: Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Romantic Character" makes a good point of termination for this study of poetic variation structures. We have moved in the course of this chapter from formally transparent poems of numbered, congruent sections, through O'Hara's increasingly free adaptations of the musical genre, to end at "Hohensalzburg," which initially looks and reads like a narrative, not a variation set. As we shall see, there is indeed good reason to suspect its self-proclaimed classification. Nevertheless, an examination of Jarrell's poem makes clear the ways in which variation form coincides with twentieth-century understandings of psychological reality. Here, variation form falls in line, improbably enough, with psychoanalytic theory.

The structure of the work is not sectional, nor do Jarrell's repetitions follow any apparent plan, aside from the approximate symmetry of the opening and closing passages; however, a reader of the poem does recognize exact reiteration and cannot but perceive certain material returning in varied forms and altered contexts. A forward-moving dream-narrative operates alongside a musical structure of constant return to a small group of motives, recurring phrases and images. There are significantly-placed white spaces on the page, and Jarrell marks out those significant moments when the scene shifts or the poem's point of view alters, often pivoting on a line spoken by one character and then parroted by the other. Those formal articulations, however, do not necessarily coincide with the repetitions. The narrative structure cuts across the returns and vice versa. Instead of the discrete, articulated repetitions of the Classical variation form, Jarrell uses a fluid variation technique in which no return has a sharply defined beginning or end, a technique that involves recursion to individual lines and motives, not wholesale

repetition of an extended theme. As in dreams, the poetic narrative turns back upon itself, uncannily revisiting isolated words and images, most only half-recalled yet unmistakably familiar. Jarrell almost subliminally creates a sense both of compositional unity and narrative uncertainty, the shifting yet constant terrain of the nightmare.

A Romantic version of variation form is taken explicitly as a musical model. This Romantic form, seldom identified as variation, is an organic structure in which the Classical variation's clearly intelligible sectional framework gives way to free motivic reiteration and transformation. In Schumann's *Carnaval*—a work that stands midway between the variation set proper and its later, freer developments—the “Sphinxes” are common motives that pervade each of the work's otherwise disparate character pieces, motives perceptible through their many disguises yet by no means overtly thematic. Schumann spells them out midway through the set, but he does not intend them to be sounded alone. The traces of the “Sphinxes” are everywhere obvious yet these ‘themes’ are nowhere explicit. Although Schumann prints them separately, they remain a secret between the player and the page. Jarrell's “Theme of Romantic Character” is similarly implicit everywhere in the work yet nowhere exists as a separate entity. The poem's ‘theme’ consists of verbal formulas that return in almost identical form, as well as inexpressible, half-conscious thoughts that pervade the work but never become articulate. As a genre-label, variation is insufficient, although the variation set's dual principle of structural congruity and surface difference is in some sense still at the heart of the work. Jarrell's title makes explicit the connection between his poem and the Romantic style of non-sectional, freely metamorphic variation: the subtitle connects the work with Strauss's *Don Quixote*, a set of *Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character*.

Jarrell saw his poem as a reiterative musical structure rather than as a progressive

narrative. The subtitle warns us to expect formal changes, alterations at the surface, against a background of sameness. "Fantastic Variations" conditions us to expect a certain circularity of movement yet signals that there is no rational structure of balanced reiterated parts, only a dreamlike sense of uncanny returns with metamorphoses. The sense of return is clear. Jarrell goes so far as to use direct, unaltered verbal repetition on several occasions in order to foreground the circularity of the verse. The points at which the story doubles back upon itself are, however, obscure and, as I have noted, out of phase with the apparent breaks in the narrative. The pleasure of the Classical variation comes from viewing, within a comforting framework, something familiar wittily transformed into something new. Jarrell's "Fantastic Variations," by contrast, produce the effect of uncanny surprise. Reiteration only becomes recognizable once the return is well underway or already finished.

One example will suffice. On the second page, the first-person storyteller awakes, signaling a break in the fantasy. One expects a new scene to begin, which it in fact does, the setting a castle, an unanticipated piece of imagery. Yet this new beginning is merely an awakening into a further fantasy, albeit one now grounded in the contemporary realities of leather coats with map-pockets, bars of chocolate, and tinfoil. The narrator opens his eyes on the new scene, only to echo the opening line of the previous dream-sequence. "I saw, as I always saw" recalls "I should always have known": both vision and thought move in endless circles, although the narrator's story appears to have the forward momentum of a tale. The castle rises "above limes," again recalling the earlier dream, and "has never been taken," echoing the earlier reference to the "flesh that has never flowered." Waking state and dreaming state are merely variations upon one underlying theme, inexpressible directly but nevertheless making itself known through every perception and colouring every fragment of speech.

Jarrell's subtitle makes explicit that which should be clear from a receptive, imaginative reading of the poem: the narrative is no more important than the shifting images that send the work back in inconclusive circles. When questioned as to its logic and its meaning, the verse merely points back toward that which it has already said. Such a poem defies paraphrase, although its narrative nevertheless follows an apparently logical track. The ending reads as a moral, but it is crucial to recall that the last speech is a literal, although truncated, recapitulation of the opening page. The "one word" that underlies existence is inexpressible, underlying as it does even such categories as life, death, or soul. "Hohensalzburg" is 'about' inexpressible longings and our obscure sense of a constant element at the heart of a variety of conscious and semiconscious experience. Yet instead of theorizing about this buried yet vocal Real in psychoanalytic terms,<sup>36</sup> Jarrell acts out its return. He casts it as a musical theme that, having a truly "Romantic Character," remains merely *Sehnsucht* and never submits to possession, prediction or rationalization—though it is instantly recognizable, uncannily familiar.

All of the above observations would be unexceptionable were it not plainly recorded in a letter that the poem came first and its subtitle was an inspired afterthought: just as Schumann's appealing descriptive titles, which seem so clearly to belong with his pieces, were often late additions.

I've just been playing *Don Quixote* on the phonograph, and noticing that its subtitle is *Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character*. I'd been correcting proof on *Hohensalzburg* and I thought "A good subtitle for it would be *Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Romantic Character*." (Wright 277)

"Hohensalzburg" was not designed as a variation set, yet Jarrell's retrospective labeling of his poem nevertheless reveals much about its author's understanding of his own accomplishment.

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<sup>36</sup> Jarrell writes "when I read ["Hohensalzburg"] I think, 'What does it *really* mean?' And this I can't answer, though usually I know exactly what my poems mean. It's like a dream that needs analysis to be plain." (Wright 277)

The poet recognized that what he had attempted was in line with the spirit if not the letter of the musical variation form. That which seems new, which appears to follow logically, frequently turns out in musical form to be a replay. The variation form, as the label implies, is by no means a standing-still, but a model of constant change. Jarrell's dream changes setting (both in place and time) and viewpoint quite abruptly, with the result that the two main characters not only exist as vampire and prey, but become sexually interchangeable. Even the living and the dead exchange roles. Yet the conclusion, which reiterates the initial statement, affirms that "surely, at the last, all these are one, / We also are forever one."

The musical form of the variation may be used, as it is at the hands of Stevens and O'Hara, to uncover variety at the heart of apparent sameness. It may equally be used to point to a common element where all seems to be change. Mathews accomplishes this, after first working to demonstrate the opposite. Olson does something similar in his "Variations Done for Gerald van de Wiele," and Jarrell himself quietly makes the same sort of sympathetic connections among a disparate group of suffering creatures in his "Variations." The theme in each of these cases is a complex of verbal sounds and ideas that makes itself heard repeatedly yet has no existence independent of its poetic context. It pervades the work, yet it can only be identified through reading the poem. The theme does not organize the poem logically, as an essay theme might; rather, it sounds, then sounds again, and then yet again, always appearing in new verbal clothing yet always felt to be either comfortingly or disturbingly the same beneath each disguise. There is no rational framework behind the poem, but that does not mean that the work is given over to chaos. On the contrary, every word is over-determined.

Most of the poems we have examined assure their reader that something is in control: in that of Mathews it is the will to love; in the poem by Olson, and again in that of Mathews, it is

the mind that builds bridges between experience and thought and equally across temporal and linguistic barriers; in the variation sets of Stevens and O'Hara the poetic imagination differentiates, organizes, and perhaps transcends reality. In "Hohensalzburg," by contrast, Jarrell suggests that whatever is constant, whatever gives order to experience, is not controllable but shows itself through compulsive, shape-shifting repetition. Jarrell's poem clearly has affinities with musical form, but not necessarily with any specific genre, and not with the rational shape of the Classical theme-and-variations. Yet Jarrell is on solid ground when, with the necessary qualifiers built into his title, he calls his work a *sort* of variation.

In the following survey of poetic analogues to the fugue, we will examine several more examples of this type of recursive compositional impulse, most of them involving not the balanced, rational shape of the Classical sectional variation but instead the "Hohensalzburg" style of compulsive back-and-forth movement. It will become more clear in the following pages that the impulse to organize language through varied return, through what one could generalize as circular and not linear means—no matter whether such organization bespeaks rational control or obsession—is at the heart of the widespread and elusive dream of writing a truly musical poem.

## Chapter II

# The fugue

Forgetting

I said:

*Can*

The design

Of the fugue

Be transferred

To poetry?

Louis Zukofsky ("A"-6)

## **The impossible project of the poetic fugue**

At first glance, the fugue appears to be a singularly inappropriate form of organization for the purposes of the poet. There are at least three obstacles in the poet's way, one of which is strictly speaking insurmountable. 1) Fugal technique calls for direct, unmistakable imitation, the restatement of the subject in identical pitches or in transposition. 2) In fugal writing, the counter-subject does not necessarily 'counter' the subject in any strongly oppositional sense of the word. This element of fugue raises the problem for the poet of finding verbal contrast without producing strong conceptual conflict. 3) The most serious incongruity between a musical fugue and any full poetic analogue is the self-canceling chaos of simultaneous speech versus the richness and constructive potential of contrapuntal texture in music. A literal rendering of fugal technique in the spoken or printed word alone, even if it were possible to achieve, would result in a work monotonous in tone, insufficiently differentiated among its component parts, and significantly communicative merely in fleeting, tantalizing moments. The interest and pleasure of the work would be that of listening to multiple conversations at a party without following more than a few phrases of any one speaker. One can enjoy simultaneous talk in just this manner, for the sake of its sound-quality and the play of timbre and not for its semantic content, but the pleasure is not for everyone's ears.

Even if the poet wished or were able to produce an effect of simultaneous speech for a sustained period, however, there would remain the fact that much modern poetry engages the eye first, and then (presumably or ideally) calls for an internal hearing in the reader. Can such an internal ear 'hear' multiple speech in any truly synchronized manner? An uncompromisingly fugal piece of writing would seem to be a chimera, and an undesirable one at that.

A multiple-voiced composition, rigorous in structure but based on a limited set of nonsense or quasi-nonsense syllables, in the manner of Kurt Schwitters's *Ur sonate*,<sup>1</sup> would be the ultimate approach to fugal writing. Yet an intriguing part of the fugue's challenge to poets is the possibility of creating a literary analogue which maintains the progression of dialogue or argument while employing a very restricted kernel of generative words or ideas. A fugue in nonsense would be a curiosity—and the desire to produce a tour-de-force is a strong motivation behind all of the works that will be examined in this chapter—but it would hardly satisfy the poet's more serious desire to unite the two arts. The quixotic ideal has been to create a structure of words and phrases that obeys all the demands of linguistic signifying yet is generated by some convincing adaptation of fugal process.

Despite the potential pitfalls of such a project, a surprisingly large number of modern English-language poets have attempted it. Other poets have found in the fugue a more general method of proceeding, a method by which they might organize long poems consisting of disparate material. In these cases, the analogy is more flexible, and the critic must look not for the overall shape of a fugue but for its characteristic processes. Fugue is often used carelessly in literary criticism as a metaphor for a large balanced work generated from fragments, as though one would discover a grand familiar structure called 'fugue' if one could observe the work from a high enough vantage, at a level of appropriate abstraction.<sup>2</sup> Smaller self-proclaimed 'fugues' often do display such a familiar outline, but in the cases of larger works we do better to look for

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<sup>1</sup> Schwitters's gramophone recording of the work has been made available on the website [ubu.com](http://ubu.com). I recall hearing an ensemble perform a completely convincing 'arrangement' of the sonata for four voices.

<sup>2</sup> In *A Vision*, Yeats attempts to justify Pound's *Cantos* on such a basis: 'Now at last [Pound] explains that it will when the hundredth canto is finished, display a structure like that of a Bach Fugue' (4). Pound did not thank Yeats for his clarification: "If Yeats knew a fugue from a frog, he might have transmitted what I told him in some way that would have helped rather than obfuscated his readers. Mah!!!" (*Letters* 293). Kay Davis's *Fugue and Fresco* helpfully contrasts the procedural nature of fugue with Yeats's concept of form as something "full sphere-like single" (qtd. in Davis 78). As we know," comments Davis, "fugue is not that."

fugal techniques in the detail, and cease equating the writing of a literary fugue with the achievement of unity in diversity.

## An exposition of fugue

Fugue is not a closed structure. It is, above all, a process of beginning a piece, a standard opening scheme, although the term also describes a set of techniques for continuing that work. The designation 'fugue' implies a monothematic composition for several voices. In Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the collection that is practically synonymous with fugue, three- and four-voiced compositions predominate, with a few exceptional two- and five-voiced examples. It is also possible to approximate the texture of fugue in a composition for a single-melody solo instrument: the melodic line alternates between two or more parts in different registers, a technique referred to as *style brisé*. Poetic fugues overwhelmingly tend to be these sorts of pieces, which is not surprising given that the solo voice of the lyric has been so dominant in modern verse. The truly multi-voiced poetic fugue is an as-yet unrealized ideal.

A fugue is based on a single musical idea (the *subject*), which is announced by a solo voice. Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, Opus 130, the overwhelming inspiration for some of the poets we will be examining, begins with all four voices in unison: when the fugal subject proper arrives, it is already accompanied. This is a later re-imagining of Bach's technique. In the works of Bach and his Baroque contemporaries or predecessors the unaccompanied opening is an unmistakable cue that a fugue or fugato procedure is to follow.

The second voice now enters, usually at the interval of a fifth (*dominant*) above the initial entry, and restates the subject: this restatement is termed the *answer*. The answer may consist either of the intervals of the subject in an exact transposition, tone for tone and semitone for semitone (*real answer*) or in a form altered to fit the harmonic context (*tonal answer*). The fugue may be sounded by multiple voices, but they each repeat the same idea either exactly or in

a slightly altered form. The poet's problem with this element of fugue is that it runs counter to our normal expectation that speakers in dialogue say different things. A many-voiced conversation that centres upon one idea is an orderly, coherent exchange, but a conversation that is monothematic in the fugal sense—that is, consisting of exact imitation—is a comic absurdity. Long passages of precise repetition, something very conventional in musical composition, would be grotesque and unnatural in the context of conversational exchanges: distinct personae are thereby reduced to the status of puppets. As we shall see, Sylvia Plath's "Three Women," a multi-voiced poem inspired by fugal technique, is a work that straddles the line between unity of content and voice and plurality of character and experience.

While the second voice answers, the first continues either with material derived from the subject or with a secondary theme that provides some rhythmic contrast, the *counter-subject*. The counter-subject must differ from the subject, but only so as to be clearly distinguished when the two are heard together. The relation is not one of antithesis but of constant juxtaposition. Often the counter-subject, when analyzed, will be found to be composed of the key elements of the subject (similar interval content: motives of the subject rhythmically augmented or diminished). The counter-subject need not accompany every further entry of the subject.

The remaining voices enter in turn with further restatements of the subject or answer. One must keep in mind that the similarity between subject and answer outweighs their differences: the effect is of three or four voices entering with complementary information, not conflicting ideas. In his "Fugue for Ann Griffiths," the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas makes explicit the challenge this presents to a poet, who must find a way with each imitative entry "To put it differently / yet the same" (470). The fugue is not without elements of conflict—eventually three or four parts are speaking at once, 'saying' different things—but the conflict is rhythmic, among

the parts, or occurs between the one part which states the subject—thereby arresting the listener's attention—and the others which continue with their secondary material. *Stretto* is the term for overlapping entries of the subject and answer, a quickening of the rhythm of statement.<sup>3</sup> It is in a section of *stretto*, usually found near the end of the fugue, that the sense of conflict is greatest.

Once all of the voices have entered and the exposition is complete, they may continue stating the theme for another round or partial round—in a different order—perhaps at times in inversion (the pitches move up where the subject initially moved down and vice versa) or perhaps through rhythmic augmentation. The composer will more likely develop one or more of the initial ideas, either a motive from the subject or the counter-subject material, without explicitly stating the subject: this period of intervening development<sup>4</sup> is called an *episode*. Poets have relied on the episode or episodes to further the argument of their works. The exposition promises great rhythmic energy but threatens to become conceptually stagnant. The episode allows the poet to engage in a sustained lyrical meditation on the ideas suggested by the more fragmentary subject-exposition.

After the episode, some or all of the voices may engage in another exposition.<sup>5</sup> More episodes and partial restatements of the subject may follow. *Stretto* may build up the sense of momentum as the piece reaches its climax. A pedal point, the sounding of one sustained note (usually the dominant in the bass) while the chords continue to change above, will strongly signal the termination of the composition, the beginning of the *coda* or *codetta*. The fugue ends with a

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<sup>3</sup> The German poet Paul Celan (also the author of the widely-anthologized “Todesfuge”—see the discussion below of Plath’s “Little Fugue”)—attempts to approximate this technique of overlapping voice-entries in his poem “Engführung” (the word is the German equivalent of *stretto*)

<sup>4</sup> To speak more precisely, an episode is a period of continuation or extension of the original ideas, called *Fortspinnung* (spinning-out) by the German Baroque; the term ‘development’ carries with it connotations of sonata procedure, of motivic transformation and increased harmonic tension, that can confuse matters

<sup>5</sup> The term counter-subject is already too likely to suggest false notions of thematic contrast in the mind of a non-specialist. It is best not to employ the alternate term *counter-exposition* in this connection. Where necessary, I will refer to a re-exposition or second (or third, or final) exposition

sense of relaxation as the voices converge on a tonic chord, passed over lightly in the course of the work, perhaps at its mid-point, but firmly settled upon only at the conclusion.

Double or triple fugues are possible in such cases two or three distinct subjects are introduced and developed, either in subsequent, discrete sections of one work or simultaneously (in which case the second subject is merely a more cohesive and individuated counter-subject)<sup>6</sup>; or, most likely, a first subject is treated fugally, a second (or third) subject is introduced, and then the multiple subjects are developed and woven together. In these models, the fugue begins to look like other more dialectical compositional processes such as the sonata.

The closer a fugal poem approaches logical argument or dialogue, the more likely it is to be such a 'multiple fugue': poets have rarely been content with the monothematic restriction of strict fugal process. In Baroque composition, however, a work with a double exposition remains tied to a single field of tonality and a single controlling *Affekt*, or emotional gestalt. Poets, by contrast, have taken the idea of multiple exposition as a license to employ tonal contrast and to set conflicting ideas against each other. Such license may be foreign to the spirit of Baroque fugal process, but it is not without precedent in the wide range of musical works which call themselves fugues. Fugue is of course nearly synonymous with Bach in the popular conception, but the fugues in Beethoven's late sonatas and quartets, more individual and less susceptible of generalization, are also fruitful models for modern English-language poets. One might even argue that Beethoven's reinvention of fugue is a more important presence in modern poetry than Bach's version of the technique. The *Grosse Fuge*, especially as played by some contemporary quartets, is a proto-modern struggle between four agitated voices, not the meeting of "reasonable

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<sup>6</sup> *Counter-subject* is sometimes used to denote the second subject of a double fugue to avoid obvious confusion I will not use this terminology. The overlap of designation points to the fairly recent provenance of the entire theoretical construct we call 'fugue'. A double fugue was not particularly distinct historically from a single fugue with a prominent counter-subject.

men in an orderly discussion" (Zukofsky "A"-12 127; referring to Bach's *The Art of the Fugue* ). It is a marriage of the textural and tonal contrasts of a sonata movement with the obsessively singular qualities of fugue. Beethoven's use of rhythmic augmentation and diminution, fluctuations between minor and major modes, and violent stretto are all crucial to the moderns' understanding of fugal process. Sylvia Plath testifies to this heritage by calling her effort in fugal poetry "Little Fugue."

## Musical metaphor as structure: May Sarton's "A Fugue of Wings"

Not surprisingly, as poets are first and foremost artists with a heightened sensitivity to language's nuances, the connotations and etymology of the word itself have determined the nature of poets' responses to *fugue*. Images or ideas of flight or chase, both literal and metaphorical, have called for fugal treatment.<sup>7</sup> Poets have found fugue an appropriate metaphor for the elusive nature of present time,<sup>8</sup> and a useful shape for metaphysical meditations on the divide between an earthbound body and a freely-ranging soul. The term fugue connotes in the poet's mind both a composition of mathematical rigour and—paradoxically—a liberating flight or escape.

May Sarton's "A Fugue of Wings" (*Collected* 269-70) makes a good starting-point in a discussion of fugue, since the poem merely describes the musical process in straightforward syntax and sequential narration instead of mimicking the fugue in a more formally adventurous manner. Sarton describes a very literal flight. In her first stanza, silence and winter desolation dominate the landscape. Summer's "rippling dance" has given way or "been abstracted" to a chilling emptiness and numbness. The "rippling dance" suggests the prelude or toccata that conventionally precedes a Bach fugue. Sarton seems to have understood as have few poets that the fugue is traditionally an intellectually rigorous response to a preceding movement of relatively free design. The silence between the movements is a crucial part of the fugue's impact: out of that clearing of the air emerges a single declarative voice. Sarton's description of the quality of the opening phrase is appropriate both to the flight of songbirds and to the often

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<sup>7</sup> John Holloway's "The Fugue," for instance, draws on the latter connotation, describing both the progress of a running fugitive and the progress of a musical fugue.

<sup>8</sup> As witness the beginning of T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton"—a discussion of the slippery nature of time in the shape of a quasi-fugal exposition (*fugato*). See the final chapter of this survey.

jagged interval contour of fugal subjects. The “perpendiculars / Of tree and shadow” are “*shivered* by minute particulars” (my italics), suggesting splintering glass falling in thin shards. Sartor’s subject goes up, down, everywhere, and is executed with a staccato touch. The line is “erratic” and rhythmically incisive. In intellectual terms, the chickadees’ flight translates to “an assault / On all defined and frozen boundaries.” Sartor’s chickadees symbolize the violent intrusion of the here-and-now on tidy abstractions—the initial winter scene being a lifeless abstraction of the vital summer landscape. Beyond their symbolic import, the birds actually embody that intrusion, just as the fugal subject, often spiky and hardly melodic, breaks in on the expectant silence.

Sartor’s fugal subject undergoes inversion (the members of the flock “Hang upside down”) even before the first voice has ceded to the second. Renaissance fugal exposition were much more likely than later models to be imitative through inversion. Sartor, however, clearly has Baroque or Classical models in mind. She merely plays fast and loose with her analogy: the natural scene is the poet’s primary focus, and precision in the fugal metaphor must take a backseat to vivid description. The widely contrasting tone qualities of the “boisterous” descending jays and “gentler” finches suggest that we are now in a Beethoven fugue, not a Baroque composition. The birds each begin feeding following their dramatic staggered descents. That feeding, continuing in the background as new birds enter the ‘composition,’ forms Sartor’s counter-subject. The poet clearly understands that the counter-subject is simply an ongoing accompaniment and not necessarily in dialectical conflict with the subject.

Finally, a nuthatch appears, the fourth voice, and ‘clutters up’ the composition. Sartor’s ensuing episode is short and without a contrasting character of its own. That episode, as in most musical fugues, is simply a working-out, a carrying-on of ideas declared in the exposition.

Nature carries on, and the poet loses her sense of being assaulted by the moment. “What we have seen, / What we did hear is done,” and rapt attention to the passing moment, in the form of the individual ‘fugal’ entries, gives way to inattention and the undifferentiated din of normal existence. Until, that is, the birds begin another flight and re-engage the poet’s consciousness. The voices enter in inverse order, and there is even a moment of stretto involving the simultaneous flight of finches and jays. Now silence once again frames the fugue, but this time the poet hears the lack of sound not as an austere period of anticipation and emptiness, but as a tranquil silence reverberating “with praise.”

In Sarton’s “A Fugue of Wings,” metaphor and structure converge. The poet makes no obvious verbal attempt to imitate the devices of fugue, yet by metaphorically casting a natural scene as a fugue and conscientiously following that metaphor from start to finish—actually, from a point some moments before the start of the work proper—Sarton creates a poem on the borderline between simple description of a structure and structural analogy. Sarton’s lyric introduces some of the themes which we will observe again and again in fugal verse: the flight of wings suggests the flight of a human consciousness through time and calls attention to the instability of the present instant.

## **William Bronk's "The Arts and Death": "life has always required to be stated again"**

Sarton's effort, although it is a borderline case, partakes more of paraphrase than true structural imitation. William Bronk's "The Arts and Death: A Fugue For Sidney Cox" (*Life Supports* 34-35) is a more formally adventurous attempt to produce a fugue in verse. Poets have two options in generating a subject that will be appropriately liable to Fortspinnung. They may settle upon an underlying idea which clearly resonates in different verbal formulations, or they may employ a verbal formulation which is unmistakable and bears repetition in different conceptual spaces. Bronk has done both. The poet repeats the initial formula "I think always how we always miss..." at intervals throughout the poem, with changes of punctuation and various concluding words or phrases ("it"; "the aim"; "the real"), but without other verbal transformation. Bronk's subject, however, is not merely that set of words but also the concept behind them. His fugal answer, transposed to a different 'pitch,' is the ensuing statement that "Not anything is ever entirely true." From this conceptual perspective, Bronk's subject is 'the incapacity of human understanding to embrace real experience or lived truth.' As the poet formulates it in his conclusion: "We live in a world we never understand." Or as he puts it elsewhere: "life has always required to be stated again, which is not ever stated."

Looked at from the conceptual and verbal angles simultaneously, Bronk's subject may be pedantically paraphrased in the following manner: the fugal subject of "The Arts and Death" is a meditation on the incapacity of human understanding to encompass the real (and the paradoxically endless struggle of the human mind to think about that very dilemma) phrased in the form of philosophical statement; in its purest form using the words "I think always how we always miss..." but also liable to be transposed into other, conceptually-related restatements such

as “I do not stop thinking how...,” or “...dominates my mind,” or “not by art alone the aim is missed... / ... No, it is in our terms, / the terms themselves,” or less tangibly related: “the forms are never real. Are not really there. Are not.”

Of course, the fugal subject is a musical idea that is instantly recognizable in each statement, whether transposed as an answer or sounded at the original pitch in a voice distant in range from the initial voice. Does Bronk’s subject really qualify as such? The poet has recognized that in words we look both for verbal semblance and conceptual identity. The relation of musical statement to musical statement is one of gestural similarity and congruence of melodic contour or harmonic progression. The poet may lack the sonic resources of fixed pitch relations, but he has his own compensating compositional tool which music utterly lacks: the poet can create congruent statements on a purely conceptual plane. His ‘voices’ can say things that may have little linguistic connection yet that our minds recognize instantly as small transformations of one common language-kernel. Bronk, a poet of philosophical argument and abstract ‘talk,’ and not a poet of imagistic precision, is well-placed to take advantage of both sonic and conceptual similarities to create a fugue around both an idea and a phrase. The reader, alerted by the title to expect a repetitive texture, has no difficulty tracing the exact verbal echoes back to the initial statement, but that reader is also able instantly and quasi-consciously to make the more abstract connections between “I think always” and “I do not stop thinking,” or, more profoundly, between “we always miss it” and “we never understand,” or, on the most abstract level, between “I think always how we always miss it” and “We play games / however serious we aim to be.” Bronk’s fugue is a fugue in words, but more importantly, it is a fugue *as words*: the poet lets words function in their own way, not simply as verbal chimes, but as bearers of abstract significance and elements in symbolic statement.

The poem's title suggests that the subject must be "The Arts," and indeed, Bronk meditates on the inability of man's 'arts' to give him a true picture of lived experience. 'Arts' should here be taken in an unusually broad sense to refer not only to poetic and musical forms, but also to the purely intellectual form-making which man does in his thinking, his "passion for forms" in a Platonic and not simply aesthetic sense. 'Arts' can also refer to the arts of war and the exercise of power, a concept developed in the first episode. Music-making, image-making, name-coining, symbol-making; in his episode, Bronk spins out the initial idea of 'arts' through the enumeration of these stages in the history of human form-creation. He arrives finally at the toy soldier, the idea of knowing life by the paradoxical human method of destroying the object of knowledge. At this point, the subject returns, recognizably intact, to end the episode and make way for a second episode.

The second episode is based on the counter-subject. That counter-subject, as announced in the title, is "Death." The subject has concerned man's inability to think about the real, as well as the poet's obsessive thought about that very inability. Bronk's counter-subject is, in true fugal fashion, not a contrasting idea, but a complement to the initial theme: "Death dominates my mind" continues the theme of obsessive, melancholy thought. If life is unknowable, its counter-subject is the other great unknowable, death. The death of the self is the epitome of the unthinkable. The poet tries to think of the "vast debris of the dead" in the second episode, but he finds the dead themselves to be unthinkable: they represent another reality that refuses to be formulated in human terms.

In a musical fugue, the episode and exposition are a seamless unit, distinguished only by the degree of emphasis on and attention to the subject itself. Bronk's third episode likewise flows organically out of the preceding statement of the subject. One may locate the beginning of

that episode in any one of several lines, but the precise delineation is unimportant. What is instantly understood is that Bronk's subject returns with the clear verbal regression to the initial "I think always how we always miss it," and a new direction follows from that restatement, no matter whether exactly three or nine lines later.

The third episode addresses the "wilderness / of raw consciousness," a threatening unruliness that forces man to try to reign in experience by creating limiting and discriminating terms and forms. The fugue reaches a climax of intensity at the apostrophe "World, world, I am scared and waver in awe," and the profession that "it is real / this passion that we feel for forms." Yet the poet must admit that those forms are "never real," and a passage of abbreviated, overlapping statement—suggestive of *stretto* ("Are not really there. Are not")—brings the poem back to the final exposition: "I think always how we always miss the real. / There still are wars though all the soldiers fall," i.e. 'there still is symbolic exchange, although none of our symbolisms are adequate to encompass the real.'

Fugal technique provides both a scheme by which a composition may be started and a set of options for that work's continuation, but it does not provide a concluding formula. It is essentially an open-ended process, not a ready-made shape. The fugue simply spins itself out and concludes after enough time has passed. This makes fugal process an apt analogue to Bronk's philosophical message: the real can never be sufficiently captured intellectually and artistically through closed forms, but must be known through lived experience—a maddeningly open form. Bronk despairs, both in formal and philosophical terms, that "there is never an end." Bronk's brief lyric merely notes and laments our need to spin out endlessly forms and language around the core of experience, an unattainable real. The poetic project of Zukofsky (and one could say the same for that of Pound) enacts this spinning-out on the scale of an entire poetic career, as we

shall see toward the end of this chapter.

## The single-mindedness of fugal process: Weldon Kees's "Fugue"

Although not a grand masterpiece, the lyric by Weldon Kees simply titled "Fugue" (36) is a small and surprising tour-de-force. Emotionally excruciating material of limited tonal range is developed through rigorous and intellectually nimble construction. Kees is close to the spirit of Baroque fugue, although his world-view is hardly that of the eighteenth century. William Bronk's despairing fugue engages with the flight of the real beyond our grasp, a reality that we "always miss" with our clumsy categories. Death and Life escape the organizing power of the Arts. Kees likewise employs the fugue as an analogue to the fleeting character of life and experience, and his conclusion is even more despairing than Bronk's. In a monothematic expression of hopelessness, Kees laments two disappearances, two prophesied flights: the daily flight of the sun with its sustaining heat, and the end of life itself. The single-minded despair of the poem is not a miscalculation on the poet's part, a failure to include sufficient contrast. Kees, in the spirit of Baroque fugue, maintains a unified tone, a single relentless *Affekt*, in the terminology of German Baroque theorists.<sup>9</sup> The poet is also aware that such a singleness of mood cannot be sustained for long without becoming tiresome. Utter despair is expressed, paradoxically, through a playful experiment in poetic form.

Kees's subject could be described as 'the falling of night, the extinction of light.' "When the light begins to fail,"

### Falling night

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<sup>9</sup> The term referred to the proper unity of emotional content, although it became bound up with a language of figures: a set of increasingly formalized musical gestures that corresponded to and consistently evoked given sentiments. In *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, Johann Mattheson writes that **we must set as our primary goal one affection** (where not more than one) **with each melody**" (Harriss 318). Elsewhere in the treatise he suggests that "Since for example joy is an **expansion** of our soul, thus it follows reasonably and naturally that I could best express this affect by **large** and **expanded** intervals. Whereas if one knows that sadness is a **contraction** of these subtle parts of our body, then it is easy to see that the **small** and **smallest** intervals are the most suitable for this passion" (104-05).

Will darken drives,  
Spread the darkness  
Over all.

Or in the re-exposition:

Light will fail,  
Alive will fall;  
Sun that blinded  
Will be gone.

“Falling night / Will cover all.” The answer is no ‘answer’ in the sense of a solution to a dilemma, but a true fugal answer, a restatement of the subject in a new conceptual space. “Fall,” for instance, is a natural transposition of “fail.” The sound similarity is unmistakable, and the concepts are on some level complementary, but the pitch of the vowel has dropped and the precise meaning changed. Likewise, “Over all” in the exposition becomes “cover all” in the final line. Kees is not systematic in these transformations, but he is apparently aware that the fugal exposition consists of a statement (subject), a related but transposed statement (answer), and a return to the initial idea, but in a new voice in a contrasting octave: “Falling night” instead of “light / Begins to fail.”

The central episode restates the initial idea with a new emphasis on the flight of the sun, a new imagistic focus on the impermanent details of the landscape, its grass and skin, and a now explicit emphasis on the flight of time: the “Minutes tick with steady beat.” The re-exposition abbreviates the initial statements of gloomy anticipation, mixing with them the image of the blinding sun. One could, in fact, view the second stanza either as counter-subject or episode: it is not, finally, very important to an understanding of the poem’s structure. What must be noted is the monothematic nature of the poem, its relentless single *Affekt*, that of quiet despair. The calm certainty of the poet that night will fall, and the stoicism with which he anticipates

mortality are paired as two inflections of one all-subsuming profession of hopelessness. Yet the desperation of the poetic voice is countered by the playful engagement with form and verbal transposition. This productive disjunction between meaning and technique is one we have noted several times already in the course of this survey. Here, however, the poet initiates speech not by willing variation in a scene that is endlessly and depressingly the same but by raising sameness and recurrence to the status of an artistic method. Sylvia Plath's "Little Fugue," which we will examine below, likewise uses the imitative process of fugue to initiate a poem about the abyss, but her technique has more in common with that of Stevens or of O'Hara: excruciating memories surface through the playful action of words in a vacuum. Kees's "Fugue" does not even allow that much escape, yet in reiterating its message of despair with such formal rigour, it strangely counteracts its own melancholy.

Kees was evidently taken with the possibilities of basing new poetic structures on musical models: writing both sets of variations<sup>10</sup> and cyclical poems in multiple movements that are clearly intended to recall symphonic models.<sup>11</sup> One of these efforts at creating a musical/poetic hybrid deserves brief mention in connection with "Fugue." His "Round" (100) is not as rigorously imitative as the musical genre of the same name, but with a few deft strokes Kees manages to suggest the texture of the canon, overlapping voices running through the same series of phrases at staggered intervals, looping back over and over. The canon is, of course, the prototype of the fugue, and the boundary between them is not firm. Kees employs both of these musical techniques to similar purposes. His "Round" consists of a collection of apparently

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<sup>10</sup> "Eight Variations" (*Collected* 47-51) takes the sonnet as its *ground*, and divides the fourteen line form into patterns of 4-4-4-1-1 9-5 10-3-1 etc. "Variations on a Theme by Joyce" (10) takes a line from *Finnegans Wake* (98 l. 34) as its basis—with that line already a variation—presumably, on the title of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. Kees uses Joyce's phrase, however, more as a ritornello than as a theme for variation.

<sup>11</sup> But as we shall see in the final chapter of this survey, poets such as Kees writing in the latter half of the twentieth century tended to view symphonic forms through the lens of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. With its time theme and clear verbal echoes, "The Hourglass" (*Collected* 89-95) plainly takes Eliot's work as its immediate model.

random quotations and observations, to which the poet's attention obsessively returns. Whenever the mind tries to take in something new, old material breaks in and insists that the morbid round is always continuing just below the level of consciousness. At the heart of the work is the poet's knowledge that he cannot feel with Marvell that life is "Wondrous" or, with Renan, admire anything "wholeheartedly"; rather, life seems a stagnant, claustrophobic round of the same scattered thoughts and maddening obsessions: "But here dried ferns keep falling to the floor. / And something inside my head / Flaps like a worn-out blind." Even the penultimate line ("One notes fresh desecrations of the portico") despite its glimmer of novelty, does not in fact signal the advent of fresh perceptions, but simply brings the poet back once more to Marvell's exclamation, reduced through reiteration to a ridiculous slogan.

In "Round," as in "Fugue," Kees uses an insistently repetitive musical structure as a constructive counterbalance to his poem's stultifying content. As we observed in the previous discussion of the variation set, especially in connection with O'Hara's work, repetitive musical form is one way for poets to speak of monotony without being monotonous. In his introduction to the *Collected Poems*, Donald Justice calls Kees "one of the bitterest poets in history" (ix), but that bitterness, at least in "Fugue" and "Round," is tempered by a sometimes quiet, sometimes exuberant pleasure in formal invention, in a manipulation of words that at first glance may seem either detached or lightweight, but certainly not the work of a man paralyzed by despair, as the poem's surface meaning would suggest.<sup>12</sup> To write about despair involves one in a practical dilemma: if there is no future but only numbing reiteration, how does one project words ahead in time? In making recurrence not only his subject matter but his main formal tool, Kees—in a

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<sup>12</sup> Kees's 1955 disappearance (with the signs pointing to suicide) underlines the seriousness of his despair: it was no occasional poetic pose. In this light, it is even more remarkable that Kees was so often able—as in "Fugue" and "Round," to strike the difficult balance between formal invention and morbid content.

manner we are quite familiar with by now—finds a way to speak about hopelessness, which by rights should inhibit creation. He goes on by making an artistic virtue of not going on.

### **Fugue as essay: Delmore Schwartz's *The Repetitive Heart***

The attempt to create a fugue in words, an analogue in verse to a structure popularly regarded as western music's most rational artifact, seems a natural project for a certain kind of poet. Kees and Bronk were both intrigued by the mysteries of human consciousness (Kees's most widely disseminated work is a psychology textbook he co-authored entitled *Nonverbal Communication. Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations*), and given to exploring philosophical problems in verse, even at the risk of excessive abstraction in statement and flatness of imagery. The young Delmore Schwartz was another such poet. In his first volume of poetry and fiction, 1938's *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, Schwartz published a set of purportedly fugal poems, *The Repetitive Heart: Poems In Imitation of The Fugue* (republished in *Summer Knowledge* 63-77). While writing these poems, he was engaged in a project of musical/poetic aesthetic theorizing, preparing a paper for a written symposium organized by Arthur Berger.<sup>13</sup> In discussions with Berger and in the published paper, Schwartz maintained that all art, and especially music, produces symbols of emotion rather than emotion itself: "certain combinations of tones may be signs of sorrow. To say, however, that the music *is* the sorrow, or makes us feel sorrowful, is clearly false" (*Letters* 33). The 'musical' poetry which he produced for his first book is a logical extension of this philosophical position. For the most part, these eleven lyrics are calm, deceptively flat engagements with questions of free will versus necessity, the desire for an unselfconscious, childlike existence versus the impossibility of unmediated experience, and the aspirations of spirit versus its necessary embodiment. The emotional turmoil

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<sup>13</sup> *Symposium. The Nature of Music*, a collection of three papers by Delmore Schwartz, Herbert Schwartz, and Berger himself, was originally published in March and June, 1936 in *The Musical Mercury*, a journal edited by Berger. The symposium has recently (1994) been reprinted in *Perspectives on Musical Aesthetics*, edited by John Rahn.

which arises from these human dichotomies is discussed and symbolized, instead of being evoked and exploited for its dramatic appeal.

In a 1936 discussion of Hart Crane, Schwartz makes the following telling distinction: “I don’t deny that he is a great poet, but... his method is entirely that of rhetorical allusion, and he seems so impressive mainly because he overpowers the reader with loudness and a grand manner. Measure the difference between Bach and Wagner, and you see how much is wrong in Crane as compared with, not Shakespeare, but Yeats, Eliot, Valéry, and Rilke” (28). The young Schwartz does not wish to create a ‘musical’ verse in the romantic sense, in which the poet short-circuits the requirement that words precisely signify and directly accesses an intense and intoxicating emotion. The desire is for something entirely opposite: a poetry that recognizes and willingly assumes the symbolic, signifying burden of language yet adopts those architectural resources of music that stand most in opposition to language’s discursive nature. Music, with its patterns of repetition, approximates the structure of human thought and experience in ways which forward-moving logical argument and standard syntax cannot. It is the constantly recursive pattern of a Bach fugue that Schwartz tries to import into poetry. The romantic notion of music as a rhetorical evocation of real and powerful emotion is alien to Schwartz’s poetics: even if the poet was able to produce such “loudness and a grand manner,” the poem produced would be of relatively small value to him, and the entire enterprise philosophically suspect.

Critics have preferred to ignore Schwartz’s assertion that his poems are some sort of fugal imitations, perhaps due to the unassuming scale of the poems that make up *The Repetitive Heart* and the degree to which they satisfy our usual formal expectations. When a poem seems to be a modest lyric, self-sufficient and explicable in purely literary terms, why complicate matters and look for a hybrid musical/poetic structure? In *Tones Into Words*, his 1953 study of musical

imitation in poetry, Calvin Brown flatly dismisses Schwartz's experiments "*The Repetitive Heart: Eleven Poems in Imitation of the Fugue Form* contains nothing in imitation of the fugue form" (38)<sup>14</sup> It is true that Schwartz's eleven fugal imitations—published as part of his first volume of poetry, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*—are not uniformly faithful to fugal procedure. Some of the lyrics included in the set are, however, much more successful analogues to musical structures than Brown would allow. Instead of imposing a more strictly 'musical' scheme of organization from without the poem, Schwartz lets the verbal material and intellectual content of the verse dictate the form of utterance. As a result, it is possible to read these poems—even those which most closely approximate fugal technique—without taking notice of the musical analogy. The poems are organized both by successive steps in argument and by periodic recurrence. In this way, they are models of one manner of poetic-musical union in which neither repetitious nor discursive organization dominates the structure. This approach foregoes some of the pleasures of sonic recurrence and phonic play, the pleasures of a more radically 'musical' verse, in favour of the traditional poetic qualities of logical, sequential statement and steadily unfolding, intellectually-accessible meaning. One could make the case that in maintaining the intellectual organization most natural to the written text, that of syntactical and discursive progression, Schwartz has been faithful in his fashion to the spirit of fugue, traditionally seen as the supremely rational, supremely intellectual method of musical organization. He employs enough verbal recurrence and maintains enough conceptual unity to suggest the familiar formal qualities of fugue, yet retains a more prosaic form of organization which immediately identifies the poems as discursive 'philosophical' verse. Would a fugue in words not be closer in spirit to the essay than the song? Schwartz's admittedly rather abstract

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<sup>14</sup> Brown negligently adds the word 'Form' to the work's actual title, raising one's suspicions concerning the depth of his engagement with the poetry.

equivalents to fugue pose exactly this question.

Perhaps the clearest of the fugal analogues is the poem "Will You Perhaps Consent To Be" (*Selected* 64). The recurring verbal material of the poem is set out in the initial stanza. The phrases "Will you perhaps consent to be," "My mind's continuing and unreleasing wind," "Touches this single of your flowers," and "My many-branched, small and dearest tree" not only echo throughout the poem but are each literally recapitulated at some point. There is no clear verbal equivalent to the subject, unless one takes the entire first stanza to be that initial statement. Even within the first stanza, however, there is a regression to the initial phrase. The 'subject' of the poem is a subject in the essayist's sense, a controlling conception that perhaps never appears in the work explicitly but is nevertheless constantly present, shaping every line. The first stanza is one question, interrupted and extended by the poet's parenthetical digressions, but essentially stated thus: 'Will you be my tree?' Without its verbal Fortspinnung, the question is embarrassingly banal. The reader's interest is not in the valentine-card sentiment, but in the twists of language and idea by means of which Schwartz qualifies, complicates, and delays the lover's request. If the direction of the poem's thought is, in its broadest outlines, forward, it is nevertheless only by means of a series of recursions and false starts that it reaches its goal of intelligible utterance. In the spirit of fugue, it is the beginning of the utterance and the process of continuation that provides interest. Unlike sonata or variation structures, in which section endings and other formal articulation points are moments of great interest and drama, the fugue ends only once, and that ending merely marks a re-establishment of an original tonal centre and temporary exhaustion of the composer's ingenuity in continuing the piece.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of the first stanza, Schwartz has essentially finished his poem: the exposition

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<sup>15</sup> It must be reiterated that Schwartz's model is the Baroque fugue, not its later reinvention at the hands of Beethoven. It is J.S. Bach whom a very young Schwartz vowed in 1931 "To listen to... every day" (*Letters* 8).

of the content of the piece is complete. Thirteen of the following nineteen lines are either exact repetitions of the initial material or refinements and extensions of those first six lines ('six' because the first stanza already contains a one-line regression). Schwartz returns to the subject to exploit its inherent conceptual/verbal nuances. The phrase "My mind's continuing and unreleasing wind" returns at the head of the second stanza and is then developed in a first episode, a series of anaphoric phrases spinning out the original one-line description of the mind's wind. This episode continues with a new verbal element, a catalogue of place names, ancient and modern, where the restless mind "Lusts" to be. The original subject material breaks in on this flight of the mind, with a variation of the first phrase: "—May I perhaps return to you." Schwartz's third stanza begins with a nearly-exact restatement of the opening words, followed by another episode describing the wind, this time represented not as the ambiguous, wet and fertile wind of the creative mind but winter's "Intent and stripping, ice-caressing wind." The poet's plea remains the same: he begs of the beloved a stable refuge, a respite from the restless action of consciousness. The nature of the torture changes character, however, as Schwartz replays the lover's initial question. From the poet's fertile and far-ranging mind, we move on to the mind of the thinker dealing in abstractions, which kills as it seeks to understand. In the first episode, the poet recognizes that he continually absorbs a confusing excess of stimuli from the external world and from an intellectual tradition. In the second episode, it is no longer life's variety which breaks in on consciousness, but the action of the mind which denies life itself. Love becomes not only a stable resting-place but "The very rack and crucifix of winter."

The syntax of this stanza becomes strangely ambiguous. Is the beloved the killer of winter, i.e. spring, or is she meant to agree to *be* winter and the winter wind herself, an antidote to the unpredictable summer wind of the second stanza? Either reading is possible, although the

beloved cannot easily be both tree and flower *and* winter wind. It is more consistent to read the comma in line nineteen as a replacement for the word ‘and.’ This syntactical ambiguity is trivial and probably best resolved in favour of the fairly obvious sense of the passage: ‘would you destroy winter, and with it winter’s relentlessly destructive wind?’; however, the manner in which Schwartz’s initially clear and almost banal request to the beloved ends up, perhaps unintentionally, straying so far toward self-contradiction points out an important consequence of Schwartz’s adoption of fugal technique. A simple statement or question is repeated and nuanced until the competing versions of the subject begin to pile up in a dense tissue of meaning, a tissue which is in the end of more interest than the ostensible subject, in this case the simple love-lyric, which has been subjected to fugal/imitative treatment. In other poems from *The Repetitive Heart*, Schwartz exploits this result of his ‘fugal’ process in a more clearly intentional fashion. One might speak—although only in the most figurative sense—of a counterpoint of meaning. A reader of the poem has not forgotten the earlier formulations of the poem’s central argument, and must simultaneously take in a new and apparently contradictory version of the lover’s initial request. The lover, spinning out his original plea, talks himself far beyond love poetry and into something closer to religious verse. The “you” of the poem becomes an ambiguous figure which could be ‘God,’ ‘the mind’s capacity to believe,’ or ‘common experience.’ The “many-branched, small and dearest tree” of the opening stanza now becomes “My dear, most dear, so-many-branched tree,” a line that could come straight out of Hopkins. Stretto in the penultimate line, however, breaks in on the poet’s metaphysics and send us back to the original tonality, to the world of the love-lyric: “—Consent, consent, consent to be / My many-branched, small and dearest tree.”

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bouncing ball! O, fellow, follow” The idea of the ball as object of attention is here developed an idea present merely as potential in the sporting episode. No longer the object of escapist play, of flight from consciousness, the ball now, through our obsessive fixation on it, becomes the very incarnation of conscious attention. Schwartz’s ball serves very much the same symbolic purpose as Sartre’s descending flocks of birds. That which begins as an external distraction becomes a sign of the vivid here-and-now, of a certain hyperawareness. In the fifteenth line the two subjects merge. The bouncing ball becomes the very thing it was supposed to help the poet escape “[you follow] The bouncing ball you turned from for solace.” In spinning out his initial generalization about humanity’s inability to bear—in Eliot’s phrase, “very much reality” (“Burnt Norton” I) Schwartz arrives at the more troubling thought that one cannot fly away from consciousness in search of solace after all, although one makes a constant effort to do so. The final line of the poem turns the rest of the poem on its head, but—and this is crucial—it does not negate the opening observation. Schwartz’s fugue advances by accumulating layers of assertion until the initial subject is subsumed in a larger assertion that is much less liable to explanation. Out of a relatively confident and almost platitudinous initial statement, Schwartz spins a philosophical tangle, just as the fugue-writer spins a sophisticated, many-voiced structure out of an initially singular, easily-identified, or perhaps even banal subject.<sup>17</sup> Submitting a subject to Fortspinnung, however, does not normally alter its identity. The process is one of elaboration rather than transformation. Schwartz does not explicitly contradict the assertion made in his opening phrase, but he does elaborate its consequences and thereby sets that observation in a wider, more complicated context, which in turn reveals the initial generalization as a hopelessly inadequate description of the human condition.

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<sup>17</sup> The prime example of this is Bach’s *The Art of the Fugue* with its nineteen fugues and four canons all based on one unassuming subject.

In “Calmly We Walk through This April’s Day” (66-67) Schwartz approximates polyphonic speech. The phrase “This is the school in which we learn... / ...that time is the fire in which we burn” appears in parentheses periodically. Schwartz’s use of parentheses and ellipses, and the manner in which his refrain breaks into the flow of the verse proper suggest that these lines are meant to be ‘heard’ by the mind of the reader as a second layer of simultaneous speech: in the jargon of sound recording, an ‘overdub’ of a second voice. The poet must set his lines one after the other on the page—and in a recitation must read the lines in succession—but Schwartz’s typography tells the mind to play the two voices together. Despite this nod toward polyphonic texture, “Calmly We Walk” is not an especially clear example of fugal poetry. If, however, we treat the analogy with great latitude and take the ghostly refrain to be the fugal ‘subject,’ we notice that Schwartz has interestingly placed his ‘exposition’ at the poem’s conclusion: “Time is the school in which we learn, / Time is the fire in which we burn.” The final statement of the ‘subject’ is more emphatic than the previous statements: no longer “This is the school” but “Time is the school”; no longer a ghostly parenthetical second voice, but a definitive statement by the main lyric persona. The discursive quality of the essayist’s method, his need to build an argument and demonstrate a logical progression from observation to generalization: this forward-moving, sequential quality of Schwartz’s meditative verse is incompatible with the tendency of the musical composer to show his hand at the outset, to ‘expose’ his central idea in the opening bars. In the case of “Calmly We Walk,” the poet puts the exposition in a more syntactically suitable place, the conclusion of the text, and thereby turns the fugue structure on its head. The earlier refrain-style statements of the subject are pre-echoes, verbal premonitions of the clear and univocal final exposition.

Most of the other poems in *The Repetitive Heart* use repetition of an initial phrase in a

more conventional manner. The subject is not spun out, but merely reintroduced at suitable intervals. "Dogs Are Shakespearean, Children Are Strangers" (68) is one exception: the poet plays with the concepts 'dog,' 'child,' 'stranger' and 'Shakespearean' in a mostly non-discursive Fortspinnung of the initial line, bringing the words of the subject back in new formulations at intervals. A pair of learned commentators on childhood and strangeness, namely "Freud and Wordsworth," accompany the central idea as its counter-subject. Their insights are not completely congruous with the strange indecipherable realities of our animal nature ("The child who credits dreams and fears the dark, / Know[s] more and less than you"), but, on the other hand, intellectual exploration, Freudian and poetic, may complement the incoherent insights of the child and the instinctual action of the animal.

The subject of "All Clowns Are Masked and All *Personae*" (65) is a categorical declaration: "All clowns are masked and all *personae* / Flow from choices." The fourth and fifth lines raise an objection to the initial statement, an objection which flatly contradicts the subject yet leaves the initial claim somehow intact: "And yet not so! For all are circumstances, / Given." Truth lies on both sides of the debate. For the rest of the poem, Schwartz plays with the concepts of choice and circumstance. He mixes the two sets of verbal material exposed in the opening stanza, inverting word order, converting "mortal" into "immortal," running the ideas of "Gifts and choices!" together instead of in sequence, and in the process producing new layers of meaning which complicate the either/or plan of the exposition. "All clowns are masked and all *personae* / Flow from choices" is tinkered with to produce the contradictory "All men are masked, / and we are clowns who think to choose our faces." In the final stanza Schwartz assaults the reader with quickly successive repetitions of the words "Choice" and "chooses," and later "children." The effect of stretto is unmistakable, even though the poetic voice remains

essentially singular and does not truly overlap itself—with the possible exception of line twenty-eight (line four below). To produce the proper effect in reading, one would need to accent each repeated word with a slight stress. Any possible notation would seem impractical and overemphatic on the printed page:

there are circumstances,  
And he who chooses chooses what is given,  
He who chooses is ignorant of Choice  
—Choose love, for love is full of children,  
Full of choices, children choosing  
Botany, mathematics and love,  
So full of choices! So full of children!

As in so many fugal poems, ideas of flight here abound. Circumstances “Fall from the sky, rise from the ground.” Those desperate to preserve the illusion of simple free will are urged to “Decide to take a trip, read books of travel, / Go quickly” and plan a visit to “Atlantis, Ultima Thule, or the limelight, / Cathay or Heaven.” This passage recalls the list of mental destinations in “Will You Perhaps Consent To Be.” The motion of the globe is pictured “Spinning the trivial and unique away.” and more concretely, the poet observes the “motor-car / Fugitive about us, running away.”

I have so far treated Schwartz’s poems as formal equivalents to fugue. On a more abstract level, one can say that Schwartz’s set of poems uses fugue as a metaphor for the motion of human thought and desire. A repetitive heart may wish to move directly forward from desire to fulfillment, but it more often finds itself returning to difficulties, cravings, obsessions, and inexplicable behaviours that it believed itself to have overcome. “The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me” (74-75), one of Schwartz’s most anthologized poems, comes from the *Repetitive Heart* series. Although it in no way resembles a fugue (aside from a variation of the opening line at each stanza-beginning) the poem belongs with the rest of the set on thematic grounds. The

“heavy bear” returns again and again and disrupts the efforts of spirit to neatly raise itself above “The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.” The body and its drives are a clumsy fugal subject which return and snatch all attention away from the smooth unfolding of sublimated love and chaste human interaction. In “A Dog Named Ego, the Snowflakes As Kisses,” Schwartz again describes an attempted flight: this time the self wishes to flee toward the external world which solicits its attention and care and away from the ever-present and jealously deterministic Ego.

Beyond the etymological connection of fugue with the theme of flight and the intermittent repetition of certain key words, these later poems in the series appear no more ‘fugal’ than any other poems with recognizable refrains. By this point, Schwartz seems to have become more interested in the metaphor of fugue than in the technique’s formal applicability to poetry. It would be impossible to prove this assertion biographically. The order of composition of the eleven poems is uncertain. Their final arrangement does, however, move from the more verbally recursive “All of Us Always Turning Away for Solace,” “Will You Perhaps Consent To Be,” and “All Clowns Are Masked and All *Personae*” to the less obviously ‘fugal’ “Calmly We Walk Through This April’s Day” and “Dogs Are Shakespearean, Children Are Strangers” and finally to the moving and successful but doubtfully ‘fugal’ “Abraham and Orpheus. Be With Me Now,” “The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me,” and “A Dog Named Ego, the Snowflakes as Kisses.”

Assuming that the order of publication is even roughly the order of composition, one could argue that the early poems show the poet experimenting with his formal analogy and the later ones show him integrating his discoveries more seamlessly with his previous poetic manner. Certainly the minimal repetition of “Abraham and Orpheus” adds a poignant tone of supplication to a poem that otherwise perhaps would have seemed a dispassionate intellectual exercise. A comparison with one of any number of other poems from *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*

would make clear what Schwartz gained from his engagement with the fugue.<sup>18</sup> Even if he did not write the poems in the exact order of their publication, Schwartz clearly intended the reader to move from a playfully ‘musical’ and recursive verse to a more discursive verse informed by but not so dependent upon the formal devices of musical repetition.

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<sup>18</sup> “Socrates’ Ghost Must Haunt Me Now” (*Summer Knowledge* 58) or “For the One Who Would Take Man’s Life in His Hands” (54) make instructive points of comparison

## Sylvia Plath's "Little Fugue": spinning memory out of vacancy

Fugal technique first and foremost provides a scheme for beginning a work—it is therefore a type of compositional exercise especially appropriate for breaking the intimidating state of anxiety which may precede artistic creation. Thus, it would not be surprising to find poets turning to fugue as a means of breaking writer's block. Schwartz's *Repetitive Heart* progresses from poems of intricately recursive structure characterized by verbal and formal playfulness to works more conservative in construction—essentially through-composed<sup>19</sup> with only periodic returns to the ostensible subject. One is tempted to see this progression as evidence that Schwartz adopted fugal procedure as a means of keeping his creative technique exercised, as a strategy for conquering inertia. As the series continued, Schwartz seems to have needed the crutch of the fugal exposition less and less.

In the case of Sylvia Plath, the poet indeed uses fugue as a means of breaking the inertia of the blank page. moreover, in "Little Fugue" (*Collected* 187-88), Plath lets the reader witness the procedure. Margaret Uroff calls the beginning of "Little Fugue" "a finger exercise" (138)<sup>20</sup> According to Uroff, the first half of Plath's "fugal composition never proceeds far beyond a repetition of the original words" (139). Yet it is precisely the requirement that the work move in circles until the exposition is complete that makes fugue an ideal method of organization for Plath's purposes. The first half of the poem is *about* starting a poem, just as a large portion of a fugue is about starting a fugue. "Little Fugue" enacts the attempt to speak in the absence of any initiating event, to speak of nothing until the sheer momentum of the poem reveals surprising

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<sup>19</sup> The term for a musical composition that is not based upon a repetitive structure—having no refrain or other form of periodic repetition, a *through-composed* work is not strophic or recursive in design.

<sup>20</sup> "Five-Finger Exercises" is also Eliot's deprecating term for some of his lighter and more workmanlike verses—they are cast as mere preparations for the real poetic work.

content and vivid imagery.

In the notes to his compilation of Plath's *Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes remarks that the poet had never before shown "more than a general interest in music" but at the time of the writing of "Little Fugue" in April 1962 (the *Collected Poems* specifies April 2nd) "became keenly interested in Beethoven's late quartets, the Grosse Fuge in particular" (292). Although the excruciating emotional pitch of Plath's poem corresponds to the Beethoven movement, the scale of the work is entirely different. Beethoven's fugue is a dense and imposing design, one that proved too enormous for the Opus 130 Quartet that originally preceded it;<sup>21</sup> Plath's work is a small, tentative thought-experiment which raises terrifying ghosts not by design but apparently to the poet's—and the poem's—surprise.

The multiple reference of the title has been remarked by past critics, including Judith Kroll and Jacqueline Rose. Both Rose and Kroll, following Webster, point out that 'fugue' may also refer to a state of "psychological amnesia," a "temporary flight from reality" (Kroll 110; Rose 221-22). Kroll sees the speaker's life itself, with its "repetitive involutions," as a fugue, "a kind of torture, the claustrophobic, circular entrapment in a drama whose outcome is foreclosed, yet feared" (109). The verbal material of the poem is indeed foreclosed, obsessively generated from the images of the first quatrain. Rose, however, comes closer than Kroll to spelling out the complicated function of fugal technique in the poem. The psychological flight from the speaker's reality is no flight at all: she spins out the details of her numbing immediate reality until that action generates of its own momentum episodes from historical and personal memory, episodes which are in turn unbearable and require another flight back to the secure but empty present. Rose describes Plath's poetic procedure as an "engendering," and a "logic of the event."

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<sup>21</sup> Beethoven was persuaded "to take the fugue out of the quartet and to write a new finale in his most noncontroversial vein" (Steinberg 239).

perfect metaphors for fugal process:

In “Little Fugue,” the personal present is engendered in its possibility—provisional, precarious—by the drama of a fully historical past. To say, in this context, that Plath uses history as metaphor is to establish a hierarchy of levels—the historic simply signifies the personal drama—and by implication a hierarchy of values between the two levels, which overlooks something presented here more as a sequence, more in the nature of a logic of the event.... What the poem seems to narrate is at once the historical engendering of personal time and the psychic engendering of history. (222)

The poem is not *about* its own genesis, nor is it about the genesis of personal or historical memory. Rather, it enacts that process without comment, letting us witness its own coming into being, just as the beginning of the compositional process is transparently enacted step by step in a fugal exposition. The “logic of the event” unfolds inexorably, with the gradual addition of voices and their separate but parallel continuations of the original motive. Likewise in “Little Fugue,” content is a function of the poem’s unfolding logic, not something preordained.

The fugal subject, that first natural observation from which all else draws energy, seems built on polarities. The black yew and white clouds are juxtaposed in stark proximity in the landscape. Yet although white and black are traditional terms of opposition, they are here treated as two sides of one coin, as twin emblems of emptiness. The extremes of the spectrum both signify an abyss: the presence of all light is as horrifying as its complete absence. This marriage of traditional opposites is intriguingly reminiscent of the subject of what is probably the most well-known fugue in modern poetry. Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge” (“Death Fugue”): “Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends” [in Michael Hamburger’s translation: “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown”] (*Poems* 50). It seems likely that in thinking about the possibility of fugal design for poetry Plath was, perhaps without being fully aware, also recalling Celan’s poem (published in 1952) and its yoking-together of the traditional imagery of hope and

sustenance with the common symbols of death and evil” Celan is describing a world in which hope itself is a dark compulsion, yet the poet, in the words of Michael Hamburger, transposes personal anguish “into distancing imagery and a musical structure so incompatible with reportage that a kind of ‘terrible beauty’ is wrested from the ugly theme”, the poem “celebrates beauty and energy while commemorating their destruction” (*Celan Poems* 16) <sup>22</sup> Once again, as so often in this survey, we are faced with the paradox of a poem that on the one hand manifests structural elegance and a vital energy stemming from the very act of composition, but on the other depicts emptiness and hopelessness

Plath’s counter-subject is the human body at its closest approach to the abyss, in a state of deafness, dumbness, and blindness, in which the eyes fail to perceive light, and the mouth and ears are unable to communicate or receive meaningful communication. In other words, Plath’s counter-subject and subject are, on some abstract level, the same state of vacancy: the fugue is based, like Kees’s “Fugue,” on two inflections of one horrifying perception. In the second stanza, re-exposing the initial ideas, the poet declares that she likes “black statements” and points to “The featurelessness of that cloud now!” Blindness: the whiteness of the cloud and of the eye, blackness, and statements which partake of nothingness and darkness. Plath lets the initial images of the stark landscape and her initial meditation on human infirmity, which were originally presented in sequence, sound together upon their restatement.

Plath’s first episode is a reminiscence. The theme of blindness continues to sound, along with the word “fingers.” Here, however, the figurative fingers of the yew have been replaced by

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<sup>22</sup> References in Plath’s poem to a “blue eye” and “clouds” strengthen the parallel.

<sup>23</sup> Plath has been accused of appropriating, in poems such as “Little Fugue,” the imagery of the Holocaust for her own private purposes and thereby aestheticizing and trivializing its horrors (“Todesfuge,” a poem explicitly about the Holocaust, was itself criticized on similar moral grounds—though here there is no divide between history and the poet’s private anguish; Celan’s parents died in a death camp). If “Little Fugue” is in fact modeled on Celan’s “Todesfuge,” that fact would seem to be further ammunition for Plath’s critics.

the real digits of the blind pianist, fingers which “had the noses of weasels.” The episode is a spinning-out of the original words and images, not a radical departure or development of them. At the mention of Beethoven, Plath brings her subject back into the fugue: the *Grosse Fuge* is described as another “Black yew, white cloud,” full of “Finger-traps.” Blindness and dumbness are compounded (“Empty and silly as plates, / So the blind smile”), and the image of the yew returns not alone but multiplied into the “yew hedge of the Grosse Fuge.”

Plath’s next episode takes off from the mention of deafness: deafness is “something else,” and that turn of phrase suggests a movement into a new phase of the fugue. Like the first episode, this one is an excursion into memory, this time the memory of the father’s “yew hedge of orders.” The yew tree spins out into the yew hedge of Beethoven’s uncompromising late work and from there the image spins into another uncompromising, “barbarous” German creation, the voice of the father.

The word ‘yew’ continues to resound throughout the following stanzas, transposed into its homonym in the line “And *you*, during the Great War” (my italics: ‘you’ and ‘yew’ significantly fall in the same position metrically in the first and third lines of the verse). The poet’s father has in both senses of the word become the ‘subject.’ Images of deafness, dumbness, and blindness give way to related images of decapitation: the poet dreams of cut sausages “like cut necks. There was a silence!” The counter-subject of infirmity spins out further. Dumbness and decapitation give way to the idea of lameness, both the literal one-leggedness of the father and the figurative lameness of the remembering daughter.

In the penultimate stanza, Plath returns to the fugal answer. The image of the empty white clouds is restated (“spreading their vacuous sheets”), and the trope of dumbness returns (“I like black statements”) is transposed into “Do you say nothing?”). One more memory-episode

follows. The image of the pianist's white eye from the first memory-episode is answered by the remembered blue eye of the father with his "briefcase of tangerines." That case asks to be opened, and the idea of opening suggests, by verbal association, a return of the subject proper: "Death opened, like a black tree, blackly." The fugal answer provides the conclusion of the poem: clouds and fingers make their final appearances.

I have been analyzing the poem as if it could be neatly broken down into sections that correspond to fugal elements. The nature of fugue, however, is to let one musical idea move through various tonal environments and spin itself into new combinations, interweaving with an ongoing accompaniment to produce a seamless polyphonic texture. Only the periodic return of the subject tells the listener that a new moment of formal articulation has arrived. Plath's 'subject' is not precisely identifiable, but one does receive certain more or less exact sonic cues that the original material is returning: most obvious is the intrusive, structurally-motivated return of the "Black yew, white cloud" imagery in the fourth stanza. But does the poet have such a precise notion of her germinal idea? I have, for the sake of schematic simplicity, taken the subject as the initial natural observation of 'black yew and white clouds'; however, to consider only one obvious problem with this analysis, on their first appearance, the clouds are not yet described as white: they are "Cold clouds," and only become white in the second stanza. A better approach might be to define the subject as the word/concept string 'yew; black; fingers; cloud; deaf; dumb; blind.' Once these key words have been sounded, Plath begins spinning out a poem based on these simple terms. This way of stating the process is not really very different: the above oversimplified analysis merely draws what I think is a warranted distinction between the imagistic and immediate opening with its juxtaposition (subject-answer) of yew and cloud and the more abstract concepts of infirmity and emptiness which continue to appear along with

those images, which in turn suggest new memory-scenes (episodes).

More important than a precise delineation of Plath's construction technique is an understanding of why the poet would turn to fugue in the first place. "Little Fugue" is an exercise in generating a wealth of images out of the poorest of materials. We think of stream-of-consciousness writing as following the flow of thought from one object of attention to another, and this technique is similar. Plath, however, must keep coming back to the head of that stream of consciousness,<sup>24</sup> to her initial images and unifying concepts, to generate new combinations and new metaphors. The imitation of fugal technique, with its dual emphasis on return and continuation, re-exposition and episode, enables Plath to range from a relatively vacant landscape in the present tense to shipboard memories to music criticism to recollections of her father's voice to the father's disability to the problem of memory to surreal memories of a briefcase of tangerines to thoughts of death and finally to a grim picture of marriage and domestic life. The strands of memories and melodramatic episodes that comprise "Little Fugue" are all initiated by the conceptual and verbal recurrences of the initial subject—however one defines that subject. Out of the initial observation of a dark and cloudy landscape comes an emotionally disruptive string of ideas, an interruption possible only through the poet's rigorous but inventive play with a few commonplace words.

Judith Kroll states that the "'fugue' is really the life of the speaker, and its central theme is her dead father" (109). The dead father is unquestionably the presiding figure of the poem *as completed*, his disappearance the poet's constant obsession. It is not the spectre of the father, however, which initiates the poem, but the poem's exercise of language which leads the poet to

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<sup>24</sup> My metaphor of the fugal subject as the head of a stream comes from a work to be examined later in this chapter. In "A"-12, Louis Zukofsky calls Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*—Bach is the generative force of the entire poem—the "spring" and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—a key 'counter-subject'—the "source" (127).

buried images of him. He may become the 'subject' of the poem, in the common sense of the word, but he is not the fugal subject which generates the succeeding text. The "Black and leafy" voice of the father does not enter until the sixth stanza, just as the bass voice of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, that of the cello, enters last with its statement of the subject.<sup>25</sup> It is of course true, as Kroll suggests, that "his appearance modifies the earlier images." I am simply arguing that the poet does not know where her fugue is headed or what it is trying to express until the play of words and phrases leads her to the father. At some level, of course, she undoubtedly expects the ideas to spin themselves into significant statement, perhaps half expecting to meet the terrifying father-figure, but the initial flight is a flight from stasis into motion for its own sake. The black yew and white clouds must in time suggest their own symbolic matrix.

The final stanza is a tranquilizing return to domestic life and its repetitive rhythms—to babies, marriage, and the intact body—the fingers—of the poet. The end of the fugue is no real ending but an arbitrary cessation of imaginative flight: the poet knows she will continue 'arranging her morning—her "own mourning," as Rose makes explicit (222)—despite the end of the formal composition. It is this idea of continuous generation of poetic energy from a fairly nondescript environment and limited stock of recurring words which makes Plath's use of fugue interesting and valuable. Plath breaks the emptiness of the white page by letting verbal and structural play suggest the poem's unforeseen content. The speaker in the poem moves similarly from despair at the emptiness about her to emotional engagement and finally, exhausted by the fugue, returns to numbness and the apparent security of those realities she can count and name.

As a means of exorcising the past, the psychological fugue is insufficient: it is merely a flight

<sup>25</sup> The father's voice enters not during the exposition, but after the initial episodes, according to my earlier analysis. The delay of direct reference to the father increases the impact when the poet finally addresses him directly. In making the fugal analogy non-exact, Plath produces the very effect of dramatic completion which the bass entry often produces in a musical fugue. The poet achieves an analogous effect by a calculated (or instinctive) infidelity to the structural model.

from an unbearable reality to a differently unbearable past. As a means of poetic proceeding, however, the musical fugue offers a solution to the problem of creating art out of nothing: rigorously spinning out “black statements” gains the poet access to an unexpected wealth of memory-images and vividly expressive language.

### Plath's "Three Women": a three-part invention on common experience

Thus far in this chapter we have examined poetry in which the abstract formal properties of fugue, its recursive design, monothematic character, and texture of motivic Fortspinnung, have been translated into the medium of language. One crucial property, however, has been conspicuously disregarded in each of the examples analyzed above. We have yet to look at a poem which truly adopts the multi-voiced texture of the fugue. This more ambitious and dramatic project has never been fully undertaken, although one could argue that a similar 'fugal' technique is characteristic of an entire school of modern verse drawing inspiration from Pound, poets who use multiple quotations and impersonations of other voices to create a univocal/multivocal hybrid. Pound's conception of a literary fugue will be dealt with in detail later in the chapter. For the moment, it is worth relating the previous discussion of Plath's fugal imitation to her long polyvocal poem "Three Women" (*Collected* 176-187). "Three Women" bears a completion date of March 1962, and "Little Fugue" is dated April 2. One may assume that Plath had the *Grosse Fuge* on her mind during the writing of the former poem as well as the latter.

"Three Women" is not directly modeled on the fugue, but the poem is intended to be read as a sort of imitative counterpoint. In each round of monologues, the three (occasionally two) speeches cover the same period of time. One hears the voices in succession, but those voices are understood to be soliloquizing roughly simultaneously. "*I am* slow as the world. *I am* very patient" [all italics mine] so begins the first speech. The following stanza echoes that construction, with its repetition of the personal pronoun, but the conjunction 'when' is introduced. "*When I* walk out, *I am* a great event." The second voice enters echoing those words.

but in the past tense and with a reversal of the first voice's supreme confidence and expansive quality of striding through the world: "*When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.*" Approximately at the halfway point of her monologue, the second woman once again echoes the opening construction: "I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension." The third voice enters with yet another repetition of the personal pronoun and a return to the certainty of the first speaker ("I remember the minute when I knew for sure"). That certainty, however, is undercut in the next two lines: "The willows were chilling, / The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine." The third voice synthesizes the attitudes of the two previous speakers.

The initial "I am" continues to resound throughout the poem, reinforced by its appearance in successive lines—especially pronounced on page 184 where the third voice finishes its monologue with an obsessive anaphora ("I am.... / I am.... / I am.... / I leave.... I leave... / I undo... I go") and the second voice imitates that string of declarations ("I am.... / I am... I have.... / I am..."). In the final stanza, the second woman wakes from a vertiginous dream and attempts to soothe her wounded sense of integrity. She once again echoes the opening declaration, but this time the "I am" has a sad quality of willed forgetfulness: "I am no shadow / Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife."

Other verbal echoes tie the speeches together and undermine one's sense of three independent voices speaking at once. The characters are precisely differentiated, but their voices are clearly shown to be emanating from some more profound source of unitary experience. The title tells us that the poem is about aspects of a common feminine experience, and the initial vantage of the first voice, nearly atemporal and non-spatial, reinforces that universality of outlook. Plath's task is to differentiate among three individuals surviving three profoundly different experiences of birthing while maintaining the sense that these experiences belong, on

some profound level to 'woman' in the abstract. The first voice says "I am ready" and the second answers "When I first saw it / I did not believe it." The third echoes and synthesizes the others "I wasn't ready / I had no reverence," but it "was too late, and the face / Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready." The second voice's abhorrence of the 'flat / flat, flatness' of men and the "mountain women" described by the third voice reappear as contraries throughout the poem. These themes are both introduced in the first round of monologues. Double statement is common to all the voices: the first voice describes how the moon "passes and repasses" and the second hears "departures, departures!" called out in the train station. The third is exasperated at the "conceptions, conceptions!" she has formed of birth. One need not catalogue Plath's spinning-out of the motives set out in the initial round of speeches.

"Three Women" is not an attempt to impose a fugal outline on the dramatic contents of the poem. Plath wisely lets her characters and the chronology of their respective crises control the movement of the verse. It is clear, however, that Plath was thinking of imitative counterpoint, of fugal procedure in a very broad sense, when she shaped the material. The voices, like those of imitative counterpoint, are meant to be simultaneous yet independent. Plath's solution to this problem is to let that simultaneity be a construct of the reader's intelligence rather than a chaos of voices or a collage of inter-vocal quick-cuts. Although one would not wish to push the analogy too far, Plath surely meant for "Three Women" to be read as a sort of three-part invention, an exploration in three voices of a common female experience. Within the closed space of a maternity ward, very different emotional dramas are acted. From out of the initial monolithic abstraction called 'woman,' very different voices emerge. Great extremes of experience are shown to exist where male "flat, flat, flatness" of perception sees a false unity. Yet that unity is not entirely spurious, Plath suggests: her three voices are recognizably harmonized in verbal

terms and are synchronized, not absolutely individual, in their separate movement toward and on from the central fact of childbirth.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Or for the second voice, the equally central absence of that fact.

### **In search of fugue in the *Cantos*: Ezra Pound's musical critics**

The authentic genius will be as touchy, or perhaps more touchy, about the differences between his own particular art and all others, as, or than, he will about any possible analogies with other arts.  
(*Ezra Pound and Music* 255)

The trajectory of this chapter has been a movement outward, from poems that are relatively straightforward imitations of musical fugues to works that have a certain manner of proceeding in common with fugue but in which the familiar structural signposts have all but disappeared. In the case of Plath's "Three Women," we at least know that the poet was fascinated with Beethoven's fugues at the time of composition. She was clearly thinking at that point about ways in which the fugue might be translated into language: one would be justified in looking through "Three Women" for characteristic fugal procedures, even if one ruled out in advance the possibility of finding a clean analogy on the macro-level. In turning now to Ezra Pound, we come to a poet whose work 'looks' much less like fugue than any of our previous examples, less even than "Three Women," but who dropped several broad interpretative hints sending the critic in just that seemingly unpromising direction.

The question of whether or not Ezra Pound constructed the *Cantos*, his "endless poem" (*Pound/Joyce* 102), upon fugal lines has been closely debated by previous critics. Pound himself initiated the debate; or rather, Yeats initiated the debate on Pound's behalf, much to his dismay (as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter). Stephen Adams, in a brief cautionary article, makes it clear that Pound hit upon the fugal analogy only after considerable progress had already been made on the first thirty *Cantos*. As for the remaining eighty-seven, however, which could conceivably have been composed with the fugal parallel firmly in mind, Adams has little to say. He does not so much disprove the validity of the fugal analogy as argue against such analogy

itself. Kay Davis, in her book *Fugue and Fresco*, carefully draws attention to Pound's ongoing discomfort with the comparison, even as the poet advances it in his letters and conversation. Unfortunately, in her analysis of Canto LXIII, Davis falls into the very trap against which she has so clearly warned the reader, equating the general themes of the Canto with the particular parts of a fugue in an overly schematic fashion. What needs to be a rather liberal analogy comes to appear as a direct mapping between musical form and the conceptual framework of the Canto.

The composer and critic R. Murray Schafer makes a more convincing case for Pound's use of fugal technique. His introduction to Pound's collected music criticism treats the fugal parallel as a loose analogy, not a point-for-point translation of a textbook musical form. Unlike Adams, Schafer makes no demand for literal correspondence, and unlike Davis, he does not presume to find such correspondence through a fine-grained analysis, sensing that only on a sufficiently abstract plane will the comparison yield rewards. 'Abstract' does not in this case, however, mean operating at the level of macro-analysis. Schafer suggests a critical approach that considers the poem as an unfolding process, not as a finished, balanced structure:

Strictly speaking, the fugue is not a form at all, but rather a procedure. Unlike the sonata, where the length and shape of the exposition determines the development and recapitulation sections, the fugue regenerates itself constantly from its own motivic material.... And it is judged by the craftsmanship of its texture rather than the boldness of its form. Certainly nothing like the tripartite structure of Dante's *Divina Commedia* ever emerges from the *Cantos*, and the final drift into oblivion of the fragments up to Canto CXX is very discouraging for the critic who wants to see a structure he can draw on the blackboard. (*Ezra Pound and Music* 22)

Schafer makes some useful distinctions between Pound's approach to literary fugue and Joyce's version of the same in *Ulysses*. His argument, which it is not my purpose to dispute here, is that Joyce's "musicianship ran more to details, to isolated sounds" (18) whereas Pound understood that fugal subjects are "ideas, not mere profusions of sound." There is a potential

confusion of logic inherent in this comparison: a fugal subject must be more than a mere collection of sounds but it does not follow that a subject may exist for the mind only and never engage the ear. Davis, citing Schafer's pronouncement, does not manage to avoid the non sequitur: she takes his words as a license to analyze Pound's work as a fugue not of sounds but of concepts, of 'themes' in the literary and not the musical sense. Schafer's own analysis, however, is very precise: his eminent musical sense never lets him equate the fugal subject with a disembodied conception. Prior to reminding the reader that a subject is an idea, Schafer cites as clearly exhibiting fugal technique the "lengthy stretches of the 'Thrones' *Cantos* dominated by variants of the line, 'The temple is not for sale,' enforced by its ideogram." Whereas Schafer understands that a literary fugue would require recognizable aural as well as conceptual identity, Davis analyzes Canto LXIII as if an abstract idea alone could constitute the subject and another related but contrasting idea its answer. The demonstration is ingenious, but Davis's 'uncovered' fugal scheme has little to do with fugue as the musician knows it. Moreover, having traced with commendable precision and open-mindedness both Pound's reasons for suggesting the musical parallel and his doubts as to its exactitude, Davis then produces a made-to-measure structural schema.

Given the obvious pitfalls, Stephen Adams is perhaps prudent in flatly refusing to take up Pound's challenge as laid down in his letters: "Take a fugue: theme, response, contrasujet. *Not* that I mean to make an exact analogy of structure" (*Letters* 294). Davis's work reveals the difficulties that can beset even an articulate and informed critic. Schafer's approach is fruitful but he is content to let his comparison of the *Cantos* with fugue remain a broad, suggestive notion. I propose in the next few pages to follow Schafer's critical lead, but engage in a somewhat more detailed analysis.

## Pound's forced return to the subject in the *Pisan Cantos*

Kay Davis's selection of one of the 'Adams' Cantos, Canto LXIII for her detailed analysis is perhaps unfortunate. The Adams section is already unified by its close focus on American history and historical documentation. Fugal procedure, if it is truly a component in the design of these Cantos, plays a secondary role to more obvious and traditional methods of organization. Davis chooses this particular group because she finds in them "a subtle and interesting interplay of voices, suggesting events in history and personalities of historical figures" about whom she has some knowledge and whom she can respect (81). I will examine in detail some of the *Pisan Cantos* because I find the interplay of voices in these postwar utterances unsubtle but powerful and because the possible logical links between Pound's allusions are so thoroughly suppressed in favour of sharp juxtapositions and extreme fragmentation.<sup>27</sup> After examining the possible function of fugal procedure at close range, I will step back and make some suggestions about seeing the entire poem not as a literary fugue or even as several *fugues*, but as *fugue* with words that is, as a poetic process which endlessly spins out more of itself through recursion to that which has already been said, and indeed to that which has been said in the first few 'measures'.

It would be a serious misreading of the poem to seek a fugal subject in the singular in any part of the *Cantos*. The first of the *Pisan Cantos* (LXXIV) begins with a passage of imitative texture for two voices. The anger of the poet at the fall of Mussolini is of such a ferocity that it requires doubled utterance. "Manes!" says the first voice, "Manes was tanned and stuffed" is the response (425). The typographical layout of the next two lines suggests overlapping imitative

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<sup>27</sup> Davis chooses Canto LXIII because of her knowledge of the history. I have deliberately chosen a section of the poem I find somewhat opaque, one in which the central figure is the poet himself whom I both dislike *and* respect



Elias anticipates the sound of OU TIS, and OU TIS is clearly transformed into Ouan Jin, Chinese for “man of letters” (*A Guide* 73). The return of the subject is thus prepared by the end of the first episode: the fugue then spins off into the next episode, one based on Australian aboriginal legend about Wanjina—still of course, reflecting back on the plight of the poet, another

...man with an education  
and whose mouth was removed by his father  
because he made too many *things*.... (426-27)

Punning, transliteration, and translation are employed as analogues to the fugue’s transposition between subject and answer. Pound’s multi-lingual and multi-alphabetical restatement of the brief Homeric allusion, his variation of the signifier without transformation of its significance, is as near-perfect a counterpart to musical transposition as one could desire. Fugal technique, however, relies on contrast between entries at the dominant and entries at the tonic. Pound achieves a similar sense of alternation, but his subject-phrase appears, so to speak, consistently in the dominant. The strangeness of ‘OY TIS’ appearing in the midst of Roman characters makes the Greek phrase stand out from the text in a manner analogous to that of the fugal subject, intruding its clear auditory signature into the musical texture each time it appears. ‘OY TIS’ is from one point-of-view the place of return, the subject in its familiar tonic key. The text, however, despite its frequent recourse to other languages and even other systems of notation, remains essentially an English-language poem. Use of Greek lettering and language, from this perspective, comprises a movement *away* from a more stable tonic, that of the poem’s conventional Roman characters and the American English of the poet’s own voice. To create a clear sense of regression to an unaltered, audibly and visibly distinctive subject, Pound must make that subject strange to its context. The subject of the musical fugue is, by contrast, perceived as distinctive partially because it is so securely at home in the prevailing tonality. The

episodes move the fugue away from the home key and the re-exposition moves the piece back toward the tonic. A poetic theme, if it is to possess through all its reappearances the stable identity of a fugal subject, seems to require, paradoxically, an irremediable strangeness of utterance, whereas for a fugal re-exposition to be perceived as identical with the exposition, the composer needs to diminish strangeness and reaffirm the security of the initial tonality. If one can even speak of dominant and tonic functions in the context of Canto LXXIV, one must imagine them as reversed. The fruitlessness of such speculation as to which verbal forms, 'OY TIS,' 'Odysseus,' or 'noman,' correspond to the musical tonic and which the dominant demonstrates the limitations of a too-rigid analogy. Pound employs a technique completely opposite to that of the musical fugue-writer in order to accomplish a precisely analogous end.

Several pages later, OY TIS is re-exposed with its initial strangeness intact and a new element of distancing typography added: the Greek is accompanied by the Chinese ideogram for, according to Cookson's *Guide to the Cantos*, "'not,' 'do not,' 'there is not'" (74), which Pound fancifully interprets as "a man on whom the sun has gone down" (430). When the Greek letters next appear several lines later they are accompanied only by the interpretation of the Chinese character. Finally, the ideogram interpretation appears several lines later by itself, without the Greek. This point marks the end of the brief fugue on Odysseus. OY TIS cannot be seen as a subject any longer. It rejoins the common pool of verbal and visual tags which recur not in a semi-regular rhythm of restatement but at unmeasured intervals throughout the series of *Pisan Cantos*. In Canto LXXX, Pound quietly reintroduces the theme, accompanied with a new Greek refrain of lament. The poet is not only noman, but *achronos*; time has come to a standstill around him:

put me down for temporis acti



flexibility: so much so that the fugal analogy must be seen as no more or less helpful than a number of other descriptions of the structure of the work. A compositional style based on repetition cannot alone justify applying precisely defined musical terminology. Something in Pound's procedure must correspond fairly closely to fugal procedure, or the analogy is a hindrance to achieving what should be the goal of such analysis, a clearer comprehension of the poem's structure.

Snatches of conversation, vulgar refrains from Pound's fellow-prisoners, return almost verbatim in successive Cantos. The hostile challenge of a fellow-prisoner

Hey Snag wots in the bibl'?  
wot are the books ov the bible  
Name 'em, don't bullshit ME... (430)

reappears in Canto LXXVI verbatim and is then fleshed out with some further narrative. Such recurrence might perhaps qualify as a nightmarish rondo,<sup>28</sup> but fugue requires closer proximity of voice-entries. In abstract terms, nevertheless, the vignettes of camp life do function somewhat like fugal subjects: they wrench one's attention back to the underlying facts of the poet's imprisonment and his despair. The reiteration of the name 'Mt. Taishan,' Pound's ironic designation for the conical mountain visible from his tent,<sup>29</sup> better qualifies as fugal recurrence. The initial mention of "sinceritas / from the death cells in sight of Mt. Taishan @ Pisa / as Fujiyama at Gardone" (427) is echoed a page later in the lines "from Mt. Taishan to the sunset / From Carrara stone to the sunset." The echoes continue at relatively predictable though widening intervals (pages 429, 430, 431, 434, 437, 443...). Like a true fugal subject, the reappearance of the image of Mt. Taishan always brings the composition back to its beginning. Part of the appeal of the *Pisan Cantos* when compared with earlier history-laden decads is this

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<sup>28</sup> A repetitive, refrain-based musical form usually diagrammed ABACAD, etc

<sup>29</sup> Named after China's sacred mountain (Cookson 71)

constant sense of expansion and implosion, a gradual imaginative movement out from the poet's prison tent countered by a sudden crushing reversion to the confined space of the camp. Rather than classifying other specific themes as 'fugal' or merely 'casually recurrent,' it is best to suggest here a general criterion: the fugal analogy is most appropriate where repetition equals regression to the beginning, and in the *Pisan Cantos* such regression takes the form primarily of retreat to the place of captivity. Fugue consists of a flight, but not necessarily of a flight onwards. There are other types of recurring lines, however, which powerfully contradict this generalization: "Le paradis n'est pas artificiel" is one (page 460 is its fullest, most musically suggestive statement) and "Κυθηρα δεινα" (456) is another, to mention only two. Any attempt to set up a singular tonal centre for the *Cantos* is doomed to failure. The *Pisan Cantos* do, however, begin with the words "The enormous tragedy" and end with the grim couplet "If the hoar frost grip thy tent / Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent" (540). Whatever the overall tonality of the *Cantos*, the local tonality is undoubtedly despair occasioned by captivity.

The second half of Canto LXXIX is probably the closest analogue to fugue in the *Pisan Cantos*. "O Lynx, my love" is answered in inversion by "my lovely lynx" (487)—"Keep watch over my wine pot" pleads the poet (488). "Manitou, god of lynxes" is then called upon to "remember our corn." The address 'O Lynx' recurs at semi-regular intervals: Lynx is called upon to wake the fauns, keep watch over the fire, keep "the phylloxera from my grape vines" (489), guard the orchard, "keep watch on this orchard" (490), "keep the edge on my cider," and "Keep it clear without cloud" (491). The frequency of apostrophes to the Lynx increases, and one climactic passage suggests overlapping voice entries, a moment of stretto:

Here are lynxes	Here are lynxes
Is there a sound in the forest	
	of pard or of bassarid

or crotale            or of leaves moving?

Cythera, here are lynxes.... (490)

The reiteration of 'O Lynx' even has a plausible counter-subject in the interspersed references to Pomona and the Pomegranate field. Rarely in previous sections of the *Cantos* has Pound given himself over to this sort of insistent rhythmic reiteration; the Cantos on usury (XLV and LI) and the Complaynt Against Pity (XXX) are exceptions, but there the constant repetition of words at the beginnings of lines is a clear example of anaphora and not the periodic departure and regression characteristic of fugue. Those who would loosely call the *Cantos* a fugue should read Canto LXXIX as a corrective. Pound had the ability to imitate a sensuously repetitive musical texture, but he generally declined to use it to the full.

To talk of *the* structure of the *Cantos* is to horribly misread the poem, but some patterns are nevertheless evident on the macro-level of analysis. Fugal procedure involves at its most essential an initial statement of a theme, its transposed reiteration, a continuation of counterpointed material in the first voice, a departure from the initial tonality (perhaps episodes), and a restatement of the subject. Canto I retells part of the *Odyssey*; the first of the *Pisan Cantos* re-exposes that theme (alluding to a different part of the epic, quoting from its Greek source, not from a Latin translation). The second Canto retells a story (another sea-story, tellingly) from Ovid; Canto LXXIX re-exposes this Dionysian theme, focusing on the god's attendant, the lynx: "Safe with my lynxes" (8). The third Canto begins beside the sea, because "the gondolas cost too much, that year" (11). A counter-subject is introduced, that of the poet's private journeys, which will provide a relatively straightforward accompaniment to the poem's more grandiose voyages of mind and myth. Pound's counter-subject is a mirror of the subject, not necessarily designed to undercut the generative theme or to be placed in dialectical opposition to it.

Pound's comparison of the *Cantos* to a *fugue* in the singular has misled many critics. He undoubtedly exposes certain themes in the first seven Cantos which are developed, or rather spun out, throughout the remainder of the poem: that is a critical commonplace. Given that fact, the *Cantos* are best viewed as a multiple fugue: shall we say a septuple fugue? Pound's description of the "repeat in history" as either his 'counter-subject' or 'fugal answer' suggests a form of unity foreign to the actual poem. Critics have seized on this description as longed-for proof that the *Cantos* possess a buried design or abstract continuity. The poem's particular continuity is not, however, that of chronological recurrence. Its process is that of a constantly recursive structure which in its construction may move very far indeed from its original premises and requires a periodic journey back to the centre for renovation. After the episodes of the Chinese and Adams Cantos, the *Pisan Cantos* represent one such recursion, probably the most dramatic of all. It is not surprising that the OU TIS theme appears with such reiterative force at the beginning of Canto LXXIV. There is no going forward without making a radically new beginning, and in the poet's postwar predicament that could hardly appear more absurd. The fall of the Fascist state and the slowly dawning realization of the extent of the catastrophe leaves the poet absolutely no possibility of continuing the *Cantos* along the lines of the preceding sections. To continue, Pound returns instead to the very beginning, re-exposing the opening themes of the entire poem.

Delmore Schwartz identified the particular continuity of the *Cantos* in a somewhat hostile 1960 essay. He claims that "little change or genuine development of theme and attitude have occurred throughout the entire work. Through the years Pound has remembered a great deal, but he has learned nothing—nothing that could be called a new insight into the attitudes with which he began to write" (*Essays* 113). Fugue is best seen as a procedure, but here 'procedure' does not

suggest the type of progress we are familiar with from literary narrative. Pound, in the wake of the destruction of his “dream,” Mussolini’s Italy, could hardly think otherwise than fugally: the only other option is a narrative of utter despair and fear for his own very tenuous future. As he is obliged to write: “rain also is of the process” and “the wind also is of the process” (425). Pound later repeats those words almost verbatim, and thereby in structural terms enacts his message: “The wind is part of the process / The rain is part of the process” (435). The musical process is one of departures and returns, not a forward-looking dialectic. It is a technique appropriate for a poet waiting in limbo, one who has gambled unwisely on a vision of a future and then participated in its spectacular ruin, who has had stripped away from him even the category of ‘future.’

## Life as fugue: Louis Zukofsky's "A"

Ezra Pound suggests a fugal analogy for his poem only outside the work, in letters and conversations. Louis Zukofsky is more forthcoming than his sometime mentor in pointing critics toward a fugal analysis.<sup>30</sup> He even makes the suggestion within the text of his long poem "A". At the end of "A"-6, published in 1930, he writes

Forgetting  
I said  
    *Can*  
    The design  
    Of the fugue  
    Be transferred  
    To poetry?

*At eventide*

Venus come up

How shall I —  
Her soles new as the sunned black of her grave's turf,

With all this material  
To what distinction — (38)

The sections up to "A"-6 have been a piling-up of "material," material which pales in comparison with the daunting mass of particulars yet to pile up in "A"-8 and "A"-12. It is not clear that such a method of proceeding guarantees more than a shapeless accumulation of words. Yet the poet still asks *how* he will shape these particulars into a fugal design, not *whether* he can. Elsewhere in "A"-6, Zukofsky's faith in his ongoing poetic project falters more profoundly. Some intangible quality or obscure principle is required to turn empty stretches of Fortspinnung

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<sup>30</sup> In one of Pound's letters likening his *Cantos* to fugue, he incidentally directs the correspondent to Zukofsky's work while taking ultimate credit for the younger man's enterprise. Vide incidentally, Zukofsky's experiment possibly suggested by my having stated the *Cantos* are in a way fugal (*Letters* 386).



quoted above—Zukofsky articulates his belief that the spinning-out of a composition from a sustaining centre ought to be a viable design for poetry as well:

As in Johann Sebastian,  
Listen, Kay [Zukofsky's intermittent aesthetic antagonist]...  
The music is in the flower,  
Leaf around leaf ranged around the center;  
Profuse but clear outer leaf breaking on space,  
There is space to step to the central heart:  
The music is in the flower,  
It is not the sea but hyaline cushions the flower —  
Liveforever, everlasting.  
The leaves never topple from each other,  
Each leaf a buttress flung for the other.

Ankle, like fetlock, at the center leaf —  
Looked into the mild orbs of the flower,  
Eye drowned in the mild orbs:  
Hair falling over ankle, hair falling over forehead,  
What is at my lips,  
The flower bears rust lightly,  
No air stirs, but the music steps in the center —  
It is not the sea, but what floats over it. (7)

The passage both outlines Zukofsky's poetics and gives a practical demonstration of them. A series of elaborations of one relatively simple image is spun out successively, but always with a periodic regression, sometimes literal, sometimes not, to the poet's initial declaration that "The music is in the flower." It is possible in this passage to distinguish three formations of the same abstract idea, a model of centripetal organization: 1) The petals support each other and are "ranged" around the centre. 2) Forehead, ankle, hair, and lips are made sensuously indistinguishable and equally central—ranged about the eye, not safely maintained at the extremities of the body. As Zukofsky will later make more explicit in "A"-12, concepts of the primacy of thought (the forehead) and its subsequent embodiment (ankle, lips) are out of place in this aesthetic. 3) Music "steps in the center," but it is not some profound source of inspiration

that can be imagined separately from its playing-out in tones. The two are always a unity: “It is not the sea, but what floats over it.” Three nuances of one underlying idea may be distinguished: Zukofsky does not, however, present these three images in discrete sequence. The statement of his poetics plays itself out in accordance with those poetics. “The music [is in the flower]” acts as a fugal subject, and returns as a familiar parcel of sound, as well as an organizing thought.

“A ”-12 is perhaps Zukofsky’s most interesting and successful attempt to adapt the techniques of fugal composition to language. To isolate one overall subject is to force the poetry into a mold it does not pretend to fill: this is a fugue on multiple themes. Barry Ahearn decides that “if there is a specific model for “A ”-12, such as the concerto form, it is well hidden” (212). Burton Hatlen correctly identifies the musical model as fugue, specifically *The Art of the Fugue*, and equally perceptively writes that “A ”-12 “does not... model itself on a specific fugal pattern—double, triple, etc.—, much less on the elaborate over-all design of *The Art of the Fugue*” (26). At times Zukofsky follows the fugal model with great fidelity, whereas at others he all but neglects the analogy. He nevertheless maintains the impression of continual recursion not to one but to several subjects, all of them subordinate to the first and most important subject, that of Bach’s name, the primary theme of the larger poem. Hatlen rightly suggests that just as “In music, pattern becomes significant when we hear it *again*,” so “The same is true... in Zukofsky’s poetics.” The opening sequence of the section calls for close analysis along fugal lines. The first four lines,

*Out of deep need*  
Four trombones and the organ in the nave  
A torch surged —  
Timed the theme Bach’s name, (126)

are reasonably clear in their surface meaning. The poet describes a performance of the final

unfinished work from Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, arranged for unidentified instrumental ensemble: the third subject, consisting of the four notes corresponding to Bach's name,<sup>31</sup> has just entered, played in this case by four trombones and organ. The first line seems a romantic description, an emotional interpretation, of the yearning quality of the theme, with its prolonged central appoggiatura and its falling chromatic intervals—its 'sighs' in terms of eighteenth-century *Affekt* theory. "*Out of deep need*" is also italicized, however, which in Zukofsky's work often suggests direct quotation. The four words describe the four-note theme,<sup>32</sup> but they are also intended as a substantial reproduction of that theme in language: the pitch of the vowels drops between 'ow' and 'ah,' rises above its initial level with 'dee,' the line's peak, and falls off very slightly to end on 'nee.' The pitch transformations between each group of two vowels are slight, corresponding to the semitone intervals of the musical phrase. Zukofsky has produced a line which both describes Bach's subject and actualizes that subject using spoken sound. Line five, "Dark, larch and ridge, night" also becomes explicable in this light: the subject-answer is entering. Hatlen comes very close to such a recognition, allowing that the line is probably "here almost solely for its sound values" (29) and even speculating that "the four operant words in the line represent the four letters of Bach's name, moving these letters back toward sound, so that they can be set into motion" (29-30).

"So goes:" Zukofsky now writes, setting up an expectation of some restatement of the subject, a re-exposition of sorts. The poet does not continue his sound-play, however, but turns to aesthetic philosophy, sketching out his poetics, the theoretical stages by which man moves from senseless being to artistic reflection of his existence. Zukofsky has signaled—albeit

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<sup>31</sup> According to German convention: B-flat (B in German), A, C, and B-natural (German H).

<sup>32</sup> Hatlen also identifies those four words as a reference to the chorale which Bach dictated in place of a conclusion to the *The Art of the Fugue*: the words of the hymn upon which it is based begin "When we are in deepest need" (31).

through a rather elliptical method impenetrable on a first reading—that “A”-12 will be fugal in design, maybe with multiple subjects like Bach’s “fourfold 19th fugue” (130) from *The Art of the Fugue*. The reader, willing to allow a certain amount of latitude in the analogy, tries to find a connection between the four-note theme and the following recursive passage on the genesis of poetic speech. In what sense is this passage a re-exposition? Perhaps the four-note theme will be echoed in a description of some fourfold process.

Such expectation is dashed, however: “first, *shape*” declares the poet, “Then *rhythm* / ... / Then *style*.” Experience translates into poetry through three stages. This process has theological overtones: “first, *shape* / The creation / ... / The whole face of the ground” and only then “*rhythm* — / And breathed breath of life.” Immediately after it reaches a full stop, Zukofsky replays the statement, but translated into historical terms, as an imagined genesis of our modern languages. The process now runs thus: “First glyph; then syllabary, / Then letters.” The repetition of the verbal formula ‘First... then... then’ provides an unmistakable cue that another fugal exposition is underway. The new subject, however, seems to bear no connection with the earlier repetitions of the four-note theme BACH. Zukofsky now restates the threefold procedure in terms of perception: “Ratio after / Eyes, tale in sound,” which is to say, decoding Zukofsky’s circumlocution, ‘first sight, then thought about that perception, and finally its narration in poetic language.’ Or perhaps, such is the ambiguity of the verbal form, sight leads to speech and song, and *then* to reasoning. Zukofsky progressively refines his initial idea by restating it with crucial variations. The poet then gives yet another transposition of the three-stage model. “First dance. Then / Voice. First, body — to be seen and to pulse / Happening together.” This formulation of the fugal subject requires attention in order to discover its congruence with the other versions. In theological terms, the process ran “first *shape*” and only then rhythm, but in human terms the

rhythmic impulse and the embodiment of that impulse are not so clearly separable. To have body is to participate in living rhythms. One could speak figuratively of a moment of stretto here: the theme overlaps itself. Finally, the idea of succession itself comes into question. Did warmth or the desire of warmth come first; living or the impulse to live? That unanswerable question is phrased in a form which frustrates any attempt to impose syntactical succession:

Before the void there was neither  
Being nor non-being;  
Desire, came warmth,  
Or which, first?

Fugally, one might speak of inversion—the verbal form is clearly inverted—except that inversion requires succession, which the poet has seriously called into question. At least the insights of “the sages” seem clearly subsequent to such metaphysical non-events: “Until the sage looked in their hearts / For the kinship of what is in what is not” (126-7). Zukofsky, however, undermines even that reassuringly successive “Until.” The very idea of a void and all speculation about what preceded it are only possible through the action of human wisdom and metaphor. A passage that began with a clear sense of first, subsequent, and final steps in a threefold process ends up in a metaphysical knot. Zukofsky accomplishes this, not by walking the reader through a process of induction, but by reiterating a single idea in several transpositions, and allowing the various versions of the subject to agree or conflict with each other as the case may be. In this sense, his method is very much like that of Delmore Schwartz discussed above.

Next Zukofsky inverts his previous precept. “Ratio after / Eyes, tale in sound” becomes “Sense sure, else not motion, / Madness to ecstasy never so thrall’d / But showed some quantity of choice” (127). Feeling and judgement turn out to be coequal with pure sensory experience. With this final refinement of the initial proposition, Zukofsky ends his second exposition.

Suddenly, the theme of Bach's name returns, now elaborated as an acrostic:

Blest  
Ardent good,  
Celia, speak simply, rarely scarce, seldom —  
Happy, immeasurable love  
heart of head's greater part unhurt and happy,  
things that bear harmony  
certain in concord with reason.

This acrostic reappears, appropriately, at the conclusion of the 'fugue' over a hundred pages later.

Signaled by initial capitals in bold type, it also returns (with several pages of commentary interleaved) between pages 231 and 238. On this second appearance, the fourth term is omitted.

The omission is deliberate and revealing.

Several ingenious but strained efforts have been made to identify the letters BACH with the members of Zukofsky's family, or with the 'four' thinkers who preside over "A"-12 (the count is doubtful), or even with the elements. I would like to suggest a less hermetic reading, one which takes the four words as its basis, and leaves implicit any more abstract correspondences between BACH and the poem's content. Whether or not B is a notation for Spinoza or Zukofsky's father, or more likely, both, 'Blest' signifies, first and foremost, the state of non-separation from the world. It means an acceptance of pure being, a oneness with

Infinite things  
So many  
Which confuse imagination  
Thru its weakness.... (231)

As well as signifying 'fire,' 'Ardent' signifies love, especially that of the parent for the child, by which things are known and made one's own even before the intelligence may grasp them,

are known without qualification:  
So a certain nature is simple and  
Loved, all other things moved to it are moved.... (237)

'Celia,' Zukofsky's wife, is herself. More generally, she is an emblem of human wisdom, discovered through face to face conversation, the potential of humanity to think with its entire being, to know truth by speaking it to itself, "simply, rarely" or perhaps "Over coffee" (237).

'First *Blest*' one might say in Zukofsky's own verbal formulation, 'then *Ardent*, then *Celia*': the initially undifferentiated being of the child is shaped by parental love or love of certain elements of its environment and is finally brought to maturity in a conscious union with the adult other. Zukofsky can elaborate the words *Blest*, *Ardent*, and *Celia* in poetic fantasias, but 'Happy' is inexpressible except as a function of the other three. It must remain implicit until the final re-exposition, where it appears significantly as the final word, the consummation of the entire composition. The four-note motive in fact reduces to three concepts: taken as a whole, they produce the fourth unsounded tone. One is reminded of Browning's Abt Vogler, who wonders that "such gift be allowed to man, / That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star" (279, ll. 51-52).<sup>33</sup> Recognizing Zukofsky's transformation of the fourth term into a gestalt of the first three, one understands better the poet's seeming abandonment of his 'subject' on page 126 after its initial exposition. The threefold process he describes is really a prescription for happiness: being calls for love and then for its reflection in wise forms of expression. As we saw in the case of Schwartz, the fugal subject can be almost embarrassingly straightforward. The spinning-out of that subject provides the poetic interest of the work, an exercise in verbal ingenuity, and produces the poem's rich philosophical ambiguities. "4"-12 can be read as a huge elaboration of Zukofsky's initial precept.

Such a scheme is helpful as a way of initially entering the dense, elliptical, and verbose

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<sup>33</sup> Vogler is not, however, referring to a melodic succession but a harmonic triad. Zukofsky seems to understand from the beginning that melody and harmony are indistinguishable in poetic terms: statements are always read sequentially but the concepts signified by those statements interact and form new complexes of thought regardless of any temporal distinction on the verbal plane.

text, but the analogy breaks down as it attempts to encompass the entire work. Other subjects exist in their own right, and not merely as elaborations of a central philosophical insight. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, especially its scenes between Bottom and Titania, is perhaps the most prominent example of such a recurring subsidiary subject, one that might profitably be seen as the counter-subject. It is labeled "the source" and placed alongside "the spring" of *The Art of the Fugue*. To press the fugal analogy any further is to tidy an essentially rambling and various poem. Once the poet begins spinning out words and phrases he may either continue in a given direction or revert to the original impulse. The return of the subject produces a sort of reiterative unity, but the extended continuation of any given line of development may lead the poet far from his original centre, with only a string of moment-by-moment links between ideas and themes. Zukofsky suggests something of both the excitement and frustration of such a method of proceeding when he exclaims "Look, Paul, where / The sawhorses of "A"-7 / Have brought me" (228). If such a work can never be said to be complete, because it could extend on to encompass all of a poet's life, times, and knowledge, it may also be considered finished at any point. The ostensible division of the work into twenty-four books is "A kind of childlike / Play" (258). In Bach's aesthetic, as understood by Zukofsky, "Unfinished is against the laws of the *spirit*. / Take that word I never use — no word someone can't use" (130).<sup>34</sup> Or, as the poet phrases it near the end of his labours on "A", he has created a

never-  
 Unfinished hairlike water of notes  
 vital free as Itself—impossible's  
 sort-of think-cramp work x.... (563)

The fugal design of the poem is as much an unfolding organic process as its maker's life, yet unity is also forced on it at all stages by the intellect.

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<sup>34</sup> The first line is said to be recalled "from the spring [of *The Art of the Fugue*]" (129).

It is a shame for the reception of his work that Zukofsky did not continue "A" into a twenty-fifth book, as Williams continued *Paterson* beyond his finished four-book scheme. He could have broken the false symmetry of his 'epic' framework, and demonstrated pointedly to any critics who look upon form as a preexisting artistic skeleton the always-finished-but-never-complete nature of such procedural structure, a fugal spinning-out the direction of which is unforeseen at every point yet paradoxically strongly engineered in advance. I am not suggesting that there is a design flaw in Zukofsky's work as it stands, but merely attempting to make a point by playing what-if. The poet in fact stops one book *short* of twenty-four to make such a point, as the final book is not of his own arrangement. Another hand arranges his works and Handel's harpsichord pieces in a five-part polyphonic composition (up to eight-part, in fact, if one remembers to count the independent musical voices of the Handel). To 'hear' this work properly, one would need a complete familiarity with Zukofsky's canon, an ability to hear only a moment of poetry or dramatic dialogue and call to mind its original significance and wider poetic connotations in terms of the writer's life work. Anyone who has tried to appreciate a fugue without hearing its exposition, without fixing the identity of the subject in memory, knows the necessity of such advance induction. The problems are multiplied when the notes become texts. Probably only Celia Zukofsky, the poet's wife and typist and 'arranger' of the *Masque*, was ever qualified to realize mentally this score. The words become musical elements, never free of their original context, yet combinatory in new and unexpected ways. To the casual, or even the scholarly reader, the book is dense, chaotic, and ultimately unreadable, as well as an amazing demonstration of the difficult limit to which Zukofsky's work always tended. I will return to this fascinating and extravagant collision of art forms at the end of my survey.

## Conclusion: a pedal point

In a chapter on fugal writing, as in fugal poetry, it would perhaps be fitting to merely declare an arbitrary end to the discussion, settle upon one key concept to highlight and call that a pedal point, and thereby confess that, in the words of R. Murray Schafer “the composer is getting tired and intends to stop” (*Ezra Pound and Music* 22). The critical faculty, however, wants more closure than that. Some generalizations about the nature of poetic fugue are called for.

The musical fugue has always been perched between the solidity of form and the fluidity of process. As Alfred Mann writes, “It has become evident that the term fugue does not apply to a form, as does, for instance, the term minuet. It denotes something structurally less concrete. Nor does the term merely apply to a texture, as does, for instance the term counterpoint. From the very beginning of its use, it has denoted something structurally more concrete” (72). The poetic fugue, if one can even speak of such a thing in the singular, is likewise poised in the intermediate ground between technique and structure. I have spoken largely of process and technique in this chapter. Structure has needed less explication. The rhythm of subject recurrences creates a familiar kind of form obvious to any reader, a structure which resembles known forms of poetic refrain—albeit in this case an exceptionally irregular version. It has been more important here to emphasize the unique way fugal writing grows out from a central unit of sound and meaning until variety threatens to destroy coherence, at which point the poet must somehow force the work to return to the centre. Zukofsky, despite the great length of his poem “A”, is largely successful at balancing the vital movement out from the subject into entropy and the necessary periodic regression to a controlling, re-energizing core of language—the name of Bach being the primary motive of the entire long poem; which is not to say its ‘meaning.’

Pound, by contrast, is less successful in these terms: stretches of the *Cantos* can be usefully compared to fugue, but no large-scale analogy bears fruit. The *Cantos* are more process than structure, and a certain minimum degree of formal periodicity is crucial to the concept of fugue. Poems on a smaller scale than those of Pound or Zukofsky show more fidelity to the musical model. That short stretches of "A" and the *Cantos* map quite easily onto the fugal model does not weaken but in fact strengthens this observation. It is easier to speak of the fugues within those long poems than to speak of any macro-level structure called 'fugue.' This is not surprising. The Baroque fugue was, except for certain celebrated examples, a relatively small form, or one component in a larger composition: in the Renaissance it was often a method of beginning a work and not even an independent compositional form.<sup>35</sup>

In closing I would like to leave the self-proclaimed writers of fugue behind and suggest some other potentially unacknowledged examples of the technique in modern poetry. Whether both, one, or neither of the two examples I have in mind are self-consciously fugal is not important. They both nevertheless illustrate the technique as well as one could wish: recursion is a basic habit of thought and speech among modern poets, a predisposition which lent fugue an irresistible attraction. One no longer imagines one's thinking as progressing in a straight line: rather, one moves in mental circles toward and away from certain central obsessions. The poet continues speaking, but is unable to speak sequentially. Her speech is not through-composed: she must return to the same reiterated line. In the following example, T.S. Eliot's 'exposition' is not even an orderly series of restatements, but a stuttering stretto of interrupted phrases, each suggesting new shades of despairing meaning:

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<sup>35</sup> "[A]lthough in this period [the Renaissance] *fuga* designates the imitative or canonic manner as well as individual compositions in which this manner is applied, the term refers in its strict theoretical sense to a fugal exposition within a work. This meaning is evident from Ponzio's references to fugues at the beginning and in other parts of the composition" (Mann 31-32)

Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn.... (“Ash-Wednesday” I)

Eliot’s fugal exposition, like that of many Renaissance composers, is only a way of starting a longer work, not a self-contained composition.<sup>36</sup> H.D.’s “Amaranth,” my second example, is full of what could easily be seen as fugal devices. To cite only one excerpt, which makes an interesting pair with the opening of the Eliot poem, here is the ‘exposition’ which ends the work:

Turn if you will  
from her path,  
turn if you must from her feet,  
turn away, silent,  
find rest if you wish:

find quiet  
where the fir-trees  
press, as you  
swaying lightly above earth.

Turn if you will from her path  
for one moment seek  
a lesser beauty  
and a lesser grace,  
but you will find  
no peace in the end  
save in her presence. (*Selected* 29)

The obsessive quality of fugue matches a certain obsessive quality of modern expression. Certain modern poets who felt that sequential argument no longer adequately mirrored the workings of the human mind and heart turned naturally to fugue as a type of non-discursive structural model. The musical method of proceeding better matched the frequent circularity of experience, and the fugue provided a framework in which to speak more precisely about that experience.

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<sup>36</sup> Eliot uses a similar device at the beginning of “Burnt Norton” (see the following chapter).

Chapter III

## **The sonata**

## The poetic sonata: an illusion of dialectic

Dynamic antithesis lies at the heart of sonata form. It is not surprising, therefore, that poetic sonata-allegros are frequently poems of ideas. The variation set, as we have seen, lends itself to poetry about perception—landscapes or mindscapes—and poetry that undertakes its own analysis: poems about poems. The fugue lends itself to experimental poetry, experimental in the sense that verse does not serve as a container for pre-formulated thought; the poem, rather, discovers its content as it unfolds: formal play leads to significant utterance. The sonata, by contrast, often becomes a vehicle for poetry of intellectual debate or meditation upon intellectual categories, what one might loosely label ‘philosophical’ verse.<sup>1</sup> Such poems frequently take the form of logical argument or progressive dialogue. Like the sonata, however, sonata-inspired poetry creates merely an illusion of reasoned debate or dialectic. This body of writing generally uses ideas as compositional building blocks, as juxtaposed themes (in the musical sense) that need not be brought together in an intellectual synthesis, but are destined to be harmonized in an artistic whole. In other words, the opposition of ideas is an aesthetic problem to be solved, not an impetus to rational inquiry. Such work assumes the language and the manner of philosophy, frequently producing a convincing impression of opposing theses being brought ultimately into intellectual balance. On closer inspection, however, this poetry is seen to reconcile conflicts more in the manner of the sonata-allegro recapitulation, satisfying the ears and eyes while taking in the mind. It does not provide, or indeed intend to provide, any logically sound synthesis.

From Stevens’s “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” with its imitation of the manner of aesthetic theorizing, to Eliot’s elliptical use of philosophy in *Four Quartets* primarily as material

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<sup>1</sup> The fugal poems of Bronk, Kees, and Schwartz, however cerebral, never take the form of debate or dialogue: these poets muse on a central idea without any intention of ever reaching an ‘outcome’ or ‘understanding’

for 'musical' sequencing, and finally to Ashbery's paradoxical production of both meaning and a mimicry of meaning in "Blue Sonata," modern poets who have taken up the challenge of sonata form have produced a poetry of ideas that undermines its own status as reasoned argument, yet a poetry that nevertheless reads as thought progressing toward its inevitable conclusion. Using non-rational means, the poetic sonata simulates a logical outcome. In the cases of Aiken's 'Symphonies' and Williams's "The Clouds," the intrusion of clear-cut ideas may even be said to disrupt the musical structure of the work.

## First-movement form superimposed on the multi-movement sonata

Turning to the sonata<sup>2</sup> after dealing with the variation set and fugue, we need to modify our conception of musical structure. Although a certain set of compositional procedures has been associated traditionally with the term 'sonata,' the word identifies much more than a general approach to handling musical materials. The designation is more formally prescriptive than the labels 'variation and fugue,' which denote relatively open-ended structures. 'Fugue,' in particular, describes both a formula for starting a piece and procedures for continuing the work, yet the term never corresponded to a closed, stereotyped structure.<sup>3</sup> A sonata, by contrast, is a finished, balanced work, its end more or less determined by its beginning. Schubert's recapitulations are generally literal enough that his unfinished sonatas have been plausibly completed through simple transposition. Beethoven stands at the opposite end of a continuum: telling transformations crop up in the recapitulation, making a new statement out of the return of the thematic material. Yet his transformations, however subtle or radical, nevertheless play out within a framework of expected symmetry. Although 'sonata' described many types of form over its history, at each stage the term suggested certain structural norms: an articulation of large-scale compositional sections, and a conventional trajectory of tonality—not the harmonic wandering of fugue or the overall stasis of the variation set, but a clear, large-scale movement away from stability and a clear final reaffirmation of the home key. Although it is a mistake to think of a single stereotypical sonata, it is not misleading to talk here about form, as it was in the case of fugue, or to a lesser degree in the case of the variation set.

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<sup>2</sup> In the discussion that follows I will sometimes, for the sake of concision, be referring to sonata form as if it were a single, universal plan. This is of course a drastic oversimplification.

<sup>3</sup> Once the fugue had ceased to be a vital technique, in the late nineteenth century, the procedure did come to be seen as a prescriptive set of rules.

The term sonata accumulated many meanings over time, and several of those multiple definitions may apply simultaneously to the same work. The word, as it came to be employed in the late eighteenth century, primarily denoted an instrumental work in several discrete parts, taking on various dimensions and consisting of various assortments of movements, yet always sectional.<sup>4</sup> From Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Conrad Aiken's *The Divine Pilgrim* to Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, poets have been inspired and challenged by the musical example of a multi-movement work, by their sense of the sonata as a musical epic of grand proportions and dramatic juxtapositions.

'Sonata,' however, also suggests *sonata-allegro* form, the constructional plan of many sonata movements. Sonata-allegro form usually provides the backbone of a work's first movement. This is not an inflexible rule: other parts of the composition infrequently follow this plan; however, these other movements more often take the shape of variations, rondo, minuet, or scherzo. When sonata-allegro makes an appearance in a movement other than the first, it is often mated with another structure, producing something labeled 'sonata-rondo' or the like.

The word sonata, then, refers in the same historical context both to a multi-movement work and to the internal structure of a single movement of that work, a structure that hinges upon eventual reconciliation of an initial tonal and perhaps thematic duality. Most of the modern poets who have attempted to produce an analogue to the sonata have understandably blended these two concepts into a single hybrid. Typically, the poet will apply sonata-allegro principles over the course of an entire multi-movement poem, thereby conflating sonata form in the micro-sense with sonata in the macro-sense. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, epitomizing such poetry, are constructed

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<sup>4</sup> Earlier sonatas, those of Scarlatti for example, were frequently more modest single-movement works. In the nineteenth century, the single-movement plan made a reappearance, but in these later works one large, continuous structure often subsumed the parts of what was in fact a sectional work.

on a multi-movement sectional plan (five movements),<sup>5</sup> but in addition the sonata-allegro structural principle—initial juxtaposition calling out for final reconciliation—is plainly at work throughout *Four Quartets* must be seen both as a large work made up of discrete parts and as a single overall structure progressing from opposition to synthesis. Beethoven himself was moving in his late works toward this precise conception of the sonata, making the formerly discrete movements into a continuous cyclical structure, a more-or-less unified whole comprised of thematically-related segments.

I begin my survey of poetry in sonata forms not with such large-scale sectional designs but with two short single-movement “Sonatinas”<sup>6</sup> by Donald Justice, in order to make clear the sort of poetic structure that might serve as an analogue to the sonata-allegro, without the added complication of multiple ‘movements.’ Justice’s poems are the clearest analogues to the musical form I have encountered.<sup>7</sup> After examining these lucid single-movement works, it will be easier to follow the traces of sonata-allegro form in more ambitious poems, ones that combine a dialectical structural principle with the sonata’s other distinctive characteristic, its multi-movement plan.

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<sup>5</sup> Below, I will be revisiting the debate over the possible musical models for *Four Quartets* and examining the validity of the widespread notion that Eliot had Beethoven’s late string quartets particularly in mind. The multi-movement plans of these late quartets are by no means obvious analogues to Eliot’s five-movement structure. Opus 132 is, however, nominally in a five-movement form, although the slow introductions to movements one and three complicate the structure (Eliot’s first and second movements also tend to begin with a ‘slow introduction’). Opus 135 is ostensibly in a four-movement form, although the fifth movement is preceded by a short *Graue* section just as Eliot’s final movements are preceded by short lyric fourth movements.

<sup>6</sup> Sonatina: either a short multi-movement work, often for instructional purposes—a small-scale sonata—or a single-movement work in some abbreviated version of sonata-allegro form. The boundaries between sonata and sonatina are not definite; it is generally a question of the work’s proportions and ambitions. Scarlatti’s shortest single-movement works are still labeled sonatas.

<sup>7</sup> The poet is of a similar mind himself: “I don’t think it turned out to be what I might ideally have imagined a literary sonatina to be, but it’s similar. It’s as close as I’ve been able to get, and I think it’s as close as anybody’s been able to get to a musical form in poetry—musical *form*, that is, so far as the structural outline goes.” (*Platonic* 94)

## **“It seemed to me that you might wish to start modestly”: Donald Justice’s “Sonatinas”**

### **“Sonatina in Yellow”**

The sonata-allegro plan was never a stereotyped framework. It was always in flux, taking on quite different proportions and characteristics over time. Poets have not always differentiated among these several versions of the sonata, but each poet has generally taken as his model a particular historical incarnation.<sup>8</sup> I would like to begin in the middle of the music-history trajectory, thinking of the elegant shape that the sonata-allegro assumed at the hands of Haydn, Mozart, and their contemporaries. The “Sonatinas” of Donald Justice are short, structurally-lucid analogues to this Classical version of the sonata.

Sonata-allegro, or first-movement form, in its late-eighteenth-century guise, is centred upon oppositions between tonal and thematic blocks, articulated sections set in contrast to each other. In the simplest version of the form, that epitomized by the sonatina, these oppositions are *exposed* (set out initially in full) and then synthesized in a final, perhaps truncated *recapitulation*<sup>9</sup> of the original material. Most importantly, the tonal opposition gives way to a unity. Not every sonata form need play upon the contrast between two themes. Haydn’s sonata-allegro movements are often monothematic.<sup>10</sup> The contrast between two tonalities—in major keys usually a dominant/tonic relation, and in minor a contrast between the tonic and its relative major—is, however, crucial. Donald Justice himself puts it very well, explaining why he chose to create poetic analogues to the sonatina.

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<sup>8</sup> Witness two works that, for reasons of space, will not be examined in detail in this chapter: Delmore Schwartz ostensibly models his “Vivaldi” on the eighteenth-century concerto—a particular incarnation of sonata form—and Basil Bunting’s ‘Sonatas’ are purportedly modeled on the keyboard works of Scarlatti. In both cases, however, the analogy is strained if not simply inapt.

<sup>9</sup> The terms *recapitulation* and *re-exposition* are used interchangeably.

<sup>10</sup> Based on tonal opposition but not thematic contrast: a single theme appears in both keys (see note below).

I didn't want to get into a complicated sonata-allegro, even if it could be done. I certainly didn't want to get into any sort of complicated set of quasi-musical forms such as you find in the "Four Quartets," or *think* you have found after reading the criticism. It seemed to me that you might wish to start modestly. The sonatina is a modest classical form which involves an A part and a B part. It involves saying A again and saying B again in a key different from the one it was said in the first time around.

The only thing I had to find was an A thing to say and a B thing to say, and—which was trickier—a way to change the key of B  
(*Platonic* 92)

At times in this 1980 interview Justice seems to suggest that his two themes are strictly ideas, subject matter divorced from its manner of saying.<sup>11</sup> Because Justice is so clearly setting up abstract antitheses between his first and second themes, it is fairly easy to follow his lead and devise a simple abstract scheme for the poem, something that has often been a challenge throughout the previous chapters of this study. The poet himself confesses that he "worked all these schemes [of modulation] out in advance of writing the poem, that was part of the pleasure of the whole business for me at the time" (92). His themes, however, are not simply two opposed concepts liable to prose summary; each is a complex of abstract theses and concrete linguistic motives, just as a musical theme usually possesses a textural and dynamic identity in addition to taking its part in a large-scale tonal opposition. Despite Justice's disclaimers concerning the modest scope of the sonatina, each of his themes contains multiple images and is subject to numerous shifts of tone and setting. The music-analysis term *theme-group* probably better captures this multiplicity within each formal unit, but I will retain the simpler term *theme*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> At other points, it should be noted, Justice suggests that the manner of saying dictated its own transformations in spite of the repetitions required by the musical form.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Rosen writes "I should prefer to speak of tonic and dominant areas in an exposition, always remembering that the composer has often created a no-man's-land between the two" (81). This terminology is patently more accurate for purposes of musical analysis. Until quite recently, however (and even up to the present in far too many music history classes) the misleading nineteenth-century concept of an exposition composed of two 'themes' was a commonplace of musical discourse. In discussing the *poetry* of the early to mid twentieth century, one must make a choice between using the somewhat inaccurate musical language of the time or our more correct but anachronistic contemporary categories. In general, I have chosen to retain the earlier, misleading terminology, but wherever

In the “Sonatina in Yellow” (*Selected* 106-7), the two ‘things to say’ are, in the broadest terms, statements about memory and forgetting. Sonata form is especially appropriate as a framework in which to explore such subject matter. The musical form requires of its listener an alertness both to repetition and to the transformation of that which is repeated. At the heart of the sonata concept is memory itself, especially the power of the mind to compare earlier and later versions of motives. John Ashbery puts it well in “Blue Sonata,” which I will discuss at the end of this chapter:

For progress occurs through re-inventing  
These words from a dim recollection of them,  
In violating that space in such a way as  
To leave it intact. (*Selected* 244)

The listener may accomplish this paradoxical task of reinvention and conservation without full consciousness, but he or she does it nonetheless.

Although the initial tonality of Justice’s sonata, its primary controlling idea, is remembrance, the process of remembering is intimately bound up with the process of decay. As the tangible evidence provided by photographs yellows and vanishes, the meaning of past events becomes clear, through the simplifying effects of distance and the poet’s imaginative reconstruction of his childhood, through processes passive and impersonal as well as active and emotionally involving. Once the pictures vanish “The meanings come, or come back later”; or, as Justice refines this thought in his recapitulation:

The faces fade, and there is only  
A sort of meaning that comes back,  
Or for the first time comes, but comes too late  
To take the place of the faces.

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necessary have noted its musical insufficiencies, gaps that are plain in hindsight to today’s music theorists but, I would argue, not obvious to the layman of earlier decades—especially considering that the academy of the day was itself largely satisfied with ideas of a stereotyped ‘sonata form’ and simple thematic opposition.

The contrasting tonality underlying the B theme is, as may be expected, the other strand of this two-part process, that of oblivion, of the forgetting that must clear the field before meaning will emerge from memory. In the sonata, it is not absolute distinction between the first and second themes that creates the dynamic tension of the form; rather, that tension is produced through the play of opposed-yet-related keys. Final synthesis and the necessity of eventual transposition is implied in the movement's key-scheme, its governing dominant/tonic or mediant/tonic polarity. Justice understands that the form calls for dialectical interplay and not absolute opposition: he therefore builds a central ambiguity and instability into his themes. Memory and forgetfulness do not stand apart from each other. Instead, remembrance feeds upon forgetfulness, upon its apparent opposite.

Justice is careful to begin his second theme with a verbal ambiguity that will enable it to be transposed more easily upon its reappearance, a brief passage of *transition* entirely in keeping with his musical model. "Think of the past" seems a continuation of the first stanza. This statement is immediately repeated, but this time with a qualification that brings us into the new tonality: "Think of forgetting the past."<sup>13</sup> Forgetting is characterized as a "difficult exercise" requiring nearly as much commitment as remembering. It demands the child's complete attention to the moment. He must diminish his emotional distance from the scene and must engage in no conscious reflection, reflection that would abstract the essentials and fix the instant more firmly in the mind. Forgetting is never entire, however. One remembers almost in spite of one's attention to the passing moment. The two terms, then, are not mutually exclusive, but bound up in a complicated relationship. The poet, following standard sonata procedure, sets up a duality in this first half of the poem—his *exposition*—but makes the two terms of the opposition

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<sup>13</sup> Compare this smooth reversal of ideas with Eliot's interrupted transition in "Burnt Norton" (discussed below).

so dynamically interdependent and porous that they call for some later synthesis, a newly-imagined *recapitulation* that will be able to comprehend both halves of the unstable dichotomy, to transcend their partial truths.

When the two themes are *re-exposed*, the first theme is refined and complicated but not essentially changed. The faces still fade, and meaning still comes back, whether or not “for the first time” or “too late.” Justice’s changes are significant but do not produce an entirely new statement. In his recapitulation, the same process is narrated a second time with greater insight and new imagery but without radical transformation. Yellowing faces give way to the yellow of “forgotten sunlight”: the effect is of a scene viewed from a new angle, not of absolute novelty. Justice himself claims that literary necessity forced upon him certain changes in the re-exposed first theme: “But then I felt it really wasn’t literarily interesting just to repeat A if there were more than two or three lines to it; so I modified A, which also happens in the musical form” (*Platonic* 92). Although musical forms are apparently more tolerant than literary forms of lengthy stretches of exact repetition, those musical returns are never perceived as simple reiterations. The first theme is heard differently when it appears on the heels of its thematic antithesis. As sonata form became more complicated over time, a re-exposed first theme could not simply make a reappearance but needed to be profoundly reconstituted. In these later versions of the form, the themes undergo free transformation and recombination, and both themes often lose their thematic and tonal identity in a *development* section.

To achieve the required sense of an almost-but-not-quite-exact return of A, Justice does not trust to identical words. Exact repetition in language has always been experienced as less rich and less satisfying than exact repetition in music.<sup>14</sup> The composer generally brings his theme

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin Brown expands upon this observation:  
The primary difficulty for the poet among these structural elements of music lies in repetition and

back whole or merely truncated, and not often in a substantially altered state. Instead of simple reiteration, the writer employs that which is in fact a more precise poetic equivalent to musical repetition: restatement with new words. The disjunction between signifier and signified is central to language but is, except in trivial cases of text-painting, unavailable in music. Unlike the composer, the poet may rely upon an underlying meaning to provide identity, letting the words themselves vary. Trusting to this deeper identity, he may let the surface of the text bear witness to the inevitable change in perception; he may let his slightly varied words mark the inexact nature of the repetition. Justice, though mimicking a musical model, takes advantage of the full resources of his own art. Some exact repetition helps make more obvious the connections between the first presentation of the theme and its return; Justice's main tool, however, is varied restatement, not simple reiteration. The poet is not without musical precedents, of course, in modifying his returning theme, but his decision is primarily a literary one.

Justice's earlier labour pays off when he comes to transpose the second theme into the tonality of the first. The reader easily accepts the new beginning of the second theme, the lines "Remember the dead air of summer. Remember. . ." as a restatement of the exposition's "Think

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variation. These are, of course, essential literary principles. They may be most clearly seen in such verse forms as the triolet, ballade, villanelle, rondeau, etc., but repetition, either identical or with a difference, is important in all poetry. The difficulty is not one of kind, but of degree, since music can tolerate repetition more easily than poetry. It is true that in the opening of Book II of the "Iliad" a substantial passage is used three times within a compass of forty-seven lines, but such repetition is fortunately rare in poetry. In music, on the other hand, it would not be at all remarkable, and the frequency of repeat-marks in scores is ample testimony to the amount of unchanged repetition that music allows, or, in most forms, even demands. The reason is fairly plain. [I]n music, form and content are indistinguishable. A speech or idea repeated in different words gives an impression of prolixity, but a musical theme "divided," augmented, diminished, transposed, reharmonized, reorchestrated, or varied in any possible way seems to be more of a new thing than a repetition. Even unchanged repetition is far more tolerable in music than in poetry, probably because a theme is simply itself and must be fixed in the memory by repetition, whereas a literary idea is something apart from the words in which it is presented, and one can—and does—retain the idea without necessarily having any clear recollection of the form of its statement. Hence the poet will usually repeat, either exactly or with variation, only small parts of his work, while the composer will often construct the major portion of his product out of repetitions and variations. ("Poetic Use" 91-2)

of the past. Think of . . . This time, however, Justice does not make the crucial key change. He does not turn an imperative to remember into a commandment to forget. The *transition* is now no transition at all, rather, the false transition continues with an unambiguous exhortation to remember. We remain in the original tonality.

In the exposition, the unreflecting child's full attention is fixed upon the father's too-familiar, angry, and insistent voice. Small catastrophes occupy the boy's consciousness: the father's nap is interrupted and the vase shattered. Having been preoccupied as a child by the passing moment, the grown poet is unable to recall the past in its fullness, experiencing it as something hidden in "another room" from which through the walls only imperfect messages reach him. In the recapitulation, however, all of these obstacles to remembrance are overcome and the imagination enables him quite literally to enter the next room. "Notice" is the new commandment. The vase is whole, remaining unbroken yet also newly reconstituted by thought. It exists now solely for the poet's examination, recreated as it was in the moment before it shattered, a moment suspended as long as the mind wills. The sleeping father lays himself out inanimate under an imaginative gaze: anger and disturbing action do not yet deform his image—or else do so no longer. Whereas the father's voice was initially the epitome of absorption in the passing moment, the father's body now becomes strangely atemporal, simultaneously resting in the moment before his awakening and laid out after death with the passivity of a corpse.<sup>15</sup> Even the father's rising and speaking are transposed in the recapitulation: he rises, not as a man disturbed in sleep but as a figure resurrected by the poet's imaginative work, giving meaning to the past instead of giving lectures to the boy in a vanishing present.

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<sup>15</sup> This state corresponds to what Emmanuel Levinas calls the artistic paradox of an instant that endures without a future, "The imminence of the future" as it "lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, its evanescence" ("Reality" 138).

The memory-images that make up Justice's second theme are abstracted from their places in the chaos of daily life and lingered over by the mature imagination, like the yellowing photographs of theme A. A natural process of forgetting, of abstraction, and even falsification, has enabled the poet imaginatively to reconstruct a moment of repose that he never witnessed but in which the memory of the father paradoxically may be more fully and faithfully preserved. The second theme, in its transposed form, evokes a suspended moment in which the dead father and the vanished objects, through their non-resistance to the force of imagination their long silence, come almost to the point of communication. In their original states, theme A describes the mind's effort to make sense of memory, and the contrasting B theme describes the chaos and resistance to thought of a single passing moment. The recapitulated form of the second theme now reveals that particular instant in the process of becoming a meaningful memory, yet without losing its characteristic elements and setting, its vivid sense of place and time. In short, we witness the process by which the mind synthesizes experience. It does so not by assimilating and neutralizing a specific instant but by interpreting certain details of the scene, details that maintain their own identity while gaining a new meaning. In the recapitulation of a sonata, we similarly witness not a union of opposites but the taking-up of the second theme in the governing tonality. The second theme is not made over to resemble the first or otherwise merged with it but maintains its identity in a new key-environment, a synthesized environment in which tonal tensions have been resolved despite the continuing independence of the themes.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This observation requires modification in the case of a monothematic sonata, one in which each tonal area is established by playing near-identical initial material (the themes that articulate the primary and secondary tonalities are the same or nearly the same, the 'A theme' is also the 'B theme'). There thematic juxtaposition is not a factor the secondary key *is* its own separate identity. However the continuations of each half of the exposition need not be—and are rarely—the same, and any material exposed in the second key area must be convincingly reconstituted in the first key, which is not the same as replaying the opening of the sonata. Haydn's 'monothematic' movements do not require the full recapitulation of the first 'area' but they do call for a revisit of the entire second half of the exposition. A sonata without a differentiated B theme still demands an explicit return of the B area: the secondary tonal area retains its identity, although that identity cannot be defined in terms of themes.

The final three lines of “Yellow” comprise a *coda*, a short section, usually repeating earlier materials, that reaffirms the main tonality (perhaps through an excursion to the subdominant key). Justice ends his recapitulation on a note of excitement and accomplishment, the triumph of “He rises, speaks....” Yet the poem’s first theme is clearly more bittersweet than this. “Yellow” is primarily in what one might call a literary minor key; it is at the very least ambiguous in mode, like those Schubert theme-groups that wander between major and tonic-minor keys. Justice’s coda therefore serves to restore the poem’s initial ambiguity. The communication of the dead needs clarification through repetition: “no one was listening.” Although the poet repeats the “difficult exercise”—now an exercise of remembering and not of forgetting—the past becomes progressively murkier. The one who remembers becomes a memory himself: the coda, with its final images of touch and obscurity re-inscribes the epigraph from Rilke (“Du schnell vergehendes Daguerrotyp / In meinen langsamer vergehendes Händen”). Having achieved at the end of the recapitulation what may seem a too-easy harmony between his two themes, the poet, through his three-line coda, brings the “Sonatina” to a less reassuring but more tonally-satisfying close. Justice takes his leave at the point of departure, having shaped unruly experience into stable imagery and having given order to his childhood memories, yet without having changed the initial mood of frustration and melancholy. Sonata form implies movement and reinterpretation but not necessarily progress: the poet ends by reaffirming Rilke’s sad lines.

## **“Sonatina in Green”**

Justice’s “Sonatina in Green” depicts generational conflict: the poet pits his own sense of what poetry is or can be against the new outlook of his creative writing students. The first theme describes the efforts of the poet’s students to make poetry despite their rejection of previous aesthetic canons and their seeming creative paralysis. The second theme, somewhat surprisingly, shows Justice trying to understand his students’ approach and bring their efforts in line with his own assumptions about the nature of the art. It appears that in the exposition the poet is moving already toward a synthesis of his two ideas, that he may not wait for the re-exposition to bring his themes together. In fact, Justice has a more interesting transposition in mind for the recapitulation. Once again, as in “Yellow,” the poet reveals a clear understanding of the musical form: the two themes as set out in the exposition are not absolute opposites but related ideas held in a dynamic tension. The students reject what they know as literature but nevertheless attempt in their haphazard way to create poetry. The teacher tries to understand their aesthetic, if it may be called that, but cannot make the leap to acceptance.

Justice’s first theme is characterized by a rhetoric of absolute pronouncements and terse commentary. Insistent repetition assaults the reader from the first word. An enumeration of all the would-be poets never adds up to any total greater than “One”; the students are reduced to interchangeable, solitary shadows without ideals or energy:

One spits on the sublime.  
One lies in bed alone, reading  
Yesterday’s newspaper. One  
Has composed a beginning, say,  
A phrase or two. No more!

As in “Yellow,” Justice is faithful to his musical model both in bringing back the first theme

basically unchanged at the point of recapitulation and in modifying that returning theme in a subtle manner to acknowledge that it has undergone development: it must be understood differently, following as it now does upon contrasting material. In the exposition, the poet is dismissive of the one who “Has composed a beginning, say, / A phrase or two” and “No more” than that, but by the recapitulation the student’s false start takes on a more hopeful character, is felt to partake somewhat of the sublime, if not the conventionally beautiful:

Or say  
That one composed, in the end,  
Another beginning, in spite of all this,  
Sublime. Enough!

The stance of absolute dismissal and the satirical manner characteristic of the exposition give way, upon the recapitulation of the first theme, to a tentative acknowledgment that the students’ approach may indeed contain the seeds of a new beginning for the art of poetry. Justice’s “Enough!” can be read both as a negation of this possibility—a re-inscription of the original tonality—or as its confirmation: it ambiguously phrases itself both as ‘Sublime. Enough!’ and ‘Sublime enough’ (echoing the earlier pun ‘A phrase or two. No more!’—‘A phrase or two, no more!’) The first theme returns in its original tonality, but not without having been modified by its relation to the second theme.

Having examined both the exposition and recapitulation of the first theme, we now turn to Justice’s contrasting second idea. The second theme is the poet’s attempt to relate the new aesthetic of his students to his old-fashioned understanding of poetry’s power, his attempt to see them as continuing a tradition rather than standing outside that tradition. Justice suggests that the students, despite their false starts and paralysis, are indeed attempting to break through to some point of meaningful expression and artistic intoxication, much as their predecessors had done.

At one point the ghost of Eliot suggests the phrasing, broadening still further the sense of a unity underlying the apparent generational divide:

Distantly, through some door ajar,  
Echoes, broken strains; and the garland  
Crushed at the threshold.

Although Justice here takes as his contrasting theme the continuing strength of the creative will, the outlook hardly seems bright for this new generation: "For them, what music?" he asks, answering that any music they achieve will be caught "Distantly, through some door ajar." This ambiguity, the fact that each theme already contains in some measure its own contradiction, allows the poet elegantly to transpose his second theme into the first tonality upon its recapitulation, something we have already seen him do in the case of "Yellow."

The recapitulation demands synthesis, a bringing-into-alignment of the two governing ideas. Justice reserves a surprise for this point of resolution, a transposition of the second theme into the first key that is logical yet unexpected, that provides a formal harmonization of the two theme-groups but involves no easy coming-together of the generations. The teacher and his students are one, not in sympathy but in non-comprehension. In place of the previous "door ajar", the poet laments in the recapitulation that

Closed are the grand boulevards,  
And closed are those mouths that made the lesser songs,  
And the curtains drawn in the boudoir.

Perhaps the acceptance of these truths will point the way toward a new manner of poetic statement. Yet if the poet has in mind such a catharsis, he does not make the thought explicit. The final version of the theme can be read as a clear denial of possibilities for the young, an acknowledgment that the world has changed and that toils in "the boudoir of the muse" are no longer enough to satisfy the contemporary artist. It is also, as suggested by the prominence in the

poem's title of green, the traditional colour of envy, an ironic response from a teacher in love with his old models of order and beauty when faced with the possibility that someone has, in spite of initial appearances and against all likelihood, arrived at a new version of the "Sublime." The second theme, which originally described the teacher's effort to see the new works on their own terms, is now cleverly transposed into a tone of voice that matches the students' own uncompromising attitude. The youth who "spits on the sublime" is now matched by an aging teacher who spits on their lesser songs. Having tried to understand their new, sullen-seeming aesthetic, Justice has finally come to see himself as implicated in their revolt. The witty synthesis between first and second themes is not the hopeful resolution one might expect; rather, it is a mutual hardening of positions. Older and younger artists stand side-by-side in envy and discomfort. Whereas we had been led to expect a rewriting of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," we are confronted with a model of creative misunderstanding closer to *The Anxiety of Influence*. The sonata-allegro form likewise requires a final alignment of the themes but not necessarily a comic resolution.

Unlike "Yellow," "Green" introduces a section that one may clearly label the *development*. In a development section, a composer takes up motives from the first two theme-groups, in turn or in combination, and transforms them in a new, frequently-shifting tonal environment. The new wavering tonality of Justice's development is that of self-doubt and self-examination. The poet reintroduces and manipulates exact words and imagery from the exposition, applying the second theme's central question—"what music?"—not this time around to his students but to himself and to his own contemporaries, the "few with the old instruments, / Obstinate, sounding the one string." The poet's irritated outburst "No more! / There has been traffic enough" is transmuted in the development section into a nostalgic and quietly satisfied—

yet perhaps also a touch defensive?—“More than enough”: his efforts to wrest beauty from decay have been modest but worthwhile.

A development section serves to explore some thematic possibilities that remain unrealized in the exposition, with its fully-formed, apparently finished statements. A development criticizes the themes in the only way music knows, lacking as it does the ability to speak about itself. The composer demonstrates the further potential implicit in his or her themes by revising and juxtaposing them. Justice finds a literary equivalent to this musical play of motives. His development becomes a way of questioning his own secure statements and buried assumptions. Although the poem never quite denies these assumptions, it does lead the poet to a new understanding of his aesthetic blind-spots. This self-examination, however, this so-called ‘development’ of his own ideas, paradoxically leads Justice not to a greater sympathy with the new but to a recognition of his own role in leaving the students paralyzed and oppressed. With grace and a healthy measure of irony, he turns the tentative movement toward understanding into a final stance of solidarity in alienation. The “ecstatic cries” of the young from theme B become the youthful cries of his own generation, which “Diminish behind us.” With these words Justice anticipates the return of theme A, preparing for this return by sounding the dominant, the secondary tonality, and thereby, as in so many other instances, following closely the standard sonata plan.

Justice’s “Sonatinas” mimic their musical model not only in their employment and arrangement of verbal motives but also in terms of the explicit opposition of ideas. It is relatively easy to identify the musical structures of these works, not merely because of their convenient hints of typographical spacing and rhetorical repetition, but because Justice’s themes are at heart conceptualized theses that can be abstracted from their specific verbal clothing and

spelled out as intellectual dialectic. Having examined these clear and very Classical examples of sonata-allegro forms transferred to language, I will now turn to some works in which the conceptual antithesis/synthesis pattern takes a backseat to strictly verbal manipulations. Not all poets have been as clearly dialectical as Justice, as comfortable in the realm of statement and counter-statement. Few have been as ready to subordinate verbal play to reasoned dialogue.

Taking a large step back in historical terms, I will examine the works of some of the disparate poets of T.S. Eliot's circle who, in the teens of the twentieth century, attempted with varying degrees of success to produce poems that would fit the label 'symphony.' Here the sonata-allegro principle of opposition and resolution collides with the idea of the symphony as a multi-movement, occasionally cyclical work of great dynamic contrast. Having sketched briefly this historical context, I will turn to two of the most successful attempts to organize poetry along lines analogous to sonata structure. Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is a multi-movement work that finds an elegant balance between the competing pressures of musical and poetic techniques, an achievement comparable to that of Justice but on a slightly expanded scale, and in its use of words and thoughts more closely approximating the particular musical notion of 'theme.' Eliot's influential *Four Quartets*, a late and more considered product of the 'symphonist' impulse, stands literally and figuratively at the middle of my narrative as both a culmination of earlier efforts and a challenge to any poet coming after. The idea of a sequence of multi-movement poems modeled on sonata structure was not original with Eliot. His innovation is in his simplification of form: a concentration upon a single sharp juxtaposition in the case of each quartet, the use of a very selective diction, and an awareness that poetry organized as musical dialectic will be primarily a construct of structural and verbal rhythm and only secondarily a vessel of idea and image. As Eliot writes in "The Music of Poetry":

But I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure. ...I know that a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image.... (63)

The examples provided by his contemporaries John Gould Fletcher and Conrad Aiken—both their failings and their discoveries—undoubtedly remained with Eliot twenty years later when he began conceiving of a set of poems to follow “Burnt Norton” that would take the shape not of unruly ‘symphonies’ but of concentrated chamber music.

## **‘Symphonists’ and ‘imagists’: complementary poetics**

The short-lived imagist movement has often been viewed as the point of departure for a narrative of modern English-language poetry. Louis Martz gives a synopsis of that prevailing narrative in his introduction to H.D.’s *Selected Poems*: “the critical and poetical currents of the 1920s and 1930s, under the influence of Eliot and Pound and T E Hulme, were violently reacting against romanticism and were insisting upon the need for terse, compact poetry, rich in imagistic inference but spare in abstraction and exclamation” (vii).<sup>17</sup> It is true that the canonical modern poets, especially Pound and Eliot, were reacting against a nineteenth-century poetic romanticism. In the received literary-historical narrative, such terse, emblematic works as Pound’s “In A Station of the Metro” claim pride of place as the point of departure in the development of a modern poetic style. Yet, as has been increasingly recognized in recent years, the frozen visual/verbal moment we think of as the essence of the imagist aesthetic is hardly the sole context for the great modernist works. Alongside the imagist legacy, with its privileging of the visually concrete and its sense of arrested temporality, there is a rival legacy one might call the ‘symphonist.’ It is not my purpose, I must emphasize, to set up a new historical narrative in place of the old: even if such a transposition were desirable, the fact that some of the leading ‘imagists,’ particularly Amy Lowell and John Gould Fletcher, were also dedicated ‘symphonists’ would force one to see the two legacies as complementary. I would like, however, to draw an artificial working distinction between the two categories.

John Gould Fletcher, in a 1919 essay on Conrad Aiken, draws a more general distinction

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<sup>17</sup> Martz’s introduction, it should be added, tries to move beyond this received wisdom and do justice to what he calls the “swirling, dynamic power” of H.D.’s work, a power in evidence even in her early, supposedly imagistic poems, a dynamism that belies the “static, lapidary, crystalline implications” of the *Imagiste* label

between two currents of inspiration that he sees running through the whole of English poetry. In place of the familiar romantic/realist dualism, he suggests a new divide between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ poets. He quickly rejects these new terms in favour of an imagistic/symbolistic pairing, and finally settles on what he feels to be a more comprehensive dichotomy between the ‘externalistic’ impulse and the ‘metaphysical.’ According to Fletcher, the externalist poet has been much more common in English and more appreciated by his contemporaries. The metaphysical poet, on the other hand, “must be always turning the world inside out, so to speak. And since the faculty of verse writing is based primarily on an emotional response to sensuous impression... the good metaphysical poet must be always battling against his own immediate apprehensions” (*Essays* 106). This system of nomenclature, whatever its value as a general principle of English poetry, is helpful in understanding the contradictory tendencies that shaped modern poetry during the teens of the twentieth century. Fletcher’s externalist/metaphysical divide corresponds to my more historically-specific distinction between imagist and symphonist. Poetry modeled on instrumental music, on so-called ‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ music, tends to lead its practitioners in a direction diametrically opposed to the concentrated visual/emotional complex (or vortex) of imagism. The symphonist impulse abdicates the power of poetry to crystallize a fleeting impression in favour of its power to play immediately—that is, unmediated by those senses that favour spatial or visual conception—upon the emotions and mind. A poem that achieved musical form could access truths beyond the world of external appearances, of concrete particulars. Trusting in poetry’s direct access to profound truth, such poets are clearly the heirs of certain strands of nineteenth-century romanticism.

Few writers were, even for a time, strict adherents to this poetic, just as few poets remained card-carrying imagists for long. The official imagist circle produced a small number of

worthwhile poems along with many more empty efforts, yet the impulse behind the short-lived movement produced an enormous ripple-effect in later work. The impulse to create a poetic analogue to the symphony likewise resulted in great expanses of tiresomely abstract verse,<sup>18</sup> but that poetic also played a crucial role in the most valuable achievements of Pound, Williams, Stevens, and especially, I would argue, of Eliot. Most of the outstanding modern works, the *Cantos*, *Paterson*, *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*, are in part products of the symphonist impulse, an impulse characterized by the desire to organize by periodic repetition, by the juxtaposition of themes with the goal of an ultimate harmonization (meaning not simply the struggle of abstract ideas, which would be nothing new for literature, but the play of verbal/conceptual units, of 'motives'), and, most importantly, by a faith expressed repeatedly in Pound's criticism that the way forward for poetry was through a cross-pollination with music, which amounted to the broaching of a long and artificial divorce.

The classicist tendencies of the canonical modern poets are well-evidenced in their criticism, but this counter-tendency is nowhere explicitly acknowledged—Pound holds up the troubadours and the 'pattern music' of the eighteenth century, Vivaldi and Bach, as his ideals: anything but the prevailing climate of late romanticism. Minor poets such as Aiken and Fletcher, more committed to this 'musical' poetic, were less concerned to distance themselves from their nineteenth-century legacy, both in their poetry and criticism. Their model is not, after all, the Classical sonatina so elegantly and concisely reproduced by Donald Justice, but the sprawling post-Beethoven symphony of the nineteenth-century. A brief study of such relatively minor works provides a new context in which to understand the great modern long poems, and in

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<sup>18</sup> Abstract in the sense of non-concrete: that is not to say that these poems are necessarily unified by abstract schemes. Conrad Aiken perceptively criticizes his own early work along these lines: "a little more statement and a little less implication would have been a good thing, for it verges on the invertebrate" (*Collected* 876).

particular, for the purposes of this study, *Four Quartets*<sup>19</sup> Poets more adept than Fletcher and Aiken give the poetic symphony a more satisfying grounding in external reality, creating works that balance arresting visual imagery with repetitive aural patterns. In lesser hands, that balance is tipped toward repetitive structural rhythm, resulting in a corresponding weakening of the visual sense and a tendency toward misty symbolism and disembodied abstraction.

John Gould Fletcher and Conrad Aiken both made strenuous efforts to import the techniques of symphonic composition into poetry. Fortunately for our purposes, they both felt compelled as well to explain and justify their approach, acknowledging not only the potential reservations of a skeptical public but also their own sense of having produced puzzling works which could not speak for themselves. There is an uncertainty, on the one hand, in their use of musical terminology that undermines the intended musical analogies or reminds the reader that such analogies are not meant to be mistaken for absolute identities. There is, on the other hand, an eagerness to defend such inter-art identities that forces one to another conclusion: the making of musical/poetic analogies was for these poets a very serious and quasi-mystical pursuit.

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Aiken is full of confidence in his project as he composes his 1918 preface to his 1915 Symphony 'The Charnel Rose': "in some ways," he writes, "the analogy to a musical symphony is close" (*Collected* 865). His symbols recur throughout like themes, sometimes unchanged.

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<sup>19</sup> The question of influence between Aiken and Eliot is complicated. Upon reading Aiken's *The House of Dust* Eliot remarked that "I have glanced through the book and it appears to me that the workmen called in to build this house were Swinburne and myself, the Dust being provided by Conrad" (*Letters* 414). Eliot is referring to the clear echoes of "Prufrock" in the poem. Certain scenes in *The Waste Land*, on the other hand, such as the visit to the fortune teller, seem influenced by Aiken's *The House of Dust*. Aiken's biographer writes:

That Eliot could have 'stolen' certain felicitous images or architectural motifs from the work of a friend seems reasonable. *The Waste Land* would be, however, a direct outgrowth of Eliot's earlier verses: an elaboration and amalgamation of material he had been wrestling with for years. More relevant in practical terms [and especially for our purposes here] when one abandons straight narrative in any extended poem, what is left but some form of recurrent musical analog? With pragmatic opportunism, Aiken and Eliot were simply tackling the inherited problem of absent or discredited frames by applying a logical solution from their common arts background. (Butscher 247)

sometimes modified, but always referring to a definite idea." Aiken's 1919 review of his own book for *Poetry* is, however, more circumspect:

I do not wish to press the musical analogies too closely. I am aware that the word symphony, as a musical term, has a very definite meaning, and I am aware that it is only with considerable license that I use the term for such poems as *Senlin* or *Forslin*, which have three and five parts respectively, and do not in any orthodox way develop their themes. But the effect obtained is, very roughly speaking, that of the symphony, or symphonic poem.  
(*Collected* 875)

Aiken goes on to diagram his method. Set alongside Justice's clear and accurate explication of the sonatina, Aiken's explication demonstrates a much less precise conception of the musical form. Yet his analysis, while imprecise in details, does accurately reveal the nature of the symphony's attraction for modern poets. The form, however vaguely grasped in exact structural terms, was seen, quite correctly, as a means of producing a maximum of contrast with a minimum of means. The structural manipulation of a limited group of basic elements replaced the additive devices of narrative. A series of tonal juxtapositions could serve to generate form: no scenario need initiate action. Simple reiteration rather than progressive plot complications could sustain a long poem.

Like Justice after him, Aiken understands that not every idea lends itself to such treatment, that any poetic material suitable for musical manipulation must be broad enough to allow for its own reversal, must be liable to transposition:

Granted that one has chosen a theme—or been chosen by a theme!— which will permit rapid changes of tone, which will not insist on a tone too static, it will be seen that there is no limit to the variety of effects obtainable: for not only can one use all the simpler poetic tones (let us for convenience represent any five such simple poetic tones, each composing one separate movement to be used in a symphony, as *a, b, c, d, e*); but, since one is using them as parts of a larger design, one can also obtain novel effects by placing them in juxtaposition as consecutive movements: such as *ab, ac, cae*. For *a*, it is clear, if it is preceded by *c* and followed by *e*, is not quite the same as *a*

standing alone. A peculiar light has been cast across it, which throws certain parts of it into stronger relief than others, and *a* itself reacts on *c* (retrospectively) and, a moment later, on *e*. In a sense, therefore, we have created a new poetic unit, *cae*—a unit of which the characteristic pleasure it affords us is really contrapuntal, since it works upon us through our sense of contrast. Each added movement further complicates the tone-effect, adds color to the hover of reverberations—creates a new composite unit. And we get finally a whole major section of the symphony so constructed of contrasts and harmonies, which in turn, if we are careful, will differ clearly in general tone from the next major part. And here the same principles apply. (875-76)

This statement is worth citing at length to demonstrate both the degree of understanding and the degree of confusion concerning musical form in the minds of the early modern symphonists. Aiken claims to have been searching for “some way of getting contrapuntal effects in poetry—the effects of contrasting and conflicting tones and themes—a kind of underlying simultaneity in dissimilarity” (875). Passing over his false conflation of thematic contrast with counterpoint,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that the poet understood the effect in a sonata-form movement of juxtaposition in changing our perception of each theme. Simple contrast is not the central principle of sonata form: the themes must return altered and be fused into a larger unit through their dialectic. But Aiken’s model of symphonic form is clearly not the eighteenth-century symphony’s binary interplay of tonic and dominant tonalities, nor the simplicity and strong identity of its motives. Each of Aiken’s movements contains as many as five distinct themes, another multi-movement symphony in miniature. By contrast, when Eliot comes to write *Four Quartets*, he will strictly limit each movement to a single juxtaposition. For Aiken, there is no hierarchy among *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, and *e*: the “simpler poetic tones” are freely combinable. This complex interaction of multiple

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin Brown observes that although Aiken is attempting to find a substitute for counterpoint—what he has actually done is to use a different structural device of music, since an identical principle is found in the relationships of repeated sections and episodes in the larger musical forms—Aiken has simply admitted that harmony and counterpoint are impossible in poetry, and has substituted repetition, variation, and antithesis themselves important structural features of music—in an attempt to suggest contrapuntal effects (“Poetic Use” 89).

motives is less akin to Classical compositional procedures than to the late-nineteenth century technique of constant development, as pioneered by Wagner.<sup>21</sup>

The poems produced in the grip of such a poetic predictably share all the failings of late romantic musical composition, as well as its occasional merits. Fletcher writes of *The Charnel Rose* that “We are simply upborne in these mad, delirious waves of drunken music that flow in and out endlessly. We are hurried from one chaos into another, so that we should be in danger of losing our bearings utterly were not the mind and voice directing this orchestra that of a poet” (*Essays* 107-8). Merely one year later, Fletcher writes more critically of the same poem: “[Aiken] has developed Poe’s celebrated theory about a long poem being only a succession of short ones to its logical conclusion. He splits the central theme up into innumerable facets, and sets these facets one against the other to shine by contrast. The result is that the central design is frequently lost” (132). Confusing counterpoint and simple contrast, precisely as Aiken does. Fletcher sums up Aiken’s work as “essentially a poetry of dramatic contrast, or of counterpoint welded together only by his own rich sense of verbal melody.” That which in 1919 was welcomed as a drunken and near-chaotic yet somehow masterfully-ordered music becomes in Fletcher’s sober 1920 reconsideration a mere chaos united solely by its melodious surface. With breathtaking speed. Aiken and Fletcher shift from an initial mania for a synaesthetic poetry, a virtually content-less verse playing purely with contrast, to a later profound skepticism, indeed despair, concerning such a project.

The most readable of Aiken’s ‘Symphonies’ is *Senlin: A Biography*, perhaps because of its relative concision. In his earlier long poems, Aiken takes a series of abstractions as his themes, using generalized words such as ‘music’ as the final term in so many intellectual

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<sup>21</sup> Such technique lacks, however, one crucial structuring feature of Wagner’s own style. The opera composer’s own “hover of reverberations” (Aiken’s term) was hung on the strong framework of dramatic narrative.

analogies, representing by those thematic words so many vague states of emotion that the supposedly portentous recurring theme becomes an empty verbal counter. His building-block images of 'moon,' 'room,' and 'wind' fail to strike the reader anew on each varied appearance. With *Senlin*, Aiken finally discovers a theme with an identity recognizable enough to serve his purposes of musical reiteration and variation. The strange name 'Senlin' carries the broad yet ultimately delimited significance Aiken would like to have invested in such generalized words as 'music': it is alien enough to take on, through its many repetitions, a life of its own specific to the poetic structure. Aiken repeats the name often enough that the poem assumes a sense of unity it would not otherwise possess.<sup>22</sup> Not quite a word, yet not entirely without inherent significance, the made-up name almost fills Aiken's need for a language unit that can function as a musical tone. Etymologically, it suggests age; rhythmically, it evokes a crabbed and unassuming figure through its two rapid syllables curtly closed off by their final n's. It has an Eastern ring, overtones of Romance, or a belittling quality, depending on context or the reader's own ear-conditioning. 'Senlin' is, then, supposed to stand for everything, and that is the poem's difficulty, and the problem with Aiken's technique. The poem works where *Senlin* is left as a verbal question mark, a true musical theme with a clear identity and power to call attention to itself as a series of tones, a signifier that breaks the surface of the run-on lines on each appearance, accumulating with each return a web of suggestions, of undefined relationships within the poetic form. The poem breaks down where Aiken overloads his musical tone with self-important 'literary' significance, where he lapses into explicit metaphor and spells out the name as an algebra for all of human consciousness or for all of art. The poet's undoing is not his radically aural poetic: it is not that Aiken is too enamoured of musical structure; rather, he insists

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<sup>22</sup> Harry Marten makes a similar point: "Senlin: the name is repeated with certainty as if in the performance of some temporal ritual that will establish a still point in the turning world but that will not itself stop the world's spin" (18).

on a logical structure of comparative ratios, of traditional metaphor, undermining that which is most promising in his experiment.

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John Gould Fletcher was more concerned than Aiken to achieve a “fusion of both visual and auditory interests” (*Essays* 36) in his poetry. The poems published in his 1916 collection *Goblins and Pagodas* are not simply quasi-musical “Symphonies,” but also quasi-painterly studies in various colours. Of Fletcher’s group of eleven rather uneven musical-literary experiments, the “Blue Symphony” (*Symphonies* 25-30) was by far the most celebrated. Interestingly, “Blue” was regarded by Ezra Pound as “a beautiful imagist poem” (qtd. in de Chasca 49), and in fact appeared in the imagist anthology of 1915, *Some Imagist Poets*. Here, the two distinct early-twentieth-century impulses toward musical elaboration and visual concentration superficially seem to come together. Fletcher’s commitment to the imagist movement *as a movement* and his central role in its history is unquestioned: the matter is well debated in Edmund de Chasca’s book on the subject. As de Chasca suggests, however, Fletcher’s allegiance to or even understanding of the imagist aesthetic is highly suspect. The “Symphonies” do not concentrate upon the frozen moment or reduce poetry to a few exact observations that would crystallize a scene: they are constructed of tonal juxtapositions and repeated motives (both concepts and sounds), and they attempt to marry states of the mind or soul with states of nature. Their technique is additive and expansive. Images are employed for their constructive and contrastive power, not as ends in themselves.

Although in some of the other colour symphonies the poet more closely approximates the musical use of repeated and juxtaposed motives, “Blue,” the first of the series, does make a few tentative gestures in that direction. The initial image of the darkness rolling “upward” is echoed

in the second section of the poem through the use of other 'up' prefixes: "Through the upland meadows"; "Long upward road that is leading me " The overwrought exclamation "Oh, old pagodas of my soul, how you glittered across green trees!" is also recalled in the second section, in the lines "Oh, blown clouds, could I only race up like you, / Oh, the last slopes that are sun-drenched and steep!" the use of the word 'up' signals an attempt to mate the two initially independent motives. The words 'grasses,' 'water,' 'sun,' and 'foot,' among others, return again and again, striving to be heard as musical themes. Fletcher's theme-words are ostensibly more concrete, more imagistic, than Aiken's giant abstractions, but they are so patently bland, they have so little distinction either as scenery or as a projection of the poet's state of mind, that they lack the constructive power the poet would like to impute to them.

The five sections of "Blue" neither stand up as separate movements with distinctive characters, nor do they merge sufficiently into a larger whole. The poem strikes one as five rather similar poems, not as a suite of varied-but-connected pieces and not as a more-or-less

unified structure in five semi-independent parts like each of the *Four Quartets*<sup>23</sup> "Blue" was the

<sup>23</sup> Eliot knew Fletcher's efforts, and recalled them when he came to title his *Four Quartets*. "I am aware of general objections to these musical analogies: there was a period when people were writing long poems and calling them with no excuse, 'symphonies' (J. Gould Fletcher even did a 'Symphony in Blue' I think, thus achieving a greater *confusion des genres*" (qtd. in Gardner *Composition of Four Quartets* 26). Eliot's "I think" is perhaps disingenuous. In several places, Fletcher's "Symphonies" seem to anticipate *Four Quartets* and *Ash-Wednesday*, in terms both of phrasing and structure. This is especially true of the first poem of the sequence, "Solitude in the City (Symphony in Black and Gold)." The following passage contains multiple premonitions of "Little Gidding":

But who in the dawn should come near you?  
 There are dry leaves rattling behind him  
 And who should come in the noonday?  
 There are shadows that squat on the pave  
 And who should come in the evening?  
 There is one—a ship in dark waters  
 And who should come at nightfall,  
 To feel cold hands at his heart? (*Symphonies* 34-35)

A comparison of the following sequence with the opening of *Ash-Wednesday* makes evident the much greater subtlety of Eliot's repetitive 'musical' technique:

Because my heart is cramped in,  
 Because I have suffered much  
 Because my hope is like a candle-flame quenched at midnight,  
 Because I dare dream yet of joy (*Symphonies* 32)

first of the group, and shows a certain structural indistinctness, as if Fletcher was unsure how far to press the musical analogy, not to mention the analogy from the visual arts. Of the poems that follow, the "White Symphony" (*Symphonies* 53-61) is arguably the most successful in suggesting 'symphonic' form, that is, speaking very loosely, a sectional composition built up out of recognizable motives and distinct tonal areas juxtaposed and combined. Fletcher here develops the 'direction' motive of "Blue" much more extensively. The first movement alternates between an A theme involving a rather unfortunate comparison of white peonies with phallic "spraying rockets," and a B theme that insists through unvaried repetition on directionality, first simply a movement "Outwards," then a journey "Towards the impossible." Its clearly-articulated structure may be diagrammed ABABA—a doubled song-form<sup>24</sup>. Fletcher's second movement plays further with the motive of directionality (now "Downwards" and "Upwards" as well as "Outwards"). A second tonal area involves the repetition of the phrase "As evening came on." Yet it is unclear to what dynamic end the poet sets out so carefully these sonata-like contrasts.

By the time he composes "White," Fletcher is clearly attempting to adapt specifically musical methods of organization. "White" is more of a unified whole than "Blue" and its component parts have more structural definition. Imagism clearly takes a backseat to 'symphonic' construction. The themes are well defined (as structural elements, not as concepts or images) and more clearly articulated. Whereas the unities of "Blue" are subterranean, depending on the congruence of scattered images, the unities of "White" are made quite plain. Fletcher explicitly employs words and phrases as recurring formal building blocks. Especially when he plays with the 'direction' motive, his technique is precisely opposed to an imagist method of proceeding. Instead of an image being particularized, presented in stark isolation

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<sup>24</sup> In the first movement of the "Violet Symphony" (*Symphonies* 82-86), Fletcher is able to stretch this type of alternating form to its limit through the use of much briefer 'themes' producing a very clear ABABABA structure.

without generalization or development, abstract concepts are reiterated and varied, developed through contrast and combination

Although Fletcher's 'musical' structures bear only occasional direct resemblance to Classical symphonic forms, they approximate the spirit of those forms much more closely than Aiken's contemporary efforts. Fletcher places severe limits on the material he employs, and therefore he tends to work with dualities where Aiken's work dissipates itself in a tangle of multiple juxtapositions. This concentration comes at a cost, however, in terms of emotional range. For all their histrionics, Fletcher's "Symphonies" are rather monotonous, for all their talk of "dreams," their juxtapositions fail to surprise, move, or disturb. In several of the poems besides "White," the poet tries to suggest motion by reiterating words suggestive of movement, but his insistence only emphasizes those qualities that are lacking in the writing itself. A "Sea Symphony" from the same period entitled "Sand and Spray" (*Selected Poems* 10-15) ostensibly uses musical tempo markings to help delineate the contrasts among the five movements, but nothing in the movements makes those markings seem inevitable.<sup>25</sup>

Fletcher's musical project is undermined, ultimately, by his attachment to a rigid late-romantic idea of what sentiments and images are proper to poetry. His contrasts operate within too narrow a range of speech. A similar misunderstanding of the nature of musical structure hampers him in all of his efforts to marry musical technique with poetry. Fletcher christened Amy Lowell's prose-poem technique, which he immediately adopted in his own work, "Polyphonic Prose" (*Essays* 12), but his understanding of the word 'polyphony' is crucially limited (not to mention technically inaccurate). 'Many voices' means for him simply a valuing of "all the beautiful and subtle orchestral qualities of assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and return"

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<sup>25</sup> Fletcher himself admitted as much: "The thing is a tour de force of meters and rhythms and colors—but the musical indications—as you point out—are inexact" (*Letters* 10)

in opposition to the usual sober qualities that characterize 'good prose style'. Likewise in his approach to 'symphonic' form, Fletcher is right to see a symphony as more than a series of contrasts—Aiken's view—but he is wrong in his sole emphasis upon the consonance of the text's surface.<sup>26</sup> Without sufficient dynamic dissonance, whether among separate movements or within the exposition of a single sonata structure, the symphony is static and its initial tonal juxtapositions lack any justification.

I turn next to a contemporary work by Wallace Stevens that does capture the sense of variety subsumed in unity that is central to sonata form, even in its most expanded romantic guises. It should be clear by now that Stevens is not working in a vacuum when he emulates sonata structure. The preceding discussion of the failed efforts of his contemporaries should serve to make clear his achievement in balancing disparate materials and in negotiating between the symphonist impulse to develop simple ideas—to generalize—and the imagist/visual impulse to particularize, to produce one-of-a-kind observations in the most definite language. In achieving this dynamic equilibrium, Stevens in fact produces a much more satisfying analogue to musical form than those of his contemporaries who concentrate too exclusively on the possibilities of sound-elaboration.

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<sup>26</sup> In explaining his 'Sea Symphony' ('Sand and Spray'), Fletcher says that "these poems' (i.e. the separate movements of the work) "were written at the same spot and have a certain connection or rather continuation in mood therefore I called the thing a symphony" (*Letters* 10) he emphasizes congruence of mood instead of contrast. Fletcher goes on to say that he is "aware that it does not follow the technical rules of a symphony as established by Beethoven, and broken by almost every great composer since him. I merely meant the title to indicate what I have been striving for since *Irradiations*—to orchestrate my moods in words'. Almost thirty years later, T.S. Eliot contrasts his own goal in using a musical title with that of poets like Fletcher: "But I should like to indicate that these poems are all in a particular set form which I have elaborated and the word 'quartet' does seem to me to start people on the right tack for understanding them (sonata in any case is *too* musical)" (qtd. in Gardner *Composition* 26). Although each of his quartets, like Fletcher's "Sea Symphony" is unified by its connection to a landscape, Eliot intends no impressionistic 'orchestration of moods', rather he wishes the reader to think first of a form and of the "weaving in together" of "three or four superficially unrelated themes" the 'poem' being the degree of success in making a new whole out of them."

## Classical balance: Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier"

In the same year (1915) that Conrad Aiken composes the ambitious and unwieldy *The Charnel Rose*, the very year that John Gould Fletcher publishes his overwrought "Blue Symphony" in *Some Imagist Poets*, Wallace Stevens quietly and elegantly demonstrates the possibilities of arranging poetic materials along the lines of the Classical sonata in his "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Like most other poems that mimic sonata structure, "Peter Quince" conflates the multi-movement plan of the sonata with the recapitulative, dialectical thrust of a single sonata-allegro movement. Stevens uses this hybrid sonata structure as a means by which to balance discontinuity against seamlessness. The idea of the sonata as a suite of diverse pieces is mated with the sonata-allegro concept of dynamic, progressive form.

Stevens's first movement is serious in tone and from the first word implies the sonata-allegro process of dynamic juxtaposition ("Just as..."). It is followed by a slow, lyrical movement that evokes variation form ("Susanna lay"; "She searched..."; "She sighed"; "she stood"; "She felt"; "She walked"; "She turned"). The last words of this andante signal an abrupt segue into a scherzo: a fast, noisy, and humorous movement in an ABA form. The final movement suggests rondo, the common conclusion to a sonata cycle, with its periodic repetition ("So evenings die"; "So gardens die"; "So maidens die"). Stevens never makes these analogies explicit, and one would not want to push the parallels too far. He does, however, employ telling musical metaphors to underline the contrasting characters of the movements. The first movement's throbbing "basses of their being" and pulsing "pizzicati" give way to "so much melody" and longer note values ("quavering") in the cantabile second movement. A crashing cymbal and roaring horns announce the scherzo, an *alla turca* movement (complete with frantic

“Byzantines”) featuring appropriate “noise like tambourines ”

Superimposed on this Classical four-movement scheme is the formal plan characteristic of a sonata-allegro movement. We begin the first section in the ‘key’ of aesthetic philosophy and end in the key of narrative. On a casual reading, the first theme seems to take the shape of a logical dissertation. The appearance of progression through an argument, however, disguises a non sequitur and a tautology: “As my fingers touching keys make music, so sounds touching my spirit make music; music is feeling, then, not sound, thus what I feel is music.”<sup>27</sup> Like the antecedent/consequent phrases of Classical musical style, “Peter Quince” takes the shape of logic, with statement suggesting statement, each step elegantly balanced and moving the argument forward, yet ultimately the pseudo-logical structure doubles back upon itself. At the exact mid-point of the first movement (the middle of the eighth of fifteen lines) the voice of the philosopher, with great show of activity, triumphantly closes out his dissertation without in fact having progressed at all.

The restless joy of movement alone, and not the sober purposefulness of movement toward new understanding, provides the energy that drives the first theme. Stevens aims, as so

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Quince is, of course, the proper man to deliver such a tautological oration: “If we offend, it is with our good will / That you should think we come not to offend, / But with good will” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* V.1). Why Peter Quince in particular should be seated at the clavier has never been satisfactorily explained—the typical explanation there is supposedly a humorous “incongruity between Peter Quince, an untutored rustic and the clavier, a rather delicate, high-society instrument” (Leuschner 195). But Quince is not simply an untutored rustic; he writes and delivers the epilogue to Shakespeare’s play-within-a-play, like Peter Quince—a parody of sense that is in fact nonsense.

I offer a further possible explanation for Stevens’s allusion. Quince and Bottom argue in act III, scene I concerning the proper meter for the proposed prologue, both suggestions being, of course, to Shakespeare’s audience equally indecorous: “*Quince*: Well, we will have such a prologue, and it shall be written in eight and six. *Bottom*: No, make it two more; let it be written in eight and eight. Stevens’s poem, perhaps not coincidentally, plays with different arrangements of eight- and six-syllable lines. Sections I and III use a basic eight-syllable count; section I employs occasional feminine endings, while section III is in a very rude and mechanical “eight and eight.” Section II plays games with eights and sixes, breaking down as follows—stanza 1: 8, 4+2, 4+2, 6, 2+6; stanza 2: 6, 3+5, 6, 2+5 (anomalous); stanza 3: 6, 4, 6, 4, 6, 4 (using half-lines of four instead of full eights); stanza 4: 6, 4+2, 4+4. Section IV does not fit neatly with such a scheme, alternating as it does between pentameter and tetrameter (with feminine endings). The predominant tetrameter couplets (lines 2 and 3, 5 and 6, 7 and 8, 12 and 13) are, however, simply “eight and eight” with a leftover syllable.

often in his poetry, not at the satisfaction of the intellect but at its exhaustion. As James Guetti perceptively remarks:

Thus, the intelligence is necessary to the end of intelligence. Stevens does not discard the mind. His view of the real does not depend upon a nostalgic model of a world without intelligence but upon the continuing dynamic of the intelligence exhausting itself in order to achieve images beyond itself. In his poetry, that intelligence is always acting; but he is not—at least as he has been considered and even legitimized—a philosophical poet. His end is not intelligence achieved but spent—spent to prepare and allow the uprising of things arresting beyond our intelligence of them. (50)

Once intelligence is spent, “Non-cognitive Images” (the title of Guetti’s essay) may arise. And true to Guetti’s formula, the second half of “Peter Quince”’s opening movement sees a shift in tone, a shift toward the pictorial. For the moment, Stevens is done theorizing the relation of sense, especially sense of touch, to music’s effect on the spirit. He no longer seeks to define the erotic character of this relation in the language of reflection and reason, but turns instead to description and metaphor, to images. Stevens, in other words, draws upon the resources of poetry instead of those of the discursive essay.

The exposition of the poem, then, sets the abstract language of aesthetic inquiry against the particularities of poetic scene-painting. Although the two modes of thought do not yet display their underlying unity, the poet is careful to provide a brief transitional phrase that assures us of their potential relation. “It is like...,” Stevens begins, suggesting that the A and B themes are two different ways of expressing a single insight. The shift from rumination to evocation is quick and its logic seems as certain as that of the previous section. Peter Quince moves from impersonal assertion of truths to application of the theory in his own experience—allowing confession of his own erotic desire to disturb his distanced ‘philosophical’ stance—and finally arrives at the imaginative picture of Susanna and the elders, with each step of the process

insisting that it follows from the last, disguising the fact that there is no necessary connection

A comparison with the first movement of Eliot's "Burnt Norton" is instructive there, two voices, two theme-groups, are also set side by side. The first voice uses the language of philosophical abstraction, piling up a fabric of statement upon statement, setting what appear to be unassailable assertions in logical sequence, yet actually following a circular pattern of musical repetition.<sup>28</sup> In contrast with the first theme's show of reason, with its cool tones of abstract exposition, the second theme-group is marked by emotional intensity and by poetry's traditional freedom of metaphor. Spare, generalizing language gives way to imaginative detail and concrete diction, disembodied thought yields to visionary scene-setting. Eliot's vision, remarkably like that of Stevens, is of a still garden with a pool (Eliot's, however, having been drained) viewed by unseen watchers "Hidden excitedly" in warm weather (Stevens scene is set on a clear, warm night, Eliot's on a hot autumn day). For all their points of similarity, the philosophical divide between the two poets is revealed most clearly in their handling of the transitional passage between the two themes. Stevens insists on the continuity between abstract theory and particularity, building his bridge between the themes with a smoothly inevitable "thus," a final and prominent "Is," and an explicit "It is like." The second theme is a departure in tone, yet it is presented as an unproblematic outgrowth of the first. Eliot's bridge, by contrast—as we shall see in more detail in the following pages—questions its own validity as a transition between different modes of thought. The poet disrupts the seamless structure he has so carefully prepared.

For Eliot, the visionary moment is a moment apart, incompatible with speculation or even feeling. Music approaches that reality as frozen pattern, not as dynamic sound (or not *only* as sound). For Stevens, the moment of transport is not a moment apart, but an experience equally

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<sup>28</sup> See the discussion of "Burnt Norton" below

aesthetic, emotional, tactile, and erotically dynamic, a “strain / Waked in the elders” and felt as a living pulse. Theory is not powerless to analyze the character of the transcendent moment, as it seems to be in Eliot’s estimation; yet theory is implicated in feeling and perception. Stevens moves seamlessly from the voice of reason to the voice of lyricism, acknowledging no absolute cleavage between the two, yet at the same time making abstract thought and rational speech lose themselves in physical desire: concepts give way to vital experience, to “throbbing” feeling and “red-eyed” watching. Stevens acknowledges no definite ruptures among thought, emotion, physical desire, and vision: they are all functions of the perceiving consciousness, a consciousness that is always embodied. This conception leads the poet to borrow the appropriate form of the Classical sonata-allegro, with its two discrete yet solidly integrated themes, themes that dovetail with apparent ease and logic. As we shall see, Eliot’s dualistic conception leads him instead to a less rounded form that has more in common with the problematic, violently integrated structures of late Beethoven.

The second movement of “Peter Quince” seems hardly to move, despite its repeated emphasis on Susanna’s actions, and despite its play with lines of varying syllable-counts. Its alternating long and short lines<sup>29</sup> serve not to make the rhythm jagged and dynamic but to slow the pace of reading, the short two- or four-syllable lines usually corresponding with long vowels. The line division reinforces the song-like character of this *andante* movement. Susanna herself may be in constant motion, but the singer stops at every opportunity to vocalize on convenient vowel sounds.

The poem’s complementary second and third movements serve to illustrate the opening paradox of the final movement, that “Beauty is momentary in the mind— / ... / But in the flesh it

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<sup>29</sup> The short lines, as I have indicated above, often arbitrarily break a longer unit in two.

is immortal.” The second movement, in which Susanna’s beauty exists for itself, her existence itself being “so much melody” that it is almost overwhelming (“She sighed”), stretches slowly on and on. Its hypnotic cadence luxuriates almost to the point of stasis. The third movement, by contrast, in which Susanna’s beauty exists for the titillation of the crowd, is cast in quick-moving couplets introduced and concluded by the noisy outburst from the comic-opera ‘Byzantines.’ Susanna’s bittersweet progress in the second movement is ended only by a violent intrusion of brass: a cymbal “And roaring horns.”<sup>30</sup> Death cuts off beauty in mid-stroll or mid-sentence; beauty neither declines nor forsakes Susanna. In the third movement, by contrast, beauty is a peepshow, over in a moment and ending ignominiously with the simpering retreat of the spectators. Beauty is fleeting in contemplation, but beauty experienced as being is long-lived. ‘The arts are short, life is long’ might be the poem’s motto.

Both of the central movements of the poem advance the narrative, yet their inclusion stems ultimately from considerations of musical structure. The second movement makes the words of the narrative approximate melody. The third bangs noisily on rhymed couplets and an obvious four-beat meter.<sup>31</sup> Susanna’s story is splintered into disjointed vignettes, each independent yet gaining its full significance solely when it assumes its place in the sweep of the full narrative.

“Peter Quince” is clearly divided into four discrete movements, but it may also be read as a single sonata-allegro structure. In this case, the two central movements take on the character of a development. The first movement mentions a “green evening, clear and warm” on which “She bathed”: this line is echoed and expanded in the second movement. The poet makes a slight

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<sup>30</sup> In his essay “Wallace Stevens’s Ice-Cream,” Richard Ellmann asserts in passing that “Horn is death’s color in Stevens’s verse” (173). Is it also, then, death’s instrument?

<sup>31</sup> Scherzo properly implies triple meter: Stevens’s movement resembles a scherzo in its agitated motion, playfulness, and shape. A comparison with the “Scherzo” of Williams’s “The Clouds” (see below) is instructive.

variation it is in the “green water, clear and warm” that “Susanna lay ” The simple pronoun/verb construction of “She bathed” is echoed again and again, as I demonstrated above Susanna and the elders were introduced in the first movement as a particular illustration of an aesthetic dictum That narrative—the ‘second theme’—is now picked up and developed, whereas the first theme, that of the improviser ruminating and theorizing at the keyboard, is completely ignored This is not surprising the scriptural story, as a picturesque narrative, is that much more amenable to extension and elaboration

The final movement, like the first, juxtaposes some questionable aesthetic theorizing with the narrative of Susanna Like the first, it breaks roughly into two halves, two theme-groups The initial four lines play upon the apparently nonsensical idea that beauty is immortal in the flesh but fleeting in the mind There is perhaps a sense in which this position is defensible, one that Stevens, as we have seen, obliquely gestures toward in the middle movements of “Peter Quince ” Yet however closely we have followed Stevens’s thinking, however much we have trusted him to speak a sort of truth—albeit highly subjective—the opening of the fourth movement still comes as a shock to reason The words take the shape of an aesthetic axiom, but that axiom is absurd Just as the first movement begins with ruminations that are in the form of logical argument yet defy logic, so the last movement begins with a similar parody of reason, one that is, however, strangely compelling it is hard not to take ‘Peter Quince’ at his word, to see these lines as, in the words of James Longenbach, “Stevens” opening “all the stops to make a statement of scope and permanence” (*Plain Sense* 77), forgetting that we are still dealing not with expository prose but with a sonata in the key of philosophy

The periodic return of the formula “So die” at the beginning of each phrase suggests the ABACA pattern of the rondo the movement begins to resemble sonata-rondo form, although

the correspondence is admittedly not close. Stevens yokes together the conjunction “so,” which originally gave the first theme its appearance of logic, with the main images of the narrative second theme. The references to “evenings,” “gardens,” and “maidens” echo the description of Susanna at her bath, and these echoes serve as a transition from the first theme to the second. Susanna’s particular evening and garden and even her subjectivity are now turned into generalized instances: they all become plural. The second theme has come to be transposed into the key of the first. An individual story has become fuel for wider aesthetic speculation and moralizing upon death. Susanna herself makes her expected appearance at roughly the mid-point of the recapitulation. “So maidens die” signals her return at the eighth line (out of sixteen); the second theme is firmly reestablished two lines later (“Susanna’s music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders”). This time, however, the first and second themes are not distinct. Whereas in the expository first movement, abstract talk of music and spirit gave way to the lustful “Hosanna” of the elders’ blood, here in the recapitulation talk of immortality leads to more talk of immortality. The profane Hosanna now becomes “a constant sacrament of praise.”

Stevens’s recapitulation is not a word-for-word reworking of the exposition. Certain words and concepts do return, albeit in altered form, and the basic two-part division between the theorizing of ‘Peter Quince’ and the narrative of Susanna is retained, though with an appropriate harmonization of the two parts on their recapitulation. The poet, however, is saying quite different things the second time around. Theme A is initially concerned with feeling and music, whereas in the recapitulation it is concerned with the duration of beauty. Theme B is initially concerned with Susanna’s enchantment of the elders, whereas on its return it is concerned with the persistence of her beauty in memory despite its having perished in reality. Stevens follows the recapitulative model of the sonata-allegro on the levels of speech and structure, but he feels

no obligation to express the same thoughts twice. Verbal echoes and formal congruence are acceptable, but to recapitulate meaning, to restate one's ideas within the space of a single poem—in other words, to fully emulate musical technique—is not. Stevens's fourth movement is, after all, the finale of a multi-movement structure as well as a re-exposition. There must be a sense of progression. We have traveled from the immanence of desire in the first movement to nostalgia for "spent emotions" in the second to physical death and the transfiguration of desire into sacrament in the finale. Simultaneous with this progression, however, there is a shattering of narrative sequence. The poem turns back on itself even as it rehearses Susanna's story, even as it progresses from the tentative explorations of the first movement ("Just as my fingers on these keys / Make music so . . .") toward the strange certainties of the finale ("Beauty is momentary in the mind— / . . . / But in the flesh it is immortal . . ."). Like a sonata-allegro movement, and moreover conforming to the tonal plan of a multi-movement sonata, "Peter Quince" chases its tail yet seems to go somewhere at the same time. It produces the effect of a sequential narrative or a logical dissertation even though it is chopped into stylistically disjunct movements and moves repeatedly back and forth, making many beginnings and ending many times before it truly ends.<sup>32</sup>

I have repeatedly emphasized that the poem makes a show of logic without the reality of progress. One cannot draw meaningful conclusions from such a structure, yet the ending of "Peter Quince" seems not only to have been prepared by all that came before but reads as a significant insight won through the preceding dialectic. Its abstract 'reasoning' leads us inevitably to this place, and the tale of Susanna, as a concrete example, verifies the insight. It is

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<sup>32</sup> The first movement sums up the story of Susanna and the elders; the second and third return to the beginning and expand upon the narrative, exploring the emotional intricacies of the story; the finale returns to the beginning again and recapitulates the first movement as well as the abbreviated narrative.

in its experiential 'logic' that Stevens's poem most profoundly resembles a musical structure, especially the pseudo-rational structure of the sonata. In the stereotypical sonata, we move from a statement grounded in the main tonality to a statement in a related but contrasting key. Development and expansion of the original ideas may follow. The first statement returns, more firmly grounded, more 'true' after its trials. Finally, the second statement returns in transposition, in a satisfying synthesis between contrasting idea and prevailing tonality. Stevens's "Peter Quince" moves from broad assertion to picturesque example. It expands upon the brief narrative. It returns to assertion, now more definite, more oracular. Finally, it turns the narrative into a bold metaphysical assertion, harmonizing the specific with the universal.

There are ways of defining and limiting Stevens's terms so that sober meaning is produced—those early critics who did not dismiss Stevens's thought as nonsense were busy doing just that. But in "Peter Quince," at least, it is not the actuality of meaning that matters, but the mere appearance of thought's movement. Peter Quince is at the clavier and not at the logician's desk. He plays through a sonata in words, a composition that has overall tonal unity, variety of rhythm, a combination of serious intent and wit—moments of grotesque, even; a work, most importantly, that convinces its listener it is achieving a logical synthesis. Yet its logic is one of repetitive form—tautological, though no less satisfying for that. If "Peter Quince" has meaning, it is a formal, experiential meaning. The shapes of logic and narrative, and the language of aesthetic philosophy, are used as a musician might use them, and as a modern poet does use them, to create an emotionally resonant artifact suggestive of meaning, one that exists indefinitely on the borderline between nonsense and communication yet 'feels' true. As 'Peter Quince' says, "Music is feeling, then, not sound"—"not sound" in both its senses. One cannot make music into something objective or final; it exists only in the living experience of it.

Likewise Susanna, “escaping” from “Death’s ironic scraping,” resists finality through the play of her “music” on the “clear viol of her memory,” through a living experience of her beauty. This idea is appropriately mirrored in the musical shape of the poem, with its sonata-allegro recapitulation, which interrupts any sense of straightforward narrative, and its pseudo-rational formal coherence, which, while it is experienced, feels like logic yet ultimately resists analysis and definition.

In “Peter Quince,” Stevens carefully balances elements of continuity and discontinuity. This delicate poise, apparently effortless yet requiring a difficult equilibrium of centrifugal and centripetal forces, is the essence of sonata structure and Classical musical style. Stevens papers over the seams of the work, except where the conventions of sonata form license rupture, producing a sense of inevitable structure out of a series of discrete forms and willfully juxtaposed themes. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, by contrast, repeatedly gesture toward such equilibrium and such seamless structure, only to shatter at the moment of integration into fragments, in order to problematize—though not to reject—the very concept of balance, whether in terms of thought, form, or language. Here, poetic form must acknowledge the arbitrariness of form. Whereas Stevens’s elegant structure makes room for discontinuities as well as continuities, yet ultimately subsumes all in a larger unity, Eliot’s quartets court inelegance of construction and fragmentation. They demonstrate that despite our modern wariness of the artificiality of artistic pattern, valid form may yet arise. These poems are conscious of their own compositional logic as something arbitrary, a process of subjective selection and juxtaposition overdetermined by the weight of convention, yet all the same they claim a status as valid syntheses. This paradox, more than the few ambiguous hints from Eliot himself, is at the heart of the widespread intuition that the late quartets of Beethoven provided Eliot’s musical model. Although the need for another

discussion of possible musical analogies to *Four Quartets* may seem less than urgent to some, there are a few common misunderstandings that could be cleared away if we were to carefully analyze the range of allusion Eliot intended—or did not intend—by his generic title.

## Fighting form: T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

As they enter middle age, modern poets have commonly displayed an affinity for the late works of Beethoven.<sup>33</sup> A romantic sense of identification is undoubtedly a large part of the explanation. The modernists betray their romantic heritage when they align themselves with the figure of the physically impaired composer facing the onset of age who nonetheless produces the artistic triumphs of his late period, who, not content with his earlier mastery of form, forges at the end of his life a new musical language, his uncompromising late style. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, written in the poet's middle age, have long been compared casually to the later Beethoven quartets. Yet the overall title of the work is ambiguous on this point: it makes a very specific musical analogy, yet pointedly avoids parallels with any particular musical model, and especially refuses to engage with the culturally freighted term of 'Beethoven.' Unlike his modernist counterparts, Eliot downplays the biographical and strips the musical-poetic analogy of its contingent elements. The generic quality of the title directs our attention above all to formal considerations. Each poem is an exercise in construction, each purports to be an artifact crafted within a well-established stylistic tradition. The label of 'quartet' effaces the individual talent in favour of tradition. Tradition, however, is not simply a cult of revered personalities, like the later-nineteenth-century cult of Beethoven; it is radically impersonal. Thus, it is a mistake to read any one of the *Four Quartets* as an imitation of any one Beethoven quartet.

Eliot presents first and foremost four examples of a genre. It is true that a specific place provides the occasion for each poem, but that particularity is countered by the overriding

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Spender's "Late Stravinsky Listening to Late Beethoven," John Berryman's "Beethoven Triumphant," and Robert Lowell's sonnet "Beethoven" are a few examples that come to mind.

aspirations of the entire sequence to be an 'absolute music'<sup>34</sup> The overall title asks us to think of these poems as specimens of an established genre paradoxically, these are the first examples of that genre in literature 'Symphony' already connoted a norm of poetic structure far too expansive and amorphous for Eliot's purposes<sup>35</sup> That term had by the forties become too well established and even clichéd as a poetic label to perform the necessary task of directing the reader's attention to questions of structure A poetic quartet, on the other hand, was an unknown quantity that could be defined with some rigour The label could be made to denote a very specific form *The Waste Land* is the prototype of this 'quartet' genre Eliot's refinement of the structure in *Four Quartets* serves as a retrospective theorization of that which he had already stumbled upon in practice, just as our abstract conceptions of sonata-allegro form are explanations formulated long after the fact<sup>36</sup>

The analogy between Eliot's poetic summing-up and Beethoven's late style is as inexact as any such analogy must be yet the parallel does illuminate *Four Quartets* in some useful ways—as long as the right balance is maintained between freedom of critical metaphor and exactness of terminology Applied with appropriate care, the analogy is a fair guide to Eliot's method and perhaps to his intentions If it is to have any validity, it must operate at a fairly high level of abstraction In a 1980 article, Stanley Wiersma exposes the futility of the speculations then current concerning exactly which late-Beethoven movement Eliot had in mind, only to fall into a similar trap when he opts for replacing the late quartets with an early one A

contemporaneous (1979) article by Brian Hatton equates Eliot's propositional logic with

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<sup>34</sup> Eliot's reader realizes, more or less that there is an autobiographical program behind each poem but he or she can no more follow it through the work than the listener can trace a story through Beethoven's *Lebensohl* Sonata

<sup>35</sup> Such as Conrad Aiken's and John Gould Fletcher's notions of symphonic form

<sup>36</sup> "The five-parted dialectic of 'Burnt Norton' is exactly paralleled three times over, and so raised by iteration to the dignity of a form" so remarks Hugh Kenner, "Or so one would say, were not 'Burnt Norton,' surprisingly enough, the exact structural counterpart of *The Waste Land* That form, originally an accident produced by Pound's cutting, Eliot would seem by tenacious determination to have analyzed, mastered, and made into an organic thing" (262)

Beethoven's musical logic the music-theory analysis is correct, as far as it goes, but the paper obliterates the distance between musical and poetic compositional logics, and the distance between both of these metaphorical 'logics' and logic proper. Both Eliot's poetry and Beethoven's quartets become content-less games played with inert 'motives'. In the most recent in a long line of articles on the subject, David Barndollar sounds the inevitable note of caution but then attempts to discern concrete models for the individual movements of *Four Quartets* in isolated excerpts from the last five Beethoven quartets despite the trappings of musical analysis, the article suffers from a very superficial engagement with both sets of works.<sup>37</sup>

Any useful parallels between *Four Quartets* and Beethoven's quartets, late, middle or early, will need to involve on one hand a large-scale abstraction concerning general organizational principles (since a one-to-one mapping of forms has already proved impossible) and on the other a particular set of stylistic correspondences. The distinctive developments that mark Beethoven's late style all have their counterparts in the new style Eliot adopts for *Four Quartets*. To attempt to catalogue that which comprises Beethoven's late style is, however, to

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<sup>37</sup> The collection in which it appears *T.S. Eliot's Orchestra* is a strange blend of the perceptive and platitudinous: the former largely the work of the musicologists involved and the latter of the contributors from English faculties. Since the book promises to open no less than "a critical and scholarly discussion that will lead eventually to a new appreciation of Eliot's place in that largely undiscovered borderland between literature and music" (xviii) it seems worth pointing out a handful of its serious errors. An article by the collection's editor John Xiros Cooper speaks of the "inevitable return of the dominant" (101), Prufrock "is said to begin 'predictably' in the key of assertion: a dominant that has vanished by the close" (103). The author obviously has confused the terms tonic and dominant: it is the tonic that 'inevitably returns' in conventional harmony, the dominant being simply a provisional resting-place, the destination of the journey *outward from* the tonic. Any work that begins in the key of the dominant starts in ambiguity and confusion, not in security or confident assertion. Cooper also claims that Eliot's "dissonant 'Preludes'" are "the antitype, the negative transparency" of Chopin's Preludes, revealing a skeletal modernism inherent in the Preludes that such Romantic works in their "healthy fleshiness" (101) refuse to acknowledge. Cooper's choice of musical example is singularly inappropriate: arguably few nineteenth-century works are as fragmentary *by design* or as explicitly proto-modern as Chopin's cycle of laconic miniatures. In Barndollar's article fugue is defined as "a complex working of several themes" (188)—the very antithesis of the term's meaning unless one is thinking of a special case such as a double or triple fugue. This sort of imprecision and misinformation goes hand in hand with a tendency toward impenetrable generalizations and misuse of theory. From the contribution by Brad Bucknell comes the following: "Similarly Eliot's poetic music interimplicated as it is with his cultural-religious sensibility, is part of the endless repetition—the homage—to the absent (if not 'missed') reality of his conservative Christianity" (123-24).

become tangled in paradoxes. 1) Imitative polyphony becomes ever more prevalent, increasingly dense, and handled in idiosyncratic fashion: passages or entire movements are based on a re-imagined version of fugue. Yet there is also a matching starkness that characterizes other passages, that element of monophony which Adorno repeatedly emphasizes in his valuable notes on Beethoven's late style. 2) Separate movements are more integrated than in the composer's early or middle styles; the compositions tend to be cyclical. Cyclical recurrences are, however, more often fracturing than unifying: material from earlier movements intrudes unexpectedly or hauntingly on later ones (the ghostly reminiscence of the first movement before the finale of the Opus 101 Sonata, for instance). 3) The late works are unquestionably 'difficult' and demand repeated familiarity to decipher them: in the words of Adorno "the late Beethoven *covers its traces*" (154). Yet there is a contradictory willingness to expose convention for what it is: Adorno spells out the paradox that despite all the evident difficulties "the musical language is displayed here nakedly," no attempt now being made to disguise or subsume those elements which are conventional. 4) Leaving behind tangible stylistic elements and moving toward the more uncertain ground of subjective impression, there is a sense, frequently articulated by students of late Beethoven, that these artworks strain against their medium. John Berryman, voicing a standard point of view for the time (1947), refers to "Beethoven's onslaughts on the very materials of music" (*Collected* xxxix). This struggle is epitomized in concrete terms by Beethoven's taxing of instrumental resources beyond the bounds of what could be satisfyingly realized on contemporary instruments or by any imaginable performer.

Helen Gardner, writing at roughly the same time as Berryman, remarks that

The critic of *Four Quartets* is set a problem comparable to that which confronts the musical critic in Beethoven's last quartets, which appear to be attempting to express something which even music can hardly render, and

tempt whoever tries to analyse them into using language which seems remote from music. (57)

Eliot suggests that his own original contribution to literature comes in precisely those moments when he strives “To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*” (qtd. in Matthiessen 90). The strain that results from such striving is not minimized but becomes one of the explicit themes of *Four Quartets*. Eliot himself acknowledges the difficulty, not only for Gardner’s hypothetical critic, but for the poet who attempts to use words as elements of a pattern, wrenching them from their natural habitat of moving and shifting speech:

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still. (“Burnt Norton” V)

Interestingly, it is in “Burnt Norton,” where this lament is found, that Eliot most successfully locks language into a formal pattern; this largely without the appearance of strain. In the following quartet, “East Coker,” the poet appears to work much harder to impose form on words, yet his lines frequently end up seeming more improvisational talk than settled structure. In the two middle quartets, a subjective voice—a disconcerting “I”—frequently breaks in to insist on the relation of part to part and to call attention to matters of personal history. The discontinuities of “Burnt Norton” paradoxically seem to be governed by a greater logic, whereas “East Coker” strangely lacks unity, although a badgering subjectivity would assure us that the parts cohere. In the middle quartets, Eliot seems distrustful of his own ‘musical’ method. The objective type of internal organization proper to a string quartet, its play of distanced abstract forms, gives way to organization by subjectivity. At his most ‘musical,’ Eliot allows formal repetition to provide a sense of continuity, and lets each juxtaposition speak for itself; or rather,

he lets his juxtapositions fail to speak, trusting that a unity will emerge for the listener.

Elsewhere, in those moments when his attention seems to wander, the poet allows us to overhear him erasing and revising his words as they are spoken (“That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory”), hoping to ensure unity through the revelation that his fragments are the work of a single consciousness. Instead of the circular processes of chamber music, he gives us the forward thrust of narrative. Unity comes from the reiterations of a cajoling voice edging us toward its conclusions rather than from motives following their internal and conventional logic toward a completion of the pattern and a final harmonization. Life narratives (“So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years”) replace internal formal imperatives as the guarantors of coherence.

Critics have often objected to the ‘prosiness’ of Eliot’s middle quartets, but the undeniable lapse in intensity seems to be related less to any qualitative shift between ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ than to the turn from implicit and abstract relations to explicit and personalized ones. Yet it is entirely conceivable that these jarring self-conscious interventions by the poet are not lapses but key elements of his musical design. Eliot is operating very much in the spirit of Beethoven’s late mode when in the second part of “East Coker” he assumes a conventional visionary/poetic persona only to turn around and expose his own lyric as “A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.” A refusal on the poet’s part to weed out worn poetic conventions goes hand in hand with a willingness to expose that convention for what it is. This attitude carries a great deal of risk, the danger of emptiness or triteness and the danger of producing a poetry that is too insistently aware of its own existence as poetry.

Eliot’s avowed desire in “Burnt Norton” is to freeze language in pattern, although without

arresting the restless movement characteristic of words, to create a poem akin to a “Chinese jar” that “still / moves perpetually in its stillness” (V). He wants to go beyond the merely momentary stasis-in-motion of the held violin note, its tone lingering while its soundwaves are vigorously moving on the air (“Not that only”), his aesthetic ideal being the orderly architecture of Classical chamber music, its dynamic equilibrium. Yet both words and music are acknowledged to be particularly uncooperative materials: in each case an incessant process of growth and decay, the way words and music shape themselves only through time, means that stable forms are impossible. The suavity of any elegantly Classical musical model is a pleasant illusion. Any attempt to superimpose the stillness of form on the restlessness of speech is highly problematic. Given this hyperawareness on Eliot’s part, it is altogether fitting that he look to the late quartets of Beethoven for inspiration, works in which the problem of achieving form is not concealed artfully beneath a controlled, tidy, well-proportioned appearance but is made obvious through breaks in the structure, abruptness of transition, and disproportion amongst the parts.

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The assumption that Eliot had the late Beethoven string quartets in mind is reasonable. Many critics, therefore, have tended to take that reasonable guess as an established fact without examining the implications of the analogy for a reading of the poems, without attempting to verify its accuracy or understand exactly what such a parallel might entail.<sup>38</sup> Other critics, apparently wishing to promote a purely modernist Eliot, and therefore finding the Beethoven parallel distasteful, have wanted to replace a reasonable assumption with other, much less likely theories. Hugh Kenner’s statement in *The Invisible Poet* that “Eliot is reported”—on the unverifiable authority of M.J.C. Hodgart of Cambridge—“to have said that he was paying

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<sup>38</sup> To take one recent example, the second part of Lyndall Gordon’s biography, *Eliot’s New Life*, asserts without any corroboration, as if it were obvious, that *Four Quartets* was inspired by Beethoven’s Opus 132 Quartet (219).

attention chiefly to Bartók's Quartets, Nos. 2-6" (261) has been taken over by the second group of critics with even less consideration than the first group have given to the Beethoven analogy.

Eliot's multi-part structure, his use of repetitions, both exact and varied, in close proximity to suggest imitative voice entries (in the style of a canon or fugato), and the less tangible sense we have of listening in on a sober private conversation, a serious working-through of thought-problems: all these are very much in the nature of the quartet genre, whether we take Haydn, Beethoven, Bartók, or Murray Schafer as our representative. Eliot's title promises a certain general type of structure and texture common to the entire quartet genre, which Bartók subscribed to—in his fashion—as much as Beethoven. On an abstract structural level, the parallel with Bartók's quartets is in fact quite legitimate. In the words of Paul Griffiths:

the Fourth Quartet is partitioned with the utmost clarity into five movements, arranged in a mirror symmetry [tempo-wise and motivically an ABCBA structure] that makes the superficially analogous patterns of the First Suite or the First Piano Concerto look lax and coincidental. (131)

this Fifth Quartet is a five-part palindrome... (145)

the Fifth Quartet is the apotheosis of techniques of symmetry to be found throughout Bartók's work.... Nothing shows this more clearly than the finale. Much of the material here, not excluding the movement of disruptive irony near the end, springs from a motif announced at the start in vigorous unisons... (150)

The first movement [of the Second Quartet] moves through the three customary phases of sonata form, but, as already indicated, the exposition is lengthy, and contains plenty of development of its own.... Indeed the main thrust of the movement... is achieved largely by motivic answering with change: something to which the quartet as a medium is peculiarly well adapted. (85)

These excerpts could well be describing the structural principles of Eliot's poems, the five-part structure with movements of brisk meditation and public speech alternating with shorter but more lyrical sections, the finale of each poem that takes up the opening motif ("In my end is my

beginning” being the most obvious example), the “disruptive irony” near the close—think of Eliot’s parenthetical “(Not too far from the yew-tree),” “(The evening with the photograph album),” or, structurally if not tonally congruent with these, “(Costing not less than everything)”—and, most prevalent, the “motivic answering with change” exemplified by the reappearances of “At the still point of Time present and time past”

Eliot, then, may well have been inspired in part by the example of Bartok’s quartets, or at least their games of motivic inversion, their imitative texture, and their five-part structural plan. The rhythmic dynamism of these works, however, and their exploration of the most intense dissonances, both among contrapuntal lines and within block chords, makes the analogy a doubtful one. The rhythm of *Four Quartets* is remarkably loose and relaxed, and whatever the literary equivalent to dissonance may be—whether vulgarity and jarring shifts in tone or harshness of vowel sound and incongruity of sound juxtaposition—it is not predominant in these poems.<sup>39</sup> Eliot, if he was indeed listening to Bartok’s quartets, took over only those ideas that he needed, particularly the symmetrical formal plan and the texture of canonic imitations. The presence of fugato or canonic passages in a quartet, the regular incorporation of imitative voice entries into what is basically a homophonic style, is not unique to Beethoven’s late quartets. Yet such hybridity is the hallmark of these works. They subsume the elements of the earlier eighteenth-century ‘learned’ style with a unique thoroughness.<sup>40</sup> nowhere else does the dialectic of Classical structure so fully embrace the contradictory Baroque aesthetic, involving concentration of material and linear interplay. Whatever textural devices Eliot could have learned from Bartok’s quartets or from certain of Haydn’s movements, he could have absorbed

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, the mellowness of *Four Quartets* is also their most un-Beethovenian characteristic.

<sup>40</sup> The late style also incorporates conventional operatic elements and echoes of ancient monophony. Once again other composers make similar gestures, but Beethoven appropriates this type of material more regularly and with less concern to cover his traces.

more easily and fully from late Beethoven. A similar argument can be made concerning Eliot's adaptation of Beethoven's often compressed and strained late-period structures.

Kenner objects to the analogy on the grounds that its acceptance forces us to read *Four Quartets* as "an Olympian's transfinite testament" (261). Eliot's sequence of poems is, however, clearly intended as, among many other things, a testament: "Old men ought to be explorers"; "In my beginning is my end"; or—though here in an ironic vein—"Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort." The movement of the sequence is indeed toward something 'transfinite,' but this is accomplished not by "Olympian" force of will; rather, the self is chillingly subtracted from the equation, refusing to harmonize the fragments in any order imposed by the composer's controlling subjectivity. In his reflections on Beethoven, Adorno makes the point clearly:

But this [subjectivity], as something mortal, and in the name of death, vanishes from the work of art in reality. The force of subjectivity in late works is the irascible gesture with which it leaves them. It bursts them asunder, not in order to express itself but, expressionlessly, to cast off the illusion of art. Of the works it leaves only fragments behind, communicating itself, as if in ciphers, only through the spaces it has violently vacated. Touched by death, the masterly hand sets free the matter it previously formed. (125)

We have examined how Eliot wills a more subjective ordering principle in the middle sections of the sequence: Kenner himself excuses these lapses as having their designated place in "the economy of the *Quartets*," representing "the necessary phase of satisfaction with what our own capacity for insight can deliver, from which the taut revelations of 'Little Gidding' are later distinguished" (268). Kenner here in effect acknowledges that which he earlier ridiculed, that the sequence gradually leaves behind the subjective and finite, labouring after ever more speechless abstraction and the impersonal stillness of pure form.

### **Eliot's quartet 'genre': a whole both more *and* less than the sum of its parts**

In the Classical sonata, the individual movements are usually quite independent of one another. They are related in terms of tonality but their interconnection typically ends there. Each sonata describes an arc away from and then back toward the ruling tonic. The tempo relations usually demonstrate a similar movement, a fast—slow—fast pattern being the standard; in less typical cases, the progression is from slow to moderate to fast tempi. The movements each display internal formal coherence, but large-scale relations are not based on the congruence of detail; rather, the sonata as a whole is held together by abstract schemes of tempi and tonality. Each movement is more or less detachable from the rest, although when juxtaposed, the movements trace an apparent progression.

Beethoven's late style, with its gestures toward cyclical form, stands midway between this Classical conception of the sonata and a Romantic conception in which the parts form an organic whole (the end point of such a historical development being the return to the single-movement sonata, that one movement having been expanded to gigantic proportions and subsuming all the separate elements of the multi-movement sonata). Eliot's quartets are likewise organized on two distinct planes: the independent parts are ostensibly formally rounded and self-sufficient, yet each section looks back to what has come before, usually with the forcible insertion of precise verbal echoes, varied but recognizably related phrases, or recalled imagery. In "Little Gidding," this procedure is applied on a higher structural plane, as the material of all three preceding poems disrupts the internal logic of the fourth, insisting—with an arbitrariness, a violent assertion of control on the author's part that also marks Beethoven's late style—that

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (V)

Critics have often seen the return of material from the earlier quartets at the end of "Little Gidding" as a natural culmination of the entire sequence, but there is something violent, a certain willfulness about Eliot's gathering-together of images that have not been prepared for in the final quartet: the allusions assert a larger unity, but the logic of that unity remains merely an assertion. The sequence is cyclical, but the recurring elements do not emerge effortlessly from their immediate context. An assertive "We shall" commands unity here at the conclusion: compare this with "Burnt Norton"'s initial tones of tentativeness, of uncertain probing: "*If* all time is eternally present" [my italics]; "But to what purpose... / ... / I do not know" (I). Such rough edges are characteristic of late Beethoven. Like Beethoven, Eliot flirts with awkwardness in his construction and impenetrability in his compositional logic. The firm hand of subjectivity exerts its control too plainly in "East Coker" and "The Dry Salvages," sometimes disfiguring the work: in "Little Gidding," the same willfulness can be seen as a success, but the line between what is arbitrary yet 'right' and what is overbearing and 'false' is, to say the least, debatable. It could be argued that where the poet's central theme is the mystery of a projected unity between death and regeneration, as at the end of "Little Gidding," any organic conclusion would be a falsification. Thus, instead of harmonizing that which will not harmonize in our experience, Eliot simply lets a recurring voice tell us that "all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well." The aesthetic synthesis brought about at the end of the poem guarantees this promise, something no amount of intellectual reassurance will accomplish. A recent article by Brad Bucknell describes Eliot's technique in similar terms: "What stands in instead of proof is insistence, repetition" (Cooper 123).

Each section of each quartet possesses its own self-contained structure. Nonetheless, in the course of one's progress through all four poems a common plan emerges, a scheme that dictates which sorts of structure are appropriate for a first movement and which for a second, third, fourth, or fifth. Every individual movement turns on a contrast or collision between two themes—not necessarily 'themes,' however, in the literary sense of latent ideas: any juxtaposed images or even tones of voice will serve. This is characteristic of the typical Classical sonata movement. At the same time, a large-scale dialectic carries on regardless of the boundaries of sections, with its own structural imperative. It is correct to divide each quartet into five 'movements,' yet at the same time such division obscures the larger form. Similarly, even in the later Beethoven, each movement is a separable unit, but taken out of context a movement will often seem inconclusive or fragmentary. A slow movement will function as a mere connector, an initial movement as a mere prelude to the larger structure, or a final movement, seeming on its own to begin too abruptly—already at full steam, lacking a rising arc of interest—nevertheless functions well as a finale to the larger work. The parts are not subsumed in the whole, but neither are they entirely sufficient in themselves.

This semi-autonomy of the particular is precisely what Eliot aims for in his multi-movement forms. Each section has its own appropriate shape, a shape that only assumes an appearance of necessity in comparison with other members of the 'genre.' None of these single-movement shapes, however, are satisfactory as poems in their own right (in "East Coker," the poet admits as much, but this sense is implicit throughout, especially in the second and third movements of each quartet, with their mismatched halves). The quartet is both an assembly of fragmentary pieces and an indivisible unit. In Eliot's method of composition, as Walton Litz observes, individual sections "would, with time and luck, cohere into larger wholes" (Lobb 181).

Eliot himself saw this as his peculiar mode of operation, “doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of fusing them together, altering them and making a *kind of whole* of them” (Eliot qtd. in Gardner *Composition* 14, italics added). It is in its employment of this hybrid form, neither an organic whole nor an arbitrary collection of particulars but falling somewhere between these two—a curious “kind of whole,” that Eliot’s late work most merits an analogy with the late style of Beethoven. Such works may achieve a mysterious state of equipoise, hinting at aesthetic unity while hardly appearing, paradoxically, to cohere at all.

A complete reading of *Four Quartets* in the light of the previous discussion is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study, which aims to situate Eliot’s work in a wider historical context. I have chosen, for reasons of space, to focus in detail upon the first quartet, “Burnt Norton,” which I consider the most successful of the four. Along the way, I will point out the strategies common to all four quartets, as well as the points of dissimilarity, drawing a sketch of Eliot’s manufactured ‘genre.’

**“Burnt Norton”: “the detail of the pattern”**  
**Movement I**

Helen Gardner’s analysis of Eliot’s musical techniques in *The Art of T.S. Eliot* remains a valid account of what the poet attempts and equally of what he does not attempt. She calls *Four Quartets* “an exploration of the meaning of certain words”; these “are common words, words we take for granted” (51). Although she does not expand upon this observation, Gardner identifies the technique that makes these poems most analogous to their musical models. Eliot is radically restrained in his range of diction. Although the thoughts behind the words are as large as the mind can hope to compass, the poet’s actual language is an artificial selection—one might say, figuratively, a diatonic set of pitches, a poetic ‘scale’ chosen from amongst a great continuum of speech. Lost in the process of untangling the knots of time present, past, and future, we forget that the opening of “Burnt Norton” is a rhetorical game played with a very limited set of theme-words. Even at the level of abstract thought, *Four Quartets* is, despite the sometimes knotty progression of its logic, not a poem of various ideas but of a very few philosophical chestnuts. This is meant not as a criticism of the work, but an attempt to isolate its particular strength, to underline the way it, like the Classical sonata, and especially like the later works of Beethoven, makes such rich use of minimal materials.

In “Burnt Norton,” a dry lecturer’s voice begins quietly with an exposition of the poem’s central philosophical problem, initially allowing no hint of expression to animate its involved disquisition. The logic of these lines bears up under scrutiny, but one would require great expanses of expository prose to paraphrase them; i.e.: ‘the future is a construct based on present speculation and extrapolation from a remembered past, while present experience is shaped into something we call a past only by reflection after the fact, by a look back from a future—a future

that has already become a present, a present newly past,' etc. The passage seems to be a step-by-step working-through of certain ideas, but its logic, really no more than a suggestion of an argument, leaves the listener always a step or two behind. The logic of the passage may be sound, a meditation on a familiar temporal paradox, but the compression of the thought leaves the real-time reader of the poem—as opposed to the student-critic of the work<sup>41</sup>—in the position of a somewhat mystified auditor, not an intellectual participant. We hear threads of abstract continuity, but the predominant impression is of a voice reiterating and manipulating a small number of motivic cells. The language of philosophical discussion washes over the auditor and is received not as expository prose, digested and comprehended, but as a musical exposition. These repeated word-tones are by no means emptied of meaning, but their acoustic pattern, their regular recurrence—and not their communicative function—becomes their most prominent feature.

The A theme is based on repetitions of three related but distinct motives: 'time present,' 'time past,' and 'time future' recur in a measured and stately succession. "Time present" is balanced against "time past", then "both perhaps present" leads to "time future." The three cells sound next in inversion: "time future," "time past" and, slightly altered, "all time is eternally present." Purged of the particulars of tense, the line "All time is unredeemable" brings the first phrase to a close. The three tenses are then once again exposed, but this time in a different order and in the subjunctive: "What might have been" [past] becomes "a perpetual possibility" [present] "Only in a world of speculation" [future]. Then the three terms make a final sequence

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<sup>41</sup> These are not necessarily two different readers. The patient critic may unpack the implications of Eliot's compressed exposition and return to the poem with a heightened understanding, but in the moment-by-moment process of rereading, one is given no time to keep up with the movement of the abstract thought. However well one has assimilated Eliot's sketched-in argument, the disquisition 'sounds' too quickly and is too fragmented to be followed by the logical faculties. Similarly, study gives one a foothold in late Beethoven, but however explicit one makes the relations, the quartets, as structures unfolding through time nevertheless largely resist such mental tidying.

of appearances: “What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present.” Eliot’s first theme group is made up of four varied expositions of the initial idea, sometimes coinciding with the sentence periods and sometimes continuing across these points of articulation. This section takes the shape of a miniature fugue—a *fugato* passage, the formal signature of late Beethoven.

The spare, non-concrete—and therefore eminently variable—language of the first theme quickly gives way to imagery of footfalls and a rose-garden. What follows without a break as a concrete illustration of the initial paradox begins to take on a new and expressive character of its own. We seem to have entered a transitional passage, characteristic of the mature sonata-allegro form, that bridges the tonalities of the first and second themes. “My words echo / Thus, in your mind” anticipates the “Other echoes” that “inhabit the garden.” The initial meditation on time merges into an episode from memory. Eliot’s smooth transition is awkwardly disrupted, however, by a new voice, self-aware, which asks “to what purpose” we would disturb “the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves.” This interruption does not alter the relation between the two themes, but it does undo the illusion of continuity that would otherwise prevail. The B theme is not set out as a natural complement to the A theme. Seamless transition is shown up as a mental contrivance: abstract speculation about memory does not lead without some strain to the almost unbearable reality itself, a luminous reality which defies translation into abstract language. Eliot is not so mistrustful of the mind’s synthetic capacity as to sever the connections between his themes. By dropping in two lines of discordant, self-cautioning reflection at the point of transition, he does, however, make obvious the arbitrary element at play in even the most elegant poetic and mental structures.

Whereas the A theme is characterized by extreme minimalism of diction and abstraction,

by endless rounds of the same three conceptual statements, the B theme sees an increase in tempo, with each motive being repeated only twice—a constant stream of new diction and fresh images. The second theme spins endlessly outward, a stark contrast with the first theme's movement around a tightly constricted circle. The A theme, given over to speculations on time, is appropriately slow and measured; the B theme, in which we are suddenly located in a precise space, emphasizes—appropriately enough—movement, both in its content and in its compositional technique. Whereas the first theme consists of what we might call a measured three-part fugato, the second theme is based upon quick and very free two-part imitation in which the repetitions are immediate and the parts double back upon themselves only at the very end, producing roughly an ABA structure within the larger ABA of the movement.

“Shall we follow?” sets out the rule for this canon-like section. “Quick, said the bird, find them, find them” introduces the mode of repetition, as well as specifying the new faster tempo. “Shall we follow?” recurs three lines later. “Into our first world” is echoed at the interval of a single line. The “unheard music” is answered by “the unseen eyebeam.” The roses “Had the look” of flowers that are “looked at,” “accepted and accepting.” With the phrase “Dry the pool, dry concrete,” the repetition comes closest to being purely rhetorical: musical organization finally overwhelms narrative. The words “quietly, quietly” are more a direction to the player than a description of anything.

The A theme makes no more than a cursory appearance at the end of the movement. Like a sonata exposition, the first section of “Burnt Norton” sets out an initial juxtaposition: the return of the A theme closes the section, but it does not round off the structure. We are merely reminded by its return of the gap between the two modes of thought, between a rational and time-bound intellect that sees no way of transcending the grey present and a mystical mode that

seeks to grasp a reality ultimately incommensurate with temporality. The perfunctory return of the first theme, barely enough to let the movement be called an ABA structure, is the sort of condensing gesture characteristic of Beethoven's late style at its most uncompromising.

## Movement II

The second movement of each quartet is really two movements. First comes an introduction—analogue to Beethoven's slow introductions—in a formalized, recognizably 'poetic,' mode employing rhyme. Here convention is invoked with little attempt at renovation. The canzone at the beginning of the second movement of "The Dry Salvages" is the epitome of this. A more discursive and subjective second part follows, more conversational and marking either a conscious break with the formalized introduction or, indeed, as in "East Coker" an outright critique.<sup>42</sup>

In "Burnt Norton," the discursive section of the second movement introduces the poem's second main verbal motive, the phrase "At the still point of the turning world." The periodic repetition of the phrase "still point" again suggests fugato, with the prominent 'Neither / nor' motive forming the 'countersubject.' Donald Tovey writes in connection with one of Beethoven's late sonatas: "Never forget that Beethoven is now as inveterately polyphonic as Bach, though his voices come and go as mysteriously as the wind, blowing where they list through the various textures of keyboard-writing and pedalling" (113). Eliot, too, is inveterately 'polyphonic,' and the same proviso also applies: every new section introduces a series of

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<sup>42</sup> In "Little Gidding," the poet's early-morning meeting with the 'familiar compound ghost' is, as expected, more subjective than the introductory section, yet it is ostensibly ordered as terza rima (but without rhyme). In the final poem of the series, appropriately enough for a finale, oppositions are minimized throughout. Poetic convention is even allowed to infiltrate the 'prose' sections.

imitative voice entries, although those entries often creep in unannounced mid-line or mid-sentence “Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance”, “a grace of sense, a white light still and moving ”

The concept of the ‘still point’ serves as a theorization of the mystical experience described by the B theme of the first movement. At several other points, the second movement likewise acts as a restatement or interpretation of the first. “Into our first world, shall we follow’ becomes “concentration / Without elimination, both a new world / And the old made explicit. The observation that “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” is echoed in the statement that

the enchainment of past and future  
Woven in the weakness of the changing body,  
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation  
Which flesh cannot endure

As if to underline the congruence between the two assertions the words “Time past and time future’ break in at this point, just as they did in the first movement. The return of the A theme at this point and with such abruptness leaves little doubt that the second movement is meant to be a varied repetition of the first. The exact repetition of the time motive disguises, however, the substantial change that the A theme has undergone already. The two themes are already being reconciled, although at this point they remain paradoxical opposites.

To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered, involved with past and future  
Only through time time is conquered

Eliot’s second movements, though frequently the least successful parts of his quartets, are the most revealing of the aesthetic behind *Four Quartets*, uneasily poised as they are between

immediate fragmentation and large-scale integration. The second movement of “Burnt Norton” consists of three fragments, a short verse conforming to traditional ideas of poetic form, and a piece of long-lined subjective musing about mystical states, which, interrupted mid-line, segues into a short concluding passage. At the same time, the second fragment clearly recalls the B theme of the exposition (the visionary scene from movement I), and the third fragment is an explicit return of the A theme, in such a manner as to suggest that movement II is a second exposition. The opening passage does not ‘fit’ in terms of conceptual linkage: disjunction appears to rule, yet internally this section is the most formalized of all, using not only rhyme but exact word repetition. The image of the “bedded axle-tree” does, however, gesture obscurely ahead toward the “still point of the turning world” and the words “leaf,” “dance,” and “light” also point elsewhere in the poem. Even the word “circulation” echoes the “box circle” of the first movement. The mention of reconciliation at the end of the passage looks ahead to a transcendent synthesis, anticipating the poem’s recapitulation as well as a distant and unearthly harmonization of time and the timeless. “Burnt Norton”’s second movement is on its own an amalgam of discontinuous parts, yet those parts are not absolutely disjunct. Only when placed in relation to the rest of the quartet does the movement participate in a finished form—its fragmentary quality remains, however, its most obvious feature.<sup>43</sup>

### **Movements III and IV**

If the first and second movements of each quartet may be said to correspond to the exposition in sonata-allegro form, the third and fourth movements may be labeled the

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<sup>43</sup> The second movements of “East Coker” and “The Dry Salvages” are, as I have already discussed, more studiously fragmentary.

development. Ideas introduced in the first two sections are varied and expanded side by side. The two main themes are not yet harmonized, but they are compared and interwoven. The third movement usually begins with a reference to the final lines of the second, in contrast to the discontinuity between movements I and II.<sup>44</sup> "East Coker"'s second movement ends with a lament that "The houses are all gone under the sea / The dancers are all gone under the hill," and its third movement begins by echoing those lines "O dark dark dark They all go into the dark." "The Dry Salvages" begins with an explicit connective sentence. In "Burnt Norton," "Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness" is varied as "Time before and time after / In a dim light." The "still point of the turning world" becomes "lucid stillness / Turning shadow into transient beauty / With slow rotation suggesting permanence." The "Neither . . . nor" countersubject of movement II is also developed: "neither daylight" is present "nor darkness," "neither plenitude nor vacancy." Eliot tries to distinguish the "time-ridden faces," which are able to grasp nothing but the "twittering world" present before them, from the true mystics: the contrast between time-bound life and conscious life is drawn not implicitly by simple juxtaposition but explicitly by active comparison.

The fourth movement is Eliot's Adagio. As in many of Beethoven's late works, it is no more than a brief lyrical interlude that leads into the finale. In "The Dry Salvages," the fourth movement is a prayer to the Virgin, in "East Coker," an unabashedly 'metaphysical' meditation before communion, and in "Little Gidding" a pentecostal reflection. The poetic conventionality and the brevity of the fourth movement serves to balance the similarly conventional opening of the second. Each quartet, in that sense, is structurally a palindrome, although the movement breaks do not correspond.

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<sup>44</sup> "Little Gidding" differs here as in so many other instances. Eliot may be said to begin a coda to the entire sequence at this point in place of an explicit development of the poem's themes.

“Burnt Norton”’s next-to-last section is not so formalized. It is little more than a fragment of melody introducing the finale: even so, it is the most affecting of all four penultimate movements. There is little to add here, except to say that in one particular Eliot comes remarkably close to his ostensible musical model, probably closer than he knew. The development section of a sonata usually ends with a *dominant preparation*, in which the return of the tonic key is anticipated by a passage centred on the dominant, often involving a pedal on that note. Eliot’s development ends with the return of the phrase that has functioned as the second theme of the poem, as its ‘dominant’ tonality, “At the still point of the turning world.”

### Movement V

The final movement of each quartet functions as a sonata-allegro recapitulation.<sup>45</sup> Instead of writing a textbook recapitulation, however, in which an A theme is followed by a B theme transposed into the initial key, Eliot generally chooses to invert the themes’ order of appearance. In “East Coker,” the A theme appears at the very end of the poem, and is itself inverted: “In my end is my beginning.”<sup>46</sup> “Burnt Norton” likewise ends with an inversion of the original material, although the themes are now so interwoven that it is a mistake to distinguish too absolutely between them. Eliot does begin, however, by restating the initial opposition:

Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach

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<sup>45</sup> “The Dry Salvages” is problematic at this point.

<sup>46</sup> Incidentally, Eliot’s theme is a self-reflexive summary of sonata-allegro form. “In my beginning is my end” the problem set out in the exposition must contain the seeds of its own ultimate solution. “In my end is my beginning” the recapitulation is determined by the opening conflict.

The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

The repetition of words in the opening line is undoubtedly intended to recall the repetition, albeit of a different word, in the first line of the poem: instead of “Time present and time past,” Eliot now writes “Words move, music moves / Only in time.” The word “time” is close at hand to remind us of the exposition more explicitly. The “stillness” motive immediately makes an appearance. If we can speak of a transposition here, it is a transposition not of the B theme into the initial key, but of A into the second tonality. That which most purely represents duration becomes timeless itself. Those arts which are most bound by time, speech and music, escape time by being forced into form.

In a multi-movement sonata, we expect the final movement to be some variation upon the rondo. “Burnt Norton”’s finale approximates rondo form—though not closely—in its periodic reiteration. First, “Words move”; two lines later, “Words, after speech, reach.” Later “Words strain” and finally “The Word in the desert / Is... attacked.” The three later recurrences of this motive all appear mid-line, and at the beginning of sentences, as if breaking in on the intervening material with a new statement of the initial theme, in the manner of a rondo. One would not want to press this analogy further, especially since the final movements of the other quartets are not constructed along these lines.

Some of the imagery of the B theme returns near the end of the finale: “There rises the hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage.” Eliot seems to be reminding the reader that the final section of the sonata-allegro involves a concrete recapitulation of themes rather than a synthesis of competing abstractions. More profoundly, by interjecting the B theme imagery stripped of its accompanying theoretical apparatus, he reminds us that the moment of true consciousness is a

concrete experience, a hyperreality, not an unreality, something that assimilates only with difficulty and transposition—with loss of its essence—to our normal ways of perceiving the world. As the second movement has made clear, memory, with the transformations it works upon the conscious moment, is the tool by which time and the timeless are harmonized (“Only in time can the moment / / Be remembered, involved with past and future / Only through time time is conquered”)<sup>47</sup>. This work of remembering and harmonizing is analogous to the recapitulative procedure of the sonata by casting his poem as a sort of sonata-allegro then Eliot makes the shape of his poem a mirror of its argument.

The quartet ends, however, on a note of irresolution. The “waste sad time / Stretching before and after” does not, after all, harmonize with the “Sudden” moment of stillness, the instant in which time seems “not before and after, but all at once present and future and all the periods of the past” (Eliot *Letters* 215). To end on the words “before and after” is to end by re-inscribing the poem’s initial dichotomy. “Burnt Norton” finishes too late; it does not close upon the expected tidy resolution (“Quick now, here now, always”) but carries awkwardly on, underscoring the artificiality of the poem’s form. Yet the untidy ending does not negate the previous harmonization; rather, the momentary alignment of past, present, and future makes the rest of existence seem “Ridiculous” by comparison.

“Burnt Norton” can be analyzed profitably as a single sonata-allegro structure. It moves through all the stages one might expect: exposition [I], repetition of the exposition [II] (with the goal of more clearly delineating the initial clash of tonalities), development [III and IV], dominant preparation [close of IV], and recapitulation [V] (albeit with an inversion of themes A

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<sup>47</sup> Compare with “The Dry Salvages” II  
 We had the experience but missed the meaning  
 And approach to the meaning restores the experience  
 In a different form, beyond any meaning  
 We can assign to happiness

and B and an integration of those themes beyond what the ostensible musical model requires). Yet this orderly structure is repeatedly undermined. Connections between parts are constantly shown up as arbitrary. The first movement is almost perfectly formed, yet Eliot breaks in nervously upon his own transition. The finale argues against the very harmonization of opposites that it would enact: "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break." Form is built up out of jagged fragments. The return of the A theme in the first movement is perfunctory. The second movement is in itself a collection of mismatched fragments, taking its form from its relation to the rest of the work. The fourth movement is emotionally intense yet fleeting, a mere introduction to the finale. Finally, Eliot does not end the poem with its strongest cadence. Despite all this, the poem coheres and achieves form. In art and in life, meaningful pattern is, as the poet admits in his final movement, a product of "tension," or as he labels it in "East Coker" II, an "intolerable wrestle." Yet in "Little Gidding" V form is seen quite otherwise, as a product of "The complete consort dancing together." An examination of *Four Quartets* from the vantage of its musical analogues plainly exposes the danger of seeing Eliot either as a collage artist or—the more common fault—as a composed classicist, the pose he so often adopted in his criticism. Like Beethoven's later quartets, Eliot's final serious works both implicitly and explicitly acknowledge the difficulty of finding adequate form.

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A full reading of *Four Quartets* along the lines I have sketched might be interesting, but perhaps no more revealing than my limited look at "Burnt Norton." "East Coker," as I have suggested, is tied together more by the force of subjectivity than by internal logic. Its repeated motives seem more willful insertions than 'musical' necessities. "The Dry Salvages" lacks a real recapitulation of its primary motives. Its final movement tries to rehearse the central ideas of the

previous three quartets, but fails as a conclusion to the poem itself: Eliot seems to forget here that his poems are discrete works as well as elements in a series. “Little Gidding” ends with a similar recapitulation of the entire sequence, but as it is the final quartet, the move is much more easily justified. “Little Gidding” would benefit most from a full reading of the sort I have given to “Burnt Norton”: its opening section, for instance, is Eliot’s closest approach to a sonata-allegro form within the confines of a single movement. After a ‘slow’ introduction, Eliot sets up a contrast between particularity in time and space and a purpose that transcends that particularity. He then repeats the exposition, giving clear verbal cues that he is recapitulating his material, with the A theme transposed into the second key: “If you came this way / Taking the route you would be likely to take / From the place you would be likely to come from” becomes “If you came this way, / Taking any route starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season.” At the heart of the movement is the solid-sounding assertion that “It would always be the same”—that the moment celebrated in the poem partakes of past, present, and future, that the place celebrated is both “England and nowhere. Never and always”: this claim feels convincing not because it has the force of an obvious truth—it does not really bear rational scrutiny—but because it is mirrored in the form of the movement, which in fact ‘comes the same way’ twice and ends up the second time in a place recognizably the same yet transformed, organically completed. Here in “Little Gidding,” Eliot comes closest to the Classical model of effortless transposition and balanced structure. But “Little Gidding” is also, perhaps not coincidentally, the quartet that most plainly short-circuits the understanding, ending with an image of symbolic harmony that resists explication, a truly musical close that has the appearance of logic without the reality.

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*Four Quartets* casts a long shadow in the musically-inspired poetry that comes after. Any

poet who sets out to create an analogue to musical structure runs up at some point against Eliot's example. In a previous chapter we noted how Frank O'Hara's five-part variation sets recall Eliot's work. One of the variations in Harry Mathews's *Trial Impressions* is labeled "A Disconsolate Chimera," in reference to "Burnt Norton." In "Little Fugue," Sylvia Plath not only responds to Beethoven as a father figure but responds, albeit obliquely, to Eliot in similar fashion: the "yew's black fingers" that figure so prominently as Plath's fugal subject recall "Burnt Norton"'s image of "Chill / fingers of yew," the yew motif that resounds throughout *Four Quartets*. In the previous chapter, I noted in passing the obvious influence of Eliot upon Weldon Kees's multi-movement symphonic poems. Donald Justice, as we have seen, deliberately rejects the Eliotic model in favour of a less complicated form that corresponds more closely to the sonatina, yet even his need to reject the 'quartet' points to the inescapable centrality of *Four Quartets*. For those poets who have set out to imitate musical form, and in particular for those who have taken the sonata (or its related genres the concerto and symphony) as a model, the weight of Eliot's example has often determined the shape of the final product more than the ostensible musical analogue.

In the pages that follow, I will examine works by two very different poets that purport to imitate musical form yet in fact engage primarily in a literary dialogue with Eliot's *Four Quartets*. William Carlos Williams's "The Clouds" follows closely on the heels of "Little Gidding," stridently opposing its own metaphysic to that of Eliot. It is a polemical poem, and therefore, appropriately enough, although ostensibly in 'symphonic' form, it lacks the expected final reconciliation of opposites. John Ashbery's 1977 collection *Houseboat Days* contains a "Blue Sonata," which eschews multi-movement form but implicitly echoes "Burnt Norton." Ashbery plays upon abstractions concerning time, apparently leading the reader through a

reasoned analysis of the relations among time past, present, and future, but in fact producing a pseudo-logical structure that, like Eliot's poem, has more in common with musical form than with the philosophical discourse it adopts as its 'scale set.'

## Symphony without harmony: W. C. Williams's "The Clouds"

In his biography of William Carlos Williams, Paul Mariani, without citing any corroborating material, offers an interesting speculation concerning the genesis of Williams's "The Clouds": "Its musical form may have been undertaken as a direct response to Eliot's *Four Quartets*. In that sense it was Williams' agnostic answer to Eliot's religious and even 'mystical' synthesis about ultimate meaning" (566).<sup>48</sup> At about the same time that the "The Clouds" (*Collected II* 171-74) was published, Williams, who considered himself engaged in a grim literary war with Eliot, admitted in a letter that *Four Quartets* were "about the only poems... that are truly inventive (Pound not writing much) today" (qtd. in Mariani 571). Despite some internal evidence that supports Mariani's speculation, which I will highlight below, it remains an open question whether or not "The Clouds" is in fact a deliberate reply to the challenge laid down by the completion of Eliot's sequence and by the contemporaneous essay "The Music of Poetry." More interesting is the way Williams's handling of symphonic form mirrors his denial of a metaphysic that he believes falsifies our experience, one that he associates—rightly or wrongly—with Eliot. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot creates a poetic form that operates in the same way as a musical sonata or symphony, the initial juxtaposition of themes giving way at the end of each quartet—and at the end of the complete sequence ("Little Gidding" V)—to a final synthesis (although, as we have seen, the syntheses of *Four Quartets* do not mask their arbitrariness). "The Clouds," by contrast, refuses not only Eliot's mystical synthesis but also the sonata's characteristic harmonization of opposites. There is recapitulation, but not transposition; debate

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<sup>48</sup> The first part of the poem dates from 1942: "The Clouds" as completed shows signs of being a particular response to 1942's "Little Gidding." The 'symphonic' shape of the work seems to have come about through discussions with Louis Zukofsky: not surprisingly, given his own obsession with musical/poetic analogy. Williams refers to "the suggestion of a friend" in his note to the poem (*Collected II* 476), and Zukofsky was the first reader for Williams's poems of 1946.

but not compromise. The poem does not move ahead to a culminating unity but, in Mariani's words, can "do nothing but circle at its close back to its beginnings" (569). Williams's symphony does not even end on a reassuring tonic but closes without a cadence, finishing in mid-sentence upon an ellipse.

*The Clouds*, Williams's 1948 collection, contains several other poems that allude to music making, use vaguely 'musical' techniques of repetition, or create the impression of overlapping voices. "Lesson From a Pupil Recital," "Ol' Bunk's Band," "For a Low Voice," "A Unison," "Note to Music: Brahms 1st Piano Concerto," as well as "Choral: The Pink Church" which was intended to be published in *The Clouds*. Williams was clearly preoccupied at that point in his career, likely due to his association with Zukofsky, with the possible intersections between poetic and musical method. His labeling of the third movement of "The Clouds" as a "Scherzo" is his most explicit evocation of symphonic form, but the poem's particular use of verbal recurrence also suggests that Williams is gesturing throughout toward musical techniques, and in particular the recapitulative structure of the sonata.

The first movement of "The Clouds" appeared well in advance of the other parts and was first published separately in *The Wedge*. Sonata-allegro structure may be dimly discerned even in this early single-movement version of the poem: motives are exposed and then re-exposed but there is no transposition, no harmonization of opposed themes. There is to be no accommodation between opposing ideas. Williams's poem is a polemic, not a dialogue. Williams's exposition turns upon a contrast between the "lucid" visible, represented by the "horses of / the dawn" and the "rank confusion of the imagination"<sup>49</sup>. This intended duality is, however, complicated by the ambiguous status of the central image. The clouds are representative not only of the visible

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<sup>49</sup> The line "a rank confusion of the imagination" may itself cause serious confusion if the article "a" is taken as referring back to the horses and not "the pit", as it should be understood. But see the following discussion.

heavens, the bounds of knowing beyond which we cannot step, but also of the clarifying power of thought poised against the chaos of non-sentient existence. Moreover, the clouds lend themselves to illusion and imaginative interpretation: they are the “horses of / the dawn” or “statues / before which we are drawn.” They may be seen but not held, possessed, or traversed.

The exposition may be said to take up the first three stanzas. Williams introduces the central image of the “horses of / the dawn” and immediately sets against their forceful “charge” the “rank confusion” of the flaming horizon—and also undoubtedly the “rank confusion” of outmoded notions of hell (“the pit”). Their “fore-parts / rise lucid” beyond the swamp in which the poet finds himself. That swamp is a place of life, of an amazing fecundity, yet equally a place of death, of putridity and fear. The aspiration to be free of life is briefly and almost wistfully entertained (“A black flag... / fights / to be free”), but that desire is overpowered by the distinct outlines of the clouds and their unmistakable progress from south to north. The “edge of the world” may be “unclear,” a matter of shifting perspective, but the clouds disappear inexorably beyond it nonetheless. We do not see where the clouds or the dead go, Williams is saying: our only certainty is that they do disappear, always moving, tragically, in the one direction. We turn the clouds into a speculative heaven, but they ought to be our one unmistakable, lucid certainty—or rather, our lucid uncertainty.

The clouds repeatedly charge in one direction, and the recapitulative structure of the sonata mirrors that charge. The opening motive is sounded again, now in inversion (“the bodies of horses, mindfilling”), at the beginning of the fourth section of five, exactly where a sonata recapitulation might be expected to begin.<sup>50</sup> In the exposition, the words “imagination,” “rule,”

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<sup>50</sup> In a recent reading of “The Clouds,” Ron Callan argues that the “opening section offers no regularity in rhythm or design but rather operates around recurrent images of the clouds as horses” (123). I suggest that the opening movement is in fact tightly constructed upon patterned recurrence: its design is hardly irregular. I do, however, agree with Callan’s basic emphasis upon the ambiguity of its central imagery versus the greater “regularity” and degree of conscious control characteristic of the second movement, and accept his reading of the poem as moving from

and “torn from its hold” were used to characterize the overweening intellect, the antithesis of all that the clouds represented. Here in the recapitulation, these terms are reformulated. Now they are paired with their opposites, and the poem’s symbolism made explicit. The clouds are

actual against  
the imagined [“the imagination”] and the concocted [“a rule”]; unspoiled  
by hands  
and unshaped also by them but caressed [“torn from its hold”] by  
sight only.... (words in brackets added)

This is not the sonata-allegro’s harmonization of opposites; rather, it is a reinforcement and clarification of the initial duality.

The contrast of the muddy swamp and the clouds is briefly alluded to (“undirtied by the putridity we fasten upon them”), but not recapitulated at length. Momentarily, the clouds seem to be carrying the dead above the exigencies of life and death, just as in the exposition the black flag aspired to rise above the empty bank. As before, however, the phrase “South to north” interrupts the movement toward transcendence. Once again, the clouds are described as “distinct.” The closing of the exposition is recast but not altered upon its recapitulation. Those on earth were originally left looking to the clouds, “*knowing no place* / where else rightly to lodge” their dead. Here at the conclusion of the movement, nothing has been clarified: the dead still charge “*into the no-knowledge* of their nameless / destiny” (italics added).

The opening section of the poem takes on, very loosely speaking, the shape of a sonata-allegro movement. There is a clear return to the opening lines at the expected point; both halves of the movement follow the same progression of thoughts and use certain key words in the same succession; and, beyond simply juxtaposing themes, Williams places two sets of ideas in violent opposition. Yet this would-be symphony is missing the crucial element of synthesis.

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ambiguity to self-assurance but then reverting to ambiguity, ultimately avoiding closure.

Indeed, the opposition of themes is so absolute that they will not harmonize. Williams creates what one might call an 'anti-symphony,' in which dialectic is impossible and recapitulation becomes mere restatement of the original themes, with those opposites even further polarized. The clouds will not be transcended or harmonize with our hopes; rather, they are destined to retrace their journey from "South to north."

I have tried to isolate the argument of this first movement, but the poem's polemic is by no means as evident as I have made it appear. Williams frequently loses the thread of his argument in the sheer pleasure of baroque description. As well, the clouds are uncomfortably associated with violence and with a way of knowing that cuts arrogantly through all complexities. Indeed, the poet seems, at times, to be criticizing *them* for their unwarranted lucidity in the face of life's messy vitality. The clouds are ambiguous symbols, intended to embody the limits of human knowing but themselves frequently becoming symbolic of hubris, their reliability and 'distinctness' making them suspiciously close to the conceptual 'heaven' that the poet rails against. Indeed, in the third movement, they are transformed into "the clouds of [the Amalfi priest's] belief." Here in the initial section of the poem, the rich complexity of Williams's central symbol is uncomfortably assimilated to the rigid duality of his intellectual argument. This tension demonstrates, as Donald Justice, Eliot, and Stevens clearly understood, that ideas ripe for ultimate harmonization must not be fully opposed to each other. The second theme must bear the seeds of transposition within itself. Each theme must, even on its first appearance, imply its partial identity with its opposite.

The second movement of "The Clouds" occasionally rises to the level of a passionate—though unfocused—rant, the electric charge of its rhetoric being a sort of justification, but for the most part this movement comes as a disappointment, its polemical character jarring against the

complex ambiguities of the first. It is here that Williams begins to make his poem a more direct response to Eliot, particularly to his *Four Quartets*. His hyperconsciousness unfortunately disfigures the work. Williams criticizes the transcendental thought that imagines a consciousness

that does not eat but flies by the propulsions  
of pure—what? into the sun itself, illimitably  
and exists so forever, blest, washed, purged  
  
and at ease in non-representational bursts  
of shapeless flame

These lines seem quite plainly to address Eliot's "Little Gidding," especially its fourth movement, "The dove descending", and its conclusion

All shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one<sup>51</sup>

Yet the first movement of "The Clouds," for all of its ambiguity, which threatens to undermine Williams's didactic purpose, is arguably more successful as a response to *Four Quartets*. Eliot's own fine awareness of the near-impossibility of apprehending "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time" is paralleled by Williams's awareness that human perspective is provisional. that the clouds are only "for this moment distinct / and undeformed," as they move into a "destiny" that is nonetheless "nameless," about which we can boast "no-knowledge." The clouds represent both the human aspiration to go beyond the visible world and the impossibility of such transcendence. We are left with the sense of motion but no ultimate sense. Williams in his first movement creates a structure of language that, like the symphony, seems to draw organic

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<sup>51</sup> Williams's observation that the brain "unwilling to own the obtrusive body / would crawl from it like a crab" is perhaps a response to the observation by Eliot's Prufrock that he "should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Williams also ridicules a supposed contemporary resurgence of spiritualism, apparently taking on a specific unnamed antagonist. If this too is meant to be a polemic against Eliot and against the metaphysic behind *Four Quartets*, it is particularly misguided. Williams in fact simply paraphrases much of Eliot's own critique of the contemporary scene at the end of "The Dry Salvages."

conclusions but can point only to its own movement of thought

The third movement of the poem is labeled a “Scherzo.” It is appropriately brief and comic, with a strong element of the grotesque (“this holy man / juggling upon his buttocks to the litany / chanted, in response, by two kneeling altar boys”) The usual ABA form of the scherzo is perhaps alluded to in the use of the central image of clouds both to begin and end the movement, and Williams’s three-line stanzas may correspond to the scherzo’s standard triple meter, but the parallel stops there.<sup>52</sup>

The very presence of such a movement in “The Clouds” may be viewed as a response of sorts to Eliot—a subtlety that Williams likely did not intend but with which he would undoubtedly have been pleased. It is telling that Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, for all their correspondences to Beethoven’s sonata structures, never include a proper scherzo. Williams sees the impulse toward transcendence as essentially ludicrous, and is pleased to reflect that his Amalfi priest, in the midst of the ritual, showed signs of being lost in an all-too-human sort of rapture. He reads the priest’s ecstasy as a barely sublimated homoeroticism. Eliot’s poems, by contrast, are in deadly earnest about the transcendent moment, and make no room for scherzo. Where they do attempt satire or broad comedy they usually fail, and where they turn their gaze on ordinary existence they either sentimentalize or denigrate, both with an equally heavy hand, whether dealing with “rustic laughter” (“East Coker” I) or the bearers of “fruit, periodicals and business letters” (“The Dry Salvages” III). Williams, by contrast, is pleased and “amazed” to find human foolishness peering through the trappings of solemn ritual. Eliot takes no pleasure in

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<sup>52</sup> Stevens’s scherzo in “Peter Quince at the Clavier” is more plainly in an ABA form. For a more elaborate and formally exact example of a poetic scherzo, see the Randall Jarrell poem simply entitled “Scherzo” (*Collected* 438-39). The poem begins and ends in a prancing triple meter, with a contrasting middle section in a varied pentameter. The ‘jest’ here is a bitter one at the poet’s own expense: “I say so too, I suppose I know it / If I didn’t still, I suppose I’d do it— / It’s a way”, “Each year I talk more like the other fools.” Jarrell’s tone is that of Beethoven’s ‘serious,’ often gruff, scherzo, whereas the scherzo of Williams and Stevens are broadly comic.

the description of the ludicrous, whereas Williams relishes the image of human limitation grotesquely exposed. In more concrete terms, it can hardly be coincidental that Williams's "Scherzo" begins with the phrase "I came upon a priest once" (compare with "Little Gidding" I: "If you came this way, / ... / At any time"), or that Williams describes a visit to a church deserted except by the priest, altar boys, and tourists ("Little Gidding" of course describing a visit to "a secluded chapel").

Williams's final movement is still more inconclusive than his first. The union of past and present is nothing mystical: it is simply "the old life, treasured," involving a healthy respect for each irreplaceable human life and obeisance to "the good minds of past days" (II). It is "that which is the brotherhood," preaches Williams. Each death is not a translation but a "diminishing" of "the bins by that much / unless replenished" by new growth. Yet the poet cannot help entertaining the contrary possibility, equally unprovable, that death is not final. "But if they live?" he asks, "What then?," and what then becomes of the value of human life? The answer is no answer at all. "The clouds remain," assuring us that any attempt to transcend the here and now is at best hubris and at worst idiocy. Yet those clouds are also "a calligraphy of scaly dragons and bright moths," a suggestive skywriting calling us to make form out of chaos. The symphony ends without resolution. In life, "straining thought" is confused with "the flesh itself (in which / the poet foretells his own death)," but balance is never achieved between the two. Williams may be said to re-inscribe the original key—though a state of blindness and uncertainty can hardly be considered a tonality.

In the end, the horses of the dawn lunge inconclusively "upon a pismire, a conflagration, a ....," perhaps Williams's parting shot at Eliot, and the final line of "Little Gidding": "the fire and the rose are one." Although it is impossible to say conclusively, it seems that Mariani's

speculation concerning the relation of "The Clouds" to *Four Quartets* is correct. One may, in fact, go much further. The poem is a response not only to Eliot's quartets and the particular insidious orthodoxy that Williams believed were their motivation, but to the very ideas of certainty and closure. In musical terms, this translates to valuing simple repetition over the sonata-allegro ideal of transposed recapitulation and unresolved dissonance over cadence. Williams consciously opposes irresolution to resolution, yet he paradoxically insists upon inconclusiveness so forcefully that it becomes dogma. The second movement offers not a check against a falsifying metaphysics but a counter-faith.<sup>53</sup> Williams makes the point more wittily and effectively in his "Scherzo." "The Clouds" is most successful where the poet keeps in tension the human drive to resolve and the inconclusive nature of our experience, where the clouds are both an insurmountable barrier and a shifting field upon which imagination can play. The first movement of the poem acts out this struggle, assuming the form of a sonata-allegro yet refusing to produce a synthesis. The final movement is much less subtle in its juxtaposition of the two themes but does give the intellectual desire for resolution its due before finally frustrating and parodying that impulse.

Whereas Williams violently opposes that which he finds false in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, John Ashbery, in his "Blue Sonata," offers a more subtle critique, along with the compliment of imitation. Taken together, these two works give some idea of the range of responses that Eliot's sequence has generated, from pointed rejection to respectful copying to Ashbery's careful rewriting, his delicate middle ground.

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<sup>53</sup> Some comments of Williams concerning the contemporaneous "Chorale: The Pink Church," intended for inclusion in *The Clouds*, are worth citing in this connection: "HOWEVER, I think The Pink Church fails in that it speaks of a 'church.' It seems to want to present a formula for Heaven. In that I too find fault with it. It is, however, a protest poem, a protest against palpable abuses against reason. That was its main purpose" (*Collected II* 478).

## “We could re-imagine the other half”: Ashbery’s “Blue Sonata”

The example of *Four Quartets* not only has influenced the shape of any later poetry based on sonata form, but quite often has dictated the content of such poems. In “The Clouds,” as we have seen, Williams responds to what he perceives as Eliot’s dishonest attempts to transcend death’s inevitability, to build a protective intellectual apparatus around an unpleasant truth Williams offers what he believes to be an alternate attitude toward death’s imminence Donald Justice’s “Sonatina in Yellow” takes on a different *Four Quartets*, echoing Eliot’s concern with questions of memory and meaning, the “Sonatina in Green” takes up yet another strand of the poem. Eliot’s worrying over problems of artistic originality. The variety of creative responses to *Four Quartets*, the fact that the central themes of the work have been extended in so many very different directions, certainly attests to the range of Eliot’s poetic sequence and the remarkable fruitfulness of its example. *Four Quartets* has functioned repeatedly as a mirror for later poets, reflecting their varied private concerns and presenting, whether in terms of formal innovation or intellectual debate, a formidable challenge to be met

Even as poets ‘correct’ Eliot’s meaning, they pay tribute to the centrality of his accomplishment.<sup>54</sup> In his “Blue Sonata” (*Selected* 243-44), John Ashbery reworks the opening of “Burnt Norton,” reinscribing its lecture on time while subtly undermining Eliot’s thought, investing new value in the passing moment.<sup>55</sup> The suggestion that Ashbery expands upon Eliot’s

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<sup>54</sup> The Welsh poet R S Thomas, for example, pays reverent tribute to “Little Gidding” in his “Fugue for Ann Griffiths,” but Thomas must recast the symbol that he borrows as something explicitly Christian

If you came in winter,  
you would find the tree  
with your belief still crucified  
upon it, that for her at all

times was in blossom, the resurrection . (472)

<sup>55</sup> Although “Blue Sonata” makes no explicit reference to Eliot, several other poems in Ashbery’s 1977 collection *Houseboat Days* do invoke him—though in cryptic disguises—or echo his words “Loving Mad Tom” (16-17) may

example rather than setting himself in opposition to it no longer surprises. Works such as James Longenbach's *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, in particular his introduction and the essay "John Ashbery's Individual Talent" (85-101), have successfully challenged previous orthodoxies concerning the nature of 'postmodern' poetry and the simplistic account of Eliot as the antagonist to a later generation of poets, with Ashbery being read as one of the prime oppositional figures. It is finally possible to see clearly something that Ashbery, for one, makes no attempt to conceal: that Eliot was never a tyrant to be deposed, but a complex eminence whom one might emulate as well as critique, perhaps in a single poem.

A brief aside from a piece of Ashbery's art criticism (published five years after "Blue Sonata") takes up one of the points made in my discussion of *Four Quartets*:

Their [referring to *The Waste Land*'s hallucinatory fragments] contiguity is all their meaning, and it is implied that from now on meaning will take into account the randomness and discontinuity of modern experience, that indeed meaning cannot be truthfully defined as anything else. Eliot's succeeding poetry backs away from this unpleasant discovery, or at any rate it appears to, though *Four Quartets* may be just as purposefully chaotic beneath its skin of deliberateness. Yet the gulf had opened up, and art with any serious aspirations toward realism still has to take into account the fact that reality escapes laws of perspective and logic, and does not naturally take the form of a sonnet or a sonata. (*Reported* 302)

That is not to say that the sonnet and sonata are therefore necessarily invalid forms, with other up-to-date equivalents taking their places, or that form itself is a thing of the past, that discontinuity is all. Form is, however, exposed as artificial. If it is to mirror reality accurately, it must now encompass randomness and discontinuity. Ashbery perceives the tension in Eliot's quartets between their new deliberateness of surface—a sign of Eliot's supposed new allegiance to pre-modern continuities of thought and structure—and their author's profound awareness of

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be read as a hallucinatory biography of Eliot, "That was a way of getting here" being a clear allusion to "East Coker"'s "That was a way of putting it." In "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid'" it is asserted that "in the early forties" "Thomas a Tattamus" (Thomas a Becket meets "The Hippopotamus"?) was the only one who "seemed to care" (86).

the inadequacy of any ordering scheme he may adopt. Reality does not naturally take the form of a sonata: in “Blue Sonata,” Ashbery produces another version of this argument, yet in the same poem he works to imitate precisely that unnatural shape. The drive toward meaningful structure and the critique of tidy structures of meaning are not necessarily exclusive. Ashbery intuits that this may be the case in the later works of T.S. Eliot.

“Blue Sonata” is divided into three not-quite-equal parts. It does not break down neatly into two halves, an exposition and recapitulation—the plan of the simplest sonatina movements—nor can it be analyzed as a more sophisticated three-part sonata structure, with exposition, development, and recapitulation. The second stanza is essentially a rewriting of the first; the third also refers back to the earlier material, but it gestures in a new direction (although, as we shall see, this new direction ultimately proves not entirely new). Ashbery appears to incorporate an element of sonata structure that has not been exploited by any other poet examined thus far, with the possible exception of Eliot in the second movement of “Burnt Norton.” In the Classical sonata, the two halves of the work are usually repeated: the repeats, in Charles Rosen’s words, become “above all an essential part of the proportions, the balance of tonal areas, and of the interplay of harmonic tensions” (395). The practice is not universally followed in contemporary performances, but significantly, if only part of the work is to be replayed, that part most often will be the exposition. The initial juxtaposition of tonalities is reinforced by sounding the exposition again. As Rosen writes, “There is no rule” as to the necessity of repeats, “some repeats are dispensable, others absolutely necessary; some succeed in clarifying what is only half-intelligible without them.” He gives as an example Beethoven’s Sonatas Op. 31 nos. 1 and 2: “if the repeat of the exposition is carried out, and the circular form heard in its entirety, the new turning of the development after a few measures becomes only more

effective.” After exposing his themes, Ashbery immediately replays the exposition. In this, he wittily mirrors his subject matter. By restating his exposition, he reinforces the poem’s concern with ratios of then and now, with the identical structure of each passing moment relative to what has come before and what will come after (or rather, with each moment as one more in a series of snapshots of fluid becoming). The identity of stanzas one and two, it should be acknowledged, is rather obscure, depending mostly on the movement of the thought—the congruence of abstract concepts—and on a similar rhetorical progression, not on the repetition of specific words or phrases.

The syntactical chaos of the first phrase should alert us to the insufficiency of any scheme that would reduce Ashbery’s musical themes to coherent ideas liable to paraphrase. “Long ago was the then beginning to seem like now”: either ‘the’ then was beginning long ago to seem like now (and why ‘the’ then?: is the poem saying that the past—or both past and future—is always present, liable to be singled out among other present categories?), *or* ‘long ago’ was the then (‘long ago’ was the past to another present or, more likely, the future to a still more distant past), which was always beginning to seem like now, *or* long ago was the ‘then beginning to seem like now’: the distant past was once a potential future realizing itself as the present. The use of the ambiguous word “then,” which could be taken as either past, future, or indeed present, makes it impossible to disentangle the three tenses and establish a stable meaning, although the following phrase does seem to imply a much simpler reading: our old future, ‘the then,’ has now come closer and seems to have become the present, just as the present now seems to be a “setting out” toward another unknown future. Ashbery’s opening phrase does not make a statement that could be summarized in prose, yet it is structured like sober philosophizing and comes teasingly close to coherence. The language of the philosophy of time is used, following Eliot’s lead, primarily

as patterned sound, as detail in an aesthetic design, and only secondarily for purposes of debate or explanation. Time present (“now”) and time past (“Long ago”) are both perhaps present (“beginning to seem like now”) in time future (“the then”) and time future contained in time past (“Long ago was the then beginning”). While we try to disentangle its intellectual paradoxes, we perhaps overlook that which makes the poem a poem, not fully appreciating the way Ashbery plays upon different words of similar sound and upon the multiple meanings of words, such as the play between “As now is but” and “a new but still” in line two, the relation between “the then” in line one and “one once” in line three, or the link between the first and second lines (“like now / As now”). At the end of the exposition the poet plays “seen” against “seem”—and against “mean”—and in the third stanza, he juxtaposes “have” and “half” in similar fashion. Like the musical sonata, Ashbery’s poem is a structure of patterned sounds that persuades us it is a reasonable conversation. Yet it does not follow that “Blue Sonata” is meaningless. On the contrary, its excitement consists in the way it constantly approaches meaning only to swerve away. In “Syringa,” which follows soon after “Blue Sonata” in *Houseboat Days*,<sup>56</sup> Ashbery describes song-making in exactly those terms:

...the poem streaked by, its tail afire, a bad  
Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward  
That the meaning, good or other, can never  
Become known. The singer thinks  
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages  
Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away.  
The song is engulfed in an instant in blackness.... (*Selected* 247)

The sentences that follow the opening seem to oblige us with coherent statements, but looked at more closely, these too break down: “*That* now [which now?], the one once / Seen from far away [this qualifier does not clear up the confusion], is our destiny [our future] / No

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<sup>56</sup> The two poems were also published together in *Poetry*, along with “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid,’” which ends the volume.

matter what else may happen to us [no matter what the future holds].” “We are half it and we / Care nothing about the rest of it” has a ring of finality, although the declaration illuminates nothing. This sentence is a transition of sorts. The poem begins impersonally, then gradually yields to the pronouns ‘our’ and ‘us.’ Yet here statement is still indirect. Events dominate individuals: things “happen to us,” the present “is our destiny,” and “our features, / Our opinions *are made*” (italics added). Now, in the crucial transition between themes, the word “We” comes to dominate nearly every clause. The focus shifts from cool theorizing to warm assertion: “we / care nothing about the rest of it”; “We can see”; “We know”; “we feel”; “We have our right.” Incidentally, the exposition of “Burnt Norton” likewise switches from impersonal speech to the pronoun “we” at the point of transition to the second theme. Along with the change of tone, there comes a shift, again very much on Eliot’s pattern, from analysis of time to the experience of time’s passing, of how it feels to be “in it and not some other day.”

In a human life—as in sonata form—the poem suggests, the future is projected already in the present. Ashbery is also slyly signaling that the completion of a “Blue Sonata” would be projected in its exposition. Yet that extrapolated conclusion, whether of a life or a poetic form, is only vaguely anticipated, not predetermined: “We are half it and we / Care nothing about the rest of it. We / Can see far enough ahead for the rest of us to be / Implicit in the surroundings that twilight is.” This idea of progressive completion, of the future as the natural complement to the “present past,” will become the target of Ashbery’s critique in the final stanza, the ‘recapitulation.’ In “Syringa,” Ashbery once again makes explicit that which he speaks of more cryptically in “Blue Sonata”:

But probably the music had more to do with it, and  
The way music passes, emblematic  
Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it

And say it is good or bad. You must  
Wait till it's over. (246)

It would be a mistake to take these words as endorsing either a view of life and music as formless flux or as form-in-the-making that needs to be "perfected in death" ("Little Gidding" III). Our sense of form must comprehend both the desire for structures of meaning and the lived experience that defies ordering, forever postponing understanding or cohesion.

The second stanza follows the same pattern as the exposition, moving from impersonal to personal statement, from "The things that were coming to be talked about" to "We have, we understand." The poem's initial ratio between a future that has become the past and a present that is becoming the future is repeated, and perhaps clarified. In fact, this repetition seems to reduce the ambiguities of the opening stanza, eliminating the crucial word "seems." The exposition describes a struggle between the rights of time and twilight and the rights of living beings. This sense of struggle now gives way to a mystical affirmation that "Each image fits into place, with the calm / Of not having too many, of having just enough. / We live in the sigh of our present." The sonata seems to have reached its synthetic conclusion, but this apparent conclusion is premature: lived experience in fact simply predominates over memory and foresight, just as it did at the close of the exposition. To "live in the sigh of our present" is to renounce understanding in favour of image and content oneself with a fictitious frozen 'moment' that is in fact radically unstable. "Syringa" once again provides some context:

"The end crowns all,"  
Meaning also that the "tableau"  
Is wrong. For although memories, of a season, for example,  
Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure  
That stalled moment. It too is flowing; fleeting.... (246)

The second exposition reinforces the dichotomy between lived experience and a transcendent

system of order. One cannot end the sonata without reconciling the two themes. The repetition of the exposition merely makes the contrast between the themes seem absolute and adequate.

The third stanza offers a complicated critique of the sonata form, yet ultimately provides a succinct explanation of the sonata-allegro method and—the poet’s final feat—a traditional reconciliation of opposites in spite of the poem’s apparent denial of harmony. The recapitulation begins with the bringing-together of the two themes: the passive voice of theme A (“that was all there was to have”) sits side by side with the active voice of theme B (“We could re-imagine the other half”). Ashbery, however, denies such easy harmonization, criticizing the idea that one half of a life or one half of a poem could imply its own complement. If the present “was all there was to have,” we could extrapolate from that which is seen to that which is yet to come. The rest of the sonata would be simply the repetition and completion of that which already has been exposed. Ashbery, however, describes that situation as “tragic.” When “Each image fits into place” for us (the false reconciliation of the second stanza), then we merely “fit / Into the space created by our not having arrived yet.” Ashbery opposes to this idea a more complicated conception of progress:

... progress occurs through re-inventing  
These words from a dim recollection of them,  
In violating that space in such a way as  
To leave it intact.

These lines are on the surface a description of the way memory alters and orders that which we would prefer to freeze as ‘the moment.’ They are also a good summation of the way a sonata recapitulation works. The identity of each theme is violated yet left intact: progress occurs through recollecting and reinventing, not through simple repetition or extrapolation.

Ashbery first rejects the “tragic” idea that the present is determined by its completion as a

future and that, conversely, the future could be extrapolated from that which we see and believe we possess. He then seems to embrace the idea that memory creates harmony between present and future, transforming the moment yet preserving its unique identity. The final two sentences of the poem dissolve into paradox. Ashbery attempts to do justice both to the sense that “We live in the sigh of our present” and the sense that “now is but the setting out on a new but still / Undefined way.” He admits that “we do after all / *Belong here, and have moved a considerable / Distance*” (italics added). I believe that the word ‘and’ carries a great deal of weight in the statement, more than one would tend to give it in a reading. By setting such an unobtrusive word to do the job of linking his two themes, Ashbery diminishes the effect of harmonization at the very moment of final synthesis. The themes do not merge, but they coexist in a single sentence. This is precisely the manner in which sonata themes are synthesized: they come together but they do not lose their separate identities.

Ashbery’s final lines are impervious to analysis yet sound convincingly final: “our passing is a facade. But our understanding of it is justified.” In one reading of these concluding words, we ‘have not ever moved from the present, have not really traced any sort of temporal pattern, but we are justified in understanding that we have.’ In the other reading, we ‘are not really creatures of flux, creatures of the passing instant, yet we are close enough that we are justified in saying that we understand what it is like to live in the moment.’ Ashbery ends on a note of reassurance, although nothing has been resolved, no synthetic final meaning has been produced. One is reminded, especially because of the use of the word “moved,” of the consoling yet artificial ‘resolutions’ of Eliot’s quartets. Ashbery’s benediction, however, registers a subtle protest against Eliot’s world-view. The insight that “we do after all / *Belong here*” gets pride of place in Ashbery’s conclusion, and his declaration that “our understanding of it is justified” (with

'it' apparently referring to the passing moment) is an oblique response to Eliot's assertion that "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable" ("Burnt Norton" I).

"Blue Sonata" critiques aesthetic or religious schemes that make the moment subordinate to overarching patterns. At the same time, it does not offer a radical perspectivism as a substitute. An appropriate form must give proper weight to the instant, must incorporate discontinuity, but it will nonetheless be structure, something transcending "the present past." As Ashbery writes in "Syringa," "Singing accurately / ... encapsulizes / The different weights of the things. / But it isn't enough / To just go on singing" (245). "Blue Sonata" may critique the idea of artificial and orderly dialectic at the heart of sonata-allegro form, but it also provides a fair justification for such a structure. Ashbery ends up writing a respectful homage both to the sonata form and to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, along with a quiet rebuttal to both.

### **Conclusion: impure contraptions**

The diverse group of poets discussed in the preceding survey defies categorization as an American 'school' or tradition. Williams is found alongside his nemesis Eliot. Stevens rubs elbows with Pound and Olson. Zukofsky, Jarrell, Sarton, Kees, and Schwartz represent the diversity of one generation; Plath, O'Hara, Ashbery, and Mathews that of another. Poets of intellectual rigour, careful designers such as William Bronk and Donald Justice, have been inspired by the literary possibilities of musical pattern, but so have irrepressible romanticists such as Conrad Aiken and John Gould Fletcher. Despite this remarkable catholicity, a complete list of modern poetic fugues, sonatas, and variation sets would be surprisingly short: many writers attempted to imitate musical structure once only, as an isolated tour-de-force, or took up the challenge a mere handful of times. The influence of these isolated efforts is, however, out of all proportion to their number. Stevens's early efforts in variation form, which reached their culmination with "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," laid the groundwork for some of his best poems, chiefly "The Man With the Blue Guitar." Plath's "Little Fugue" was the apparent catalyst for the productivity of the final year of her life, in which she wrote some of her most powerful work. Schwartz's fugal poems are among his best-known and most successful, setting a standard he would seldom meet in later years. The rewards were even greater for those poets such as Eliot and Zukofsky who devoted more sustained attention to the literary possibilities of musical structure.

The desire to create a poem that conforms to the canons of musical form is evidently widespread. I have already outlined in my introduction some of the reasons why such an array of modern poets found eighteenth-century musical structures suited to their twentieth-century

artistic visions, but in the light of the preceding survey the discussion is worth revisiting. Which qualities proper to music might the modern poet especially covet? W.H. Auden's "The Composer" (*Collected Shorter* 125) succinctly sets out the well-established grounds for envy.<sup>1</sup> Only the composer's "notes are pure contraption," only his "song is an absolute gift." The poet, by contrast, "fetches / The images out that hurt and connect, / From Life to Art by painstaking adaption, / relying on us to cover the rift." The jarring word "contraption," a characteristic Audenism, highlights the artificiality of musical structure and its self-contained nature, its existence as a complete, interlocking—and utterly impractical—formal system, one hermetically sealed from reality, which is the mundane province of the painter and poet. Auden's praise of music is not unmixed with criticism: music is not able to affirm existence but is simply "unable to say an existence is wrong." The poet's accomplishments are heroic, honest, and labour-intensive, whereas the composer passively receives "an absolute gift." Yet the sestet of Auden's sonnet generally expresses an envy of music's ability to invade "Our climate of silence and doubt" with "delight," an envy of its transcendent properties.

Auden's poem is an elegant and thoughtful expression, one which seeks to avoid the usual romantic overstatement, of a traditional view—a view dating back to Pater and to Schopenhauer before him—that music is superior to the mimetic arts; not, certainly, as a mode of knowledge about life but as a mode of aesthetic creation, as a means of transcending life through art. Robert Browning's Abt Vogler, talking about his decision not to paint or compose verse but to improvise on his Orchestrion, makes a less circumspect case for music's supremacy atop the hierarchy of the arts:

For think, had I painted the whole,

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<sup>1</sup> But in the form of a sonnet, not of a sonata, underlining the reason why I have focused exclusively on American poets in this survey.

Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder-worth:  
Had I written the same, made verse—still, effect proceeds from cause,  
Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told;  
It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,  
Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled:—

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,  
Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!  
And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,  
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.  
(Browning 279, ll. 43-50)

Musical composition is not merely sub-creation in accordance with pre-existing laws, but a means of transcending matter (“still, effect proceeds from cause”) and making contact with the very maker of those laws. Abt Vogler’s improvisation is a species of mystical experience. This is not only a symptom of the Abbot’s state of mind during the frenzy of extemporization: the very nature of music makes it a mystical conduit. Free of material form yet formed according to precise architectural laws, music is the closest human equivalent of the house “not made with hands” (l. 66). Free of the requirement common to other arts to represent external reality, to simulate events in human time, music can make “What never had been” exist now and make “what was, as it shall be anon” (l. 39). The poet covets music’s power to transcend actuality (especially temporal succession), its ability to produce repetitions not only of things that have been but of things that never were in reality. Abt Vogler’s *Orchestrion* is the original “pure contraption,” a truly closed aesthetic system: an invented reality is evoked upon a machine that is itself of the artist’s own devising.

Surprisingly, however, when we turn to the modern poems written in imitation of musical structure, their most striking feature is their existence not as hermetic, self-sufficient aesthetic systems but as radically ‘impure contraptions.’ Of the variation sets examined in the first chapter of this study, those of Jarrell are a panorama of human suffering and a nightmare of vampirism;

those of Stevens and Olson are, among other things, studies in the nature of perception; that of Mathews exposes a courtly love poem to the tests of the ugliest sexual realities. O'Hara, precisely when he is at his most formally playful, jokes about eating manure.

Of the fugues, those of Bronk and Kees are preoccupied with the inevitability of death; those of Schwartz with the frustration of desire by circumstance; those of Plath with childhood trauma and with the varied trials of childbirth; that of Pound with his crushing downfall and humiliating incarceration. Only Zukofsky seems to approach, in climactic moments, the musical ideal of an absolute aesthetic object, of transcendent form—yet his "A"-12 is in fact a grab-bag of personal letters and undisguised biographical vignettes.

The situation is much the same when we turn to the sonatas. Justice's "Sonatinas" deal with the death of a father and generational strife. Though they seem most removed from mimetic concerns, most purely exercises in musical construction, Aiken's symphonic poems are in fact full of content, of representation in all its possible variety: they depict not only sensational scenes of murder and vampirism but also (in *Senlin*) the day of an 'average man.' Stevens argues jarringly that beauty is immortal in the body, not in the mind or in its works. Williams stands resolutely against the drive to transcendence. Eliot's *Four Quartets* vigorously deny their own status as 'pure contraption.' Even Ashbery, whose "Blue Sonata" is arguably the most abstract, self-contained piece of 'pure poetry' in the entire survey, is most concerned to give a clear account of the paradoxes of being *in time*, to delineate what it means to "live in the sigh of our present."

One looks in vain for cases where musical models have licensed poets to indulge in pure play of language. Structural manipulation, despite its undeniable immediate pleasures, is viewed almost inveterately as a means, not an end. In fact, it seems precisely the distancing, abstracting

quality of musical structure that has allowed poets to speak of painful or ugly subject matter or simply to speak where reality remains mute, where “The images that hurt and connect” are not forthcoming. Yet the success of this process depends upon a giving-over of control from the poet to the work itself. A poet employing musical techniques is not permitted to develop an argument step by step from its conception to its conclusion or pursue a chain of images straight through to its culmination. The repetitive imperative of musical structure obliges a series of new beginnings, a re-conception of existing images, and a recasting of that which has already been set down. The ‘final form,’ an article of faith for the modern lyric poet, is put profoundly in question, especially by variation structure, but also, less obviously, by the fugue and sonata. In this sense, such hybrid musical/poetic forms do indeed introduce an element of transcendence in place of the assumption of subjective control characteristic of linear structures. As the music theoretician Victor Zuckerkandl argues, music “is appropriate, is helpful, where self-abandon is intended or required—where the self goes beyond itself, where subject and object come together” (24-25), in contradistinction to language, which must be content to name, discriminate, and control reality by establishing borders. In precisely this vein, Conrad Aiken writes in justification of his ‘Symphonies’: “Granted that one has chosen a theme—or been chosen by a theme!” (*Collected* 875).

Modern poets have accepted this loss of overt agency more or less with equanimity, but the relative scarcity of such musical/poetic hybrids suggests that while the challenge of writing a fugue or sonata in words has frequently acted as a creative stimulus, it has perhaps proved too rigid and chilling a constraint for most writers. T.S. Eliot, who pursues the musical/poetic project as far as any other modern writer, himself expresses a certain wariness about that project in “The Music of Poetry”: “I think that it might be possible for a poet to work too closely to

musical analogies: the result might be an effect of artificiality"; "I would remind you again of the two tasks of poetry, the two directions in which language may be worked: so that however far it may go in musical elaboration, we must expect a time to come when poetry will have again to be recalled to speech" (63-64).

In analyzing the modern poet's simultaneous attraction to and suspicion of musical techniques, no single critic has been as perceptive or as eloquent in voicing the writer's dilemma as Samuel Beckett in his allegorical radio play entitled "Words and Music." The relation between the loquacious Words and his non-speaking partner, Music (the character is played by a chamber orchestra), is one of alternate suspicion and dependence, cooperation and rivalry. Words initially asks of Music: "How much longer cooped up here in the dark? [*With loathing.*] With you!" (*Collected* 127). Their master, Croak, tries to make his "comforts" "Be friends!"; and indeed, the pair do collaborate more or less successfully on two songs, Music generally leading the way, significantly, with a "*Discreet suggestion*" (133), and Words following, extemporizing in response to rhythmic demands. In the words of Beckett's stage directions, Words is always "*Trying to sing this.*"

The songs that Words produces display what, in the light of the preceding survey, will be familiar traits of literal repetition and frustrated continuity. In "Age is when to a man" (131), the phrase "She comes in the ashes" becomes (although undergoing progressive diminution) a recognizable and intrusive 'fugal subject.' The pair's final collaboration, "Then down a little way," is short enough to quote in full. Though it progresses like a sentence, that sentence never really concludes:

Then down a little way  
Through the trash  
Towards where

All dark no begging  
No giving no words  
No sense no need  
Through the scum  
Down a little way  
To whence one glimpse  
Of that wellhead. (133-34)

The dramatic context of the poem further intensifies its element of monotonous repetition.

Beckett's Music is able to supply his master instantly with a voluptuous transcendence—one wonderfully absurd stage direction reads: "*Rap of baton Love and soul music*" (129).

Words, by contrast, is only able to travel down "Through the trash" of the here-and-now, "to whence one glimpse / Of that wellhead," and that only when he explicitly renounces words and allows himself to be directed by musical imperatives. Yet from the beginning, Beckett reveals Words—whose usual medium is not poetry but prose—to be in truth a purveyor of repetitive set speeches and verbal tags rather than a carrier of reasoned, linear thoughts, a source of platitudinous dissertations identical except for their ostensible content: 'Sloth' becomes 'Love' and nothing in the speech of Words really changes. Structure is all and content is next to nothing. By cooperating with Music, Words renounces the already hollow appearance of reason, and in exchange is granted a glimpse of what might be transcendence, or—what is more likely—a serenity in the face of annihilation. The play significantly ends with a plea for repetition, an obliging response from Music, and an ultimate lapse into the pre- or post-verbal, into a "*Deep sigh*" on the part of Words:

Words: Again. [*Pause. Imploring.*] Again!  
Music: *As before or only slightly varied*  
[*Pause.*]  
Words: *Deep sigh*

Words ends up not so much actively willing an eternal recurrence in the Nietzschean manner as

quietly acquiescing in that recurrence, soothed by music's ability to raise unreasoning repetitiveness to an aesthetic value. Beckett's allegory ultimately affirms the supremacy of music among man's 'comforts': with Auden, Beckett seems to give music pride of place for its ability to "pour out" its "presence," to "pour out... forgiveness like a wine." Yet only at the very end of the play has Words been beaten into submission. All along, his protests have been loud and he has been constantly wary of the way Music breaks up his forward momentum, irritated with the demeaning repetitions forced upon him by Music's interfering suggestions.

Perhaps we can distinguish in the preceding survey only one actual approach to the submissive "*Deep sigh*" of Words. "A"-24, the final section of the long poem by Louis Zukofsky, is an arrangement, a musical 'score' organized by his wife Celia, of the author's words, set against a selection of Handel's harpsichord works. The four contrapuntal voices of the "Masque" are made up of, respectively, excerpts from Zukofsky's essays, the text of his one dramatic work (split apart into successive monologues), the text of one of his stories, and excerpts from the preceding sections of the long poem. Although Celia Zukofsky suggests in her introductory note that the Handel selections make up "one voice" (564) more, in addition to the other four, the contrapuntal texture of the music means that there are in fact as many as eight 'voices,' spoken and sounded, being heard at certain moments. The initial statement from the first voice (labeled 'Thought') is a declaration of the arranger's intent, and ultimately of Zukofsky's own literary ideal:

And it is possible in imagination to divorce speech of all graphic elements, to let it become a movement of sounds. It is this musical horizon of poetry that permits anybody who does not know Greek to listen and get something out of the poetry of Homer: to "tune in" to the human tradition, to its voice which has developed among the sounds of natural things, and thus escape the confines of a time and place, as one hardly ever escapes them in studying

Homer's grammar.<sup>2</sup> (566-570)

One is expected to listen to the poem's concluding "Masque" as if listening to just such a "movement of sounds," a contrapuntal musical structure, perhaps catching a meaningful phrase here or there, but generally acquiescing in the play of sonorities and silences.

In some particulars, "A"-24 is profoundly *unmusical*. Its arrangement is, according to the compiler, "centrally motivated by the drama. Each character *speaks* in monologue, acting the complete sequence of the assigned role in *Arise, Arise*" (564). That is to say, linearity ostensibly predominates: the score, however slowly, moves straight ahead, not in circles. The succession of the poet's words is carefully preserved, in spite of the simultaneity of speech that threatens to obliterate all semantic properties. In several other important ways, however, the conclusion of Zukofsky's "A" represents a spectacular abdication of meaning and a giving-over of subjective control, a deep, protracted, and wistful 'sigh' on the part of language.<sup>3</sup>

Most importantly, though, the "Masque" is in fact designed as a massive creative rereading of Zukofsky's whole life's work. If it is to have any impact as the culmination of the preceding poem, "A"-24 requires a full knowledge of and lively engagement with the poet's entire corpus. There is, then, repetition at the heart of this unplayable score after all, but not the concrete textual repetitions we have been occupied with throughout the preceding survey. To

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<sup>2</sup> This statement begs comparison with some of T. S. Eliot's remarks—in his 1929 essay on Dante—on the possibility of being moved by poetry in an unknown language.

<sup>3</sup> 1) A reading of the above prose passage, neither too slow nor too fast for comprehension, might take anywhere between thirty and forty-five seconds. The tempo marking of the Handel (Celia Zukofsky wishes the markings to be observed) that accompanies the passage in "A"-24 implies, by contrast, a duration of ninety-eight seconds, and this exclusive of the free adagio at the opening. Semantic coherence is sacrificed to a musical prolongation of sound. 2) The contrapuntal arrangement of Zukofsky's words makes comprehension difficult. Moreover, the listener is never given a real chance: the fragmentary nature of the arranger's excerpts ensues this. 3) Whereas the text loses its audible coherence in the musical arrangement, the Handel selections retain their original shape. Breaking under the strain, writing struggles to emulate a musical structure that itself remains whole. It is hard to imagine a performance of "A"-24 in which the words would rise above the level of an irritating series of interruptions, an unwanted buzz during a musical performance that is sufficient unto itself (the too-familiar sound of one's neighbour chatting during a concert). 4) Finally, the poet literally gives up his agency to another, Celia Zukofsky: the words are his only as far as they remain language, not pure tone.

make "A"-24 actually 'sound,' an ideal reader (who in truth could be no one but the arranger herself) must *review* the poet's thought, *reread* each section several times over in the attempt to imagine both a simultaneity and a comprehensibility of separate parts, and knowingly *recombine* Zukofsky's words, words wrenched from their context and juxtaposed to suggest a new unity, a coherent vision embracing different stages of the poet's career and encompassing disparate genres of writing. Musical repetition only subverts linearity: it does not set it aside. A rather different type of repetition is required to produce a meaningful reading of "A"-24, one that almost entirely dispenses with succession. Despite its claims, perhaps no poem has ever been less of a 'score' than "A". Even "A"-12's play upon the theme BACH, complete with its imitation of sounded pitches, depends upon the layout of the words, upon the recognition of an acrostic. This is poetry that refuses to privilege the eye, ear, and mind, that resists timing by metronome (whatever the introductory notes to "A"-24 seem to demand).<sup>4</sup>

In our reading of modern poetry, we have become habituated to a sort of repetition that far outstrips the temporally-governed reiterations of a piece of music yet is nonetheless broadly analogous to musical repetition. We are used to going repeatedly back in order to go on. A contemporary poem, despite efforts to limit it either to the mouth or to the mind, is a complex of sounded speech and silent interpretation, words moving forward in succession and thought traveling back and forth over the entire artifact, comprehending and making sense of the whole. Celia Zukofsky's "Masque" simply follows this tendency to its ultimate outcome. At the point where poetry has drifted furthest from music, from a mutual beginning in repetitive aural structure, the modern poem nonetheless has come to depend more completely upon repetition than even the most monotonous rondo or variation set.

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<sup>4</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting Zukofsky's late-career tendency (exemplified in "A"-22 and "A"-23) to use a line measured by word count (usually five words) in place of a syllabic or metrical unit of organization.

With our reading of modern poetry obliging us to so much inveterate repetition, it seems logical that twentieth-century poets should have wished to exploit this tendency, a specific manifestation, moreover, of their age's general intellectual developments. It is natural that they would wish to produce works in which form is not violated with each recommencement; rather, repetition itself creates structure. A few possible patterns awaited writers in the concert music of the eighteenth century, where the intellectual impulse toward progressive form and the aural need of reiteration had been convincingly reconciled already. Having borrowed from the music of the past the means to structure through repetition, they did not stop with a simple recasting of poetic technique; rather, this disparate group of poets used their new hybrid forms to speak about those repetitions that modern thought had newly discerned both in the structure of the mind and in the processes of the mind's collision with the external world. Begun as the most self-sufficient artifacts, intended to subvert temporal succession and thereby actuality, turned in upon themselves, offering circularity in place of linearity, these newly-invented 'pure contraptions' turn out to be mimetic after all. Copied from one art to another and across two centuries, these structures are nonetheless faithful—in their fashion—to literature's descriptive imperative, and, by playing, ironically, with time's progression, make strangely appropriate mirrors of their time.

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