

Knowing Language: The Poetics of Epistemology
in Jan Zwicky, Paul Muldoon, and Geoffrey Hill

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the poetics of epistemology in the works of Jan Zwicky (1955-), Paul Muldoon (1951-), and Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016), three contemporary poets who engage epistemology by way of diverse interdisciplinary proxies. Principally, my dissertation shows that in Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, poetry is not representative as a knowledge-producing discourse but is instead meta-epistemological: as a cultural artefact of language that is exemplary for the way it self-reflexively expresses epistemological themes (thinking, thought, knowledge, etc.), poetry calls into question the stability of linguistic meaning by challenging the epistemological assumptions and rhetorical commonplaces of other discourses on knowing—especially philosophy (Zwicky), history (Muldoon), and theology (Hill)—discourses whose epistemological foundations are based on a language-as-knowledge-producing model.

For Zwicky, the paradigm of “lyric philosophy” informs and is informed by the poem’s capacity as a phenomenological gestalt, where poetry’s knowing occurs in a matrix of linguistic resonances. Gestalt insight in Zwicky’s work relies for its rhetorical force on the lyric integration of linguistic elements rather than on language’s formal logical procedures. Muldoon’s framework for poetic knowing—and not-knowing, and un-knowing—is the result of an aesthetics of encyclopedic reference, etymological punning, and intertextual allusion deployed in the form of riddles. As a locus of facts, data, and information, knowing in Muldoon’s poetry is contingent on the play and ply of both the locally synchronic and the intertextually diachronic aspects of the language used to structure it. These riddling dynamics are indefinitely played out in Muldoon’s work, where reference and ambiguity as competing linguistic forces together constitute an interminable weaving and unweaving of epistemological multiplicities. In Hill’s work, knowing is disclosed negatively through a variety of apophatic tropes: combined with an aesthetics of

theological sublimity as well as the ethical demand for responsible language, Hill's poetry expresses knowing as an apophatic epistemological mystery.

Poems accomplish this interdisciplinary thinking about knowing through their resistance to the rhetorics of representation, thematization, and closure, all of which are central features of epistemological discourses that work to reveal, establish, or reinforce truth claims. In Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, poetry complicates, problematizes, and resists the ontological simplifications implied by the language-as-knowledge-producing model of epistemological discourse. By exploring the paradigmatically gestalt, riddling, and apophatic qualities of poetry, this dissertation provides insight into the contingencies of linguistically-derived truth, offering a view of poetry not as an expression of knowledge but as “knowing language”.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family: Styliani, Stamatios, Maria, Steve, Effie, and Tom.

“we would always voyage in our own places”

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INTRODUCTION & STRUCTURE OF CHAPTERS

Structured in four chapters, this dissertation analyzes the operant epistemological paradigms (gestalt, riddle, apophasis) that structure knowing in the poetry and poetics of Jan Zwicky, Paul Muldoon, and Geoffrey Hill. I argue that as gestalt, riddle, or apophatic expression, poetry challenges the themes of epistemological certainty and closure, key rhetorical commonplaces that knowledge-producing discourses (especially philosophy, history, and theology) rely on for their disciplinary persuasiveness. To say that poetry challenges the themes of epistemological certainty and closure expressed in these disciplines is not to say that poetry challenges the foundational truths that they are predicated on. Instead, I argue that poetry challenges the certainty implied where language is taken for granted as the epistemological model par excellence for knowledge production; in doing so, poetry's epistemological function is redefined more accurately as a mode of meta-epistemology, as questioning the paradigmatic validity of the language-as-epistemology model of knowledge production itself. The resultant models for knowing that this dissertation focusses on—poetry as gestalt, poetry as riddle, and poetry as apophasis—do not replace the language-as-epistemology model for knowledge production but are, as meta-epistemological designations, the paradigmatic frameworks through which poetic knowing is expressed.

As “knowing language”, poetry has occupied a historically and culturally significant position: whether understood as a medium for recording myths and social values, as a conduit to divine or metaphysical truths, or as an expression of *ars poetica*, poetry has been characterized as striving, in W. H. Auden's words, for a “knowledge of life”, a phrase which implies that in poetry there is an affinity between knowledge, experience, and the language that connects them.¹

¹ From W. H. Auden's “Orpheus”: “What does the song hope for? And the moved hands/A little way from the birds, the shy, the delightful?/Or to be bewildered and happy,/Or most of all the knowledge of life?” in in *Collected Poems*. Edward Mendelson, editor. New York: Random House, 1991. 158.

Despite its connotative range and suggestiveness, this description of poetry—as striving for a “knowledge of life”—reflects an idealistic view of what poetry functionally aims, or should aim, to do. Poetry can encode, contain, and embody certain aspects of the human experience, relaying information about culture, society, history, and knowledge; in a more generalized epistemological sense however, these metaphors for holding—encoding, containing, embodying, relaying—exemplify a paradigmatic bias towards the rhetoric of substitution, where poetry (like other discursive expressions of language) would be defined and thereby limited as a medium for expressing, in particular and even peculiar ways, information about things in the world.

Different kinds of knowledge are expressed according to the paradigm of substitution, where words function as symbolic referents for what they seek to describe. Data, whether collected from experience or experiment, is represented in different disciplines according to distinct discursive patterns: emphases on the rhetoric of procedural logic, deductive reasoning, and phenomenological reduction signify modalities for how old knowledge is overwritten according to new epistemological paradigms. What is unique about literary works, and poetry especially, is that new epistemological paradigms—new ways of engaging critically with literature—do not affect the value of literary works; the discursive oscillations between obsolescence and innovation do not overwrite the potential for subjective insight. My dissertation argues that in contrast to analytical or empirically-based discourses—which emphasize the use of procedural rhetoric, deductive methodologies, and teleologically-driven premises in their pursuit of truth—poetry’s epistemological quality is predicated on how its paradigmatic features (as gestalt, as riddle, as apophasis) reveal the contingencies of deductive thinking in language; through its anti-reductive and self-reflexive expressiveness, poetry resists interpretive schemas that are structured according to the premise that poetry is a knowledge-producing discourse.

Although a poem may draw from any number of analytical or empirical structures for its rhetorical effect(s), the position that poetry contributes to the production of knowledge is challenged or subverted over the space of a poem, not according to a poem's form—"the disjunction between sounds and sense (marked by the possibility of enjambment)" (Agamben, 111)—but according to the way a poem complicates, problematizes, and resists the epistemological structures it deploys by creating at all points any number of epistemic crises, "as if the possibility of the end" of the poem—or, the possibility of arriving at an epistemic vantage from which the poem could be evaluated according to a specific teleology—"were radically withdrawn from it" (Agamben, 113). My research shows that although poetry does not contribute new knowledge in the way that syllogistic, sequential, premise-based, or systematically structured discourses do, poetry does function in an epistemologically divergent way: through their implementation of interdisciplinary modalities, poems resist the rhetorics of representation, thematization, and closure by subverting the structures of epistemological discourse.

This resistance to the rhetorics of representation, theme, and closure functions, in part, according to the ways that poems figure their self-reflexivity, a move that sets up a semantic double-valence, one representational-referential and one figural-epistemological. In contrast to the rhetorical development of discursive understanding, poetry is epistemologically structured as exhibiting lyric understanding, where knowing in poetry both conditions and is conditioned by the literary and linguistic dynamics that work in unison (hence, lyric) to create a multiplicity of possible meanings. Whether poetry is designated, interpreted, or framed in paradigmatic ways as *gestalt* (Zwicky), as *riddle* (Muldoon), or as *apophasis* (Hill), the poem functions as its own epistemological and self-referential apparatus: what a poem may know—which is always fluid, depending on how knowledge as a concept has changed and will change over time—is

conditioned by the quality of the language that orders it; in another sense, poetry is not epistemologically incomprehensible: it is comprehensively epistemological—the poem as a whole is not just what it knows or what it can know, but more precisely, how it knows it.

Knowledge claims from philosophy, history, and theology—whose various disciplinary themes and rhetorical commonplaces feature prevalently in the works of Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill—are transformed in the space of a poem into contingent truths, truths whose epistemological value is not measured according to the rubrics of facticity or justified belief but according to the multiplicitous consistencies of a poem’s internal structures, be they referential, acoustic, etymological, historical, aesthetic, or otherwise. Poetry re-conceptualizes how knowing in literature is a linguistically-determined value: a divergence between epistemological discourse and the development of poetic understanding becomes evidence of poetry’s epistemological value, of its “knowing language”. The poem knows enough to say that although it cannot “know” in the strict sense, it can present its knowing self-reflexively: by representing an awareness of the degree of its knowing as well as disclosing the rhetorical structures that make its knowing possible, the poem establishes its own coherence par excellence and does so without recourse to discursive explanation. Where the epistemological function of language is to structure and signify knowledge in a tightly controlled field of discourse, the epistemological value of poetry lies, in part, in its ability to call into question the epistemic certainty of discursive modes of signification. Poetry achieves this by presenting itself as a radically self-reflexive mode of expression: as “knowing language”, the poem is a space where the richness of language, both associated and disassociated with words according to their discursive applications, is developed and organized according to language’s aesthetic, acoustic, structural, and referential affinities—contingent, accidental, or otherwise.

Chapter one provides a literary-historical analysis of how the relations between poetry, knowledge, and language develop throughout the twentieth century: beginning with modernism as “the thesis of historical difference and epistemological break” (Bruns, 2007), this chapter contextualizes how Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill—inheritors of modernist aesthetics and the possibilities implied by postmodern multiplicities—channel their epistemological skepticisms through diverse acts of poetic experimentation, each according to a variety of methodological approaches and each resulting in a variety of epistemological outcomes. Chapter one contextualizes contemporary views on the place of knowledge in literature from critics, rhetoricians, and literary theorists and argues that historical attempts at evaluating poetry as epistemologically productive have been unsuccessful due to the interference of and incompatibilities between the epistemological standards set in heterogeneous discourses as well as through the consistent description of the poet as a “thinking subject” but not necessarily as a philosopher (Gibbons, 2015; Peperzak, 2012; Miller, 2007; Arnold, 2007).² That poets have not traditionally formulated literature as epistemological discourse shows why Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill are an important group: understanding how their interdisciplinary engagements with philosophical, literary-historical, and theological genres are implicated in their poetry is fundamental for understanding how knowing is paradigmatically figured in their work. These poets take care not to formalize epistemological theories of poetry; their work, however, can be seen as a series of interdisciplinary meta-epistemologies, aesthetic solutions to the problem of the epistemological function of language. These interdisciplinary meta-epistemologies are not discursively presented or productive of knowledge per se, but together function as a set of

² Gibbons, Reginald. *How Poems Think*. University of Chicago Press, 2015; Peperzak, Adriaan. *Thinking About Thinking: What Kind of Conversation is Philosophy?* New York: Fordham University Press, 2012; Miller, David. *With Poetry and Philosophy: Four Dialogic Studies*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007; Arnold, David. *Poetry and Language Writing*. Liverpool University Press, 2007.

paradigmatic relays (poetry as gestalt, as riddle, as apophasis) against which the relations between poetry and knowledge can be more accurately mapped.

Chapter two, “Lines of Thought: Jan Zwicky’s Gestalt Epistemology”, explores how Zwicky’s early theory of “lyric philosophy” develops into a view of “poetry as gestalt”, an orientation to poetry that frames language as “greater than the sum of its parts” (Zwicky, 2019).³ Chapter two situates Zwicky’s philosophical-poetical investigations as a challenge to what she calls “aggregative” epistemological models. This chapter shows how Zwicky differentiates between philosophical and poetic thought, moving from the paraphrasable and prepositional logics of philosophy to the inimitability of poetry as an expression of “lyric philosophy” according to how epistemological forms are rhetorically figured. In *Wisdom & Metaphor*, Zwicky suggests that poetry is “an epistemological and metaphysical problem for the poet” (2; 2003)⁴, and in her poem “Epistemology”, the speaker recollects what (s)he knows according to a troubling memory, a suggestion that knowledge according to experience (phenomenology) can be fraught with errors and omissions which are articulated through a series of ambiguous and allusive repetitions: “Nothing/prepared me for it: it was like a dream./That’s why. Because I’ve tried hard to forget...Imagine/singing without sound, because it was/like that;” (Zwicky, 2004). This chapter outlines how, in *Lyric Philosophy* (1992), *Wisdom and Metaphor* (2006), *The Experience of Meaning* (2019), and *Once upon a Time in the West* (2023), Zwicky’s interdisciplinary and philosophical poetics situate poetry as a “resonant gestalt”, where each element of language in a poem contributes to a gestural view of the epistemological play of lyric thought rendered in poetic form. Zwicky’s conception of poetry as a resonant gestalt—a comparison that suggests

³ Zwicky, Jan. *The Experience of Meaning*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019.

⁴ Zwicky, Jan. *Wisdom & Metaphor*. Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2003.

language's lyric integrity beyond its acoustic or structural dimension(s)—is to understand the poem as a cognitive “tuning fork” that harmonizes the relations between thought, language, and knowledge. Zwicky's argument for poetry as a linguistic, acoustic, structural, integrated, resonant, and gestalt multiplex reframes the role of the reader where the reader is not in a privileged position as searching for or interpreting knowledge in language but as one who works to adjust their critical sensibilities to simultaneously hear as well as see the drama of linguistic interplay—and by extension, poetry's knowing quality—in a highly individualized experience of linguistic meaning. Chapter two develops Zwicky's understanding of the poem as a coherent whole—a visual-lexical-acoustic gestalt—whose constituent parts are integrated in resonant fashion: each aspect of a poem compounds meaning to the point where the expressiveness of language exceeds the representational expression that seeks to contain it, the poem as a gestalt compositional whole whose theme(s) cannot be articulated in teleological ways.

Chapter three, “For ‘griddle’ read “Riddle”: Paul Muldoon's Riddling Epistemology”, investigates how Muldoon frames knowledge as historically, etymologically, and referentially suspect, especially in his collection *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (2015). This chapter develops an understanding of the poem as an epistemological riddle, whose continuous approximation of clues (which are etymological, historical, intertextual, and referential) both guide and disorient the reader, the poem as implying both the necessity of knowing (and bringing to bear) any number of facts, pieces of (mis)information, or data to an interpretation of the poem while at the same time working to withdraw from the reader the possibility of interpretive closure. The intertextual and referential effects of Muldoon's poetry are achieved through a series epistemological and etymological ploys, where the multiplicitous presentation of “things worth knowing” in a given poem—which implies varying degrees of truth and falsity—represent an

accumulation of historically contingent information derived from the richness of linguistic compendia like dictionaries and encyclopedias. In Muldoon's work, knowledge is represented at a remove from Muldoon's own authorial voice, sometimes signalled by his use of parenthesis or quotations: in *The End of the Poem* (2006), Muldoon cites Auden on Yeats ("All the reader requires/ Is some knowledge of gyres") (15), Elizabeth Bishop ("our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown") (97); and Seamus Heaney ("We were all together there in a foretime,/In a knowledge that might not translate beyond/Those wind heaved midnights we still cannot be sure/Happened or not") (372) as a way of establishing his own riddling epistemological aesthetic, where knowledge—or, commentary on knowledge—is framed as belonging (or as having belonged) to other historical voices: as written, recorded, and repeated language, knowledge in poetry exhibits an awareness of its own contingent historicity.⁵ This is compounded in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (2015), where, in multiplicitous fashion, Muldoon presents his reader with aphoristic ("Earth is to all ye know as done is to dusted"), embodied ("while knowing in my bones I shouldn't tense/myself for impact"), analogical ("the more literal among us can't abide/the thought an island may be tidal"), and medical ("...tinged with saffron, saffron thought to be a cure/for scabies, bloody scours,/fires in the belly") things worth knowing, multiplying both the linguistic tenses as well as the tensions between what qualifies as knowledge and what constitutes knowing in poetry.

Chapter four, "'Alienated Majesty': Geoffrey Hill's Apophatic Epistemology", investigates how, for Hill, knowing is figured anti-epistemologically, that is, according to the aesthetics of rhetorical apophasis ("speaking away"). Chapter four develops an understanding of Hill's ethically-inflected poetry which, aware of its own inadequacies as language, strives to articulate

⁵ Muldoon, Paul. *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

the themes of both silence and suffering, the poem as attempting to balance the aesthetically-fraught ethics of bearing witness with the ethically-fraught aesthetics of articulating suffering without reducing suffering to theme. In Hill's work, the poem deploys apophasis as a rhetorical strategy for resisting the tendency towards thematizing the poem's subject; by speaking silence, the poem as apophatic writing articulates knowing in poetry as epistemological ambiguity. Registering the (un)sayable at the limits of language, Hill's themes of silence, language, violence, and suffering demand that poetry—and by extension what qualifies as ethical language, language that speaks the suffering of another while resisting reducing its subject to a historical object—be inflected with no less than the seriousness of literary rite and philological orthodoxy. Hill's poetry and apophatic aesthetic is of a piece with his academic, theological, and confessional tone: "Already, like a disciplined scholar/I piece fragments together, past conjecture/Establishing true sequences of pain" (BH, 69).⁶ This chapter studies lines of continuity in the procession of Hill's works, from his earliest collection *For The Unfallen* (1959) to the posthumously edited *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (2019), arguing that attempts at establishing a congruence between word and thing—or, between language and knowledge—are symptomatic of a desire for an impossible, pure, poetic language ("the absolute yet again/atoned with the contingent" (BH, 175)). For Hill, attempts at restoring poetry to knowledge—or, expressing poetry that approaches the ethical threshold that its subject demands—depend for their rhetorical force on the poet's labours, on the unending word-work required to harmonize, acoustically and semantically, the cataphatic representational with the apophatic unsayable.

This dissertation shows not only how poets implement the epistemological commonplaces of other disciplines in their own work but also how poets frame poetry as a modality for resisting

⁶ Hill, Geoffrey. *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2013*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

disciplinary subsumption into existing epistemological constraints. My dissertation provides insight into how the rhetorical commonplaces of knowledge production used in different epistemological domains are transformed in the space of a poem: by using interdisciplinary poetry and poetics to better understand how knowledge is presented as a linguistically-determined value, a divergence between the production of discursive knowledge and the development of poetic knowing becomes evidence of poetry's paradigmatically meta-epistemological vectors, of its "knowing language". Poetry knows enough to say that language on its own cannot "know" in the strict sense. Poetry has an epistemic function insofar as it calls into question and reveals the contingencies of a language-as-epistemological model of knowledge production, a model which, through any number of procedural rhetorical applications, represents a stable field of signification. Poetry re-invigorates language by widening the interpretive range of discipline-specific words, terms, and ideas, allowing them, in the space of a poem, to return to their metaphorical roots; the poem becomes a space where language is disassociated from its disciplinary or ideological applications, where language's aesthetic, acoustic, structural, and referential fields are brought into a variety of textual affinities and semantic richnesses.

(In)commensurability: Literature, Epistemology, and Literary Knowing

Θεαίτητε, πάλοι ἐσμὲν ἀνάπλεω τοῦ μὴ καθαρῶς διαλέγεσθαι. μυριάκις γὰρ εἰρήκαμεν τὸ
‘γινώσκομεν’ καὶ ‘οὐ γινώσκομεν,’ καὶ ‘ἐπιστάμεθα’ καὶ ‘οὐκ ἐπιστάμεθα,’ ὥς τι
συνιέντες ἀλλήλων ἐν ᾧ ἔτι ἐπιστήμην ἀγνοοῦμεν: εἰ δὲ βούλει, καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ παρόντι
κεχρήμεθ’ αὖ τῷ ‘ἀγνοεῖν’ τε καὶ ‘συνιέναι,’ ὥς προσῆκον αὐτοῖς χρήσθαι εἴπερ
στερόμεθα ἐπιστήμης.

But really, Theaetetus, our talk has been badly tainted with unclearness
all along; for we have said over and over again ‘we know’ and ‘we do not
know’ and ‘we have knowledge’ and ‘we have no knowledge’, as if we
could understand each other, while we were still ignorant of knowledge;
and at this very moment, if you please, we have again used the terms ‘be
ignorant’ and ‘understand,’ as though we had any right to use them if we
are deprived of knowledge.

Plato, *Theaetetus*, 370BC

Although Plato’s dramatic casting of the question of knowledge in *Theaetetus* remains an inaugural moment for the study of epistemology in the Western philosophical tradition, classical scholars locate the roots of epistemological discourse even earlier in Presocratic literature, beginning with ancient authors and the works of the sophists. For Edward Hussey, the works of Homer and Hesiod presuppose implicit divisions “between divine and human knowledge”: whether mapping a route back to Ithaca or deciding how to manage one’s estate, human knowledge, in contrast with the knowledge of the gods, is acquired through “direct perception”; the verb “eidenai” (εἰδέναι, “to see”), translated as “having acquaintance”, is not knowledge arrived at deductively but knowledge acquired through experience, knowledge that describes moral wisdom or, in another sense, folk-epistemology (13).⁷ For J. H. Leshner, skepticism—the

⁷ Hussey, Edward. “The beginnings of epistemology” in *Companions to ancient thought 1*. Stephen Everson, Editor. Cambridge University Press, 1990. See Bernard Williams’s “Ethics and Psychology” in *The Homeric World*. Irene J. F. de Jong, Editor. Vol II., Routledge, 1999: “the word *eidenai*...certainly does mean, in Homeric as in later Greek, ‘to know’ (though even in later Greek it does not necessarily mean ‘to know that something is the case’: it can also refer to a skill)”; in Homer, ‘eidenai’ “has a less specific sense” than “to know” in the modern sense - “to have something in mind”, “to have thoughts of a certain kind” is the “sense [of the word] that later contracted into the notion of knowledge” (344).

impossibility of arriving at conclusive knowledge—develops in the ancient world in fragments by Xenophanes and Heraclitus, two thinkers for whom absolute knowledge, in contrast to mortal intelligence, belongs properly to the gods. The development of a two-tiered conception of knowledge—contrasting things knowable and unknowable on the basis of human experience and the absolute or unknowable—can further be attributed to Parmenides, who provides a passing account of knowledge and its limitations “in verse, the traditional language of prophetic revelation” (Leshner, 473)⁸:

...and it is necessary for you to learn all things,
Both the still heart of persuasive reality
And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no
genuine reliability. (1.28b-30)

Seeking a more human conception of knowledge, Parmenides, like Homer and Hesiod, frames his position on the nature of knowledge through narrative: “the goddess” in Parmenides’s poem (1.28b-30) is a speaker who delineates what knowledge might be on Parmenides’s behalf, a character whose perceptions guide Parmenides’s musings through to their conclusions. Despite the narrative implications of a transcendent character discoursing on the nature of knowledge (*deus ex rhetorica*), the narratological approach that Parmenides employs reinforces in a practical way the idea that Presocratic knowledge in ancient Greece, in addition to being culturally conceived as divinely-inspired was also rhetorically constructed, knowledge as conditioned by its communication through human language.⁹

With the rhetorical innovations introduced by Protagoras and Gorgias, both contemporaries of Plato, epistemology—discourse on how one arrives at true knowledge—

⁸ Leshner, J. H., “The Humanizing of Knowledge in Presocratic Thought” in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*. Curd, Patricia and Daniel W. Graham, editors. Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁹ Hussey, Edward (1990): “...what is clear is that by making the goddess do the exposition, Parmenides shows that he is claiming no personal revelation” (29). From “The beginnings of epistemology” in *Companions to Ancient Thought: Epistemology*. Everson, Stephen, Editor. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

becomes understood not only through the dialectic method but also as an expression of relative positions on a given topic: the Presocratic conception of rhetoric as “dissoi logoi”, the “law of two possibilities” is expressed as a principle of Sophistic rhetoric, despite its fundamental emphasis on winning arguments through the application of both ethical and perhaps less ethical argumentative strategies. In an attempt to deflect this relativistic perspective, Plato describes the sophistic position in the *Theaetetus* as “perfectly evident”, downplaying the relativism built into “dissoi logoi” arguments to reinforce that the production of knowledge is properly a dialectical, discursive, and objective undertaking.^{10,11} Where Plato’s rhetorical method is one that separates and differentiates between dialectical and sophistic approaches to truth, Gorgias recognizes a fundamentally integrative connection between utterance and action, where “every meaningful action lies within the horizon of language” (Consigny, 76). In this sense, Gorgias would not assent to the division between rhetoric and other ways of approaching truth, implicitly arguing that “in rhetoric there is no such manual working, but its whole activity and efficacy is by means of speech”; in Gorgias’s view, rhetoric—despite Plato’s analytical divisions—is not separable from the structure of expression (Consigny, 76).¹²

¹⁰ Although branding the sophistic epistemology of Protagoras and Gorgias as “relativist” is only partially true—there is no ancient equivalent for a “relativist” epistemology—this comparative description is also made out of convenience: “if in Greek philosophy there is something close to what nowadays is meant to be ‘relativism’, this may be found first in the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*” (Zilioli, Ugo. *The Epistemology of the Sophists, Protagoras*. Durham theses, Durham University, 2002). See also: Bett, R. “The Sophists and Relativism” in *Phronesis* Vol. 34. Brill, 1989. 135-170: “Suffice it to say that a respectable case can be made for the conclusion that Plato interprets Protagoras as a relativist, in the deep sense that we have throughout been interested in [...]. If that is indeed Plato’s interpretation, Plato’s *Theaetetus* becomes the one piece of evidence for relativism, in the deep sense, among any of the Sophists” ([84], 168).

¹¹ See, additionally, Protagoras’s fragment 80DK A20: “every argument has an opposite argument”; “καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις” in Ugo Zilioli’s *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism*. Routledge, 2016.

¹² From: Everson, Stephen (editor). *Epistemology*. Cambridge University Press, 1990: “...it is striking that the interest of nearly all current epistemology remains focussed upon knowledge, where that state is taken to be equivalent to having a true justified belief in some appropriate way. The interest of ancient epistemologists was not so limited, however. The range of epistemic states which we find explored in the ancient texts is much wider than will be found in any contemporary discussion of epistemology or cognition. (3-4).

This brief sketch of Presocratic and Sophistic positions shows that epistemological discourse in its embryonic form (that is, before the inauguration of dialogic method in Plato) was both literary and rhetorical: literary, because of the emphasis on knowing through recollection, narrative, and storytelling; and rhetorical, because of the emphasis on how the production of discourse on knowledge was tied directly to the understanding and application of language as a modality of persuasion. These perspectives form the foundation from which Plato would launch his counter-position, separating dialectically-derived knowledge and sophistic wisdom into two categories and demarcating sophistry as lacking the political orthodoxy that philosophy in the Platonic sense implied, charging that “the Sophist’s *sophia* is not the right *sophia*, or at least the *sophia* the city needs, since the Sophist often fails to grasp what is the most useful for the city” (Zilioli, 101).¹³ That the epistemological uses of philosophy are directly tied to the needs of the body politic is not only of primary importance throughout Plato’s work, especially in *Republic* and *Theaetetus*—where Plato most directly poses and elaborates the fundamental epistemological question “what is knowledge”?—but is of primary importance for the way that Plato famously suggests in *Republic* 10 that “the imitative poet who aims at being popular”—who’s “*sophia* is not the right *sophia*”—“implants”, through his works, “an evil constitution” in the minds of Athenian citizens; as “a manufacturer of images”, the poet, more sophist than philosopher, is for Plato “very far removed from the truth” (Rep. 10.605a-c).¹⁴

The epistemological positions of the sophists in Plato’s writings are structured as argumentative straw-men, represented throughout the dialogues as incorrect opinions to be

¹³ Zilioli, Ugo. *The epistemology of the sophists: Protagoras*. Durham theses, Durham University. 2002.

¹⁴ See, Myles F. Burnyeat’s “Episteme” (in *Episteme, etc.: Essays in Honour of Jonathan Barnes*. Morison, Ben and Katerina Ierodiakonou, editors. Oxford University Press, 2011) which, following Gilbert Ryle’s example, expands on the demarcation of the ancient divisions between “knowledge that, knowledge how, and knowledge by acquaintance”, which comprise the ‘epistemic troika’, a “codification” of the contrast between these different kinds of ancient knowing, where ‘gnosis’ is closest to ‘knowledge by acquaintance’, and ‘episteme’ as “knowledge that” (3).

refuted and redressed according to Plato's own designs. Although Plato's interlocutors signpost sophistic positions for philosophical takedowns, Plato's method of exposition—the undercurrent literary style of his dialogues—inadvertently reinforces the sophistic style that he works to restrain; rhetorical assent produced through narrative in the dialogues establishes, in an unexpected way, a literary-sophistical structure for knowing in Plato's work. In Plato, the use of literary conventions—rhetorical figuration, ambiguity, soliloquy and dramatized exchanges between interlocutors, to name a few—not only continue the sophistic mode of implementing rhetorical strategies to arrive at knowledge but moreover establish that the division between the sophistic and the philosophical is largely artificial, at least from a rhetorical standpoint.¹⁵ In this sense, *Theaetetus*, for example, is more than a dialogue whose object it is to determine what knowledge is: it is also a case-in-point that philosophical discourse in the ancient world, whether pre-Socratic or post-Platonic, is not without the literary, narratological, and rhetorical conventions that make its epistemological and argumentative movements possible.

Although Plato's approach to philosophy—and his writing on what falls within the subject—affects the trajectory of what the philosophical sciences will become, the rhetorical underpinnings for how philosophical discourses define and delineate what knowledge is continue to feature literary-rhetorical elements for producing meaning according to the logical, persuasive,

¹⁵ See Ch. 3 of George Steiner's *The poetry of thought: from Hellenism to Celan*. New York: New Directions, 2011. The argumentative affinity of Steiner's point with the argument I am attempting to generate has not to do with defending my claims against a choir of academic opponents who would argue to the contrary (that Plato is first a philosopher and not a writer or dramatist) but to recognize that the fundamental division between the rhetorical applications of language in poetry and the rhetorical applications of language in philosophy are evident regardless of disciplinary division. For Steiner, "it is the study of Plato's literary genius, of his supremacy as a dramatist and of the ways in which that genius and supremacy necessarily generate the substance of his metaphysical, epistemological, political and aesthetic teachings"; "there have been ample studies of Plato's initiation and uses of myth", writes Steiner, "but we do not have any literary and philosophically authoritative investigation of the manifold ways in which Platonic thought and Platonism are the products of a *writer*, of a dramatic sensibility and technique second to none in both the tragic and, more rarely, comic or ironic vein. What is missing is any thorough analysis of such complex literary devices" (Steiner, 51). Although my notes here are anything but exhaustive, it is Zwicky, more than any other contemporary poet or philosopher who at least begins to undertake a study of the sort that Steiner suggests (i.e.: *Plato as Artist*).

ethical, historical, and symbolic powers of language: on one hand, epistemological discourse is an account of what epistemology is, has been, and may be, the study of the theory of knowledge according to the methods, validity, and scope of what it means to know; on the other hand, language's rhetorical underpinnings invite the possibility for renewing an understanding of how epistemological discourses function according to the persuasive structures that make knowing possible, an account of what epistemology may be outside of the principles of philosophy.

Although rhetorical differences make up, in some part, the thematic divergences between what qualifies as literature and what qualifies as philosophy in a disciplinary sense, that both share a rhetorical dimension is one of their common features, a common ground that expands the definition of epistemological discourse outside of the strictly analytic, calculative, and logical methods—all categorical designations, not without their rhetorical patterns—that philosophy has traditionally relied upon for its suasive authority. It is not enough to suggest that marking the rhetorical differences between genres creates a correspondence between rhetorical difference and epistemological expression; understanding how the epistemological divergences between disciplines and sub-disciplines—as well as the rhetorical expressions that separate them—affect knowledge (as an outcome of that epistemological framework) also requires the recognition that each generic division itself presupposes any number of a priori and a posteriori influences that could bear upon how an epistemological framework produces certain expressions of knowledge for any given discipline or mode of organized thought; ideologies, mythologies, presuppositions, disciplinary paradigms, biases, misappropriations of existing knowledge, epochal cultural influences, institutional(ized) traditions, and any other number of (un)quantifiable interpretive possibilities affect how epistemology is understood and implicated in the production of knowledge.

A rhetorical approach—which, according to tradition understands itself from the outset as an epistemological framework (recognized, as early as the ‘dissoi logoi’, as neither a wholly comprehensive nor wholly incomprehensive way of framing positions)—helps draw attention to epistemology—not knowledge—as constructed; by extension, a rhetorical orientation helps to clarify that even when knowledge is not justified or true according to the disciplinary values of a discourse community, the structure of that knowledge (the epistemological framework from which it is derived) retains its rhetorical—that is, linguistic, symbolic, or literary—truth. Looking to contemporary poets for whom epistemology is a fundamentally literary concern is not to reprise arguments (or to return, dialectically, to the resultant banishment of poets) from Plato’s *Republic*. The rhetorical posture of poetry is not, as Plato once characterized, one of “fatuous sophistry”, but in the case of Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, of meta-epistemological orientation: each poet’s work represents a sophisticated attempt to work into distinct linguistic structures the contingent relations between language and knowing—not simply as gnosis, certainty, justified belief, or knowledge based on expert consensus—but where language is the fundamental condition of and possibility for not only epistemological discourse but the knowledge and knowing that it implies.

Despite Plato’s effort “to restrain the Gorgianic ambitions of rhetoric” (Lyne & Miller, 168)¹⁶, the idea that rhetoric is “epistemic”—a much more modern concept in the history of rhetoric, introduced by Robert R. Scott in 1967 following Francis Bacon (“that knowledge should be in the service of power”), Thomas Kuhn (“that the historical development of scientific disciplines” are not “governed by logic but influenced by psychology and argumentation”), Michel Foucault (“that power constitutes knowledge”), and Stephen Toulmin (that “rational

¹⁶ Lyne, John and Carolyn R. Miller. “Rhetoric Across the Disciplines” in *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, 2009.

enterprises...have both cognitive and social dimensions”)¹⁷—was developed after the 1980s according to two counterparts: the “rhetoric of inquiry” and the “rhetoric of science” (Lyne & Miller, 168). According to Lyne and Miller, there are several “general issues...pertinent to the relationship between rhetoric and special fields of knowledge”: 1) the “relative incommensurability of different disciplinary discourses”; 2) the role that expertise plays, not only between “a specialist and a field of knowledge” but also between “the specialist and different audiences”, what is called “interactional experience” (Collins & Evans, 2007); 3) the ways that “scientific language and scientific claims chain out across disciplines and across cultures”, where “science seeks public understanding” while at the same time risking becoming “captive to a popular rhetoric”¹⁸; and 4) the contentiousness of the idea of the “disciplinary status of rhetoric itself”, where, on one hand, rhetoric either sufficiently consists enough of its own “subject-matter knowledge” that it constitutes a body of knowledge, or, on the other hand, that rhetoric is more simply “a supplement to the other disciplines” (Lyne & Miller, 169-171). Despite these developments—which would seem to imply a connection between the representation of knowledge in science and the representation of knowledge in literature via rhetorical conventions—the argument for incommensurability necessarily problematizes the less rigorous but more popular idea that literature—or the production of literary knowledge and its interpretation as

¹⁷ Scott, Robert L. “On viewing rhetoric as epistemic.” *Communication Studies* 18.1, 1967: 9-17.

¹⁸ Notice how the parallelistic repetition of “scientific” (x2) and “across” (x2) is figurally symbolic of the dissemination of knowledge from the localized level of expertise to the far-reaching (and perhaps watered-down) level of knowledge commoditized as popularity. The chime between “claims” and “chain” helps to reinforce the parallelism across the line. There is also embedded here a taxonomical gradatio structured as chiasitic analogy: “language” and “cultures”—broad categories—bookend or contain the smaller discrete units of “claims” and “disciplines”; the gradatio (language (large), claims (small), disciplines (small), cultures (large)) are chained together in a way that typifies the ways that knowledge is produced and disseminated: of language, as claims, in disciplines, across cultures. Even in such a compact example, these figures work together to represent a rhetorical pattern intended to typify one way that epistemologies are constructed and knowledge is disseminated.

such—could be reduced to a science, and, vice versa, that scientific discourse could be reduced to the empiricism of the letter, as nothing more than a purely communicative structure.

Incommensurability—“the lack of a common standard for taking the measure of two systems with respect to each other” (Harris, 3)¹⁹—might have functioned as the paradigmatic standard for enabling a fruitful discourse to develop in Plato’s *Republic* between poets and philosophers (or, philosophers and sophists); what may have been incommensurable between philosophers and poets in Plato’s day—namely, that the philosopher seeks after truth whereas the poet, like the sophist, does not seek after truth in the strict sense—is arguably still the case, even though the conditions have drastically changed. For Randy Harris, rhetoric begins “with the speculations into (and, necessarily, out of) language: language as filter, as tool, as medium; first of knowing, and then of distributing what is made known” (Harris, 9), and in the twentieth century, the “rehabilitation” of rhetoric is signified by two primary movements: first, as “a return to Aristotle” (“with his emphasis on argumentation and reason” (Harris, 16)) and second—and more importantly for this argumentative thread—as “an expansion of the Aristotelian synthesis back into the more embracing sophistic view of rhetoric as elemental to all symbolic exchange” (Harris, 16). In this sense, rhetoric is as fundamental to knowledge production in the fields of science and technology as it is to the development of a poetics of epistemology in literature. Contemporary rhetorical theory suggests, however, that “what gets called ‘knowledge’, even in the hallowed realms of science is far less rule-based or data-derived and far more a consequence of interpretation, social construction and rhetorical choice than had previously been imagined” (Herbert, 239).²⁰

¹⁹ Harris, Randy Allen, Editor. *Rhetoric and Incommensurability*. Indiana: Parlour Press, 2005. 3.

²⁰ Simons, Herbert W. “The Rhetoric of Philosophical Incommensurability” in *Rhetoric and Incommensurability*. Randy Allen Harris, Editor. Indiana: Parlour Press, 2005. 3.

Notwithstanding ancient and medieval perspectives on literature and literary writing, the interpretive vantages of modern literary criticism have become increasingly interdisciplinary: the humanist, romantic, and formalist traditions that endured into the twentieth century continued to flower into modernist, New Critical, psychoanalytic, structuralist, historicist, poststructuralist, post-colonial, disability, and feminist theories (among others); these additionally fragmented (through no less interesting or sophisticated) approaches to criticism have developed in the wake of the postmodern challenge to “some aspects of modernist dogma” (Hutcheon, 43), where a new historicizing—which questions “(perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge” (Hutcheon, xii)—is expressed in increasingly heterogeneous ways.²¹ As these interpretive vantages splinter and accumulate—into new materialism, distant reading, critical race theory, cognitive poetics, digital humanities, new aestheticism, and speculative materialism, to name a few²²—they ossify into epistemologies which are then distilled under the broad rubric of interdisciplinary research, where each epistemology becomes an increasingly nuanced form of interpretive “metadiscourse”.²³

²¹ Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.

²² New materialism “encompasses a heterogeneous group of different approaches and theoretical orientations” (Lemke, 2021, 3). See *Diffractional Reading: New Materialism, Theory, Critique*. Merten, Kai, Editor. United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021 and *New Materialist Literary Theory: Critical Conceptions of Literature for the Anthropocene*. Howalt, Kersten and Kai Merten, editors. Of “distant reading”, Franco Moretti suggests that “distance...is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (48)—see *Distant Reading* Verso, 2013. For Pauline Moret-Jankus and Adam J. Toth, “there is no unique matrix of race”; by extensions, race theory “is highly heterogeneous” spanning themes of “monogenism, polygenism, exclusion, racism, inequality” (2)—see *Race Theory and Literature: Dissemination, Criticism, Intersections*. Moret-Jankus, Pauline and Adam J. Toth, editors. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. Cognitive poetics, while not entirely “new” per se, combines gestalt theory, theory of metaphor, and rhetorical figuration as a way of developing the central concept of conceptual blending, which emerges from the work of Lakoff and Johnson (and Kenneth Burke, to some extent) and becomes cemented in the work of Reuven Tsur, Mark Turner, and Peter Stockwell, among others. Digital humanities combines digital technology and computing with the traditional aims of literary criticism and scholarship; new aestheticism continues as “the theoretical discourse which attempts to comprehend the literary” but with an increased focus on considering “the philosophical origins of literary theory” (2, 3). See *The New Aestheticism: an introduction*. John J. Joughin and Malpas, Simon, editors. Manchester University Press, 2003.

²³ Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008. viii.

Metadiscourse implies that there is an interpretive distance between source text and critical methodology: it is a fundamental quality of analysis—and of epistemological framing more generally—where the outcome of a reading is conditioned according to a preconceived idea of value; specific methodologies privilege these interpretive values so that an analysis can produce specific results.²⁴ One can interpret *The Canterbury Tales* according to structuralist, Marxist, rhetorical, or psychoanalytic frames and produce a variety of readings in accordance with the discursive consistencies of each approach. Although this interpretive replicability differentiates criticism from other forms of knowledge production (say, the natural sciences)—the primary differences being the iterability of reading (each time with different results) and the interdisciplinary transference of concepts from one form of criticism to another (for example, applying the rhetorical tropes in Sigmund Freud’s “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” (1924) to Don Paterson’s translation of Antonio Machado’s poem “The Eyes” (1999) as a framework for understanding both texts as meditations on the relations between writing and memory)—what certain schools of literary criticism have in common with teleological discourses is the prescriptiveness that each epistemological set of values presupposes, where each preferred critical approach increases the possibility of predetermined forms of reading. Although the production of thematic readings become reinforced into discursive epistemological practices, each distinction between reader and text presupposes a metadiscursive hierarchy where the reader is drawn teleologically towards the goal of reading in more or less prescribed ways.²⁵

²⁴ For René Wellek, “literary theory, an *organon* of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today”. Wellek, R, Warren A. *Theory of Literature*. Harcourt: Brace, 1949. See also Nicholas Birns’s chapter “Foucault: Deconstructing Categories” in *Theory After Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the early 21st Century*. Broadview Press, 2010: “Theory...is any kind of abstract knowledge or any kind of general principles that are applied to particular circumstances” (45).

²⁵ “In the substantive approach, theory provides a set of themes that are directly imputed or applied to the primary material” from Livingston, Paisley. *Literary Knowledge: Humanistic Inquiry and the Philosophy of Science*. Cornell, 1988. 12.

In *What Literature Knows* (2018), Antje Kley writes that literature and knowledge are “interdiscursive”: whether represented in integrative (“literature may *integrate bodies of knowledge* in order to *confirm, modify, or criticize* them”), anticipatory (where “literature may entertain fields of knowledge that scientific discourses have not yet taken up” or “produce knowledge that is taken up and authorized later by academic discourses (e.g.: psychoanalysis)”), or inaccessible (“specialized bodies of knowledge might remain difficult to mediate or even inaccessible for literary writing”) ways, literature “may participate in and selectively connect other more specialized discursive formations” (Kley, 9).²⁶ Accordingly, a metadiscourse can be established as such by first being an interdiscourse; interdiscursivity implies that literature has in part helped to catalyze the invention of methodological approaches—metadiscourses/epistemologies—within literary criticism, like psychoanalytic, structuralist, or historicist criticism. Although Kley’s suggestion that “literature’s guiding epistemic value is not scientific truth or plausibility but a notion of truth that is built around historically shifting semantics from beauty to coherence and attraction” stands to explore “ways of thinking about...and experiencing the production, reception, evaluation, and reformulation of knowledge”, it seems to reiterate, according to Richard Sha, the “Romantic ideology of seeing poetry”—and literature more generally—“as non-ideological” and thematically indeterminate (Sha, 21).²⁷ Whether through integration, anticipation, or inaccessibility, the interdiscursive perspective that *What Literature Knows* (2018) offers is in the service of describing the relations between literature and knowledge according to cultural change rather than according to the relations between literature and knowledge as distinct expressions of genre.

²⁶ Kley, Antje. “What Literature Knows: An Introduction” in *What Literature Knows: Forays into Literary Knowledge Production*. Kley, Antje and Kai Merten, editors. Peter Lang, 2018.

²⁷ Sha, Richard C. “Imagination” in *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies*. Faflak, Joel and Julia M. Wright, editors. Blackwell, 2012.

How far does interdisciplinary transferability go? Moreover, what *is* transferred? In *Literary Knowledge* (1988), Paisley Livingston writes that the disciplinary dichotomy between a distinctly scientific methodology and literary criticism is “far too tidy to be trusted...for in science *and* in literature we find hypothesis and fact, creation and discovery, the delicate and the correct” (2).²⁸ Hypothesis and fact, however, mean very different things in scientific vs. literary critical modes: they are both evident across disciplines as rhetorical markers, sure, but the structural nuance of their presentation, the methodological differences between genres, and the textual modalities for what constitutes hypothesis and fact in each discourse say just as much about the value and nature of truth in each discipline as the denotative content of each expression. This is especially the case in literary criticism, where each iteration or reading of a text creates the possibility for textual difference—and by extension, new textual truth(s)—to emerge according to the particular turns of language the criticism takes; the truth that this textual difference substantiates is threatened by the possibility of backsliding into existing frameworks for interpretation, which reinforces the methodological consistency between science and criticism. It is not that the disciplinary dichotomy between a scientific methodology and literary criticism is “too tidy to be trusted”, but that despite their shared rhetorical genetics, the replicability of literary criticism—in contrast to the replicability of scientific method—leads to very different expressions of truth in each iteration; they express truth, but their truths are epistemologically incommensurate.

In *Criticism and Truth* (1966), Roland Barthes suggests that “classical criticism forms the naive belief that the subject is a ‘solid whole’, and the relationship between the subject and language is that between a content and an expression” (85).²⁹ In an analogous way, the “naive

²⁸ Livingston, Paisley. *Literary Knowledge: Humanistic Inquiry and the Philosophy of Science*. Cornell University Press, 1988.

²⁹ Barthes, Roland. *Criticism & Truth*. Athlone Press, 1987.

belief” to which Barthes refers reflects the idea that between the reader and the text lies an epistemological decision, the decision to take an interpretive vantage in reading practice (to select an approach to criticism or truth) as a way of satisfying a desired epistemological outcome. Notwithstanding the ostensible discoveries that different interpretive vantages substantiate, each mode runs the risk of becoming a teleological epistemological frame that validates the discoveries that each reading would produce. What is problematic is that epistemological teleology presupposes that a “final secret” of the text is indeed discoverable; what Barthes suggests however, is that “if there is in the work a ‘buried’ and ‘objective’ signified”—a secret code or vantage that could bring the text into a final wholly interpretable form—then “the symbol is nothing but euphemism, literature is nothing but disguising and criticism is nothing but philology” (87).

“Whatever one says about the work”, Barthes writes, “there always remains in it something of language, of the subject, of absence, *just as there was at the moment of its inception*” (87).³⁰ Part of Barthes’s lesson is that despite one’s best efforts to remain epistemologically neutral, approaching a text by way of writing “creates an abyss between criticism and reading, which is the very abyss which all meaning creates between its signifying aspect and the aspect which is signified” (93); in an analogous sense, the iterative repeatability of criticism regardless of epistemological methodological designations ensures the discovery of “a certain intelligibility” that “cannot be a signified” but only a link or series of links in “chains of symbols, homologies of relation”, where “the ‘meaning’ which it is fully entitled to attribute to the work is finally nothing but a new flowering of the symbols which constitute the work” (86-87). In contrast to this “new” criticism, Barthes suggests that traditional criticism establishes “the facts surrounding the work

³⁰ Original emphasis.

but does not establish an interpretive framework for the work itself” (16); following from this—and keeping in line with the increasing fragmentariness of interpretive positions—criticism would come to represent a 1:1 ratio between theory and text, where each text as its own epistemological conundrum would presuppose an entire theory of interpretation for that text and that text only, in and of itself.

Writing around the same time as rhetoric of science theorists suggest the fundamental role that rhetoric plays in the production of discursive knowledge, Livingston’s argument in *Literary Knowledge* (1988) does suggest an equitable counterbalance: on one hand, Livingston defends against “perverse arguments” that would reduce scientific method and discourse as “just rhetoric too”, which according to Livingston is a dogmatically repeated and “ill informed” assertion; for Livingston, the “basic scientific project is not reducible to scientism”, and implicit in Livingston’s remark is the argument that a fundamental incommensurability exists between the production of scientific knowledge and what constitutes literary knowing.³¹ On the other hand, Livingston defends the position that there is indeed “literary knowledge” and that it is of “interdisciplinary relations”, though perhaps not interdisciplinary in the sense previously mentioned (i.e.: that other disciplinary modalities for reading—structuralism, psychoanalysis, new historicism, etc.—are brought to bear on literary texts).

Although Livingston’s suggestion that literary knowledge can only be applied in a narrow sense—“the critical analysis of literary works can have an invaluable heuristic function” by means of refining “the models underwriting research programs within the human sciences”,

³¹ In a similar sense, Jerome McGann iterates this argument in *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (University of Chicago Press, 1989): “the truth-functions of poetry (and of imaginative work in general) operate through the principle of incommensurability. Poetry is not irrational; rather, it is the one form of discourse we have which displays there fact that human reason—the mind—has more comprehensive means for dealing with truth than is suggested by the traditional arguments of philosophy” (7).

contributing “to the crucial process of hypothesis formation”³²—Livingston remarks that positive formulations for how literature produces knowledge (or contains it, or represents it) often result in “negative definitions”:

Critics should be able to argue for the cognitive value of literary knowledge in both major senses; that is, it should be possible to demonstrate the possibility and value of a knowledge of literature, as well as a knowledge in literature...one may experience in this conversation with colleagues from other disciplines, who are usually quick to agree to the cognitive value of literature and its criticism, and who are thus only puzzled by the specialists’ difficulties in saying anything clear and rigorous about this knowledge. At such moments one understands the appeal of purely negative definitions of the literary insight, as in Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Espace littéraire*, where the privileged figure is an Orpheus who must never turn to embrace his Truth, for in that very instant she vanishes into oblivion. Yet to say even this is perhaps already to have said too much, for this kind of literary knowledge remains forever shadowy. (Livingston, 196)

Indeed, much of Livingston’s analysis throughout *Literary Knowledge* is in the negative, especially in the sense that statements on literary knowledge are descriptions of what literary knowing is not: according to Livingston, “the possibility of knowledge *in* literature should not be limited to such broad notions as cognition, meaning making, aesthetic experiences, or *Bildung*. That meaning is possible does not mean that it is true, valid, or important. Nor is a ‘meaningful’ belief equal to ‘knowledge’, except in a loose and self-serving acceptance of the latter” (210). Despite numerous descriptions for what sets literature apart from other disciplines, the idea of literary knowledge for Livingston is limited as supplementary to other forms of research. In terms of literary criticism, the relevance of truth claims in a reading are limited to “what the message is, not the validity of the message itself” (234).

³² “I believe that the question of literary-critical knowledge is to a significant extent distinct from the questions of literary ‘experience’ as a whole, although I would of course not want this distinction to be taken as an absolute disjunction of the two. The reader, then, is reminded that my focus is on literary critical writing viewed as research” (Livingston, 199).

There is, inherent in Livingston's division between "what the message is" and "the validity of the message itself", echoed the division between knowledge and epistemology: on one hand, knowledge can be framed as communication, as message, as the epistemological product or synthesis, whereas epistemology on the other hand is the methodological or disciplinary mechanism that validates or makes possible the communicability of the message as knowledge itself. Livingston's suggestion that the "epistemological value of a literary knowledge"—that literature be "employed to complexify, challenge, and improve the models and hypotheses guiding research within the humanities and social sciences"—is to frame the literary work as a supplement to more broadly conceived and "practical" research endeavours in other disciplines; this line of inquiry into the epistemological standing of literature has been taken up most prevalently in interdisciplinary research on pedagogy, institutional change, decolonization, anthropology/ethnography, and knowledge in the humanities.³³ Although Livingston's conclusion—that the "*epistemic* nature...made by a literary knowledge" is most applicable in research contexts according to how a literary work can provide a "useful and revealing *perspective on the problem*" under discussion (261-262)—clarifies one way that literature contributes to the production of knowledge, it begs the question of the possibility of a non-supplementary model or modality for literary epistemology, a literary epistemology that does not rely for its value on

³³ See, eg: Taylor, James S. *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education*. State University of New York Press, 1998; Webb, Jen. "Seeing, doing, knowing: Poetry and the pursuit of knowledge" in *Text*. 16. Vol 13. 2012. 1-13; Cooms, Samantha, and Vicki Saunders. "Poetic inquiry: a tool for decolonising qualitative research." in *Qualitative Research Journal* 24.1. 2024. 3-22; Maynard, Kent. "Rhyme and reasons: The epistemology of ethnographic poetry" *Etnofoor* 21.2. 2009: 115-129; Franke, William. "Involved knowing: on the poetic epistemology of the humanities" in *The European Legacy* 16.4. 2011. 447-467; and Edwards Price, Sally. "Poetising research to enhance understanding: poetic methodologies and philosophical positioning" in *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 36.4. 2023. 300-309.

whether or not a text can reveal a “useful” perspective on problems in other disciplines along other lines of inquiry.³⁴

In contrast to Livingston’s suggestion that “the critical analysis of literary works can have an invaluable heuristic function” in social sciences and humanities research programs—especially in terms of how literary analysis can contribute “to the crucial process of hypothesis formation”—the question of what makes a literary epistemology different from other forms of epistemological discourse remains, in a broader sense, unanswered (or, if not unanswered, then inadequately consolidated in the form of a study). “It hardly seems a revelation”, writes Livingston, that “it is a scientific model that is held up as the yardstick against which other conceptions [of knowledge] are measured” (20-21); Livingston’s explication of “framework relativism”—the notion that “the ‘knowledges’ produced by science have no truth other than that bestowed upon them by their own autonomous frameworks of concepts and prejudices” (23)—applies as equally to science as it does to literature (and other disciplines) and is a “major tendency within literary theoretical circles” (28). Although what may be sought after in science, literature, or any other discipline is the “best possible approximation of an explanation that, although forever beyond reach, can provide an effective guideline for the progress of human knowledge” (28), Livingston counters—perhaps heavy-handedly—that “literary knowledge is best when it actively and directly articulates its opposition to the present world order, that is, when it attempts to comprehend and to remedy what is wrong” (31).

³⁴ “Literary texts can be very usefully mobilized in relation to the models and assumptions at work in a range of anthropological research programs...I do not think, however, that literary works are likely to illuminate the issues of quantum mechanics, nor that the problems of the latter are particularly revealing in regard to the epistemology of the human sciences...the kind of contribution being discussed here amounts to an *immanent* critique of the hypotheses and models employed in the extra literary research programs, by which I mean to say, not that the role of literary knowledge is purely negative, but that its criticisms and amendments arise in a determinate relation to the existing research strategy and hence are oriented toward its particular anomalies...the literary text and its interpretation must not be used as a playground within which the critic’s imagination toys with with the instruments of science” (Livingston, 262-263).

In some instances, the epistemological biases at work in Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill may indeed represent literary remedies that counterbalance what are interpreted as problematic literary practices: in Zwicky, it may be argued that the development of a gestalt perception of how things “hang together” (in lyric fashion) could be construed as a remedy to other calculative modes of analytical interpretation (which, according to Zwicky, have been productive for society at large but have nonetheless resulted in social inequities and other cultural-hierarchical problematics)³⁵; in Muldoon, it is “the constant soldering of poetic language to the imperatives of the political situation” that results in language—especially poetry—that is emblematically “split against itself” in various etymological and epistemological capacities³⁶; in Hill, it is the obligation to engage intelligently with the manifold difficulties that language—as “genuinely difficult art”—presents that functions as a defence against the tyranny of “simplification”, where, for Hill, it is “genuinely difficult art” that “is truly democratic” (CCW, 408).³⁷ The difference, however, between Livingston’s sense of literary epistemology as a mode of redress (of societal or cultural wrongs, mistakes, or errors) and the poet’s sense is that the poet’s redress is tempered by an insistence against the instrumentalization of art and the thematic reduction of literary work to only political, cultural, theoretical, or aesthetic ends.

³⁵ From Zwicky’s *Once upon a Time in the West*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023: “Western civilization is over. By that I mean the culture that replaced the European Middle Ages, that began with the Renaissance, saw the invention of the printing press and the telescope, fostered the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, engendered capitalism and a host of European empires, persevered through the Romantic Reaction, and went on in the twentieth century to dominate global economic policy and social aspiration, is finished. The signs are everywhere: teetering economies, belligerent populism on the rise, ecological cataclysm on the horizon...At the source of many of the West’s problems is a *way of thinking* that is also responsible for some of its most signal achievements...the West’s style of thought is not politically neutral: it is intensely anthropocentric...it cannot recognize value unless it is monetized...This book looks at how the West’s dominant epistemology has produced critical blindness about reality, blindnesses whose terrifying consequences even now begin to unfold” (viii).

³⁶ Moi, Ruben. *Paul Muldoon and the Language of Poetry*. Brill, 2020. 31.

³⁷ Hill, Geoffrey, and Kenneth Haynes. *Collected Critical Writings: Geoffrey Hill*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

The recognition of the duality of poetry as a mode of redress is representative of an ethical orientation to language (Williams, 102-105), an orientation articulated recently and perhaps most steadfastly in the poetic tradition by Seamus Heaney in his lecture “The Redress of Poetry”³⁸: like Livingston, Heaney recognizes that “poetry is understandably pressed to give voice to much that has hitherto been denied expression in the ethnic, social, sexual, and political life”, a necessary social function of art that is “appealed to constantly”; in contrast, however, to Livingston’s view of poetry—as attempting to “comprehend and remedy what is wrong”—Heaney also recognizes that overemphasizing the function of poetry as “proclaiming and correcting injustices” slights and loses sight of an orientation to poetry “*as poetry...as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means*” (260).³⁹ To balance these opposing tendencies in art and language—between the political and the imaginative, the theoretical and the ethical, the thematic and the multiplicitous—is to recognize a space where poetry may sustain an interpretive basis for a literary epistemology to emerge; by extension, this orientation must also recognize the incommensurability between what are only convenient categorical (and not oppositional) distinctions (politics/imagination, theory/ethics, theme/multiplicity), where, despite the structural convenience supplied by each pair of dichotomous terms, the production of interpretive exegesis in the ethical sense must be “attentive to responsibilities beyond epistemology, and higher than the aesthetic celebration of the spectacle of be-ing or its language” (Cohen, 16). This is why a literary epistemology must necessarily account for literary knowing and not literary knowledge: initially, it is not necessary to do away with the external theoretical apparatuses brought to bear in an interpretation; the idea, however,

³⁸ Williams, David-Antoine. *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

³⁹ Heaney, Seamus. “The Redress of Poetry” *Finders Keepers*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002. 260.

is to balance theoretical considerations through a reorientation to the text as its own epistemological apparatus par excellence.

1.1 INSTRUMENTALITY, THEMATIZATION, & TELEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Several key features differentiate literary knowing from discursive knowledge: 1) for Derek Attridge, literary works have available to them “all the resources of meaningful language”, which frees them from “the limitations imposed on purely instrumental language by the purposes which it must serve”; in this sense, literary works—and by extension their epistemological vectors—are not limited to the “known and fixed parameters and values” that other discursive compositions rely on for their epistemological continuity (Attridge, 119)⁴⁰; 2) literary knowledge is not rendered obsolete by new knowledge in the way that discursive or scientific knowledge is; although there are always paradigm shifts and breakthroughs in literary criticism, the literary artefact is not exhausted of meaning;⁴¹ 3) the literary artefact cannot be altered or adjusted without drastically changing how it works; philosophical, scientific, and other forms of explicative discourse can endure some measure of stylistic alteration while still retaining a consistent aesthetic posture and interpretable meaning; in contrast, a literary artefact is singular: it is a “verbal sequence” that “exists as a literary work only in a reading” (Attridge, 65); 4) a literary epistemology is necessarily

⁴⁰ Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge, 2004.

⁴¹ Miner, Earl. “That Literature Is a Kind of Knowledge” in *Critical Inquiry* 2:3 1976. 487-518: “We distinguish literature as a kind of knowledge belonging to a class we think of as aesthetic. The members of that class may differ at various may differ at various historical periods and stages of civilizations, but literary knowledge does not clearly advance. A sonnet today is not necessarily better than one written a century ago. Knowledge *about* literature does accumulate” (Miner, 491). “The claim of the sciences to the veridical entails verifiability, which is also to say falsifiability. As in all else, so in science, two propositions may be made about the same thing. If so, both may be false or one may be true. Both cannot be true. Normally the new replaces the old...a science that does not bury its predecessors is dead. The opposite is true of literature...Aesthetic knowledge is virtually, not predictively, true. If therefore endures as not being falsifiable. Of course poems may use such things as scientific propositions—pre-‘Copernican’ astronomy for example—that are later falsified. But the virtual status of such an element in a poem saves it from falsification. The virtual or provisional truth of the arts limits as well as distinguishes them. Yet it gives them an astonishing degree of immunity from falsehood” (493-494).

a poetics of epistemology: in addition to other discipline-establishing texts (dictionaries, essays, handbooks, theory, criticism) a literary epistemology—which is articulated via a comprehensive close reading of a poet’s oeuvre—is a critical relay against which the validity of the meaning in a literary work can be measured; the validity of a given reading in this sense is the product of a triangulation between the literary epistemology, the literary text, and the open and changing system that is the field of literary study and artistic production—the system is open and it changes. What remains unchanging are the source texts themselves, which are not objects or artefacts from which knowledge is excavated, extracted, or obtained but are linguistic totalities whose knowing is determined according to an explication of the text’s own paradigmatic relations to an ever-changing field of literary practice. In this sense, it is the reader who, “through the accumulation of individual acts of reading and responding” articulates or co-creates the epistemological salience of the literary work, drawing out not only the text’s “collocation of coded elements” but also responding to the text’s singularity, “a singularity that cannot be analyzed, yet remains recognizable across all repetitions of reading” (Attridge, 79; 87).

For Attridge, what separates literature from other forms of discourse is the way that the literary work resists teleological reading, the treatment “of a text (or other cultural artifact[s]) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness” (Attridge, 9). Part of the danger of producing a dissertation on the poetics of epistemology is implied in the word epistemology itself, which suggests that literary works contribute to the production of knowledge according to the familiar tropes of epistemic progress, productivity, and innovation, designations which are often equated with the cultural and institutional patterns of the advancement of knowledge. Although Attridge concedes that “an

instrumental attitude to literature...is a necessary one for most of our dealings with verbal texts” because it a) it “enables us to process them efficiently”, b) it “prevents the continual re-evaluation of our beliefs and assumptions”, and c) “is in accord with the main function of most of the writing and speech we encounter”, the instrumentalist attitude as seeing “as its task the pragmatic utilization of the work it reads” has in some measure resulted in “the diminishing of careful attention to the specificity of the literary within the textual domain...to the uniqueness of each literary object” (Attridge, 9-10). In contrast to the instrumentalist attitude, literary works are epistemologically valuable for the way that they implicitly question—or, call into question—the finality of discursive epistemological conclusions, encouraging, over the course of reading, the continual refinement of critical sensibility and the production of incommensurable ways of knowing according to the singularity through which literary works represent their ideas.

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson writes that “the analysis of a poem can only be a long way of saying what is said anyhow by the poem it analyses”⁴²; if the poem is a singularity in the way that Attridge and Empson suggest, then it must also be an epistemological microcosm, in that, what the poem presents is a paradigmatic way not only of seeing-as but also as setting the very conditions for its knowing: its presentation of language does not conceal meaning as hidden among or between words but presents everything freely, openly, and plainly; in the Heideggerian sense, this is the truth of the work of art as “unconcealedness” (Heidegger, 54).⁴³ There is an analogical relation between Martin Heidegger’s description of unconcealedness as truth and the experience of reading:

...the open place in the midst of beings, the clearing, is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course. Rather,

⁴² Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New Directions, 2nd Ed., 1949.

⁴³ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971.

the clearing happens only as this double concealment. The unconcealedness of beings—this is never merely existent state, but a happening. Unconcealedness (truth) is neither an attribute of factual things in the sense of beings, nor one of propositions (Heidegger, 54).

Like “the clearing”, reading is “never a rigid stage” that occurs outside of or differently from regular experience: to reinforce the previous example, to assume the possibility of an interpretive distance between reader and text is to assume a material discontinuity between Being and beings; by extension, the “double concealment” that Heidegger’s example describes is the interpretive presumption that behind language something unknown is decipherable and can be brought to light even though the text in question, as a material totality continuous with phenomenological experience, presents itself without concealment.

Attridge, Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, and others have “attempted to understand artworks in ways that challenge” the “separation between the domain of the aesthetic and the search for truth”, contending that “‘truth’ is no longer to be understood...as the privileged preserve of science, of the non- or even anti-aesthetic” (14). For John Picchione, understanding how this position—the “attack on science”—emerges according to literary, historical, and cultural changes can be traced back through “Nietzsche’s antifoundationalist philosophy and to Heidegger[’s] hermeneutics”, where subsequent postmodern works by “Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Vattimo, Baudrillard and others” have contributed to the displacement of scientific knowledge as no longer “grounded in empirical investigations” but as “the result of temporal paradigms which are inevitably entangled in a web of cultural and epochal limitations” (19-20).⁴⁴ The trouble, according to Picchione, is that in this view “science is

⁴⁴ Picchione, John. “Poetry, Science, and the Epistemological Debate” in *TTR* 12:1. 19-30. Picchione is careful to note that prior to the questioning of science—and more importantly “epistemological absolutes”—in literary studies, thinkers in the philosophy of science had proposed corollaries to this notion, including Karl Popper (“falsification theory”), Thomas Kuhn (“scientific paradigms” as “metanarratives”), and Paul Feyerabend (“anarchist epistemology”) (20, n3).

reduced to textualism”; extended to poetry, literature, and the arts, this position negates “the possibility of truth” in any expressive endeavour since “verbal signs inevitably dissolve in a semantic vacuum which makes it impossible to attach a signifier to any signified” (Picchione, 22). According to a postmodern aesthetics, it would be erroneous to suggest, in a teleological sense, that poetry as something other than a science—which is iterative, reproducible, able to “predict physical phenomena”, etc. (23)—could contribute to the production of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinarily-applicable knowledge; literary works are not produced according to the motivations of a scientific community and they do not reveal knowledge that can be subsumed as such according to the methodological or epistemological rubrics of other discourse communities.

It is difficult to tell whether or not the reduction of discourse to textuality is emancipating (i.e.: as enabling a wider array of interpretive approaches to literary works) or imprisoning (i.e.: as suggesting that all writing and communication is reduced to the play of arbitrarily motivated signifiers). Despite this gap between literature and other disciplines, critics have suggested that throughout the twentieth century poetry did not become increasingly scientific but rather evocative (perhaps unsurprisingly) of emerging themes in scientific discourse. For Tim Armstrong, modernist poetry at once incorporated “the findings of science” while at the same time—echoing Livingston—offered “a critique of it”, where the inherent “contradiction” of these aims represents “an ambivalence which is itself one of the keynotes of modernity”, a theme itself (77)⁴⁵; although modernist poetry widely incorporated metaphors and terminology from “science, engineering, and medicine”—“new metaphors for poetic communication”—the development of modern science, Armstrong notes, had been to the benefit of “the material

⁴⁵ Armstrong, Tim. “Poetry and Science” in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* Roberts, Neil, Editor. Blackwell, 2001.

production of poetry” (especially in terms of technological distribution and transmission), not vice versa.

To look perhaps a bit further back than the modernist turn, Jude Nixon writes that the poetry of G. M. Hopkins “reveals an attraction to the emerging science of thermodynamics” (131)⁴⁶:

Hopkins’s tropical discourse, when scientific, is frequently thermodynamic, with expressions of particular angst over entropy...His energy tropes are deployed in such richly nuanced ways that his discourse manifests arguably the most heterogeneous display of nineteenth-century popularization of thermodynamics (149).

Nixon’s argument, while thematically focussed on how thermodynamics is figured variously in Hopkins’s poems, does not suggest that Hopkins’s poetry or essays played an instrumental role in furthering a scientific understanding of the laws of thermodynamics; in a meta-critical sense, Nixon’s arguments—which necessarily serve the purpose of furthering Nixon’s thesis—tend to limit (and in some places distort)⁴⁷ the acoustic particularity and textual nuance of Hopkins’s verse in favour of suggesting that Hopkins’s poetry thematically anticipates the aesthetic rendering of thermodynamic processes in poetry. It would be difficult to suggest—but not impossible—that a poem could influence and inspire the production of knowledge in other fields; the difference, in this case, points again to the formulation of the question: the question ‘can poetry contain or produce scientific knowledge?’ inherently assumes that the comparative frame of discourse as textuality can facilitate the exchange of cross-disciplinary knowledge as rhetorical difference.

⁴⁶ Nixon, Jude, V. “‘Death blots black out’: Thermodynamics and the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins” in *Victorian Poetry*, 40:2, 2002. 131-156.

⁴⁷ “A poem on seminal flow, ‘God’s Grandeur’ assumes a magnetic field across which charges (electricity or ‘lightning’) are conducted...The world receives energy from God’s ‘rod’... ‘gathers to greatness’ is equivalent, then, to seminal flood. Hopkins even personalizes this vital energy flow and containment.” (143-144). This is probably excessive.

It is not impossible that a poem may in chance instances anticipate some aspect of knowledge before it is established as such (i.e.: where a poem might be said to have prefigured what will eventually become factual information on a topic)⁴⁸, however to frame literary inventiveness as operating according to the methodological objectives of science (or any methodologically scientific discipline) would be to establish the possibility of a hierarchical exchange between the two discourses, where art would be reductively interpreted as in the service of distilling knowledge; to subsume one discursive form according to the epistemological objectives (or institutional desires) of another discipline by reducing it to proof, limiting its expressive range, or extracting from it only what is useful would be to commit an interpretive disservice relative to the text.⁴⁹ If the literary work or poem functions as its own epistemological apparatus—the text as simultaneously delineating not only what it knows but as also presenting the textual features that make its knowing possible—then a reading must necessarily articulate the aesthetic and material nuances that make its knowing possible; to interpret whatever ostensible knowledge a text may be understood as demonstrating is a secondary interpretive endeavour.

Take, for instance, G. M. Hopkins’s “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves”: the poem’s words impressionably influence one another, each one modifying and co-creating the sense, meaning,

⁴⁸ There is a difference between poem-as-science and poem-as-prefigure (of what will be established as true): the former is poetry suffused with scientific terminology (which reinforces a view of the metaphorical index of scientific language) (see J. H. Prynne’s “The *Plant-Time Manifold* Transcripts”); the latter suggests that without foreknowledge, the poem records some aspect of science that can be viewed, eventually, as factually evident. The latter—poem-as-prefigure—is perhaps always the case: it is the work of interpretation which would prove the poem true; the knowledge that is presupposes, however, is both true and not true, since knowledge in the scientific sense, is overwritten. That a poem might prefigure some aspect of quantum mechanics, for example, can only be true if quantum mechanics is truly paradoxical, since the language of the poem is inherently paradoxical (ontologically referential/self-referential) itself. In another way, if Hopkins’ revelatory poetry is truly revelatory in the ontological sense, then it will be proven as such but it will have been too late to have known.

⁴⁹ The alternative—to read science as art—is undertaken by rhetoric of science scholars, though perhaps not in a literary-critical sense; to some degree this critical inversion is adopted by Zwicky in her readings of philosophy as art.

and particularity of each word around it, the poem's first line self-reflexively demonstrating the memorability of its specificity through lexical approximation:

EARNEST, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous, ... stupendous
 Evening strains to be tíme's vást, | womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
 Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height
 Waste; her earliest stars, earl-stars, | stárs principal, overbend us⁵⁰

In the first line, the vowels of seven attributive adjectives resonate, their permutations exerting collective pressure down the line, culminating in the next line on the noun "evening". Metaphorical vehicles "womb", "home", and "hearse" (as enclosed or enclosing spaces in a compressed life-cycle) invert the previous line's adjective-noun modification, establishing a continuity between opposing temporalities, of the brevity of dusk as it strains, either into or against, "tíme's vást...night". The combination and repetition of parts of speech "fond" (attrib. adj.) "yellow" (adj.) "hornlight" (n.) "wound" (v.) "to" (prep.) "the west" (det., n.) are mirrored across the break in the third line in their corresponding doubles "wild" (adj.) "hollow" (adj.) "hoarlight" (n.) "hung" (v.) "to" (prep.) "the height" (det. n.), while "night" tethers together more securely "(horn)light", "(hoar)light", and "height" in their shared rhyme of the long vowel /ī/ and alliterative quality. The "er" sound of the neologism "earl-stars" fastens together acoustically similar "earliest", "earnest", and "earthless" while "-stars" laterally yokes "earliest stars" with "stars principal". In the poem's first four lines, words are organized according to the compressions and expansions of the sounds and senses of the language, splitting and joining together in a process of complex lexical co-modification both enacted and implied by variations and deviations of words in relation to their origins, spatially (i.e.: on the page), grammatically (according to parts of speech and usage), and thematically.

⁵⁰ Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie. editors. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967. 97.

The heavy alliteration in Hopkins's poem invokes an incantatory property by continually emphasizing, through intonation and stress, pairs of words whose letters are proximally doubled⁵¹:

Fire-féaturing heaven. For earth | her being has unbound, her dapple is at an end, as-
 tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self ín self steedèd and páshed—quíte
 Disremembering, dísmémbering | áll now. Heart, you round me right
 With: Óur évening is over us; óur night | whélms, whélms, ánd will end us.
 Only the beak-leaved boughs dragonish | damask the tool-smooth bleak light; black,
 Ever so black on it. Óur tale, O óur oracle! | Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wind
 Off hér once skéined stained véined variety | upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck
 Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—black, white; | right, wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind
 But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút these | twó tell, each off the óther; of a rack
 Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, | thóughts agáinst thóughts ín groans grínd.

From the modifier “Fire-féaturing” onward, the poem repeatedly makes use of similarly sounding words: the “as-” of “as-/tray” physically astray from itself, with “tray” enjambed in line below next to “aswarm”, organized in a way that links the two from afar. The /θ/, /r/, and /o/ sounds in “Thoughter” are compressed into “throngs”, both of which are closely followed the same two selves—“self” and “self”—with “disremembering” reflexively dismembering itself (by removing its anterior prefix “re-”) into “dismembering”.

Line by line, these patterns—emblematic figures exemplifying how poetry creates and de-creates—continue throughout the remainder of the poem, usually as pairs of words that play variously against one another: “round” and “right” (rhyming with “night”); “whelms” and “whelms” (with “will end” inverting the “el” sound); “beak(-leaved)” and “boughs”; “dragonish” and “damask”; “bleak” and “black” (“b” echoing from “beak-” and “boughs”); “Our” and the vocative “O our oracle!” (which anchors the allusion to the Sibyl from the title); “waned” and “wind”; “skéined” and “stained” (with the diphthong /éj/ of “skéined” markedly echoing (acoustically ‘stained’) in “véined”; “part”, “pen”, “pact” (monosyllabically abrupt at the end of

⁵¹ Sperling, Matthew. *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words*. Oxford University Press, 2014. 29.

their line); “flocks” and “folds”; “right”, “wrong”, “reckon”, and “reck” (with the ghosted “w” of “wrong” helping to support the dichotomy); “wáre”, “world”, and “where” (/we(ə)r/ sliding into “world”, but not sliding smoothly out); “selfwrung” and “selfstrung” (reminiscent of “self” and “self”); “sheathe-”, in which the word ‘heath’ sits “shelterless”; “thóughts” and “thoughts” (marked and unmarked (ó, o)); and finally, in “groans” and “grínd.” The sounds of the poem precede and organize the senses of its words, the poem exhibiting a uniquely revelatory knowing—of creation? of poetry itself?—that at once refrains from the conclusiveness of external logical design and structures language in rhetorically sophisticated ways, ways which cannot be observed according to a predetermined heuristic method.

One of the hallmarks of literary texts is that they necessarily resist the limits implied or imposed by teleologically (or methodologically) predetermined interpretive modes (Attridge, 7).⁵² It is why, despite the production of any number of interpretive schemes or vantages developed throughout the history of theory and criticism—seeking “to comprehend the text by relating it to known and fixed parameters and values”—literary texts work to suspend or exceed “instrumentality, a blocking of the aesthetic urge to separate form from content and to assign content alone to the domain of ethics and politics” (Attridge, 119); to read in an instrumental way is to arrive at an interpretive position where the singularity of literature is reduced, through paraphrase, to the economy of the communicable. Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have written most extensively on the relations between ethics and language. In Levinas, it is the face-to-face encounter as ethical demand—an analogue for the responsibility between self and not-self—that characterizes ethics as first philosophy; in Derrida, it is logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence that characterize the discursive hegemony of knowledge production, an

⁵² Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge, 2004.

epistemological orientation challenged by concepts like trace and differ $\acute{a}$ nce, which call into question the stability of meaning within a given discourse. Without risking a long excursus into positions, key terms, arguments, and developments—for which a great deal of insightful scholarship already exists⁵³—what is relevant to the discussion of literature as resisting the tendency towards theme (a quality of reductive reading) is an ethical and not just an aesthetic designation, the idea that “the thematization of the singular reduces all individuality to being a case or instance of a nameless universal” where “the individual is recognized only insofar as it illustrates, as an example, the conceptual structures by which it is enclosed” (Gunkel, 52).⁵⁴

For Charles Bruns, who adapts elements from both Levinas’s and Derrida’s philosophies for understanding the ethical relations between art and language, poetic language “is not just an inert mass” or an “opaque aesthetic ‘veil of words’” but an “event that interrupts the logical or dialectical movement of signification” that, in doing so, “opens up a dimension of exteriority or worldlessness—a world without things...things free of the world”⁵⁵; what is significant about this orientation is that “the work of art”—“the *modernist* artwork”, in this case—“does not represent things” but instead “*materializes* them...presents things in their *materiality* and not as representations”, as exemplifying its striving for “the emancipation of singularity from the

⁵³ See Jill Robbins’s *Altered Reading: Levinas And Literature*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999; Seán Hand’s *Emmanuel Levinas*. Routledge, 2009; Richard A. Cohen’s *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas*. Cambridge University Press, 2004; Adriaan Peperzak’s *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Northwestern University Press, 1997; Simon Critchley’s *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 3rd Ed.; Michael Eskin’s *Ethics and Dialogue in the works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel’shtam, and Celan*. Oxford University Press, 2000; Colin Davis’s *Levinas: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996 and more recently *Literature, Interpretation and Ethics*. Routledge, 2024; Robert Eaglestone’s *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997; and, Derek Attridge’s *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction’s Traces*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

⁵⁴ Gunkel, David J. *Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology*. Purdue University Press, 2007.

⁵⁵ Bruns, Gerald. *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy*. Fordham University Press, 2007. 178.

reduction to an order of things”(212).⁵⁶ Although this orientation would displace “knowing and making visible” as the ideal objectives of not only the work of art but also the aesthetics of epistemology, it might also be that “knowing and making visible” as “the work of intentional consciousness” (Bruns, 2007; 179-180) has also represented a historical and categorical misapprehension about the function of the work of art.

“Words”, writes Bruns in *The Material of Poetry* (2005), “are not the ideal objects they are said to be in logic, linguistics, and philosophy of language; they are things made of sounds, letters, and diacritical marks but also of bits and pieces of other words, morphemes, phonemes, and homophones that are embedded historically in heterogeneous contexts of usage”:

The boundaries that separate words from one another (and, indeed, from things) are not logical or even determinate, so perhaps we should not think of meanings as ideal objects, either...forget the distinctions between letter and spirit. Only at the level of their materiality do words connect with things. (83)⁵⁷

“One has to imagine”, writes Bruns (following Levinas), “a poem that seeks proximity with things and not a cognitive transcendence that grasps or contains them or makes them transparent to view”; in terms of poetry as the expression—“the centre and circumference” (Shelley)—not of knowledge but of its own paradigmatic epistemological framing, it is the manifold (and perhaps unexpected) rhetorical relations among words in a poem that give salience to its knowing.

For Jerome McGann, the “truth-experience of poetry is always transactional”, that is, “social”:

a poem’s incommensurability is replicated at the level of reception...what we call ‘context’ is the transactional dimension within which the bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason plays itself out...in this frame of reference we shall find that poetry possesses ideological investments, and that within its fictional space it still delivers—sometimes forthrightly, sometimes in ciphered texts—opinions,

⁵⁶ Bruns, Gerald. “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Simon Critchley and Bernasconi, Robert, editors. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁵⁷ Bruns, Gerald L.. *The material of poetry: sketches for a philosophical poetics*. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2005.

ideas, even *propositions*. Unlike other kinds of discourse, however, poetry's expositions and arguments are always set in their entire context of controversy. That interactive field opens the text to many readings—co-operative and descriptive reasons, analytical and dissenting readings, readings that move upon the text at strange diagonals, or that leap away from the text altogether in imaginative flights of their own.⁵⁸

“Poems may be at the mercy of their readers”, continues McGann, “but readers find themselves equally at the hazard of the texts” (8).⁵⁹ Although poems are “first of all, acts of representation” that “are begun and carried forward in specific socio-historical circumstances”, they are also artifacts of “historicity”, influenced by the “degrees to”, “vantages from”, and “emphases according to” which they have been read; for McGann (as for Bruns) “the interpretation of poems is not a revelation of meaning but a history thereof, a ‘matter of facts’ (though not only a matter of facts)” (McGann, 132). “Poetry and the meanings of poetry” are not equal to one another; “their histories”, McGann suggests “are open-ended in all three phases of their temporalities—in their futures, obviously, but in their pasts and their presents as well” (133). In a contrasting sense, Robert Scruton writes that:

poetry transfigures what it touches, so that it is revealed in another way. If it does not do so it is not truly poetry, but merely rhetoric. There is a test of the value of poetic language and this test is that of truth...as revelation, as the unconcealing of what is, in our instrumental and scientific ways of dealing with the world, hidden from us. (154)

⁵⁸ “It is an illusion of scholars to think that whereas a special privilege—the possibility of rigour and precision—lies within the range of textual and bibliocritical discourse, it stands beyond the reach of hermeneutics, which is a house built of sand. This illusion is based on various misconceptions, the most prevalent of which holds that so-called positive knowledge, factual information, and documentary materials provide the basic ground of stability in critical thinking. The truth is in fact far more difficult and elusive. The truth is that all forms and states of knowledge, including factual and documentary knowledge, are mediated in precise and determinate ways. These mediations introduce determinate—and hence critically specifiable—instabilities into every kind of investigation. Scholarship is interpretation, whether it is carried out as bibliocritical discourse or a literary exegesis. Though we scholars like to believe that one is prior to the other—though we are told, for example, by René Wellek that textual studies are ‘preliminary operations’ to interpretive work—this idea is at best a specialized hypothesis for programmatic work, and at worse a deep critical illusion” (98) in McGann’s *The Textual Condition*. Princeton University Press, 1991.

⁵⁹ McGann, Jerome. *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989): “Poetry’s negative or critical awareness emerges”, according to McGann, “because it has embraced ‘knowledge’ in the modern scientific sense of that term. That is to say, poems have factive dimensions which it is essential to ‘know’ before one can begin to approach their truth-contents” (131).

Poetry and rhetoric need not be framed as an antagonistic pair. Their conflation here represents a hierarchical shift from rhetoric as a mode of methodological enframing to rhetoric as a modality of expression. What is notable, however, is that Scruton's definition that the "test of the value of poetic language" is based on poetry's revelatory quality. This is not problematic per se, but it may only be half of the story: poems are not only valuable according to their exemplariness as singularly-wrought compositional structures that may, under certain circumstances, reveal something previously unknown; the poem's value is further secured by the demand it imposes on a reader, a demand to re-conceptualize truth in a way that does not rely for its stability on its continuity with external epistemological frameworks. In the end, art may not reveal or know anything teleologically verifiable or true about the world; what it does know and reveal, however, are the mechanisms involved in its purported knowing, the epistemological frameworks—which may or may not emphasize the rhetorical consistencies and contingencies of language—that make whatever it does, can, or may communicate possible.⁶⁰

Although investigations of epistemology in both literary and rhetorical studies have traditionally argued that poetry communicates or represents knowledge allegorically or thematically through "myth", "memory", and "experience" (Tsur, 2017; Gourgouris, 2003; Jenkins, 2012)⁶¹, ethically-oriented criticism—which orients literature in terms of "alterity", "singularity", "response-ability", "proximity" (Robbins, (1999); Attridge (2004), Williams (2009);

⁶⁰ See: Scruton, Roger. "Poetry and Truth" in *The Philosophy of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2015). In "Poetry and Truth", Scruton notes that "the truths...revealed by art, are truths about us, about the archaeology of consciousness" (150); where Scruton equates "the truths...revealed by art" as "the archaeology of consciousness", I have equated the truths revealed by art as the epistemological mechanisms that generate art's purported knowing.

⁶¹ Tsur, Reuven. *Poetic Conventions as Cognitive Fossils*. Oxford University Press, 2017; Gourgouris, Stathis. *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era*. Stanford, 2003; Jenkins, Nicholas. "Poetry as Knowledge" in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton, 2012.

Bruns (2018))⁶²—shows a movement away from a conception of literature as either reproducing or confirming existing “knowledge claims” and towards poetry as a figure (as I am suggesting, an epistemological figure) that traces the formal lines involved in thinking through epistemological themes but doing so while necessarily avoiding, resisting, or evading the reductive tendency towards arrival at a conclusive interpretive vantage, a vantage which would obliterate the possibility of continued engagement with the work of art, a vantage that represents the difference between literary knowing and language as producing knowledge.

One of the mechanisms by which thematic totalization occurs—the “reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term” (Levinas, 43; 1969)⁶³—in literature is through mimesis, the imitative representational dimension of language that suggests an intrinsic link between language and its referents (see, eg: the *Cratylus*). At its core, mimesis implies a kind of philosophical essentialism: as a theoretical term, “mimesis” presupposes (for literature at least) that in instances of representational troping (i.e.: where mimesis is interpreted as evident in a text, or, where the tenets of a theory or literary epistemology, say, psychoanalysis, is implied as an interpretive apparatus) attributes (external to reality, a priori, or ascribed qualities) are copied vis-à-vis the work’s imitation of an ideal quality or characteristic.⁶⁴ Poetry as mimesis—as representing external concepts or structures—could be best described as a “flawed

⁶² Robbins, Jill. *Altered Reading*. University of Chicago Press, 1999; Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge, 2004; Williams, David-Antoine. “Tête-à-tête, Face-à-face: Brodsky, Levinas, and the Ethics of Poetry” *Poetics Today*. Duke University Press, 2009; Bruns, Gerald. *Interruptions: The Fragmentary Aesthetic in Modern Literature*. University of Alabama Press, 2018.

⁶³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. trans. Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1969.

⁶⁴ “Following Plato—or, in the event, Aristotle, who found a place for poetry in his organon, or rule of discourse, by reconceptualizing it both as a species of cognition (mimesis) and as a kind of consecutive reasoning (plot)—the justification of poetry became the traditional task of allegory, which is a philosophical way of reading nonphilosophical texts by construing them so as to make them coherent with prevailing true beliefs. Henceforward poetry could only justify itself by celebrating or supplementing conceptual worlds already in place” (177-178) from “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings” in Gerald Bruns’s *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly*. Fordham University Press, 2007.

reproduction”; in this sense, mimetic poetry implies “no knowledge and no understanding” of the things it reproduces (or is seen as reproducing).⁶⁵ Consistent with the essentialist perspective, a mimetic text would represent some external quality that the text captures as a feature of its representativeness. What may be fallacious (or indeed, irrecoverable) for this orientation towards language is that it assumes that words (and by extension the texts they constitute) strive only to represent qualities and characteristics outside of themselves. An essentialist orientation would maintain that regardless of the unique features that the poem expresses—including its knowing quality—there is an essential, attributive quality being mimed (i.e. an ideal or “perfect” act of speech). This orientation disrupts the potential for reading how a poem’s knowing is structured according to the singularity of its expression, an interpretive frame that draws the poem’s performance back into the representational mode, dislocated from a view of the poem as the fulfillment of its own linguistic accomplishment.

In both philosophy and the poetic tradition, many attempts have been made to construe poetry as a knowledge-producing discourse: knowledge in poetry has been widely interpreted as “mythological” (Craig, 1982), “divine” (Modesto, 2015), “practical” knowledge (Fitch, 2018), as a “knowledge of making” (Janscó, 2019)), and “fictive” (Schaeffer, 1999; 2010).⁶⁶ However, privileging poetry—or indeed literature—“as the embodiment of knowledge”, at least in a scientific sense, is not only suggestive of “a retrograde cultural stance” but is also “sharply limited” in epistemological perspective (Geuss, 2003; Jenkins, 2012).⁶⁷ The difficulty in construing

⁶⁵ Collobert, Catherine in *Plato and the Poets*. Brill, 2011. 53.

⁶⁶ Cairns, Craig. *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry*. Routledge, 1982; Modesto, Filippa. *Dante’s Idea of Friendship: Transformation of a Classical Concept*. University of Toronto Press, 2015; Fitch, John G. *The Poetry of Knowledge and the ‘Two Cultures’*. Palgrave, 2018; Janscó, Daniella. *Twentieth-Century Metapoetry and the Lyric Tradition*. De Gruyter, 2019; Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. *Why Fiction?* University of Nebraska Press, 2010.

⁶⁷ Geuss, Raymond. “Poetry and Knowledge” in *Arion* 11.1. Boston University Press, 2003; Jenkins, Nicholas. “Poetry as Knowledge” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton, 2012.

that poetry is a knowledge-producing discourse—a position that has been represented in philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger), literary theory and criticism (McGann, Vendler, von Hallberg) and the science of ideas (Steiner)—and is predicated on the essentialist perspective, is of a double valence: language, being “neither strictly referential nor strictly performative” still tends either toward reference or performance:

When the referential is separated from the performative and professed as the standard of knowledge, the result is positivism in method. When the performative is separated from the referential, and professed as the standard of comprehension, the result is rhetoric. The first leads to formal logic and rigorous inductive and deductive procedures, the second to absolute interpretive freedom. I have argued here that logic and rhetoric, inductive and deductive procedures, and interpretive freedom and constraint, subsist in a complex relationship that defines the nature and function of reasoning in literary criticism. (Suresh, 233)⁶⁸

Insofar as words and texts may be conceived as mimetic—as imitating objects or things in the world (or, somehow, conceptually beyond it)—it is also conceivable that words may be perceived otherwise, words as connected internally, comparatively, epistemologically (especially where knowing—not knowledge-production—is understood as operating anterior to the poem and not according to external influences); mimesis fails to account for language that might be seen as turning, at least to some observable degree, reflexively back upon itself. For Jill Robbins, (following Paul de Man) the mimetic would only count as one of the available modes of artistic expression rather than as its only available mode of expression:

if mimesis were no longer *the* privileged trope for artistic making but simply one trope among others, then it would be, as de Man suggests, like paronomasis or punning, where language imitates sound on an *intralinguistic* level, merely an

⁶⁸ Raval, Suresh. *Metacriticism*. The University of Georgia Press, 1981.

example of language's choosing to imitate a nonverbal entity with which it does not necessarily have anything in common.⁶⁹

In this instance, language as “choosing to imitate a nonverbal entity” emphasizes an interpretive frame emancipated from the extrinsic essentialist perspective, where punning (the word as turning self-reflexively back upon itself) competes with mimesis (language as representation) as one trope of artistic making among others. The effects of this view—emancipating a view of language as only representational—reinforces analogical rather than essential linkages between words and their referents without assuming a strictly natural or genetic connection holding the two together.

Framed this way, language and literature can be reimagined as functioning in a capacity other than the mimetic trope suggests, literature as complicating the tendency to view language as only externally referential. Without an alternative to the strictness and restrictiveness of the mimetic (and by extension representational) trope in language, what could be made of rich figurative abstractions or conceptual and metaphorical associations between words, instances where poetic language may affect or refer (rhetorically, stylistically, etc.) to itself to the point where the expressiveness of its terms exceed expression itself? The resultant epistemological shift that this view creates—of language and literature as producing meaning other than mimetically—suggests that although arguments for literary texts as epistemological constructs (as productive of knowledge) can be propositionally valid and proven according to a posteriori reasoning, the

⁶⁹ Original emphasis. In *Allegories of Reading* Paul de Man supports this view similarly, saying that “to the extent that language is conceptual, it always already speaks about language and not about things” (152). Barbara Johnson’s gloss on Paul de Man’s “central insight is that language, since it is (to use Raymond Williams’ term) *constitutive* of the human, cannot itself be entirely ‘human’”; “It is neither inside nor outside the subject, but both at once. As the ground of possibility of expressive intentionality, language cannot itself be entirely reduced to interpretability. This does not mean that language *never* means, but rather that beyond the apparent meaning, and even beyond the suppressed or hidden meanings (unconscious, poetic, ideological, counterdiscursive), there can always be a residue of functioning - which produces effects - that is not a *sign* of anything, but merely the outcome of linguistic rules, or even of ‘the absolute randomness of language’.” (A world of difference, 6). See Johnson, Barbara. *A World of Difference*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

performative dimension of literary epistemology is inaccessible (or only partly accessible) to the mimetic framework for knowing. Literary knowing is as much comprised of what language says it knows and how—i.e.: according to what linguistic, rhetorical, mimetic, acoustic, etc. mechanisms—it signifies its knowing as it is, by meta-epistemological extension, comprised of how it knows what it says it knows.

1.2 PERSPECTIVES: LITERARY KNOWING IN THEORY & CRITICISM

“It is an open and living question”, writes Zachary Tavlin, “whether poetry criticism can furnish a valid epistemology, a system of formal processes that satisfactorily describe the act of thinking, especially where in the difficult cases where thought reaches a limit condition, where it can no longer determine its own methods of justification” (4-5)⁷⁰. In a recent issue of *Modern Philology* titled “Thinking Poems, Poems Thinking” (2024), articles by Tavlin, Marjorie Levinson, Marshall Brown, and Aaron Kunitz (and others) explore how poetic knowing is different from other ways of knowing. “That poems think”, writes Tavlin, “is the broadest assumption” of all of the authors in the collection; Tavlin suggests that if “poems are cognitive prosthetics”, then “our critical task” is to “describe, evaluate, and even celebrate poetry’s medial specificities and differences from its others, especially its close generic neighbours in artful deliberation” (3). Tavlin points out the “distinctiveness of poetry” in contrast to “other modes or discourses of writing”, saying that

poetry orients readers to the world in a certain way or coaxes them into a certain type of being. It makes us more empathetic, imaginative, creative, attentive, or receptive. These claims augur the possibility, if not the necessity, of figuring out what kind of thing poems are, what kinds of essential features poems share, the necessary and sufficient conditions for being poems and nothing else. And cognition, its processes and results, is one such lever for marking poetry as distinct from other modes or discourses of writing—from prose fiction, from analytic

⁷⁰ Tavlin, Zachary. “Introduction: Thinking Poems, Poems Thinking” in *Modern Philology* 122:1. University of Chicago Press, 2024.

philosophy, from mathematical proofs, from the news, from diaries or prayers or legal briefs. (Tavlin, 12)

Tavlin argues that for Charles Altieri “the mental states evoked or produced by poetry are different...than those our ready-to-hand cognitive models are built to get a grip on” (3). Following from this, Tavlin continues that “poetry is not an immediate transcription of its maker’s thought but *thought made*, not only an objectification of prior acts of thinking but an artifactual instance of a cognitive process that solicits and includes readings”, where “strong critical readings play thought back, rerecording the poem’s leaps, turns, and condensations in protoconceptual terms that are new but not invented *ex nihilo*” (Tavlin, 4).

Tavlin’s portmanteau “artifactual” is a particularly telling formulation for what a poem may be: like all writing, a poem is constructed of language that bears some measure of arbitrary relation to things in the world; the poem is also a formal structure, especially to the degree that despite its inherent arbitrariness language it retains its factual anterior logics, rhetoric, and textual modalities for saying. Although questions of how poems function epistemologically might help, as Tavlin suggests, to further “a theory of mind that remains incomplete until we test it against the specific modes of attention poetry activates”—especially from the perspective of cognitive poetics as a discipline—one wonders in a contrasting and analogous way how the development of a poetic epistemology might also help further the thesis that poetry calls into question the very idea of epistemological closure and completion. It would seem that despite the importance and novelty of the questions being posed in this collection of essays, the question of how a poem resists these tendencies is far less common (and perhaps yet still more urgent) according to the idea that literature should necessarily serve an external (instrumental, social, or cultural) purpose, especially in terms of its situatedness among other disciplines.

Strictly speaking, poetry cannot be supplementary outside of the orientation that all language is, in an extended sense, supplementary. Despite the emphasis on arguing for “a theory of mind that remains incomplete until we test it...”, Tavlin concedes that “this is not a neuroaesthetic approach to literary studies, nor are we borrowing methods and vocabularies from cognitive science” (6). Questions about poetry and epistemology are never without an air of provisionality, and whether or not that provisionality can be attributed to “how and where poetic thinking goes (or does not, maybe even cannot, go” (Tavlin, 6)) speaks to the singularity of expression that symbolizes poetry’s difference from other discourses as well as the role that criticism and reading play in the production of that difference.

Similarly to Tavlin’s suggestion that poetry is “not an immediate transcription of its maker’s thought but *thought made*”, literary critics and theorists have focussed on the development of a conception of poetic language understood as not merely descriptive and representational but as constructed, performative, and textually crafted. The rhetorical particularities of style as an expression of performative difference has had significant epistemological results: for George Steiner, philosophical writing is “perennially” threatened “by the temptation of the poetic”; “in both philosophy and literature”, writes George Steiner, “style is substance”⁷¹:

Rhetorical amplitude and laconic contraction offer contrasting images and readings of the world. Punctuation is also epistemology. Within philosophy resides the perennial temptation of the poetic, either to be made welcome or to be rejected. The nuances of tension and interaction are manifold. Seemingly disparate teachings are made contiguous by affinities with voice...the crossings need not be those of specific doctrine. (Steiner, 37)

In Steiner’s view, both philosophy and poetry share the rhetorical resources that structure meaning: if “no philosophic proposition outside formal logic is separable from its semantic means

⁷¹ “The Platonic dialogues and letters”, for Steiner, “are performative literary acts of surpassing richness and complication” (52). In *The Poetry of Thought: from Hellenism to Celan*. New Directions, 2011.

and context” (52), it follows that literature and philosophy’s “performative means are identical” (10). Whether reading Wittgenstein and Heraclitus or Samuel Beckett and Shakespeare, the philosophical and the poetic are, for Steiner, thematically, structurally, and rhetorically saturated with one another.⁷² Just as Parmenides registers “a poet’s awareness” of the language he uses “to dramatize, to ‘perform’ his central thesis of conflict leading toward harmonic resolution”, for Steiner, Beckett’s work evinces “echoes out of Spinoza and Schopenhauer”, the “barest bones of language...made resonant” (37). By extension, Steiner suggests that Heraclitus’ “abstractions are radically sensory and concrete”, and in a literary sense “enact...perform thought where it is still, as it were, incandescent—the trope of fire is unavoidable” (32); contrastingly, in the prison monologue of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* is “rendered, unforgettably”—writes Steiner—Georg Lukács critical-philosophical inquiry: how “can grammar externalize the transit from consciousness to self-consciousness and then to reasoned conceptualization when this transit takes place both within the immediacy of the self and in encounters with others?” (Steiner, 92). On one hand, language as textual material provides the grounds for mimetic troping and performative self-reference to occur in both poetry and philosophy (albeit, in differing quantities). On the other hand, the literary and the philosophical both contain and enframe one another on a discursive basis; that there is no clear division, in terms of rhetorical continuity, between generic structures of expression in language is to understand that the lines between language as reference and language as performance are epistemological designations that proceed according

⁷² “Philosophy and literature” for Steiner, “occupy the same generative though ultimately circumscribed space. Their performative means are identical: an alignment of words, the modes of syntax, punctuation (a subtle resource). This is as true of a nursery rhyme as it is of a Kant Critique. Of a dime novel as of the *Phaedo*. They are deeds of language. The notion, as in Nietzsche or Valéry, that abstract thought can be danced is an allegoric conceit. Utterance, intelligible enunciation is all. Together they solicit or withstand translation, paraphrase, meta phrase and every technique of trans mission or betrayal” (10). This dissertation answers “No” to Steiner’s prompt: “Can any cognitive or epistemological system be dissociated from its stylistic conventions, from the genres of expression prevalent or under challenge in its time and milieu?” (11).

to critical sensibility. Steiner's "style is substance" is as much an invitation to recognize the division between mimesis and performance as it is to recognize one of language's chief epistemological dualities.

In keeping with the characteristic iterability of literature (and of literary criticism as a parallel disciplinary endeavour), it should come as no surprise that the scholarly emphasis on the themes of literary knowing—thinking poems and poems thinking, the poetry of thought, poets thinking, how knowing is expressed in literature, etc.—shows that there is no general unified theory for expressing formulaic epistemological relations between literature, cognition, and knowledge; each author's expression of these relations represents the development of an epistemological frame comprised of both intra-disciplinary possibilities (i.e.: the different kinds of critics that literary criticism as a discipline can produce) as well as constraints (i.e.: the different kinds of poets that authors read).

Those who write on literature and epistemology delineate the terms of what constitutes formal literary knowing in a variety of ways. In "Involved Knowing: On the Poetic Epistemology of the Humanities" (2011) William Franke calls poetry "the matrix of knowledge in all fields", and although Franke distinguishes between scientific knowledge (which seeks to "neutralize historical and cultural contingencies") and humanistic knowledge (which focusses "precisely on... subjective and historical factors"), the position represents a stance that re-romanticizes poetry as "the centre and circumference of knowledge" (Shelley) and not as something that exceeds those constraints.

As a corollary, John Picchione describes the problem of representing or reproducing knowledge from other fields in poetry: where "poetic cognition is compared to the discourses produced in a philosophical, political, or sociological context" a tautological problem arises—

poetry becomes “redundant or, at best, an ancillary activity” (25).⁷³ Picchione’s resolution of this tautological problem begins with “a conception of poetry as an activity centred around the materiality of language and the rupture of the linguistic norm”, poetry as “a disruptive force that puts in motion new cognitive dimensions” (26). Picchione settles on the idea that “poetry becomes the great intermediary between language and reality—not in the sense that it reproduces it, but in the sense that it is able to bring to consciousness aspects of reality which were otherwise not immediately accessible” (26). As for Attridge, in other words, so too for Picchione: poetry is a “techne” that “challenges” the “fixed boundaries and firm predictions” of established cognitive processes for knowing (Attridge, 2015).⁷⁴

In *Poets Thinking*, Helen Vendler investigates internal consistencies—“the way thinking goes on in the poet’s mind”—by interpreting the “structural inner shapes” of poems as material representations of poetic thought.⁷⁵ Attending to the “unmistakable, idiosyncratic, and formally coherent personal style” of Alexander Pope, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and W. B. Yeats, Vendler connects each poet’s “characteristic and recognizable patterns” of writing with the “psychological continuity”—or discernible noetic signature—each poet exhibits in their poems (7). Vendler’s selection of poets—Pope for his “parodying intellectual discourse”, Whitman for his “supervening of the aesthetic on the impressionistic”, Dickinson for her form and “narrative structure”, and Yeats for his “mistrust of propositional statement”—suggests a fundamentally textual understanding of how thinking and language are related.

⁷³ Picchione, John. “Poetry, Science, and the Epistemological Debate” in *TTR. Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction*. 12:1, 1999. 19–30.

⁷⁴ Attridge, Derek. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁷⁵ Vendler, Helen. *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*. Harvard University Press, 2006.

The discursive, aesthetic, narrative, and propositional modes Vendler finds these poets working within supply evidence for how poetry “as both the product of thought and bearer of thought, becomes thought made visible” (9). However, like the disjunction between thought and language—the immaterial and the material—the connection between the inaccessible “thinking” and the discernible “style” of each poet cannot be in any sense final, despite their linguistic connection. Vendler’s concession that “thinking” can be “made visible” by observing consistencies in poetic style is subverted by her later idea that “the aesthetic specificity of each poem tends to disappear under the pressure of arguing for a common ideology”, and, in an effort to distance “lyric thinking” (“ruminative meditations in verse”) from “the discourse of philosophical thought” (“ruminative meditations in prose”), Vendler’s study refrains from questions of poetry as epistemological framework in favour of establishing argumentative consistencies (Vendler, 9). Although thinking in poetry is materialized through the “act of making” instead of “adjacent to, behind, or analogous to poems”, that “poetry mediates difficulty”—“which does not necessarily mean dissolving it” (Tavlin, 5)—is an emancipatory orientation that, in contrast to the instrumental position that poetry may produce knowledge as a discursive form, is continuous with the idea that poetry substantiates how it knows in paradigmatically singular ways.

“Philosophical theories of meaning in the analytical tradition”, writes Alison Denham, “have almost exclusively focused on issues of public meaning—of stable, context-independent semantic content”:

Such theories have also dominated analyses of figurative language, focusing on the semantic relations of figurative utterances to literal propositions and paraphrases. Whatever its merits, this approach stands to overlook some of the most distinctive and valuable characteristics of our experience of poetry; in particular, it stands to

misrepresent the *epistemic* value of poetry—the value it has as a way of informing our beliefs. (188)⁷⁶

Although Denham concedes that “poetic language is of course seldom the best medium for representing impersonal, mind-independent facts”, “such facts”, for Denham, “do not exhaust the possible objects of knowledge”, where a poem, in contrast with “truth-conditional semantics”, enables an understanding of “its subject from a particular subjective, experiential point of view” (188). In Denham’s view, poetry as “a classic medium of subjectivity” can elicit “affective, perceptual and cognitive responses...contrary to our precious experience and our considered judgement” (189). Denham calls this effect “ethical estrangement”, where, as an effect of experience, a person’s “evaluative worldview” is “radically undermined”; although Denham’s framework for understanding “ethical estrangement” is based on a psychological model—“ethical estrangement is a distinctive psychological condition” whose influence as a concept “affects multiple dimensions of a person’s relations” (191-193)—its particular application according to a conception of poetry as “giving public form to the more remote reaches of human experience” (195) is perhaps most evident where poetic language is not merely descriptive of the particularity of experience but is materially constitutive (vis-a-vis Vendler (“the product...and bearer of thought”) and Tavlin (“*thought made*”)) of that experience, as language.

For Angela Leighton, “the moments when language shifts from one thing to another—fact to figure, sense to sound, or sense to nonsense—are all...the beginning of poetry—the beginning of something verbally wayward, slippery, playful, or just deliciously daft” (163).⁷⁷ Although Leighton cites her professional standing as a “non-philosopher” as a way of safeguarding the tentativeness of her arguments on poetry’s knowing, the tripartite structure of

⁷⁶ Denham, Allison “Ethical Estrangement” in *The Philosophy of Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁷⁷ Leighton, Angela. “Poetry’s Knowing: So What Do We Know?” in *The Philosophy of Poetry*. Gibson, John, editor. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Leighton's statement on "the beginning of poetry"—"when language shifts" from "fact to figure, sense to sound, or sense to nonsense"—places an uneven pressure on the final comparative term, "nonsense" (ibid.). Poetry is not "nonsense" but language that structures a framework for knowing in singularly expressive ways, of which "nonsense" may very well be a type; philosopher or non-philosopher, that a difference can be posited between "sense and nonsense" is grounds enough for a less "slippery" sense of what language does. Leighton's "language as 'verbally wayward'" (ibid.), however, is far more reasonable a comparative basis, not only because it has a more concrete or propositional sense but because the phrase provides a conceptual frame through which an epistemology of unpredictability can be explored. For Leighton, the epistemological difference between "poetry's knowing" rather than 'poetry's knowledge' captures 'knowing' in contrast to 'knowledge' as "tentative" and "unfinished", a "verb in the continuous present"; for Leighton, poetry "has its own varieties of knowledge, but knowledge which may be better conceived as a verb rather than a noun, a process rather than a destination, a way of 'knowing' rather than an object known" (ibid.).

In *Lyric Powers*, Robert von Hallberg questions "whether poetry is a branch of knowledge, or just of rhetoric" (105-106), suggesting that knowledge in poetry is only manifest in writers who "methodically invoke the structures of explanatory prose syntax...and the conventions of intellectual activity that govern philosophy and science" (107)⁷⁸. Philosophical thinking in poems is not limited to a poet's "holding their poems especially close to the rational mode" to express lyric powers of thought: where "most criticism aims at the triumph of understanding" for von Hallberg, poetry aims "at the nearly complete frustration of understanding" (4). Writing that "poems are not meant to extend ordinary discourse", von Hallberg contends that "a poem's

⁷⁸ Von Hallberg, Robert. *Lyric Powers*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

triumph”, rather, “silences discourse” (5). Following Gerald Bruns, who suggests that poetry “cannot be exhausted by our examples”, von Hallberg adds that “the actualization of ideas of poetry sets no constraint on concepts of poetry because every actual poem thought to be great exceeds interpretive accounts” (5).

In contrast to Bruns, who defends what von Hallberg calls “the utopian element of poetry”—the idea that “poetry is as much a conceptual art” (“philosophically interesting”) “as it is an art of language”—von Hallberg suggests that “the authority of poetry has three sources”: the “traditions of religious affirmation”, the “social status of those who speak the idioms from which particular poems are made”, and “the extraordinary cognition produced by the formal” and musical “resources of some poems” (7). In his chapter “Thought”, von Hallberg notes that although “poetry yields knowledge”—and that verse has traditionally been considered an “envelope for knowledge”—the more important (and “modest question”) is to determine “how poetry asserts knowledge claims”; in von Hallberg’s examples, it is the “self-complicating” poem that suggests the dual powers of knowledge and reflection. But von Hallberg’s investigation does not describe how, precisely, this is instantiated, and although the conclusion that “the discourses of poetry and philosophy, as the rational adjudication of rival propositions, are properly separate” is agreeable, epistemological arguments framed in poetic works are ekphrastic—not in a visual but in a referential sense—and thematically inclined: where a poem may invoke themes or references to epistemology in direct ways, what a poem says or concludes on the topic cannot be taken at face value. Although the “structures of analytical reasoning and even of contemporary, expository prose have an extremely firm hold on the intellectuality of poets”, writes von Hallberg, poetic language can “lead thinking in directions that might otherwise be unexplored”, presenting “a sense of wonder in the face of what cannot be adequately comprised

in prose” despite “the common and mistaken notion that poets easily leave reason and coherence aside” (116).

In his chapter on “Knowing” in *The Work of Literature* (2015), Attridge’s position on poetry and knowledge takes a series of critical turns: his initial idea that “thinking...can be staged in art” becomes an affective statement that “works of art...can produce an intense experience of the mind’s workings”; this culminates in the notion that “every work is a knowing work...because there is no way we, or it, can satisfy the thirst for knowledge that it generates” (257).⁷⁹ Attridge concludes by stating that “every work of art, coming into being as a performed event, engages with our epistemological desires” (258). Where “thinking” shifts to “knowing” in Attridge’s examples, “art” becomes “work”; “thinking” is “staged” in art, but knowledge is “generated”, “performed”, and “produced” in art-works. Like other key works on poetry and knowledge, Attridge is deeply concerned with the links between thought and language, with the way poems engage our “epistemological desires” and our subsequent reading as “discovering” the “treasures” that literary works disclose through their “alterity, singularity, and inventiveness” (258).

1.3 POETRY AS KNOWING LANGUAGE

If, following Attridge, knowledge is a desirable rather than an inherent element of poetry, to what degree is a poem subject or resistant to the epistemological desires of the poet (or the reader)? According to what principles, constraints, or standards is one able to evaluate the truths of poems when poems themselves may contain any number of errors, omissions, or faux-pas(es)? How can Zwicky’s idea of lyric philosophy function as an antidote to or vouchsafe against what is perceived in her work as representationally-inclined (and by extension, un-resonant or non-lyric)

⁷⁹ Attridge, Derek. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

reading habits? How can Muldoon's cyclical, intertextual, etymological riddling help further an understanding of poetic knowing, of knowing in general, (or, of knowledge as a concept itself)? How do Hill's theological, literary, and historical sensibilities condition the poem's ability to think-through any number of apophatic epistemological conundra?

Inversely, it is precisely that Zwicky's sense of lyric philosophy, Muldoon's purposeful riddling, and Hill's apophatic poetics together provide critical through-lines—as paradigmatic epistemological and methodological designations—for engaging the question of how epistemology is explored in poetry in unique ways as opposed to bringing the methodological and epistemological consistencies from other disciplines to bear on poetry. This inversion—to use the poet's writing to develop an epistemological framework for thinking about the relations between poetry and epistemology—forms a foundation for this inquiry to be possible, as they provide specific principal constraints within a strictly literary tradition without assuming or prescribing the results of the possibilities of exploring the question itself.

The argument for mistaken knowledge, errors, and intentionality in poems together form part of the reason why a poem can be epistemological—as commenting on or calling into questions themes and notions about knowledge—but not as knowledge-producing. Although “the readerly impulse...that poets *don't* make mistakes...is pervasive among twentieth- and twenty-first century treatments of poetry from both inside and outside of the academy”, it is, for Erica McAlpine, “misguided” with respect to intentionality:

mistakes in poems...involve the sorts of errors that most poets, from any period, would wish *not* to make. These might include misspellings, ungrammaticalities, misconceptions of meaning, misreadings of prior poems, and historical or factual inaccuracies. They do not include purposeful errors of syntax, grammar, or logic that operate in service of creating multiple or indeterminate meanings, nor do they include deliberate breaches of code, as might be exemplified by poets writing

in dialect or those whose language arranges itself in opposition to certain institutional, political, or cultural norms. (PM, x)⁸⁰

“When we insist on a poem’s inalienable rightness”, writes McAlpine, “we risk overemphasizing the extent to which its mistakes derive from unconscious intentions” (PM, x). Although McAlpine is right to suggest that “purposeful errors of syntax, grammar, or logic” can “operate in service of creating multiple or indeterminate meanings”, it would be an overstatement to suggest that readings of those poems should attempt to attribute meaning as the product of the writer’s psyche. Poets make errors, to be sure, but sometimes the incorporation of linguistic accident, happenstance, or contingency, whether in a poem or in a reading, can lead productively to an “epistemology of interpretive error” (Williams, 132).⁸¹

Although some, McAlpine notes, may prioritize “poets’ unconscious intentions over their self-conscious choices” because it reflects “a productive tension” between the “‘unfathered vapour’ of the imagination and the more deliberate elements of poetic craft”, mistakes in poetry in McAlpine’s sense have to do with the poetic consistencies of factuality and facticity rather than with the mistake (or what appears as a mistake) as an epistemological trope; neither of these are commensurate categories as far as criticism is concerned, since the printed mistake as a feature of the poem (for better or worse) is not always the product of intention vis-a-vis facticity but perhaps, in a more generous reading, a matter of aesthetics. The poem as a linguistic artifact is, in an abstract and implicit sense, an expression of a set of epistemological preferences; the self-reflexive poem—which is characteristic for its knowing about the conditions of its own knowing (or as representing or gesturing towards the textual-cognizance of its knowing)—is an expression of the poem as an epistemological construct: it exhibits a higher-order textual awareness of its

⁸⁰ McAlpine, Erica. *The Poet’s Mistake*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

⁸¹ Williams, David-Antoine. *The Life of Words: Etymology and Modern Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

knowing (epistemological troping that may play on error) while still accommodating readings that formulate text as simply representational and knowledge-producing (facticity as data which can be evaluated for degree of correctness).

John Suroweicki's "What I know about Epistemology" is a poem that invokes knowing in several ways: it highlights knowing in its title, it refers to "knowledge" as a concept in its form, it loosely evaluates knowing according to normative ethics ("it's dangerous, inescapable, and exact"), and it plays on the idea of the formal sequentiality of deductive knowledge:

As the light goes, go.
Be the rustling in the grass, the fall from
convention's good graces: learn, or someone
will have you filing files or writing writs,
demonstrating cutlery or selling knowledge

door to door; someone might even drop
your lovely life into a factory and have you
derusting rings on the coolant-spouting
turntable of a vertical lathe.
It's best for everyone that what you know

is generally thought of as general knowledge.
You can find it in pool rooms and roadside bars,
in meadows as inviting as beds, in bedrooms
where it whispers like a ribbon untying;
you can even find it in schools. But be careful:

it's dangerous, inescapable and exact
down to every atom of everything there is,
to every name each thing goes by and every
law each thing obeys. And the best part is,
you always know more than you know.⁸²

The tautological structures deployed throughout the poem are not a fault of style but a play on how the poem presents knowledge as the product of function: the poem first offers a directive—"learn"—and then presents the perceived effects of not doing so—"or someone/will have your

⁸² Suroweicki, John. "What I know about Epistemology" in *Poetry* (Chicago: Vol 182: 1). Spring, 2003. 30.

filing files or writing writs”—where the mundanity of each tautological process—“filing files” or “writing writs”—is stylistically matched by the alliterative simplification implied in the language of the repetitions themselves. The repetitive acoustic and tautological semantic effects established in the first stanza are echoed in the poem as narrative repercussions; the poem suggests that not following the directive to “learn” may lead one “door to door”, living, perhaps implied in the poem in an ironic sense, a “lovely life” where “what you know” is “generally thought of as general knowledge”, the circularity of the statement once again coming full circle, closing the premises it sets up in conclusions. If the poem were indeed a “vertical lathe”, the reader might be found “derusting” its semantic/denotative rings, so to speak. In one reading, the poem may be seen as creating these references, repetitions, and circular effects in a way that grounds knowledge in a thematic way as practical and repeatable; where the poem exceeds these practical grounds (which are signalled through the excessive emphasis implied in “filing files” or “writing writs”, etc.) are at its start and at its end, where the overarching directive—“As the light goes, go”—is paralleled by the delimiting rhetoric of the poem’s final line: “you always know more than you know”. The poem’s title—“What I know about Epistemology”—is at once descriptive and constraining: it provides a specific frame of reference while at the same time creating the logical conditions for the poem to communicate some idea about “knowing” and also about “knowing about knowing” (epistemology), which adds recursive frames (or rings) of reference through which the poem’s effects are established and sustained.

It is odd—paradoxical, even—to suggest that a poem, while not productive of knowledge in a traditional or disciplinary sense, can still serve an epistemological end. The truth in a poem (or of a poem) as previously suggested is contingent, not on the verifiability of language as fact, on the poem’s internal consistencies in sync with its thematic content, or on the applicability of

knowledge represented in poetry in accordance with other forms of discourse; the epistemological value of a poem—which cannot be prescribed outside of the discrete and technical contingencies involved in its reading⁸³—is based, on one hand, on a view of the poem as a singularly wrought, resonant, and semantic multiplex that self-reflexively draws attention to the constructedness of its representational form, and, on the other hand, by the idea that the poem cannot, in any final sense (as one approaches the undecidable limit implied by the language-as-representational/language-as-contingency divide) know or delimit the degree to which its knowing—or, its ability to ironize or problematize the inherent contingencies its knowing may imply—may be perceived or interpreted.

For Reginald Gibbons, poetry is a porous construction, where “the stances that poets take to everything *outside* poetry inevitably give particular leanings to what poetry *does*”; by extension, “some portion of poetic thinking necessarily depends on thinking *outside* poetry” (Gibbons, 1).⁸⁴ That a poem can convey knowledge of a subject outside of its own scope would presume that its writer is, at least to some degree, aware of that knowledge; to what extent, however, the stances that poets take on subjects outside of poetry actually influence what poems do—or fail to do, or do mistakenly—is either uncertain, inarticulable, or ambiguous. Arguments for the autotelic nature of the art object—where the poem is brought to provisional completion through the efforts of the artist—cannot be corroborated without some investigation into the persuasive teleological powers of theme, which is not without its own measure of reductionism.

⁸³ Marjorie Levinson (in *Modern Philology* 2024) suggests that “thinking through” and “thinking with” are paradigmatic frameworks for understanding the relation between reader and text that does not seek to instrumentalize or reduce the interpretation of literary work according to a hermeneutic model: where “thinking with...makes bid to free us from habitual ways of grasping things as they are” (Levinson, 2018). To understand a poem as a paradigmatically epistemological “is to use at least one poem to think better”; although Tavlin’s claim “to exhaust that poem’s capabilities in the thinking” may overstate the case, “to end up somewhere that is not merely poetic but theoretical or philosophical” allows the poem to enrich the particular engagements—be they philosophical, theoretical, artistic, or otherwise—with language that poetry provides (Tavlin, 7).

⁸⁴ Gibbons, Reginald. *How Poems Think*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Some poems frame questions about knowing in poetic ways, invoking epistemology as a theme; others represent perspectives on knowing in poetry that are not conscripted to the the epistemological designation. The overarching paradigm of “poem as epistemological”—the poem as a medium or expression of how knowing is constituted in language—may or may not treat of epistemology as a theme or discipline but is nonetheless both referentially inclined towards and reflexive about the quality, possibilities, and limits of its own knowing. Although poems may fit more or less cleanly into the comparative model of “poetry as epistemology”, it is the case that the paradigmatic designation—which would accommodate prescriptive readings that explore the theme of epistemology—is not characterized by the question of classification but by the framing effect of the comparison itself. It is one thing to read poems according to what they do with epistemology as a historical or philosophical concept; it is quite another to read poems as epistemological expressions in and of themselves.

Although A. R. Ammons’s poem “Epistemology” takes on the concept of epistemology in an implicit—even symbolic—way, it more centrally plays on the idea of truth (even perhaps the truth of language itself) as only ever partial: what is initially “a bit of/truth” (n.) at the beginning of the poem becomes, by the poem’s end, at once more “truly” (adv.) representative of the world but also, displaced from its origin, a “bit” of a “bit” of original truth; the severity of the lineation helps exemplify the falling of a seed (or, in a broader and perhaps more symbolic sense, the falling of a fruit):

A bit of
truth
told pops
its pip
and falls
small
into its
(if bitter)

consequence
but the bit
untold
avoided collects
about it
networks
bindings
of disguise &

going
around
till, an
enormous posture,
it can't be
identified
solved or made
to disappear &

so by
recalcitrance &
complication
comes
to represent
the world
truly
ours.⁸⁵

The word “consequence” conditions the interpretation of the falling of the poem’s “truth”. The “bit of/truth” can fall “small/into its...consequence” or it can fall, “small/into its/(if bitter)// consequence”; regardless, the question that remains central to the poem is not whether or not the symbolic falling of the pip is analogous to a perspective on the fallenness of truth as representation, nor is it on whether or not the transformation of the fallen truth (presumably into a ‘tree of knowledge’ implies a relativistic perspective on truth)—more pressingly, the brackets exemplify the question as self-reflexive, as oriented towards its own aesthetic posturing: is the poem of epistemological “consequence” or is it “(if bitter)” an epistemic “con-sequence”? The

⁸⁵ Ammons, A. R. “Epistemology” in *Worldly Hopes*, 1982. 19–20.

slight acoustic shifts throughout the poem—bit/bitter/bit/about it, pop/pip, falls/small, into its/consequence/collects/represent, bindings/disguise/identified, can't/recalcitrance—parallel the journey that the “pip”—distended from “a bit of/truth”—takes, ossifying by the end of the poem in a particular expression of the truth—“the world/truly/ours”—which is demarcated and interpretable according to the contingencies of language that make knowing that truth possible.

In contrast to Ammon's “Epistemology”, “Epistemology” (this time by Chelsea Dingman) uses its title to condition reading in a thematic way, posing—in a less formally-constricted way than Ammons's poem—the question of what it means to know in a more descriptive sense: first, at the beginning of the poem in terms of “the properties/of ice, of snow”; second, in the middle of the poem through a narrated recollection (of “the parents we knew little”); and third, by the end of the poem, as a series of ongoing questions and cognitive reframings (“What does it mean to say we know...How do we love/what is damaged...What now/is the prairie sky, if not another relic, burning?”):

What does it mean to say we know the properties
of ice, of snow? The wheat berries piled in metal bins

in the silos. The house on a corner lot, properly
broken down, the septic tank leaking

into the closets for years, rats in the attic, box
upon box upon box of belongings that belong

to the long dead. Sex toys and pornography.
Money stashed in old socks. In ties. In tobacco

tins. The house was once lovely. Flower boxes at the sills.
Large picture windows that held up the prairie

sky, faces of the parents we knew little, if at all.
How easily people end up like this, perhaps. We stand

at the tree line, and I can't decide if Mother's Ruin
is an appropriate name for gin, or screech,

or every century where someone died bleary-,
eyed a bottle within reach. How do we love

what is damaged? Ahead, the valley rivers through
the city. Ahead, the frozen prairie, the lone cross-

country skier. No one will find us here, I fear.
Here, the world is desperately bare. What now

is the prairie sky, if not another relic, burning?⁸⁶

The repetition, alliteration (“rats”/“attic”, “box/upon box upon box”), and the boxy containment of “belong” in “belongings”—not to mention the “close” (v. 2) in “closets” (and, to go too far, the poem’s tidy structure in couplets as “clause-ettes”)—furl and unfurl the rhetorics of compartmentalization that the poem uses to explore knowing through a series of narrative recollections. The subtraction of “be” from “long” and the distance separating “belong”—which shortens to “long”—from “long dead”—additionally heightens the salience of a more universalized sense of knowing, balancing the eternally “long” knowing that belongs only to the paradoxically all-knowing (or better yet unknowing) dead (not the boxed or compartmentalized dead as an item (implied through the poem’s serialization of things)) with the “longing” that the also all-knowing and yet unknowing living end up belonging to and continuing to live with.

* * *

The chapters that follow offer interpretations of the poetics of epistemology in Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill according to how each poet structures and represents their orientations to both the possibilities and limitations of language as an epistemological medium. Each chapter is dedicated to presenting the poet’s orientation to poetry as “knowing language”, both in terms of how they present poetry as an epistemological singularity (which is further enriched by its

⁸⁶ Dingman, Chelsea. *I, Divided*. Louisiana State University Press, 2023.

situatedness as a literary, historical, and cultural artefact) as well as how each poet responds to the epistemological force(s) that organize knowledge according to the other disciplines (or disciplinary constraints) that their works explore (philosophy, history, theology), especially in terms of the frameworks that each discipline's epistemological commonplaces as themes supply. These chapters not only represent an attempt to formalize how Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill explore poetry as a way of responding to how language structures knowledge but also explores how the incommensurability between disciplines—and by extension, the epistemological consistencies of those disciplines—singularizes the quality of poetry's knowing language as a mode of resistance against the rhetorics of epistemological closure.

The language of epistemology—or rather, the rhetoric of epistemology—is organized according to the logic that informs language's function as a representational form, as symbol. What has been called epistemological—the logical underpinnings of knowledge—is of a distinct set of rhetorical consistencies, where epistemology signifies the linguistic and metaphorical conditions for rhetorical assent in knowledge discourse. These conditions provide the structural grounds for disciplinary knowledge to be produced and understood as such. For Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill too, the development of epistemic certainty in language is an effect of rhetoric; knowledge is not given but produced. The poem, for all three authors, produces what it knows in a way that is either radically different from—or that radically resists or draws attention to the constructedness of—the knowledge producing structures inherent in other discourses; by extension, the poem is, in a paradigmatic way, “knowing language”, in that it expresses its knowing not according to language as a representational medium but according to any and all of the available expressive vectors of language from the representational and symbolic to the self-

reflexive and intertextual. As such, what a poem knows, or how it represents its knowing, cannot be adequately or exhaustively captured in criticism that is not itself poetry.

The limit of criticism, it seems, comes at a point where the inadequacy of language as representation reveals itself either according to its own failure (its declaration of interpretive finality) or according to its necessary partiality (where criticism is attentive towards some aspect (and necessarily not all) of the poem). What is possible, in other words, is not to know what a poem knows but to formalize the aesthetic and rhetorical characteristics of how it seems to know or how it constructs its knowing. It is inconclusive whether or not a poem adds to the store of human knowledge in the discursive sense, “the language-game of giving information” (which, according to Wittgenstein, the poem does not partake in)⁸⁷; what is epistemological in a poem is not a factor that contributes to or builds upon conventional knowledge but rather designates a modality for knowing that the poem *qua* poem—through its unique discursive and rhetorical structuration, singularity as linguistic artifact, matrix of inter- and intra-textual resources—produces. The structural elements and mechanisms through which a poem purports to know (eg: acoustics, etymology, facticity, structuration, rhetorical figuration, allusion, intertextuality, etc.) tell us of its knowing as opposed to its ostensible knowledge. The poem, like the mathematical proof, the essay, or the scientific report is bound in language according to rhetorical elements that condition it; in a contrasting way, however, the teleological orientation of a poem or literary work is less determinate than the stock sheet, the engineering report, or the mortgage application: as a genre, the literary represents a category whose teleological bias is to create art out of language. Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill create poetry that questions the epistemological stability of language; in doing so, they each facilitate the emergence of a unique poetics of epistemology.

⁸⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Zettel*. Anscombe, G. E. M., and G. H. von Wright, editors. G. E. M. Anscombe, translator. University of California Press, 1967. 28e.

For Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, poetry does not contribute to the production of conventional forms of knowledge in fields it invokes, nor does it attempt to announce its own literal untruthfulness or fictional quality in cases where knowledge is either feigned or asserted for argumentative purposes. This dissertation proposes that for these poets, poetry serves an epistemological function by drawing attention to how the divisions between language and knowledge—regardless of discipline or theme—are fundamentally problems of representation to which the poem as epistemology seeks to respond and potentially redress. Poetry’s epistemological function comes into play where poets deliberately ask questions about the representational stability of claims to knowledge and the methodologies that make them possible in other systems or discourses for knowing: Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill have in various ways questioned poetry’s ability to represent certain aspects of truth in contrast to other discursive traditions, especially philosophy (Zwicky), history (Muldoon), and theology (Hill). In doing so, they have produced both an epistemological style of poetry (poetry that challenges the conventions of knowledge as represented in language) as well as a set of interdisciplinary poetic epistemologies, bodies of critical work that represent new branches of knowing about knowing, not only in but also according to the poetic tradition.

For the three poets treated in the chapters that follow, poems can offer a criticism of the language problems that underlie the knowledge claims that other epistemic fields rely on for their stability as knowledge-producing disciplines. Poetry can provide new perspectives on how questions of knowledge are fundamentally questions about critical orientations to language as representational. Each poet’s poetics of epistemology is formulated not as a way of reiterating, dramatizing, or reflecting in their poetry knowledge as it may exist for other disciplines. Rather, each poetics of epistemology comes to represent a new understanding of what knowledge—

specifically, literary knowledge—may look like, where poetry is recognized as the epistemological catalyst for the kinds of knowing that literary works are responsible for.

Lines of Thought: Jan Zwicky's Gestalt Epistemology

Analysis was never meant to hold
or judge: a purifier of the ore
it cannot comprehend. Don't rest
your weight on earth, for this
suspend yourself from heaven. Then
there will be time enough to leave untouched
the truth of each thing as it is.

We will be different. (WE, 27)⁸⁸

“Ontological attention”, writes Jan Zwicky, “is a response to particularity: *this* porch, *this* laundry basket, *this* day...its object cannot be substituted for, even when it is an object of considerable generality” (W&M, §52). The idea of “this-ness” in Zwicky’s formulation, “is not of a complex series of relations” but an awareness of the distinctness “of a thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it”, where each “*this* focusses that resonant structure in a distinct way” and “has the character of metaphor: its object is, and is not, everything” (W&M, §55). Notwithstanding the syntactic parallelism and integrated logics of Zwicky’s philosophical writing—which are characteristic of her approach for delineating the relations between lyric, language, and thought—it is a phenomenological prerequisite that the “ontological attention” of Zwicky’s presumed observer must be attuned to the idea that meaningful experience—of philosophy, of music, of art—is paradigmatically the experience of resonance.

Organized as a series of dialogues between literary, artistic, and philosophical voices, Zwicky’s early works *Lyric Philosophy* (1992) and *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003) argue not only that the forms of thought most closely associated with “philosophical analysis” set “unintuitive limits to what

⁸⁸ Zwicky, Jan. *Wittgenstein Elegies*. Brick Books, 1986.

can be meant and understood” (LP, ix) but also that the “deep epistemological structure” of lyric—whose “characteristic formal properties” are “resonance and integrity”—is “at root, a flight from the condition of language” (W&M, i). Although both *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* may at first appear as collections of enigmatic phrases and oracular convictions, they are structured texts that present carefully curated orientations, arguments, and perspectives on the experience of meaning, especially in language.

It is a central tenet of Zwicky’s philosophical work that lyric does not always designate lyric poetry: more generally for Zwicky, lyric—which can apply as much to poetry as it can to the language of philosophy, mathematics, art, or music—is a “species of gestalt understanding”, a “mode of thought” that is “fundamentally integrative, rather than analytic” (TEM, viii).⁸⁹ Zwicky’s emphasis on the difference between lyric as an integrative mode of thought and philosophy as representative of the processes of analytical thought is not a dichotomy in Zwicky’s work but a convenient comparative model: brought together under the rubric of “lyric philosophy”, Zwicky explores not only the extent to which some philosophical works—especially those of Plato and Wittgenstein—can be read both sequentially as well as in resonant and integrative ways but also how the experience of meaning is a fundamentally gestalt phenomenological experience.

Although Zwicky’s work explores “the relationships among lyric poetry, lyric philosophy, and other members of their genus”, Zwicky’s use of lyric “quite deliberately sets aside surface historical associations with Romantic poetry” and designates—whether in poetry or in philosophy, mathematics, or painting—a resonant structure which stands in a “resonant relation to a resonant structure in the world” (TEM, 28). Following from this, a poem—particularly a poem with lyric quality—is for Zwicky “a gestalt that enacts, or responds to, a way the world, or some part of it, is”

⁸⁹ Zwicky, Jan. *The Experience of Meaning*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019.

(TEM, x). In an expanded sense, lyric in Zwicky's formulation describes the experience of resonant internal relations between elements in a compositional structure, lyric as a quality belonging as much to literature as it does other genres, including visual art, music, philosophy, mathematics, and psychology, to name a few. In a similar way as a poem structures or is structured by acoustic, semantic, rhetorical, or etymological resonances, so too can a work of philosophy structure or be structured according to those same resonant linguistic sources.

For Zwicky, the characteristic common to both lyric and philosophy is resonance. In *Plato as Artist* ("PA", 2009), Zwicky describes the *Meno* as a "work of philosophic art—a complex ecology of argumentation, a survey of Plato's views in very small compass"⁹⁰; for Zwicky, the *Meno* is "a philosophical jewel" that, "like other works of art", is "provocative, ambiguous, tantalizing (PA, 13). The *Meno* is exemplary, in Zwicky's view, not simply because it is a work of central philosophical significance but moreover because it is a work of lyric philosophy: it has the rhetorical qualities of a philosophical discourse but it can also be read, as Zwicky's essay attempts to show, as a gestalt, that is, according to the resonant relations it produces as a compositional whole. Following from this, reframing (in this case, Plato's) philosophical discourse as a compositional gestalt provides new epistemological possibilities to emerge, not only in the sense of whether or not the central epistemic question raised in the *Meno* is adequately resolvable ("is virtue knowable...some kind of knowledge?" (PA, 16)) and by extension applicable as new knowledge about the nature of knowledge, but more importantly, when read as a gestalt, the *Meno* shifts into a commentary on epistemology itself: framing the *Meno* as a work of lyric philosophy is to see how the constituent parts of the commentary together resonate.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Zwicky, Jan. *Plato as Artist*. Gaspereau Press, 2009.

⁹¹ "What is at stake in Meno's paradox...is not whether inquiry is possible but whether *successful* inquiry is possible. In particular, the problem is about whether it is possible to *acquire* knowledge by means of inquiry" (108). See Andrew Clings's "Meno's Paradox is an Epistemic Regress Problem" in *Logos & Episteme*, Vol 10, No. 1, 2019.

To read the *Meno* as a gestalt composition and not simply as a series of arguments is to acknowledge how epistemology, at least in the context of the dialogue, relies on the rhetorical conventions of literature—narrative, irony, ambiguity, allegory, and allusions to myth—for determining its methods, scope, and validity as a discipline. In contrast to straightforward interpretations of *Meno* as a discourse on virtue, knowledge, and human excellence, for Zwicky, there is “much that is unvoiced in the writing” that contributes to *Meno*’s epistemological salience that is not, strictly speaking, philosophy⁹²:

when we regard Plato not only as a purveyor of arguments but as a consummate philosophical artist, when we take every move, every sentence to be carefully and deliberately crafted to support the dialogue’s thematic preoccupations, when we therefore regard every detail as worthy of our concentrated philosophical attention, the work’s essential unity begins to emerge. (PA, 17)

For Zwicky, there is as much Socratic argumentation in the *Meno* as there are professions “of profound faith”, “phenomenological and aesthetic” justifications for arguments on virtue, and the application of “philosophical psychology”, that is, as Zwicky outlines, insofar as Socrates’s “philosophical method” functions “distressingly like brainwashing”: first “you beat them [Meno] up” (argumentatively speaking, by proposing abstract definitions approximating to virtue that only Socrates can understand) then “disorient them, break them down” (Socrates’s attacks on Meno’s credibility and the subsequent “dissolution of his [Meno’s] unexamined expertise” as interlocutor (PA, 37)), and then finally, “when they’re at their most vulnerable, you slot in the belief system you want them to adopt” (in this case, “instead of *telling* Meno what to believe” about virtue, Socrates “*invites* him to stand beside him” and see things from his perspective) (PA, 43).

⁹² See Fine, Gail. *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno’s Paradox from Socrates to Sextus*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Plato's intergeneric style of piecemeal persuasion—his incorporation of such diverse strategies in the dialogue as storytelling, dipping into and out from a series of logical premises and examples, applying both calculative and conjectural reasoning, supplying reference to other sources of ancient cultural convention to further the argumentative plot, restyling and incorporating echoes of positions taken in other dialogues—show that Plato is, for Zwicky, “miles ahead of us” in terms of framing his approach to epistemology (and many of his other dialogues) similarly to a work of literature: “there are arguments in Plato as penetrating as any in Aristotle, and as sophistical as any in Gorgias...there is no question”, writes Zwicky, that Plato—“adept in the elenctic and eristical arts”—“believes that both are skills essential to the practice of philosophy” (PA, 41-42).⁹³

Despite the irony between Plato's literary inclinations and his general disavowal of sophistry and eristics, at this point in the dialogue Meno has not, following Socrates's “profession of faith” (*Meno*, 81e) in “divine matters” experienced an epistemic revelation (at least not yet); by the middle of the dialogue, he is no closer to understanding the truth of epistemological virtue than he was at the beginning. What is critical however, for understanding how the *Meno* is for Zwicky a work of lyric philosophy, occurs by section 81e: there is narrative shift in the dialogue, where Meno “has been started on the path” to believing—or being convinced, by way of what will eventually be a visual mathematical proof—that an individual can gain “epistemic access to truths” despite not having been previously taught (PA, 15). Although Meno is “not yet willing to search for virtue”, he is “willing—truly willing—to be convinced that he ought to try” (PA, 44). Despite Socrates's (un)philosophical methods, Meno's interest (by section 81e) in understanding

⁹³ There is no mistake in Zwicky's argument: despite Plato's staunch positions against sophistic rhetoric (*Gorgias*) and the pedagogical/political value of literature to the Greek state (*Republic*), the literary-rhetorical qualities that Plato implements in his dialogues reinforce his status as more than simply a philosopher.

virtue has been stabilized (PA, 44); at this point, it is as though Socrates, through his “use of allusions to ancient myths” and “recitation of lyric poetry” has created “a gestalt shift in his interlocutor: what Meno previously saw as wearisome now becomes something irresistibly intriguing” (Scott, 81).⁹⁴

Although the gestalt shift that Meno experiences takes place at the narrative/psychological level of his character, this first small gestalt shift foreshadows the thematic shift that occurs at the end of the dialogue: in section 82b—“the physical and intellectual centre of the dialogue” (PA, 45)—Socrates, in the interest of contrasting the epistemic difference between “imparting information” and “assisting someone towards understanding”, intends to guide an uneducated slave through a visual proof (“that a square that is double the size of a given square is built on the given square’s diagonal” (PA, 15)). Where a reader might conclude, depending on the slave’s success at understanding the proof, that “an inquiry into human virtue” (where the dialogue begins) may lead, as Zwicky tentatively suggests, “deeply into mathematics” (PA, 15), Socrates’s example also teaches, regardless of whether or not the slave’s reception and memorization of the proof constitutes true understanding (and by extension knowledge), that on a thematic level Plato’s reader identifies the gestural logic of the movement in the slave’s experience, that the visual impact of the mathematical proof that Socrates offers, even to the uninitiated—despite the mysteriousness of the gestalt shift—is unquestionably the case. Through some unknown application of “phenomenological intelligence”, both the slave and the audience experience, regardless of the slave’s apparent success at grasping the proof, that the shift in cognitive experience has occurred (PA, x).

⁹⁴ Scott, Dominic. *Plato’s Meno*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Zwicky's essay ends with reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries, what is believed to have been an ancient rite wherein initiates "may have re-enacted Demeter's agonized search for Persephone" or "may have been led through a dark and terrifying imitation of the underworld" (PA, 94); regardless of hotly contested interpretations of what the Mysteries might have been for the ancients, Zwicky, using an etymological tie-in, remarks that it is less important what, precisely, was experienced by initiates and more important that "once initiated, a person could return for a subsequent celebration of the Mysteries" (PA, 96):

one who did so, who returned for more, was known as an ἐπόπτης—*epoptēs*. The etymological origin of the prefix is uncertain...but there is no doubt about the stem: ὀπ- or *op-*, referring to the eye, the root of our English word *optic*. The most advanced initiate, then, the one whose commitment was deepest and most real, was neither one who had a mission nor one who believed, but one who had seen. (PA, 96)

Zwicky's reference—"neither one who had a mission nor one who had believed"—is an allegorized version of Zwicky's position throughout the whole of the essay: in addition to the elenctic's "mission" or the eristic's "belief", it is the value of sight, of having effected a gestalt—and by extension, cognitive—shift that contributes to the experience of philosophy as lyric as well as to the epistemological possibilities that a resonant experience of meaning can help to produce.

Zwicky's reframing of philosophical discourse as exhibiting the qualities of literary and lyric works not only broadens the interpretive methodologies for how texts like *Meno* can be meaningfully experienced but it also emphasizes how the rhetorical value that philosophers (whether consciously, contingently, or accidentally) place on how language (and not only language as analysis) can condition the kinds of knowledge that discourse as lyric philosophy can exhibit. Like Zwicky's description of *Meno* as "work of philosophic art—a complex ecology of argumentation, a survey of Plato's views in very small compass" (PA, 13), a poem might too be

described as a “complex ecology” of linguistic elements whose relations, interdependencies, and resonances are also “provocative, ambiguous, tantalizing” (PA, 144).⁹⁵

Zwicky’s poem “Epistemology” (*Robinson’s Crossing* (“RC”, 2004)), for instance, is not a thematic attempt at poeticizing epistemologically; it is also not representative of epistemology as a theme in poetry, nor is it even the artistic occasion for presenting or referencing epistemological conundra as if to point attention towards its own constructedness. Although the poem may invoke epistemological themes for its own rhetorical purposes, it is not responsible for resolving the dialectical movements it may present. It is responsible, however, for structuring and sustaining its language in a way that supplies space to think-through or think-with the epistemological problem(s) that it is primarily concerned with. As a “sympathetic meditation on Wittgenstein’s remark: ‘If you do know that *here is one hand*, we’ll grant you all the rest’”, Zwicky’s “Epistemology” invokes a historical exchange between Wittgenstein and G. E. Moore as a way of contrasting Wittgenstein’s enduring skepticism against Moore’s ontological proof of an external world (through “the gesture of displaying his hand” (Heiti, 198)); although, Zwicky suggests, Moore may have “profoundly missed the point” of Wittgenstein’s original statement, Wittgenstein’s concern, as Zwicky’s poem frames it, is less ontologically-oriented than it is epistemological, especially with reference to what constitutes “justified true belief”, whether about “hands” or, more technically, about propositions about things in the world, as in the *Tractatus*.⁹⁶

The skepticism in Wittgenstein’s remark is directed, in the poem, at how language conditions epistemological certainty. The narrative, logical, and thematic premises of the poem

⁹⁵ Zwicky, Jan. *Alkibiades’ Love: Essays in Philosophy*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012.

⁹⁶ Heiti, Warren. “Introduction: What Is Lyric Philosophy” in *Philosophy and Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 39, No. 1. 2015. 188-201.

“Epistemology” are held together by the conjunction “because”: not only does the word make ten distinct appearances in twenty-seven lines, but in each instance it chains together the poem’s sequential progressions. Beginning with a response to Wittgenstein’s challenge, the poem opens by taking a clear position:

‘If you do know that here is one hand, we’ll grant you all the rest’
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Because there were no hands, they were
completely absent. I don’t mean this as a joke. Nothing
Prepared me for it: it was like a dream. (RC, 17)

The poem’s initial deployment of “Because” both captures the logic of the argument that it structures (“because there were no hands”) and links the conclusion of that statement (“they were/completely absent”) with the epigraph: the poetic “I” does not confirm whether there is or is not knowledge—only that “there were no hands”. Incidentally, “the rest”—in the ontologically generous sense that Wittgenstein may have intended—cannot be granted; although knowing that “here is one hand” in the way the epigraph intends is secondary to comprehending that “there were no hands” to know, the poem maintains that they were “absent”, not non-existent:

That’s why. Because I’ve tried hard to forget.
And, without warning, I could tell that I was
seven storeys in the air. The fragrance of the earth
when I lay down on it. Because
I’d pulled the fuses from my heart
and every corridor was suddenly ablaze.
Because things like that don’t happen on the bus.
I mean that when I stepped out on that plain,
I’d been alone for years—it was
the breath of spring, and it was snowing.
Because it was a river in my heart, because
it moved like winter underneath my skin. A tree
came into leaf behind my eyes.
It woke me up.
The silence sparkled. Imagine
singing without sound, because it was
like that; and when I think of it at lunch,
Liz, Shelley talking about the movies, Gerry

hockey, Bruce about the mayonnaise,
I start to cry. Because my body
was a flock of horned larks and my bones were
bells. I didn't care—that's how I knew.
Because it was the opening of an eye. And, yes:
because it was against all reason. (RC, 17)

Having distanced itself from Moore's position that "external things exist" by virtue of "rationalistic justification", the poem refrains from developing the position of the skeptic, preferring instead to question the emphasis on certainty of the rationalist position, to highlight the "provisional" nature of "justification" or knowledge as "justified true belief" (Heiti, 198) and to offer, at the poem's most descriptive and climactic moment, an embodied sense of knowing through a transformative analogy: "my body/was a flock of horned larks and my bones were/bells".

As a conjunction, "because" is as much a grammatical designation as it is a rhetorical feature of the poem: it sets the logic of the poem in motion and signifies causality between the disparate narrative experiences of the speaker. On one hand, "because" consistently communicates factual narrative information: "There were no hands" because "they were/completely absent"; "I've tried hard to forget" because "Nothing/prepared me for it...it was like a dream"; "every corridor was suddenly ablaze" because "I'd pulled the fuses from my heart"; because "it was the opening of an eye", "that's how I knew", etc.). On the other hand, "because" also complicates the authority of the speaker's statements by convoluting or keeping hidden the possible premises that would have preceded the "because" statements: what is the "it" being referred to in the third line? Does "it" reflect an understanding of the skeptic's position, that there is a distinct difference between the world and a statement about the world? Or, in another interpretation, does "it" refer to the ostensible trauma—physical or otherwise—suffered by the poem's speaker, some incident that would not normally "happen on the bus"? Or, is it the same

revelatory epistemological experience as mentioned before, but with a cognitive force far greater than the seemingly mundane (like movies, or hockey, or mayonnaise)? The penultimate “Because” creates the possibility of an epistemological dyad: the phrase “because it was the opening of an eye” may finally provide an idiomatic referent (“opening of an eye” as having awareness) to the “it” described at the beginning of the poem or it may describe some quality about the (still) undefined “it” from the speaker’s perspective. Reading “it” as the “opening of an eye” aligns certain narrative details of the poem, but the poem does not entirely resolve the possibility; the ambiguity of “it”, in conjunction with the way “because” is deployed in the poem, sustains the plausibility of both readings.⁹⁷

Zwicky’s philosophical allusions and invocation of Wittgenstein’s terse propositional logics prompt questions about the limits of language’s representational capacity, not only in “Epistemology” but throughout much of Zwicky’s work. In “Epistemology”, the question is not ontological—“is there one hand”?—but epistemological: what qualifies knowing that “here is one hand”? The poem’s language encourages a reorientation to what lyric “knowing” means as well as how it occurs. The skeptical position of the narrator in the poem relies on a willingness to entertain plausible conjecture: the epistemological crux of the poem is not based on whether or not the truth of the matter can be resolved but, like the shift that occurs in *Meno*, whether or not the gestural logic of the poem manages to shift the philosophical frame of reference from the rational to the skeptical, from a definition of knowledge as justified true belief to a view of knowledge as dependent or contingent on the linguistic qualities that structure it. Although for Zwicky, “linguistic meaning is merely one *facet* of a larger phenomenon”—namely, “lyric

⁹⁷ If “it” designates the “opening of an eye”, then by substitution in line 17 “the opening of an eye” “woke me up”. In another reading, this would have to be taken into consideration in terms of how the logic of the poem supports or denies the facticity of the statement.

meaning”—it is the gestural logic of language as a gestalt composition that informs “linguistic meaning”, the gestural and gestalt more “vast and primordial than the dimension of meaning encompassed by propositions” (Bifford & Heiti, 2015; xii-xiii).⁹⁸

Zwicky’s early work in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor*—gestalt philosophical ensembles “in which each part has a place, or functions in a way, that enables the whole to be, stably, what it is (TEM, 9)—is structured as both premise and conclusion, both works comprising a terminological thicket of interrelated definitions, citations, propositions, and arrangements of “ineffability claims” from artists, poets, and philosophers that attempt to provide both clarity and closure about the possibility of a “lyric philosophy”, an argument for “the legitimacy of modes of knowing other than analysis” (109).⁹⁹ Continuous with *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor*, Zwicky’s later works *The Experience of Meaning* (2019) and *Once upon a Time in the West* (2023) are more exegetical and focus on defending Zwicky’s argument for lyric philosophy against what Zwicky calls the pressures of epistemological “reductionism” and “calculative reasoning” that stem from post-Enlightenment thinking, the idealization of “context-independent, algorithmically specifiable processes that reductionism subserves” (TEM, 83; 20).

By exploring the vectors of gestalt comprehension—the “perception *that* a thing or situation hangs together”, a “sensitivity to structural echoes between that thing or situation and others” (TEM, 5)—in contrast to the paradigm of “thinking as calculation” (TEM, viii), Zwicky formulates an interpretive framework for recognizing the gestalt quality of meaning in a variety of disciplines (philosophy, literature, art, music, psychology, and environmental studies). Zwicky’s defence of gestalt comprehension is not to deny the value of calculative intelligence, “to say that

⁹⁸ Zwicky, Jan. *Chamber Music: The Poetry of Jan Zwicky*. Darren J. Bifford and Warren Heiti, editors. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015.

⁹⁹ Dickinson, Mark, “The Back-Stretched Connection” in *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky*. Dickinson, Mark and Clare Goulet, editors. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2010.

aggregative synthesis is *not* a kind of thinking” (TEM, 21); indeed, Zwicky concedes (but not without ideological bent) that “it is clear that the technocratic paradigm of good thinking is not wholly wrong” based on “the stellar achievements of calculative reasoning in technological applications” (TEM, 145). For Zwicky, it is the “ideal of mechanization”, which “grounds the West’s pursuit of what it calls progress” that has “eroded” the contemporary sense of “gestalt thinking”, the perception of “the shape of things, their inner and outer attunements, their melody” (TEM, 21). Although Zwicky’s argument for reductionism as intellectual erosion in the West may at first sound casual in the context of her redress of gestalt comprehension, Zwicky’s question—“what if...the domination of the idea of reason by calculative intelligence has broadly undermined human capacities to know the world?” (TEM, 142)—creates a space for the development of what this chapter will call Jan Zwicky’s “gestalt epistemology”.

Using selections from Zwicky’s poetry as exemplary models for understanding the relations between poetry and gestalt comprehension, this chapter develops a view of poetry as gestalt whose epistemological salience, function, and capacity for truth condition and are conditioned by the lyric resonances it produces. This is not to argue for poetry as an epistemological category in the sense of contributing to the production of discursive knowledge; to the contrary, it is to reframe epistemological value—and indeed the epistemological value of a poem—according to a paradigmatically gestalt mode of comprehension. In addition to situating Zwicky’s gestalt epistemology in terms of its connection to modern poetics—especially with reference to G. M. Hopkins (poetry and resonance) and T. S. Eliot (poetry and integrity) and gestalt theorists Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Kohler, among others—this chapter will argue that resonance, in the lyric sense that Zwicky defines, enables the epistemological aspect of the poem to resound.

For Zwicky, resonance refers to the associative echoes between language elements that go beyond their acoustic dimension; just as a tuning fork vibrates at a constant pitch when struck, so too do elements of a lyric composition resonate when it is read as a gestalt—“when one part sounds, other parts sound as well” (TEM, 64). This chapter argues for a view of poetry as a linguistic, acoustic, conceptual, and epistemological multiplex where the reader is not in a privileged position for interpreting the poem as corroborating logical, deductive, or calculative knowledge but as one who works to attune their critical sensibilities to simultaneously hear as well as see the dramatic interplay between lyric and epistemological elements, that is, with reference to the particular and peculiar ways that the poem might present its knowing language, either clarifying or complicating the dynamic epistemological relations between language, reader, and text.

Subtending this argumentative arc, this chapter also proposes that Zwicky’s pronouncements on lyric philosophy, resonance, integrity, and gestalt comprehension rely for their oracular, persuasive, and epistemological force on the figures of rhetorical parallelism: figures like parison (a similarity of grammatical structure in a pair or series), homoiopiton (a repetition of case endings in either adjacent words or words in parallel position), isocolon/tricolon (a series of similarly structured elements with the same length), and syncrisis (which is structured through the use of comparison and contrast in parallel clauses) contribute to the resonant quality of Zwicky’s epistemological framework throughout her collected philosophical and poetic works.

2.1 ANALYTICAL AND GESTALT COMPREHENSION

From *Where Have We Been* (1982) to *Once upon a Time in the West* (2023), Zwicky’s writing has focussed precisely on how language—philosophical, poetic, or otherwise—is constitutive of

different kinds of meaning, from “aggregative” forms of meaning, which according to Zwicky are produced by “mechanistic epistemologies” (“thinking as calculation” or analysis (TEM, viii)), to “resonant” forms of meaning, where in a composition “every part is internally related to every other part” (TEM, 63). The distinction between “mechanistic” and “gestalt” is one of the key theoretical dichotomies in Zwicky’s work: where a mechanistic epistemology proceeds according to “piecemeal” and “aggregative” reasoning, a “resonant” epistemology functions according to an “integrative” and gestalt “experience of meaning” (TEM, x).

Without venturing too far, at least initially, into the complexity of Zwicky’s technical philosophical work—which registers terms like “clarity”, “resonance”, “gestalt”, “domesticity”, and “integrity” as theoretically-freighted descriptors for the experience of meaning that Zwicky presents—Zwicky’s case for the experience of meaning as a form of gestalt comprehension seeks to correct what she discerns as a “two-stage” “reductionist epistemology”: perception for Zwicky “doesn’t consist of registering ‘raw’ data and then transforming that data into something meaningful”, as in analysis or through the synthesizing power of logic or deduction; instead, gestalt comprehension is fundamental to the phenomenological “‘experience’ of truth”, which is “always the experience of resonance...the attunement of various distinct components of a whole” (W&M, §37). This is not to say, as Zwicky does, that “everything that is true is also resonant”, but rather that “the sorts of truths pursued in analysis, for example, generally lack resonance”; “to say that an utterance is not resonant”, Zwicky writes, “is not to say that it is not true” but rather “to say that it has no phenomenology”, that, as expression, it “lacks awareness of the tension” between metaphor (seeing-as) and “the distinctness of things” (W&M; §37, §67).

For Zwicky, a gestalt is not simply characterized as a compositional whole whose parts are “deeply integrated” but whose constituent and resonant parts determine “the ‘inner lawfulness’

of the whole” according to what those parts “do, the way they behave” (TEM, 6). In Zwicky’s work the difference between the experience of meaning in poetry and the experience of meaning in prose is minimized, as both involve a gestalt experience of meaning, “a shift to coherence out of chaos, or a shift from one coherent arrangement to another, the perception of their resonant relation” (TEM, 50). This is not to say that the experience of meaning in prose works is always resonant, but that some prose works are organized from the start in lyric fashion, where a resonant accordance between language elements is crafted in conjunction with the language’s logical and representational qualities.

Zwicky writes that gestalts, unlike aggregates, “tend to shift or coalesce suddenly, in a flash”: in contrast to language produced according to an aesthetics of calculation—“the result of processes with discernible steps which elapse through time” (TEM, 17)—gestalt comprehension involves “the crystallization of certain internal relationships” (TEM, 67). Mechanistic and gestalt epistemological frameworks are not distinctly separate processes—they refer to two intertwined experiences of meaning: for Zwicky, a gestalt experience of meaning begins with a comprehensive understanding of parts, where “we see things first one way, and then we see them—the same things!—another way” (TEM, 67). “When you see a face”, Zwicky writes, “you don’t, contrary to received computational wisdom, first perceive bits and pieces - a blue eye, a 45-millimetre-long nose, a squarish chin...you see, first, the face” (TEM, 11). This “tendency to perceive gestalts” is called the phi-phenomenon and refers in Zwicky’s work to the discernment of “a pattern of things within the confusion of details” wherein “our perceptual experience or conceptual experience undergoes a kind of restructuring” (TEM, 12).

The cognitive effect of a gestalt, according to Zwicky, “is the mental equivalent of dropping a crystal of sodium acetate into a supersaturated solution”—the solidified solution

creates a discernible pattern on its surface. By analogy, the cognitive effect of experiencing meaning as a gestalt is an experience that, in a flash, affects the sensibility of its reader by “changing one’s mind” in both senses of the phrase.¹⁰⁰ Unlike the form of aggregative logic, which describes thinking in terms of succession, “of atoms or elements”, gestalt comprehension is fundamentally the experience of metaphor: “x is not y; and yet it is...it is the dawning of the second gestalt, in relation to the first” (TEM, 67). What makes prose “lyric”—as in “lyric philosophy” in Zwicky’s conception—can be measured according to the degree in which a text can be discerned as “complex, non-linear, integrated, and therefore resonant” (TEM, 27). By extension, a poem is, for Zwicky, “a resonant linguistic structure” that “stands in a real relation to a resonant structure in the world”, a gestalt “that enacts, or responds to, a way the world, or some part of it, is” (TEM, 28).

Framed in her work as antithetical to “calculative reasoning”—synonymous with aggregative logic—Zwicky’s literary application of gestalt theory proceeds according to a characteristically phenomenological argument: as an epistemic framework, gestalt theory is based on a conception of knowledge as the product of integrative visual experience as opposed to knowledge produced through sequential logic (i.e.: knowledge that proceeds “by aggregation of elements” (TEM, vii). “Gestalt comprehension” Zwicky writes, is fundamental to accurate, reliable perception”: unlike “calculative intelligence”, gestalt comprehension “fundamentally involves the spontaneous perception of structure: not analytic order - one brick stacked on another - but what might be called resonant internal relations” (TEM, 19). Zwicky charges “thinking as calculation” not only with a blindness towards gestalt comprehension, but also as

¹⁰⁰ Zwicky’s chemical analogy is suggestive, and brings to mind T. S. Eliot’s comparison of poet’s mind to a “shred of platinum”: in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, the poet’s mind (“inert”, “neutral”, “unchanged”) in a chamber of “oxygen and sulphur dioxide” acts as a catalyst for “sulphurous acid”, where the experience of “a work of art upon a person” in Eliot’s metaphor creates a newly synthesized element of experience; in Zwicky, the experience of meaning does not “form a new compound” until “all the particles which can unite...are present together”.

having “fostered correspondingly limited conceptions of truth and reality” (vi-vii). Zwicky’s argument for the paradigmatic shift from calculative reasoning to gestalt comprehension represents a position that champions the integrative and resonant possibilities that a gestalt theory of epistemology suggests, a space where “philosophy might assume lyric form” and in doing so promote a view of “the experience of truth” as “the experience of resonance, that is, of the attunement of various distinct components as a whole” (W&M, 37).

In *Lyric Ecology* (“LE”, 2015), Dennis Lee suggests that Zwicky’s collagist approach establishes lyric philosophy as a contrast to analysis as an “account of thinking”; lyric philosophy does not begin with a denial that “analytical philosophy can do what it claims to...nor that it’s worth doing” but with the “larger claim...that all real knowledge is verbal, systematic, and susceptible of analysis, and hence that determining the logical validity of linguistic statements is the only proper concern of philosophy” (LE, 29). For Lee, the fragmentary, oracular, and compositionally orchestrated structures in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* make them works “of meta-philosophy” whose subject is “philosophy itself” and whose meaning—which is both “discursive” and “aphoristic”—can be determined according to the “resonant unity” of their constituent parts.

Keeping with the fundamental logic of resonance as “the relations that must hold among the parts”, Zwicky refrains from offering an analytical account of her philosophy; however, as works of “meta-epistemology”, to “say ‘see’ or ‘perceive’ or ‘know’, in a scholarly context, is to invoke the whole apparatus” (TEM, 10). Statements which would initially seem entirely logical in structure are not only qualifying arguments but are also structured as resonant premises:

Time, as it exists for logic, is Newtonian.
Its order is absolute; it is absolutely independent of space. (LP, 2)

It is not Zwicky's goal to conclusively determine, through expository prose, the scientific accuracy of logical statements, whether on time, logic, space, Newtonian physics, or such other topics; despite their sequential structure, Zwicky's lines establish a resonant connection that echoes throughout the rest of the text. Thirty-four sections later, Zwicky's logically structured yet enigmatic convictions continue; the verb "is" continues to supply Zwicky's statements with the force of rhetorical certainty:

Resonance is a function of the integration of various
components in a whole. (Integration, not fusion. Resonance
occurs in the spaces between). (LP, 64)

The space between the lines does some of the local conceptual work. Reworked as a phrase—"Resonance occurs in the spaces between"—holds less persuasive value when taken propositionally in an interpretation decontextualized from the one Zwicky has fashioned for it in *Lyric Philosophy*: the meaningfulness of the definition is deepened precisely because the language is structured to enact as well as interact with the text preceding (and following) it.

If, as Zwicky notes, resonance is a function of the integration of various components in a whole according to any and all of their linguistic qualities (acoustic, logographic, etymological, intertextual, etc.) it follows that the "spaces between" that Zwicky refers to expands the range of meaningfulness to the text as a whole and not just according to the sequential logics of its various premises. Despite Lee's caveat that as a philosopher Zwicky is "aware that fellow academics will view her paradigm detonations"—Zwicky's seemingly casual dropping of decontextualized quotes, especially in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor*—"with a reflex scepticism", Lee contends that the "structural grammar" of Zwicky's work—with its "simplicity, daring, and elegance"—is representative of Zwicky's development of lyric philosophy as "an original medium for philosophic thinking" (35).

Not all share Lee's optimism: although many scholars and commenters on Zwicky's work—Andre Furlani, Warren Heiti, Tim Lilburn, Sue Sinclair, and Brian Bartlett, among others—assent in their writings to the resonant coherences of Zwicky's lyric philosophy and her championing of gestalt comprehension, there are others who level arguments to the contrary: Colin Davis and Bruce Krajewski—who acknowledge their appreciation for the originality of Zwicky's work—not only object to Zwicky's glossing-over and casual invocation of philosophical concepts but also charge Zwicky's use of the collective "we" in her argumentation as an expression of coercive rhetoric; neither Davis nor Krajewski are entirely convinced that Zwicky's oracular approach is adequate to its theoretical objectives.

"Much as it must have been for an alien before and after a visit to the Delphic oracle", writes Krajewski, "it can sometimes be foggy for an outsider...trying to find one's way" in Zwicky's "world of aphorisms, gnomic statements, wide-ranging metaphors, gestures towards the ineffable, and resonant structures" (Krajewski, 47).¹⁰¹ Krajewski notes both the dizzying effect of Zwicky's fragmentary writing on lyric philosophy as well as a lack of philosophical rigour in Zwicky's work: from Zwicky's "choice of dead company (especially her preference for Heraclitus)" (46), and her "shying away" from invoking "mass politics" as an antidote (in Krajewski's view) to what she senses as the increasing threat of "global capitalism"(48) to her provision of "instruction for how her work is to be read" (49) and her positioning as the philosophical "underdog...outsider...rebel among her analytic philosophical counterparts (50)" all stand as proof, for Krajewski, of Zwicky's attempt "to rescue mystics and mystical language from analytic philosophers who might be dismissive of oracularity" (47).

¹⁰¹ Krajewski, Bruce. "Lady Oracle: Engagements with Jan Zwicky's Lyric Philosophy" in *Common Knowledge* 20.1, 2014. 46-54.

Although Krajewski's objections to Zwicky's choices—her invocation of quotes from those unable to respond, her resistance to qualifying philosophical ideas according to the expected disciplinary constraints, her provision of an interpretive explanation for her work—are reasonable according to the discursive expectations of philosophy as a genre, there is little in Krajewski that engages with Zwicky's work according more precisely to the aesthetics of her lyric-philosophical approach. In *Alkibiades' Love* ("AL", 2015)—a collection of essays that explore resonance as a central quality of lyric—Zwicky argues that both resonant and analytical forms of comprehension affect philosophy in different ways: "the consequence of *requiring* analytical structure for any claim or view that aspires to philosophical status" will "deny, in the very gestures of that expression, what they seek to maintain"; in contrast, "resonant, deeply associative modes of expression" in philosophy can, alternatively, be dismissed "as unserious—'merely' poetic, philosophically unfounded, 'oracular'" forms of expression (AL, 122). Insofar as Zwicky's work functions as "a response to some of [philosophy's] central ideas, in particular that...philosophical analysis...itself sets unintuitive limits to what can be meant and understood by human beings" (LP, ix), it follows that Zwicky's resonant approach to lyric philosophy would necessarily differ in significant ways from the premise-forward linearity of traditional philosophical style. Notwithstanding the lack of an interpretation of Zwicky's work according to the lyric principles it sets out, that Krajewski begins his article with the admission that the "questions and reflections here do not range across all of Zwicky's published writings"—condition objections against Zwicky's unorthodox lyric philosophical work from the start.

In "'Now I Get It!' The Dogmatic Assurance of Lyric Philosophy", Colin Davis takes issue not only with what he interprets as the "rhetorically intimidating" forcefulness of Zwicky's argumentation—where Zwicky's "rampant generalization...coerces me to identify *my* experiences

with those of the lyric philosopher”—but also with the fact that Zwicky’s arguments for lyric philosophy are already aligned with what “a great deal that literary critics...would readily accept”: a) that “form and content are ‘inextricably bound up with one another’”; b) that “lyric compositions are radically misunderstood if they are judged by the criteria of rigour, exactitude and truth”; c) “the repudiation of any attempt to reduce metaphor to mere propositional content”; d) that “the rejection of the implication that all there is about being human...can be mastered, delimited, and regulated by reason and logic”; and e) “the celebration of the imagination” (Davis, 63).¹⁰² Davis’s rejection of oracularity as the authoritative voice of lyric philosophy is based on the “rhetorically intimidating” and coercive aspects of Zwicky’s argumentation and critical register.

More pressing for Davis, however, than delineating Zwicky’s terms or determining the possible disciplinary overlaps between literary critics and lyric philosophers, is the perceived coerciveness of Zwicky’s rhetorical style (Davis, 63)¹⁰³: Davis’ criticism is levelled against Zwicky in terms of what Davis perceives as “dogmatic” turns of phrase that push their reader “too quickly into assent”; Zwicky’s implementation of first-person pronouns like “us” and “we” turn lyric philosophy into “a form of rhetorical intimidation”:

What makes me uncomfortable here is the rampant generalization, which coerces me to identify *my* experiences with those of the lyric philosopher. “It makes *us* feel good to experience these patterns: it is one way of coming home,” she writes (my emphasis). The use of the first-person plural forces me into assent. I am being told what makes me feel good. I do not know what entitles the lyric philosopher to speak for *me*, to tell *me* what I like or do not like. Indeed, as a reader I experience

¹⁰² Davis, Colin. “NOW I GET It!” The Dogmatic Assurance of Lyric Philosophy.” in *Common Knowledge* 20.1, 2014. 62-67.

¹⁰³ See also in Bruce Krajewski’s article “Lady Oracle: Engagements with Jan Zwicky’s Lyric Philosophy” in *Common Knowledge* 20:1, where Zwicky is charged with using “we” in an argumentatively coercive fashion: “What is the political solution she [Zwicky] is suggesting at the conclusion of ‘What Is Ineffable?’ She tosses around ‘we’ as if speaking universally” (54).

this use of the first-person plural as a form of bullying. I am being told what I *do* and *should* feel. (Davis, 64)

Davis's criticism comes to a head in its discussion of Zwicky's commentary on Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" at the end of her essay "Imagination and the Good Life" (in *Alkibiades' Love*)¹⁰⁴:

The poem is a description of seeing-into, and it first enunciates the consequences of *not* seeing-into precisely...But when we see what the archaic torso of Apollo *is*, when we perceive it as a *this*, we experience its meaning—which is the radiance of the god's gaze, which is the resonance of light, and which therefore moves, and moves us. (AL, 276)

The parallel repetition of clauses and application of coercive "we's" in conjunction with equally coercive "is's" and "therefore"—"when we see...when we perceive...we experience...which is the radiance...which is the resonance...and which therefore..."—creates a rhetorical slippage from literary criticism to subjective theorizing, where a predisposition for what one might wish to see the poem doing overtakes the more pressingly critical orientation to what it actually does (and how). It is critically damaging that Zwicky's commentary on Rilke's poem is framed, as Davis points out, as a form of "rampant generalization", where interpreting certain aspects of the poem serves the purpose of reinforcing localized concepts and arguments about epistemology, gestalt theory, and ontological attention rather than attending not only to the poem according to the movements of its language but also according to the history of criticism of this poem in particular—especially the place of the poem in discussions of ethical criticism, which is of primary concern for Davis—that Zwicky's gloss does not adequately engage.

That "Zwicky races past the words" of the poem—"strangely inattentive" to them—for Davis represents either an inability or an unwillingness "to read the lyric" with appropriate attendance (Davis, 67). Davis's reservations are reasonable: the use of first-person pronouns as a

¹⁰⁴ See also *The Experience of Meaning* (2019), where this essay is reproduced.

strategy for creating an assenting readership is a far more coercive rhetorical move than engaging the requisite critical theory for defending a theoretical position. It is difficult to defend the idea that Zwicky's implementation of such a strategy is only a stylistic felicity; it is additionally damaging that the self-proclaimed objective of Zwicky's work—as establishing “a more just epistemology”—flies in the face of the implied aesthetics of ethical criticism that Davis and others express in their own work, especially where “Archaic Torso of Apollo” is cited (for various reasons, both disclosed and undisclosed) as an exemplary poem.¹⁰⁵ The incompatibility lies in the difference between normative and non-normative ethics: in Zwicky's work, key concepts in ethical criticism (“responsibility”, “demand”, “thisness”, “hypostasis”, “Being”) casually find their way into Zwicky's less rigorous exegesis.¹⁰⁶

Contrary to Davis's charge that Zwicky's “opponent” is simply the philosopher who “believes that meaning is a matter of language, conveyed in propositions that can be assessed dispassionately for their truth or falsehood” (Davis, 63), it would be more accurate to suggest that Zwicky's opponent—or, less pointedly, audience—is closer to a listener. As thematically suggestive, resonant, and performative works, *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* respond to what Zwicky senses as both “the demand that form follow sense” and “to the need to mediate between the lyric and the scholarly” (W&M, foreword). As “a reading of Wittgenstein”, *Lyric Philosophy* (and, given its similar structure, *Wisdom & Metaphor*) both respond to “specific elements”

¹⁰⁵ It is doubtful, however, that in a longer reading Zwicky would be inattentive to the formal features of the poem, especially one so highly wrought and widely discussed as Rilke's “Archaic Torso of Apollo”: in her chapter “Simplicity and the Experience of Meaning”, Zwicky addresses the arguments in Davis's criticism (whether directly or indirectly) by offering a renewed reading of the poem, describing the poem as both “a testament to the power of art” and “and a vivid description of the experience of meaning” vis-a-vis Rilke's encounter with the sculpture. Although this revision may not entirely solve the critical-interpretive-coercive issues that Davis raises, it does go some way towards acknowledging that oracularity, while appropriate for relaying the aphoristic and resonant qualities implied through Zwicky's lyric philosophy, may not be an appropriate modality for literary criticism more generally.

¹⁰⁶ In Zwicky's defence, the paper Davis cites is itself of fragmentary structure: written in sixty-seven parts, the paper flits from section to section and theme to theme in a way that is reminiscent of *Lyric Philosophy*; the paper references ideas from Zwicky's work but is not structured to accommodate the lengthy excursions that Davis fairly expects.

of Wittgenstein's work, elements "that have been regarded as subsidiary to the main enterprise": for Zwicky, the "difference between the *Tractatus* and most examples of systemic philosophy is the bell-like quality of the writing...each sentence seems to exist as a fully self-sufficient entity, yet each seems also to set the entire structure resonating" (LP, 50). Zwicky's work implies that Wittgenstein is the lyric philosopher par excellence, a writer whose philosophical works—especially the *Tractatus*—can be read in lyric fashion, that is, not only according to the piecemeal and deductive progressions that the work takes from premises to conclusions, but also as a gestalt, especially according to the way that Wittgenstein's philosophical positions are expressed in the form of an integrated and resonant compositional whole. It is this "bell-like", "resonant", and ultimately lyric quality Zwicky finds native to Wittgenstein's work that Zwicky's writing, in kind, responds to. Davis is only half right to categorize Zwicky's implied audience as "a philosopher", however, the philosopher—the lyric philosopher, to be precise—as a paradigmatic type in Zwicky's work is neither an "opponent" nor strictly of the belief that "meaning is a matter of language, conveyed in propositions that can be assessed dispassionately for their truth or falsehood" (Davis, 63).

Inasmuch as Zwicky strives for epistemological coherence, however, the fragmentary aesthetic of Zwicky's writing does not always result in a "bell-like" clarity. Zwicky's assertions—which do not refrain from invoking terms from literary theory, philosophy, and poetry, often simultaneously and without explication—sometimes clash in a jargonistic amalgam: "lyric is not so much synchronic as outside the synchronic/diachronic dichotomy" (LP, 72); "*Thisness* is the experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it" (W&M, 55); "lyric achieves integration only to the extent that words are bent to the

shape of wordlessness” (LP, 137); “the world’s resonance is its integrity” (TIW, 112).¹⁰⁷ Although *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor*, in contrast to *The Experience of Meaning* (2019) and *Once upon a Time in the West* (2023), are arranged in a way where the suggestiveness of each aphoristic fragment—all drawn from an eclectic array of authors ranging from philosophers, poets, musicians, psychologists, and artists—is intended to reinforce Zwicky’s thesis on the experience of lyric meaning by expressing the resonant and gestalt qualities of language that unite them, Zwicky’s near-synonymous and specialist terms—often less qualified as concepts than might otherwise be desirable—can make the philosophical aspect of “lyric philosophy” difficult to follow.

In a more general sense, Davis’s and Krajewski’s do not disagree with the literary principles implied in Zwicky’s lyric philosophy; they take issue with the rhetoric of oracularity, aphorism, and obscurity as a privileged position for expounding philosophical expressions of truth. In *Alkibiades’ Love*, Zwicky not only defends against the charge of oracularity as feigning access to truth but also situates oracularity as both a meta-epistemological frame and as a resonant gestalt. Although

readers take it that oracular philosophical writing—that of Herakleitos, for example, or of Wittgenstein—assumes a rhetorical posture designed to create the *impression* of special access to truth, meaning, or understanding where no such access is, or could possibly be, available...the test of an oracular claim’s truth... will simply be its adequacy to experience...by a reconceptualization of what the phenomena *are*...we must be willing to hear, to do the critical, dismantling, imaginative, and synthetic work it [oracular utterance] demands. We must measure the claim against our own experience and what we know of the experience of others; think how the world would appear if it were true; ask whether there is a way of looking at the phenomena that would reveal them to be as the utterance says they are. (AL, 112)

¹⁰⁷ Zwicky, Jan. *Once Upon a Time in the West: Essays on the Politics of Thought and Imagination*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023.

Zwicky's directives—to “measure the claim”, “think how the world would appear”, and “ask” whether or not linguistic expression is adequate to the utterance that seeks to grasp it—as the constituent elements for determining the truth of oracular utterance are contentious, especially given that they are offered according to an untested and subjective personal phenomenology.

Zwicky offers further remarks, however, for reframing oracularity, not as knowledge-producing discourse but as a modality for attuning experience according to the gestural logic of oracular utterance itself. Although for Zwicky “oracular utterances have the *form* of empirical generalizations”, they can go some way towards reframing “the stance towards phenomena *from which we judge* the truth or falsity of various empirical claims” (AL, 112). In other words, oracular utterance is not intended—as Krajewski may imply and that Davis seems to express—to verify or deny the truth or falsity of a claim but, like the oracle, who “neither declares nor conceals” instead “gives a sign”, invites the possibility for asking “whether there is a way of looking at” or experiencing “the phenomena that would reveal them to be as the utterance says they are” (AL, 112). For Zwicky, oracular utterances on their own “help us discern some radically integrated pattern, structure, or whole”; what makes oracular utterance lyric, however, is when oracular utterance becomes “radically integrated” as a “resonant structure” in a compositional whole, displaying “a fundamental attunedness of thought and expression” (AL, 116; 119). Collected in the form of a poem, oracular utterances comprise a singularly integrated lyric utterance in the form of a resonant and gestalt whole; “lyric utterance”, Zwicky writes, “is often not *literally* singular; its unity springs from the dense interconnectedness of its frequently multiple sentences” (AL, 114).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ In one sense, this epistemological crux in Zwicky's work is mis- or un-identified in Davis's and Krajewski's essays: taken piecemeal, what is intentionally structured in Zwicky's work as lyric utterance is mistaken for a collection of singularly oracular statements.

To object to Zwicky's deployment of terms central to the study of philosophy in a way that is not adequately philosophical may be to overlook the key feature—the resonant function—of her work: it would be to reduce the constituent linguistic and gestural elements of what is intended as lyric philosophy to their systemic or discursive senses.¹⁰⁹ For Zwicky, “philosophy can claim no privileged status as a means of achieving clarity of thought”; it is “one approach” and “has no *a priori* grounds for restricting its methodology” (LP, 64). Zwicky's project, which invokes and mixes ideas from both lyric and philosophical discourses, creates logical complexities due not only to the gestural and gestalt orientation towards lyric, poetry, language, and art (that her work tries to both represent and perform) but also to the ways that lyric stands in terms of its relation to philosophy—especially the ontological (as language pertains to being), the phenomenological (as language pertains to experience), and the ethical (as language pertains to morality), all of which are both philosophically and lyrically central to Zwicky's work.

Despite disciplinary and rhetorical arguments against lyric philosophy as representing a critical orientation to truth that the fragmentary and oracular aesthetics of *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* imply—the epistemological tension in Zwicky's work between analytic and gestalt forms of knowing comes to a crescendo in her most recent book *Once upon a Time in the West* (“TIW”, 2023). In previous works, Zwicky's presentation of a distinctly resonant, lyric, and gestalt epistemology was a contrast—indeed, a counter—against what she characterized as the epistemological shortfalls of mechanistic models for knowing: as “the intellectual standpoint that

¹⁰⁹ Arguments for poetry as a corollary or substitute for the technical precision and analytical argumentation required as part of a rigorously philosophical theory of language could only follow from a coercive form of interpretation that subverts the possibility of a resonant “lyric” philosophy of language (whose premises remain poetically unstated but mysteriously connected) in exchange for an empirical account of “lyric ontology” that relies on “possession of language”—Heidegger's “Being” as “dependent on time, on language, and hence...categorically on humankind—to uncover the analogical correspondence between language and world, speech and ontology, language and presence; for Zwicky, “possession of language...pre-empts lyric awareness of what is” (LP, 106). For this reason, Zwicky's gestalt epistemology of poetry cannot or should not be—or should not be intentionally, at least—an expression of the resonant relations between personal phenomenological experience and a paradigmatically intransigent experiences that language brings about.

dominates technocratic culture”, the paradigm of thinking as calculation for Zwicky has “fostered correspondingly limited conceptions of truth and reality” (TEM, vii). In *Once upon a Time in the West*, Zwicky’s contrastive approach—while no less forceful than in previous titles—becomes tonally sombre (and not without the drama implied in its title’s invocation of the West as a genre); in adopting a rhetorical posture which seems to reflect, in the collective ethos of “how we got here”, the drama of a country standoff, the book takes a stance (albeit, an almost defeatist one) in defence against the post-Enlightenment erosion of lyric-epistemological responsibility:

over the millennia, lyric attention has been practiced by many human beings—in the West, most have been artists, naturalists, or religious—but since the seventeenth century, lyric thought has been increasingly derogated in European and Euro-colonial cultures. I focus on it [lyric attention] not because it represents a solution to our problems—I do not think solutions exist—but because it provides a foil against which the nature of resourcist thinking reveals itself even more starkly...because I do not think solutions are available, my main aim is simply to understand how we got here. (TIW, viii)

Notwithstanding the stoic cynicism, the attitude towards Western culture that Zwicky expresses in previous works becomes more clearly unbalanced: for Zwicky, “The West’s dominant epistemology” has not only been “intensely anthropocentric”—“the source of many of the West’s problems”—but also “responsible for some of its [the West’s] most signal achievements” (TIW, viii). It is against these pressures, which are not Western but global phenomena—“automation, the global shift to digital technologies, addiction to life online, the decline of literacy, the evisceration of humanistic studies”, among others—that Zwicky’s emphasis on “lyric awareness” and gestalt comprehension become even more critical as epistemological designations. Zwicky’s challenge—that “we have, in the West, convinced ourselves that the idea of gestalt thinking is too fuzzy and vague to be taken seriously” (TEM, 3)—calls for a revisit of gestalt theory for asking the epistemological question “how do we see” according to the principles of lyric comprehension, resonance, and integrity.

More pointedly than in her previous works, *Once upon a Time in the West* (2023) collects a number of essays on “the politics of thought and imagination” as a counteragent to what Zwicky discerns as the paradigms of control operant not only in Western philosophy but more broadly Western sensibility, culture, and epistemological production. In “Auden as Philosopher: How Poets Think”, Zwicky argues that W. H. Auden—as “lyric epistemologist”—presents in his work “a deep and cogent challenge to the picture of knowing that currently dominates global resourcing culture” (TIW, 3). In “Integrity and Ornament”, Zwicky forwards the position that “ornament”—“the distinction between essence and accident” (TIW, 66)—is not a “failure of lyric integration” but an extension of “culturally organic form” (TIW, 60). In “Heidegger and the Poets”—Zwicky renders deliberations on Heidegger in the register of a stereotypical Western farmhand:

my problem's with what thinkin of yerself as a poet the way Heidegger means it does to your ability to pay attention to things, to really listen to an look at the world, see'r for how she is instead of what you want 'er to be...if you really get what he's gettin at, it's not quite so simple as thinkin poets come up with a kinder gentler way of runnin camp. An to really get what he's gettin at you gotta go back years — hell, you could go back to before these parts was ever opened up if you wanted the whole story. But you ain't got all night, have ya, so I'll try to keep it short an start with what happened when Manny Kant got wind of that strike over on Dave Hume's place. (TIW, 29)

In one sense, Zwicky's essay is altogether a performative interpretation of the developments of Western phenomenology and the ontology of being; in an ironic and necessarily overbearing way, however, it is also a humorous dig against the seriousness of Western philosophical language itself: “Anyways, this Heidegger fella, he comes in, has a drink or two — George is still pourin — shoots the shit a while, an then he says, “Fellas, time we called this dickin around quits” (TIW, 32). In a rhetorical sense, this essay—in contrast to the others in the collection—stands sardonically against arguments (to recall Krajewski and Davis) that the casual and uncritical

invocation of philosophical ideas are unsuitable disciplinary grounds for revealing truth. The essay, however, does not aim at revealing truth but instead at drawing attention to the linguistic mechanisms that make a version of truth possible: the speaker's statement—"If we really wanna unmask Big Science and show Bein for what she is, then we don't stop the technocrats calculatin, we show 'em that their calculatin is a way of constitutin Bein, a way of bein an Author of the World" (TIW, 34)—is not a statement on politics nor is it, as Zwicky's speaker dutifully notes, "thinkin human language creates the world." (TIW, 36); it is, instead, a statement on the qualificatory foundation that language plays in the development of epistemological paradigms about how some aspect of the world may be.

The essays in *Once upon a Time in the West*—performative, ironizing, semi-autobiographical, and thematically coherent—are representative of Zwicky's multifarious lyric approach to interpreting and engaging with what she perceives as the philosophical, linguistic, and epistemological problems underlying thought and imagination in Western culture. In "The Syntax of Ethical Style", Zwicky argues that lyric thought is "thought driven by intuitions of radical coherence...thought whose structure is resonant, in which each aspect is tuned by the whole" (117). A resonant whole—whether it be a work of visual art, a mathematical equation, a musical piece, or indeed a literary text or poem—is, in Zwicky's view, a gestalt, since it precipitates (or, is intended to precipitate) a cognitive shift in the observer. The resonance of language, according to Zwicky, can be plotted according to "at least three intersecting continua": the "epistemological" (which measures the resonance of thought), the "musical" (which measures the resonance of language's acoustic qualities), and the "typographical" (which measures the resonance of language as visual composition) (TEM, 48).

What is important about these "continua" is that they represent a set of values in

Zwicky's framework for poetry as gestalt; they are not simply metrics (or "measures") but qualia that define the integrity of a resonant whole as a gestalt. Zwicky's argument that "all understanding"—including "what we mean by 'beauty' and 'moral excellence', or 'language' or 'philosophy'—involves grasp of a gestalt" are the mechanisms through which her theory of lyric philosophy—as a paradigmatically resonant and gestalt epistemology—emerges. An understanding of the branches of philosophy that Zwicky groups together—aesthetics, ethics, and ontology—as well as their ostensible counterparts—the 'beautiful', the 'good', and 'the real'—can be renewed in a fundamental sense through a re-cognition of "the experience of meaning" as a paradigmatically gestalt form of comprehension.

2.2 MODERN POETICS AND THE GESTALT TURN

Drawing on the works of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka—the "next generation of Gestalt theorists" after Christian Von Ehrenfels—Zwicky argues in *The Experience of Meaning* (2019) that "great poems, great theorems in mathematics, lyric insights of any kind... present a whole in a manner that invites us to see parts we'd never seen before, and to see them in connection with the parts we thought we knew, but now see differently"; the fundamental premise of the comparison—lyric as a paradigmatically gestalt experience—is that the gestalt quality of a text is not simply "more than the sum of its parts", as von Ehrenfels claimed, but, as an integrated whole is "*different* from the sum of its parts" (TEM, 4-5).

Although gestalt theory was, in general, "eclipsed in North America by behaviourism"—falling out of favour due to both "a burgeoning interest in qualified 'personality diagnostics'" in psychology and gestalt theory's emphasis "that language is not the source of meaning"—gestalt comprehension for Zwicky remains valuable because it provides "insight into how things hang together"; it is a "sensitivity to [the] structural echoes" of a form whose parts "do not function as

parts, until there is a whole of which they are parts” (TEM, 5). Zwicky offers the caveat that not all wholes produce the structural echoes reminiscent of a gestalt: some wholes, “like bags of marbles”, “a deck of cards”, “a pallet loaded with bricks” are “mere aggregates”; although their parts are “distinctly, independently real”, they are not—in contrast to “symphony performances”, “marshes or forests or lyric poems”—structures “whose aspects are in dynamic interrelation with each other and with the whole” (TEM 8-9).

As “a resonant linguistic structure”, Zwicky continues, the lyric poem “is a gestalt that enacts, or responds to, a way the world, or some part of it, is”; in contrast to “the genuinely meaningless poem”, which “may have moments of local coherence”, the poem as gestalt “stands in a real resonant relation to a resonant structure in the world” (TEM, 28). In *The Experience of Meaning*—which focusses most intently on “the concept of gestalt thinking” and its “operation... in mathematics and physics, poetry, music, literary composition, and Plato’s ancient theory of forms” (TEM, vii)—G. M. Hopkins and T. S. Eliot are for Zwicky preeminently gestalt thinkers: their works, for Zwicky, are motivated by a sensitivity to the principles of resonance and gestalt theory that Zwicky describes, albeit in differing ways.¹¹⁰ Hopkins’s “theological aesthetic”, “excellence in Greek”, and emphasis on sprung rhythm, inscape and instress—in conjunction with Eliot’s early philosophical essays, expositions on imagistic logic, and doctoral work on the epistemologies of Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant, and A.C. Bradley (many of whom Zwicky also cites throughout her work)—form a constellatory set of gestalt go-betweens.

In Hopkins’s descriptions of “inscape”, Zwicky notes an emphasis on the acoustic and structural resonances of language as they relate to phenomenological experience: by sensing a

¹¹⁰ See eg: Daniel Brown’s *Hopkins Idealism: Philosophy, Physics, Poetry* (Clarendon Press, 1997) which explores how Hopkins’s unpublished Oxford essays on philosophy contribute to his “personal metaphysic of ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’”. See also Donald Child’s *From Philosophy to Poetry: T. S. Eliot’s Study of Knowledge and Experience* (Athlone Press, 2001) for a study of Eliot’s early engagements with philosophy and its subsequent effect on his poetry, from “Prufrock” to *Four Quartets*.

thing's "inner order, its developing pattern of interior relations" and "vibrant interior structure" (TEM, 166), Hopkins's poetry is, following Matthew Sprinker's position in *A Counterpoint of Dissonance*, "generated by analogical correspondence", where "the poem produces a heterocosm, a world structurally parallel to but ontologically distinct from objects and events in nature" (Sprinker, 64).¹¹¹ Zwicky's idea of poetry as gestalt—as "analogically correspondent" to but ontologically distinct from other things—emphasizes the idea of the shared "structural echoes" that may exist among the constituent parts of a poem and things in the world. While Zwicky's theory of lyric philosophy does not present a significantly "revelatory" component, they do rely in some measure on an aesthetics of perception within a characteristically phenomenological framework: for Zwicky, "gestalt thinking fundamentally involves the spontaneous perception of structure", and in the case of the poem as an acoustically, visually, and semantically meaningful "word-complex", gestalt comprehension "is *what we perceive*" or "register—without calculation" according to the "internal relations among aspects of visual arrays" (TEM, 10). In Zwicky's gestalt epistemology of poetry, resonance names the quality that links each dimension of the poem in combination—whether visual, acoustic, semantic, or etymological—with one another; resonance defines the "relation that must hold among parts if the whole of which they have become parts is to be a gestalt" (TEM, 19).

In a similar way, there are resonant rhetorical gestures that motivate Eliot's writing: an aesthetics of gestalt experience in Eliot's work—reminiscent of von Ehrenfels' claim that the gestalt quality of a text is not simply "more than the sum of its parts" but "*different* from the sum of its parts"—is expressed through the taxonomical resonance implied by Eliot's idea of "the

¹¹¹ See Sprinker, Matthew. *A Counterpoint of Dissonance: The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980. Insofar as poetry can represent ideas that may well exist outside of itself, poetry, for Sprinker, is also "the structuration of language", language "structured by *laws* and *relations* that are intrinsic to itself" (125) (my emphasis).

existing order of literature”: in a similar way as the historical works of literature in Eliot’s chronology bear some relation to other works in that chronology, so too do words, at the lexical level of a poetic composition, bear some relation to the words around them; in a parallel sense, the “the relations, proportions, [and] values” of both the existing order of literature and the words in a composition are structured in such a way that each relation of the part “toward the whole” is, by the end of the order, “readjusted” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”, 37).¹¹² For Zwicky, Eliot’s idea of a distinctive “logic of images” (TEM, 43)—the question of justifying a sequence of metaphors, of “relating in a coherent discursive manner the cognitive content of a number of metaphors” in a poem (Strier, 177)¹¹³—is another expression of resonance: insofar as Eliot’s imagistic logic describes the development of metaphor across a compositional whole, it is “imagistic thinking”, Zwicky writes, that “naturally seeks resonant form”: it is “an attempt to sing along with reality, to respond in kind, to co-respond; and thus it, too, traces and awakens sympathetic vibrations” (TEM, 44). When it takes linguistic form, Zwicky writes, “imagistic logic...is verbally resonant”: having a synchronic rather than a diachronic nature, “thinking, in resonant structures” is the “quickenings of perceptions, images, motifs and ideas that are structurally and tonally related to other perceptions, images, motifs, and ideas” (TEM, 44).¹¹⁴

Hopkins’s senses of inscape and instress form, in Zwicky’s work, a chimeric counterpart with the imagistic logic of poetry (that Eliot expounds and that Zwicky recognizes) as gestalt by supplying the aural-conceptual component of a resonant epistemology in acoustic terms:

¹¹² Eliot, T. S. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Methuen, 1920.

¹¹³ Strier, Richard. “The Poetics of Surrender: An Exposition and Critique of New Critical Poetics” in *Critical Inquiry*. University of Chicago Press, Vol. 2, No.1, 1975. 171-189.

¹¹⁴ See Philip A Ballinger’s *The Poem as Sacrament* (Peeter’s Press Louvain, 2000) and Bernardette Ward’s *World as Word* (Catholic University of America Press, 2002) on Hopkins’s “theological aesthetic” as well as M. A. R. Habib’s *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) for a deeper study of Eliot’s engagements with philosophical figures including Henri Bergson, Jules Laforgue, Immanuel Kant, A. C. Bradley, and Bertrand Russell.

Hopkins's senses of inscape and instress echo Zwicky's writing on the structure of language through "rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration" so that "the action of the whole" is directed by "integrated comprehension" (TEM, 57). In these ways, Zwicky's resonant and gestalt poetics are both continuous with acoustic ideas in Hopkins writing and the development of the imagistic logic of poetry in Eliot, respectively, especially in terms of pre- and early modernist ideals of what kinds of language-work poems do: Zwicky's sense of resonance is founded upon a poem's musical and formal coherences, where the aural dimension—in accordance with the the imagistic logic that motivates its language—work in harmony to create a congruous whole, the poem as a gestalt figure "made literally resonant" (TEM, 57).¹¹⁵

Zwicky's poem "Musicians" is tuned to these proto-modernist frequencies; where the poem's lines are metrically variable, they remain united in their formal proportions: although the poem is fourteen lines and roughly in the structure of a sonnet, told from the perspective of an impersonal observer, the poem's coherence is established in terms of narration, expression, and organization of sound both before and after the poem, at its centre, turns from observation to reflection and synthesis:

I pass a bunch of musicians in the street.
 It's about 12:30, rehearsal just over, they're
 standing around outside the side door of the church.
 A good rehearsal; and it's April. They're laughing,
 horsing around, talking about shoes, or taxes, where
 to go for lunch, anything
 except what their heads are full of.
 It's a kind of helplessness, you can see
 they're still breathing almost in unison, like people
 the searchlight has passed over
 and spared, their attention
 lifts, swerves, settles: even

¹¹⁵ Another instance of Eliot's gestalt poetics: "the poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" ("Tradition", 40).

the gravel dust stuttering at their feet
is coherent.¹¹⁶

Despite the poem's lack of a definite acoustic scheme, its punctuation and change in register suggests a halfway split at line seven: after a series of factual observations ("I pass...They're laughing") typified by end-stops, the poem's symmetrical quality becomes more pronounced: that laughter turns to "breathing" helps to signal the shift in expression, as if the perspective of the poetic "I" begins to focus, like the "searchlight", more intently upon its subjects, between the "helpless" musicians and "people/the searchlight has passed over/and spared". "Helplessness" does not describe the musicians as receiving unwanted attention—it describes the "helplessness" of the musicians from breaking form: the poem orchestrates this shift by a thematic 'decrecendo', framing "laughing", "talking", and "breathing" as a synchronous pattern and action. In addition to the poem's modulation of voice, consistency of the lyric "I", and narrative quality, the metaphors of aspiration in the poem—from "laughter" and "talking" to "breathing" and "stuttering"—reinforce the poem's organizational scheme as guided by the resonating acoustics of the poem's verbal music.

But there is more to this seemingly innocuous poem than initially meets the eye: the distention of "pass" and "over"—and more importantly the lines that they bookend ("I pass a bunch of musicians in the street./It's about 12:30, rehearsal just over")—combine with the fact that "it's April" and "they're/standing around outside the side door of the church"; together, these coherences suggest the Passover, or, what may be—other than music—what the musicians's "heads are full of". Moreover, these narrative coherences are also attuned to the idiomatic: the poem's observation that "even/the gravel dust stuttering at their feet" is reminiscent of the biblical phrase to "shake off the dust of your feet" in Matthew 10:14 as symbolic action for

¹¹⁶ Zwicky, Jan. *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth*. Brick Books, 1998.

differentiating Jew and Gentile. The biblical gestures of the poem's language, however, are eclipsed by the poem's final image—having been “passed over/and spared”, the dust at the musicians's feet does not settle (unlike the musicians's attention) but is described, ambiguously, as “stuttering”; one cannot be sure, to re-invoke to the idiomatic implications, whether or not the dust has been shaken or whether it had always been settled. In addition to the coherence between the narrative and biblical implications of the poem, the repetition of /t/ sounds in the poem's final lines—“the gravel dust stuttering at their feet”—also helps to unite the two halves of the poem into an acoustically coherent whole, whose narrative, biblical, and musical consistency is evenly secured as both an imagistic and acoustic gestalt.

Where for Eliot, allusions, intertextual references, and archetypal figures from the literary past are juxtaposed into a modern period—as in “*The Waste Land*”¹¹⁷—Zwicky's poetic references are more localized, often rural and Canadiana (and less pointedly literary). In *The Sacred Wood* (1920), T. S. Eliot chooses the word “integrity” as a touchstone for determining the quality of modern poetry—in contrast to Romantic and Victorian “impressionistic” poetry and criticism—by establishing that “...when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing” (viii). For Eliot, “integrity” describes the poet's work as “amalgamating disparate experience” until, as a poem—a formal organization of language—all of its elements work together in concert to create meaning. While Eliot's poetics are based on a conception of poetry whose depth of historical meaning is produced by referencing and invoking figures from throughout the canon of English and sometimes European literature, Zwicky's poetry establishes

¹¹⁷ Although scholarship on Eliot is saturated with arguments for the pervasiveness of literary allusion and ambiguity in Eliot's work—inaugurated by Eliot's own notes to “*The Waste Land*”—what is more important here is that allusion is one of the primary vehicles driving the “imagistic” element of “resonance” (rather than acoustic resonance) in the poem: by juxtaposing an historical or textual reference, the poem anchors several other elements in one point of general confluence. In another way, a “gestalt epistemology” of poetry would hold that at an atomic level, each word (or etymon) is a point of historical confluence that the rest of the poem alters through a shared interdetermination of meaning. “*The Waste Land*” is an apt title: the poem's structure forms an ecology of meaning.

her references in musically, philosophically, and ontologically significant ways within the ecology of the poem: Zwicky suggests that “the relation of details to the complete work in lyric composition enacts the coherence of the whole in lyric vision” (LP, 111).¹¹⁸

Both Eliot’s and Zwicky’s understanding of the relation between parts and wholes are principally gestalt conceptualizations, and in *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth* (“SE”, 1998), Zwicky’s poem “Kant and Bruckner: Twelve Variations” not only emphasizes the historical significance of two canonical composers but also argues that the significance of “the number and *sort* of echoes in the lives of Immanuel Kant and Anton Bruckner have to be more than coincidental” (SE, 17).¹¹⁹ The poem is prefaced by a series of factual “coincidences” that link Kant and Bruckner biographically: according to Zwicky, “neither man produced much of anything until middle or late-middle age...both were early risers...both were obsessive revisers...” (SE, 17); where Kant “didn’t like music” and “had some unusual notions about the transmission of germs”, Bruckner “wrote a fugue every morning before breakfast” and at one point “had a nervous breakdown during which his numeromaniac tendencies became very pronounced” (SE, 17).

Zwicky’s introductory remarks are not only annotative—they signal the beginning of the poem and the “*sort* of echoes” one might expect to find, not only between both Kant and Bruckner but also between the prose introduction and the verse that follows it. To take arguments for the integrative function of poetry as gestalt seriously—where the “integrity” of the poem in Zwicky’s technical formulation as a gestalt whole is a key characteristic of poetry that many join

¹¹⁸ See *Lyric Philosophy* section 68: “philosophy might assume lyric form: when thought whose eros is clarity is driven also by profound intuitions of coherence—when it is also an attempt to arrive at an integrated perception, a picture of understanding...”.

¹¹⁹ “Twelve Variations” is a poem that expresses its “thinking” in a dialectic fashion, that is, between voices that pose question after question until the poem’s enigmatic end; more importantly, and like many of Zwicky’s poems, the poem’s expressiveness of those questions is an experience not entirely independent of the expression that contains them. Lyric philosophy is a recovery of poetry that in expressing sensibility or thought at once also modifies that “sensibility”, poetry whose expression of thought is experience, one that modifies sensibility.

with Eliot's historical sense of integrity in terms of the poet's work as the work of establishing formal-historical integrity between a living poetic tradition and the poem as an amalgamation of "disparate experience" without losing sight of the poetic tradition—there must be some reconciliation or resonating qualities between the reported facts of the poem and the poem's structure as a "set of variations", where 'variations' signals either a degree of sameness in a series of differences or differences in a series samenesses—"unity in multiplicity, multiplicity in unity", as Zwicky suggests.¹²⁰

The poem's first variation begins with allusions to Bruckner: in the preamble, Zwicky notes that although Bruckner was regarded "by Viennese society as something of a country bumpkin"; the preamble also indicates what seems an even less consequential fact—that "on at least one crucial occasion" Bruckner wore "mismatched socks" (SE, 18). While this "fact" may initially seem like an inconsequential detail, references to articles of clothing are consistent (albeit awkwardly juxtaposed (like the socks)) in the poem: although the first variation's phrase "always losing your socks" refers to the reported detail from Bruckner's life, the rest of the variation's couplets retain a general ambiguity as far as which references are to Kant or to Bruckner (or to both):

What did they want of me?
What's worth saying?

A terrible thing, always losing one's socks.
God is everywhere, everywhere,

This is the shortest path:
there is only one. Listen.

¹²⁰ That Zwicky uses the term "variation" as a way of describing the poetic sequence of the "Kant and Bruckner" poem deepens the stylistic links between Zwicky and Eliot; if for Eliot the "new" poem alters the existing order of literature, so too does the idea of "Twelve Variations"—the variation, like the new poem in a sequence, signals a difference in condition of each subsequent poem while maintaining stylistic consistency within some formal limit. In this sense, Zwicky's "Twelve Variation" shares with Eliot's "existing order of literature" the principle of application on a structural level but with application to new subject(s).

Clouds above the western mountains;
a good laugh.

Close your eyes. Not what you knew then.
Not even what you know now. (SE, 20)

Like a situation involving “mismatched socks”, the colloquial statement in the third line is unabashedly odd, especially in the context of this variation’s tendency towards reflection, metaphysical or otherwise: from the stanza’s opening questions to the insular responses contained in its final lines, the poem begins as an exercise in connecting the poetic and the prosaic in the form of a dramatic monologue, where the repetition of “is” (“God is...This is...there is...”) creates a series of equivalences that reflexively culminate in revisions (“Not...then/Not...now.”) of the initial queries. Like *Wittgenstein Elegies*, which Zwicky refers to as “a collage of voices other than my own” (WE, 71), voice in “Twelve Variations” “is polyphonic...Sometimes it is Kant’s, sometimes Bruckner’s, sometimes that of both, sometimes that of an observer” (SE, 19). Whether the poem begins as a philosophically motivated dialogue or as an occasion for producing a pastiche of philosophically and lyrically coherent couplets, the multiple voices at play in the poem (as well as in Zwicky’s philosophical works) retain an aesthetic link to the modernist tendency towards a multi-voiced and polyphonic style (and by extension to the tendency towards experimentation with the textual effects of continuity and discontinuity).

The poem’s initial idiomatic allusion to clothing (“A terrible thing, always losing one’s socks”) changes in the next variation: where the biographical focus shifts from Bruckner to Kant, the poem’s focus on clothing changes from socks to gloves. The connection between the seemingly banal details linking to different pieces of clothing would seem inconsequential, but within the framework of a “gestalt epistemology”, the broader thematic connection between the biographical lives of Kant and Bruckner becomes heightened: Kant and Bruckner were both

writers—composers of philosophy and music, respectively (“Bruckner wrote a fugue every morning before breakfast”)—and walkers (“the housewives of Königsberg set their clocks by his [Kant’s] daily walk” (17)); their biographical stories, according to the poem, go hand-in-hand (or, are presented in the poem step-by-step and fact after fact). Despite this unusual attempt at retrofitting criticism to the poem, for Zwicky (as for Kant) the ‘clothing’ puzzle is of philosophical—and by extension poetic—importance: the poem’s implicit nod to Wittgenstein helps make the reference to gloves in the second variation more coherent¹²¹:

If reason cannot do it, what then?
Don’t care for music, never have.

How is pure math possible? Turn inward: you will
see the left hand’s glove can never fit the right.

Love your mother. Love the moral law,
the path up and the path down. *Lieber Gott*,

We cannot touch a hair
without affecting all the rest.

Bees of the invisible. *Ignavum*
fucos pecus a praesepeibus arcent. (SE, 21)

Notwithstanding the poem’s references to socks and gloves (which in the third stanza disappear into shoes), the second variation (and the poem more generally) begins to show some stylistic resemblance to Eliot’s poem “*The Waste Land*”: the quasi-philosophical monologue of a series of poetic “I’s”, the recourse to German (“*Lieber Gott*”; “*Frisch weht der Wind/Der Heimat zu*”), the shared allusions to Virgil’s *Georgics* (“*Ignavum/fucos pecus a praesepeibus arcent*”; “Shall I at least set my lands in order?”) help to reinforce the idea that Zwicky’s poetry is aesthetically continuous with

¹²¹ From *Tractatus* 6.36111: “The Kantian problem of the right and left hand which cannot be made to cover on one another already exists in the plane, and even in one-dimensional space; where the two congruent figures *a* and *b* cannot be made to cover one another without moving them out of this space. The right and left hand are in fact completely congruent. And the fact that they cannot be made to cover one another has nothing to do with it...A right hand glove could be put on a left hand if it could be turned round in four-dimensional space”. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge, 2013.

certain aspects of modernist and perhaps Eliotesque writing vis-a-vis 1) a gestalt recognition of the broader referential linkages (eg: Zwicky and Eliot as poets whose work is saturated (in different ways) with philosophical content), 2) the aesthetic emphasis on how polyphony and voice affect poetic texture, and 3) a shared emphasis on classicism vs. the aesthetics of Romanticism.¹²² The comparative basis between Zwicky and Eliot emphasizes not only that Zwicky's lyric mode has much in common with Eliot's modernist aesthetic but moreover that modernism and gestalt theory are, in their reliance on the successful integration of the disparate acoustic and imagistic elements of language suggest an unexplored theoretical overlap between the two.

The third variation continues to deploy these Eliotesque motifs through a juxtaposition—a performative response to the poem's own call to "Improvise!"—of place names reminiscent of the lines "Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria/Vienna London" from "*The Waste Land*":

Gesture unhurried.
The shoe that's on the right foot

will not fit the left.
The way is clear.

Organ lofts: in Linz, Kremsmünster, Steyr.
If the practice is coherent, we are free.

Improvise! St. Epvre, the Crystal Palace, Notre Dame: there's Bach
For those who need to see it written down.

Step by step, semitone by semitone.
The bishop, listening, too moved to pray. (SE, 22)

Where in the previous stanza the poem suggests "the left hand's glove can never fit the right", variation three presents an inverted chiasmic logic (antimetabole): "The shoe that's on the right

¹²² See Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue's *The Poems of T. S. Eliot (Vols I & II) - The Annotated Text*. (Faber & Faber, 2015).

foot/will not fit the left”. Like hands in gloves and feet in shoes, the mirror opposition of limbs presupposes a singular formal uniqueness—or fittingness—of garments; in a correspondent way, the poem suggests that despite clear parallels between both Kant’s and Bruckner’s lives, each remains their own; even further (analogically still) the poem also retains conceptual continuity with Zwicky’s idea of ontological attention and the experience of meaning as the experience of “*thisness*”: like the uniqueness implied by left and right gloves and shoes and the unique individual details of the lives of Kant and Bruckner, the experience of meaning as the experience of a gestalt “is the experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it” (WM, 55); “in perceiving *thisness*”—like the poem’s unexpected call to “Improvise!”—we too respond “to having been addressed” (W&M, 52).

The local inferences and coherences of Zwicky’s argument for a gestalt epistemology of poetry relies, to some extent—in terms of relaying continuity in the poetic tradition—on both Hopkins’s poetics of sound and Eliot’s understanding of poetry as a historically-motivated image of language. The consistency of Zwicky’s theory is influenced not only by Hopkins’s and Eliot’s exemplary insights but also by Zwicky’s well-informed position as a poet and as a philosopher: for Zwicky, as for Hopkins and Eliot, it is the associative quality of language rather than its processional march that makes it lyric—epistemologically, musically, and iconographically resonant form expression. “To know what a thing is”, argues Zwicky, “is to sense its inner order, its developing pattern of interior relations...when we see into a thing, we perceive an inalienable structure that makes the thing what it is—its ‘sheer quiddity’...is also the foundation of the thing’s genuinely resonant relations with other things” (TEM, 167). Although Zwicky’s use of the first person plural (“we see...we perceive”) has been called objectionable on coercive grounds, the parallels between the “inalienable structure” of a poem and the distinct music of its language are

consistent with Zwicky's appeals to characteristically gestalt literary principles in Hopkins's and Eliot's criticism.

That Hopkins's and Eliot's criticism can be framed together here in the service of a gestalt theory of poetry is as much the product of a rhetorical pretence as the result of a foundational assumption: gestalt theory relies for the experience of meaning on a synthesis of ideas. The coherence and proximal resonance that can be said to exist between words and the ideas or images they seek to express is to some degree based on a conventionalized understanding of language, which is simply to say that for the identification of a gestalt whole to occur, whether between similar ideas between authors or in another way between the sounds and senses of words in a poem, closure—or an act interpretation—must also occur. In other words, gestalt criticism occurs phenomenologically according to interpretive levels that “cohere” or “resonate” at varying degrees of perceptual breadth and according to a definite fineness of interpretive detail. This makes Zwicky's theory of poetry as gestalt intoxicatingly suggestive: it has the power to make wholes out of disparate parts, requiring the identification of discursive patterns and the ability to synthesize those patterns into commentary. The difference, however, between arguments for gestalt theory as forming a critical-interpretive foundation and arguments for the experience of meaning as the experience of a gestalt is that the former, as a disciplinary designation moving from theory to application, is limited as only ever having a partial view of what is occurring at any given moment in a reading by virtue of its lack of resonant comprehension.

2.3 GESTURE AND GESTALTS IN *WITTGENSTEIN ELEGIES*

Wittgenstein Elegies (1986), Zwicky's second book of poetry after *Where Have We Been* (1982), attempts to reconcile the multiple voices Zwicky finds operant in both philosophical and poetic writing; *Wittgenstein Elegies* ("WE") is representative as an account for drawing "attention to the unity of Wittgenstein's life and work...to show how profoundly he experienced the moral dimensions of language's relation to the world" (WE, 72-73). In addition to being written as an "intellectual drama" that oscillates between several voices—the narratorial voice, the voice of Wittgenstein, of Georg Trakl, and voiced propositions from both *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*—*Wittgenstein Elegies* is also written as "a piece of abstract music" whose elegiac and discontinuous quality calls for both a "collagist reading" of the poem—a reading which privileges the many "voices other than my [Zwicky's] own"—and also a reading that "insists on the text as an integrated whole that ultimately overrides the multiplicity of voices" operative within it (WE, 71).

The first stanza of "Philosopher's Stone"—the first of five sections in the collection—epigraphically frames the poem as a medium for inducing this cognitive reorientation: in a similar way as the alchemical process of chrysopoeia would theoretically transform base metals into precious ones, the poem as "a purifier of the ore" is transformed into the catalyst for a gestalt reaction:

Immense turn in the deep black,
small points of light, faint gleam or slash
along some buried axis, white reticulated wink.
Size only guessed but staggering: swing
of infinite compounded rhythms through the
unthought reach. Each note pure, perfectly
distinct: the graveness of a star. Whom did this grow
within? Slow ramified unfolding, sky of a summer night
that hung the crystal arch above us, hummed silence.

But who is it that heard, who could have thought
that it might go like this about the rolling
piecemeal world? It is the possibility of life as art. (WE, 27)

“Infinite compounded rhythms” is a fine description of poetic “resonance”, a phrase that captures Zwicky’s sense of language’s music as well as a definition of her more broadly conceived project in *Wittgenstein Elegies*, “to suggest links among the facts” of Wittgenstein’s lyric philosophy (WE, 73). The contrasting relation between “black” and “light” in the opening lines is suggestively astral, and together begin to resemble a constellation of sounds (in “black”, “slash”, “axis”¹²³) and of imagery (in “light”, “gleam”, and “buried axis”), where the words together form a cluster of acoustic and conceptual sense: like a net or lattice (or ‘riddled’ surface (“riddle”, v.2)), the “points of light” in the poem’s description of the night sky and the “buried” axes that would unite them—like a constellation—are reticulate lines of thought that the poem implies through the paradigmatic “resonance” in its language as a lyric gestalt, the result of an “attempt to comprehend” or in Zwicky’s formulation present “the whole in a single gesture” (LP, 73).

Although the opening lines of the poem are acoustically motivated—“wink”, “swing”, “distinct”; “ramified”, “summer night”; “this”—the split in the stanza, which begins with “It is the possibility of life as art” marks a shift from Zwicky’s constellatory image: as the poem’s language begins to gravitate towards a philosophically-inflected argument, the poem becomes suddenly “driven...by profound intuitions of coherence”, a turn representative of the “attempt to arrive at an integrated perception” (LP, 68). The appearance of commonplaces from the vocabulary of philosophical aesthetics—“life as art”, “analysis”, “judge”, “comprehend”, “the truth of each thing”—marks a rhetorical shift that, while interrupting the poem’s astrometric

¹²³ The central placement of “axis” in the line acts as a point of rotation from which “slash” turns its rhyme. The smooth sound of “slash” contrasts with the consonance of “white reticulated wink”, whose mimetic thudding exemplifies the line’s syntactic end.

trope (and by extension unbalancing the stanza), causes the language of philosophy to compress and “assume lyric form” (LP, 68). If, as Zwicky contends, “resonance requires space” (LP, 202), the poem becomes a structure where “thought, music, and truth are woven in a different ontological continuum” (LP, 254). For Zwicky, lyric “is not defined by an attitude to what it knows, but by the structure of its knowing” (LP, 153):

Analysis was never meant to hold
or judge: a purifier of the ore
it cannot comprehend. Don't rest
your weight on earth, for this
suspend yourself from heaven. Then
there will be light enough to leave untouched
the truth of each thing as it is.
We will be different. (WE, 27)

The philosophical sense (and by extension telic definitions) for “analysis” (“a detailed examination of structure”), “judge” (“to form an opinion”), and “truth” (“in accordance with fact or reality”) become “suspended” (and yet also form a constellation of meaning) in the poem, their philosophical sense supplanted by a poetic—even etymological—inversion: in an antithetical (and perhaps fallacious) way, the philosophical sense of “analysis” is at odds with its etymological sense—“analysis” (ana-lysis (Gk: ανά-λυσις)) comes to represent a “loosening up” of definition rather than a “taking hold”, which in turn makes the line an exercise in etymological (and by extension philosophical) tautology, whose implied irony not only emphasizes the contrast between the poem’s distinct parts—between lyric (first stanza) and philosophical poeticizing (second stanza)—but also meta-textually or self-reflexively becomes symbolically expressive of the aesthetic and resonant division that separates philosophical poetry from lyric philosophy.

By extension, “Analysis was never meant to hold” becomes an insight that is both true and not true, and in either case—whether as a tautology or a philosophical distinction—remains a well ‘judged’ if not ‘comprehensive’ deployment, drawing extended attention to the division (or

points of juncture) between “earth” and “heaven”, and “rest” and “suspend”.¹²⁴ The final enigmatic lines of the poem’s first stanza rely on a manipulation of metrical scheme for their rhetorical salience: the classic pentametric length of “there will be light enough to leave untouched” and tetrametric geometry of “the truth of each thing as it is” establish an acoustic order that heightens the affirmative force of “We will be different” as a statement of deviance. Precisely to whom “We” refers at the end of the stanza is ambiguous, and while it may designate the multiple voices in the poem or is meant to address the reader directly (“Don’t rest/your weight on earth, for this/suspend yourself from heaven”), “We will be different” is a remark that suggests both a multiplicity of voices as well as their integrity as a series of integrated differentiations.

In the poem, the voices of Georg Trakl and Wittgenstein are, like the voices in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* will be, fragmented: excerpts from Trakl’s poetry and Wittgenstein’s philosophy are provocatively juxtaposed throughout the poem in a way that implies a thematic connection between the two without producing a direct exchange of speech, an aesthetic choice which incidentally mirrors a historical occurrence where Wittgenstein attempted to visit Trakl in a Kraków hospital but ultimately missed him.¹²⁵ Although the second section of WE (“The Death of Georg Trakl”) represents only a fraction of Trakl’s work (samples

¹²⁴ See *Lyric Philosophy* p. 41b entry for critic as judge: “critic, n.—L. *criticus*, fr. Gk. κριτικός, ‘capable of judging’, fr. κριτής, ‘judge’, fr. κρῖναι, ‘to separate, decide, judge’, which is cogn. with L. *cernere*, ‘to sieve, distinguish, discern, understand, decide’ (41b). If in this sense analysis as ‘loosening up’ also means “never meant to hold”, “judge” is implicated by proxy: if “purifier of the ore” refers to the extraction of precious material by a process of refining or separating it from other impurities, then “judge” becomes an ironic description of that capability in the poem in terms of understanding “the possibility of life as art” through the process of “analysis” (“never meant to hold/or judge...the ore/it cannot comprehend”).

¹²⁵ See Zwicky’s notes in “Afterword” in WE (p. 67-68): “In 1914, the poet Georg Trakl received an anonymous donation from funds Ludwig Wittgenstein had consigned to the editor Ludwig Ficker for distribution among promising young artists...Trakl wrote to Wittgenstein...apparently having discovered the identity of his benefactor, and begged him to visit. Wittgenstein was unable to obtain leave immediately, however, and Trakl died, possibly by his own hand, three days before Wittgenstein’s arrival” (67-68).

from “Helian” and “Melancholy” (plus one “pseudo” quote))¹²⁶, the poem centres on Wittgenstein’s (and Zwicky’s) elegiac emphasis of their missed connection as well as the “echoes” between their writing that each juxtaposition implies. After a section from “Helian”—which forms a continuity with the “starry” contrast of “light” and “dark” developed in the poem’s first stanza (“On a dark plain/We gather with shepherds and white stars” (WE, 40))—Zwicky’s ventriloquized Wittgenstein subsequently reflects on Trakl’s lines:

<i>Ludwig Wittgenstein</i>	Sometimes he speaks: echoes He speaks echoes. So pure, almost unrecognizable—and it’s what one must wish: no clutter, stripped bare, colours pure, original: unsayable itself directly echoed. I have scraped and cut, but unforgivable the clumsiness. These limbless sentences show nothing, little heaps of rags and dust. (WE, 34)
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As commentary, Wittgenstein’s characterization of Trakl’s poem as embodying “what one must wish” in speech—“unsayable itself/directly echoed”—gestures towards a quality Zwicky finds in Wittgenstein’s philosophical work, namely that his writing “drew limits to analysis” by putting “everything meaningful and valuable...outside the domain of direct articulation”, a position that paradoxically locates meaning in language “prior to language” itself (WE, 72); Zwicky notes that “if language is to bear its trace”—of the “unsayable itself/directly echoed”—“the choice of words must be exact” (LP, 190).

In the same breath as Zwicky’s Wittgenstein provides an aesthetic account of Trakl’s poetry, he also deprecates his own skill with language: “I cannot help these words as he can:/

¹²⁶ From WE p.40: “We will never know/whether it is a strength or a weakness/to have survived where others could not”. In Will Stone’s translation (*Surrender to Night: Collected Poems of Georg Trakl*. Pushkin Press, 2019) these lines are not represented, making Zwicky’s inclusion anomalous given the emphasis of the sequence on Trakl’s poetic voice.

mute radiance, the empty shining valley” (WE, 34). By the end of the poem’s second section (“The Death of Georg Trakl”), the rest of *Wittgenstein Elegies* becomes an extended meditation on Wittgenstein’s architectonic view of language:

<i>Tractatus</i>	<i>The possibility of each single case discloses something of the essence of the world.</i> ¹²⁷
<i>Investigations</i>	We walk into a room, our feet are bare. Books, papers, letters, piled about, discarded tie and random pencils, picture crooked on the wall. At first we think, “A mess! What disarray! It should be straightened up!” But then we look around and recognize that no, no thing can be disturbed. Even the dust is in its place. (WE, 56)

The philosophical juncture between Wittgenstein’s work in *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* serves as the basis for how these two excerpts (labelled in the poem’s margin as *Tractatus* and *Investigations*) retain their “resonant” connection. For Zwicky, “the movement between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* involves the disappearance of the drive towards system simultaneously with the disappearance of the attempt to ‘say’ what can only be ‘shown’” (LP, 185). The chime produced between the first line’s abstraction—“each single case”—and the image of “the dust is in its place” at the end of the stanza creates an echo across the distance between the two works, linking the “structural logic” of each text from “one clearly etched focus of content...to the next” (LP, 186).

For Zwicky, “the connection between the *Investigations* and the *Tractatus* is moral” and “requires great strength of mind to resist the temptation to climb the ladder”, a statement that

¹²⁷ See C. K. Ogden’s translation of *Tractatus* proposition 3.3421: “...the possibility of every single thing reveals something about the nature of the world” (pp.). Zwicky’s translation uses “case” for “thing”, “discloses” for “reveals”, and “essence” for “nature”—these represent significant (what for some might be irreconcilable) philosophical differences. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and C. K. Ogden. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Dover ed., Dover Publications, 1999.

echoes Wittgenstein's reflection on the utility of his own propositions as systematic philosophy, what Zwicky would call "a misrepresentation of Wittgenstein's work": "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them" (LP, 186). In this sense, to read Wittgenstein as an "analytical philosopher"—to wrongly "cram", as Zwicky notes, Wittgenstein's philosophy "into a positivist straightjacket" loses sight of "how profoundly he experienced the moral dimension of language's relation to the world" (WE, 72-73). That *Wittgenstein Elegies* "hangs together both as a kind of intellectual drama and as a piece of abstract music" (WE, 71) is central to Zwicky's theory of lyric philosophy, that "a book should ultimately speak for itself, and I hope that this book in some measure does", where the double-valence of the phrase "in some measure" saliently acknowledges the compounded difficulty of reconciling language's own 'double-valence' as both communicative act and as lyric utterance. (LP, v).

In this sense, *Wittgenstein Elegies* represents an attempt at shifting the significance (and by extension signification) of meaning from systematic philosophical argument "as the transmitter of truth" (LP, 62) to a conception of language as gestalt experience, where the "intuition of coherence" that "drives lyric vision" and whose achievement in language is paradigmatically "resonant" and "integrative" (LP, 65). Where philosophical prose is driven, for Zwicky, by "lyric vision", as Zwicky argues of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the resultant resonance of the work becomes evident in "'the bell-like quality'" of Wittgenstein's writing: each sentence or proposition functions "as a fully self-sufficient entity" that sets "the whole structure resonating" (LP, 28). Zwicky warns that when read "only as an argument (or a sequence of arguments)"—as "systematic philosophy"—lyric texts like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* "will have been misunderstood";

in a “systematic context”, the “notion of truth ‘as coherence’ has nothing to do with resonance” (LP, 36; 109).

For Zwicky, Wittgenstein’s “attitude to philosophy”—that “philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*”¹²⁸—suggests that writing other than philosophy, i.e.: writing without propositionally “discernible argumentative content”—like a poem—“might still be taken seriously as *thought*” (LP, 36). It also suggests the fundamentally poetic quality of language shaped into philosophical discourse. For Zwicky, “there is no exclusive connection between analytic structure and ability to convey truth” (LP, 64):

Investigations One thinks that one has traced the nature
 of a thing when really one has traced
 the frame through which one sees it.
 And when one draws a boundary,
 there could be many reasons.

The world is all that is the case. (WE, 55)

The last line uttered by Zwicky’s Wittgenstein “The world is all that is the case”—signified through italicized text before the last confessional (and most fragmentary) section of *Wittgenstein Elegies* (“Rorso, County Galway”)—is the first proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*; the lines preceding Wittgenstein’s first proposition in *Tractatus* are perhaps, in *Wittgenstein Elegies*, pre-propositions, poetically motivating thoughts that Zwicky’s speaker might have expected to have set the first proposition in *Tractatus* in motion.

More importantly perhaps is the reflexivity built into the lines themselves: the division between “The world is all that is the case” and the preceding lines is representative of the “drawing of a boundary” that the lines reference; by extension, “there could be many reasons” why this boundary between Wittgenstein’s and Zwicky’s text in particular is drawn. What initially

¹²⁸ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. Von Wright, G. H, and Heikki Nyman, editors. Winch, Peter. trans. University of Chicago Press, 1984.

comes to mind is Wittgenstein's note in his preface to the *Tractatus* (another kind of textual pre-proposition) on the value of the work achieved: "The book will...draw a limit to thinking, or rather not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought)" (*Tractatus*, 23). The symbolic terminus in Zwicky's lines allow this inability to think "both sides of this limit" to occur in the poem; they are also the boundary that draws a limit to Wittgenstein's thinking in *Wittgenstein Elegies*, the point at which the final line is drawn, where Wittgenstein's voice in Zwicky's text goes silent. The inclusion of "The world is all that is the case" in Zwicky's poem is a way of signalling the hither-side of thought that Wittgenstein gestures towards—in a symbolic way the poem represents "what", prior to the first preposition of *Tractatus* "cannot be thought". For Wittgenstein "what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent"; the poem does both.

By framing Wittgenstein's voice as balanced between speech and silence, the poem does not create so much a boundary as it does a window—the poem gives voice to its interpretation of unsaid thoughts while at the same time creating silence and segue between two lyric texts. It is the particular organization of the text that creates the conditions for "the ontology of *thisness*"—for a resonant interpretation of the poem—to be expressed according to its distinctness: this "ontological attention and address", the "experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it" is, for Zwicky, "the character of metaphor"; the poem says nothing of prepositions, pre-prepositions, voice, speech, or silence, however, it is the particularity of arrangement—the gestural logic of the text—that makes the reading possible, regardless of contention. As a first collection, *Wittgenstein Elegies* displays Zwicky's awareness of the theoretical tensions in her work, where philosophy as "poetic composition", poetry as "serious

thought”, and the experience of lyric meaning as the experience of a resonant gestalt must be brought into compositional harmony.

2.4 THE RHETORIC OF RESONANCE: FIGURES OF RHETORICAL PARALLELISM

Zwicky’s pronouncements on lyric philosophy, resonance, integrity, and gestalt comprehension rely for their oracular, persuasive, and epistemological force on the figures of rhetorical parallelism: parison (a similarity of grammatical structure in a pair or series), homoiopiton (a repetition of case endings in either adjacent words or words in parallel position), isocolon/tricolon (a series of similarly structured elements with the same length), and syncrisis (which is structured through the use of comparison and contrast in parallel clauses) contribute to the resonant quality and persuasiveness of Zwicky’s argumentation throughout her collected works.¹²⁹ These figures reinforce the epistemological salience of Zwicky’s lyric-philosophical vision by creating a harmonious, resonant, and argumentative balance between both proximal and intra-textual statements, which the aphoristic and fragmentary style of Zwicky’s work supports. Although the metaphorical bias of resonance is clearly musical, in terms of Zwicky’s epistemological framework lyric is also signified concretely, that is, with an eye towards the gestural quality of lyric language.

As an attempt “to give voice to an ecology of meaning”, philosophy in Zwicky’s work assumes lyric form when it uses all of the available resources of language to arrive at an integrated perception (LP, §68). The deployment of parallelistic rhetorical figures helps to reinforce the “ecology of experience” that Zwicky’s work develops: since Zwicky’s oracular

¹²⁹ The Chiastic, Proleptic, and Climactic suites shows some of the research done on the rhetoric side, which features work on rhetorical figures done at the University of Waterloo by Profs Randy Harris, Chrysanne DiMarco, Ashley Mehlenbacher, and others as well as an example from Peter Verdonk, which seems to follow from Roman Jakobson but approximates with a greater degree of accuracy that sound repetition on its own is not an example of parallel figuration unless phonological repetition is considered in a visual/concrete way.

argumentation relies for its persuasiveness on gesture, integration, and resonance, parallel figures—which have an affinity for being sequentially structured—function like building blocks in that they help to “epitomize the meaning” of a syntactically logical structure while also establishing “the relation that must hold among parts” so that the parts can form an “ecology of non-systematic resonant relationships” (AL, 123).

Lyric Philosophy begins with a statement on time:

Time, as it exists for logic, is Newtonian.
Its order is absolute; it is absolutely independent of space. (LP, 2)

The proximal repetition in the opening lines take the form of epanaphora (inspired by the opening lines of the *Tractatus*): the insistent repetition of “it is...its is...it is...” ensures stability of reference in Zwicky’s argumentative contrast between time and space, using “is” as a parallel marker of equivalency between time and its qualifiers (that it exists in a logical capacity, its order is absolute, its order is absolutely independent, as *Lyric Philosophy* states). Here, the acoustic repetitions and standalone lines (which are also concretely visual as the only two items on the whole page) work in concert to create the resonant quality of the statements. These lines are the synchronic beginning of *Lyric Philosophy*; with each successive page and parallel deployment, the initial resonance (or reference) complicates. For Zwicky, the parallel organization of these opening lines meet “the most standard precondition for resonance: it has more than one dimension”. Whether or not the statement “time, as it exists for logic” is “absolutely independent of space” in Zwicky’s formulation can be validated according to calculative logic is secondary to the way that the implied parallelism reinforces Zwicky’s epistemological project: each oracular proposition, in sequence, creates a gestalt complex of resonant insights.

“The categories that count epistemologically”, writes Zwicky, “are those of *lyric* and *sequential thought*”; of lyric thought, Zwicky writes:

Lyric thought is thinking whose *eros* is coherence, whose syntax is synchronic, whose structure is resonant. *What is lyric thought for?* For the discernment of lyric truth—the nature of timeless, unlanguageable, resonant reality. Where the *eros* for coherence is coupled to an *eros* for clarity, the result is what I have called lyric philosophy.” (LP, x)

In this excerpt from *Lyric Philosophy*, Zwicky’s initial metrical emphasis on “whose *eros* is coherence” develops into a structural complexity that is paralleled in the next two iterations: as a scheme of lexical repetition, the four-item syntactic structure—‘whose X is Y’—are internally comparative (*eros* : coherence ; syntax : synchronic ; structure : resonant) and whose equivalent terms—‘coherence’, ‘synchronic’, and ‘resonant’, are all trisyllabic repetitions. The tripartite parallelism, according to Jeanne Fahnestock, is one that suggests commonality between parts or phrases, and the sentences following the first figural complex (‘whose X is Y...’) are no different in their use of parallelism¹³⁰: the first sentence is structured in a comparative-antithetical fashion in the form of a question/answer—“what is lyric thought for? For the discernment of lyric truth”—where the conjunctive tissue of the statements are yoked together through the repetition of the preposition “for”; the clause linked to this, signified after the dash—“—the nature of timeless, unlanguageable, resonant reality”—uses parallelism through the repetition of adjectives (“timeless”, “unlanguageable”, “resonant”), acoustically secured through the alliteration of “resonant reality”. The final conclusive statement—“where the *eros* for coherence is coupled to an *eros* for clarity, the result is what I have called lyric philosophy”—structures parallelism initially in the form of an analogy where “coupled” iconically and acoustically links both comparative premises: the syntactic parallelism—“*eros* for coherence” and “*eros* for clarity”—is presented with a repetitive emphasis on *eros*, the middle preposition *for*, and the two trisyllabic nouns “coherence” and “clarity”. This comparison combines epanaphora (“*eros* for”...“*eros*

¹³⁰ Fahnestock, Jeanne. “Verbal and Visual Parallelism” in *Written Communication*, 20: 2, 2003. 123–152.

for”) and uses alliteration and syllabic consistency (coherence/clarity) to emphasize the acoustic parallelism, which improves the the rhetorical harmony that resonance helps to facilitate.

It would be an understatement to suggest that Zwicky is concerned with the idea of integrity, both formal and ethical, as the foundation for truth: from *Lyric Philosophy* (1992) to *Once upon a Time in the West* (2023), Zwicky’s idea of integrity—whether moral, aesthetic, epistemic, or structural—is context-dependent: “integrity is determined both within a context of utterance, and in the larger sphere in which language is also a *part* of the world” (LP, 260); “Truth is the asymptotic limit of sensitive attempts to be responsible to our actual experience of the world” (W&M, 102); “the experience of the integrity of the complex is strong enough that the thing as a whole arrests our attention” (TEM, 133); “integrity is an ecological concept” that “names a particular kind of wholeness: one in which every aspect of a complex entity contributes to the stability of the whole, and to the well-being of every other aspect” (TIW, 64).

As a fine point of distinction however, “lyric speech”, writes Zwicky, “is an echo of the image of integration” as opposed to the image of integration itself (LP, 219). This is evident even in Zwicky’s more stylized definition for integrity as “unity in multiplicity, multiplicity in unity”, which is itself of integral or integrated phrasing: using chiasmus (“x” in “y”, “y” in “x”) and antimetabole as reinforcements to sound and sense, Zwicky’s definition applies the gestalt principle of “coherence” acoustically (through repetitions of (/iti/ and /i/ (x3) sounds) and organizationally, where the chiastic order of words changes the semantic sense of the back half of the phrase (antacsis) through a conceptual-antithetical analogy. These applications of parallelism do contribute to the development of argumentative assent; by extension, they also provide a necessary measure of “lyric closure”, where the “lyric ‘motifs’” of a compositional

structure—like chiasmus, parallelism, antaclasis, antimetabole, etc.—reflect the lyric structures own “gestural integrity”, where “syntax *is* the semantics” and “meaning is the *use*” (LP, 215).

The paradox involved in suggesting both a parallelistic and resonant epistemology stems not only from the formality and figuredness of Zwicky’s arguments but also how parallelism and resonance work together to create conceptual closure, setting up a propositional pattern whose synchronically interpretable acoustic, structural, etymological, and epistemological qualities become permutations that stretch across the work diachronically and enrich the experience of meaning throughout the course of reading.¹³¹ The continuous use of parallel figures throughout *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* both emphasize the importance of proximal closure (synchronically interpretable definitions or positive statements) as well as intra-textual or deep closure (diachronically resonant statements). In poetry, the resonance of parallelistic figures is compressed but no less meaningful. Although formal closure changes according to arrangement, the resonance that unites the figural parallelisms from section to section produces an experience of meaning whose structural logic is more complex and integrated.

In section III of “The Death of Georg Trakl” (*Wittgenstein Elegies* (1986))—written before the publication of any of Zwicky’s lyric-philosophical works—parallelism (and more generally resonance) is evident as a rhetorical commonplace for establishing the resonant relations among

¹³¹ For Reuven Tsur, parallelism designates a separation between graphemic and phonological signifiers, which further reinforces the idea that resonance, as a figure of parallelism, brings a harmonious balance to these separate yet related axes of meaning. Mark Turner makes another important distinction: Turner invokes Plato and Aristotle in parallel as philosophical archetypes for thinking about figures as epistemological schemata; in doing so not only not only deploys a schematic antimetabole, but more importantly he reinforces, like T. E. Hulme (and Aristotle), the idea that figures are not idealized abstractions but are representative of “concrete realities”. Jeanne Fahnestock, who has perhaps most directly and thoroughly documented the functions of parallel figures, says that “parallel form” is an efficient choice “for epitomizing or reinforcing” argument - in a parallel construction, a comparison of two takes the form of an analogy; a comparison of three things in parallel constitutes an attempt at arguing for a common feature. See Tsur, Reuven. “The Poetic Function and Aesthetic Qualities: Cognitive Poetics and the Jakobsonian Model” in *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia*. 42:1, 2010. 2–19; and Katz, Albert N., et al. *Figurative Language and Thought*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

the disparate parts of the poem; even without argumentative content, the parallel figures at work continue to epitomize comparison:

Turn, world, against
the great clear space, against their innocence, his guilt,
at last unhidden eyes see through.
Turn, world, away
through emptiness to some blank space, smudged, filled
with sand. Crumble
these shadows, indecipher them, make dust. (WE, 39)

In addition to the clausal parallelism of “turn, world, against” and “turn, world, away”, the spatial break differentiating line three from line four structures a visual parallelism between the two sections: although the stanza break creates separation—which emphasizes the continuity and repetition between the two—the shape of the distended, like two puzzle pieces, fit together but remaining separate items. The repetition of the word “against” helps to reinforce the concrete parallelism by joining “great clear space” and “emptiness” through the space between the lines, balancing the negative and positive aspects of parallel space in a visual sense. The voiced fricative /th/ in ‘their’, ‘these’, ‘them’ conjoin the language throughout. Punctuation here is notable as well, the commas functioning as robust points of juncture, distinct but conjoining: the comma placement in the stanza creates semantic groupings of three (which according to Fahnestock is constitutive of similarity); to compound this punctuational consistency further, the deployment of groups of semantic elements of twos and threes is also a kind of global or thematic parallelism that Zwicky deploys in both poetry and prose, creating acoustic, semantic, rhetorical, and diachronic resonances throughout her lyric works.

“Philosopher’s Stone”, the opening poem in *Wittgenstein Elegies*, is also exemplary for the way that acoustic resonance is created through the parallel deployment of proximal sounds:

Immense turn in the deep black,
small points of light, faint gleam or slash

along some buried axis, white reticulated wink (WE, 27).

...

Webern's paradox: spare solitary
elements, yet each wound in the web that's torn apart,
then stitched, then fused, the gleaming cicatrix
become the very twisting of the thread.
Can one encounter fix the axis of a life? (WE, 28).

...

Words show us everything. How? Sense is
vertical, position in the counterpoint.
A necessary unity: aesthetics, ethics,
truth. Whole presences in every word,
the flicker of an eye. (WE, 29)

The acoustic relations between /ac/ and /ix/ sounds, especially in “black”, “axis”, “cicatrix”, “twisting”, “fix”, and again in “axis”, intensify the resonant linkages between each term. Near the end of the poem is presented an argument—“Sense is/vertical, position in the counterpoint./ A necessary unity: aesthetics, ethics, truth”—where the deployment of the commas separating “aesthetics, ethics, /truth” creates at once both a series of divisions between the individual terms while also emphasizing their thematic conjoinedness, where “aesthetics”, “ethics”, and “truth”—unified according to the poem under the banner of necessity rather than philosophy—are defined by the poem as the necessary attunement for achieving a “polydimensional structure”, whose “possible axes of connectedness” together produce complex formal resonances; “the world’s resonance is its integrity” (TIW, 112).

Zwicky’s leveraging of rhetorical parallelism, whether as a necessary rhetorical posture or naturally as a reflection of integrated lyric thought, create not only an environment for the development of argumentative assent but also for developing a wider range of meaningful engagement with lyric philosophy as effecting an epistemological shift from analytical thinking to the development of resonance as a lyric modality for integrated gestalt knowing. As “a function of the integration of various components in a whole”, resonance is developed in Zwicky’s work

through the deployment of figural parallelism. Parallel figures work together in resonant ways by emphasizing the intra-textual (rather than extra-textual) and repetitious relations between proximal signifiers and strings of signifiers. Resonance is parallelistic in both synchronic and diachronic ways: synchronically, resonance is localized and tends towards proximal acoustic repetitions that heighten the associativity between words; diachronically, resonance is established through the textual repetition of similar syntactic elements. Under the rubric of lyric philosophy, resonance draws on both synchronic and diachronic deployments of parallel figures to help reinforce the produce lyric integrity—and by extension, the uniquely lyric truth—of its propositions.

“Every word”, writes Wittgenstein “has a different character in different contexts”: on its own, each word in a sequence has an isolated meaning; in discursive contexts, each word has a stable, representational, and contextualized meaning; in a poem, each word has an integrated meaning. Poetry organizes each word in its particularity and peculiarity as a resonant, gestural, and lyric gestalt; in doing so, poetry shows the “one character” that each word “always has: a single physiognomy. It looks at us” (W&M, 113). In the context of the final section of *Wittgenstein Elegies* (“Rorso: County Galway”, near where Wittgenstein lived his final years as he worked to complete his manuscript for *Philosophical Investigations*), the poem presents a contemplative Wittgenstein; where the poem begins with the thinker’s reflection on immediate surroundings—“Salt light from over/The dark chafed sea. So much is constant: Desk, cot, window, soft grey wood, light sea” (59)—the rapid succession of images quickly turns philosophical: “Signs by themselves are dead./What gives them life? Who teaches/them to dance? In use they come alive” (60). Suddenly, the poem again shifts registers, an attempt “to render with exactness what is set before us”:

It is evening when one hears most clearly.
Losses drop like pebbles in a shallow well.
A steady hand in the long-shadowed light
Limns even the most delicate of ripples,
Leaves each thing as it is. (WE, 61)

Just as “losses”, “limns”, and “leaves”—organized linearly down the left-side of the stanza—
“drop like pebbles in a shallow well”, and the /æloʊ/ in “shallow” limns and resounds in “long-
shadowed light”, it is the consonance of the poem’s /l/ sounds—“the most delicate of ripples”—
that begin to structure the end of *Wittgenstein Elegies*:

Yet still the sickness, clumsy need
To wrestle with the pattern, make one blueprint
To explain all bricks.

But system is a gift
Of art, its essence transcendental.

The most that we can hope
Is steadiness of soul, courage
To render with exactness what is set before us,
Love what must
 each time we grasp it
 vanish (WE, 61)

The poem—and indeed the collection—do not promise truth, but only, in a meta-epistemological sense, “the possibility of truth”, which in a flash of perception—and often disappearing just as fast—leaves “each thing”—crucially, precisely—“as it is” (WE, 61). “I disagree”, writes Zwicky, “with the suggestion that art aims at the ‘mere’ transformation of materials”; artists, impelled to “respond to the arrival of insight” (TIW, 137), are called, as the poem suggests, to “render with exactness what is set before us” (WE, 61), to capture gesturally in the poem, as a resonant gestalt, some aspect of one’s phenomenological experience.

There is no guarantee—as Davis’s criticism duly warns—that gestalt insight will arrive, and even if it does, that a formulated response will be adequate to the experience of the poem in question. The adequacy of our critical response when we do, however, experience meaning in a

sudden flash of insight is predicated on its requisite resonance, an expression of the gestalt experience rendered, still within the critical register, lyrically. Following Zwicky, we are compelled to work at recognizing the lyric qualities of language, not only in terms of a poem's ostensible allusions and references but moreover according to how those allusions and references as gestural and resonant continuities form the epistemological frames that makes the experience of meaning as a gestalt possible. Zwicky's work draws attention to the lyric potential in all language, where compounded poetic elements like alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and metre can be interpreted in philosophically rich ways.

Like the carefully metered and parallelistic address to Plato and Socrates in the penultimate lines of Zwicky's essay "Frost and Snow"—"Plato's ghost, are you there? Sokrates? Do you hear?"—the experience of language as a form of gestalt epistemology demands not only that we recognize the rhetorical elements at work in Zwicky's supplication but also that we recognize the implications of Zwicky's address to her dead philosophical muses. Zwicky's address does not simply create the occasion for response—in this case, an impossible one—but moreover stands as a gestalt puzzle for the reader, one that encourages resonant engagement with everything before it. To establish gestalt lines of thought between this utterance and the disparate voices throughout the rest of Zwicky's oeuvre is to find affinity with Zwicky's parting line as a radical commitment: echoing Zwicky, we may "come close some days" to creating—or working to add indefinitely to—a clearer picture of what constitutes lyric philosophy as an eminently gestalt epistemology, but, despite the elusiveness of poetry, "haven't given up" (TIW, 146).

For ‘griddle’ read “Riddle”:
Paul Muldoon’s Riddling Epistemology

‘When are you going to tell the truth?’
For there’s no such book, so far as I know,
As *How it Happened Here*,
Though there may be. There may.
What should I say to this callow youth
Who learned to write last winter—
One of those correspondence courses—
And who’s coming to lunch today?
He’ll be rambling on, no doubt,
About pigs and trees, stars and horses. (41)¹³²

“‘When are you going to tell the truth?’” asks a voice at the end of Paul Muldoon’s poem “Lunch with Pancho Villa”. Despite the clarity of the initial exchange between the poem’s speakers, the quotation marks around the question here, at the end of the poem, frame it as emanating from an ambiguous voice. Whether the question belongs to the first-person narrator of the poem, his interlocutor, or to Muldoon himself, it expresses in a paradigmatic way how the poem thinks through what it perceives as one of the challenges to literary work: to represent some aspect of truth, via language, despite the ever-present difficulty that between words and their meanings, between signifiers and signifieds, the ostensible truth of the situation being described—or, the truth of the language of description itself—is fundamentally at odds with the reality of that experience.

Although the initial reference represents one of the major criticisms of structuralist aesthetics—that, although language refers outside of itself, it cannot adequately represent experience—the position takes several permutations over time, turning its focus inwards: Roland

¹³² Muldoon, Paul. *Poems: 1968-1998*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Barthes' *Mythologies*, following Saussure's view that "semiology is comprised of three (rather than two) terms", suggests that the "sign is a relation" between the acoustic image, the concept, and the sign itself, whose stability is granted based on its reference to other signs within that system.

Jonathan Culler, echoing the work of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, suggests that

there is a metaphysical stake in maintaining the distinction between the representation and what is represented and the priority of what is represented to its representation...when truth is conceived as *aletheia*, the unveiling or making present of what has been hidden, then mimesis is the representation necessary to this process, the doubling which enables something to present itself. When truth is not *aletheia* but *homoeosis*, adequation or correspondence, then mimesis is the relation between an image or representation and that to which it may truly correspond. (186)¹³³

Culler concludes that in either formulation—"when truth is conceived as *aletheia*" and "when truth is not *aletheia*"—"the difference between signifier and signified cannot be of one substance" as "there are no final meanings that arrest the movement of signification"; following from this, the imperative to tell the truth in language—whether established discursively as an essential directive or represented as an epistemological crux in a Muldoon poem—is either a farcical project, or, *aletheia* as "uncovering" or "unconcealedness" is inadequate as a concept for establishing a textual foundation (or an interpretive framework) for revealing truth in language (186-187). Although "the structural redoubling of any signified as an interpretable signifier" suggests, writes Culler, "that the realm of signifiers acquires a certain autonomy", it does not mean "signifiers without signifieds" but "the failure of signifieds to produce closure" (189).

Muldoon's "Lunch with Pancho Villa" does not attempt to resolve the issue by taking a stance on whether or not truth in language can be adequate to its subject; it does, however, present itself in a way that prompts continuous investigation into how it thinks about the relations between truth anterior to language in poetic ways. As a layered matrix of associations and

¹³³ Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Cornell University Press, 1982.

contradictions, the epistemological crux in the poem—“when are you going to tell the truth?”—motivates the unfolding of its narrative according to the structural, associative, acoustic, etymological, and contingent harmonies that together dramatize the difficulty of language as having a capacity for truth or truth-telling; by extension, the poem’s epistemological crux brings into focus a more definitive view of what literature may designate, a medium through which words work to reconcile (or reconcile with) the truth they presume to reveal while at the same time capturing or typifying language as trapped within itself—the “prison house” of language—as its own epistemological conundrum or riddle.

In the poem, the objective of the poet is aptly put: “You want to get down to something true,/ Something a little nearer to home” (Muldoon, 11).¹³⁴ The question—“When are you going to tell the truth?”—is the challenge and the standard that the poem sets for itself and its writer; the line, delivered in the poem’s closing stanza, captures both the dialogue between the poem’s budding revolutionary and his “celebrated pamphleteer” as well as addresses, self-consciously or self-reflexively (implied below by the term “Co-author”) the poet’s dialogue between his former and future self. The poem begins *in media res*, in the middle of a conversation:

‘Is it really a revolution, though?’
I reached across the wicker table
With another \$10,000 question.
My celebrated pamphleteer,
Co-author of such volumes
As Blood on the Rose,
The Dream and the Drums,
And How It Happened Here,
Would pour some untroubled Muscatel
And settle back in his cane chair. (41)

Although terms like “revolution”, “pamphleteer”, “blood”, and “drums” produce a politically impending atmosphere in the poem, they also dramatize certain pressures of the poetic vocation,

¹³⁴ Muldoon, Paul. *Poems: 1968-1998*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

both the coercion a poet may feel to engage the politics of language, “to speak on national issues” while also balancing the quality of language’s arbitrariness—the disconnection that exists between signs, signifiers, and signifieds (Muldoon, 4-5)—to create an experience of meaning.¹³⁵

The sloganeering rhetoric implied by the pamphlet titles—“*Blood on the Rose, / The Dream and the Drums, / And How It Happened Here*”—are metrically-charged and alliterative phrases that help establish the idea of “revolution” as an overarching theme in the poem, especially in terms of the compounded connections that the poem makes, whether through puns on political alignments (“left, right and centre”), references to the turns and returns of poetic forms like “rondeau”, or the repetition and chiasmic rejigging (antimetabole) of “stars and horses, pigs and trees” (here, and again in the poem’s final stanza, where the order is reciprocal):

‘Look, son. Just look around you.
People are getting themselves killed
Left, right and centre
While you do what? Write rondeaux?
There’s more to living in this country
Than stars and horses, pigs and trees,
Not that you’d guess it from your poems.’ (41)

The political attitude of the poem—its allusion to revolution, the turns and returns of its phrasings, the march of its metrics—is weighed and balanced against the poem’s counter-tendency towards indeterminacy through the ambiguity of theme: where the poem’s first three stanzas develop the narrative between an imagined “Pancho Villa” and an eager youth in a familiar setting, the second section sustains the narrative while becoming more lyrical in tone, the voice of the poet transforming the story into an allegory on storytelling itself. Where the speaker returns to the suburban setting “later that afternoon” to hear more of the pamphleteer’s “famous

¹³⁵ Muldoon, Paul. *To Ireland, I*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

revolution”, the poem reframes the narration, placing the poetic “I” at a distance from the story in order for its self-reflexive commentary to emerge:

No one’s taken in, I’m sure
By such a mild invention.
But where (I wonder myself) do I stand,
In relation to a table and chair,
The quince tree I forgot to mention,
That suburban street, the door, the yard—
All made up as I went along
As things that people live among. (12)

Here, in a compounded set of revolutions, the poem inverts the character positions: now, the poet may address his own position as a kind of pamphleteer, or revolutionary, or storyteller. The poem ends in consideration of this compounded storytelling as a creative fiction: not only does the poem’s speaker bring the narrative full circle, now as the “celebrated pamphleteer” hosting the next generation of “callow youth”, but the ending—with its inversion of “stars and horses, pigs and trees”—maintains the consistency of the beginning of the poem as a point of departure; “Lunch with Pancho Villa” is a poem with narrative, poetic, and conceptual consistency that structures its theme by compounding several senses of poetry as revolution while at the same time refraining from granting interpretive primacy to any reading.

“Is it really a revolution, though?”:

‘When are you going to tell the truth?’
For there’s no such book, so far as I know,
As How it Happened Here,
Though there may be. There may.
What should I say to this callow youth
Who learned to write last winter—
One of those correspondence courses—
And who’s coming to lunch today?
He’ll be rambling on, no doubt,
About pigs and trees, stars and horses. (11)

The answer to the question of whether or not the poem is to be trusted—whether or not the poem does in fact “get down to something true”—begins to emerge: although the details of the story were admittedly “All made up as I went along”—the dialogue between speakers, the suburban setting, the pamphlet titles, the story itself, and the allegory that the poem tells about the poet’s struggle to work out the perceived crux that differentiates stories from truths—the thinking and associative word-work that the poem does concentrates on whether or not (and to what extent) a poem can or should function as an occasion for recollecting and faithfully presenting what, in language, is politically and historically contingent—in a phrase, as the poem so aptly puts it, the “*How it Happened Here*”. Although the speaker in the poem admits that “there’s no such book, so far as I know” as “*How it Happened Here*”, the concession is also made that “there may be. There may”.

Similarly to the ambivalent position of the speaker (“there’s no such book...there may be”), the poem too in a thematic way straddles the boundary between what constitutes a complete and incomplete experience of reading, at once establishing formal structural closure as a narrative composition while keeping open the possibility of multiple readings (e.g.: the poem as framing its primary (yet unresolved) objective to “tell the truth”). By the end of the poem, the opening question “Is it really a revolution, though?” comes to characterize the elliptical movements of the poem’s language, the question playing on both senses of “revolution” for its overall effect: telling a self-reflexive story (a doubly-entwined narrative) while acknowledging the manifold vectors of truth, despite their contingency, that all of the poem’s revolutions work together to produce as well as rely on for their formal consistency. The poem entertains these positions without providing a conclusive statement on the problem(s) it raises, teasing out the implications and the possibilities of how the poem deploys language in deliberate ways in order

to think through what it frames as linguistic and epistemic aporia, still echoing the contemporary call for poetry to “tell all the truth, but tell it slant” (Heaney, 359 (2008), via Dickinson).¹³⁶

Poems and riddles have a shared preoccupation with the connections created or implied in the analogical constructions of figurative language (metaphor, wordplay, punning, polysemy, paradox, imagery) whose abstractions give rise to elaborate expressiveness and rich conceptual associations. By extension, where the epistemological content of a poem is structured in the form of a riddle—that is, according to a series of clues that, in the process of establishing an epistemological theme, test the sensibility, perceptiveness, and ingenuity of readers without guaranteeing the possibility of any interpretive resolution—the poem presents contradictory statements while accommodating conflicting truths; in doing so, the poem creates a resistance to epistemic closure by disrupting or interfering—like riddles—with the logical schemata that are intended to inform (and in some cases misinform) the reader about the poem’s purported knowing.

In *To Ireland, I* (“TII”, 2000) Muldoon allies himself with the riddling “figure of Amergin”—first (so it goes) among Irish national poets—as a way of “understanding the role of the Irish writer as it has evolved over the centuries”; as a figure positioned between two opposing forces, Amergin, for Muldoon, is as much a public poet with “a mandate, it seems...to speak on national issues” as he is a poet of contradiction, a riddler; Muldoon identifies in Amergin’s poetry “an urge, equally strong as the public... towards the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible” (TII, 5). On the surface, “Lunch with Pancho Villa” takes an anecdotal approach

¹³⁶ See: Heaney, Seamus. *Opened Ground* (Faber & Faber, 1998) and “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Ralph W. Franklin, editor. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1998. In her essay “Thirteen or Fourteen: Paul Muldoon’s Poetics of Adolescence” (in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*), Stephanie Burt comments on the thematic significance of the transition from youth to adulthood, one of the narrative elements of “Lunch with Pancho Villa” that contributes to the poem’s circularity. Burt notes that “in Muldoon’s world to grow up is to know more facts, to have more experience, to see more of the conjunctions and resemblances that could link anyone to anything. It is not, however, to learn how the world makes any final, stable sense” (18).

to the politics of being a poet during (or in the wake of) a period of civil strife; at the same time, slightly below the threshold of the poem's narrative theme, the poem also frames an epistemological riddle about the rhetorical contingencies of truth. In its own way, the poem is characteristic of Muldoon's tendency in his work to balance these competing forces: both cyclical and encyclical, revolutionary and revolution-ery, the poem turns about a theme without necessarily capturing or disclosing it, holding out on its provision of a conclusive interpretive vantage. In a more general sense, what is particularly striking about the poem—and indeed many poems throughout Muldoon's oeuvre—is that despite the poetry's role as the rhetorical topos for balancing of questions about what constitutes knowing according to the political, historical, narratological, and lexical positions, Muldoon's poetry tends to encourage interpretive undecidability while at the same time maintaining the integrity of both poetry's inner structures and purported knowing by deploying and textually manipulating the literary sub-genre of the riddle.

This chapter characterizes one of Muldoon's chief poetic practices—and by extension chief epistemological practices—as “riddling”, as operating within the paradigm of poetry as an epistemological riddle. The encyclopedic span of Muldoon's work—a far-reaching network of lexical intra-connections, deep etymological linkages, and intertextually allusive references—generates both poetry's knowing as well as its unknowing, the poem as a framework for setting-up and upsetting the logical schemata that structure and balance its epistemological consistencies and inconsistencies. Riddles are organized in Muldoon's poetry through the circuitous movement of words and phrases the poem deploys as clues, the multiplicitous alternations between clues that both approximate towards and complicate epistemological certainty all while reinforcing and maintaining the poem's structural integrity as a self-contained referential matrix.

The concealed or otherwise latent links that Muldoon lays down in his work create the multitudinous connections that his poetry relies on for its epistemological force; refraining from positing any kind of terminal truth or epistemological position that the particular bits of information, technical knowledge, and data that his poems tend to relay, Muldoon's poetry, especially in his collection *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (2015) generates riddling epistemological ambiguities: where the knowledge contained in a poem (for example, in the metaphorical comparisons established in "Dirty Data" or "Recalculating") may be logically evaluated as true or false (depending on one's source), the poem and its language are structured—acoustically, semantically, etymologically, epistemologically—as simultaneously both true and untrue, facilitating an experience of reading that may be may be "either", "or", accommodating multiple interpretative vantages without necessarily giving primacy to one over another; the designation 'poetry as riddle' is a paradigmatic description of the word-work that poetry does in Muldoon's writing: it tends towards paradox while entertaining contradiction, communicating what, at the outset, may seem like conventional knowledge only to confound the interpretive conclusions that convention, expectation, or theme would otherwise anticipate.

3.1 LEGERDELANGUE: POETRY AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL RIDDLE

"Riddles", write Thomas Green and W. J. Pepicello, "are not simply descriptions whose referents must be guessed or revealed, but are conventional questions of various sorts which must be answered" (17)¹³⁷. Despite Green and Pepicello's definition of the folk-riddle as based on "the question and answer format", that the literary riddle is "potentially solvable" is perhaps its most interesting, if not contentious, characteristic. The definition of the riddle and its deployment in

¹³⁷ Green, Thomas A., and W. J. Pepicello. "The Folk Riddle: A Redefinition of Terms" in *Western Folklore*. 38:1, 1979. 3-20.

literature has been deliberated by several critics to various ends, some agreeing on the necessary solubility of the riddle—equating insolubility with meaninglessness—and others agreeing on the necessary ambiguity of the riddle, the riddle as a device “for mediating conceptual ambiguity and stimulating cognitive reexamination” (Gruenler, 2017); as riddle, Muldoon’s poetry tends towards the latter.¹³⁸

For Dan Pagis, “every proper riddle must fulfill two conditions...its social function as a competition between riddler and riddlees” and “its literary form, which must be difficult and enigmatic” (81); Pagis writes that although riddles in literature may be “formulated as a question or command”, many riddles are “written as a third-person description or monologue by a hidden narrator” (92).¹³⁹ In Pagis’s formulation, the most common forms of literary riddle include 1) “a question implying a challenge (‘What is a tree, yet its branches are in the earth?’)”; 2) “an imperative connected to a question (‘Tell me, what looks like houses?’)”; 3) “mention of the riddle as genre in the text (‘Now I pose you a riddle...’)”; 4) “an imperative which continues as a description (‘Behold, a short sceptre...’)”; 5) “propositions spoken by the observer, who describes the hidden subject in the third person (‘A box in the form of a cube...’)”; 6) declarative sentences spoken by the hidden narrator who describes himself in the first person” (‘Clothed I emerged from my mother’s womb’” (92-93)); in all of these examples, Pagis holds that the riddle—unlike the poem—“must be soluble” (83). This solubility is one of the primary differences between the two genres.

In the same volume (*Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (1996)), Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman contend that “the knowledge generated by the riddle process has

¹³⁸ Gruenler, Curtis A. *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma: Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology*. University of Notre Dame, 2017.

¹³⁹ Pagis, Dan. “Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle” in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*. Hasan-Rokem, Galit and David Shulman, editors. Oxford University Press, 1996. 81-108.

both ontic and emotional components” (5): the riddle “is not just a statement about the world; it also produces change within the world”, toying “with the normal borders of referential language...breaching the normative limits of language” while at the same time “redelineating a cognitive order at the edge of silence or the absurd” (5). For Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, the “epistemological aspect inherent in the genre...moves from an initial mixing of domains to a powerful disambiguation that reclassifies cultural categories”, the dual-process defining “more strictly the nature of the knowledge activated or embodied in riddling” as well as “its implications for the inner process that the ‘riddlee’ undergoes” (4). By bringing into proximity different thematic domains—“terministic screens”, if one is feeling Burkean enough—the riddle causes an epistemological shift by focussing intently on some overlooked metaphorical element that two seemingly disparate ideas have in common.

This “mixing of domains” in Hasan-Roken’s and Shulman’s formulation is, for Daniel Tiffany, materialized as the “correspondence between riddles and things”; in “Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity”, Tiffany invokes the idea that what is epistemological in a poem “may be able to tell us about the material substance of things”, where lyric substance—which “corresponds to an essential aspect of the way science understands the nature of the material world”—“is the solution to the conundrum posed by things that speak in riddles: the verbal identity of these objects, which is the source of their obscurity, corresponds to the role of analogy in the determination of material substance” (75).¹⁴⁰ The precise “degree of identification between poem and thing”, writes Tiffany, is rooted in the “phenomenon of darkness or obscurity, a quality intrinsic to the riddle or *aenigma* (and to allegory)”; although Tiffany argues that a poem as riddle can “tell us about the material substance of things and

¹⁴⁰ Tiffany, Daniel. “Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity” in *Critical Inquiry* 28. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

about the substance of the riddle itself”—a reframing of the argument that a poem can contribute, in a discursive sense, to knowledge produced not only in literature but also in other epistemological domains—it can only do so paradoxically, according to “the corporeal aspect of obscurity” as a “critical concept” that the poem as riddle evinces (82-83).

Although, for Tiffany, the “aim of a riddle” is, through the positing of a solution, to “coalesce” the “dark speech veiling the [poetic] object...into an image of the object itself”, Tiffany concludes that the epistemological significance of “lyric substance” to “philosophical materialism” has less to do with poetry and more to do with methodology: that “a poem should encourage criticism in the humanities to abandon uncritical assumptions about the nature of material substance” (97). The riddling poem, for Tiffany, is not without the double obscurity it produces, both in terms of the riddling language and the thing its language hides: “the darkness of the riddle becomes a property of the thing encrypted in the riddle...the dark speech of the riddle finds an image of itself in the cryptic nature of the thing it brings to life” (81).

Literary and poetic riddles (which stem from more broadly-formed and historically, culturally, and mythologically contingent folk-riddles) are, Eleanor Cook writes, “composed by conscious literary artists” whose skill shapes the riddle as a “verbal artefact” firmly “embedded in language.”¹⁴¹ Cook stresses that whether “riddle” is considered a mode, a pre-literary form (following André Jolles), or as a genuine folk-riddle (based on folklore and folklorist constructions)¹⁴², neck-riddle (based on “secret, personal knowledge” set, usually in narrative “by someone whose life is at stake and will die if the riddle is solved”) or true-riddle (“one whose

¹⁴¹ Cook, Eleanor. *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 114-117. See also Cook’s earlier chapter on riddles “The Function of Riddles at the Present Time” in *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play*. Stanford University Press, 1998. 202-212, as well as her article “Enigma as Art” in *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 6.1, 2004. 132-147.

¹⁴² See, eg: Archer Taylor’s paper “The Riddle” in *California Folklore Quarterly*, 2:2, 1943. 129-147.

question contains sufficient evidence for the answer”), riddles “do not sit comfortably with ordinary mimetic writing, except as amusement or wit” whose function is located “on the edge of mimesis or in an auxiliary way.”¹⁴³

Cook is careful to separate “riddle” and “enigma” into sets of generic types, modes, tropes, and masterplots, making some important distinctions between the role and functions of the two in their literary formulations. There is a common trope associated with the provision of an answer to a riddle as “undoing” or destroying the riddle or the riddler:¹⁴⁴ failing to decipher a riddle in certain situations (i.e.: in narrative or dramatic modes) is often a matter of life and death (as in aptly named “neck-riddles”). Cook reminds us that “poetically, a riddle that is fully answerable is not much of a riddle...a poetic riddle is only answerable to its best nature if it is not answerable, in the sense that its answer does not close down a question, but goes on generating meaning” (Cook, 118).

For Gregg Hecimovich, whose study on the “vitality of the riddle in nineteenth-century British literature” in Blake, Keats, and Dickens emphasizes their shared “love of word play”¹⁴⁵, riddles in literature “bring together elements from different semantic domains” and “provide a context of artful word play in which an exploration of the spaces between domains can be opened up, admitted to and explored.”¹⁴⁶ Hecimovich holds that where metaphors “constantly assault our sense of meaning” by disrupting naturalized conceptions of order, riddles “heighten

¹⁴³ Cook, 2006: 116-120, 128-129.

¹⁴⁴ See eg. Gregg Hecimovich’s commentary on Oedipus and the Sphinx in *Puzzling the Reader: Riddles in Nineteenth Century British Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Hecimovich, 3. Though riddles can be thought of as instances of word-play, I contend that when deployed in a poem, word-play takes place as word-work.

¹⁴⁶ Hecimovich, 2-3. Hecimovich attributes his developed ideas to Roger D. Abrahams original ones, citing both “Between the Living and the Dead” in *Folklore Fellows Communication* 225. Academia Scientiarum Fennica: Helsinki, 1980 and “The Literary Study of the Riddle” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14, 1972. 177-97.

the stakes”—a riddle necessarily “makes its comparative statement quickly,” yet it manages to prolong its reader’s experience by “inducing participation” in understanding the riddle’s construction as well as the resultant implications of its terms of comparison.

Brian Tucker, who reads with a critical eye towards the rhetorics of obscurity, processes of psychoanalysis, and vocabulary of Freudian dream language, writes that riddles both codify “a particular relationship between sign and user, one that grounds aesthetic experience in obscurity, difficulty, and resistance” and at the same time function analogically “*as* literature, as a figure for the processes of reading and writing.”¹⁴⁷ Notwithstanding Tucker’s interpretation that “literature is the object of psychoanalysis,” more neutrally (though just as forced), the riddle as a generic construction presupposes that “every riddle has a solution; and when this solution arrives, it dissolves the riddle...the riddle, in other words, is destroyed by its solution and ceases to exist.”¹⁴⁸ What is crucial to remember, however, is that the “riddle” on its own is a representational form whose genre assumes or expects eventual solution and in turn teaches or divulges its version of “truth.” Conversely, in devising solutions to riddles in a poem that specifically ask the poem to divulge or reveal its secrets (if indeed poems can have or hold secrets and mysteries), the poem-as-riddle necessarily closes off, evades, or resists interpretation, prompting both a re-evaluation of the reading and eventually a recognition of the poem’s necessary resistance to the strictures of the riddle proper.

Literary riddles, from the inaugural Exeter book of riddles (10th C. AD) to Ian Duhig’s “Riddle” (2015)—whose challenge to the reader is a version of “say what I am called” or “who”/ “what am I?”—integrate elements of the riddling paradigm into their own constructions,

¹⁴⁷ Tucker, Brian. *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011. 15.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 16.

bringing to the poems both the thematic limitations of the riddle as a genre but also the freedom to create (within the question and answer format implied) more meaningful (and convoluted) associations (acoustic, lexical, etymological linkages) between words as a mechanism for the provision of clues. Literary riddles can range in difficulty, from question and answer building-block formats—as in Duhig’s “Riddle” (“Who I am’s child’s play/a cry in a kindergarten;/though I pun on Latin, my Yorkshire kin’s laik”)¹⁴⁹—to poetic commentary on the riddle as a paradigmatic designation for the production of poetry itself—as in Seamus Heaney’s “The Riddle” (“Which would be better, what sticks or what falls through?/Or does the choice itself create the value?”)¹⁵⁰—to self-reflexive and seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes about the nature of language itself, as in Muldoon’s poem “Riddle”. In instances where riddling configurations of language—or overwhelmingly applied riddle-tropes—assume dominance over the poem, the supposed solution to the poem’s riddle would be the site of the poem’s terminal limitation as well as its undoing. Where the provision of an answer to a riddle—in bringing all of clue elements into alignment—renders the riddle ineffective to the solver (or by extension, knower, who is brought to experience by finding a solution). The literary riddle, however—or, at least the postmodern one—which provisions clues for the reader (and perhaps even gestures towards localized solutions), does not promise that a solution will bring the elements of the poem into alignment; indeed, what makes it epistemological is its built-in resistance towards granting thematic closure.

Unlike “Lunch with Pancho Villa”, which poses its question about the epistemological salience of a poem according to the relation between representation and performativity,

¹⁴⁹ Duhig, Ian. “Riddle” in *Poetry*. Chicago, 207:3. 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Heaney, Seamus. “The Riddle” (1987) in *Opened Ground*. Faber & Faber, 1998.

Muldoon's poem "Riddle" is more enigmatic and expectedly game-like. "Riddle" establishes and continuously cycles through familiar stanzaic repetitions, motivating approximation towards increasingly allusive clues; the poem begins by challenging its reader to solve a problem that the poem itself—the voice of the literary riddler—advises, by the poem's end, may not lead to any promising solution(s):

My first may be found, if found it ever is, quite firmly embedded in grime
but not in rime,
despite the fact that I'm
cold as well as dirty, with what being stowed away almost all the time.

My second sounds doubly in roar
and singly in oar.
When the buccaneers put ashore
And set fire to our little craft, my spirit would sink, then soar

when I thought of my third, found in the ideal
but not in the raw deal
I got from them. Just because I've a heart of steel
doesn't mean I don't *feel*.

My fourth is in Drake
but not in rake.
They'd rake the coals they'd make me walk. My last request was for a steak
followed by something like a piece of cake.

My fifth is in drum
but not in rum.
The drunken buccaneers offered me a lump of dough if I'd keep mum.
A lump in my throat. My lump sum.

My sixth is in leaves
but not in eaves.
I heard them laughing about "honour among thieves"
when they left me stranded here with the dry heaves.

My last heaves to, as it were, twice in event
but once only in vent.
I'm still wearing that old stovepipe hat. I've made scarcely a dent
in that lump of dough I was given, or lent,

by the buccaneers from whom I still take my cue.

A barb of smoke from the barbecue
brings a blush to the cheek of the cockatoo
who'll wait as long for a word from me as I'll wait for a word from you.¹⁵¹

The poem, which simultaneously intersects several planes of reference—the subtractive word-game, the experience of first-person speaker, and the details of the pirate story—begins in characteristic riddle form, addressing the reader directly to “find”—“if found it ever is”—the first clue in a series of “what am I” constructions. The poem’s first clue is discovered in a patterned form, discernible by comparing the end words from each stanza’s first and second lines and subtracting the second line’s end word from the first: by subtracting “rime” from “grime” we find that the letter “g” is “firmly embedded in grime” and not in “rime.”

Despite the speaker’s goading, this subtractive process discloses the poem’s first big clue intuitively; applied to the first seven stanzas, deciphering the first clue transforms becomes an iterative word-game, where the the lexical (subtracting $xa - xb = x$), in accordance with the directive to search (“if found it ever is”) and the threatening result of passing over or missing necessary clues (“They’d rake the coals they’d make me walk”) not only create convergences between the poem’s interpretive planes but also heightens the tension of discovery, perhaps even to the point of over-interpretation (not unlike the common trope in pirate/seafaring narratives of going through every possible trouble to find a missing treasure which may or may not actually exist (or, upon finding it, realizing it is another clue, etc.)). Many things can be found embedded in grime, or, as Muldoon’s poem implies, in the “grime” of language; intra-poem, “g” and “rime” are the embedded components. This play of words reinforces the poem’s epistemological quality: where the poem works creatively to conjoin words that are separated as clues, each stanza compounds the riddling play-on-words to reinforce the layered narrative structures throughout

¹⁵¹ Muldoon, Paul. “Riddle” in *Horse Latitudes*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. 76-77.

the poem in a way that the reader must co-create or co-approximate towards some sense of formal closure according to what the poem purports to know.

Once the first clue is discovered—the letter “g”—each subsequent clue becomes discernible, in that the poem prompts and encourages continued approximation towards additional connections. When the operation (used to discern “g” from “grime” by subtracting “rime”) is applied to each stanza (with the exception of the final one), the word ‘griddle’ is spelled. The word ‘griddle’, the ostensible solution to the poem’s riddles, is not much of a revelation given that each letter-clue is determined using the same formula. Rather than functioning as a solution however, ‘griddle’ is—in the context of the postmodern riddle—more properly another clue, the word now centrally integrated as part of a more broadly conceived riddle, one whose comparative basis collapses several domains (the solution being, for instance, “barbecue” or “stow-away” or indeed the griddle-as-speaker) without settling on which one validates the poem’s operant riddle in a conclusive way.

The play of words not only constitutes the poem’s logical internal structures but also supports its overlaid narratives, which together allude to cookery (where a ‘griddle’-like instrument is used for cooking or smoking food) and to seafaring or prisoner-keeping (a stow-away behind a ‘griddle’ of steel). The narrative overlaps occur where key phrases ambiguously allude to both of the interpretive positions: declarative phrases like “I’m cold as well as dirty”, “stowed away almost all the time”, “I’ve a heart of steel”, “They’d rake the coals”, “I’m still wearing that old stovepipe hat” keep the narrative undecidability consistent throughout the poem, each ambiguity supporting but not fulfilling the conditions for one narrative to take interpretive primacy over another.

Etymological allusion, too, is interwoven into the poem based on the ‘griddle’ clue. The

word “rime”, though not idiomatic in the way that some of the poem’s phrases are, is important to the poem as another kind of clue: though it does not apply in a direct way to cookery or captivity, it is notable because of its connection to ‘griddle’. The OED outlines a usage of the word “griddle” as an adjective (“griddled”) whose definition (now rare) links ‘griddle’ to ‘rime’: “griddled frost, hoar frost”, which links to and highlights the importance that the word “griddle” carries throughout the poem.¹⁵² While hoar and rime are distinguished from one another as different kinds of frost, they are both of a variety, rime being an “amorphous deposit formed by the rapid freezing of supercooled droplets of water when they are brought by air currents into contact with a cold surface” (i.e.: formed on the hull of a ship, or perhaps even on the hull of a metal cooking instrument).¹⁵³ Buccaneer is notable for this reason too—it reinforces both the seafaring narrative as well as the cookery narrative at the same time, though it does in a different way: rather than share a definitional connection with ‘griddle’ as “rime” does, ‘griddle’ as a device for cookery shares a connotative connection with the object “boucan”, from “buccaneer”, where a “buccaneer” can be a name for a pirate, (originally off of the Spanish- American coast) as well as a person who dries and smokes flesh on a boucan; a ‘boucanier’ (from “buccan”), (one who cooks) using a wooden frame on which to cook or cure meat. (buccaneer | buccanier, n.)”.¹⁵⁴ Boucan, through buccaneer, shares a connection with griddle through their shared function: a buccaneer is someone who uses a boucan, a kind of griddle for cooking or preparing meat—in this instance, the cookery and seafaring narratives coincide with one another, which more solidly cements their allusion in the relation between the clue ‘griddle’ and the rest of the poem.

¹⁵² † “Griddled, Adj. (1)”. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP. September 2024. Date of access: 30 January 2025.

¹⁵³ “Hoar-frost, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, December 2024. Date of access: 30 January 2025. The nature of the formation (and definition) of “rime” ice/frost reinforces that it must exist in a place where air currents carrying water droplets come in contact with an already frigid surface - conceivably on the hull of a vessel.

¹⁵⁴ “Buccaneer, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP, December 2024. Date of access: 30 January 2025.

Here, the poem-as-riddle offers what it knows comparatively, reflexively, adjacently; it refrains from granting obvious solution while remaining resolute in its execution, maintaining equipoise in its distribution of clues while keeping supposed answers tentative but not entirely conclusive, allowing the poem to fulfill its own “(g)riddling” function.¹⁵⁵ The poem’s assiduous latticing of distinctly patterned words—strands of riddling verse knotted together in grid-like fashion, whose definitions, connotations, and lexical clues coincide with one another in quality and agreement—reinforce the poem’s layering of idiomatic language and ambiguous comparisons that by extension support the poem’s narrative movements. The poem’s final line “who’ll wait as long for a word from me as I’ll wait for a word from you” is not only a trapping mechanism essential to the poem’s circularity and aloof, knowing manner, but also an echo of the subtractive quality of the first clue, where the word “from”—in “a word from me” and “a word from you”—is suggestive of the poem’s initial operation of separating “griddle” from “riddle” (but this time at the narrative level as opposed to the lexical). The poem uses the riddle as a trope to threaten difficulty, encouraging a mechanical scouring of the poem for additional clues for the riddle’s solution (“if found it ever is”) while ending in a way that keeps the pursuit of a final answer alive, at once confirming the “riddler-riddlee” relation of speaker to reader (fulfilling its function as a riddle) while also reproducing the reflexivity with which the poem exhibits the acoustic, etymological, and lexical relations between “riddle” and “griddle” as a compositional whole. Although this poem is paradigmatic for the way it delineates the thematic and metaphorical significance of poetry as riddle as a comparative basis for understanding the epistemological possibilities of poetry, it is by no means the only one: the elements used in the

¹⁵⁵ The idea of ‘griddle’ as holding together the poem (as the primary ‘riddle’) while at the same time keeping things separate (as in cooking or keeping a captive) is requisite to the poem’s central function: “riddle” and “griddle” are most significantly related in the space where their connotative extensions overlap. Besides its function as a genre of communication, the word “riddle” also refers to “a coarse-meshed sieve”; as a verb, to “riddle” means “to separate one thing from another; to examine (a person); to extract or reveal (something) by separation or examination.”

poem-as-riddle formulation are deployed just as rigorously throughout Muldoon's oeuvre—despite not being riddles in a thematic sense—as they are in this singular, exemplary poem.

3.2 MULTITUDINOUS MULTIDOONIOUSNESS

Although critics have focussed on Muldoon's characteristic balancing of the political and the poetic (Wills, 1998), his complex layering of etymological allusion and the “epistemology of confusion” (Gaudern, 2020; Williams, 2020), and his ability to complement, sometimes frustratingly, intertextuality with indeterminacy (McDonald; 2004), the question of how the epistemological content of Muldoon's poetry is structured in the form of a riddle—in addition to being modelled, as David-Antoine Williams suggests, on “the structures of etymological knowledge” (209)—has been of less critical focus.^{156,157} Muldoon's integration of the riddling paradigm allows his poetry to deploy, often simultaneously and interchangeably, both fact and fiction; to trouble, confuse, or occlude epistemological certainty, to assert half-truths and proverbial wisdoms while working to complicate interpretation, where each newly discovered detail of a poem-as-riddle—some unfettered “thing worth knowing”, as Muldoon's collection *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (2015) alludes—prompts and encourages approximation towards increasingly interconnected but equally perplexing clues.

For Andrew Motion and Derek Mahon, Muldoon's early style “aspires to the condition of clear glass...there are no outbursts of *recherché* language, and no strong rhetorical gestures...just plain phrases and conversational cadences” (Motion, x).¹⁵⁸ For Mahon, Muldoon's early

¹⁵⁶ Wills, Clair. *Reading Paul Muldoon*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1998; Gaudern, Mia. *The Etymological Poetry of W. H. Auden, J. H. Prynne, and Paul Muldoon*. Oxford University Press, 2020; Kendall, Tim, and Peter McDonald, editors. *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹⁵⁷ Williams, David-Antoine. *The Life of Words: Etymology and Modern Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Motion, Andrew. “Paul Muldoon's Latest Collection.” *New Statesman* 100:2584. Sept. 26, 1980. 22

collections—*New Weather* and *Mules*—exercise “the quirky, oblique lyricism which has become his personal signature”; in collections thereafter—*Why Brownlee Left* and *Quoof*—Muldoon’s style shifts, beginning to constitute “a private poetry of departure”, his work continuing to incorporate, in a more homogeneous way, themes of “childhood, Ulster and myth” while also becoming “opaque to the point of secretiveness”; in these collections, Muldoon establishes a pattern of concluding poems “with a teasing displacement of gravity” (Mahon, 1980; Mahon, 1983).¹⁵⁹

Although Motion and Mahon provide generous insights about what motivates Muldoon’s first few collections of poetry—citing “Immram” for its “abiding fascinations...the shifts between fact and fiction” (Motion; 1980), “The Boundary Commission” for its “real or imagined disappearing acts” (Mahon; 1980), and “Trance”, for its “whimsical recreation of some long-ago Christmas Eve”, which proves to be an “Ulster childhood...myth” (Mahon; 1983)—the riddling undercurrent (fascinations with fact and fiction, real or imagined disappearing acts, myth) that motivates Muldoon’s questioning, circular, epistemologically-ambiguous poetry is alluded to in early collections but is not entirely elaborated. For example, the poem “The Glad Eye” in *New Weather*—a collection where “philosophy, myth and landscape come together” (Holdridge, 3; 2009)—features a protagonist who, after becoming “Bored by Ascham and Zeno/In private conversation on the longbow,” shoots an arrow into his brother’s eye; in the aftermath of the protagonist’s nonchalance, a compounded riddle is revealed:

I went out onto the lawn.
Taking the crooked bow of yellow cane,

I shot an arrow over
The house and wounded my brother.
...

¹⁵⁹ Mahon, Derek. “Long Goodbye” in *London Review of Books*, 1980, 2:22, p. 6, and *The New Statesman*, 1983.

Zeno could have had no real
 Notion of the flying arrow being still,

 Not blessed with the hindsight
 Of photography and the suddenly frozen shot,

 Yet that obstinate one
 Eye inveigled me to a standing stone. (7)

Thankfully, unlike Zeno and the narrator (neither “blessed with the hindsight”), we can still see that “inveigled”, from Anglo-Norman French, functions as a lexical clue in the poem, its etymological decipherment transforming the narration into a double experience of reading. In a similar way as the shot arrow, which has “inveigled” the brother (“aveugle”, from Old French “aveugler” via Anglo-Norman French, “enveigler” (to blind)), the etymological connection implied by “lith” /liθ/—connects the “standing stone” (a mono-lith, -lith, from Greek ‘lithos’ (stone)), and the poetic I, “standing” frozen, as still as a “stone”, still in shock. The long vowel in “suddenly frozen shot” (/o/) also connects acoustically to “notion”—which is just shy of the poem’s “motioning” (or lack thereof)—to Zeno’s paradox, of the “flying arrow being still” at the blinding instant of the graphic snapshot. The poem’s etymological connections direct epistemological attention to Zeno of Elea and Roger Ascham: in addition to the reference to Ascham, whose first published work, titled *Toxophilus*, “Lover of the Bow” was the first book on archery in the English language¹⁶⁰, Zeno’s paradox—in connection with the poem—shows an engagement with the paradox of infinitesimally small periods of movement (or, non-movement) that informs the paradox of movement in the subject(s) of the poem as well. As a kind of textual monolith, the poem tells a story that unfolds in snapshot couplets: it achieves both effects while playing on elements of Zeno’s paradox at both meta-textual and narrative levels.

¹⁶⁰ Ascham, Roger. *Toxophilus*. Edward Arber, editor. Southgate, London. 1868.

“*What* a poem can tell us”, writes Peter MacDonald, “is not separable from *how* it tells us what it does; in Muldoon’s case, this is especially evident, and perhaps especially problematic” (3-4).¹⁶¹ In *Mules*, the “what’s” and “how’s” in Muldoon’s poetry become more intertextual, incorporating proper names and literary-historical sources as textual clues worth tracking down: poems like “The Centaurs”—“I can think of William of Orange...Hernan Cortes...Saul of Tarsus”)—“Ma”—“She reads aloud, no doubt from Rupert Brooke...Keenaghan and Collegelands...Old miners at Coalisland”—and “Boon”—“Her parting shot/Left me more intent than Lancelot/Upon the Grail. Or whoever it was. Sir Galahad.”—typify Muldoon’s leveraging of the thematic domains from other works for use in his own creating an intertextual accumulation of sources that anticipates the multiplication of textual-referential fields that characterize his later work. In *Why Brownlee Left*, the poems “Whim”—which merges the myth of Cu Chulainn with a lover’s escapade to mysterious ends—“Cuba”—which creates ambiguity by overlapping the public language of the Cuban Missile Crisis with the private language of the confessional—and “The Boundary Commission”—which implies how political divisiveness can lead to undecidability—enigmatically combine the familiar and local with the strange and unknown, where events, details, and stories from beyond domestic borders permeate the senses and sensibilities of Muldoon’s characters.

In *Quoof*, Muldoon’s poems begin to formalize elements of the riddle in conjunction with its history as a literary genre: “The Salmon of Knowledge”, which incidentally (or intentionally) names a story from the Fenian cycle of Irish mythology and folklore, creates more questions than it presumes to answer; structured in couplets (implying pairing or ‘couplings’) by its end asks—

¹⁶¹ Kendall, Tim, and Peter McDonald, editors. *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

slightly more obliquely than the classic riddle question ‘What am I’—‘Who is he? (and indeed, “Who is She?”):

Out of the world of blood and snatters
the inch-to-the-mile

world of the eel,
the yardstick of lymph,

the unquenchable oomph
of her whip, her thigh-length boot

...

Here lies one who reached for the sky.

There is a bay-leaf over his eye
and his name is writ in water.

Despite the dominating language of the interim lines (quoted here using ellipses, which feature bodily fluids and an “ass hole/clean as a whistle”), the poem ends with a conventional summons to take a guess at what or whom is being referred to. “Here lies one who reached for the sky” plays on the ambiguity of the idiom “reach for the sky”—or, in a more pointed sense, “stick em up!” (but what, exactly?)—suggesting either one who aspired or one who surrendered (or both).

That the bay-leaf as a symbol is substituted for what might have otherwise been a ferryman’s gold coin suggests ‘one who has seen’ or experienced knowledge; in combination with the epitaphic “here lies one”, the poem describes both a burial rite or rite of passage and a coming to age narrative, a narrative and thematic coupling of innocence (“out of the world of blood and snatters”) and experience (the unquenchable oomph/of her whip”). The poem’s compacting (through compacted couplings) of youth (“world of blood and snatters”/“world of the eel”), sexual experience (“yardstick of lymph”/“unquenchable oomph/of her whip”/“her hacked gulp of semen”), death (“out of this world”/“here lies one”), and myth (“bay-leaf over

his eye”/“name is writ in water”) not only create the conditions for the journey from innocence and experience to emerge as a theme but also connects it, in a riddling way—leaving the reader to question the significance of the bay leaf as a symbol and the clue “his name is writ in water”—as an analogue for how experience (perhaps through the experience of drawing the poem’s disparate details into a conclusive interpretation) represents the journey towards knowledge. The riddle in the poem’s final line, which may contain the seed of its solution in its clues, encourages the reader, like the directive to Fionn mac Cumhaill in the Fenian folklore, to chew his thumb, so to speak, “to know is there any way out of this” (TII, 62).¹⁶²

For Clair Wills and Tim Kendall, Muldoon’s early style is “balanced between two separate visions” (Wills, 12), writing where “everything resembles or contains a portion of something else” (Kendall, 235) and that exercises, overall, “a persistent air of provisionality” (McDonald, 2).¹⁶³ For Wills, Muldoon’s collection *Meeting the British* “plays with notions of poetic language as an abstraction from or magical transformation of everyday discourse, and explores the ways in which such a ‘rarefied’ language may refer to or act on public events and the shared language of everyday communication” (x).¹⁶⁴ In Wills’s formulation, “Muldoon’s circular narratives stress the omnipresence of repetition”, suggesting that the “forms of metamorphosis, of trade and exchange” create the creative conditions where “one thing can become another” (138). In *The Life of Words* (2020), Williams characterizes Muldoon’s etymological poetics as turning on “the Muldoonian ‘or’”, the epitome of the “porous binaries” that saturate his work

¹⁶² See Curtin, Jeremiah. *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* (1890; reissued by Wings Books, 1975). 290.

¹⁶³ See Clair Wills’s *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), Tim Kendall’s *Paul Muldoon* (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions Inc., 1996), and *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* (eds. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald) Liverpool University Press, 2004.

¹⁶⁴ From Clair Wills’s “The Lie of the Land: Language, Imperialism and Trade in Paul Muldoon’s *Meeting the British*” in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*. 1992.

and which activates an epistemology “of confusion, error, and revision”, which, in terms of the questionability of facticity, instigates a deeper engagement and investigation into the poetic ‘fact of the matter’ for which there is no resolution but the “subterranean and etymological associations between words” (222).

The poem “Sushi”—a poem that at once emblemizes Wills’s description of Muldoon’s poetry as stressing “the omnipresence of repetition” and also turns on the rhetorical possibilities of the word “or”—or, the “Muldoonian ‘or’”, according to Williams—as an epistemological crux—begins in the middle of a dinner reservation, the speaker distantly narrating his observations at the sushi bar while his partner carries on a one-sided conversation:

‘Why do we waste so much time arguing?’
We were sitting at the sushi bar
drinking *Kirin* beer
and watching the Master chef
fastidiously shave
salmon, tuna and yellowtail
while a more volatile
apprentice
fanned the rice
every grain of which was magnetized
in one direction—east. (174)

That every grain of rice was oriented in one direction (i.e.: who’s to say that they weren’t actually facing west?) is one of the thematic elements that connects the poem’s polarized voices, one questioning and quoted in parentheses, one coolly observational and disinterested in everything but the Master’s craft. The repetition of speech interrupts the observer again:

‘It’s as if you have some kind of death-wish.
You won’t even talk . . .’
On the sidewalk
a woman in a leotard
with a real leopard
in tow.
For an instant I saw beyond the roe
...

I saw, when the steam
cleared, how this apprentice
had scrimshandered a rose's
exquisite petals
not from some precious metal
or wood or stone
(‘I might just as well be eating alone.’)
but the tail-end of a carrot. (174)

Rather than giving over to the partner's continued pleas, the observer gives over to a different interruption (“a woman in a leotard/with a real leopard”), the metrical emphasis on “leotard” adjusting the reading of “leopard” into “leo-pard”, breaking, for an instant, the normal pronunciation of the word to emphasize the significance of this interruption over the (now parenthesized) protestations of (what could only now be loosely referred to as) the dinner guest.

On the way to being interrupted by “the tail-end of a carrot”—masterfully “scrimshandered” into a rose by the kitchen apprentice—the speaker is interrupted by another individual outside the restaurant: by the end of the poem, the compounded doubling of narrative effects (not to mention the proximally-doubled (and tripled) words, “leopard/leotard”, “oregano/orgone/organs”, “Arigna/Aragon”, “Duns Scotus/Scotus Eriugena”) reaches its climax—the apprentice submits “this work of art/to the Master—”:

*Is it not the height of arrogance
to propose that God's no more arcane
than the smack of oregano
orgone,
the inner organs
of beasts and fowls, the mines of Arigna,
the poems of Louis Aragon?—
it might have been alabaster
or jade
the Master so gravely weighed
from hand to hand
with the look of a man unlikely to confound
Duns Scotus, say, with Scotus Eriugena. (175)*

The narrative doubling between the Master and apprentice, the speaker and parenthesized dinner-guest, the unfolding of the dinner and the lyric intensity—implied in the poem through italics and non-italics—creates a meta-textual analogy between the master and apprentice and the speaker and the poet where the poet, like the apprentice, might too achieve fastidiousness of craft by balancing “the tension between alternative possibilities, the pull of opposing forces” (Wills, 135).

In “Sushi”, the poet’s achievement—as well as the poem’s—is its polarizing balance, its magnetizing of the [k/g-n] sounds in “arrogance”, “oregano”, “orgone”, “organs”, “Arigna”, “Aragon”, and “Eriugena” (that they might all resound “in one direction—east”) as against the countervailing /or/ sounds that echo through those same words: “more”, “oregano”, “orgone”, “organs”, “Arigna” and “Aragon” (that they might all resound “in one direction”, west). The /or/ sounds, which culminate in the poem through an invocation of the actual word “or”—“it might have been alabaster/or jade”—not only reinforce (with the help of “might”) the poetics of contradiction (which is a key feature of the riddle) as a paradigmatic quality of Muldoon’s work but also signify the multiplicity of linguistic possibilities that “or” implies, “or” as the mechanism through which the poem’s power to polarize is achieved.

“Increasingly dexterous feats of rhyme and wordplay” writes Eric Falci, are central to the multitudinous complexities in Muldoon’s poetry: combined with “ever-more-intriguing variations on traditional forms” and an “expanding corpus of oddly angled parables”, the riddling nature of Muldoon’s poetry hinges on “some unstated knowledge that lies outside the text” (149)¹⁶⁵; Falci’s position that Muldoon’s poetry contains “some hollow or absence that disallows a full sense of narrative completion to emerge” is of a kind with the argument that Muldoon’s poetry

¹⁶⁵ Falci, Eric, editor. “The North” in *The Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry 1945-2010*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

resists epistemological closure: where the narrative closure is achieved, the riddling aspects of the poem exert an equal amount of pressure in the form of epistemological uncertainty, not because there is unstated knowledge laying somewhere outside the text waiting for discovery, but because the knowledge that Muldoon is drawing from for continuity in his poetry is also subject to epistemological contingency, the contingency of knowing.

This is particularly true in his collection *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*; it is not enough that the collection plays on the idea that there are “things”—pieces of factual information, mistaken knowledge, “dirty data”, etc.—to be known and approximated towards as a way of engaging the work itself—but, in addition, it is the contingent value of such knowledge, information, disinformation, and data that the reader is left to decide or modulate what is “worth” knowing and what is not. Just as a coarse-meshed sieve—as Heaney’s riddle poem implies—separates one substance from another, so too does a conception of the poem-as-riddle, where, like a griddle—through its separation of “things” from “things worth knowing”—leaves the reader to decide which clues contribute to knowing in a given reading and which clues are more properly sleights (which yet can still contribute to the development of a certain kind of reading). The poem-as-riddle works to accommodate both possibilities.

3.3 ONE THOUSAND THINGS WORTH KNOWING

Despite his self-mockery as “a very badly brought-up nonacademic” (EP, 67), Muldoon’s writing is comprehensive in its application of any and all of language’s available resources, not shying from engagement with any range of subject matter for the conceptual, etymological, and acoustic linking together (else, conjecturing or conjuring) of seemingly disparate facts, figures, and points of knowledge in his poetry. “Muldoon’s poetry”, writes Clair Wills, is “playful, tricky, erudite,

given to complex rhyming structures, full of references to seemingly unconnected objects and events” and proceeding “by means of etymological threads and weaves” (Wills, 2020).¹⁶⁶

In *The Life of Words* (2020), Muldoon’s epistemological bias is called “negative” due to “the double and porous valences etymologies often acquire in his work” (4); for Williams, Muldoon’s poetry and poetics characteristically encourage both “the primacy of unknowing” and “almost total knowingness on the part of the poet” (TLOW, 209) as a warranted or desirable aspect of the poetic experience, an experience which is paradigmatic of poetry as an epistemologically-inflected genre that challenges the stability of knowledge (and what it means to know) while also offering an appraisal of the epistemological themes that language may in some cases either expose or perpetuate.¹⁶⁷

Muldoon’s poetics, Williams writes, are composed of “a tense epistemological dyad of ‘unknowing’ and ‘all-knowing’ which hinge on what Williams calls “The Muldoonian ‘Or’”, where “‘things’ confused in Muldoon include words for things as well as what they represent - Muldoon confuses in language as much as with language” (223). For Williams, the etymological dimensions of Muldoon’s poetry motivate the coherences and disruptions between the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language over time. Both of these epistemic extremes—the ‘all-knowing’ and the ‘all-unknowing’—present a problematic akin to what Muldoon calls

¹⁶⁶ Wills, Clair. “On Paul Muldoon” LRB 6 February 2020: “Not unlike Muldoon’s Amergin, who, in *To Ireland*, I is described in terms of his “liminality”, “lining up just beyond the door”/“the threshold of an ‘unseen dolmen arch”, so too does Wills describe Muldoon in her review as such a liminal figure, Muldoon standing “by the entrance, or rabbit hole”, seeming to “invite us inside” and through “tunnel of abstruse references and allusions” that his poems so well invoke.

¹⁶⁷ Muldoon on knowing and unknowing, from Laird (“The Triumph of Paul Muldoon”): “Another article of faith (which I touched on briefly) has to do with un-knowing, and that, I think, connects it to many experiences that could be described as “spiritual” experiences, and I know you are all familiar with those, where one has a sense of giving oneself over to something beyond oneself, something one doesn’t quite understand; and only when one does that, and only in a spirit of humility, is there half a chance that one will come out the other side *knowing* anything at all in some minor way. So I think I am really pleased that you enter these discussions in the spirit of unknowing, because that is the spirit in which we all engage in the business of trying to write poems”. See also: “Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*” in *Essays in Criticism* 48.2 (1998), 107-28.

the “ungetroundable”, a lexical conglomerate signifying the “apparently insurmountable difficulties” for which a poet might develop or negotiate poetic strategies; in the case of balancing the “supremacy of ‘unknowing’” with “almost total ‘knowing’”, Muldoon relies in his poetry on blurring the lines between both, leaving the reader—for whom the poem “creates the role”—to decide or test how far each boundary might go.¹⁶⁸ The “epistemological markers of Muldoon’s poetics”, writes Williams, “focus on the uncovering, not of facts per se, but, through facts, of the connective structures”, like etymologies, “that support and sustain them” (TLOW, 209). In addition to its etymological dimensions, Muldoon’s poetic style is also epistemologically loaded, that is, through his encyclical compounding of semantic, historical, phonetic, syntactic, rhetorical, contingent, intra- and extra-textual elements; this compounding makes the poem a stratified layering of linguistic references for which “it’s the poet’s job” writes Muldoon—and certainly also the reader’s or critics’s—to know, “to take into account...all possible readings of the poem” (1998).

The kinds of knowing that Muldoon refers to—on one hand “the supremacy of ‘unknowing’”, for the Keatsian model of poet as conduit, channel, the ‘belly’ from which a poem is ventriloquized”, and on the other hand “the almost total ‘knowing’ of Robert Frost, a ‘knowing’”, to “use concrete images to suggest metaphysical concepts”—are touchstones for how Muldoon’s poetry is expected to navigate the difficulty that the ‘poetry as epistemology’ comparison presumes¹⁶⁹; whether the knowledge embedded in poems is found to be actually true, false, approximated, or mistaken, it is the poet’s task to invoke as much as challenge its own knowledge to the point where it becomes either epistemologically suspect (and by extension leads

¹⁶⁸ Muldoon, Paul. “Getting round: notes towards an ‘Ars Poetica’ in *Essays in Criticism*, 48: 2. 1998.

¹⁶⁹ “Robert Frost and Paul Muldoon” in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* Kendall, Tim, and Peter McDonald, editors. Liverpool University Press, 2004. 39.

to any number of plausible/valid interpretations) or gives an impression of being so thoroughly persuasive as to be misconstrued as all-knowing.

In Muldoon's *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* ("1KT", 2015), the poem "Recalculating" balances this unknowing/all-unknowing "dyad" (Williams, 223) by first establishing a consistent matrix of analogies: presented in the shape of a sonnet, each line takes the robust form "A:B::C:D1 | D2:E::E:F1". Each line in the poem is bisected into two distinct halves, where the first two related words in the sequence are presented by analogy as correspondent to the latter pair according to any number of associable elements, whether through a shared historical relevance, etymological derivation, acoustic resonance, or metaphorical suggestiveness. The final word from each line is carried forward and "recalculated", forming the beginning of a new analogy in the subsequent line, a kind of cyclical anadiplosis or re-doubling that compounds and carries forward each beginning and end-word's referential field:

Arthritis is to psoriasis as Portugal is to Brazil.
Brazil is to wood as war club is to war.
War is to wealth as performance is to appraisal.
Appraisal is to destiny as urn is to ear. (1KT, 45)

Each word's correspondent elements—which can be framed in terms of their comparative similarities or differences with the terms surrounding them—place a significant deal of responsibility on the reader to discern, more or less accurately, the latent connections that link the operant terms of each analogy.

The poem does not provide a standard or a legend according to which the accuracy of each analogy can be conclusively determined, let alone established as true; the relations between the first two terms of each line approximate towards some formal correspondence between the latter terms, though, what kind of comparative basis prompts such connections is suspect, as in

line nine, where, at the poem's turn, the poem's opening analogy becomes self-reflexively questioned:

Wait. Isn't arthritis to psoriasis as Brazil is to Portugal?
Portugal is to fado as Boaz is to Ruth.
Ruth is to cornfield as wave is to particle. (1KT, 45)

Although the accuracy of the poem's analogical deductions become muddled at the poem's turn, the now recalculated recalculation retains its structural integrity: the poem's analogically-compounded structure maintains its consistency despite the tenuous questionability of its connections. Although "Arthritis is to psoriasis as Portugal is to Brazil" could be delineated taxonomically as two afflictions and two countries, it is also the case that through a recalculation of the poem's semantic structure—that is, by a kind of algebraic substitution and connotative arithmetic—the poem also implicitly states that "Arthritis is to psoriasis as Portugal is...to wood as war club is to war", etc., and so on, where each substitution is a link in a longer argumentative chain or hyper-extended metaphor. Without taking this semantic "recalculating" to the extreme—substituting each line's end-word with the recalculated analogy that each following line presents—the poem multiplies its associative possibilities while working within a strict semantic calculus of textual elements.

It is worth recognizing (before venturing further) one of the pitfalls of reading too much into a poem—perhaps "ungetroundable"—like "Errata" and "Riddle", "Recalculating" is a poem that, in the process of establishing a set of analogous statements, runs the risk of upsetting the interpretive status quo by suggesting a significant revision of the poem's initial comparisons midway through, an effect which could have one of two outcomes: forcing either an interpretive reconsideration of the links between analogous terms in the first half of the poem, or creating more far-reaching additional associative links, by extension strengthening the initial analogical

ties further. The danger involved in this process, to borrow a phrase from John Lyon, is that the poem invites what Lyon calls the “vanity of interpretation”: by framing the analogies in the form of a riddle (where, line after line, a portion of the analogy is allowed through and carried forward), the poem encourages the reader to become “intent on revealing the significance” of what might turn out to be only trivial “insignificance” (111).¹⁷⁰

One such reading might go as follows: the terms “arthritis” and “psoriasis” both share a common root language: as English loanwords, they derive from Greek via Latin. Both words have acoustically-similar suffixes (“-itis”/“-asis”), each implying disease;¹⁷¹ connotatively, the “arthritis”/“psoriasis” pair refers to inner and outer afflictions of the body, where in dermatological terms “arthritis” is an affliction of the joints below the skin whereas “psoriasis” is an irritation on the surface of the skin itself. In contrast, neither of the words “Portugal” nor “Brazil” seem to share the distinct comparative traits (inner/outer) of the first two words: although “Portugal” may have a connection to the Greek language through an etymological play on words (from the Latinized Roman-Celtic place name “Portus Cale” or “port of the Gauls”, transliterated in Greek as “Πορτο-γαλία”) the same cannot be said of the word “Brazil”: it comes from the Portuguese word for the indigenous tree found there, the “pau-brasil”, whose wood, an encyclopedia will say, is amber-coloured.

Although the interlingual (Greek-Latin) and etymological (“-itis”/“-asis”) characteristics of “arthritis” and “psoriasis” are not connected in a patterned way to “Portugal” and “Brazil”, the

¹⁷⁰ Lyon, John. “All That’: Muldoon and the Vanity of Interpretation” in *Critical Essays*. Liverpool University Press, 2004. 110-124.

¹⁷¹ The suffix “-itis” in Greek has a much broader application in the language than the suffix “-asis”: in Greek, “-itis” forms the feminine form of adjectives and is used in medical Latin—and by extension in English—as the regular name given “affections” (OED Online “-itis, *suffix*”) of particular parts of the body, especially re: inflammation. On the other hand, a quick lookup of “-asis” in OED shows its general semantic restriction to the field of pathology—it does not, in contrast to “-itis” form the feminine of adjectives in naming but denotes the names of diseases as nouns eg: metastasis (to metastasize), which is also close to the suffix “-sis”, which, like a cousin of “-asis” forms nouns that denote an action (“genesis”, “analysis”, etc.).

amber-coloured wood discovered by Portuguese colonists and the amber-coloured rash one might discover on their skin provide a comparative frame for connecting “psoriasis” with “Brazil”: as a kind of abnormal side-effect of this linguistic play however, the missing connection between “arthritis” and “Portugal” that the “psoriasis”-“Brazil” analogy implies as a clue leaves more than a conceptual itch for the reader to scratch—the juncture that would transform the initial comparison into a fully-fledged analogy is hidden, invisibly, somewhere in the words’ subterranean etymologies.

Or, perhaps more accurately, the juncture that connects “arthritis” and “Portugal” is perceivable just below the surface of the poem, as the poem’s second line so clearly confirms: if “Brazil” and “wood” are comparable to the relation between “war club” and “war”, the “amber-coloured” link between “psoriasis” and “Brazil” is reinforced, making “pau-brasil” the connection that the poem must so painstakingly bear in the opening analogy so that “arthritis”, in conjunction with “Portugal”—and the etymological roots that unite them—becomes an example—like the subtractive formula in Muldoon’s “Riddle”—that characterizes how the poem configures its analogies, which is not without associative compounding and perhaps their tortuous distortions. To reach, perhaps a little more painfully, into the colonial history of Portugal—in the context of its past exchanges with Brazil, disease notwithstanding—would be to corroborate extra-textual links that the poem does not, in contrast to the precise ways it structures its analogical form, corroborate in and of itself.

If one reaches in another extra-textual direction, say to Franz Boas, whose name bears homophony with the poem’s “Boaz”—“Portugal is to fado as Boaz is to Ruth”—as well as a relation to the the homophone “boas”, as in boa constrictors (especially of the species native to Brazil, the rainbow boa “*epicrates cenchria*”), and finally a direct reference to the biblical

character Boaz, as in Ruth and Boaz, Boaz son of Rahab and Salmon (here, we might recall the reference to salmon in “The Salmon of Knowledge” (or, more generally the reference to the word salmon, an echo of the name “Solomon”, the “poet of wisdom”). There is no telling how far a reading could go in its attempt try and cure the riddling disease (or lack of ease) that the poem so effectively inflicts. “Recalculating” successfully blends the referential fields between the poem’s disparate terms to a seemingly incalculable degree: insofar as “Recalculating” represents an “ungetroundable” poetic structure of “apparently insurmountable difficulties”—presented through poem’s compounded layering of analogies—it is also perhaps an example of another lexical conglomerate Muldoon calls “conglomewriting”, which, like “conglomerating”—denoting something gathered into a rounded mass—captures in a word the tendency for the poem’s implicitly etymological, comparative, acoustic, and lexical elements “to blur and bleed into another” to an indefinite degree, maximizing the possible epistemological range of the “knowing”/“unknowing” dichotomy (TII, x).

The clues that would unite each analogical pair of words and the differences that would again divide them are compounded in “Recalculating” to such extremes as to invite or coerce not a singular but a series of readings that, in a similar way, try to first unite what end up being a set of irreconcilable divisions while at the same time—in an equal and opposite way—encouraging reading that keeps separate what end up being words with formal similarities. “Recalculating” invites this kind of speculative brokering between words but makes no promises as to whether or not the strategy will yield satisfying results. As a paradigmatic example of how Muldoon’s poetry functions as an epistemological exercise of a highly relativistic and encyclopedic kind, “Recalculating” as a kind of analogical riddle prompts encyclical forms of investigation, a series of mini-odysseys into, through, and about language, into the world of encyclopedic oddities,

comparisons, and trivial facts that are unusually shared between things that would at first seem to have no similar or related quality at all. In many cases, Muldoon's poetry is structured to complicate the formal correspondences that unite words, making them epistemologically salient as well as epistemologically enigmatic: insofar as the poem complicates its own riddling form, the poem keeps the ostensible formula for its solution(s) either hidden or altogether non-existent, holding open, like a vision of a desert oasis, the possibility of resolution while at the same time withholding the possibility of complete poetic closure.

Although "Recalculating" invites a multiplicity of readings, it is not the only poem in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* that turns and returns—"conglomewrites"—in cyclical fashion: "Cuthbert and the Otters" is packed with references to facts, literary allusions, and etymological plays that are not immediately obvious. Like "Recalculating", a certain amount of digging for "things worth knowing" is necessary to uncover the latent richness of its allusive style. Despite its function as elegy for Seamus Heaney, "Cuthbert and the Otters" balances its sombre tone with sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious references to Heaney's work. Following Heaney's example in "The Redress of Poetry", Muldoon's poem discharges its dual function: as elegy, the poem tends in a thematic way towards a "representation of things in the world", a poem written in memory of Heaney as fellow countryman, colleague, and poetic forebear; however, as "a process of language" not strictly limited to its elegiac theme, the poem also functions as what Heaney called "an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means", the result of the "imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (FK, 259-60).¹⁷² Where the "pressure of reality" is echoed by the speaker in the phrase "I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead"—"thole" an allusion to Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*—the

¹⁷² Heaney, Seamus. *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 - 2001*. Faber & Faber, 2010.

poem too imaginatively “presses back” historically, using an array of images, facts, and turns of phrase that connect to both St. Cuthbert’s life and Heaney’s writing¹⁷³:

Notwithstanding the fact that one of them has gnawed a strip
of flesh
from the shoulder of the salmon,
relieving it of a little darne,
the fish these six otters would fain
carry over the sandstone limen
and into Cuthbert’s cell, a fish garlanded with bay leaves
and laid out on a linden flitch

like a hauberker warrior laid out on his shield,
may yet be thought of as whole.
An entire fish for an abbot’s supper. (1KT, 3)

The image of the salmon “laid out on a linden flitch” and carried by the otters runs parallel to the image of “a hauberker warrior laid out on his shield”; gleefully carried over the “sandstone limen”, the “terminus”¹⁷⁴ of St. Cuthbert’s cell, so too does the overt reference to Heaney remain “liminal”, slightly below the threshold of the obvious: see, for example, “/sa-l-men/” in “carry over the sandstone limen” (“~~sandstone~~ limen”). The image of otters with fish and the pallbearers (Paul-bearers) carrying their “hauberker warrior” make for one heroic salmon, or Solomon, a suggestively wise alternative than directly comparing—especially in an elegy—the poet with a fish (though one might expect no less). The poem continues this associative linking, working behind, underneath, and between words and their multiple meanings to make all of these

¹⁷³ In a similar way as Michelle Brown points out in *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (University of Toronto Press, 2003)) that St. Cuthbert is a “figure of reconciliation and a rallying point for the reformed identity of Northumbria and England” (p. 64), several essays in Michael Cavanagh’s *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics* present Heaney as gesturing towards but not strictly advocating a similar sense of reconciliation, whether between “Catholic and Protestant Ulster” (p. 69), the problematics associated with the “ongoing partition” of Ireland “between British and Irish jurisdictions” (p. 229), or in his own work trying to responsibly manage the cultural and political pull that both Yeats and Eliot exert on his work. That these historically remote narratives between St. Cuthbert and Heaney are not reconcilable strictly as facts, the poem becomes the occasion for a symbolic reconciling, where normally incongruent details about St. Cuthbert and Heaney are made to be congruent.

¹⁷⁴ See Heaney’s poem “Terminus” from *The Haw Lantern*, which frames the poetic “I” in terms of occupying a terminal space at the edge of alternatives: “Two buckets were easier carried than one,/I grew up in between...When I stood on the central stepping stone/I was the last earl on horseback in midstream/Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.” (*Opened Ground*, 296-297).

elements combine in a single expression, paying homage to Heaney while also manifesting Heaney's—and by extension Muldoon's—poetics in a productive and pleasurable way. In achieving these twofold ends, “Cuthbert and the Otters” both recognizes the importance of Heaney's life and poetic work while also establishing a Muldoonian equilibrium: by balancing between its chief tasks as the dutiful remembrance of a dear friend as well as its “imperative” as language “where something unhindered, yet directed, can sweep away into its full potential” (*FK*, 261), the poem substantiates, at least in a conceptual way, the senses of “redress” that Heaney called for in his Oxford lecture, both “to set (a person or a thing) upright again”—perhaps in the way that Muldoon's elegy may cleverly imply—as well as “finding a course” for language's “breakaway innate capacity” as poetry (*FK*, 261).

Muldoon's allusions to Heaney throughout the poem rely for their persuasiveness on at least a cursory knowledge of Heaney's work: as a hyper-allusive elegy, it proceeds according to “things worth knowing” about Heaney's oeuvre. Although, in a countervailing way, the poem can be read (according to the narrative presented)—the historical references and etymological tropes interwoven throughout the poem provide as reasonable conditions as any for substantiating meaningful reading without effecting over-interpretation—a knowledge of the web of associations Muldoon uses to make each connection with Heaney strengthens the poem's elegiac function while encouraging additional rummaging through both the poem and Heaney's poetry and biography for additional bits of associative information.

As a general rule, these equal and opposite tendencies—one thematic (related to memorializing Heaney), and the other aesthetic (related to the “innate capacity” of language, something that Heaney as a great poet strove to reveal through his own work)—characterize the ways that many of the poems in the collection structure their sense of knowing: where a cursory

knowledge of the theme is not available (or is only half-implied), Muldoon provides a bread-trail of clues to help the reading along, just enough that the reader is not swayed that one reading is necessarily “truer” than another. The poem succeeds at accommodating of all of its latent “authorities” (Latin: *auctoritas*/author-ity): notwithstanding whether or not Muldoon, Heaney, St. Cuthbert, or language is the point of reference against which the poem’s content is deciphered, the poem continues to function in spite of itself:

It’s true they’ve yet to develop the turnip clamp
and the sword with a weighted pommel
but the Danes are already dyeing everything beige.
In anticipation, perhaps, of the carpet and mustard factories

built on the ground first broken by the Brigantes.
The Benedictines still love a bit of banter
along with the Beatitudes. Blessed is the trundle bed
it readies us for the tunnel
from Spital Tongues to the staithes. I’m at once full of dread
and in complete denial.
I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead. (1KT, 3-4)

As a kind of conceptual tautology, “dyeing everything beige” is a well-conceived expression for a poem that so effectively camouflages its layers of intertextuality: the “turnip clamp”—which features in Heaney’s “The Turnip-Snedder” (*District and Circle* (2009)), another elegy (for Hughie O’Donoghue)—and the burial mound (here in Muldoon’s poem) and the “delta face of each potato pit” from Heaney’s poem “Alphabets” in *Opened Ground* (294) brings to life the pastoral links between the agricultural, historical, and textual relations suggested by the poem, where a connection to the earth is common to each expression. The /l/ sound in “pommel” is weighed with acoustic significance, heard again in “trundle”, which in turn “readies us for” the rhyme’s resounding as it travels into “the tunnel” and ends “in complete denial”, where the space in “in complete” self-reflexively performs its own incompleteness—by inserting an empty space—and at the same time describes the feeling being complete in “denial”, the paradox of complete

incompleteness (or incomplete completeness) as an expression of elegiac endurance (“thole”, finally ending the movement of the /l/ sound at the end of the stanza and referring to tolerance without complaint (OED, n. 1.a.: “to be afflicted with; to have to bear, suffer, endure, undergo”)).¹⁷⁵

Like Muldoon’s *To Ireland, I*—which collocates both closely-related and seemingly disparate aspects of Irish literary history in the form of a self-reflexive performance of its own—“Cuthbert and the Otters” forms a compendium of “things worth knowing”, where the poem threads together allusions to the biographical (Heaney’s life and influence), intertextual (Heaney’s poetry and poetics), factual (“in the way that 9 and 3 are a perfect match/an Irish war band has 27 members”), and etymological (“Refulgent all. From *fulgere*, ‘to flash’”) while at the same time making contingent the structural integrity of the poem as a whole dependent on the strength of each rhetorically-fused linkage. Although connections to Heaney’s life in poem are biographically referenced, (“I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead” (1KT, 4); “...I straighten my/black tie as the pallbearer” (or the more burdensome “Paul-bearer”) (1KT, 5); “We come together again in the hope of staving off/our pangs of grief.” (1KT, 10)), it is the intertextual allusions to Heaney’s poetic corpus that are most telling of Muldoon’s elegiac homage, where knowledge of at least some of Heaney’s work lends itself to the intertextual echoes of the poem, things “worth knowing that enrich the acoustic and referential range of Muldoon’s elegy.

Muldoon’s reference “as a child might mooch/for blackberries in a ditch” (1KT, 4) brings to life the adolescent coming of age theme in Heaney’s early poem “Blackberry Picking”; Muldoon’s “filching” of the word “filched” for the line “who almost certainly filched/that strip of skin” (1KT, 5)—calls to mind Heaney’s “filching” the warning (“that older people would give us”)

¹⁷⁵ “Thole, *V*” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, September 2024. Date of Access: 30 January 2025.

about bogs—that “the wet centre is bottomless”—for the end of “Bogland” from “Death of a Naturalist” (“Feeling into Words, 15”) ¹⁷⁶; “Bellaghy”, “Castledawson”, “Armagh” are all implored as common place-names that connect Muldoon’s and Heaney’s work in *Wintering Out* (1972); one can hear in Muldoon’s “Lucky Strikes clutched by a G.I. on the bridge/at Toome” an acoustic and thematic continuity with “the soft blasting,/ *Toome, Toome*” from Heaney’s “Toome”. It may be a coincidence that while the poem may be read without a cursory familiarity with Heaney’s corpus, Muldoon’s source-tracing back to Heaney is better appreciated with a knowledge—perhaps one of the first few of many things worth knowing in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*—of Heaney’s work. “Cuthbert and the Otters” dutifully elegizes Heaney through multiple allusions to Heaney’s career and poetic oeuvre while also exercising, in Muldoonian fashion, a kind of double-vision that both unites Heaney and Muldoon in a poetic-traditional sense but that also shifts the focus too and fro, from elegiac voice to allusive intertext. The subterranean literary roots of association in the poem are indeed “things worth knowing” and exploring: whether related to Muldoon’s intertextual aesthetics of association or Heaney’s etymological and historical investigations into of language (poetry as dig, or in the case of translation (*Beowulf*) as a “raid” into (or of) language), the epistemological quality of “Cuthbert and the Otters”, which deviates slightly from the “what am I” template of riddling, is only perhaps a half-deviation, since the poem preempts the riddling question—“who am I”—by presenting in sophisticated ways an elegiac response to the significant impact of Heaney’s life as both a great poet and friend.

Although some critics prefer to emphasize the thin and delicate quality that the description of “tenuous threads” in Muldoon’s work would imply, others prefer to emphasize

¹⁷⁶ In “Bogland”, there is another reference that shoots back into Muldoon’s poem: it turns out that the word “strip”—which Muldoon has also filched and deployed in the same line—comes from Heaney: “Our pioneers keep striking/Inwards and downwards,//Every layer they strip/Seems camped on before”; outside of its context in “Bogland”, it is difficult to imagine that Muldoon—a kind of pioneer himself—would not have read these lines and not found the

their ostensible weakness. Williams recognizes that several critics—Peter McDonald, Fran Brearton, and Clair Wills—identify the centrality of contingency “as fundamental to Muldoon’s poetics”; at the same time Williams cautions that “there is a tendency to overestimate the very idea of linguistic accident, and thus to overstate the notion of the arbitrary in Muldoon” (230). Writing on *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, Ruben Moi notes that although “epistemological quandaries tend to outweigh linguistic conundrums as the principal focus” of the collection, it is the epistemological focus—which “challenges the imperative of language”—that causes Ben Wilkinson to deem the collection as “rock bottom in a continual decline”:

In this often manic hall of mirrors where language and trivia run about, cartoon-like, to a soundtrack of canned laughter and the odd sentimental tune, things seem mainly to go from bad to worse, albeit by the perilously high standards of the Muldoon glory days. Paul Muldoon so rarely gets to any kind of point in this book. (358)¹⁷⁷

What is initially “trivia” in Muldoon’s work is far from trivial, however, especially given the transformative power of the effect of reading, which for Muldoon often results in “looking at some aspect of the world in a modified way”.¹⁷⁸ For Moi, the title of the collection—*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*—“affirms Muldoon’s omnivorous appetite for knowledge of all kinds: biology, technology, history, philosophy, mythology, art, literature and language, and, of course...arcana, liminality and narthecality, and for ‘the esoteric’, ‘the pied’, ‘the cryptic’, the encoded, the runic and the virtually unintelligible’, to mention some domains” (Moi, 359). There is a degree of reservation, however, in Moi’s framing of how Muldoon balances knowing and unknowing in his work. Moi writes that Muldoon’s “own epistemological view” is, paradoxically, that “knowing cannot be thought without unknowing”, and by extension that “the main realm of

¹⁷⁷ Moi, Ruben. *Paul Muldoon and the Language of Poetry* (Brill, 2020).

¹⁷⁸ “Muldoon in America”, interviewed by Christopher Cook, BBC Radio 3, 1994.

the unknown is the spiritual dimension - the metaphysical realm beyond empirical facts...the realm and sphere Addison and Dr. Johnson tend to exclude as criteria in their assessment of most eminent poets” (Moi, 363). To corroborate that knowing in Muldoon’s poetry is equally informed by spiritual unknowing would be to corroborate an entire metaphysics of language; Moi is correct to say (echoing Plato) that “knowable knowledge needs to be correct and verifiable” (in other words, justified and true), however, to separate the “epistemological questioning” in Muldoon’s poetry from the “language philosophy” that it implies would be to dismantle the nuance with which Muldoon’s poems frame their questioning, to undo the singularity of the poetic form of questioning operant in Muldoon’s work itself.

Although the complexity in Muldoon’s poetry creates epistemological conundra, it is worth knowing—or remembering, following McDonald—that “*what* a poem can tell us is not separable from *how* it tells us what it does”, and “like any profoundly original or daring literary experiments”, write Kendall and McDonald, “Muldoon’s more recent works are risky affairs” (3). Recalling criticisms levelled at Muldoon by John Carey (of Muldoon’s “cliquish nonchalance”) and Helen Vendler (of Muldoon’s poetry as having “a hole in the middle where the feeling should be”) its worth recalling Holdridge’s defence that Muldoon “of course, aims for this effect” (Holdridge, 2008).¹⁷⁹

In his essay “The Main of Light”, Heaney notes that some poems have “openings at their centre” which “take the reader through and beyond” (FK, 145). In a similar way as E. M. Forster’s comment on *A Passage to India* as “a book with a hole in the middle of it”, Heaney comments on the line “Nativity, once in the main of light” from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 60 as a line that transports (or, provides passage to) the reader “for a split second” to “the world of the

¹⁷⁹ Holdridge, Jefferson. *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon*. Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2008.

Paradiso"; by extension, Muldoon's translation of Rilke's "The Unicorn" is another poem with a "passage" in the middle of it, "a clearing in the wood":

This, then, is the beast that has never been:
not having seen one, they prized in any case
its perfect poise, its throat, the straightforward gaze
it gave them back—so straightforward, so serene.

Since it had never been, it was all the more
unsullied. And they allowed it such latitude
that, in a clearing in the wood,
it raised its head as if its essence shrugged off mere

existence. They brought it on, not with oats or corn,
but with the chance, however slight,
that it might come into its own. This gave it such strength
that from its brow there sprang a horn. A single horn.
Only when it met a maiden's white with white
would it be bodied out in her, in her mirror's full length. (*Hay*, 1998)

Like the unicorn the poem describes—which only becomes "manifest" in the mirror held by the sensitive virgin—so too do poems (even, in this case, translations of poems) manifest their knowing qualities through the equally invisible sensitivities of the poet: although the place where "feeling should be" may look empty like "a clearing in the wood", it does not mean that nothing is there; as an analogue for the the epistemological and riddling aspects of a poem, the unicorn in the poem goes unseen until certain conditions are met, conditions that the poem itself dictates (or leaves behind) for the reader to follow: "once we allow ourselves", writes McDonald, "as readers, to abandon the distinction between *what* and *how*"—*what* a poem can tell and *how* it does its telling—"we begin to understand the way poetry works, and to put aside—if only for the moment—certain less important aspects of 'meaning'" (McDonald, 4).

3.4 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ENDS OF THE END OF THE POEM

“Poets seem conscious”, writes Giorgio Agamben in *The End of the Poem*, that “there lies something like a decisive crisis for the poem” at its end, a “*crise de vers* in which the poem’s very identity is at stake” (113).¹⁸⁰ In an attempt to understand how enjambment—“the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit”—functions as the paradigmatic differentiator between poetry and prose, Agamben forwards the position that poetry “lives only in the tension and difference... between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere” (109). “The disorder of the last verse”—or the end of the poem, where “sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense”—is, according to Agamben, “an index of the structural relevance” of the poem “to the economy of the poem...as if the poem as a formal structure would not and could not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically withdrawn from it” (113). Despite the emphasis on sound and sense in the conclusion of Agamben’s essay—which finishes by saying that sound and sense in poetry are forever “consigned” to one another, that neither “die away in a final comprehension” but together collapse “into silence...in an endless falling”—there is, according to Agamben’s description, a formal suspension that takes place at the end of the poem, not one that keeps the poem from ending per se, but one that keeps the possibility of continued engagement open, the last line as “suspending its own end in a declaration” (113).

For Muldoon the “essential characteristic” of poetry “has to do with how and why the line stops before it quite reaches the right hand margin, why it makes that turn...that’s what makes it ‘verse’”¹⁸¹ Where Agamben’s essays in *The End of the Poem* seek to “define a general

¹⁸⁰ Agamben, Giorgio, and Daniel Heller-Roazen. *The End of the Poem: Essays in Poetics*. Stanford University Press, 1999.

¹⁸¹ *The Poetry Program*, ‘Paul Muldoon’, RTE Radio 1. <<https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/11016819/>> Date of access: 30 January 2025.

problem of poetics with respect to and exemplary case” and explore “the problem of the specific structure of the poem itself”, Muldoon’s Oxford lectures (*The End of the Poem* (“EP”, 2006)) explore the interpretive possibilities of the idiomatic phrase “the end of the poem”, which refers not only the end of a poem as a topographical designation or locus—“the extremity or outermost part” (OED2, “end, n.” II.a)—but also the end of the poem as teleologically motivated by the necessity of continuity, as both eliciting a specific response—the “intended result of an action” (OED2, “end, n.” II, 12)—but also suspending the possibility of cessation.¹⁸²

In each of Muldoon’s essays, “the end of the poem” refers to something different, yet connected: in the opening lecture “All Souls Night”, the end of the poem encourages a “regard for” the “intertextual relations” it implies or creates between different authors, poems, history, and other texts (EP, 31); in “The Literary Life”, Muldoon connects “the end of the poem” “to the notion of there being ‘no barriers’ between the poem and the biography of its author—including the hinterland of the letter, the journal, the gossip column”; in “The Mountain”, Muldoon suggests that the end of the poem “has to do with the influence of one poem on another within the body of work of a single poet whereby the ‘gaps’ or ‘blanks’ in one poem are completed or perfected by another” (EP, 58); in “12 O’Clock News”, the end of the poem refers to “the delineation of where verse ends and prose begins, a delineation somewhat blurred, if not obliterated, by the mode of the ‘prose poem’” (EP, 84); in “I Tried to Think a Lonelier Thing”, Muldoon refers to the end of the poem as an attempt “to determine the boundaries or borders between reader and writer, the extent to which the writer determines the role of the reader and, connected to that, the question of the location of the prefix historical moment” (EP, 108). In all

¹⁸² “End, N., Sense I.1.a.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1118303988>; “End, N., Sense II.12.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1586884029>. Date of Access: 30 January 2025. See also “12 O’Clock News” in Muldoon’s *The End of the Poem*: “there is, in any event, the positing of a relationship between topography and *typography*” (EP, 85).

of these examples, it is the formal and teleological end of the poem—the linguistically-motivated or resultant features of a poem’s conclusive lines—that prompt continuous investigation into some other related aspect or detail about the text, creating a web of interrelations which encourage the reader to approximate towards other connected aspects of the text; the end is not an end per se, but a new, inveterate beginning. The epistemological implications of the “ends” of the “end of the poem” as reflecting an aesthetics of formal suspension, thematic incompleteness, and interpretive undecidability are that a reader must necessarily be prepared “to appeal to an inappropriate extent to information beyond the bounds...of the poem”, that “determining just how much one *doesn’t* know”, Muldoon emphasizes, is necessary for engaging with poetry that is at once “a *relatively* freestanding” but also not entirely a “completely discrete construct” (EP, 171).

Writing on “Beginnings, Endings, and Midpoints in Paul Muldoon’s *Why Brownlee Left*”, Lars-Håkan Svensson notes that Muldoon’s sonnets, which “usually follow the Petrarchan pattern” present “a proposition, an idea or an experience, which is then completed, modified or contradicted by the sestet...the sestet usually leads up to a strong endline, which often has the incisive ring of finality...and thus producing closure”; for Svensson, a successful sonnet “must therefore surprise the reader by doing something unexpected at an unexpected moment, which in this case means the last line” (Svensson, 221)¹⁸³. The closure established in Muldoon’s poem “Why Brownlee Left” is emblematic for the way its speaker, according to Svensson, “exits from the text”: although Svensson’s remark that the “potent image” that the poem ends with—two black horses “gazing into the future”—is perhaps misapplied in his comparison of the poem as equivalent to “cinema’s frozen image” (since, in the poem, the horses shift “their weight from foot

¹⁸³ Svensson, Lars-Håkan. “Gazing into the future: Beginnings, Endings, and Midpoints in Paul Muldoon’s *Why Brownlee Left* in *Exit: Endings and New Beginnings in Literature and Life* Stefan Helgesson, editor. Rodopi, 2011. 219-236.

to/foot”), the poem, for Svensson, “epitomizes [the collection’s] thematic concern with fortuitous departures, unexpected exits, and mysterious disappearances” (225).

In *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith differentiates between psychological closure and poetic closure: in contrast to psychological closure, which refers “to a quality of visually perceived forms” and “spatial structures which exhibit relatively clear, coherent, and continuous shape”, in a poem “a sense of finality and stability is secured or strengthened by certain terminal features or special devices that tend to have closural force more or less independent of the poem’s particular formal or thematic structure” (151).¹⁸⁴ For Smith, these “certain terminal features”—formal antithesis, arbitrariness, allusions to death, to name a few (152)—“often achieve their characteristic effect by imparting to a poem’s conclusion a certain quality that is experienced by the reader as striking *validity*”; by extension, closural validity—the “sense of truth”—that can develop over the course of a poem does not bring the poem into the discourse of “verifiable scientific truth” or “statements of probability” but reframes the poem’s validity as a “significant response to an experience” (153).

Several of Muldoon’s poems can be read as applying these terminal poetic features, and although the end of the poem may function, as in Smith’s formulation, to establish formal psychological closure, other cases they are only tentatively closural, or anti-closural. The poetics of closure then, may be better described in Muldoon’s work as a poetics of “disclosure”, where “disclosure” as internally contronymic—at once “making secret information known” as well as “dis-closure”, negating closure—captures the paradox of formal closure with the revelatory continuity it implies. Muldoon’s poem “Pelt”—which too plays on the double meaning of “pelt”—creates closure (and anti-closure, through its encouragement of re-reading) through its the

¹⁸⁴ Herrnstein Smith, Barbara. *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*. University of Chicago Press, 1968.

definitional shift in the word “pelt”, first deployed as a verb, describing something falling quickly and heavily, and then, at the poem’s end as a noun, describing the skin of an animal:

Now rain rattled
the roof of my car
like holy water
on a coffin lid,
holy water and mud
landing with a thud

...

till I gave way

To a contentment
I’d not felt in years,
not since that winter
I’d worn the world
against my skin,
worn it fur side in. (1KT, 13)

The formal closure of the poem is established by balancing both senses of “pelt” in the narrative. The inversion in the last line—“against my skin,/worn it fur side in”—clinches the play on pelt(ing) as both outside (“rain rattled/the roof of my car”) and the inside (interred), which in turn encourages a reinterpretation of the poem according to the particularities of each referential plane.

Although poems establish closural and anti-closural patterns in distinct ways, epigrammatic conclusions in Muldoon’s poetry most often tend to balance terminal appeals to authority with an equal measure of tentativeness, displaying, to use Smith’s terminology, either “an inability” or a “refusal to make absolute and unqualified assertions”; the poem, affirming its own “irresolution” compels “the reader to participate in it” (Smith, 233). In “A Night on the Tiles with J. C. Mangan”, the poem’s final couplet sets the conditions (“We’ll swear...as we swore”) for

whether or not the speaker intends a repeat event (another “Night on the Tiles”) based on the manipulation of tenses:

Some call for “macerated.” Some call for “stewed.”
The prunes are oddly fizzy
from narcosis.

Not that Francis Bacon. *That* Francis Bacon.
The barcode
on the cereal box is Ogham.

At least we haven’t misconstrued
two eggs over easy
as a lace-frilled pair of knickers.

At least we haven’t mistaken
a bottle of Paraquat
for a 1990 Chateau d’Yquem.

We’ll swear this is the last time as we swore the rain
would never darken our door again.

That the speaker suggests the future tense—“We’ll swear”—as predicated on the past—“as we swore” as well as the conditional—“would never”—the poem creates a meta-narrative loop that the title—“A Night on the Tiles”—implies; that the speaker is out—“on the tiles”, so to speak—the logic of the poem’s final lines suggests that the promise has not only been continuously broken but will be made again. In conjunction with the poem’s narrative doubling—the double recipe of “Some call for ‘macerated.’ Some call for ‘stewed’”, the corrective “Not that...*That*”, the parallelism of both the “barcode” and “Ogham”, the provisional “At least we haven’t”, the possible compound implied by “mistaken” as “mis-taken”—the circularity of the final couplet helps to establish a sense of tentativeness of end of the poem. Although a poem, according to Muldoon, “may not offer the last word”, poetry does—like Muldoon’s “Riddle”—“nonetheless offer a word”; it may be tentative, like the speaker swears in the poem—“this is the last time”—but we know, and the poem knows, “it’s not”.

In “12 O’Clock News”, Muldoon writes that “part of the delight, surely, of trying to make sense of a riddle...lies in our not quite knowing what is being described...that the poem is concerned with this tension between knowing and unknowing is evident from the outset” (EP, 87). Although Muldoon’s reference is Elizabeth Bishop’s poem of the same title (“12 O’Clock News”)—a poem that describes “not only things of the world but things of a writer’s world”—the emphasis on writing that Muldoon implies, especially in terms of the physical limitations of a poem—that is, “in the context of the writer’s desk”, the “typewritten page” as “a rough-and-ready runway, a clearing”—involve, like riddles and clues, “the positing of a relationship between topography and *typography*” (87).

Riddles provide clues that put into question the sensibility, perceptiveness, and ingenuity of their readers while keeping possible (or else plausible) solution(s) ostensibly out of reach, and like “Riddle”, “Cuthbert and the Otters”, and “Recalculating”, “Position Paper” from *Frolic and Detour* (“F&D”, 2019) also takes the form of a riddle-poem: like a portmanteau, the poem grafts idiomatic phrases onto one another in a way that simultaneously encourages and complicates understanding, facilitating some measure of interpretability while sacrificing sense; it achieves both contradiction and formal closure, where the anticipation of the true proverbial phrase (eg: “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” is replaced by an altered form that carries forward (“pro-verb”) trace clues from previous lines:

One rotten apple keeps the doctor away.
 When the doctor’s away the cat will get the cream.
 The law is an ass that loves to hear itself bray.
 The path of least resistance leads to Rome.

Like father, like two peas in a pod.
 It’s in the country of the blind
 we find ourselves kissing the auld sod.
 A society is great when men plant

trees in which they'll never seek shade.
Man does not live by half a loaf
while riding roughshod
over a house divided against itself. (F&D, 101)¹⁸⁵

In the first line, both proverbial phrases “a rotten apple spoils the whole barrel” and “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” are combined. Under what conditions, however, is it possible that “one rotten apple keeps the doctor away”? Or is it simply nonsense? Although William Logan refers to “Position Paper” as a “doltish piece composed of proverbs that never caught on”, the poem is not nonsense.¹⁸⁶ It may exhibit, as Logan suggests, a particular “daffiness”—which is part of the theme of the collection (*Frolic and Detour*)—but the poem retains an inherent formality that structures the particularity and movement of its language. Referring to poems in the collection as “fakir tricks” and “sideshow cons” is a heavy-handed way of missing the point of the poem¹⁸⁷, and perhaps, missing the point of Muldoon’s riddling aesthetic more generally: what is important about these ‘procedure’ poems (like “Riddle” or “Recalculating”) is not that once the pattern is discovered the poem becomes boring or meaningless but that the patterning or procedure lends itself to showing how the richness of poetic association exceeds the expression that is intended to contain it; by extension, “Riddle”, “Recalculating”, and the like are important examples of how poems think differently about how language structures and expresses knowing differently than other epistemological modes might (or indeed have the ability to express).

¹⁸⁵ Muldoon, Paul. *Frolic and Detour: Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

¹⁸⁶ Logan, William. “Truth or Consequences.” *The New Criterion*. 38: 4, 2019. 1–16.

¹⁸⁷ Logan’s criticism extends to other poems in *Frolic and Detour*. It is true, as Logan notes, that the collection *Frolic and Detour* contains two almost identical poems—“Pablo Picasso: *Bottle of Bass and Glass* (1914)” and “Georges Braque: *Still Life with Bottle of Bass* (1914)” —but it is not simply reprinted “with a different title slapped on” because Muldoon “likes the poem so much”; even a cursory knowledge of the cubist works of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque—insofar as that knowledge bears on an interpretation of the poems—reveals not only the stark visual differences between the two similarly titled artworks but more importantly for the poems how the historical or historicizing tendency in Muldoon’s work is one that encourages the reader to do the word-work necessary to establish the particularity of and differences between what would otherwise seem inconspicuous poems; each poem is not without its distinct textual differences, the implications of which could be extensive without seeming so.

In its subsequent lines, “Position Paper” provides clues in the form of related proverbs: “You can’t get a quart/of what’s sauce for the upped swan/into an apple cart” (F&D, 102); “Stolen fruit never falls far from the tree/on which no money grows” (F&D, 104); “When in Rome, spare the rod/and spoil the whole barrel” (F&D, 105). Although there is no telling whether or not “one rotten apple keeps the doctor away” can count as a proverbial statement in the way that its counterparts do—the poem makes fun of those who will over-try to reconfigure the lines (“the law is an ass that loves to hear itself bray”)—the clues either variously reconnect to other half-idioms in the poem or depart into another half-related clue. The pair “you cannot get a quart into a pint pot” and “upset the apple cart” have little to do with one another, however, when reconnected with “what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander” (implied in the poem by “of what’s sauce for the upped swan”), there is a reconnection with genealogical proverbs: “Stolen fruit never falls far from the tree” reconnects with both “men plant/trees in which they’ll never seek shade” and “like father, like two peas in a pod”, both of which refer to forms of tautological reasoning about the fate of family: they suggest additional idioms—“the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” and “like father, like son”—which in turn connect again in the poem to “What you sow is a chip off the old block” (hear, in “old block” “auld sod”, which is something “like father”, “two peas in a pod” which, in turn, are “what you sow”, what, including trees, “men plant”, etc.) (F&D, 104).

Although the poem follows a distinct organizational pattern, the proverbial compounding is non-linear but not random: selecting a different idiom to track will also approximate both towards and away from—topographically and typographically—the ostensible half-truth of some other half-connected proverbial phrase. “Burning the candle at both ends justifies the means”

(F&D, 104). Although the poem ends in a series of diluted idioms, it does mean they are “watered down”, so to speak:

Loose lips tie knots.
Don’t put the cart before the storm.
Don’t wash your dirty linen in a watched pot.
The leopard can’t change horses in midstream. (F&D, 105)

“The paradox of the nonassertive conclusion”, writes Smith, is to “heighten the apparent significance of everything else in the poem”; by stopping, “the poem announces its own sufficiency, and, in compelling the reader to accept that sufficiency, gives a retrospective emphasis more or less to every element in it” (Smith, 258). This “end of the poem” is consistent in many of Muldoon’s poems as an aesthetic commonplace: often suspensive, these endings not only lead the reader to reread, iteratively, the content of the poem, but, in turning on an riddling tropes—wordplay, polysemy, paradox, contradiction—keep the poem from reaching a terminal interpretive end.

“It may not make any great impression on the Richter scale”, writes Muldoon “but *ideally* a poem should change the world”:

That’s a rather grand thing to say. I’m not talking about a cure for cancer or AIDS, or a solution to the Irish problem (as it’s called), not a vast social impact. But I never go into a poem knowing where I’m going to end up. I always, I hope, make some discovery, however tiny; I come out the other end looking at some aspect of the world in a modified way. So that one doesn’t look at a hedgehog again, for example, in quite the same way. It’s either a modest ambition or a huge ambition, and I think in that sense poetry must make something happen.¹⁸⁸

Despite the clear riff on Auden’s “poetry makes nothing happen” from “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, Muldoon’s poem “The Old Country” does make something happen: as a series of thirteen sonnets, the poem may not “change the world” per se, but it does take its reader back and forth between worlds, making corrections along the way. In the final sonnet of the poem,

¹⁸⁸ “Muldoon in America”, interviewed by Christopher Cook, BBC Radio 3, 1994.

lexical modification takes place on two levels: where, from the beginning of the poem, a modern city is described, after the end of the third stanza descriptions of the ‘old country’ begin, where every “wood”, “cliff”, and “runnel” has its own unique quality, typified not by the repetitive modification of the preceding lines (emphasizing the rigidity of modern infrastructure) but according to the enduring power and romantic malleability of the symbolic:

Where every town was a tidy town
and every garden a hanging garden.
A half could be had for half a crown.
Every major artery would harden

since every meal was a square meal.
Every clothesline showed a line of undies
yet no house was in dishabille.
Every Sunday took a month of Sundays

till everyone got it off by heart
every start was a bad start
since all conclusions were foregone.

Every wood had its twist of woodbine.
Every cliff had its herd of fatalistic swine.
Every runnel was a Rubicon.

Like the associative and substitutive patterns of “Riddle”, “Recalculating”, and “Position Paper”, “The Old Country” follows a pattern of repetitive modification: “every town” is not simply a town but a “tidy town”, “every garden a hanging garden”, “every meal” a “square meal”, “every start” a “bad start”, and so on.

In addition to the poem’s series of intra-linear modifications, acoustic associations are also established between lines: in “every major artery” and “every meal” can be heard ‘eatery’, which would, given the poem’s emphasis on things in the city, sit on any major artery or in any town square; between “artery” and “heart” is nested the word ‘art’, which, resounding twice in “every start was a bad start” is followed by the conditional conclusiveness and paradoxical syntax

of “all conclusions were foregone”. Once this line is established—which announces the conditionality of conclusions (emphasized additionally in the conditional logic of “would” (in “every artery would harden”))—the poem takes its final turn, where the interpretive modification of terms in the speaker’s previous lines (“*tidy* town”, “*hanging* garden”, “*square* meal”, etc.) begin to emphasize more fundamental elements—the truer ‘old country’—where elements of the landscape that exist below (perhaps both ontologically and typographically in the poem) the city are not non-existent but simply covered-over.

In an extended sense, the poem might also be read as an analogy for what is possible in a reading: if the start of every act of interpretation begins as “a bad start”—following from the condition that “all conclusions” are initially “foregone”—then the turn to the rural at end of the poem comes to signify a return to something more fundamental but also more unique, where the observational “was”-statements that described the city in the first three stanzas become secured as “had”-statements in the final three lines:

Every wood had its twist of woodbine.
Every cliff had its herd of fatalistic swine.
Every runnel was a Rubicon.

If every act of interpretation has the potential to become something beyond an ordinary designation, it must see-through (or anticipate, as Muldoon notes, the role of the poet as first reader) the layers of possible readings through to something secure—or, to recall an earlier poem, “to get down to something true”—not according to the “was” statements as an interpretive overlay (“The Old Country” as providing interpretive content) but “had” as an interpretive foundation (the truer ‘old country’ that lay below the threshold of initial observation): the initial /i/ sound in “twist” twists itself into first position in the following line in “cliff”, where the final rhyme of /i/ in “fatalistic swine” ties in—according to the deterministic rhyme scheme in

the poem—the longer /ī/ sound from the previous line in “woodbine”.

The alliterative /r/ in “runnel”—and its capital repetition in “Rubicon”—completes the transformative pattern in the poem. Whether driven narratively (between the overlain urban setting and the ‘old country’ it covered), historically (between Italy and Cisalpine Gaul (for which there was no turning back)), or interpretively (between the possibilities of multiple or conflicting readings), to comprehend the duality implied in “runnel” as “Rubicon” is to comprehend the act of interpretation as a border-crossing: to commit to an interpretation is not only to engage with the poem as a right-of-passage (for which there is sometimes no turning back); it is also to be aware of the epistemological risks—as well as the hard-won rewards—associated with making such a journey.

The teleological end of the poem, as marking or over-revealing the poem’s primary method or modality of troping, threatens to make sense of the poetic structure in its entirety, bringing all other language elements into alignment within the economy of theme. The end of the poem paradoxically ends, announcing achievement of its intended effects, while at the same time resisting such finality. As a genre, the simple riddle implies a solution; the poem-as-riddle, however, is an epistemological designation that resists, as far as possible, the occasion for finality that the “end of the poem” implies as an end as opposed to a place. In the case of Muldoon’s work, the aim is to emphasize the duality of language as autotelic but also whose terms may also be turned against themselves, where closural elements are not ends but are places in the poem that has no end, aporetically reflexive riddles that encourage approximation towards multiple possible readings by structuring its own resolutionary power in a way where to capture the ostensible solution of the poem is to read it again (and again).

“I go to poetry”, writes Muldoon, “for engagement with language and for revelations that

are momentary rather than longer-term...it's a moment that embodies a truth, but I'm not sure if it's a truth that truly helps us live our lives".¹⁸⁹ A riddle, like the proverbial lines in "Position Paper", may leave one to decide which of two contradictory truths (or more) may apply in a given situation while at the same time perplexing its reader as to which reading satisfies the linguistic clues the poem discloses along the way. In *To Ireland, I* (2006), Muldoon suggests that "it is a central tenet of the Irish imagination, that what you see is *never* what you get" (6); so too is it a central feature of Muldoon's poetry that what appears on the surface of a poem as a playful misdirection is deeply motivated by the connectivities of language. Whether between the public and the private strains and constraints of the poet, between establishing a sense of knowing or relishing in unknowingness, between setting up and upsetting relational and conjunctive elements in terms of the end(s) of the poem, the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities prescribed in Muldoon's poetry is emblematic of Muldoon's riddling epistemological style.

¹⁸⁹ Crothers, Adam. "In conversation with Paul Muldoon." *PN Review*, 41:5. 2015. 13-16.

“Alienated Majesty”:
Geoffrey Hill’s Apophatic Epistemology

Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed:
Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves,
In clenched cinders not yielding their abused
Bodies and bonds to those whom war’s chance saves
Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song.
Arrogant acceptance from which song derives
Is bedded with their blood, makes flourish young
Roots in ashes. The wilderness revives,

Deceives with sweetness harshness. Still beneath
Live skin stone breathes, about which fires but play,
Fierce heart that is the iced brain’s to command
To judgement - studied reflex, contained breath -
Their best of worlds since, on the ordained day,
This world went spinning from Jehovah’s hand. (BH, 16)¹⁹⁰

Can a person know the dead? Indeed, can a person know how and according to what conditions the dead may be “disposed”? The unceremoniousness of “disposed” and the ambiguous participial use of “knowing” in Geoffrey Hill’s “Two Formal Elegies” may provide a clue. Unlike riddles, however, the textual cues that Hill’s poem deploys are not intended to challenge the reader to provide an ingenious answer, but instead invite the reader to engage with the particular difficulty of the poem’s subject. That “this world went spinning” out of all hands—including God’s—sets up the difficulty of the poem in the magnitude of the inordinate: predicated in the unknowability implied by the poem’s themes—of death, of God, of grasping only “roughly” (implying both approximation and harshness) “the song”—the poem demands of the reader not only attention towards the content of its language—eg: the continuity of the thematic living/

¹⁹⁰ Hill, Geoffrey. *Broken Hierarchies: Poems, 1952-2012*. Kenneth Haynes, editor. Oxford University Press, 2013.

dead contrast in the poem extended to “roots in ashes”—but moreover the implicit movements that its language takes, attention towards the unspoken but evident formal cues that highlight the unspoken performative elements at work in the language of the poem—eg: where the acoustic rhyme secured between “derives” and “revives” in the first stanza transforms the focal point of the poem through a visual or eye rhyme in “Deceives” (which plays deceptively on etymology and reframes the dual role of the reader as both hearing and bearing witness to the poem’s weighty testimony). “Still beneath/Live skin stone breathes”, indeed.

Despite the “spinning”, postlapsarian state of language and humanity that the poem suggests, the best judgement one can muster—“their best of worlds”, so the poem states—is not simply to comment on language’s themes; it is to engage in the work required to give voice to what is unvoiced. In an early essay titled “Our Word is Our Bond” (1983), Hill turns about what he calls an “ineluctable problem”, “the exercise of semantic judgement” (CCW, 152)¹⁹¹:

that those for whom writing is like ‘bearing a part in the conversation’ must regard with incomprehension those for whom it is ‘blindness’ and perplexity’ and that those for whom ‘composition’ is a struggle with dark and disputed matter will inevitably dismiss as mere worldliness the ability to push on pragmatically with the matter at hand. (CCW, 154)

Like the undecidable question posed at the end of “Two Formal Elegies”—“(At whose door does the sacrifice stand or start?)”—the problem to which Hill refers is of a bipartite difficulty: on one hand, “composition” in general is, according to Hill, a “struggle with dark and disputed matter” because the poet raises questions both “about his own perplexity and weakness” and in doing so also, perhaps more pressingly, reveals “an area of real perplexity”, where the inability to surmount a particular problematic represents a challenge—“an element of helplessness, of being at the mercy of accidents, the prey of one’s own presumptuous energy”—that the poet must face

¹⁹¹ Hill, Geoffrey. *Collected Critical Writings*. Kenneth Haynes, editor. Oxford University Press, 2009.

or come to terms with through writing (CCW, 153). On the other hand, Hill signals that “those for whom ‘composition’ is a struggle with dark and disputed matter” 1) dismiss “as mere worldliness” the ability for those who, faced with what might be an ineluctable problem, “push on pragmatically with the matter at hand”; at the same time, they 2) are viewed incomprehensibly by “those for whom writing is like ‘bearing a part in the conversation’” (CCW, 153-4).

Hill’s comparison moves around a central argumentative axis but is not circular in the return of its logic: it communicates a mutual “incomprehension” between what he perceives as two different kinds of writers by disambiguating between those for whom composition is a pragmatic and straightforward affair and those whom “it is ‘blindness’ and ‘perplexity’” (CCW, 154). Framing such contrasting points of view is analogous to Hill’s framing of what he takes as one of the major dualities of language itself: that words are both “‘heavy bodies’” of “‘dark and disputed matter’” as well as the ordinary circumstances—the pragmatic straightforwardness—of communication. What may first simply appear to be idiomatic speech—like the phrase “our word is our bond”—is for Hill emphatically contronymic¹⁹²: the phrase “‘our word is our bond’” signifies both the “shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility” as well as “reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol”; the “ineluctable problem” in dealing with language, for Hill is both “elementary and empirical”, not in a facile or observational sense but in a fundamental and embodied sense, where an encounter with language, regardless of idiom or artistry, can lead to “‘*bona fide* perplexity’...hardly distinguishable from obtuseness” (CCW, 160-161).

In the essay’s epigraph, Hill sets up a contrast, quoting a passage from J. L. Austin’s *Philosophical Papers* as a way of foregrounding a position on language antithetical to the idea that

¹⁹² See, eg: Williams, David-Antoine. “Poetic Antonyms” in *The Comparatist* Vol. 37 (May 2013). 169-185: “In his own poems Hill sets some of these very words into syntactic structures that exacerbate their antagonistic tendencies as he has described them, actively staging problems of language, ethics, and faith at their most unsolvable, their most indissoluble” (181).

language may not always be seriously meant, that it does not bear a certain weight of responsibility: where for Austin, performative utterances within the framework of fiction, like “acting a play or making a joke or writing a poem...would not be seriously meant”, for Hill, there is no simple division between performative utterance and utterance in general—regardless of context, fictive or non-fictive, for Hill words contain the power to incriminate or defend, to pardon or condemn, to sin or atone, or to implicate or absolve their author of recorded actions, both in language and in life. Austin’s observation that a poet’s command, for example, to “Go and catch a falling star”, is not seriously meant to effect “an order” can be reciprocally contrasted with Hill’s observation that utterances like “Go and catch a falling star”, are not in fact “without effect”; Hill’s challenge is that “performative” as a theoretical qualification is too narrow to account for the real effects of language: where the imperative “Go and catch a falling star” may be impractical as an instruction, the phrase itself—as a phrase—is not “without consequences, results, effects” (CCW, 155-156). Although Hill agrees that a poem, following Austin, “is not ‘issued in ordinary circumstances’”, Hill, echoing John Crowe Ransom, counterbalances Austin’s remark by noting that the “density or connotativeness of poetic language reflects the world’s density” (CCW, 136).

The references here—that words implicate or absolve, pardon or condemn—revolve, at least initially, around Hill’s handling of the case of Ezra Pound, whose discriminations Hill attempts to weigh against his pronouncements on art, calibrating Pound’s literary judiciousness

with his ethical conduct¹⁹³: in “Our Word Is Our Bond”, Hill at once deliberates on the “moral offence” of Pound’s “humiliation” and “inexactitude” as a poet—stemming from the “vicious anti-semitism” in Pound’s writing—while still praising Pound’s idea that verbalism, in terms of the crafting of a poem, requires of the poet “irreproachable skill”, a trait in which, for Hill, “the ethical and the esthetic are one” (CCW, 150).

“Judicial sentences” (CCW, 147), “the price of man’s ransom” (CCW, 152), the idea of being “brought to justice” (CCW, 168), the phrase “our word is our bond” (CCW, 168): the rhetoric of Hill’s pronouncements on language is weighed with metaphors from both theology and law, both of which are often entangled fields of reference throughout Hill’s work.¹⁹⁴ In “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’”, Hill famously (or infamously) compares the making of a poem to an act of ethical atonement or “at-one-ment”, where “the proof of a poet’s craft is precisely the ability to effect an at-one-ment between the ‘local vividness’ and the ‘overall shape’” of a poem (LL, 10)¹⁹⁵; further, Hill distinguishes between “a formal acknowledgement of the human condition of anxiety or guilt and...‘the empirical guilty conscience’”, noting that

¹⁹³ See Eric Griffith’s “Being in Error” in *Modern Critical Views: Geoffrey Hill*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: “... ‘Our Word is Our Bond’, treats of the culpability of Ezra Pound for his broadcasts over Rome Radio during World War II. Here error is not in what will seem to some an excessive diffidence about tiny details” (as it may seem in the essay) “but in Pound’s unfaltering conviction of the poet’s claim to an absolute rectitude of judgement, a belief that the poetic vocation confers a right to pronounce on culture” (130). See also Hill’s notes on Pound from *The Lords of Limit*: “The moral offence of his [Pound’s] cruel and vulgar anti-semitism does not call into question the integrity of his struggle; neither does the integrity of the struggle absolve him of responsibility for the vulgar cruelty” (*Lords of Limit*, 154-155).

¹⁹⁴ Although David-Antoine Williams’s chapter on Hill in *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford University Press, 2010) argues that Hill’s preoccupations, which are always with language, shift in his early poetry and poetics from the theological to the political in his later work—“Hill’s late writings assert themselves forcefully as public speech, and increasingly take on questions of what he calls ‘civil polity’...the public, civic inflection of Hill’s late postures suggests a shift in emphasis away from the theological” (162-163)—Williams’s later work (see, eg: *The Life of Words* (Oxford University Press, 2020)) reinforces that theology and politics (and etymology) have always formed a “nexus” of meaning for Hill: “Even if Hill is primarily drawn to his civic or political writings (he has called them the ‘contentious’ or ‘political and apologetical’ works)...part of his affinity for Milton”—who is “an acknowledged centre of gravity” in several of Hill’s late collections—“is the nexus he finds in those writings of civic (including political), theological (including metaphysical), and grammatical (including etymological) thought” (TLOW, 165).

¹⁹⁵ See Christopher Ricks’s *The Force of Poetry* chapters ‘Geoffrey Hill I’ and ‘Geoffrey Hill II’ for commentaries on the thematic difficulty of Hill’s poetry as well as the literary tensions that exemplify it.

although literature can function as “a medium through which we convey our awareness, or indeed our conviction, of an inveterate human condition of guilt or anxiety”, it is something entirely different for an author “to be possessed by a sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt” (7). In *Style and Faith*, Hill argues that “in most instances style and faith remain obdurately apart...in some cases...style betrays a fundamental idleness which it is impossible to reconcile with the workings of good faith” (CCW, 264).

Atonement, guilt, and faith as thematic motifs make appearances throughout Hill’s poetry too; poem 5 of “Funeral Music”, from Hill’s early collection *King Log* (1968), is one point of reference:

As with torches we go, at wild Christmas,
When we revel in our atonement
Through thirty feasts of unction and slaughter,
What is that but the soul’s winter sleep?
So many things rest under consummate
Justice as though trumpets purified law,
Spikenard were the real essence of remorse. (BH, 51)

The poem’s attempt to reconcile allusions to both remorseful violence and revelry—like the rhymes between “Justice” and “trumpets”—are, in sound and sense, both familiar and odd: the poem frames the speaker as guilty of “atonement”, as participating in an initiation of violence (“feasts of unction and slaughter”) where “remorse” for this violence is weighted, not with the “real essence” of Spikenard but, veiled in the poem thinly as a scent, with the weight of the anointing of Christ before the “consummate/Justice” of the crucifixion; while not directly referenced in the poem, the allusion lends the gravity and difficulty of its theme to the purported guilt of the speaker.

In the poem “De Anima” (*Canaan*, 1996), atonement is transformed

through metaphysics
research into angelic song

ending as praise itself
the absolute yet again
atoned with the contingent –
typology
incarnate – Bethlehem the open field –
still to conceive no otherwise: an
aphasia of staring wisdom
the souls images glassily exposed
fading to silverpoint
still to be at the last
ourselves and masters of all
humility – (BH, 175)

That the poem ends in a dash is not only of a piece with Christopher Ricks's comment on "September Song" that Hill's poetry is "unsayably punctuated so that only the eye can sense its utterance" (1986; 68)¹⁹⁶, but is also of a piece with the title of the poem—"De Anima", "On the Soul"—which, like the dash that ends the poem, implies a certain spiritual endurance beyond the material. The lines from "Funeral Music" section 4—"Let mind be more precious than soul; it will not/Endure"—reinforce this implication—the poem's implication—of the endurance of the soul, which, like the enduring force of the dash at the end of the poem, creates a grammatical contingency that then de-limits the absolute rule. "The absolute" is not simply "yet again/atoned with the contingent"; it is

atoned with the contingent –
 typology
 incarnate – Bethlehem the open field –

“De Anima” hinges on these apparent antitheses: on the thematic level, the poem oscillates between the absolute and the contingent, the metaphysical and the material; at the grammatical level, the poem punctuates its ending as a continuity and plays on the double sense of “typology” as at-once the study of symbols and, self-referentially, as “typology/incarnate”, the grammar of

¹⁹⁶ Ricks, Christopher. "The Tongue's Atrocities" in *Modern Critical Views: Geoffrey Hill*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 55-68.

the language of the poem itself; perhaps “De Anima” offers as appropriate a definition of poetry as any other—“angelic song/ending as praise itself”—whose language as pure symbol—as both “gestures of no account” and as “contingent—/typology/incarnate”—can, through the at-onement implied between the lines—“become accountable” (BH, 175).¹⁹⁷

In “Psalms of Assize” (*Canaan* (1996))—a seven part poem that uses latin epigraphs (translations of selections from Epictetus’s *Discourses*) to reinforce what Matthew Sperling calls a “punning understanding of the correspondence between grammatical declension and the fall” (Sperling, 157)¹⁹⁸—Hill’s emphasis on atonement is prefaced symbolically in the fourth part’s epigraph, where freedom is contingent on the fulfilment of the argument’s bipartite premises:

Hac sola ratione semper eris liber: si volueris quaequumque fiant ita fieri,
et omnia in bonam partem verte.¹⁹⁹

Seeing how they stand
with what odds
by what rule
of accident resolved
the irresolute
the feats
of hapless jubilo
the gifts
set down to derision
rejoice in them
as things that are mourned
loving kindness
and mercy
righteousness
patient abiding
and whatever good
is held
untenable

¹⁹⁷ There is something to be said here re: citing the poem - the spacing between the lines in “De Anima” is essential for understanding the argument the poem makes in terms of iconicity and placement between terms

¹⁹⁸ See Matthew Sperling’s *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁹⁹ The epigraph states: “For this reason alone you will always be free: if you will everything that happens to be so, and turn everything for good” (BH, 226).

the entire complex dance
of simple atonement
as in a far fetched
 comedy
making of sleep and time
timeless healers (BH, 226)

In the poem, atonement is contingent on several factors (and is anything but “simple”, as the poem ironically implies): according to the poem, atonement is a “complex dance” akin to a “far fetched/comedy” which makes “sleep and time/timeless healers”; the language of the poem is unabashedly self-reflexive, “whatever good” the poem implies might be “held” or grasped is already “untenable”. In this sense, the poem gestures that there can be no simple atonement of “simple” and “atonement”. The poem’s doubling features are exemplified not only in the double-clause of the epigraph (“if you will everything that happens” and “turn everything for good”), but also in the distancing and proximity implied by the poem’s enjambments (“with what odds/by what rule”, “loving kindness/and mercy”, “far fetched/comedy”) as well as in the proximal etymological doubles (“accident resolved/the irresolute”, “held/untenable”, “jubilo...rejoice”) the poem uses to create the “entire complex dance” between its disparate but connected elements, its sense of “atonement” captured inimitably as a “worded ineffability” (Ricks, 304).

Just as expressions of law and legality inform Hill's pronouncements on poetry and language, so too do the vocabularies of history and theology intersect; together, these domains—the political, the historical, and the theological—for Hill form both “a kind of drama of human destiny” and “a drama of the honesty of man himself”, where the destiny of humanity and the destiny of the individual are together bound, “embedded, or encoded, in the stories of language”

that these separate-yet-connected domains imply (Sperling, 2).²⁰⁰ This is not to say that Hill is a theological poet, a poet-historian, or a poet who writes theological or political poems; it is to say, following Hill, that “the language a writer uses and the writer who uses the language are inextricably involved and implicated”.²⁰¹ Drawing this contrast between the rhetoric of naming or thematizing (“theological poet...poet-historian...poet who writes politicized poems”²⁰²) and the rhetoric of lexical and grammatical implication (via Hill’s antimetabole and repetition of the “in-”/“im-” prefixed words in his writing (“inextricably involved and implicated”)) chiefly characterizes not only the etymological dimension of Hill’s work but also Hill’s apophatic approach to language, where apophasis as “other-speech”—or, language as conceptual negation—in its resistance to the simplifications of cataphatic speech, constitutes one of the chief epistemological biases in Hill’s work. This is characterized through Hill’s scrupulous attention not only to what words say in a representational or cataphatic sense but perhaps more importantly what words do, which does not always occur according to a conception of language as a strictly representational medium. Hill’s work is characteristically apophatic for the way it straddles the division between the unsayable absolute and the linguistically contingent, bringing into proximity the aesthetics of irreconcilability with the ethics of absolution.

Registering the unsayable at the limits of language, themes of silence, violence, memory, and suffering in Hill’s work demand that poetry—and by extension poetic expressions of

²⁰⁰ “Not that Hill lacks pleasure in Austin’s world”, writes Christopher Ricks in “Austin’s Swink” (in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61.3, 1992), but “Austin’s condescension towards literature has been persuasively specified and cogently indicted by Geoffrey Hill in his profound essay ‘Our Word Is Our Bond (1983)’” (297). In the same way as Hill generously concedes that Austin’s care with language represents an irony with respect to his position, so too does Hill exercise a similar care, balancing his indicting of Pound’s anti-Semitic pronouncements with the importance of Pound’s poetic contributions.

²⁰¹ “The Lords of Limit” 153.

²⁰² For Hill, Hopkins is a major influence, if not for the exemplariness of his poetry—his “mastery of the essential techniques” of “compounding the intellective with the sensuous elements of language”—then for his exemplariness as a “Catholic priest who was also a poet” who (CCW, 405), “in his profoundest theological allegiance”, was “totally committed to mediation” (CCW, 485).

knowledge and its limits—be inflected with nothing less than the seriousness of literary rite and philological orthodoxy. Hill’s apophatic epistemological aesthetic is of a piece with his academic, theological, and confessional tone: “Already, like a disciplined scholar/I piece fragments together, past conjecture/Establishing true sequences of pain” (BH, 69). This chapter argues that attempts at establishing a congruence between words and things—or, between language and its knowing—are symptomatic of a desire for an impossible, pure, poetic language, and that for Hill, attempts at restoring poetry to knowledge are dependent not only on the poet’s labours—on harmonizing, acoustically and semantically, the contingent elements of an historical, theological, and political lexicon, but also—and perhaps more importantly—that harmonizing those elements (in contrast to the forced disharmony between “atonement” and “at-one-ment” (an exemplary attempt made and redressed in Hill’s work))²⁰³ is predicated upon an apophatic poetics; apophatic “is not simply negation” (Gibbons, 92) but the presence of an absence, where the poem—whether invoking, alluding to, or discussing, as Hill’s does, the difficult themes of language, silence, and suffering against the backdrop of a violent twentieth century—necessarily invokes “the invisible, the elusive, the absent, the not quite conceivable, the unnameable” as modalities of language that are themselves deployed in “invisible...elusive...absent...not quite conceivable”—and perhaps yet unnamed—ways (Gibbons, 93). In addition to outlining a framework for understanding apophasis as a rhetorical figure and arguing that the apophatic inflections of Hill’s poetry comprise one of the operant epistemological modalities in Hill’s work, this chapter will also present a series of readings on the apophatic aesthetics of negation in Hill’s posthumous collection *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (2019).

²⁰³ Ricks, Christopher. *The Force of Poetry*, p.321; and Ricks’s “Hill’s Unrelenting, Unreconciling Mind” in McDonald and Lyon’s *Geoffrey Hill: essays on his later work*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

4.1 APOPHASIS: THE GRAVITAS OF (UN)KNOWING

As a concept, apophasis has branches in theology, rhetoric, and philosophy. Although apophasis “has rightly been associated with the speculative philosophy of late hellenistic Platonism”, it also traces “back to the biblical account of revealed religion” (1988; 5).²⁰⁴ There are two “great moments in the early development of *apophasis*”: the first occurs in the work of Philo of Alexandria, where “the fusion of Platonic with Hebraic ideas” were “adopted and expanded by the early Greek Fathers”; the second moment “was the neo-Platonic fertilization of Christian principles achieved in the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius” a fifth-century theologian who formalized distinctions between cataphatic and apophatic modes for talking about God. In Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*, the apophatic, in contrast with the cataphatic, “affirms God’s absolute transcendence and unknowability, to such an extent that no affirmative concept... may be applied” (1988; 6); in this sense, the language as cataphasis inadequately characterizes its referent. As Pseudo-Dionysius’s names for God become increasingly abbreviated in the *Mystical Theology*—“the Transcendent One”, “The Cause of all”, “It”—so too do his accompanying descriptions, which thin out into apophatic silence and end in a denial of even denial itself:

It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding...It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life...It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness...There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these...by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial. (1045D)²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Carabine, Deirdre. “‘Apophasis’ East and West”. *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 55 (1988): 5-29.

²⁰⁵ Luibheid, Colm. trans. *Pseudo-Dionysius: the complete works*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987. 133-142.

The apophatic mode is not simply one that negates the cataphatic or positive mode for knowing (God)—it is inhered anteriorly to cataphatic speech and goes so far as to characterize even the negation of negation. The way of remotion, or process of elimination, is the primary step in negative theology as a “systemic removal from the nature of God of all attributes relating to created existence”; apophasis “is an expression both of man’s inability” not to possess “a positive knowledge of God” but also the inability of language to adequately capture (in positive terms) truth in a direct, objective sense (17). The literary implication of an apophatic epistemology is not that positive statements cannot be meaningful; rather, it is that language as cataphatic speech or as a representational medium can only ever point or gesture towards its subject—the unsubstantiated subject remains hidden, mysterious, and apophatic. Apophatic and cataphatic are opposite qualities but they are not equal: where language itself is only ever cataphatic and affirmative in its representational sense, its rhetorical gestures—its meta-textual movements—invisibly enframe language, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Apophasis as a theological concept is different from apophasis in rhetorical applications and additionally different from how the apophatic as a modality is expressed in literary works. Apophasis—or, adjacently, paralipsis (“passing over”)—as a rhetorical figure is an expression where a speaker implies a subject or argument either by denying it or by suggesting it not be discussed, thereby suggesting what was to be avoided. Where apophasis as *via negativa* is language intended to resist cataphatic or positive modes of expression in relation to definitions about God, in the rhetorical tradition apophasis as argumentative negation is securely tied to its cataphatic counterpart: in most cases, apophasis as a rhetorical figure is characterized by a statement of ‘denial’ followed by an admission that reiterates precisely what would have otherwise gone unsaid. Several examples include: “Wert thou not my father, I would have called thee unwise”

from *Antigone*; “I say *nothing of your Rouguery, your Vices and your Ill Manners*; but if I should, they are known to the whole World” from Charles Bland’s *Rhetorick* (1706); “I shall say nothing of the numerous tribes...such as foreign ministers, ladies’ maids, lawyers...” from Jane Austen’s Oxford periodical *Loiterer* 2 (1798).²⁰⁶ John Smith’s *The Myserie of Rhetorique Unvail’d* (1657), emphasizes the bipartite aspect of the figure, describing apophasis as “a kind of Irony, whereby we deny that we say or doe that which we especially say or doe”, where the internal argumentative movement is that of an oxymoron or contradiction (156)²⁰⁷. Although apophasis in theology, rhetoric, and philosophy is expressed in a variety of ways—the negative and the cataphatic, the denial and the admission, the unsayable and the said—apophasis is a relevant figure across disciplinary traditions. In Hill’s work, apophasis is not expressed as a formal rhetorical ‘denial’ but as the unsaid excess of expression, what is implied by language but remains dormant, latent, or unstated.

In contrast to theology and rhetoric, apophasis as a literary concept becomes a modality or trope for “speaking away” from, a form of “reasoning by negation” that “seeks to express the inexpressible in such a way that its unsayability directs the imagination towards it while remaining beyond speech and comprehension” (Skinner, 95).²⁰⁸ For William Franke—who has written most extensively (i.e.: has had the most to say about what cannot be said) on apophasis, apophatic poetics, and the unsayable in theology, philosophy, and literature—it is ‘unsayability’ as an overarching theme, in contrast to the discursive “self-negation” of apophasis, that “language *shows* by its logical form, enabling it to represent”:

²⁰⁶ Toner, Anne. “Apophatic Austen: Speaking about Silence in Austen’s Fiction” in *XVII-XVIII*, Vol. 73, 2016.

²⁰⁷ Smith, John. *The Myserie of Rhetorique Unvail’d* (1657). 156.

²⁰⁸ Skinner, Stephen. “Obscurity, Apophasis, and the Critical Imagination: The Unsayable in ‘Heart of Darkness’” in *Conradiana*. 42:1. 93-106.

the unsayable is what repels language, yet it requires language of some kind in order to be described, so as to register at all. Such discourse or counter-discourse, moreover, traverses a whole spectrum of different disciplines and can be surprised in the most diverse sorts of guises. However, these various manifestations of unsayability all pivot on the fact that discourse has a self-reflexive, self-critical ability to call itself into questions and to withdraw, leaving what it cannot say in its wake. This trajectory, which is produced by the movement of thought and speech via-à-vis what it cannot comprehend and therefore recoils from, constitutes the trace of the unsayable.

For Franke, apophatic writing constitutes “languages for what cannot be said—languages that cancel, interrupt, or undo discourse, languages that operate paradoxically, by annulling or *unsaying* themselves”.²⁰⁹ To read a text apophatically, then, is to read “what lies beyond its grasp”, an “active struggle to find a language in the limits of language”, the apophatic as inscribed mysteriously, somewhere behind or around the cataphatic, where the apophatic quality of a text “highlights how the awareness of the limits of text leads its author to draw readers beyond it through its very linguistic inadequacy” (Skinner, 103).

Does it? Is what is called “apophatic” actually representative of a journey beyond the limits of a text according to the linguistic inadequacies of its expressions (i.e.: in the sense that language cannot capture what it seeks to represent)? The suggestion takes for granted that a reader can, indeed, be taken beyond a text, as if a meta-textual realm were accessible and “linguistic inadequacy”—which would only be possible if language could circumvent itself—could be categorized as such. An account of apophasis, at least in a literary sense, need not imply or attempt to corroborate so untenable a metaphysics: although a text may not (cannot) draw a reader beyond its own linguistic inadequacies and into the unsayable or ineffable, it can, in a

²⁰⁹ See Franke, William. *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

limited sense, resist the cataphatic or representational tugs of a postlapsarian language²¹⁰; language cannot ‘go beyond’ itself or transcend its own limitations per se, but it can, in an apophatic sense, delineate the threshold(s) where, if possible, it might have.

For Michael Sells, apophasis is not without its own paradoxical nature, delimited as a concept in language: it “affirms the ultimate ineffability of the transcendent...without turning back upon the naming used in its own affirmation of ineffability” (Sells, 3).²¹¹ In an applicative sense, apophasis is “the effort to affirm transcendence” through “a continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false”; representative of “a rigorous adherence to the initial logical impasse of ineffability”, apophasis exerts “a force that transforms normal logical and semantic structures” where “the paradoxes, aporias, and coincidences of opposites within apophatic discourse are not merely apparent contradictions” (Sells, 3).

It is this sense of apophasis of which Hill’s work is most emblematic: the poem as inimitably singular expression that balances the gravitational pull of language’s mimetic or representational quality with the aesthetics of apophatic recursiveness; Hill’s poetry, in some cases, tends towards the “transreferential”, language or verse (versus) as exhibiting a constant “turning back upon its own deferential delimitations”, seeking “momentary liberation from such delimitations” (Sells, 9). This self-reflexive “turning back”—a rhetorical “epistrophe” or “spiral

²¹⁰ Matthew Sperling has argued that Hill’s work has been “sustained by a mythological sense of language’s historical drama”: starting with “the idea that language is fallen”, the division between elements of Hill’s pre-/postlapsarian framework are recovered “in the poetic imagination” on one hand through “surrogates” such as “music, Hebrew, or the language of angels”; on the other hand, they are recovered through etymology, by “detailed study of current and historical usage...back to the earliest conjectured roots of words” (Sperling, 2). Sperling notes that although “language’s perfect original state cannot be recovered”, he argues that in Hill’s framework it is “sin”—especially “original sin”—whose consequence is the permanent lacuna between “expression and intent, word and thing” that keeps them from being “perfectly congruent”; “because of sin”, writes Sperling, “ambiguity and error” both “infect” and “enrich...acts of utterance” (2). See Sperling, Matthew. *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

²¹¹ Sells, Michael. *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

motion”—encourages “ever deeper” investigation “into the pre-referential ground (or groundlessness) of apophatic discourse” (Sells, 9). Epistrophe—which goes beyond its standard rhetorical definition as a form of repetition—may not only be considered a figure of textual reflexivity—a modality through which apophasis operates—but also, as a trope for “speaking away”, a technique for the necessary avoidance of the gravity (or downward pull) of cataphatic speech.

In Hill’s poem “Citations I” (*A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007)), language has as an epistrophic quality, where the spiralling motions represented in the poem occur through textual recursions as well as through an imagistic invocation of W. B. Yeats’s “The Second Coming” (which also gyrates epistrophically); by extension, the poem delineates the ‘turning back’—presumably, towards the heavens—of petitions and prayers which may or may not, according to the poem, be a counterforce enough to escape the gravity of human usury as sinful action:

This not quite knowing what the earth requires
earthiness, earthliness, or things ethereal;
whether spiritus mundi notices bad faith
or if it cares; defraudings at the source,
the bare usury of the species. In the end
one is as broken as the vows and tatters,
petitions with blood on them, the charred prayers
spiralling godwards on intense thermals.

No decent modicum, agreed. I’d claim
the actual is at once cruder and finer
without fuss carrying its own weight. Still
I think of poetry as it was said
of Alanbrooke’s war diary: a work done
to gain, or regain, *possession of himself*,
as a *means of survival*, and, in that sense,
a mode of mortal life. (BH, 560)

If Hill’s poem cleaves, in one sense, towards Yeats as a source of inspiration (with the poem’s invocation of “spiritus mundi” and sanguine imagery (“petitions with blood”)), it also cleaves in

an opposite way towards Hopkins through its etymologically and lexically-associated patterning: like the opening line of “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves”, Hopkins’s acoustically-loaded “Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, vaulty, voluminous, stupendous” is echoed in Hill’s own upwards-spiralling approximation of “earth...earthiness, earthliness, or things ethereal”. Where in Yeats’s “The Second Coming” the “widening gyre” puts space between falcon and falconer—creating a fading transition between the narrator’s externalized sight of the falcon and falconer and the narrator’s inner-vision of the “vast image out of Spiritus Mundi”—in “Citations I” it is the “intense thermals” of spiritual pyres (the exhalation of hot air produced by “charred prayers”) that keep petitions—spiralling God-words—“spiralling godwards”.

The recurrent epistrophic spirals in the poem are emblematic for their transformation of the earth-borne into lightness: where the first stanza balances the moral weight of petitions with the lightness and “ethereality” that prayer implies, the second stanza also approximates towards a description for the work of poetry, balancing the weighty theme implied by the “war diary” with the lightness of illustrative definition: the poem frames commentary on “Alanbrooke’s war diary” as equally true of the work of poetry, where both forms of writing are considered as mediums for regaining “possession” of oneself, as “a means of survival”, a “mode of mortal life”; “not quite knowing what the earth requires”, the poem—full of approximations, citations, and remembrances—not only recollects or acts as a diary for recording (“to gain, or regain” the day to day) but it also responds, self-reflexively, to its own circumstance as a recording, the “as it was said”.

The idea of recording—of cataphatic speech—is of a piece with Aristotelian philosophy, given their overlapping objective of creating a taxonomical account or ontology of terms describing the elements of experience, and like the Aristotelian tendency towards cataphatic

naming and taxonomical accounting, the story of creation in Genesis follows a similar pattern, where, by fiat, God creates being *ex nihilo*. The progression of Hill's paradigmatic first poem "Genesis" (*For The Unfallen* (1959))—like all cataphatic language—loosely echoes the creation-by-naming pattern of *The Book of Genesis*; notwithstanding the parallels that might be drawn between these two texts, the poem's emphasis on delineating the masses ("I brought the sea to bear/Upon the dead weight of the land"; "the second day I stood and saw/The osprey plunge with triggered claw"; "And the third day I cried 'Beware/The soft-voiced owl, the ferret's smile/The hawk's deliberate stoop in air" (BH, 3)) as well as, in another sense, emphasizing its own structure as creation (and created, in some sense) by fiat, the poem brings subjects to bear lexical weight within the microcosm of poetic form. The poem unfurls in waves of tetrametric lines:

Against the burly air I strode
Crying the miracles of God.

And first I brought the sea to bear
Upon the dead weight of the land;
And the waves flourished at my prayer,
The rivers spawned their sand.

And where the streams were salt and full
The tough pig-headed salmon strove
Ramming the ebb, in the tide's pull,
To reach the steady hills above" (BH, 3).

The poem begins with a speaker whose proclamations of miracles, prayer, observations, and renunciations transition, at the end of the poem, into action—"on the sixth day, as I rode"; in the last stanza, this action also signals a transition away from the poetic "I" and into a collective "we":

On the sixth day, as I rode
In haste about the works of God,
With spurs I plucked the horse's blood.

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,

To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

And by Christ's blood are men made free
Though in close shrouds their bodies lie
Under the rough pelt of the sea;

Though Earth has rolled beneath her weight
The bones that cannot bear the light. (BH, 4)

The juxtaposition of oppositional elements is an expression of the poem's cataphatic emphasis on naming: the transition from a poetic "I" into a collective "we", the speaker riding "in haste about the works" (seeing everything that was made and that it was good) as opposed to declamation, in the first stanza, of "the miracles of God", the transition from life "blood" to "bloodless" myths to "Christ's blood" and the parallels between "we live, the hot" and "the cold" whose "bodies lie/Under the rough pelt of the sea", and the double sense of "cannot bear" in the final line of the poem, where "the bones"—which could equally belong to the living or the dead (all of whom are "rolled" into creation)—either suffer or endure.

Although "naming is part of the particular spirit of English", writes Reginald Gibbons, it is also the case that "no matter how signifiers differ from language to language", naming "often seems to add something to the being of what it names" (95).²¹² For Gibbons, the categorization that naming implies—where "words and names distinguish this from that", the framework of language-as-differentiation—not only "fails to evoke by name what is real but also substitutes for the real thing merely a name" (ibid).²¹³ The insistence on naming

can produce an emptiness, a word as a mere sound, or simply an idea that intervenes between the person and the thing, when what was wanted was the

²¹² Gibbons, Reginald. *How Poems Think*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

²¹³ Poem "I" of *Mercian Hymns* (1971) also opens with a naming pattern: "King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch...the friend of Charlemagne" (BH, 83).

thinginess of the thing names; yet, apophasis may produce a kind of linguistic palpability of what is unknowable directly. (ibid)

Where much is cataphatically described and delineated in Hill's "Genesis", there is still plenty left unsaid: although Hill's emphasis on the theological and mythopoetic tradition of cataphatic naming in "Genesis" is captured as a thematic (and therefore central) element, there is an equal balancing of the apophatic and incantatory. Insofar as the poem takes "creation" as a theme, the poem is not a "Creation" poem, per se; the poem's mention of "Christ's blood" would preclude "Genesis" as a reference to the "Genesis" of the Pentateuch; the line "Building as a huge myth for man/The watery Leviathan" may refer to a sea-monster in a biblical sense, though "watery"—in a more diluted sense—might also refer to an autocratic state (within which "a huge myth for man") could be construed as a metaphor for death, as in 'watery grave' (which, by extension, would imply death's absolute power; this brings the associative loop full circle in terms of death as a monstrous mythology).

While many of the touchstone poems in Hill's oeuvre—"Genesis", "Two Formal Elegies", "Psalms of Assize", "Citations I", etc.—represent well-trodden critical ground for understanding the political, theological, and grammatical inflections of Hill's work—taken together, they demarcate the movement of language in Hill's work out of cataphatic modes and into apophatic modes. Hill's "History as Poetry", while less thematically cataphatic than "Genesis", is no less referential: notwithstanding the poem's allusions to Christian tradition—"Pentecost", "Lazarus", "Selah!", all historically relevant in the context of a narrow reading—the poem emphasizes the provisionality of its comparisons, not only in its title but again in its opening line:

Poetry as salutation, taste
Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
Unearths from among the speechless dead

Lazarus mystified, common man
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
From the provided loam. Fortunate
Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung:

‘A resurgence’ as they say. The old
Laurels wagging with the new. Selah!
Thus laudable the trodden bone thus
Unanswerable the knack of tongues. (BH, 61)

The poem’s title “History as Poetry” and the poem’s first line (“poetry as salutation, taste”) palpably imply the necessity and provisionality of definition, both analogies (turning on “as”) refraining from the definitiveness that “is” might have otherwise substantiated. This provisionality might also be due to the difficulty or particularity through which Hill frames what his poetry can say within certain thematic constraints: Hill’s poetry, writes Merle Brown, is “difficult to discuss because its uniqueness is not voiced, only implicit in the critical way Hill listens to his words and rhythms”; the “contempt and sarcasm” of Hill’s “History as Poetry”, which articulates an exhumation, is only balanced by the silence of “the speechless dead” who create the demand that the poet, writes Brown, “must answer back by calling into question the laudation of the dead by way of his own ‘knack of tongues’” (Brown, 66).²¹⁴

In addition to the poem’s apophatic balancing of speech with silence, the poem’s theological invocations—cataphatically implicated as theme—become less religiously inclined as the poem progresses: “Pentecost” is not a celebratory feast but “ashen”; “Lazarus” is referred to as “common man/Of death” (or in another sense, according to the poem’s theme of exhumation (in contrast to life-giving resurrection)) the unearthing of “common man” is a principally ‘Lazarian’ but devoid of religious connotation. The ambiguity of “Selah!”—which may either signal a musical interlude, a change in melody, or the demand to ‘stop and listen’—is too

²¹⁴ Brown, Merle. “‘Flesh of Abnegation’: The Poems of Geoffrey Hill” in *The Southern Review*. 15:1. 1979. 64-77.

decontextualized from Psalms; the “knack of tongues” as poetry’s response (which “Selah!” commands as a musical interlude for hearing or listening) remains “unanswerable” to the (still) “laudable” “trodden bone”. By drawing out the theologically recognizable and cataphatically named—“Pentecost”, “Lazarus”, “Selah!”—into their decontextualized and seemingly agnostic forms—“ashen feast”, “common man/of death”, “knack of tongues”—the poem couches its argument for poetry’s inability to cataphatically respond to the dead; it is this drawing out—from one word into two or more—that emphasizes the invisible textual movement that the poem uses to adequately respond, despite the fact that it may seem, on its surface, to do (or say it cannot do) the opposite.

Arguments for a theology of language form the kind of preliminary or foundational necessity for apophasis as a negative epistemological or poetic designation to be recognized as a central aspect of Hill’s writing, and although Hill’s work is freighted with the ethical considerations of a Christian tradition—references which tend to supplement Hill’s epistemological bias—the cataphatically impossible effects his poetry may achieve are not theological or mystical in a religious sense. Hill is drawn to the themes in Christian theology but only in a provisional sense: in “Language, Suffering, and Silence” (1999), Hill states that he “would seriously propose a theology of language” which

would comprise of a critical examination of the grounds for claiming (a) that the shock of semantic recognition must also be a shock of ethical recognition; and that this is the action of grace in one of its minor, but far from trivial types; (b) that the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead as much as, or even more than, expressions of ‘solidarity with the poor and the oppressed’. (CCW, 405)

Hill’s double application of “would” is both qualificatory and distancing: qualificatory, because Hill’s “theology of language” is at once a levelling—of “the shock of semantic recognition” with “ethical recognition” as an “action of grace”—as well as a redress, specifically of Auden’s idea

that “the achieved work of art is its own sufficient act of witness”, which Hill mentions only sentences before (“I agree with him [Auden], but I think there are more competent ways of putting it” (CCW, 405)); distancing, because there is a political, historical, and religious situatedness implied in “solidarity with the poor and the oppressed” that is not broached in the demand for art and literature’s “memorializing...memorizing, of the dead” (CCW, 405).

Hill’s additionally qualificatory statement—“as much as, or even more than”—is an abbreviated form of his comparison, one that unbalances the comparison in a way that implies an asymptotic relation between “memorializing” and “memorizing”: although Hill suggests that the “art and literature of the late twentieth century” still require “expressions of ‘solidarity with the poor and oppressed’”—i.e. with the living—for Hill, an unequal but opposite counterbalance —“a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead”—is a form that divorces itself from the doctrinal or theological purchase that “solidarity” implies but that still embodies (in an apophatic way) the call to express an ongoing unity with those voices which cannot be un-silenced. “Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry” (Yeats; 1936)²¹⁵; Auden’s literature as “act of witness” escapes Yeats’s exclusionary “passive suffering”, but only just. “Suffering”, for Hill, “is real, but “suffering”—inoculated in quotation marks merely as a reference to suffering—is a sing-song, that is to say, cant” (CCW, 405). Hill’s emphasis in this passage of “Language, Suffering, and Silence” is not dismissive of cataphatic expressions of suffering, the visibly observable content of pain; instead, Hill suggests how suffering, when turned inward, is most appropriately expressed apophatically, since it avoids the moral arithmetic involved in the observable act (the cataphatic or thematic expression) of almsgiving. To truly “give alms”, as Hill suggests, is to “give till it hurts” while at the same time leaning away “from the aesthetic equation” of giving and receiving.

²¹⁵ Yeats, William Butler, editor. *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*. Oxford University Press, 1936.

4.2 APOPHASIS AS HILLIAN VALUE

One of the common threads that runs through Hill's *Collected Critical Writings* is the question of value; intertwined with the question of value is the idea of difficulty. In "Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value", Hill advises that "it may be wiser to speak in terms of value rather than of values" (CCW, 465). There is a clear semantic distinction between Hill's "in terms of value" in contrast to the more diffuse "of values": Hill's precautionary "in terms of" demands a conception of value according to the precise terms of definition, which lends the rhetoric of procedure and precision to Hill's turn of phrase; by contrast, "of values" is either too broad or too nondescript to be particularly useful; "the matter of intrinsic value"

carries a distinct referential weight in two particular areas of spheres of activity and discourse: coinage, where it can be assayed, and moral philosophy, where it cannot. In most cases the crux of the problem is the intersection of the material and the symbolic, if intersection can be said actually to take place. If there is no intersection there is likely to be hiatus, a 'gap', somewhat in Gillian Rose's sense of *aporia*. The suspect nature of much general discourse on the nature and quality of that mystical entity or aura called 'human values' can be traced to a variety of attempts to claim continuity where none exists. This is particularly the case with the type of value-discourse that is a simple trope of monetary values. (CCW, 465)²¹⁶

Value is not—or should not be considered—an extractable element in Hill's work, especially in the sense that there is something reducible in a poem, argument, or excerpt that can be distilled and restated again according to different terms; the singularity implied by this conception of value—and of language more generally, that no one substitution of words is adequate to another—is created according to Hill's precise work with words according to the diligence taken to delineate and define his terms.

²¹⁶ Hill: "Until recently I was essentially an adherent of 'intrinsic value' as delineated by Ruskin. I am now much less sure of my position, partly because I am no longer confident that I can discern the point at which Ruskin himself crosses an indeterminate line between, on the one hand, regarding money as 'an expression of right', or entitlement, or as a sign of relations, and, on the other hand, using a monetary trope in which 'intrinsic value' is by sleight of will substituted as the vital referent" (CCW, 486).

There is an affinity here between value and apophasis as an epistemological designation: in both cases, it is the singular expressiveness of language—the unparaphraseability of utterance and its contextual situatedness—which adds not only to the indefinable quality of both value (in Hill’s conception) and apophasis more generally but also to their undefined extent as descriptors for something other-than the cataphatic expressions that denotative language presents. Hill’s conception of value, like the apophatic or negative epistemological bias of his writing, is most prevalent where its negative (perhaps unrealized) capacity (despite being a “metaphysical wraith” like Ruskin’s “intrinsic value”) “points in the right direction, towards semantic realizations that have some substance”, but that “are not to be mistaken”, as Hill advises “for that *ignis fatuus* known to the philosophers as ‘value-rich vocabulary’” (CCW, 390; 393).

In “Language, Suffering, and Silence”—and indeed throughout Hill’s collected literary criticism—Hill actively turns his philological labours into acts of exemplary expressiveness. The apophatic value of Hill’s writing is borne inversely to its piercing exactitude: there is no shortage, in Hill’s language, of unstated premises, invisible connections, and unseeable (but interpretable) orientations. A particularly telling example—where Hill admits to offer an “awkward periphrasis—comes in a description of G. M. Hopkins as “‘a Catholic priest who was also a poet’ rather than the succinct ‘priest and poet’ or even priest-poet”; Hill emphasizes that the forms of the latter (“‘priest and poet’ or even priest-poet”)

imply a parity between the two vocations; a parity that Hopkins steadily refused to his own poetic gifts, gifts which he must have recognized as being outstanding. Except when directed by his superiors to provide celebratory offerings for a Church festival, as he occasionally was, Hopkins believed himself barely entitled, if entitled at all, to withdraw his attention from his duty to the work of Christ in the world in order that it might be bestowed on the lesser practice of literary composition. (CCW, 406)

Hill's application here—referring to Hopkins as “a Catholic priest who was also a poet”—is, despite its presumed awkwardness, more true a description of Hopkins's own hierarchy of values, according to Hill; in this sense, Hill honours Hopkins by faithfully representing the facts through a precise turn of phrase. By extension, the apophatic element in Hill's deliberation lies in the threat that a conflation of terms represents, where the oversimplification of constructions like “‘priest and poet’ or ‘priest-poet’” bear the weight of stylistic transgression. The value of Hill's judgement proceeds according to the care taken in structuring deliberation itself; the value of apophasis—of speaking away from oversimplification by avoiding a conflation of terms (i.e.: “‘priest-poet’”)—is apophatically implied from somewhere outside of the description itself. For Hill, it is Hopkins's willingness to deference and sacrifice—“that God's work is first to be done, then ours”—that informs the singularity and implied value of his expression, value which is “authenticated, validated, by the recognition of the difficulty with which purchase is obtained” (CCW, 392).²¹⁷

Notwithstanding Hill's unfortunate inclusion of “obtained”—whose implication, at least partly calls Hill's value discourse into question—“purchase” is not intended to refer, for Hill, to the “value-discourse that is a simple trope of monetary values” but instead to achievement according to effort or suffering.²¹⁸ The demand that these efforts represent in Hill's work is that one is willing to “haul” or “bring about” value—perhaps historically or etymologically—according to “the labor invested in determining it, however ‘impossible’ the demand and the

²¹⁷ See “Geoffrey Hill's Etymological Crux” in Williams's *The Life of Words* (2020): “Instead, the evidence of value is the labour invested in determining it, however ‘impossible’ the demand and the labor may be. In the closing sections of *Al Tempo de' Tremuoti* (2013), Hill describes ‘The grime, this always working to perfect | That which by nature must remain imperfect’ (BH, 930). In the *Collected Critical Writings*, he asks, with Bunyan, ‘how do you teach yourself to distinguish the treacherous common sense of the reprobate from the faithful knowledge of the elect; the answer is, you work at it’ (CCW, 286). Of Ruskin, from whom he gets his idea of ‘intrinsic value’, Hill writes, ‘the value of the “dream” is authenticated, validated, by the recognition of the difficulty with which purchase is obtained: you work at it, work it through’ (CCW, 392; original emphasis).

²¹⁸ The “chase” in “purchase” does not help Hill's case.

labor may be” (TLOW, 2020). As Peter McDonald notes, difficulty in Hill’s work is not “difficulty for difficulty’s sake” or as “difficult to no end”; admittedly, Hill’s work “*is* difficult” but it is a difficulty that “puts things in a clearer light” (McDonald, 98).²¹⁹ We may contend that this is the case because in the singularity of expression demanded by the occasion—and indeed all uses of language-as-occasion or event (but not occasional)²²⁰—is reflected the idea that value-as-apophatic (apophasis as vouchsafing Hill’s sense of value from slipping into cataphasis) and cataphatic speech together are the necessary constituents for a concordance of different kinds meaning to valuably inhere.

“In my immediate practice as a poet, as well as in my critical writings about public language” writes Hill, “I have tried to transform the sense of intrinsic value into matters of semantic pitch”.²²¹ For Hill, pitch—which must be precisely pitched against tone—describes “a quality of deliberated alertness in the use of a word or phrase, in which even the intended meaning has taken stock of the misconstructions to which it is liable” (McDonald, 205). Although Hill’s reference to “semantic pitch” implies a certain definitional precision,²²² the phrase itself not only refers to the degree of highness or lowness of a musical intensity but may also describe the

²¹⁹ McDonald, Peter. *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority, from Yeats to Hill*. Clarendon Press, 2002. As a descriptor, ‘difficult’ only seems to describe Hill’s work in the negative, Hill’s unrelenting avoidance of oversimplification in expression for the sake of stylistic coherence. For McDonald, “Hill produces a depth of field which requires more than a single point of critical focus—and more than one kind of critic—but which also reaffirms the centrality of the poetic imagination to a world (or, perhaps, worlds) where it will never be fully accommodated or finally at home” (4).

In *Along Heroic Lines* (Oxford University Press, 2021), Christopher Ricks notes that “the progress of Hill’s poetry was an intense understanding that all will lapse into the progress of error unless error itself be unrelentingly admitted and then probed, tented” (Ricks, 233).

²²⁰ Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature* (Routledge, 2004).

²²¹ Geoffrey Hill, ‘A Reading and Discussion of My Own Writings in the Context of Contemporary British Philosophy and Poetry’, Collège de France, Paris, 18 Mar. 2008.

²²² Where “tone” implies a mode of address, pitch implies a certain acoustic range or amplitude. See, eg: Hill’s essay “Dividing Legacies”, which comparatively iterates the differences between pitch and tone in T. S. Eliot’s writing; Hill offers several illustrative quotations: “The style of Eliot’s address to his audience is a matter of tone; the burden of his analytical criticism is, or ought to be, the question of pitch” (CCW, 375).

pitching of an idea or argument (eg: the creation of rhetorical assent), a pitch as a space or a distance between corresponding points or lines (eg: pitch as arena), or as the movement of an object around a lateral axis (eg: the pitch of a ship).

These definitional amplitudes of intended or possible meanings are implied even if the primary or conventional reference of “semantic pitch” is acoustic. In addition to its emphasis on the acoustic quality or sound-image of words, “semantic pitch” is also fundamentally linguistic, especially in the sense that the value of its multiple meanings—pitch as musical, pitch as argument, pitch as concept, pitch as movement—is encoded not only on the surface of the phrase but also in, around, between, and below words, that is, apophatically: prepositions like “in”, “around”, “between” and “below” (in the sense here intended) are important because of how they encode and designate that the meaningfulness of linguistic signs in and of themselves is also predicated on the excess meaningfulness of the liminal—the etymological, rhetorical, historical—spaces from where (or to which) language can be additionally linked.

The apophatic and the cataphatic dimensions of language are necessarily unequal or unequivocal to one another. The goal of balancing these linguistic forces in the service of “semantic pitch” is, for Hill, not only a matter of aesthetic making but more imperatively an ethical demand to engage language more fully, where the possible semantic pitches of language that the apophatic designates is suggestive as a fullness beyond the representational limits of fullness that cataphatic speech presents. The cataphatic or representational powers of language are those that serve a particular goal or end; the apophatic—which is unvoiced and paradoxically signified without signification—demands a linguistic engagement with what is implied (etymologically, historically, epistemologically, etc.) but remains unstated, to respond to what is represented in the negative but is not made to speak for itself.

The unvoiced element in Hill's "That Man as a Rational Animal Desires the Knowledge Which Is His Perfection" (*Canaan* (1996)) is signified, invisibly, by everything that comes before the word "That" in the poem's title. Although the title is imposing for a poem—the longest title of any poem of Hill's—it functions, like any other title, to condition the reading of the poem in a thematic way. In another way, however, it is less title than argument. We might, as the poem anticipates, desire the knowledge of the missing premise that "That" implies in order to proceed more easily into the rest of the poem, but the poem denies this possibility, framing its language in a way that its title plays on some knowledge that might have been uttered or represented before. The goal of the poem however, is not to facilitate syntactic understanding but to communicate something exemplary about apophatic knowing through language; the title's "That" is the initial mechanism that establishes the calling into question that the rest of the poem implies. The poem's final lines draw further attention to the epistrophic quality that "That" produces in the poem's title, where the "innocence" of "That" as the poem's "first inscription" implies an interactivity—a paraphrasing—between the poem's title and the poem's end:

Abiding provenance I would have said
the question stands
 even in adoration
clause upon clause
 with or without assent
reason and desire on the same loop—
I imagine singing I imagine

getting it right—the knowledge
of sensuous intelligence
 entering into the work—
spontaneous happiness as it was once
given our sleeping nature to awake by
 and know
innocence of first inscription (BH, 172)

The vertically uninterruptive lines and equalized spacing in the first part of the poem—in contrast to the overlapping lines in the poem’s second half—facilitates a reading where the clauses from lines two to five could be swapped around without causing a grammatical conflict: after “Abiding provenance I would have said”, any of the four—“the question stands”, “even in adoration”, “clause upon clause”, and “with or without assent”—could be interchangeably substituted (eg: “Abiding provenance I would have said”/“even in adoration”/“the question stands”/“with or without assent”/“clause upon clause”); this clausal interchangeability is an exemplary aspect of the poem (despite the substitutive function) because it keeps “reason and desire”—perhaps the reason and desire to know the “that” before “That” implied in the poem’s title—“on the same loop” (BH, 172).

The repetitive function of looping exemplified in the next line—“I imagine singing I imagine”—whose lack of punctuation allows the line to be broken down into additional possible constructions (‘I imagine, singing I imagine’ (which is revisionary), ‘I imagine singing, I imagine’ (which emphasizes imagining over singing))—is counterbalanced by the punctuated dashes after “on the same loop”, where “I imagine singing I imagine/getting it right—the knowledge/of sensuous intelligence/entering into the work”, is at once interruptive and continuous: it is the only punctuation in the poem that provides any signified sense of clausal differentiation; even then, the loop is bipartite; initially, the loop begins after the first dash, just as “I imagine singing I imagine/getting it right”. The third dash in the poem, however, calls the finality of the second dash into question—is the second dash (after “getting it right”) the end of the loop, or is it the beginning of the second part of the loop (which concludes after “into the work”)? That there is no punctuation at the end of the poem keeps the possibilities implied by the looping-tropes of the poem intact; “getting it right” is contingent on “the innocence of first inscription” is conditioned

by the interruptive “That” that begins the first inscription of the poem’s argument (in its title) which is played out in the poem through a series of open-ended loops whose punctuation (the silent dash and missing period(s)) are exemplary in their power as both connective and distinguishing elements that the poem leverages to create its apophatic effect—it denies the possibility of transmitting clear communicable meaning in place of leveraging the particular difficulty through which its language functions.

The apophatic pitches in Hill’s work are accented through “a prosodic avowal of the necessity of speech”, where the theme of “bearing witness” as ethical orientation in Hill’s work—which explores “the opposing passive/active senses of witness”—is a circulative process of “transposing words into music, music into silence, silence into words” (Caldwell, 555). “Questions of discourse”, writes Caleb Caldwell, “are posed against the theoretical explorations of the aesthetic or economic commodification of the dead, on one hand, and the complicity of silence toward atrocity on the other” (546); the ethical value of discourse and the ethical value of silence are, in Hill’s work are reflected in the contradictory relation between apophasis and cataphasis:

Hill’s heavy use of negative rhetorical devices, his famous ambiguity, and his thematic exploration of silence, are part of a calculated risk: an attempt to communicate what cannot be said, which is a far different thing than to eschew communication...the features of Hill’s poetic witnessing—its retrospectivity, its non-encounters, its paradoxical *withdrawing* of self in order to *present* (which requires self-presence) the other faithfully—require the impossibility of simultaneous silence and speech. (547)²²³

The “impossibility” suggested in “paradoxical *withdrawing* of self in order to *present*...the other faithfully” is less an impossibility and more a question of doing the word-work—of exploring the invisible semantic, acoustic, etymological, organizational, rhetorical, etc. “pitches”—necessary for engaging (or catching a glimpse of) the apophatic conditions that structure Hill’s poetry.

²²³ Caldwell, Caleb. “Silence and Geoffrey Hill’s Poetics of Witness” in *Religion and the Arts*. 17, 2013. 545-567.

One of the reasons for Hill's difficulty—and the value that this difficulty may, under the pressures of struggling with language as “dark and disputed matter”—may be due to the apparently “indefinable and indistinct” elements planted in Hill's apophatic turns of phrase: as early as “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’”, Hill's mode of expression is established in both its exactitude and its apophatic quality—commenting on the title, Hill opens the essay reflexively:

The quotation-marks around ‘menace’ and ‘atonement’ look a bit like raised eyebrows. ‘Menace’ from what, and to whom? ‘Atonement’ by whom, and for what? Is one perhaps offering to atone for there menace of one's own jargon? In fact, though the title may appear ‘challenging’, it presents little more than a conflation of two modernist clichés. That it does so is an act of choice but the choice is exercised in order to demonstrate the closeness of constraint. Behind the façade of challenge is the real challenge: that of resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive. (CCW, 3)

The “indefinable and indistinct” is undone, in some sense, through a revealing of the rhetorical constructions that make them possible: “closeness of constraint” (alliterative), “quotidian shapelessness and imperfection” (doubly undefined), “the positive virtue of negative statements” (antithesis, cadence); does Hill “atone for the menace of one's jargon” (CCW, 3), or is Hill deliberately using these constructions as breadcrumbs, Handsel and Gretel-ing his readers closer and closer to the cauldron? Hill's challenge—that “behind the façade of challenge is the real challenge”—is a particularly fertile turn of phrase for a poetics of apophasis: notwithstanding the repetitive pitching (and inherent division) of the real behind the facade, where the “real” challenge is not to ‘surmount’ or ‘get around’ the obstacle that language-as-cataphasis presents but to instead resist “the attraction of terminology itself”, the “coercive” and cataphatic power of language as “façade” (CCW, 3).

Hill's poem “Ars” (*Without Title* (2006)) is a poem that, on its surface, presents as a derisive meditation on poetry's place among the arts, a distinction from the title that announces “Ars” and not ‘Ars Poetica’; slightly below the pitch of the poem's narrative threshold, however, are implied

sub-textual arguments about the speaker's doubt on the effectiveness of poetic techniques as exhibitions of artistry. The poem opens with a critique of enjambment:

Hazardous but press on. Enjambment
drags: hinge of induration
not a patent success.
Comparisons build tautologies yet again.
What is incomparable and are we
making a list?

Don't lay destructive charge if you were booked
for exhibition.
To confess mayhem plead ornate regard.
Ciceronian conclusions, fixed resolve.

Style paradox inertia's mobile face
for the duration. It has been thought
expedient to have us curse and weep
with the same countenance as one inspired. (BH, 507)

That "Enjambment/drag" and then is subsequently defined as a "hinge of induration" ("not a patent success") calls into question two conflicting ideas: 1) whether or not enjambment as technique actually "drags" or if it is actually a "hinge" (despite not generally being thought of as such), or, if the "hinge of induration" the poem describes is more suggestive of how enjambment as technique manipulates time (in-duration); and 2) whether or not the etymological play on "induration"—"to harden", from Latin "indurat-" ('made hard') from the verb "indurare" (based on "durus" ("hard"))—is actually descriptive of the prescribed difficulty of disambiguating between the poem's conflicting pressures. It is worth mentioning that within the word "enjambment" is 'jammed' the word 'jam', whose /a/ sound, squeezed tightly into place in "enjambment" is dragged forward into the next line in "drag"; further, the /in/ in "hinge" (and in hinge-like fashion) is also carried forward into "induration". "Not a patent success", my ars.

But the poem anticipates this kind of reading (perhaps any kind of reading) through the logic implied in its next (exasperated) lines: "Comparisons build tautologies yet again./What is

incomparable and are we/making a list?” (BH, 507). Comparing the in-durance of the /a/ sound in “enjambment” and “drag” and the /i/ sound in “hinge” and “induration” could only be a tautology if, as the poem advises, “we/are making a list”; what is “incomparable” about the poem—which repeats the /in/ sound (from “hinge” and “induration”)—is the way it connects to “ars poetica” by beginning as an advisory—“in media res”—to the reader, who is warned—“Hazardous but press on”—where the weighted mass of words and machine-like pressures implied by “press on”, “drag”, “hinge” do not make a mere “list” of poetic features, as each line of the poem, taken instead as an itemized entry, might imply; they produce the hidden or apophatic machinations of language, according to which the thinking of the poem proceeds in “patent” and “incomparable” ways.

The poem’s speaker is not convinced: “Don’t lay destructive charge if you were booked/ for exhibition” (BH, 507). The poem may indeed exhibit, as it acknowledges, the inner-movements of its language; at the same time, the poem acknowledges the destructive power that blatant exhibition implies: by demonstrating its own thinking about the artistic exhibition of its own artistry, artistry through which a poem as art-object might work—or make its words work, or show its words at work—the poem acknowledges another comparative basis for exemplifying the difference between “ars” and “ars poetica”; “comparisons build tautologies yet again”. Although the poem references the history of oratory (and Roman conquest)—“To confess mayhem plead ornate regard/Ciceronian conclusions, fixed resolve”; “Delete *delenda est*—exemplary/Carthage her rubbed-in wounds” (which, by deleting “*delenda est*”, the poem points out the “negative and punitive aspects of exemplarity” (Vincent, 187))—the poem shift its tone from reflexively playful to serious: “Not everything’s a joke but we’ve been had” (BH, 507).²²⁴

²²⁴ Vincent, Bridget. *Moral Authority in Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

The second half of the poem exhibits the schematic pattern of a rhetorical aposiopesis (Gk: aposiopan, “be silent”), gradually reducing its lines per stanza from five to one; in an act of self-imposed “patterned randomness”—whose actual “randomness” is questionable—section one’s collective ‘we’s’ and ‘us’s’ become individuated in the second section as ‘I’s’:

Nor does vision deny this: the province
of human discourse, error, self-delusion;
the spirit’s oblique lifting a leverage
for the entire corpus; distressed paradigms;
and, as some have said, charges to answer.

How risible the solemnized
intentions towards joy.
Unexchangeable password, I have yet
to find the place appointed. It will come.

Over, across, the Pennine scarps and valleys
motorway lights—festal suspension bridge,
high-arching nocturne. I grasp the possible

rightness of certain things
that possess the imagination, however briefly;

the verdict of their patterned randomness. (BH, 507)

The “patterned randomness”—and the fact that the poem’s speaker grasps “the possible”—not actual—“rightness of certain things”—draw greater attention to the “distressed paradigms” of “human discourse, error, self-delusion”, where the “charge to answer” or create an appropriate equivalency between poem and subject matter, is only possessed by “the imagination”, “grasped...briefly”; as futile as the “patterned randomness” of thinning out the stanzas into silence, or that the poem, lapsing, in its creation, into “human discourse” despite its protestations may seem, the gestures that the poem makes are modalities of apophatic coding that the poem works to achieve at a different valence of signification than the content or message of its discourse may seem to provide.

Difficulty—which I’ve been characterizing as the difficulty of apophasis in addition to Hill’s senses of value and pitch—is an apposite description of Hill’s work for the way it describes and figures, etymologically, the movement away from simplicity, difficulty bifurcated as both “dis-”, as in negation or absence, and “facility” (via L. *facilis*), as in inherent aptitude, the aptitude involved in creating distancing effects. In an interview from 2000, Hill compares the complex difficulty of the individual (“we are difficult. Human beings are difficult...we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other”) with art’s resistance to “tyrannical simplification”; the division of terms is necessary because simplification takes for granted the labour through which art—that is, art not bound by the cultural tastes of an expectant readership, or art that is (in the modernist sense) autotelic, existing independent of its creator—is produced.²²⁵

Hill argues that “art has a right—not an obligation—to be difficult if it wishes”: on one hand, Hill suggests that “genuinely difficult art is truly democratic”; on the other, that tyranny is enabled by the facility that “simplification”—the propagandistic simplification through which the “minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement”—implies (*ibid.*). By extension, the epistemological quality of a poem is not predicated on the cataphatic accessibility of language—the calculative movement of premises to conclusions from line to line—but on the

²²⁵ *The Paris Review* (Vol 154, 2000): “Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when, if such simplifications were applied to a description of our own inner selves, we would find it demeaning?” (Hill, 2000). The primary complaint levelled against the ostensible difficulty of Hill’s work—and indeed, about any work that would challenge one’s critical sensibilities—“turns on the word inaccessibility”, to which Hill responds that 1) “to complain of difficulty” as “obscure reference” is “obsolete”, especially “since the invention of the world wide web and texting and so on...you tap it up on the computer and in five seconds you have the obscure reference”; and 2) that although “accessibility in certain areas of life is necessary”—for example, that “public lavatories...supermarket aisles...and library stacks should be readily accessible”—“there is no bridge between the value of accessibility in a supermarket or public lavatories and accessibility in a work of art” (Rahim, 2013). That the work of art, in Hill’s formulation, is expected to be made palatable for a readership that equates difficulty with a denial of enjoyment—art as resisting or ignoring the satisfactions and expectations of contemporary tastes—is also a denial of the poet’s genuine invocation of “some field of vision” that the poem exemplifies but that we “have difficulty in grasping”; for Hill, it is an “intolerable” position that “anything outside our mindset is invalid” (*ibid.*).

poem's resistance towards the tyranny of linguistic (or interpretive) simplifications that threaten to constrain it. The apophatic quality of language functions as a resistance against textual simplification and reinforces a conception of poetry as "knowing language" and not as knowledge-producing discourse. Hill's comparison emphasizes that genuine difficulty—not feigned or overintellectualized—in poetry can be a truer form of expression than poetry whose mode of address is "in simplified terms" because genuine poetic difficulty accommodates "any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence"; it is evidence of an intelligence in language that works in "qualifications and revelations", resisting tyrannical simplification. "Meaning is not 'established'", writes Hill, "even in those writers who greatly desire to see it so"; rather meaning—and by extension, poetic epistemology, how (and not what) a poem knows—is apophatic, "concatenation, ellipsis, lacuna: as much in those who speak 'pertinently, plainly, piercingly, and somewhat properly' as in those who strain after far-fetched conceits" (CCW, 353).

Hill's closing statement in "The Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value" brims with negations—"not", "cannot", "left with no other course":

It is simply not true to say that the intrinsic value of a line or phrase cannot be assayed and proven in close and particular detail. For the intrinsic value of the entire poem so to be established would require significant detail to illumine and regulate the whole. I am left with no other course but to say that the great poem moves us to assent as much by the integrity of its final imperfection as by the amazing grace of its detailed perfection. At those points where the intrinsic value of the formal structure, by whatever means, is revealed to us, that value is on the instant mediated. (CCW, 477)

In order to engage the apophatic elements of a literary work, a shift away from reflections on cataphatic content—the strictly referential or representational elements of language—is necessary; it is on this sense of mediated value that Hill's apophatic epistemology is predicated. That Hill has produced an enduring sense of importance in terms like semantic pitch, difficulty, or value is to recognize in Hill's poetics his engagement in an apophatic modality for speaking by

deploying the rhetorics of speaking away, of magisterially balancing the alien (and alienating) effects of both language's sense and sublimity.

What is key, however, in the linguistic play between cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of language, is the recognition that a poem is at once representational as well as gesturally performative: where a poem may reference and represent any number of ostensible themes, ideas, or allusions, the poem as apophatic epistemology must also necessarily also draw attention to the quality of its own knowing as well as to the contingencies of its knowing in self-reflective ways, the poem as self-critique or self-critiquing. "In his last collections", writes Bridget Vincent, Hill is "increasingly invested" in "responsible but self-questioning memorializing work" (15); Hill's final, posthumous collection, *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (2019) is not only the poetic occasion for memorializing and self-memorializing but also perhaps the most concentrated locus of apophatic self-reflexivity in Hill's work.

4.3 AN "ALL-SYSTEMS" WARNING: *THE BOOK OF BARUCH BY THE GNOTIC JUSTIN*

Planned by Hill as "a posthumous work", *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* ("BB", 2019)—edited by Kenneth Haynes—would consist of "as many poems" as Hill "would live to complete" before his death in 2016 (BB, 147). Comprised of 271 prose-poems, numbers 1 through 226 had

been “revised and corrected” by Hill before his passing²²⁶; the remaining poems (227 through 271) were copied from Hill’s notebooks.

The title of the collection is perhaps as disputative as the historical text(s) and author(s) whose name(s) it refers to: although the biblical Book of Baruch (Baruch I)—a text considered deuterocanonical by both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches—is attributed to Baruch the scribe of Jeremiah, R. H. Charles explains in *The Apocalypse of Baruch* (1896) that in addition to the Old Testament Book of Baruch, “a considerable literature arose and circulated under Baruch’s name, sometime before and after the Christian era” (xvi-xvii), including “the Apocryphal Baruch in the LXX”, the “Rest of the Words of Baruch”, the “Gnostic Book of Baruch”, a “Latin book of Baruch”, the “Greek Apocalypse of Baruch”, and finally a “book of

²²⁶ In *Along Heroic Lines*, Christopher Ricks writes (as the foreword of *Baruch* notes) that “*The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (2019) was to consist of as many poems—prose-poems—as Hill would live to complete” (225). Although Hill’s *Baruch* is not divided into distinct sections, there are several clear interludes which break up the regular progress of the collection. Although for Christopher Ricks Hill’s *Book of Baruch* “attends upon heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history” (225)—commentary in Ricks’s paper focusses on heroes as individuals (Thomas Carlyle, who wrote of “embodiments of heroism” and whose “writings are as -ble-based as are Hill’s” (227)), the “compact suffix, -ble... an indispensable suffix” as championed throughout Hill’s work (226), and the “English heroic line” as having done “wonders” throughout Hill’s collected works (qualifying Hill’s achievement further with subsequent comment (“But then what measure did not?”) (255))—the propositional and allusive rumblings established from the outset of Hill’s *Book of Baruch* transition, at times, into interruptive, eruptive excursions, especially in section 36 (the collection’s first ‘long’ poem), section 110 (which, like the processional approach taken in Geoffrey Chaucer’s General Prologue, provides an ekphrastic account of dramatis personae from Hans Holbein’s Renaissance woodcuts (titled: “Dance of Death” (produced between 1523-1525))), sections 126-136 and 200-218 (which proffer analogical definitions for “poem as”), and finally sections 227-271, which are poems from “fair-copy notebooks” that were added to the “corrected typescript” but were not edited by Hill as were poems 1-226.

Baruch...belonging to the fourth or fifth century of our era” (xxii).²²⁷ Despite these competing titles, Hill’s *Book of Baruch* cleaves closest to the “Gnostic Book of Baruch”: Seamus Perry writes that the “adversarial conception of his [Hill’s] last work”—whether it be political, poetic, theological, even metaphysical—“must have grown in part from the real Book of Baruch, a piece of Jewish Gnosticism that retells in massively truncated form the story of everything from Creation to Crucifixion”.²²⁸ Notwithstanding these competing apocryphal versions, the syncretic contentiousness of the “Gnostic Book of Baruch” is matched, perhaps, by the syncretic amalgamation of themes in Hill’s *Book of Baruch*: while Hill’s *Book of Baruch* is not a systematic exposition of Justin’s gnostic myth of the principles of the universe, it is, in a microcosmic way, a systematic exposition of Hill’s own making, one that thematically cycles through Hill’s own epistemic range, which is philosophically, philologically, theologically, mystically, historically, politically, and linguistically extensive.

It should come as no surprise that Hill chooses “Rehearse” as the opening word of the collection, which is emblematic not only of Hill’s emphasis on the power of lexical affixes but also because of how affixes are representative of the paradigmatic tendency in his poetry to rely

²²⁷ Charles, Robert Henry. Ed. *The Apocalypse of Baruch Translated from the Syriac*. Clarendon Press, 1896. Charles notes that the fragments that comprise the “Gnostic Book of Baruch” are “out of relation with the remaining literature of Baruch”, they are found cross-referenced in “the *Philosophumena of Hippolytus*, v. 24-27” (1896; xix).

In “Gospel Tradition and Salvation in Justin the Gnostic” (in *Vigiliae Christianae*. 57:4. 363-388), Roelof van den Broek refers to Hippolytus’s *Refutatio* V, which, following the thread in Charles’s *The Apocalypse of Baruch* “describes and refutes” Justin’s Gnostic system for understanding the “principles of the universe” (2003; 363). Van den Broek notes that Hippolytus refers to “Justin the Gnostic” to “distinguish him from Justin Martyr, the apologist” (364). In *Refutatio* V, Hippolytus describes that Justin the Gnostic “deludes those who are to be initiated into his mysteries by numerous myths through numerous books...and that ‘they’, i.e. his followers, explain in their own way the prophetic scriptures through numerous books”—one of those books, “called Baruch” was “considered excellent” according to Hippolytus’s description (364). The most important book about “the rituals in Justin’s sect”, according to Hippolytus, is called *Baruch*; “if the book of *Baruch* was a secret book”, continues van den Broek, “it possibly began with the oath” to secrecy “that Justin swore his followers to before disclosing his mystery” followed by “a systematic exposition of Justin’s myth” about the “eternal principles (ἀρχαὶ ἀγέννητοι) of the whole universe”; these principles begin with “the Good One”, who “has knowledge of everything” and “Elohim and Edem”, who are “without foreknowledge” (365-366).

²²⁸ Perry, Seamus. “Cute, My Arse” *LRB* Vol. 41 No 17, 12 September 2019. Accessed 28 Jan 2025.

(at least in part) on apophatic etymological connections both within and between words to supply additional levels of referential depth, which in turn help to tighten the conceptual, metaphorical, and linguistic fabric of his work.²²⁹ To “rehearse” is to practice something iteratively for public performance; in an extended sense, “re-hearse” might also suggest the adjustment of “rehearse” from a noun into a verb, where “hearse” (n.) describes a vehicle that ceremoniously carries the dead, whereas to “re-hearse” (v.) is to “convey the coffin” again. The first line of the poem plays on the valencies of idiomatic phrasing, the theatricality implied by rehearsal only matched by the dramatic irony of the harrowing or ‘drawing up’—cutting/revitalizing—of words:

Rehearse the autopsy. Psyche cut as ever. Not clever. Cute, my arse.
 Gross the antennae of abstruse *monnaie*. Grand Opera phoney, did you say?
 Nascent fissures; indecent pressures; thong askew; thing into thing; I ask you.
 Unpleasant sly origins barely decent. Brythonic goddess of panic still on the
 margins. Explains my odes.
 Tone of address enough to amaze even that amazonian crone Tough Shit.
 Genius does mean us, I guess. Confess to what Swift & Co. termed a
 ‘bite’. Absolutely nothing to consummate, though, as yet.
 Blitz fire-squalls. St Bride’s bells shout, fall about, for an hour; tower splits
 its sides.
 The axe head shifts on its haft. In Thaxed the stag’s tines tread to strange
 tunes under the red flags. (BB, 3)

Hill’s cadaverous opening line—four fragments—is cut up but retains its characteristic humour: the incisive division between (and repetition of) “auto/psy” and “Psy/che” (and the implied dualism that would separate the material from the immaterial) is balanced by the acoustic repetition (internal rhyme) that conjoins them (“autopsy. Psyche”)²³⁰; that “Psyche” is “cut as ever”—which, according to the poem is definitively (and comically) “Not clever”—is an

²²⁹ “Geoffrey Hill’s Etymological Crux” (2015); succeeded by Hill Ch. 4 in *The Life of Words*.

²³⁰ Hill’s rhyming of /psy/ with /che/ is a transliteration of “Psyche” from the Greek ψυχή [psūkhé, “soul”]—the cleft rhyme creates an acoustic sounding of the word that it describes in its original language. It is also worth mentioning that one provisional final cutting (though probably not the very final instance of cutting that is possible in the first line) is possible by shearing the “e” off of “arse”, leaving “ars”, as in “ars” poetica, which changes the reflexive sarcasm implied in “Cute, my arse” into a qualitative statement, “Cute, my ars”.

operation that, taken reflexively, shows additional lexical cuttings: by cleaving the “c” off of “clever”, we might observe the line as a “lever”, as leveraging the levels of its self-reflexivity, to which we might attribute “Cute, my arse”, which announces an incredulity with the cutting pattern has been revealed; in “Cute”, another “Cut”; to “rehearse the autopsy”—the “auto/psy”, the post-mortem examination, the procedure of ‘seeing for oneself’—is to rehearse the seen and heard (and, perhaps by extension, to rehearse the reading), to see again from the beginning both “hear” and “arse” (which can’t be heard) in “Rehearse”, to hear /a/ four times in “autopsy” (x2), “Not”, and “arse”, and to recognize the triple valence of “cut up” as a description of sadness (to be “cut up” about the results (autopsy) of a relative’s death, say, symbolized by the hearse), as a description for humour (to act as a cut up or to create laughter, as this opening line might), and as a description for dividing or creating portions of something (perhaps another reflexive allusion to the cutting up of the opening line).

“Rehearse”, on its own, is exemplary; it reflects its own localized, lexical autopsy: re‘hearse’, ‘rehear’se, re‘hear’se, rehe‘arse’.²³¹ That “autopsy” is both an operation—in this case, on a body of words—as well as, being carried over from the Greek—“αὐτοψία”, “to see for oneself”—implies that “rehearse” is as much a narrativized command in the poem as well as a demand for the reader to see for oneself the internal organization of the language and the rhetorical patterns that motivate them. The first line of the poem manages to compress its

²³¹ Incidentally (and perhaps unsurprisingly), G. M. Hopkins is alluded to several times throughout the poem, in some ways more obvious than others; Hill’s “Rehearse” is rehearsively symbolic in the same way that Hopkins’s line —“womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all-night”—from “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” is also in a performative sense a rehearsal (and a compaction) of the stages of life.

metaphorical, acoustic, and inflected re-doublings while also balancing the consistency of its metrical quality.²³²

The compression of the opening line is diffused throughout rest of the stanza in the form of cryptic callbacks and repetitions, repetitions that once again culminate at the end of the poem but as acoustic (as opposed to reflexive) compressions: “Gross the antennae of abstruse *monnaie*. Grand opera phoney, did you say?”, rhymes “*monnaie*”, “phoney”, and “say”; “indecent pressures” and “Unpleasant sly origins barely decent” advisedly separates “indecent” from “barely decent”; “thing into thing” and “nothing to consummate” are compounded and may function as an interpretive advisory note to the reader (“nothing to consummate, though, as yet”); “Confess to what Swift and Co. termed a/‘bite’”²³³; the acoustic repetitions of the poem’s final lines (“blitz”, “splits its”, “shifts”; “St Bride’s bells”; “shout”, “about”; “axe”, “Thaxed”; “head”, “stag’s tines tread”, “flag”; “to”, “tunes”) are reminiscent of the compressed diction found in a number of Hopkins’s sonnets, especially “The Windhover” and “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”:

Blitz fire-squalls. St Bride’s bells shout, fall about, for an hour; tower splits
its sides.
The axe head shifts on its haft. In Thaxed the stag’s tines tread to strange
tunes under the red flags. (BB, 3)

The metaphors of cutting (“Psyche cut as ever”) and humour (“Not clever. Cute, my arse”) from the first line become combined in “tower splits/its sides”, but the image here is anything but a cut up: continuous references to towers, churches, and architecture in Hill’s *Baruch* show Hill’s

²³² Seamus Perry puts things differently in his review of Hill’s *Baruch* in *LRB* (“Cute, My Arse” Vol. 41 No 17, 12 September 2019): “The thing is written in varying lines of what you might even call prose were they not interlaced throughout with glancing half-rhymes—what Hill calls at one point ‘rhyme-scoop’—as in that opening line where ‘ever’ chimes with ‘clever’, ‘cut’ pairs off with ‘Cute’, and ‘Rehearse’ with ‘arse’; meanwhile, as a kind of anti-rhyme, the last three letters of ‘autopsy’ repeat themselves with a different sound as the first three letters of ‘Psyche’, and ‘Cute ... arse’ is an approximate anagram of ‘cut as ever’.”

²³³ See Jonathan Swift’s note and illustrative definitions for ‘bite’: “Resolved to write the History of the Bandbox Plot, and to give a true account of the modern word *bite*: having concluded my journey to be a bite, Lord Harry a bite, the earl a bite, and that prudence infallibly directed to fall in with them who would bite the biters” (197-198) in *The Works of Jonathan Swift* (ed. Sir Walter Scott) Vol 16. 2nd Ed. (Bickers & Son, Leicester Square) 1883.

preoccupation with the ecclesiastical structures of England (and the importance of structure more generally) throughout the collection: although Madeline Potter argues that “Hill’s engagement with architecture is informed, at its core, by a theological act of witness to the violence of history”, the comparison that Potter makes—that, like the material construction of a church, the material construction of the poem “captures something invisible”—is true, but perhaps only insofar as material has an asymptotic relation to the divine (Potter, 450).²³⁴

Hill’s poem, however, makes no such claim, and although the argument is persuasive in the way that it appeals to the long history and authority of the Christian church and church architecture, that the poem is “reminiscent of the sacramental ritual of Eucharist and even of the Incarnation” is perhaps even less persuasive for the way that it prescribes a rhetorical-theological lens (and not a direct engagement with the language) through which the poem can be read as a cataphatic reflection. Contrastingly, what is apophatic about the poem in an epistemological sense is the way that its language—not its themes—moves in a continuously distancing relation away from the poem’s ostensible content: the cryptic referentiality of Hill’s poetry in *Baruch* highlights the importance of the unexpressed content—the referential valencies of truth hidden within each line—in terms of the figural movement of the poem’s figural movements.

Beyond its gnomic gestures, thematic allusions, contemporary cultural referencing, self-deprecating humour, and ostensible historiographical knowledge, *Baruch* is paradigmatically apophatic for the way it invokes surface references only to resist being drawn into them; it proceeds “entirely on its own terms”, resisting “anything like participation in a public discourse”,

²³⁴ Potter, Madeline. “The Theology of Ecclesiastical Architectures in Geoffrey Hill’s *Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*” in *Literature & Theology*. Oxford University Press, 34: 4., 2020. 450-464. “Hill’s theology” for Potter “emerges as materially engaged, whereby the numinous is made to inhabit the material...in this sense, church architecture, like poetry itself, can be seen as a sort of counterpart to the liturgical, in that in its accrual of both value and moral decay...it captures something invisible...reminiscent of the sacramental ritual of Eucharist and even of the Incarnation” (451).

where “its sheer miscellaneousness somehow militates against the political response it otherwise appears to provoke” (Perry, 2019). By the same token, the theme of Hill’s *Book of Baruch* as poetic apocrypha, hidden reference, or “enticing paradox”—exciting as those characteristics might initially make the collection sound as “hidden” writing—is also perhaps slightly misleading; despite the parallels between Hill’s *Baruch* and the ancient *Book of Baruch* as theologically disputed text²³⁵, Hill’s *Baruch* is neither biblical nor is it considered outside of or apart from Hill’s oeuvre.

The collection is intertextual, self-reflexive and referential, argumentative, and inflected with allusions to historical, cultural, literary, political, and theological elements; it is also emblematically “gnostic” not for the way that it purports to know but for the ways that it structures and plays on what it knows in oblique and seemingly esoteric ways. The collection does not contain allusions to mystical knowledge but it is, like Justin’s *Baruch*, a text which mixes elements of myth, gnosticism, and theology in a way that is apophatic: its orientation towards its thematic material and the material of language is secured according to the aesthetics of “speaking away”, speaking in terms of what may not be directly said but that remains otherwise latent. It is the level of engagement or willingness to work—which the poem’s opening instruction to “Rehearse” implies—with Hill’s writing that discloses poetic knowing, not the references (overt or hidden) themselves that produce the collection’s apophatic knowing.

Reference in *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* can have a dizzying effect; Hill’s use of reference is not only post-modern popular-cultural referencing—reference for the sake of making connections—but also recondite and philological, where connectivities between the poem and its

²³⁵ For Jeffrey Wainwright, Hill’s *Book of Baruch* “suggests a testament, an apocalyptic work written in expectation of judgement in the manner of other apocryphal texts”; commenting on the title of the collection, Wainwright notes that “the presentation of the book in its title refers to the literary tradition of pseudonymous writing which strengthens the author’s authority by presenting him as a part of a venerable tradition” (53). For Wainwright, Hill “strives always for real knowledge, ‘true gnosis’, but admits that what that might amount to is no more than this: ‘what I love and admire is true gnosis; everything that I hate is not’ (#81)” (ibid).

political, civil, biographical, or cultural referents are conceptually strengthened according to their associated poetic effects: recalling Perry, Hill's *Baruch* is as much a "‘literature of power’, in the terms of Thomas De Quincey" as it is "‘also a ‘literature of knowledge’...you either will or won't recognize the references to Brueghel's painting *Dulle Griet*, or Holbein's *Dance of Death*, or Brecht's 1940 radio play *The Trial of Lucullus*"; *Baruch* is "a poem on first name terms with tradition" (Perry, 2019).²³⁶ For Nigel Wheale, reference in Hill's *Baruch* connects many things: as "a poem full of poets", *Baruch* is a "serious" collection with references to "Milton, Newton, George Berkeley" and "brief allusions to all kinds of recondite material", an "anarchic" collection "overloaded with 'cultural name dropping'", figures that "float in and out of the poem, giving a sense of Hill's particular pantheon" (273-275).²³⁷

Where the poem's theme revolves around the destruction of religious sites and church bombings in England, the first part of section 36 introduces and invokes the word "holocaust"—("ὄλο-καύτωμα") or "all-burned"—as "a multiplex burnt offering, residue of scorched/hollows", which, according to the poem, is "that word's "true cast":

Like much else rebuilt out of brick dust, ash, and silt of soot; a holocaust in
that word's true cast: a multiplex burnt offering, residue of scorched
hollows, roast flesh, hallows torched, when the City went up.
Roman and Saxon roused from half-houseled sleep where they had housed (BB, 15)

That "hollows" (Old English) and "cast" (Middle English)—an echo of the Greek "ὄλο-καύτωμα" (see 'all'/"ollo" in "hollows")—reflect the etymologically "rebuilt" or rebuilding (or the rousing of the etymological from its "half-houseled" sleep) of "Roman and Saxon" derivations after the holy (churches)—"hallows torched"—"went up" is one way that the poem figures or parallels the historical sacrifice(s) of language with the sacrifices implied in historical suffering.

²³⁶ Perry, Seamus. "Cute, My Arse" *LRB* Vol. 41 No 17, 12 September 2019. Accessed 28 Jan 2025.

²³⁷ Wheale, Nigel. "The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin. Geoffrey Hill (2019)" in *Book 2.0* 10:2, 2019.

The bombings that the poem references—“Blitz drama and trauma”—are the air raids on England during the Second World War, especially the London bombings:

St Andrew Holborn for some years appeared woe-begone, as did other Wren
masterworks after Blitz drama and trauma.

St Mary Abchurch, for example, that intricate reredos torn into two thousand
bits, grieved for, retrieved by sublime near-microscopic sleights, reset as
if the miraculous were simple.

Burning St Mary-le-Bow, in ravishing show, saluted by her own bells, a last
cascade of thrashing, mangled squeals as down they go.

St Margaret Pattens: she came through it in better state. We should not spiel
the less well of her for that.

St Andrew Undershaft is home to the tomb of John Stow. He is shown stuck
patiently with his craft, the writer’s perpetual motion requital of things
sedulously or by chance bereft.

Of the reredos at St Mary Abchurch—which was destroyed in the London bombing 1940—“it is permissible”, says the poem, “to be grieved for intricate carved woodwork that could not be/saved. Grief lacks the cultural aura of Pity” (BB, 16). Notwithstanding the difference here between “grief” and “pity”, the poem makes the implicit claim that there is also a difference between the reredos described as being “saved” and as having been “retrieved”, that is, the original reredos would have been saveable—preserved in its original state over time—had they not been destroyed; what is reconstructed (the reredos, having been “torn into two thousand/bits”) implies a temporal rift from which only the retrieval of the original—and not saving the original—is possible. The semantic differentiation that the poem makes is characteristic of another division, in a broader sense, between the work that Hill’s poetry strives to achieve and the way it is received: insofar as even the slightest semantic differentiations have the capacity in Hill’s work to carry—in the case of the reredos, the weight of grief itself—the difficulty implied (the public admission of grief and the grief borne through trauma) is not only “one of the conditions of the truly open and accessible art” but also “markedly against the grain of its time” (McDonald, 189). In a series of lexical doublings, Hill’s oracular speaker in Section 94 notes that

“Words attract words as trouble attracts trouble and yet, to succeed, we must ditch all safeguards; and see and think and speak double” (BB, 43).

After the invocation of “Blitz drama and trauma”, subsequent grieving “for intricate carved woodwork that could not be/saved”, and reference to ““The high dome of St. Paul’s”” (from William Blake’s “Holy Thursday”), Hill’s speaker turns inward, levelling the threats of ostracism (“One becomes...a joke, for the rediscovering of a lost nation”) with the task of poetic production (“for a regeneration of divine themes, a gnostic hierarchy of poems”):

Moving within the light gravity of that grave planet the moon—
Providing the odd detail to the body of the whole, a younger Hawksmoor to an
old Wren, even though you also are an old man.
Early circuits become a rotunda of a *mappa mundi* without Jerusalem at its
centre but encircled by the ‘chartered Thames’ in an unmistakable
loopiness.
One becomes a flat earther, a joke, for the rediscovering of a lost nation, for a
regeneration of divine themes, a gnostic hierarchy of poems that, even
so, may not ‘take’ as in certain prophetic passages of Blake.
The first ‘Holy Thursday’ was aired by Obtuse Angle in the house of Steelyard
the Lawgiver; an unlikely muse, an unpropitious delivery, which is how
genius is delivered in the ideal dystopia.
If I have ever known a poetics it is this.
I refuse your thesis of simple catharsis.
The real Jerusalem is a many times defused and re-instated bomb.
I close my eyes; open them again; I remain an old man with a young brain. (BB, 17)

The reflective mulling that preoccupies the poem’s speaker is exemplified through a series of recursive circularities: the image of “the light gravity of that grave planet the moon” (where there is a weighty pun on gravity (“grave-ity”)); the circling-towards (and circling back) of Hill’s initial “you also are an old man” to his revisioned “I remain an old man with a young brain” at the end of the stanza; the statement that “Early circuits become a rotunda...encircled by the ‘chartered Thames’ in an un mistakeable loopiness”; in “thesis” and “catharsis” the repetition of /sis/ links “this” and “poetics” from the previous line; that “the real Jerusalem”—and not the one on represented on a “*mappa mundi*”—is “a many times defused and re-instated” (but not

“defused” and fused) “bomb” points to the idea that ‘fused’—to join into a single entity—is too permanent a description for what Jerusalem represents; finally, in the last line, there is presented the “light gravity” of the closing and opening of eyes. This pattern—of establishing a thematic centre (“Jerusalem”, “London”, the relation of “the body to the whole”, “regeneration”, etc.) and speaking away from it through a series of unexpected revisions (or “rehearsals”)—are a paradigmatic deployment in this collection.

For some scholars and reviewers, Hill’s *Baruch* is overwhelmingly politicized, even to the point where the larger themes of gnosticism, knowledge, and memory in poetry are all but discarded as topics of engagement. Although the poems in Hill’s *Baruch* use “the same form, of irregular lines, occasional internal rhymes and Hill’s characteristic style, hopping over centuries with semi-cryptic allusions” to create the collection’s “rage and mordant humour”, Nick Lezard leans into an overtly political line from the final poem of the collection, which references the aftermath of (what was) the “impending referendum”: “the numbness after the shock of exit, big-bummed Britannia in her tracksuit; her phantom lap of honour; no other runner”; following this, the “mordant humour” that Lezard mentions comes through in the final line of the section: “Even so, the power of stout roses has risen watt by watt against the afterglow of each brief thunder-shower” (BB, 145). The alluring scent of flowers is matched only by the “shock”—which rhymes with and coheres in the *gradatio* of “watt by watt”—of the implied backfire.²³⁸

In a contrasting way, Seamus Perry writes that Hill’s *Baruch* is “not obliged to offer a coherent political philosophy”; although Hill “chose to cast his later verse in explicitly political terms”, Hill’s *Baruch* extends further into language than the extensiveness of its surface references may imply (Perry, 2019). Where for Andrew Motion, *Baruch* “is pretty straightforward in plan and

²³⁸ Lezard, Nick. “‘The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin’, by Geoffrey Hill - review” in *The Spectator*. 2019.

purpose”, containing “a mass of learned allusions...compressed as to border on the gnomic”, for Jon Glover “*The Book of Baruch* is full of enticing paradox, science or magic”, presenting itself on one hand “as an Apocryphal, ancient, mystic text” and on the other as a series of “contemporary accounts of his [Hill’s] thoughts and feelings in his own last days” (Glover, 2019).²³⁹ Although it may be fruitful, as suggested, to read Hill’s *Baruch* semi-biographically, as historicizing Hill’s own life, few readers elaborate such claims or offer close readings; Hill’s *Baruch* is not exactly “apocryphal” (in the sense that it is a disputed text), “ancient” (in the sense that it does not belong to the distant past), or “mystic” (in the sense that it enables the spiritual apprehension of truth) as much as its language reflects certain apocryphal, classical, or mystical themes; it is reflective and self-referencing, as commentators suggest—and those references, hidden or overt, saturate the poem at every level of its language, from the morphological to the thematic.

One of the primary referential patterns (indeed, one of the poems most interruptive excursive sections) that runs through Hill’s *Baruch*—in addition to the collection’s political and cultural jabbiness, the parodying of literary works, and the thematic circulations and evaluative shifts that the poem takes overall—is the manifold series of observations and pithy analogues for what a poem should do, or be (or are seen by Hill’s speaker as doing or being). Section 71 of the collection begins this pattern, the poem self-referentially commenting that what a “working poem has, or is, its own microclimate”; the internal alliterative /i/ in “is”, and “its”, echoed again at the end of “microclimate” lends acoustic weight to the claim (and further down the line again in “Britain” and “it”, suggesting that the “working” poem occupies a class of perhaps unfinished but still productive poetry):

²³⁹ For Andrew Motion, the historical book *Baruch* that is referred to in Hippolytus’s *Refutatio* V is the same “Book of Baruch to which Hill refers”, a “Gnostic work blending Christian and pagan elements” (Motion, 2019). See: Motion, Andrew. “The gnomic Geoffrey: Late work of ‘an old man with a young brain’” in *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, No. 6058, 2019, and Glover, Jon. “With the Gnostic Justin.” *PN Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2019. 56-59.

A working poem has, or is, its own microclimate; certainly, in Britain it does so possess its nous. Some of us may be distinguished thus, pre-structuralists of our antic cause; the streamlet's cluck and treble through meadow and arable; gold globs of mistletoe, the spoiler, the spoils, heaped in Tenbury market to go.

Something here to be garbled if part understood. I am invoking presence not mood. Mood—almost at first standing—abandons us while, in absence, presence remains. I state it crudely enough for small gains.

But it is not, even so, the same as the 'strain of time' which, according to that Jesuit (resolute, glad, forlorn), draws from us the psychic skin that bound us to find the world tolerable, ourselves credible; and reels it in: alien earth a photonegative of all earthly loves; the Aurora palpitating absently apart in its waves and coils.

How, knowing this, he could write 'Hurrahing in Harvest' I can barely conceive; though it reflects and reveals 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', mutely audible, darkly lucent, impenetrable, starkly provident. (BB, 33)

The oxymoronic compounds in the last line—"mutely audible", "darkly lucent", and the more complicated "impenetrable" and "provident" (complicated, because their opposition is based on both the impossibility of avoiding temporal penetration into the future as well as providence (as shrewdness) presumably provisioning piercing insight—are an apophatic strategy for commenting on the work of "that/Jesuit" referenced in the third line: G. M. Hopkins. That "a working poem" (where "working" designates both poem as word-work and as exemplifying compositional completeness) "has, or is, its own microclimate" is particularly telling: that the poem is not referred here as a "microcosm"—in the context of invoking Hopkins—is notable because it creates an aesthetic argument that puts theoretical distance between "microclimate" and "microcosm": there is a tendency in Hopkins scholarship that proposes that the language of a poem is "analogically correspondent" to ontological structures in the world²⁴⁰; in this sense, "microclimate" would describe something anterior to the poem, —"Presence", which, according

²⁴⁰ Sprinker, Michael. *A Counterpoint of Dissonance: The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

to the poem “abandons us while, in absence,/presence remains”—that cannot be adequately reduced.

Hill’s *Book of Baruch* spares no expense providing a plethora of analogical frames for what a poem is, or might be. The sections are provisional and aphoristic, comprised of comparative arguments—continuous and revisionist—sprawling across sections (126, 128, 129, 135, 136 (and then again sparingly in 200-218)), flitting from analogy to analogy: beginning in section 126, the analogies are many; after section 205, analogies become singularly deployed. The comparative analogies function, in one sense, to say that a poem can be compared to almost anything according to frame of reference, however, each instantiation is specific, unique, and features—as in the rest of the poem’s wry one-liners²⁴¹—a proximal play of both cataphatic content (the comparison itself) as well as the latent apophatic premises that remain unstated but implicated throughout:

Poem as Samson dozing post coitus with coiffure of unshorn hair.
Poem as Samson with shaved head, enslaved, blindly led, belatedly back
on form. (BB, 68)

The back-to-back lines (“Poem as Samson” x2) feature two references to the Samson narrative in Judges 16: first, where Samson sees a prostitute in Gaza and spends the night with her; and second, where, having been seized the next day by the Philistines, Samson’s eyes are gouged out and he is “enslaved, blindly led, belatedly back”—presumably back continuously upon his own trodden path—as he grinds grain in prison. Between Samson’s “dozing” (undocumented in Judges) and subsequent enslavement, the people of Gaza learn—after Samson deceives them several times with hair-related clues for binding (with seven fresh bowstrings, new unused ropes,

²⁴¹ “Compared to all such *The Book of Baruch* is easy going, compliant with my disproportionate ideal, surviving surreal mismanagement with humour and style; collapsible for ease of stowing.” (BB, 41)

and a weave of the seven braids of his hair) and presumably subduing him—that Samson’s gift of great strength (which is hinted at by Samson himself) can be overcome by shaving off his hair.

There is a thin line separating the appositely wrought “coiffure of unshorn hair” and “shaved head”; in a corresponding sense, there is a thin line (or a hair-line) separating the poem as aesthetically figured and as fatally flawed; like Samson’s hair, the poem’s figural element—the source of its greatest strength—is also perhaps the source of its greatest weakness: like the hints that Samson uses to frustrate his captors, the poem approximates towards the sources of its own lexical powers or inner-workings; similarly, as Samson himself is eventually frustrated by Delilah’s incessant prodding—to tell her the secret of his great strength—Samson capitulates; Hill’s poem, however, does not, or does not exactly. Unlike the Samson narrative, the definitiveness of the lines is that they are taken together, validated through the equivalency granted by their comparative “as”; the poem’s speaker frames them—and each subsequent “as” structure—within a comparative continuum:

Poem as classified information regarding élite of nation swimming with pigs
in the Bahamas: a wealth of *Stimmung*, ‘to which only the truly great
belong’.

Poem as ‘mutual comfort, the one to the other’, barely attainable even with
dual purpose spanner found in every well-managed home.

Poem as calorific oven; the moon as manipulator of the nervous system.

Poets with old-fashioned encyclopedic knowledge bring good seed to tillage.

I doubt that many since Rimbaud would so demand; though McDiarmid and
Pound could each make out a case in face of abuse by those with and
without political bias, many of whom are of sound mind.

That there is a gnostic element in the firmament I am broadly persuaded
though I do not push it to the extent that they did.

Poem as cradle of the unbiddable name.

A novice poet will tend to over-exploit the clarinet.

Poem as sitcom. Poem as labour at a seam.

These arpeggios are run off before the passacaglia’s bass emerges, if it ever does.
(BB, 68)

The comparative framework the poem deploys here inoculates against interpretive shoring, and what is left over—what has always been evident but unstated—is the movement into and out from each analogous definition as an interpretive excursion. Although it is difficult to see the connection the poem draws between “Poem” and “sitcom” (at the end of section 126) other than through their shared seriality, the musical reference that the poem makes at the end of the stanza—where the “poem as ‘x’” constructions (“classified information”, “calorific oven”, “cradle of unbidden name”, “sitcom”, or “labour at a seam”) are figured as musical “arpeggios”, which are “run off” before the “passacaglia’s bass”—the descriptive or clueing part of the comparison—emerges—reinforces the transitory nature of the comparisons themselves, each established “poem as” analogue arriving (in varying proportions) promptly after the next.

Sections 128-136 and 200-212 continue this pattern of “poem as” groupings, often clumped together and appearing in quick succession:

Poem as gathered samphire, source of that ‘dreadful trade’ in Edgar’s tirade
with regard to the void.
Poem as neuro-linguistic programme with close attachments to the absurd.
...
Poem as prime enforcer of the realm. Poem as hostage to straws that overwhelm.
...
Poem as slow burning arquebus fire in a re-enactment universe.
Poem as nightmare stepmother in the Brothers Grimm. Poem as loquacious
sightseer at an unspeakable crime.
...
Poem as hapless amateur in competition with ‘Summertime’. (BB, 69)

The descriptions of poetry as “gathered samphire” (from *King Lear* (Edgar: “Halfway down/
Hangs one that gathers samphire—dreadful trade!”)), “neuro-linguistic programme” (which connects “void” and “absurd” as a descriptions of poem as pseudoscientific language therapy), “prime enforcer of the realm” and “hostage”, “slow burning arquebus”, “nightmare stepmother”, loquacious sightseer”, “hapless amateur”—the poem’s comparative “arpeggios”—

are inflected with references to different kinds of ars: Shakespeare, the Brothers Grimm, NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), the Absurd (philosophy), and perhaps some knightly episode in the turn from the Medieval to the Early Modern history of Britain (“realm”, “hostage”, “sightseer at an unspeakable crime”); the self-reflexive mechanism—the emphasis on “poem as” (Shakespeare, folk tale, pseudo-science, absurdity, or chivalric romance (perhaps)) is sustained as a near-tautology, since each reduction—to take the substitute function to its extreme—is a reduction to “poem” as “poem”.

The aleatory flurry of “poem as” constructions—which initially seem to imply the possible “poeticalness” of language in a more general sense—might be more broadly considered as an apophatic strategy, not for implying all of the things (“gathered samphire”, “prime enforcer of the realm”, “arquebus fire”) a poem could be compared to, but instead as undoing—by virtue of the number and variety of the comparisons—the comparative power of reference altogether; that the “poem as” construction is a definitive mode for structuring the cataphatically unstructurable.

Although the theatrical play of “poem as” comparisons in a given section of *Baruch* may be diffuse, there are also locally coherent sections of *Baruch* that set the “poem as” comparisons within a clear thematic domain; in section 135, the comparisons become denotatively historical, especially naval:

Poem as scimitar-curve, shear along shear, a ‘Tribal’ class destroyer, veteran of the North Cape run, bearing down on a submarine that has struck and already gone from the scene, leaving sea-rubble wretchedly a-swim, thicklicked in oil.

Rapid hapless signal flags, the merchantmen’s red flags, warp and snatch on the Arctic wind. Frantic asdic, its wiped mind becoming, with old memory and new writing, something forlornly grand.

Poem as wall map or table chart of a desperate, remote, protracted bid to escape. Poem in due time a diminished aide-mémoire to vanished strategic priorities of fire.

Poem as equity-release—whatever that is.
Poem as no less an authority on history than whom? (BB, 72)

The likeness of a “scimitar-curve” to the reflective sound of sonar—and by extension the increasing frequency of “asdic” beeping as a “submarine” (or other significant mass) might approach (hidden, underwater)—is secured by the curve of what could be an “equity-release” graph in the section’s penultimate line; “as no less an authority on history” (than “whom?” (history itself?)), the poem, like the asdic system, replaces “old memory” with “new writing”, again characterizing the setting and immediate movement away from comparative arpeggios—“poem as”—and descriptive “passacaglias” that the poem’s composition implies, at once fulfilling not only the theme it invokes but also the mechanism, *sui generis*, through which its language functions (while also simultaneously characterizing how it functions).

The anaphoric construction that each successive “poem as” represents—the repetition of the same word or word group(s) at the beginning of successive clauses—are characteristic in *Baruch* as expressions of apophasis, where each iteration is representative of the poem’s “speaking away” from its initial metaphorical source:

Poem as a form of pseudo-mimesis reduced to mere numero-cursus yet still
able to handle its own reverses, and re-rehearse. Bless rather than curse
according to revised fable. (BB, 131)

“As a form of pseudo-mimesis”, the poem as an analogue for what the “poem as” is doing, can, on one hand—the poem advises—be “reduced to mere numero-cursus” (ibid); at the same time, it can “handle its own reverses” in the sense that the comparisons are recursive, that is, true to form, both forwards and backwards. That the word “re-rehearse” appears here, near the end of the poem, is part of the “‘rehearse’-al” effect that the beginning of the poem inaugurates: despite Hill’s half-joking one-liner style of deployment throughout the collection—which is not without its underlying sense of melancholy—to “re-rehearse” (and hear the echo of re-doing “reredos”)

after the “Blitz drama and trauma” of the poem’s repetitive style of establishing and replacing comparison after comparison is to be caught up in the poem’s demand for repetitive and revisionary reading, the same mechanisms through which the poem’s movements take shape and characterize its epistemological movement—from one kind of knowing to the next—as a movement simultaneously away from what is written and, perhaps, towards something previously unknown.

4.4 POEM AS APOPHATIC DEMAND

Where does Hill’s *Book of Baruch* end? Does it end with “novel embalming fluid” at section 226, up to the point where Hill “had revised and corrected” the collection before his death (BB, 148)? Does it end with “each brief thunder-shower” at section 271, where the “untranscribed poems” from Hill’s “fair-copy notebooks”, taken up by Kenneth Haynes, were appended after section 226 (BB, 148)? Does it end after section 271 with “a few additional verses”—which “appear nearly finished”—“presumably to be added to section 271” (BB, 148)? Provided in the “Editorial Notes” to Hill’s *Baruch* are Hill’s “additional draft verses to the final poem”:

I spy Lorelei of mute patriotic song (say) horridly offering her irrational salute
to the worst calamity that has struct the nation since that first day of the
Somme affray: if you will please pardon my locution, representing as it
does the ill-done-by, whose bloodymindedness, equal to any amount of
abuse, aims once and for all to be boss.

Thus we self-abort in maladministered trance and become an offence to our-
selves and our neighbours.

We shall undergo Sisyphean not Herculean labours.

...

Summum imperium (Bodin) recovers its meaning in time as in some formal
garden, which cannot be merely arrangement of metre and rhyme.
Whether this would mean Sissinghurst and the National Trust is difficult
to forecast. I would have it secured by rhyme as by royal brevet.

What sovereignty means is ink instantly dry.

Whether such a term as *summum imperium* can illuminate an art form when it
evidently carried weight in the Referendum I would doubt, but employ
it anyway, as harbouring a type of specious authority which some

might equate with moral bearing as they might these grand rose-heads
uprearing or the traditional glamour of laurel.

...

How do I rate? Anything disordinate in that?

Notwithstanding the callback to the Absurd in “We shall undergo Sisyphean not Herculean labours” (and the repetitive Sisyphean quality of the collection overall) and the argument that “sovereignty”—the power of authority—is rooted in the resistance to revision, that the ostensible final line of the collection is comprised of two questions—“How do I rate? Anything disordinate in that?”—is particularity fitting, since the second question—“secured by rhyme as by royal brevet”—bears on the first.

The word (if it can be called that) “disordinate”—which is comprised of “dis-” (suggesting negation, reversal, or absence) and “ordinate” (relating to the order of a series (Latin: “ordo”, order, class, rank))—is different from the word “inordinate” in that, in contrast to “inordinate” (which uses the prefix “in-” to signify “not ordered”), “disordinate signifies negation through apartness rather than through sheer absence. Similarly to how Hill’s poem “Ovid in the Third Reich” (*King Log* (1968)), suggests, across the enjambment, that “God/Is distant, difficult” (BB, 39) but not absent, Hill’s deployment of “disordinate” rather than “inordinate” (here, editorially placed at the very end of *The Book of Baruch*) remains in keeping with Hill’s apophatic—and not simply negative—epistemological mode: apophasis (whose etymological suggestiveness (“apophasis”, which combines “a verb for ‘to say’ (phanai) and a prefix (apo)” meaning “away from, down from, far from”))²⁴² is a figure for referring to the “hidden”—but still interpretable—aspect of cataphatic writing. The “in that” in Hill’s question: “Anything disordinate in that” refers, locally, to the question preceding it: “How do I rate?”, where rating—a representation of relative value, according to certain criteria—is an ironizing, unserious jab at the question of value

²⁴² Gibbons, Reginald. *How Poems Think*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 92.

overall; moreover, to apply the implied logic of Hill's "disordinate" to "How do I rate?" is less a call to understand what is missing and more a standing challenge to understand the distance between "that" ("Anything disordinate in that?") and its referent, whether etymological, locally syntactic (in terms of this line in parley with the rest of the poem), globally syntactic (in terms of the line and the rest of Hill's critical and creative production), or, similarly to Hill's cosmic "That" in the title of "That Man as a Rational Animal Desires Knowledge Which Is His Perfection" which refers to everything that comes before.

In "Our Word is Our Bond", Hill suggests that "the word-monger, word-wielder, is brought to judgement '*by his being the person who does the uttering...*In written utterances (or "inscriptions"), *by his appending his signature.*' Our word is our bond" (CCW, 168). The lexical and acoustic balance of that phrase—balanced, in terms of the levelling of monosyllables "word" and "bond", the acoustic repetition of /o/ sounds which are chained together within it, the length of "our word" and "our bond" balanced out across the equalizer "is"—are undersigned by Hill's apophatic epistemological style, where the phrase itself and the way it exemplifies the particular form that its expression takes is, in some sense, in accord with the cataphatic content of its message. Hill is constrained, as much as he is consigned, by the poem's demand for order,²⁴³ for ordering and being ordered, where the valencies of "order" as arrangement, as status, and as authoritative demand—placed equally on both poem and poet—to engage language appropriate to its occasion. If, as Peter McDonald writes, "work in language is obliged to be a calling forth to action", then "virtue without this dimension of its verbal labour is doomed to sharing the nature

²⁴³ Sperling, Matthew. *Visionary Philology*. Oxford University Press, 2014. 126.

of the very thing it thinks it is opposing”; the “world’s exactingness of demand” tests “the exactness of language’s response and resistance” (McDonald, 148).²⁴⁴

To speak of epistemology in Hill’s work as apophatic is to begin to respond to this demand, to recognize how the rhetoric of “speaking away” is not an attempt to get beyond or outside of language but to recognize its valencies and its inferences. Although attempts at broaching the metaphysical are for Hill representative of an epistemological limitation—“to place ourselves ‘outside the process by which our knowledge is developed’ is to conceive of an untenable ‘ecstasy’—it is recognizing “our being within the process” for Hill, that is representative of “our true condition” (CCW, 158). Indeed, “outside the process” would put the question of epistemology at a remove from “the process by which our knowledge is developed”; the difference is fine, but the implications are significant, given that the aesthetics of apophysis as a rhetorical and literary-epistemological figure signify, initially, a movement away (but not a severance) from the representational or simply denotative.

“Whenever we have made anything of our own and made it well—a poem, say”, writes Hill, “our words come back to us with a certain alienated majesty”:

In the act of creation we alienate ourselves from that which we have created, or, conversely, the genius of language alienates us from itself. We are no longer masters of a well-considered *curriculum vitae* in free verse or blank verse sonnets, or whatever; the anecdote is no longer the agency of our self-promotion; something recalcitrant has come between us and our expectant and expected satisfaction. (CCW, 565-566)

That something “recalcitrant”, something obstinately uncooperative or obstructive, can be seen as having imposed itself between “expectant and expected satisfactions” is characteristic of the true “difficulty”—in Hill’s democratic sense of the term—that poetry demands, the difficulty of engagement, of working with words, not in a way that is productive according to the hierarchies

²⁴⁴ McDonald, Peter. *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

and values imposed from outside but the inherent, mediated value—and epistemological value—that would upset “our expectant and expected satisfaction” and perhaps lead elsewhere, to somewhere unexpected. In this sense, poems are not infinitely interpretable, *per se*; the value of language—and of the necessary hiddenness of meaning implied in a characteristically apophatic epistemology—is glimpsed in the response that writing and interpretation must bring, since one can only see beyond the existing interpretive possibilities by first committing work to paper. The interpretive commitments implied in a reading—of which there can be any number of iterations—allow for an alternative view of the epistemological possibilities of poetry as knowing language, views that may either come back again in proportion to engagement, or, if the work is ever abandoned, perhaps not at all:

Not as we are but as we must appear,
Contractual ghosts of pity; not as we
Desire life but as they would have us live,
Set apart in timeless colloquy:
So it is required; so we bear witness,
Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us,
Each distant sphere of harmony forever
Poised, unanswerable. If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us—or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end ‘I have not finished’. (BH, 54)

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has interpreted in the works of Jan Zwicky, Paul Muldoon, and Geoffrey Hill a unique set of interdisciplinary poetic epistemologies, paradigmatic frameworks that exemplify how knowing is expressed in poetry: as gestalt, as riddle, and as apophasis. My study shows that for Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, what poetry knows is bound to the irreducible singularity of expression in poetry itself: poetry does not deploy language within the framework of language-as-knowledge-producing discourse but functions, *qua* poetry, as an expression of what constitutes—and indeed challenges—the language-as-epistemology model for knowing. My work argues that poetry’s epistemological function is more properly as meta-epistemology, a mode of epistemological critique that questions the role that language plays in the production of knowledge: in the works of each author, poetry is exemplary for the way it self-reflexively typifies the epistemological mode (gestalt, riddle, apophasis) it uses to question the stability of language as knowledge-producing; at the same time, each poem as gestalt, as riddle, and as apophasis is differentiated as a singularly unique epistemological apparatus *par excellence*.

For Zwicky, the paradigm of “lyric philosophy” informs and is informed by the poem’s capacity as a phenomenological gestalt, where poetry’s knowing occurs in a matrix of linguistic resonances. Gestalt insight in Zwicky’s work relies for its rhetorical force on the lyric integration of linguistic elements rather than on language’s formal logical procedures. Zwicky’s philosophical-poetical investigations stand as a challenge to what she calls “aggregative” epistemological models. By differentiating between philosophical and poetic thought in Zwicky’s work—where Zwicky moves from the paraphrasable and prepositional logics of philosophy to the inimitability of poetry as an expression of “lyric philosophy”—my research shows how the epistemological commonplaces of Zwicky’s lyric philosophy are parallelistically figured.

Zwicky's interdisciplinary philosophical poetics situate poetry as a "resonant gestalt", where each element of language contributes to the epistemological play of language in poetic form. Zwicky's conception of poetry as a resonant gestalt—a comparison that suggests language's structural integrity beyond its acoustic dimension(s)—is to understand the poem as a cognitive tuning fork that harmonizes the relations between thought, language, and knowledge. My work shows that Zwicky's argument for poetry as a linguistic, acoustic, structural, integrated, resonant, and gestalt multiplex reframes the role of the reader, where the reader is not in a privileged position as searching for or interpreting knowledge in language but is instead one who works to adjust their critical sensibilities to hear and see the drama of linguistic interplay in a highly individualized experience of linguistic meaning. In parallel with Zwicky's understanding of the poem as a coherent visual-lexical-acoustic gestalt whose constituent parts are integrated in resonant fashion, this dissertation recognizes that the lyric density of language functions to compound meaning to the point where the expressiveness of language exceeds the representational expression that contains it. As a resonant gestalt, my research shows that Zwicky's poetry is a philosophically-inflected multiplex, whose fragmentary, oracular, and resonant qualities function as resistances to teleological articulation.

Muldoon's framework for poetic knowing—and not-knowing, and un-knowing—is the result of an aesthetics of encyclopedic reference, etymological punning, and intertextual allusion deployed in his poetry in the form of riddles. As a locus of (contentious) facts, (dirty) data, and (mis-)information, the truth of poetry is contingent on the play and ply of the language used to structure it. These riddling dynamics are indefinitely played out in Muldoon's work, where reference and ambiguity as competing linguistic forces result in a weave of irreconcilable poetic multiplicities. This dissertation has established an understanding of the poem as an

epistemological riddle, whose continuous approximation of etymological, historical, intertextual, and referential clues at once help to guide as well as disorient the reader.

The poem as riddle implies both the necessity of knowing—the bringing to bear of any number of facts, pieces of information, or extraneous data to the poem—as well as the necessity of the poem’s unknowing, established through its withdrawal of the possibility of interpretive closure. My research shows that these riddling effects are achieved through the intertextual performance and technical precision of Muldoon’s poetry: Muldoon’s riddling epistemology is presented most fully in his pattern poems (“Riddle”, “The Old Country”, “St. Cuthbert and the Otters”) as well as in his collection *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, where, in multiplicitous fashion, Muldoon presents his reader with aphoristic, embodied, analogical, and medical things worth knowing, multiplying language’s tenses and the tensions between what qualifies as knowledge and what constitutes knowing.

In Hill’s work, knowing is disclosed negatively through a variety of apophatic tropes: combined with an aesthetics of religious sublimity as well as the ethical demand for responsible language, Hill’s poetry expresses knowing as an apophatic epistemological mystery. By interpreting knowing in Hill as rhetorically apophatic, (as “speaking away”), my work has developed an understanding of Hill’s poetry which, aware of its own inadequacies as language, strives to articulate the themes of both silence and suffering, the poem as attempting to balance the aesthetically-fraught ethics of bearing witness and the ethically-fraught aesthetics of articulating suffering without reducing suffering to theme.

My research shows that Hill’s poetry deploys apophasis as a rhetorical strategy for resisting the tendency towards thematizing the poem’s subject; by speaking silence, the poem as apophatic writing articulates knowing in poetry through apophatic epistemological ambiguities.

By registering the unsayable at the limits of language, Hill's themes of silence, language, violence, and suffering demand that poetry be treated with no less seriousness than if it were a human subject itself. My work has argued that attempts at establishing a congruence between word and thing—or, between language and knowledge—are symptomatic of a desire for an impossible, pure, poetic language ("the absolute yet again/atoned with the contingent" (BH, 175)) and that for Hill, attempts at restoring poetry to knowledge—or, expressing poetry that approaches the ethical threshold that its subject demands—depend for their rhetorical force on the poet's labours, on harmonizing, acoustically and semantically, the cataphatic representational with the apophatic unsayable.

This dissertation has argued that for Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, poetry is not productive of knowledge in a disciplinary sense but is instead meta-epistemological: the poem—a cultural artefact of language which is exemplary for the way it expresses, self-reflexively, epistemological themes (thinking, thought, knowledge, fact, etc.)—draws attention to and calls into question not only the stability of linguistic meaning according to the paradigm of language-as-epistemology but also according to the assumptions and contingencies of implied in other discourses on knowing. Poems express their knowing not only according to their singularity as framing questions of epistemology but also through their resistance to the rhetorics of representation, thematization, and closure, all of which are central rhetorical features of traditional epistemological discourses that work to reveal, establish, or reinforce—through a model of language-as-epistemology—the stability of truth claims within those disciplines. For Zwicky, Muldoon, and Hill, poetry complicates, problematizes, and resists the ontological simplifications implied by the language-as-epistemological model for knowing and provides insight into the

contingencies of linguistically-derived forms of truth, offering a view of poetry not as an expression of knowledge but as “knowing language”.

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