This Not Knowing Needn't Bother Us:
Artistic Uses of Incompetence

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Abstract

Competence, in a psycho-legal sense, refers to a link between intention and realization. When a defendant is declared "competent to stand trial", the determination implies that the defendant is aware of the potential ramifications of his or her intended actions. If we transfer this sense into the realm of the art work – of literature and music – we begin to arrive at understandings. Language can never be held fully accountable for its ramifications. Language (or its user) may have intentions – the dictionary, for instance, could be thought of as an index of language's intentions – but language cannot control for (in the sense of a scientific experiment) the connotative, associative, paradigmatic, and purely subjective fallout of language deployment. This is why hearsay is inadmissible.

Indebted to criticism and theory by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, Martin Heidegger and Charles Sanders Peirce this work aims to defend language against accusations of incompetence by entering a plea of "conceptual competence". As examples, works of Robert Walser, Francis Ponge, and John Berryman (in literature); and Bob Dylan, Steve Reich and the Birthday Party (in music), are cited for their explorations and exploitations of various shades and shapes of incompetence: noise, repetition, incompletion, inconclusion.

Although we live in language, we are not damned. Considerations of literary language (or less definitive applications of the notion of language in music and the visual arts) allow for a re-investment in the use-value of language and its inherent incompetence. Artistic uses of language are entitled to account for and employ moments, incidents, events, modes and loci of incompetence. Conceptual competence is precisely the understanding of language's mechanical incompetence and the putting-to-use of that incompetence for positive (let's call them *aesthetic*) purposes.

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1. Introduction

1.1 word one

> The "right" way was worn so deeply in the earth as to be unmistakable. But without the errors, wrong turns, and blind alleys, without the doubling back and misdirection and fumbling and chance discoveries, there was not one bit of joy in walking the labyrinth. And worse: knowing the way made traveling it perfectly meaningless.
>
> – William Least Heat-Moon. (Quoted by Richard S. Field as the epigram to *Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible 1966-1973.*)

Before beginning, I will ruin the ending. This thesis will fail. My apologies to readers who had hoped to arrive at this conclusion by their own lights. And, while I admit there is surely something a little wrong with the writer who starts to write acknowledging he cannot accomplish what he sets out to do, there is also something a little wrong – and this, in a nutshell, is the most basic premise of this thesis – with the writer who starts to write thinking he *can* accomplish what he sets out to do. The difference between the two ways of starting – and this, in a nutshell, is the most basic implication of this thesis – is that the former acknowledges the essential incompetence of his materials and modes of representation (including linguistic representation), while the latter practices a deception. This deception is based on an arrogance, initiated not by the author, but by language as it has willfully, blindly constructed itself since Word One. This deception actually takes the author as one of its victims, along with the reader and the text. The deception imagines its victims as three monkeys with their hands over their eyes, ears and mouth.

In my epigram-in-triplicate, I mean to insinuate something of the sedimentary character of the work of art. Tracing the path from the ground up (literally, in this case) we have the worn path of human feet. This path traces the "solution" to the mystery of the labyrinth. So many have sought the solution, that there is no longer a mystery. Writing about it , William Least Heat-Moon, seeks new mysteries in lieu of solutions. He embraces "errors, wrong turns, blind alleys, doubling back, misdirection, fumbling and chance discoveries". Richard S. Field uses Heat-Moon's description as a sort of prefatorial solution to the mystery of Mel Bochner. In the dangerous fashion of the Derridean supplement which threatens to replace that which it means to supplement, the quote robs and replaces what is to follow, like a jewel thief replacing a valuable diamond with an iron bar of exactly equal weight; the alarm system none the wiser. But, of course, our alarm systems are the wiser and we see through this solution to the mysteries it creates: how can this epigrammatic metaphor replace the work of Mel Bochner? How can it supplement Richard S. Field's "Introduction and Acknowledgments" without replacing it? Why are we being prepared for a litany of errors in their various, synonymous guises? And, since we have been thus prepared, won't those errors no longer be errors when we reach them, since they are exactly what we are now expecting? Wouldn't the epigram make them, in a sense, exactly "right"? Surely any act of reading is an act of following paths "worn so deeply in the earth as to be unmistakable". Ah, but surely: being so sure of this is surely our first mistake.

1.2 competence and incompetence

Mistakes are central to my thesis. The twinned words around which this work revolves are competence and incompetence. Early on – in chapter two – I explain how I intend to use the terms. But allow me to make a few prefatory remarks here, in an effort to introduce the terms and give them some context. When I speak of competence I am not pointing a finger at a person. It is not the painter nor the poet, the musician nor the filmmaker whose competence is in question. Neither is it the spectator, the reader, the listener. The competence I mean to interrogate here is that of the work of art itself: the painting, the poem, the song, the photograph, the film, the sculpture, the performance, the sonata, etc. (I shall remain steadfastly media-neutral). I start from the assumption that, in any medium (in *every* medium) the materials and modes of representation available to the artist, available for the creation of the work, are incompetent. There is no such thing as transparency in representation. No code, no message, no picture may pass from artist to audience without being tainted or skewed or filtered or misconstrued to a greater or lesser extent. The materials of which art works are made, including the physical materials: paint, celluloid, musical instruments, letters, etc. and the ephemeral materials: form, structure, sounds, words, etc., are never fully up to the task to which they are put. They are subject to myriad ruptures, failures, breakdowns, blow ups, misfires, unintended innuendos, corrosion, derision, fashion and on and on. This can be thought of as the inevitable incompetence of the art work's materials and modes of representation. As I will explain later in more detail, I take this incompetence to be of a *mechanical* nature, that is, an incompetence of the machines of representation and signification. These machines find themselves unequal to the ideal of the machine: to efficiently produce a perfectly repeatable product or to effect a perfectly repeatable process. Instead, the art work's materials and modes of representation introduce impurities, noise, dissonance, mis-registration, inexactitude, static, ghost images, and misunderstandings into the process.

Competence is a move in the direction of transcending the inevitability of mechanical incompetence. This cannot be achieved technically or virtuosically since technique and virtuosity have recourse only to the mechanical aspects of their media and, therefore, play into the hands of the mechanical incompetence lying-in-wait. Mechanical incompetence cannot, in truth, be fully surmounted, but only taken on board, acknowledged and put to use for the benefit and enlightenment of the art work as a vehicle of communication. I call this *conceptual* competence. It is evident in works which manage to accommodate the mechanical incompetence of their materials and modes of representation. The conceptually competent art work, or so the next six chapters will argue, is better off than both the work which wallows in its mechanical incompetence and the work which makes a pretence of overcoming it by way of mastery. I say pretence because the thoughts which buoy this work partake of a stream of thought emanating most notably from Nietzsche and running through and across the work of Barthes, Derrida, de Man and others. As Jean-François Lyotard sees it

Nietzsche tries to emancipate thought, the way of thinking, from what he calls metaphysics, i.e. from that principle, prevalent from Plato to Schopenhauer, which states that the only thing is for humans to discover the ground which will allow them to speak in accordance with the true…The central theme of Nietzsche's thought is that there is no 'in accordance with', because there is nothing that is a primary or originary principle, a *Grund*…Every discourse, including that of science of philosophy, is only a perspective…(*The Inhuman* 28-29)

Partaking of this stream means accepting that "there is no 'in accordance with' because there is nothing that is a primary or originary principle". Thus every question of mastery is preceded by a the question of mastery of *what*? With no recourse to anything as grounded and grounding as truth, any attempt at repetition, duplication, precision, definitiveness or definition are bound to fail. An acknowledgement and employment of this understanding for the benefit of the resulting work of art is what I am calling "conceptual competence".

What follows, then, is a selective, subjective survey of conceptually competent works of art in various media from the period known, in its own inexact fashion, as modernism. The earliest example, Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener", dates from the moment at which American culture raised its first real challenge to the preeminence of the European. Melville, along with Whitman and Thoreau and Emerson, initiated an American literature which presaged a more comprehensive statement in the arts as a whole. It could be argued that modernism was the reply to this statement. The most recent examples are drawn, conveniently, from 2001 and 2002 albums by the American rock band US Maple. I say convenient, because there seems to be a thread which connects the ferment of an American voice in the arts to rock and roll, and because US Maple's particular approach to rock and roll represents a convergence of that American voice with a (European?) modernist sensibility. As a result, the trajectory of the given examples inadvertently traces an art historical love/hate relationship which may trace the shape of modernism as well as anything else.

I do not claim that the following examples are either exhaustive or objective. I do not mean to make the case that these are the only conceptually competent works of this period. Nor do I hope to convince you that these are the best examples or the most successful works of their kind, simply because they strike me that way. I merely propose them as candidates and hope that, in them, you will see a little of what I mean to suggest; that the notion of conceptual competence becomes a little clearer in the specifics of the works. If it does, feel free to replace my examples with your own.

1.3 the birth of conceptual competence

Incompetence is not exclusively a modern phenomenon. But the consciousness of incompetence and advocacy of a conceptual response have certainly had their heyday in the past century and a half. Incompetence found a vociferous champion in the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who, in the second decade of the 20th century, coined the term estrangement (*ostranenie*) to indicate techniques which subvert what he called the

"automatism of perception": the propensity to quickly and effortlessly assimilate the objects of the world – both natural and artificial – into a culturally instantiated system that provides shortcuts to classification, understanding, and value. Shklovsky called on art to break or impede such habituation, estranging – and thereby renewing – the audience's perception of the content by "laying bare the device" of the form. More specifically, Shklovsky believed that estrangement had always been the strategy of art, "that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found". (Shklovsky 280)

As Shklovsky suggested, the aesthetic tactic of estrangement is not strictly a 20th century phenomenon. Dmitry Cizevsky identifies a much earlier example of estrangement in *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart,* written in 1622-1623, by Moravian pastor, J.A. Komensky (Laitinized as Comenius). Comenius' descriptions of common human behaviors, such as greetings and hand-shaking, are meant to defamiliarize them, to break the reader's unhesitating acceptance of the common-sensicality of the everyday:

> Whenever some of them encountered one another, they performed various tricks with their hands, mouths, knees, and so on, they nestled up to each other and they bent – in short they cut all sorts of capers. (quoted in Cizevsky 117)

Cizevsky describes further passages dealing with common labor, sailing, and an episode in a library (which the narrator, seeking a frame of reference, compares to an apothecary: the books referred to as "boxes", their contents as "medicines"). The effect, very similar to that advocated by Shklovsky (and, later, by Brecht), is to atomize common activities into their constituent actions, to render the common uncommon.

> "One could term this device negative allegory…While allegory, through the substitution of other realities…for the things, relationships, and processes of the real world, helps us to grasp the proper meaning and value of these things, relationships, and processes, negative allegory removes all meaning and value from things". (Cizevsky 120)

Cizevsky recognizes that negative allegory does not begin and end with Comenius. He distinguishes it from Auerbach's term *Scheinwerfertechnik* (searchlight technique), and equates it with Shklovsky's *ostranenie.* Cizevsky traces the history of negative allegory preceding Comenius, noting that the technique is used "whenever the intent was to represent the mores and customs, the beliefs and superstitions of the author's own people as senseless". (121) Examples are found in ancient Greece: Xenophanes, Socrates and Plato; the Stoics: Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius; in the Renaissance and the Reformation: Sebastian Brant, Erasmus, and J.V. Andrae. But Cizevsky notes "the most important chapter in its history comes after Comenius" (121). Finding its "real flowering" with the Enlightenment, first in Swift and most notably in Voltaire, Cizevsky halts his survey (trusting Shklovsky and Jan Mukarovsky to supply more up-to-date examples): "The fact that this device has been used copiously in modern literature, from the romanticists to L. Tolstoj and Bernard Shaw, is beyond the scope of this study". (125)

Nor is the embrace of incompetence unique to the West. At the end of the 16th century, Furuta Oribe, a Japanese *daimyo*, or military commander, met Rikyu, grand master of the revered tea ceremony. He soon became one of the master's seven leading disciples. Soon, Oribe began to redefine the traditions of the tea ceremony, moving it from dimly-lit rooms to more open well-lighted spaces. He emphasized the use of contemporary stoneware vessels for the ceremony, as opposed to the older, traditional implements favored by Rikyu. Oribe also introduced a predilection for imperfection into the aesthetics of the ceremony and its wares. "Oribe ware", as the bowls, jars and cups of this period are known, display an aesthetic tendency unknown in previous eras of the tea ceremony. Oribe ware is misshapen, asymmetrical, distended and warped. The lacquer designs that adorn these vessels are equally inconsistent, uneven and incomplete.

> In a letter accompanying a water jar from the Iga Kilns with surface defects caused in the course of firing, Oribe declared that 'although it has large cracks, they too are part of its charm'. (Melikian)

Oribe didn't simply tolerate an aesthetics of imperfection, he actively created it, sometimes breaking pieces he deemed too perfect and repairing them in such a way as to draw attention to the repair and to the piece's imperfection. He also slashed calligraphic scrolls, contravening the sacred regard in which these items were held.

> These iconoclastic practices did not go down well with the Japanese establishment. One of his contemporaries characterized Oribe as 'a person who defiles treasures, cutting up hanging scrolls he deems unseemly and delighting in breaking apart good teabowls.' The perception probably cost the artistic firebrand his life. In 1615, he was ordered to commit suicide by Tokugawa [founder of the Tokugawa dynasty]. (Melikian)

The problem, of course, and the reason why we are often blind to past estrangements, is that

> an image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – *it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means of knowing it.* (Shklovsky 280)

Shklovsky uses the idea of the artistic image as a pointed reference to the idea popularized at the time by Potebnya, that "art is thinking in images". Shklovsky's point is that the artistic image, is not – as Potebnya's positivism suggested – directly connected to its object. The image of the poem or the painting is not connected to the object it represents. The image is, instead, a strategy of seeing; a perspective – in both the locational and ideological senses of the word. It is, in the robust and limited ways suggested by both Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign. But such a sign is prone – just as everything else is – to eventual habituation.

Peirce, in fact, takes the argument one step farther, to what could be considered its logical conclusion: we never have direct access to the objects of the world, all we have are the signs by which we make meaning of these objects. The question is not one of materiality. Peirce's engagement with the sign is agnostic on the question of the materiality of the world.

Throughout this thesis, I am equally agnostic. I do not deny the material status of the world and the things in it. I realize that any engagement with this apparent materiality is, by necessity, mediated by signs. I cannot even separate an experience of pain from the sign *pain.* I cannot say with satisfying certainty that I would be able to experience pain without some understanding of the sign *pain*. Is it possible to know whether pain is in some way constituted by *pain*. As a result, I choose to concern myself not with the material of the world (whose status is unavailable to me) but with signs, whose conventionality is a human construct and therefore more accessible and, more importantly, engageable. It is important to clarify, however, that to profess such faith in signs is not to install the type of originary principle barred by Nietzsche. Signs, language, do not achieve anything like primacy nor permanence. Language is always attendant, always fluid. Signs respond, if not to a signified materiality, to their ever-shifting context and usage.

Derrida picks up on Peirce's theory of signs in *Of Grammatology*, a notion that, according to Derrida, brings Peirce very close to deconstruction.

> There is…no phenomenality reducing the sign or the represener so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the luminosity of its presence. The so-called 'thing itself' is always already a *representamen* [Peirce's term for what Saussure would call the *signifier*] shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. (*Grammatology* 49)

According to Peirce, we are always already estranged from the objects of the world. But, as Shklovsky points out, we quickly and habitually overlook this estrangement, mistaking defamiliarizing signs for familiar objects. This is the automatism Shklovsky opposed.

Bertolt Brecht's ideas about theatrical technique have a great deal in common with Shklovsky's concept of estrangement. Brecht called for a style of acting which corrupts or completely destroys the illusion of naturalness or realism in the theater.

> The kind of acting which was tried out at the Schiffbauerdamm Theater in Berlin between the First and Second World Wars, with the object of producing such images, is based on the 'alienation effect' (A-effect). A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar. (Brecht 241)

Writing after the Second World War, Brecht's ideas for the theater were political ideas. His motivations were explicitly ideological, while Shklovsky's were only implicitly so.

> The purpose of the Brechtian estrangement-effect is…a political one in the most thorough-going sense of the word; it is, as Brecht insisted over and over, to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable. (Jameson 58)

Famously, Saussurean linguistics takes a synchronic approach to language, isolating the system (langue) and instances of its use (parole) at a particular point in time. Unlike most linguists of his time, Saussure did not concern himself with the development of the language

over time: its etymological evolution. Peirce too, approached his semiology synchronically. Shklovsky's diagnosis, however, is diachronic, postulating an habituation to signs over time. His remedy, too, is diachronic, calling for new artistic techniques which will perform their estrangement in contrast to the existing gestures of the old techniques. Implicit in this call is an acknowledgment that, at their inception, the old techniques may not have been ineffective, that they may even have performed – in their youth – their own estranging maneuvers on the techniques of their predecessors. For Shklovsky's formula to work, the old must be recognizable in the new. The resulting tension is estrangement's active ingredient: "….that moment in which a habitual perception is suddenly renewed we see a thing freshly in a kind of perceptual tension with our older mode of thinking about it, experiencing both identity and difference at the same distance". (Jameson 61-62) Without recognizing that which the new means to estrange, we experience the new only as the über-alien – more than threateningly different: wholly unrecognizable. We don't ascertain the relation of the new to the old. The estrangement falls on deaf ears. We fail to re-evaluate the old or to refresh our perceptions. To be effectively estranging, the new mustn't be too new.

Estrangement depends on the firm establishment of technique over a period of time. Establishment does not, however, necessarily mean recognition. Ideology is precisely the established, yet often unrecognized currents of the culture, what Gramsci means when he writes "common sense": habitual and unexamined attitudes. Whether we accept ideology in Marxist terms, as "action without knowledge", or in an updated – let's call it post-hegemonic – version: "action *in spite of* knowledge", we must accept that any act of estrangement is an act upon ideology.

Estrangement seeks to act upon ideology because ideology is what it has access to. Peirce's edict that there is nothing but signs and Shklovsky's insistence that the image is a strategy of seeing and not directly connected to its object, coalesces in Zizek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which he asserts that the conception of ideology as false consciousness is merely an acknowledgement of the world's false material status. (21) Whether this implies, for Zizek or for Peirce or for Shklovsky, that there is no material, phenomenological reality is not clear. But the lack of clarity may be part of the point and, in any case, it needn't bother us. What is important, what should bother us, if you don't mind me saying so, is access. We have access to ideology (Zizek), to signs (Peirce), to the special perception of the image (Shklovsky). It is at this level that estrangement must function, because only the familiar – that to which we have access – can be made strange.

1.4 road map

The epigram which begins this introduction warns that knowing the way makes traveling perfectly meaningless. I will now ignore that advice. (To be fair, I did follow the epigram by promising to fail. Although I must admit to being a little surprised at how quickly I've delivered

on that promise.) Nevertheless, even if we attempt to defer any knowledge of a destination, it might be helpful to agree on certain landmarks and methods of transport. This work consists of seven chapters. The first is this introduction. The last is a brief conclusion. The intervening five deal with different aspects, effects, and modalities of incompetence: 1. incompetence itself; 2. noise; 3. repetition; 4. incompleteness; and 5. inconclusion. Each chapter is subdivided in the manner beloved of software developers. Chapter 2, for example, comprises 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3.

It is with Robert Walser, the Swiss fictionalist, from whom I borrowed the thought of my title, that my thoughts on incompetence begin. Thus, chapter 2 begins by reading Walser's very short story, "Boat Trip". Walser embraces the mechanical incompetence of his materials so tightly as to squeeze the very idea of conceptual competence from their pores. Chapter 2 lays out what is at stake in questioning incompetence, touching on some of the semiotic presuppositions which inform my theoretical approach. This section leans toward Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes and away from Ferdinand de Saussure, relying on Peirce's tri-partite model of the sign. These semiotic presuppositions lead naturally to implicit philosophical notions. These rely heavily on a line of thought which stitches together Martin Heidegger, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. Such a line, when discussed in relation to literature and the arts, will inevitably absorb the deconstructive critical practices of theorists such as Paul de Man, Craig Owens and J. Hillis Miller. It is de Man, in particular, who proves crucial to the construction of a theory of textual incompetence (although he uses different terms). If we locate incompetence in artistic materials and modes of representation, then music poses unique challenges to the thesis. Chapter 2 concludes by analyzing Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone", asking what are the song's materials, what are its modes of representation and how, in music, does incompetence manifest itself?

Chapter 3 investigates noise in its numerous manifestations. By equating noise with Mary Douglas' definition of dirt as "matter out of place", noise is situated as unwanted sound, information, data or material. Depending on how it is dealt with, the introduction of noise into the art work either pushes toward mechanical incompetence or toward conceptual competence. A detailed investigation of a song by the band US Maple attempts to establish how we decide whether elements are in or out of place in a piece of music. This leads, neatly, to a bridge between Dylan and US Maple in the form of US Maple's cover version of Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay", which is examined for its "frame noise": its intertextual and extratextual elements which occlude the sanctity or singularity of either version of the song. Considering the effects of the frame on the constitution of the art work, we delve into Kant's discussion of *parerga* (the non-essential elements of the work) versus the *ergon* (the central component). Derrida's commentary questions some of Kant's notions, altering the accepted definitions of what lies inside and what lies outside the art work and, in turn altering the definition of noise. Having discussed the relationship of context to text, we look at sample-based music – Puff Daddy's "I'll Be Missing You", to be specific – and wonder what Kant would have made of the *parerga* and the *ergon* of hip-hop.

We follow Kierkegaard to Berlin at the start of chapter 4. It was there that Kierkegaard came to think of repetition as an essential component of consciousness. And so it is for the consciousness of the incompetence of the art work's materials and modes of representation. Repetition occupies a register decidedly different from those of noise, incompleteness and inconclusion. While the latter three are aspects (either causes or effects) of incompetence, repetition is a medium though which incompetence makes itself known. Relying on ideas nominated by James A. Snead, Derrida, de Man, Deleuze and Guattari and Nietzsche, we pursue the quarry of repetition through its various iterations, teasing out the difference between repetition and difference (if there is a difference). In the arts, repetitious practice reached its high-water mark in the 1960s and 70s. We turn to two examples from that period – Sol Lewitt's "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes" (1974) and Steve Reich's "Pendulum Music" (1968/74) – in an attempt to understand how repetition and, specifically, system-generated repetition, effect the relationship of the work to its proposed referent. An examination of John Oswald's "Pretender" raises the same questions with regard to audio recordings and, by implication, to all technological representation.

Chapter 5 deals with art works which come across as incomplete, failing to provide a sense of closure. The later work of Francis Ponge is examined, with particular attention paid to the book *Soap*. From a critical standpoint, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure* provides some useful ideas for testing the connection between a sense of closure and a sense of competence. Faith in closure suggests a brand of teleological faith – a belief that things either come from or lead to something determinate and stable. In his appendix to *The Postmodern Condition,* Lyotard makes this connection, proposing that works which seek such closure end in regret, whereas another kind of work, which seeks to reinvent the rules within which it operates, is a work which constantly assays its own condition and therefore never ends. As an example of this, I discuss Abbas Kiarostami's film, *Taste of Cherry*, arguing that in its ending (or lack thereof), the film demonstrates a great conceptual competence. Similar themes are investigated in the work of the Language poets, Bruce Andrews and Barrett Watten. The final thoughts of chapter 5 are devoted to notions of potential and impotential in Melville's "Bartleby", incorporating a brief discussion of Peirce's tri-partite semiotic model, before overflowing into chapter 6.

Chapter 6 deals with inconclusion: the state of being interpretively incomplete. It is impossible to identify, with any certainty, the meaning of the inconclusive art work. Continuing the line of thought which begins at the end of chapter 5, we revisit "Bartleby" through the readings of Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze. This takes us further into the jungle of uncertainty where tangles of meaning ensnare the work one minute only to release it the next. Another example is provided by a particularly unstable line in one of John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. We return to music, listening to Thelonious Monk's off-kilter piano and the indeterminate authorship of the rock song in the chaos generated by the Birthday Party. Ultimately, whether

the message is obscured by noise interfering with it, repetition blurring it or incompletion withholding it, incompetence is always, to some degree, a matter of inconclusion.

2. Incompetence

2.1 long + plotless = realistic

All of Robert Walser's texts – his novels, his short prose pieces – make certain acceptances. They accept, for instance, a certain mode of narrative convention that lacquers their surfaces with a folk tale finish. Walser isn't concerned, not, in any case, foremostly, with the overarching formal silhouette of his stories. He is content to allow them to be just stories or, more frequently, something less than stories: just little vignettes, scenes, episodes. This last word suits and Walser, himself, admitted as much:

> My prose pieces are, to my mind, nothing more nor less than parts of a long, plotless, realistic story. For me, the sketches I produce now and then are shortish or longish chapters of a novel. The novel I am constantly writing is always the same one, and it might be described as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart book of myself. (Selected Stories, frontispiece)

Typically, even in these production notes, Walser packs a world view inside a very small parcel. The adjectives "plotless" and "realistic" are separated by a comma, the smallest of separators. It wouldn't be too intrusive to replace these commas with mathematical signs, turning the list into a formula: long + plotless = realistic. Not too intrusive because Walser would almost certainly agree. His writing displays no apparent use nor fondness for the narrative notion of denouement.

If each of Walser's episodes belongs – slice to loaf – to Walser's realistic book of himself, then, apparently, the realistic is a pastiche, a bricolage, of materials, of experiences; of episodes, denuded of continuity or contiguity. Perhaps, had these threadbare patches actually been stitched together to make Walser's long, plotless, realistic novel, assembled in such a way as to mask each others' threadbareness – assembled as an ensemble, a panoply, a kit – they would portray an opacity, a certainty, a life, a reality; cut, as it were, out of whole cloth.

Here is Walser's "Boat Trip" in its entirety:

> **Boat Trip**
>
> Not that the water was crystal clear everywhere. Who would want to give orders to Nature? She makes no pretense of being other than she is. I don't know which is lovelier, boating on a lake or on a river, but this not knowing needn't bother me. In the boat sat a few understandably contented people. A cloth canopy was stretched over their heads, and their course led beneath the twigs of the trees on the bank. Slowly they moved forward, for the rowers saw no reason to overexert themselves. What cause could there have been for this? The day is long from early morning to late in the evening. On a pleasure trip the hours don't admonish you to hurry up. It's fine to waste a little time now and then. One member of the party found it odd that water is wet and not dry. It didn't have a grainy, sandy feel to it. When touched, it wriggled supply about the fingers of one's hand. One woman called it her sweetheart, and indeed what caresses more softly and cleanly than that which sustains a gondola but won't let a pebble stay on its surface? An elegant border of abundant plants

and enchanting, delicate grasses adorned both sides of the river, which displayed numerous branches, like a tree with its trunks and limbs. The wood grows more and more slender, then flows into the leaves, which are not unlike the tree's breath, or its thoughts, as it is with man. Odd similarities between things at rest and things flowing occurred to me during the trip that I, too, participated in, and I would have been delighted to have been as fascinating a storyteller as one person there, who was asked to invent a tale so that the outing not become boring. The trip took place beneath the baldachin formed by the sky. Everyone listened to the teller's words as if to something heartening. Here and there fish, driven it seemed by an uncontrollable curiosity, bobbed upward from the depths to visibility, as though wishing to help the listeners be satisfied with the tale. On fish one finds no arms. Is that why they have such huge eyes and expressive mouths? Is it because they have no legs that they make the best swimmers? Doesn't river, *Fluss*, come from *Flosse*, fins, and aren't the latter an impediment to walking, and isn't it this limitation that forms the foundation of their strength?

A girl sitting with us in the boat compared travelling over the water to the imperceptible gliding and progress of growth, that of fruit for example, which perhaps would have little desire to ripen if it knew to what end.

The thoughtful girl called ignorance a magnificent figure endowed with unconscious delights, sorrowful and splendid, not like those who learn arithmetic and writing, weep inwardly over their joy, and whose hearts tell them their laughter is a hardness, that they are incapable of enduring anything.

(Walser *Masquerade* 199-200)

This scene, so delicate; it might crumble at a mention. Look at the second paragraph. (Only three are needed to shepherd these 496 words. An episode indeed.) Imagine what that fruit is going through: the inexorable advance of time, imminent death, decay. If this is what's entailed in ripening, leave me be: hard and tart, inedible. Walser suggests answering the call of ripening with a Utopian "no." Ultimately, it is diminution. The "thoughtful girl" makes aquatic analogies: this growth-like travelling over water, leads to unknown ends. This unknowing is "endowed with unconscious delights." It is rich and uncontainable. Thankfully, we lack the apparatus to subdue and classify it phylogenetically. Both from whence it comes and its ultimate destination remain beyond our means of capture, unresponsive to our questions. Other sorts of objects, more amenable to such capture – arithmetic and writing, for example – are quick to respond: those who learn arithmetic and writing learn that "laughter is a hardness;" that they are "incapable of enduring anything." Early on, Walser says "this not knowing, needn't bother me." But he's being characteristically understated. He likes not knowing, considers it preferable.

The narrative picks up in the midst of something, relating only the modifying second half of an observation.

"Not that the water was crystal clear everywhere."

We don't know what the first half of the observation was, nor whose it was. Is the narrator correcting (clarifying) himself or someone else? This not knowing needn't bother us. If it does, the text is willing to release us after just one sentence. Already an element of contingency is

apparent in the text – the contingency of what might have been said. It seems likely that the previous, absent sentence was a comment on the transparency of the water. Such a comment could be read analogously: the text may also be commenting on its own transparency. The reputation of the text's transparency precedes it. But as soon as the text begins, that reputation is cast into doubt: muddied, clouded, occluded. It is the text itself which obstructs its own transparency. It is not crystal clear everywhere.

The text's second sentence pursues this contingency, reflecting on how the text *could* make itself. It suggests that, were it so inclined, it could make the water (the text) crystal clear everywhere. It suggests that nothing but the text can clarify the text. It is typical of Walser's texts to decline power which they, themselves, suggest they already possess. Walser's texts surrender power to the forces of nature and language, to the magnetism of desire, and to the retrograde impulses of fear. The absent sentence which precedes the text grants a power that the first sentence calls into question. The text is born into doubt. The second sentence then implies that the text does, in fact, have the power; it *could* give orders to Nature (to the water, to the text), but who would want to do such a thing? This deference to Nature is disingenuous. Walser's text knows it does not have complete control over itself. Texts, like minds, are possessed of an unconscious. (This is the level of what Roland Barthes calls the "connotative", what Jacques Derrida calls "free play", what Charles Sanders Peirce calls the "interpretant".) Neither the text nor the water freely accepts the adjective "transparent", they cannot be crystal clear everywhere. Just saying it does not make it so. The nature of the text resembles Nature in that it is beyond our command. It is open to interpretation, but its ultimate character – its truth, if you will – answers to its own exigencies. Of course, we have no access to these exigencies. They evaporate; and with them: the notion of the truth of the text.

The water (the text) is wholly situated within the text. At the same time the water (the text) relates to the entire extended order of water (of texts) outside the text. In both cases – textually and categorically – the water (the text) is (to the same extent as everything else), a natural fact and beyond our means – beyond the text's means – of capture. Given this, who would want to give orders to the water (to the text)?

"Who would want to give orders to Nature?"

Nature, in this context, is taken in the broadest sense: as that which is or is not, could or could not be; rather than as a grand design. When a text reflects on what it *could* do, it allows, into its own body, shades of potential: possibilities more or less likely, the processes of construction and reason and credulity. The *could* changes the relationship between the text and the reader. It changes what the text means and how it means. It changes how and what meaning means.

Christopher Middleton, one of only two English translators of significant amounts of Walser, has written an essay on translating Walser called "Translation as a Species of Mime." He describes the process of translation: "First, obviously, you enter into a relationship with the

writer as a presence which pervades the original text – a presence, that is, rather than a personality." (132) Middleton's description of the translator's relationship is fascinating, not least of all, for the utter interchangeability of the translator with any reader. Everything he says about translation is true about reading. Translating is a kind of reading and, more importantly, reading is a kind of translating. This equation takes on its most important meaning in this assertion: "If, as some suppose, the signs in writing gather momentum only to defer final signification, then the act of translating, if not the final translation, carries the movement of deferral a stage further." (Middleton 132)

Despite the importance I am granting it, Middleton's assertion is tautological. Its importance lies in an unspoken equivalence hidden by an illogical (and tautological) equation. Middleton, unwilling to take responsibility for such a supposition, attributes the idea that writing defers final signification, to an unidentified "some". If there is no final signification; if the process of signification never comes to a stop, then we have no choice but to consider the process infinite. Once the initial, seemingly apparent signification of writing is dissected – revealing a complex, web-like or constellative structure – then the signs' momentum (as Middleton calls it) accrues mass in the form of infinitely multiplying associations. Pursuing the physics metaphor, if momentum determines the length of time required to bring a moving body to rest, then the unending addition of mass continually increases the time required to halt the signifying process. The movement toward final signification is not simply deferred, it is infinitely deferred. Of course, infinity cannot be carried a stage further. Translation cannot alter the signifying nature of writing. This is the illogical, tautological part of Middleton's claim: that translation "carries the movement of deferral a stage further." You can't add one to infinity. However, there is still meat on the bone.

Roland Barthes calls the deferral caused by these multiplying associations *connotation.* He makes a distinction between *denotative* and *connotative* signification, calling them "two systems of signification which are imbricated but are out of joint with each other, or staggered." (*Elements* 89) Borrowing a concept from Hjemslev and refining it, Barthes proposes a model of the sign composed of three elements: "It will be remembered that any system of signification comprises a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C) and that the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes: ERC." (89) This is the fundamental unit of signification; the sign:

$$E \qquad R \qquad C$$

The plane of expression corresponds to Saussure's signifier, while the plane of content corresponds to the signified. Barthes suggests that this fundamental unit of the sign can, in turn, provide the expression of a further system of signification. The tripartite sign (ERC) of the first signifying process stands in as the expression (E) of a subsequent process. The initial process spawns a subsequent process: connotation:

(ERC)   R   C

> "Then what is a connotation? Definitionally, it is a determination, a relation, an anaphora, a feature which has the power to relate itself to anterior, ulterior, or exterior mentions, to other sites of the text (or of another text): we must in no way restrain this relating, which can be given various names (*function* or *index,* for example), except that we must not confuse connotation with association of ideas: the later refers to the system of a subject; connotation is a correlation immanent in the text, in the texts; or again, one may say that it is an association made by the text-as-subject within its own system." (Barthes *S/Z* 8)

The anterior/ulterior/exterior triplet certainly offers a concise indication of the directions from which connotation gains its momentum (to again use Middleton's phrase), as well as the directions in which such momentum is subsequently directed. At the same time, Barthes' insistence on textual immanence seems unnecessarily rigid. Barthes is determined to locate all signification in the text and the text alone. His is a structuralism which places great faith in the innate, meaning-making capacities of structure (as opposed to a structuralism which sees structure as foundational, even necessary, while attributing meaning to *processes* in which structure plays an integral part). When he allows the comparison of connotation (a function of the text) with association (a function of a subject), by employing the notion of the "text-as-subject", he provides the tool we need to loosen his structural, textual rigidity; to introduce some light, some air, a whiff of the process which is meaning.

Charles Sanders Peirce proposed a semiotic model which, in many ways, agrees with the Hjemslev/Barthes model of connotation. The fundamental difference is that Peirce made no distinction between denotation and connotation: all signifying is a process which involves three components and a process of infinite deferral. The *sign* – in Peirce's parlance – corresponds to Saussure's *signifier* and Barthes' *expression*; Peirce's *object* corresponds loosely to Saussure's *signified* and Barthes' *content*; and Peirce's *interpretant* corresponds still more loosely to Barthes' *relation*. (In Saussure's model there is no approximate term nor concept.)

Peirce	sign	object	interpretant
Saussure	signifier	signified	
Barthes (connotation)	expression	content	relation

In the Peircean model, the interpretant is the facilitator of the signifying process. The sign can only signify the object in the active presence of the interpretant. If one accepts Barthes' notion of the "text-as-subject", then the interpretant is a product of what one might call an intersubjective interaction; that is, of an interaction between a subjectivity – a reader – and the text-as-subject. To put it in a slightly less subjective, slightly more structuralist way; a way which might make Barthes feel less compromised: the interpretant is the product of an interaction between a *reading* (rather than a *reader*) and the text-as-subject.

Perhaps it would have made Barthes more comfortable still if he had considered this process in light of Peirce's concept of the "man-sign". Though many hackles have raised at its mention, the concept of the "man-sign" is both sensible and useful. (One suspects that Barthes would have taken no offense.) Peirce's assertion is that what we commonly call consciousness is constructed of thoughts (in the form of words).

> …the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. (Peirce *On Signs* 84)

The man-sign is an entity made of signs. At the same time, a man constitutes a sign (a word, or construct of words) which "speaks" in the language of human society. So, to expand Peirce's thought (or simply to make the implicit explicit), the man is comprised of thoughts *and* the man is a thought. This is not to say that a human being is nothing more than a thing. (I prefer to reserve judgment on this question.) The notion of the man-sign simply explains consciousness – that which is commonly taken to separate us from things – as a construct of thoughts (or signs). These thoughts accrue according to predilections, predispositions, the sway of both nature and nurture and by pure happenstance. Once accrued, once a critical mass has been attained, a consciousness can be said to exist.

> Again, consciousness is sometimes used to signify the *I think*, or unity in thought; but this unity is nothing but consistency, or the recognition of it. Consistency belongs to every sign, so far as it is a sign; and therefore every sign, since it signifies primarily that it is a sign, signifies its own consistency. (Peirce *On Signs* 83)

Peirce's explicit evocation of Cartesian duality is meant as a challenge. According to Peirce, consciousness is a critical mass of signs, no different in kind nor function from other accumulations of signs; from language, for instance, or from texts. Descartes' *cogito* may be entitled to its *ergo sum*. But, since thinking is nothing more glorious than consistency, human beings have no greater claim to "I am" than does language. Pursuing this line, the interpretant is the product of an interaction between reader-as-consistency and text-as-consistency.

Such intersubjectivity (though perhaps we would now be justified in calling it inter*object*ivity*)* inevitably initiates uncontainable processes. Just as one cannot wade twice into the same river, one cannot wade twice into the same signifying relation. The interpretant cannot be thought in the singular. No matter how simple, how singular, the sign and the object may appear, the interpretant is always complex, plural. In almost every case the interpretant is a construction, an amalgam of terms; each of which operates as the Peircean triad: sign-object-interpretant. But even in the rare case where an interpretant can be reduced to a single term, it is still triadic, still complex and plural. Take for instance a sign system much simpler than *Robert Walser*; take for instance, the sign *shoe*. I locate the term *shoe* in my mind. At the same time, from my chair in my living room, I look across the room at an object: my wife's

black shoe on the floor. I fix this particular shoe in my eye, in my mind's eye. I still have a firm grasp of the term – the sign – *shoe,* as well. But there is a third component – a handle, if you will – to this grasping, this connecting of *shoe* to shoe. Even in this simple connection, this third component, the interpretant, is a construction of terms.

From my chair, I make an effort to bring the interpretant to the surface of my consciousness. Terms emerge; like *clothing* and *foot* and *leather.* Of course, each of these terms is yet another sign which suggests an object and a connection between the sign and the object in the form of an interpretant. My mind spins and weaves, touching on myriad relations concerning my wife's black shoe; relations which may have nothing to do with the term *shoe* and nothing to do with the interpretant constructed of terms like *clothing*, *foot* and *leather.* I think of the day in Vicenza, when she bought the shoe. Of Andrea Palladio, whose buildings brought us to Vicenza. I think of my wife's other shoes, the red ones or the brown ones. I think of her black boots, a variety of shoe. I think of *my* shoes and how I don't simply leave them lying on the living room floor; of the different ways in which my wife and I are tidy. I think of our relationship and of the notion of relationships, in general; of the compromises and the rewards and the essence of human sociality. What's more, from my chair, as I endeavor to bring the interpretant to the surface, I am aware of doing so. I think of the signs "sign"*,* "object"*,* and "interpretant". I think of the idea of thinking. I think of semiotics: is it science or metaphor? Is there a difference? I think of the work at hand, a bit waylaid by this digression on shoes. How preposterous that my work on not-quite-rightness in Robert Walser should lead to a rumination about my wife's black shoe. Later, my wife reminds me that she bought the brown shoes – not the black ones – in Vicenza. The black ones are from Camden. But there is nothing to prevent inaccurate suggestions from inhabiting the cascade of interpretants. Andrea Palladio – though without direct relation to my wife's black shoes – is not barred from this signifying process. All this (and more, of course), lives somewhere in the gap between *shoe* and shoe. One begins to wonder if there is anything which does not live in this gap. Is the whole universe resident between *shoe* and shoe?

Now, to return to the crucial equivalence lurking in the shadows of Middleton's tautological assertion ("If, as some suppose, the signs in writing gather momentum only to defer final signification, then the act of translating, if not the final translation, carries the movement of deferral a stage further." (Middleton 132)). I suggested earlier that Middleton's description of translating is interchangeable with reading. This must be the case. Since translation cannot be added to the infinity of deferrals facilitated by the interpretant, then translation can't be anything more than a reading. It must be, simply, another reading; exactly the same as any other reading. Recalling Peirce's model, the interpretant is that which allows the sign to signify the object. The interpretant is not, itself, an object. It is a process. It is a *reading.* (Using the word *reading* in this way, at this juncture, I imagine it mounted on hinges, which allow it to swing both into the room and out of it; all the while allowing both entry and exit.) Reading is more than complicit in the infinite deferral of final signification. Reading is the initiation of a search for signification. Such a search can never end in certainty. Thus, reading

(not writing, not the text itself) is both the cause and the locus of the infinite deferral of finality. The text has no existence outside of reading. The text has no simple, significant *is*. That is to say, the text can not signify in any specific way (beyond its mere *textness*) in the absence of a reading. If a text is inert without the catalyzing effect of a reading, then writing (the text itself) cannot be the source of the deferral of signification.

Middleton opens – not unknowingly, one imagines – an impetuous can of worms with his can-opening word, *presence.* Later in the same essay, he writes, "Latency and actuality, the imaginable to be converted and the translation text, somehow conspire. Somehow the spirit I have called 'presence' fecundates places and persons, and translation can disseminate the spores, the signs, the traces, of that presence."

The ears of the Derrideans among us are presently pricking. Certainly, Middleton is making a point by using the words "disseminate", "trace" and "presence" in the same sentence. Middleton is defying – almost taunting – deconstructive analysis by referring to "the writer as presence." In the context of this essay, explicitly about Walser, Middleton is drawing arrows through the text, piercing it through and through, drawing everything, our attention included, back to the originary presence, known as Robert Walser. This presence, in turn, fecundates the text. It makes the text pregnant with possibility, as opposed – importantly – to making it fruitful with actuality. This presence – Walser – imbues the text with myriad possibilities by lacing together the latent and the actual. In Middleton's model, the latent corresponds to what he calls, "the imaginable to be converted," that is, the potential implicit in the text; the potency which is liable to release in any direction, in any form. The actual corresponds to the "translation text," the only extant actuality in the new language.

But where does this Walser-presence come from? Following Peirce, we would conclude that it emanates from a cascade of interpretants moderating our relations to myriad texts and signs. Middleton's anchoring presence is, in fact, made of cork, subject to the currents. In assigning the textually-constituted idea of Robert Walser to the role of "presence," Middleton releases into the act of reading the idea of the "could"; of possibilities more or less likely, the processes of construction and reason and credulity. Actually, Middleton is only releasing the release, like the warden delivering the governor's reprieve. This release is already there in the text; in any reading of the text's reading of itself. As he admits in the title of his essay, "Translation as a Species of Mime," Middleton is simply re-presenting the movements, the utterances, already made by the Walser text. The text, as it is constituted, accepts the notion of presence which Middleton grants to it after the fact. The text takes its presence for granted. Perhaps the ears of the Derrideans among us are now beginning to smoke a little. But before I am reclaimed or rebuked as a metaphysician, a transcendentalist, a theologian, or worse, allow me to clarify my take on the presence taken for granted by the Walser text.

First, a bit of Derrida, himself. This is from the introduction to his book on Husserl's theory of signs, *Speech and Phenomena*.

> …distrust of metaphysical presuppositions is already presented as the condition for an authentic 'theory of knowledge,' as if the project of a theory of knowledge, even when it has been freed itself by the 'critique' of such and such speculative system, did not belong at the outset to the history of metaphysics. Is not the idea of knowledge and the theory of knowledge in itself metaphysical? (5)

In addition to the theory of knowledge, a few attendant and related things and ideas are also metaphysical: language as we experience it, for one, and literature, for another. The struggle Derrida describes, the struggle of phenomenology (indeed, it could be argued, of philosophy as a whole, after Kant) against its metaphysical foundations and frames is shared, in a keenly sympathetic way, by literary uses of language. By all accounts, there is no outside position from which a critique might be ballistically directed at the metaphysical target. Nor are we merely trapped in metaphysics like beetles in amber. Our condition is significantly more intractable than that. We *are* metaphysics, we are both beetle and amber. Because, following Peirce again, we are signs or sign-constructs, built of thoughts which are no more than a reflection of the metaphysical tradition; in fact, they *are* the metaphysical tradition. Just as humans are both made of signs and signs themselves, so too is thought made of signs and a sign itself. Likewise, language – part of the same looping system – even in its supple literary forms, is unable to comment upon itself from outside itself. No analysis, praise nor repudiation of language is possible outside of language. Any attempt would require further commentary, again in language (because there is no other option), which would, in turn, require explication, in language, and so on.

The constructive myths, the beliefs, the transcendental suppositions that both buoy and motivate action, thought, morals, and judgment cannot be fully discarded. If we throw away the gods, we find reason standing just behind them looking very much the same, occupying much the same expanse, saying much the same thing. Any attempt to pogo over metaphysics soon finds itself on a metaphysical pogo stick. The presence taken for granted by the Walser text is one of these transcendental suppositions; a descendant, a ghost, a familiar of the *a priori*, of what Derrida has called, elsewhere, the "transcendental signified".

In taking its own presence for granted – the presence which informs it, the uncircumventable linguistic and literary presence at its origin and its end – the Walser text acts out a shadow play. This Walser text and many other Walser texts written between 1896 and 1933 adopt a formal, a linguistic, a philosophic, stance relative to the unavoidable metaphysical foundations of their literary use of language. In "Boat Trip", the narrative voice – the voice (or so we are led to believe) of the very presence of the story, of the author, of Robert Walser, once removed – confesses to wanting to be "as fascinating a storyteller as one person there, who was asked to invent a tale so that the outing not become boring." We're in on the secret, god bless us. We're trusted with the confessions of the text: it could have been otherwise. (Perhaps, the text admits, it would *rather* be otherwise.) Another text opens up within the Walser text. This other text is absent from the Walser text. We can not know it. (This not knowing needn't bother us, of course.) Fish in the Walser text rise to the surface, reputedly to

"help the listeners be satisfied with the tale," that is, the tale within the tale. But the fish, of course, are helping us, the readers of Walser, as well. In fact, they emerge from the narrative, as such, transforming into a detour commentary about fish and language:

> On fish one finds no arms. Is that why they have such huge eyes and expressive mouths? Is it because they have no legs that they make the best swimmers? Doesn't river, *Fluss*, come from *Flosse*, fins, and aren't the latter an impediment to walking, and isn't it this limitation that forms the foundation of their strength?

The submerged elements of the Walser text bob "upward from the depths to visibility," as fish. They help the listeners be satisfied. They themselves, the submerged/emerging fish, are limited. They have – instead of arms or legs – fins, an impediment to walking. But these impediments have their advantages, do they not? They make the fish, the inhabitants of this aquatic text in which a boat full of humans lazes across the surface of a river, the best swimmers. It is suggested, in fact, that these very impediments form "the foundation of their strength." What's more, in the context of this encounter with language, it is apparently worth considering whether the very environment of the text, and its constituting metaphor: the river (*Fluss*), "comes from *Flosse,* fins." Does the text owe its central figure to the fish, its submerged/emerging elements? The answer to this question is not important (not to me, at least). What is important is that the Walser text allows us into its asking. The text uses the presumption of its own presence – yes, the very unavoidability of this presumption – to undermine its implicit authority and to confess its incompetence.

Awareness of this incompetence is tantamount to knowing (not asserting) that all meaning, all knowing, all asserting is most appropriately followed by a question mark? In Derrida, and Heidegger the concept of *sous rature*, of writing "under erasure" is the most explicit theoretical response to the question mark. Certain words appear crossed out in the text, to signify their erasure, even while they are being used as placeholders for metaphysically-instantiated concepts. Derrida's notion of the "trace" which posits the residue of difference in each and every sign, also undermines the declaratory nature of any discourse, populating not just the gaps, but the very materials of language with the shadows of innumerable question marks cast by the rest of language; dispersed widely in syntagm and deeply in association. Importantly for our present purposes, and inspiringly, artistic texts gain strength when they confess and commit to the question mark; to their own incompetence. Long before I made this claim on their behalf, the work of Robert Walser, Bob Dylan, Abbas Kiarostami and countless others came clean. These works acknowledged their incompetence, their ignorance and their woes. If I am honest with myself, I recognize that their condition is my condition. I am incompetent and ignorant also. I am full of woe.

2.2 mechanical competence vs. conceptual competence

> The "relative motivations," of an essentially morphological order…of which Saussure speaks, and which he sees at work in the most "grammatical" languages, are not among the more felicitous for poetic language, perhaps because their principle is too intellectual and their functioning too mechanical. (Genette 411)

We talk about incompetence; we are being too general. Obviously, we say incompetence to invoke a concept of competence; a concept to which incompetence does not measure up. Competence, however, is not so unproblematic. And to give our invocation more weight, we must be more specific. A useful distinction is cleaved through the generality of competence by separating competence of the mechanical from competence of the conceptual. If we are looking for precedents, initially this distinction corresponds reasonably well with Aristotle's distinction between *techne* and *arete,* the former acquired by repetitious practice, the latter by knowledge.

When a defendant is declared "competent to stand trial", the determination implies that the defendant is aware of both intentions and ramifications; the defendant knew that what he or she was doing would or could cause harm *and* he or she could or should have known that *before* he or she did it. So competence, in a psycho-legal sense, refers to a link between intention and realization. If we transfer this sense into the realm of the art work – of literature and music – we begin to arrive at understandings. Language can never be held fully accountable for its ramifications. It (or its user) may have intentions. (The dictionary, for instance, could be thought of as an index of language's intentions.) But language cannot control for (in the sense of a scientific experiment) the connotative, associative, paradigmatic, and purely subjective fallout of language deployment. This is why hearsay is not admissible in a court of law. Once the events or the testimony or the evidence has passed from direct experience into the machinery of language, it surrenders its competence, its referential fidelity. The courts will abide one stage of translation from experience into language, out of necessity. But two stages of language is one too many. We do not trust language. In Freudian terms, the language and the user are also unreliable witnesses in their own defense. Psychotherapy seeks to understand the intentions camouflaged by the realization of language. I take this fundamental, mechanical incompetence of language for granted.

Although we live in language, we are not damned. Some see Paul de Man's take on language as doom-laden. I do not. The mechanical incompetence of language is not tragic. If, in every day usage, in courts of law, in debates and discussions, language often falters and sometimes fails, it also manages to convey enough to qualify as communication. Considerations of literary language (or less definitive applications of the notion of language in music and the visual arts) allow for a re-investment in the use-value of language and its inherent incompetence. Artistic uses of language are entitled to account for and employ moments, incidents, events, modes and loci of incompetence. Conceptual competence is precisely the understanding of language's mechanical incompetence and the putting-to-use of

that incompetence for positive (let's call them aesthetic) purposes. There is no corresponding possibility of mechanical competence. Language, in the de Manian view, is blind, broken, faulty, non-coincidental. One does not have the option of mechanical competence. It does not exist. Yet, it is commonplace for art works, songs, poems, et. al. to engage the materials of their composition as if they were transparent, agreed-upon, unproblematic; as if mastery of technique, expertise, and genius were objective criteria and that – though they may be unattainable ideals – still, we would know them if we saw them. Our conditions of existence as users of language – as beings resolutely confined to language – are such that transparency and mastery are invalid concepts, farther removed from consideration than mere ideals.

The imaginary ideal exists as a pole. At that pole all movement in its direction stops; it comes to rest. It is fulfilled. Language has no such pole, no such ideal. It never comes to rest. It is never fulfilled. Peirce's unlimited semiosis proposes the image of an infinite cascade. Rather than imagining ourselves strapped into the kayak of language as it plummets over the falls, we might accept that we can step off at any time, like skiers releasing the rope tow. The rope continues, endlessly, with or without us. But when it suits our purposes, we can exit the interminable tow and ski the section of the topless mountain to which we have gained access. Other sections of the mountain still exist. The rope tow moves inexorably toward them, but we are off, slaloming the moguls of language, navigating thickets of pine and other skiers, other users of language.

It is not that I disagree with certain models which posit a blind obedience to forces beyond human control (genetics, physics, biology), but I would rather concern myself with forces with which I might interact. Such interaction is reliant upon an initial processing of information (in the broadest sense). This information may take the form of a situation, a person, a picture, a problem, a sound, a sentence; it hardly matters. Upon encounter, I have numerous options: I may ignore the information (although an initial consciousness of the encounter *with* something, already seems to preclude this possibility); I may simply perceive the information phenomenologically, taking in the physical attributes of the body of information before me; I may try to interpret this body of information, to come to some understanding of and/or with it. (There are, no doubt, other possible options, but, for now, these will emblematically suffice.) My third option, the option of interpretation and understanding is what I call *reading*. By reading, I mean an engagement with information which strives for perception and thinking. So, when Lyotard writes: "It is perfectly possible to say that the living cell, and the organism with its organs are already *tekhnai* [*techne*], that 'life', as they say, is already technique…" (Logos 52), I am left wondering what I can do with this information. Insofar as I am concerned with reading, I can understand Lyotard's statement, but I am at odds to say how I can use the information represented by Lyotard's statement: namely, that, as a living organism, at the cellular level, I am *techne*; a product of repetitious practice. It is not that I disagree with this assertion. From one perspective, and to some extent, it is undoubtedly true. But it is not information with which I can interact; not a state of information I am able to effect.

In any case, truth itself turns out to be an unreliable witness when cross-examined by competence. Truth, for Heidegger, is discovered in (or simply is) unconcealment. Whereas being, at some essential level, is simply itself (unconcealed, true), it is equally within its nature to obscure that essence. This obscuring is not unnatural, not inhuman. For Heidegger the question concerning technology is a question concerning truth. There are two kinds of unconcealment-as-truth: an unconcealment which constitutes a revealing (carefully, not translated as a *revelation*), and an unconcealment of standing-reserve manifest in technology. The first is preferable, bringing Dasein (or, by the time of "The Question Concerning Technology", *humans*) closer to the essence of human being. The second is a dangerous substitute which allows an ordering of being – creating a standing-reserve of things "immediately on hand…on call for a further ordering" (Technology 322) – to stand-in for actual revealing. Unconcealment of standing-reserve creates a relation of human to being which is once-removed, actually a relation of human to categorical orders of being whose ultimate use is further ordering.

> The essential unfolding of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with
> the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that
> everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve.
> (Heidegger Technology 339)

The essence of technology is an *enframing* of experience which replaces "revealing" with "ordering". In Heidegger's terms, unconcealment is the way in which truth is recognized. Heidegger's wooly transcendentalism maintains a belief in a "real" which is Dasein's destiny. Unconcealing is the way to the real.

Lest we be tempted to blame actual technology (cars, computers, Cuisinarts) for such false revealing, Heidegger is insistent that the question concerning technology is a question concerning human being. The essence of technology precedes technology itself. Machines and gadgets are the answer to a question or a desire stitched into the fabric of human being. This is related, but not identical, to Lyotard's assertion about life being technique. Heidegger sees the urge to technology as an urge to a simple – yet faulty – relation with being, with truth. The essence of technology is the human willingness to accept a relation with an ordering of being in lieu of a relation with being itself. Heidegger's assertion resembles Lyotard's in the possibility that both the initial desire for a relation with being and the acceptance of the substitution of the relation with an ordering of being may be hard-wired; an inevitable consequence of life's status as *techne*.

Technology, then, is the manifestation of the inherent essence of technology in human being. Technology facilitates a relation of human being to a stand-in ordering of being. This relation hints at the truth which is the goal of unconcealing; affirms by a sort of second-order testimony – like hearsay – that this truth exists. But it is not a relation to truth itself nor to being itself. It merely insinuates that such truth and being are there, somewhere, at the root of all this ordering. Mechanical competence strives to emulate the condition of technology;

testifying to a truth which may or may not be at the root of its enterprise. The stand-in ordering of being which is judged against mechanical competence is validated by quantifiable measures which, when struck, ring like truth: efficiency, popularity, economy. Like bells, however, the ring is the product of an essential hollowness. Mechanical competence hides its mechanism, by concealing it from witness, by disguising its complexity as ease, or, contrarily, in some cases, by disguising its ease as complexity.

Geoffrey Bennington points to Pascal's arithmetic machine as the figure of mechanical competence.

> … *difficulty* in the production of *facility* is in fact figured in the machine itself, according to an opposition between its inside and its outside: preempting a possible objection that his machine is needlessly *composée* or complex, Pascal develops a nice economy which explains that such internal complexity is the necessary price to pay for external and operational simplicity… Here a generalizable facility is paid for, and paid off by, the quasi-heroic labour of the inventor, the genius. The performativity of the machine is ensured by its standing in for, as supplement or prosthesis, certain parts of the mind of its user: variously the memory, intention, expertise, and mental labour in general. (Bennington 138)

The machine is an avatar of experience. By acting as mnemonic, intentional or expert prosthesis, the machine allows us to wash our hands of the enterprise, to free ourselves from interaction with information and from the necessity or even the possibility of reading. It is a subterfuge. To resort to the metaphor of the shell game, the machine absorbs our concern for the bean under the shell. The machine frees us from any investment in the processes of memory, intention, and interaction with material and process itself. It stands to reason then, that with one or more of the processual investments subtracted from the process, the product will emerge devalued. To put it another way – which may, in fact, be more accurate – the user of the machine and/or the receiver of the product are devalued, that is to say, desensitized to or debarred from the range of possible experiential components which comprise process and product.

(There is, I think – in all this wringing of hands, this ringing of bells, this rinsing of hands, this evincing – a *project*. There is the practical initiation of a cultural transformation which mirrors or copies or takes as its model the destabilization of categories which reaches its popular apex in the project of Foucault. This is specifically apparent when one considers Foucault's project as the de-sciencing of the disciplinary objects of his studies (psychology, crime, sex, and most generally, epistemology). This project, begun in tandem with the mechanization of art and music, has had the effect of encouraging the de-sciencing of art and music – evidenced by the rise of conceptualism. Just as art and music become mechanized (technologized), they offload their scientific pretenses onto the technology itself, thus freeing themselves from the sciencing influences of systemacity and opaque order, meant to deny their ontological amorphousness.)

Derrida's thoughts on presence (discussed earlier) owe much to Heidegger. Underlying their common principles is the understanding that the problem lies in the mechanicity of our representational machines: writing, pictures, language, thought, have no direct access to truth, nor even, it would seem, to any referent in the "real" world. We, therefore and in turn, have no direct access to truth, to presence, to the real. (To interject a little Peirce, all we have access to are signs. And this goes for our access to ourselves: we only have access to ourselves through signs. Peirce's somewhat unsettling conclusion is that, for all practical – or pragmatic – purposes, we *are* signs.) It is in the best interests of communication – in its common, utilitarian sense – to dispel this thought, to move on as if words and reality are in one-to-one correspondence. (This, too, is pragmatically defensible.) Artistic uses of writing, pictures, language and thought, however, are in a privileged position. Art is entitled to acknowledge the faulty truth-value of its materials. Art may, in fact, use the a-correspondence, the non-coincidence, the mis-registration, the not-quite-rightness, to its advantage.

The object of the act of reading is the text. It is no accident that the word text has been elasticized throughout the twentieth century to encompass all sorts of information: situations, people, pictures, problems, sounds. Human beings are, in some essential sense, readers. That the text is a kind of machine has caused many a theoretical problem. It is possible to accept the output of the textual machine as one accepts the output of the machines of the mechanized age: passively, abjuring from interaction with the input or the process. It is also possible, however (and I'm sure by now you realize that by possible I mean preferable), to treat the textual machine as a partner, to interact with it such a way as to facilitate output that would be impossible without the reader's participation. I am not claiming that this interaction makes better texts (though, sometimes, I imagine that may be true and, in any case, it may, perhaps, make better readers). This approach to reading de-emphasizes the model of the text-as-machine in favor of the alternate model of text-as-relation.

Navigating the question of competence and textual machines is delicate work. The by-ways are pockmarked with mines. The first admission of the navigator is that the textual machine is faulty from the outset, incompetent by definition. Paul de Man may be the key theorist of the text's incompetence.

> Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge "reality," but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. (de Man "Resistance" 11)

The language of the literary text (de Man's primary concern) is innately unqualified to do what we generally expect language to do: to correspond with the phenomenal world. This doesn't mean that the literary text isn't subject to the same conditions of existence as everything else within the phenomenal world. It is a sign, like everything else is a sign. Or to be more precise, we grasp it with signs, just as we grasp everything else with signs. When I read de Man's

indictment of literature as being an unreliable witness to anything but itself, I take it to say that literature is, in some essential way, the same as everything else. Its privilege is that it is allowed to acknowledge its condition and to put its incompetence to work on its own behalf. The output of the literary textual machine is information about its output, which is information about its output, and so on. Each iteration, however, is just as subject to its incompetence as the previous and the subsequent iterations. This, according to J. Hillis Miller, sets the reader up for a repetition of failure.

> …the careful reader of de Man…will know that what is bound to take place in each act of reading is another exemplification of the law of unreadability. The failure to read takes place inexorably within the text itself. The reader must reenact this failure in his or her own reading. Getting it right always means being forced to reenact once more the necessity of getting it wrong. Each reader must repeat the error the text denounces and then commits again. (Miller 53)

One thing the reader reads is this textually-initiated, textually-instantiated, failed reading of the text by the text. This failure is a mechanical failure. The text-machine fails to produce the correspondence which is expected of it. As a machine, measured against quantifiable criteria such as efficiency, popularity or economy, the text proves itself incompetent. Any reading of the reading of the text by the text is doomed to repeat its incompetence. Some texts, however (I'm thinking back to Walser's "Boat Trip"), indemnify our second-order failure, absorbing the responsibility for the inevitable declension. Witness to the sort of admission of mechanical incompetence on display in "Boat Trip", we begin to define the notion of conceptual competence. Conceptual competence recognizes the inevitability of its mechanical shortcomings. By confessing its mechanical incompetence, the conceptually competent text, communicates an affinity with the ontological conditions which are common to all modes of being, including the text itself.

As a term, incompetence may be too pejorative to be sensitive to the subtle ramifications of the text's non-coincidence (another term used by de Man). Arkady Plotnitsky provides an alternate reading of de Man's reading of the text's evasiveness. Plotnitsky reads de Manian textuality as covalent with the prevaricative behaviors of quantum physics. In classical physics – and, according to Plotnitsky, in classical epistemology – phenomena (such as the speed or direction of objects; such as objects themselves) are observable both in themselves and in readings (note the happy coincidence of terminology) taken by measuring devices. We might observe a car travelling north at 75 miles per hour. We might also observe a reading on our radar-gun describing a car travelling north at 75 miles per hour. However, in non-classical (quantum) physics – and non-classical epistemology – we only get the radar-gun reading, we never see the car; and not just because it's too fast, too small or too stealthy. Quantum laws declare such phenomena to be unseeable. Quantum objects have effects, but no determinate selves to speak of. By analogy, Plotnitsky claims that de Manian readings of the text are readings of readings; that the text is the radar-gun, describing the effects of self-less phenomena. (55 – 59)

For his part, de Man credits such notions to Nietzsche:

> The unwarranted substitution of knowledge for mere sensation becomes paradigmatic for a wide set of aberrations all linked to the positional power of language in general, and allowing for the radical possibility that all being, as the ground for entities, may be linguistically "gesetzt," [posited] a correlative of speech acts. (Persuasion 123)

De Man's crucial distinction here is that Nietzsche reads "language in general" not simply as an entity that "knows" being, but as an entity that also "posits" being. In this second relation, being, like a quantum object, has no determinate self. Not only is being evinced only through the readings registered on our ontological radar-gun (the text); but being, it turns out it is posited – or as de Man says, predicated – by the text. In this sense, being is the product of something which resembles performative speech acts. (J. Hillis Miller devotes considerable attention to this similarity in the third chapter of his *Speech Acts In Literature*.)

These thoughts allow us to sidestep that wooly transcendentalism of Heidegger. We have no need to consider the location or unconcealment of the truth at the core of being. Instead, we can accept the text as the machine which, because it is subject to the selfsame ontological principles, testifies to being's being; a testimony which, as de Man says, is "a correlative of speech acts", it is performative, constitutive. But, if the text-machine is constitutive of being, and if the essence of technology is an ordering of being, and if the machine desensitizes its user from the range of possible experiential components which comprise process and product, doesn't the text alienate us from being? Not if we relinquish Heidegger's onto-teleological truth and accept that being is nothing more than the registration, the inscription, the sign – the *reading* on the ontological radar-gun: the text. The text transcends its ontological mechanicity when (and only when) it subdues its urge to mechanical incompetence in favor of conceptual competence. Conceptual competence is both coincidental with being and performative (constitutive). We must re-imagine the relations which constitute and are constitutive of the correlation between the text and its referent. We must, in fact, re-imagine the identity of the text's referent altogether. Rather than seeking a "real" world, populated by "real" objects, we must accept that a reading is, for all practical purposes, all we will ever have. Rather than imagining that the text has a strictly representative, or mimetic function, we must accept that the text has behaviors and that these behaviors are restricted (and enabled) by the same laws as being. Rather than imagining that the text aims to transparently communicate or express, we must accept that the text may be aware of the irrevocable convolution caused by its constituted/constitutive recursiveness. We become aware of this awareness in our reading of the text's reading of itself. This sedimentary-evolutionary process of reading upon reading is a series of reiterative encounters with the conditions of being. Through the process of these repeated readings, the conditions of being begin to make themselves known (like the appearance of form conjured by the repetitious actions of grave stone rubbing). The text (language, in all its forms) is testimony of being's being. As testimony to being, the text allows a reading of being. This

relation of language to being is what de Man famously calls allegory. In the words of Jan Rosiek,

> These allegories of unreadability…tell the story of how truth, meaning, or Being fail to come out of hiding, because it is language that calls. The failure to bring Being into language cannot be stated directly; it can only be written allegorically, as the diachronic dramatization of a synchronic and non-phenomenal moment, the gap between linguistic sign and meaningful world. (Rosiek 229-230)

The allegory of unreadability is not a representation of being. Being cannot be brought into language. Instead allegory is, in Rosiek's words, a "dramatization" of the conditions of being which include the incompetence of language, of text, of representation. Importantly, Rosiek calls this a moment and not a thing. He says it is "non-phenomenal". That is, it does not have dimensions and observable features. It is present only as a reading on our ontological radar-gun. I would go further and say that, not only is it not a thing, but it is not a moment either. It is a process; a process which is – in that frustrating phrase beloved of philosophers – *always already* happening. This always alreadyness bars us from describing the process of reading as a moment.

I do not have reservations about using the term allegory in the way that de Man's used it. But the term – out of favor in modernist and post-modernist aesthetics – is controversial. Samuel Taylor Coleridge spoke the mind of an aesthetics born of Romanticism when he wrote

> (the allegory) cannot be other than spoken consciously; whereas in (the symbol) it is very possible that the general truth represented may be working unconsciously in the writer's mind during the construction of the symbol. (quoted in Owens 63)

An early proponent of the role of the unconscious in the creation of artistic texts, Coleridge begins his analysis from a faith in author-centrality. For Coleridge the conscious and the unconscious are aspects or behaviors or regions of the authorial psyche. The crucial distinction here is one between the unconscious of the author and the unconscious function of language. One could argue that this distinction is what separates modernism from postmodernism (which would make Peirce a postmodernist, prefiguring Lacan's treatment of Freud). Once we acknowledge that the text has its own latent substance (its paradigmaticism), then we are freed (or forced) to dismiss Coleridge's dismissal of allegory. If we take the process a step farther and assign greater interest to the unconscious of the language than to the unconscious of a single user of it, then we reverse Coleridge's hierarchy, putting allegory above symbol.

Craig Owens offers an energetic defense of de Manian allegory, noting that, for de Man, allegory does not have the author as its source. Allegory is not a matter of one story standing in for another. It is not an intentional one-to-one substitution at either the level of the general nor the particular. Allegory does not flow syntagmatically, like two parallel rivers, echoing each other in a narrative, temporal, lockstep. Instead allegory is an inevitable effect of the use

of language. It is one of the outcomes of the conventional character of language use. Thinking allegory post-Saussure or post-Peirce – certainly and unavoidably post-de Man – one must account for paradigmatic associations constantly echoing in language. From above – from a semiotic bird's eye view – one can see that language as a whole, is constantly peeling away from its imaginary referent. Language's grasp of meaning is no firmer than perception's grasp of experience, or thinking's grasp of being. At this elevated, semiotic level, the act of reading bears an allegorical resemblance to perceiving, experiencing, thinking and being. One might say that the act of reading is precisely the combination of perceiving and thinking: a thinking *via* perception.

The ramifications of this idea of allegory are deep and significant. We may think the text's relation to meaning as symbolic – in the Peircean sense (signifiers with no innate connection to their signifieds). There may be conventionally-instantiated relations between text and referent, but these interact at a remove, like a metaphor. At the same time, and with no claim to mutual exclusivity, we may introduce the thought of the text's relation to meaning as indexical: according to Peirce, signifiers physically linked to or affected by their signifieds (weathercocks, sundials, barometers, a knock at the door). This indexicality is a relation of text to what I have called the conditions of existence; it is not a direct relation of sign to object. The text interacts with the conditions of existence directly, rubbing up against it, running into it, beating its head against it. One thing we read when we read the text is its metonymic friction with the conditions of experience.

> This projection of structure as sequence recalls the fact that, in rhetoric, allegory is traditionally defined as a single metaphor introduced in continuous series. If this definition is recast in structuralist terms, then allegory is revealed to be the projection of the metaphoric axis of language onto its metonymic dimension. Roman Jakobson defined this projection of metaphor onto metonymy as the 'poetic function'… (Owens 57)

This mode of reading: one sensitive to the allegorical nature of language, is a reading aware of the text's mechanical incompetence. This reading allows that the text can never correspond linguistically to its object. The best it can do is open parcels of possibility corresponding to words, phrases, sentences and the text in its entirety. This kind of reading constitutes a conceptual competence; aware of and accounting for mechanical incompetence. Although such conceptual competence is available in most any media, it was in the visual arts of the 1960s that it became the explicit goal of a major vein of work and criticism.

> …allegory superinduces a vertical or paradigmatic reading of correspondences upon a horizontal or syntagmatic chain of events. The work of Andre, Brown, LeWitt, Darboven, and others, involved as it is with the externalization of logical procedure, its projection as a spatiotemporal experience, also solicits treatment in terms of allegory. (Owens 57)

What Owens calls the "externalization of logical procedure" in the work of the conceptualists (though, in addition to Andre, Brown, LeWitt and Darboven, he might have mentioned Mel Bochner, Donald Judd and, most importantly, Joseph Kosuth) is an attempt to open the

process of signification; to assent to its uncontainability and to the utter equivalence of author and reader (or artist and spectator) in the process. We witness, in the work of the conceptualists, the most overt attempt to replace a substantial idea of aesthetic communication with a pure semiotic.

In his complex reading of Nietzsche (who, in turn, is reading Aristotle), de Man suggests that "the most fundamental 'value' of all, the principle of noncontradiction" is the ground of the "identity principle": the method by which we designate salient, determinate entities. (Persuasion 119) De Man begins with Nietzsche's refutation of this ground:

> We are unable to affirm and to deny one and the same thing: this is a subjective empirical law, not the expression of any "necessity" *but only of an inability.* (Persuasion 119)

De Man extrapolates under his own power:

> The convincing power of the identity principle is due to an analogical, metaphorical substitution of the sensation of things for the knowledge of entities. A contingent property of entities (the fact that, as a "thing," they can be accessible to the senses) is, as Nietzsche's early treatise on rhetoric puts it, "torn away from its support" and falsely identified with the entity as a whole. Like Rousseau, Nietzsche assimilates the delusive "abstraction" of the "coarse sensualist preconception" with the possibility of conceptualization: the contingent, metonymic link of sensation becomes the necessary, metaphorical link of the concept: "The conceptual ban on contradiction proceeds from the belief…that the concept not only designates the essence of a thing but *comprehends* it…" The semiological moment, which can simply be described as the metonymic deconstruction from necessity into contingency, is clearly apparent in this sentence. It asserts that, for Nietzsche as for Rousseau, conceptualization is primarily a verbal process, a trope based on the substitution of a semiotic for a substantial mode of reference, of signification for possession. (Persuasion 122-123)

The upshot, for our present purposes (this passage nests a gaggle of upshots for other important purposes), is that the text has no mechanical connection to its referent. It does not possess it. It doesn't even touch it, metonymically. The only things it touches are the conditions of existence; the same conditions that enable and restrict all forms of experience. De Man says "conceptualization is primarily a verbal process", and I don't think it would be perverse to flip it: verbal processes (in the broadest sense: texts) are primarily conceptual. So textual competence (or reading competence: competence in reading the information of the world) is equivalent to conceptual competence. Mechanical competence rests on a false presumption of contiguity. When de Man writes

> …language posits meaning and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood. Nor does the knowledge of this impossibility make it less impossible (Romanticism 117-118)

he is not denying the text's allegorical ability to partake of being. This impossibility is part of being too. The text cannot posit meaning. De Man is right to say that knowing this doesn't change it. The text does, however, enact being, because as the text rubs up against the conditions of being, being makes itself known. The resultant rubbings are not determinate

entities. They exist only as the process of reading. The positing of meaning happens in our secondary process of reading, our reading of the text's reading.

This is true of all our interactions with the information of experience: with situations, with people, with pictures, with problems, with sounds, and, indeed with sentences. I second de Man's suggestion that we adjust our objectives when confronted with such information.

> …whereas we have traditionally been accustomed to reading literature by analogy with the plastic arts and with music, we now have to recognize the necessity of a non-perceptual, linguistic moment in painting and music, and learn to *read* pictures rather than to *imagine* meaning. (de Man "Resistance" 10)

This may have been what Roland Barthes had in mind in his essay "The Third Meaning". In this essay, subtitled "Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills", Barthes examines stills from *Potemkin* and from *Ivan the Terrible*. In the stills, Barthes detects meaning occurring on three levels. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that he receives meaning via three pictorial languages. In any case, he considers each level or language as constituting a distinct type of meaning. The first type, he dubs the *informational.* This is "everything I can learn from the setting, the costumes, the characters", etc. ("Third Meaning" 52) Barthes says this meaning operates at the level of communication. The second type of meaning is the *symbolic*. He refers to a still from *Ivan the Terrible*, depicting two courtiers showering the young tsar's head with gold. Barthes refers to the symbolism of "the imperial ritual of baptism by gold". ("Third Meaning" 52) He calls this referential symbolism – it refers to a specific cultural ritual whose symbolism has been manufactured by convention. He also draws the reader's (and the viewer's attention to the themes of gold and wealth. This he calls diegetic symbolism. Furthermore, Barthes suggests, there may be other symbolic levels, such as an Eisensteinian symbolism (if one could connect such images to a network of symbolic images in Eisenstein's oeuvre), or an historical symbolism (related to theatrical or scenographic tropes or conventions).

These two meanings, the informational and the symbolic, together, make up what Barthes calls the *obvious* meaning. The obvious meaning

> is intentional (it is what the author wanted to say) and it is taken from a kind of common, general lexicon of symbols; it is a meaning which seeks me out, me, the recipient of the message, the subject of the reading, a meaning which starts with [the author/artist] and which goes on *ahead of me*; evident certainly (so too is the other [the obtuse]), but *closed* in its evidence, held in a complete system of destination. ("Third Meaning" 54)

But, Barthes confesses, there is something else. He detects another meaning, which he cannot, with certainty, put his finger on. He calls this third meaning the *obtuse* meaning.

> I read, I receive (and probably even first and foremost) a third meaning – evident, erratic, obstinate. I do not know what its signified is, at least I am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which this – consequently incomplete – sign is composed. ("Third Meaning" 53)

The obvious meaning "devastates ambiguity…[b]y the addition of an aesthetic value, emphasis." ("Third Meaning" 56) But the obtuse meaning

> seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely. I even accept for the obtuse meaning the word's pejorative connotation: the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche)…" ("Third Meaning" 55)

The obtuse doesn't eradicate the obvious meaning. The level of functional communication of the text operates unimpeded because the obtuse meaning is not part of the same system. "The obtuse meaning is not in the language-system (even that of symbols). Take away the obtuse meaning and communication and signification still remain, still circulate, still come through…" (Barthes "Third Meaning" 60)

If the obtuse doesn't engage language, what does it engage? It engages what I have called the conditions of existence. Barthes claims as much: "Obtuse meanings are to be found not everywhere…but *somewhere*: …in a certain manner of reading 'life' and so 'reality' itself…" (Barthes "Third Meaning" 60)

The problem of incompetence is, in many ways the problem of the obtuse. To give a name to that which disallows unproblematic representation or signification, one could do worse than to side with Barthes, to call it the obtuse meaning.

> The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it. My reading remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation. If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything – how do you describe something that does not represent anything? (Barthes "Third Meaning" 61)

Barthes recognizes that the obtuse is a necessary or defining component of the art work (of the art text). He cites Eisenstein: "'Art begins the moment the creaking of a boot on the sound-track occurs against a different shot.'" (quoted in "Third Meaning" 61-62) Discontinuity, misregistration, dislocation – these are the loci of art. Such dislocations have, as their subject, the functionality, the mode, of the art work – of its production and its reception (which are, after all, fundamentally, inseparable). What is at stake is not *the* meaning, but meaning, in general; that is, meaning-making – not meaning as a noun, but meaning as a verb.

> …the obtuse meaning can be seen as an *accent*, the very form of an emergence, of a fold (a crease even) marking the heavy layer of informations and significations…This accent….is not directed towards meaning….does not even indicate an *elsewhere* of meaning; it outplays meaning – subverts not the content but the whole practice of meaning. ("Third Meaning" 62)

The rejection of meaning as a noun (preceded by the definite article) in favor of meaning as a verb (bereft of a preceding article) allows the inherent incompetence of experience to exist in

the work as well. One could make the argument that this rejection is the primary theme in the development of twentieth century arts. Certainly, in the visual arts, this claim can be supported. Since Duchamp there has been a fundamental reordering of priorities which places emphasis on meaning, the verb. This is what is meant by Duchamp's "non-retinal" visual art. The eye is the capturer of nouns, while the perception of verbs is non-perceptual, non-phenomenological. A verb is a relation or an interaction of nouns. Verbs are perceived in the ground or the medium of the mind, as opposed to the senses. Even the verbs hearing and seeing express a relation of stimuli to perceptional interpretation; hearing requires an "I heard", which testifies to the relation of sound to hearer (think of the proverbial tree in the forest). However, it should be realized that a conceptual competence can be converted into a mechanical competence when a concept becomes standardized and repeatable; when the particular, ephemeral nuances of the verb are concretized. What we would see in the aftermath of such a conversion would be the verb inhibited and stabilized, brought to rest. The action of the verb would congeal into the thing of the noun. The noun, after all, in one of its manifestations is described as "concrete". Concreteness presents itself as approachable and accessible through mechanical means. While the verb evades attempts to capture it competently, fluttering from soluble state to insoluble process. Whether this has begun to happen or has already happened to Duchamp's concepts (Jeff Koons?), is, most certainly, debatable.

In music, serialism has often been portrayed as a conceptual approach to composition. But, ultimately, a deep, mechanical competence is required to manage the creation and reception of serial or twelve tone music. John Cage flirted with a Duchampian turn in music, employing chance and music's a-technical other, silence, as full partners in his compositions. But Cage, for all his conceptual innovation, was ultimately unprepared, unwilling or unable to abandon the ear as Duchamp had abandoned the eye. Cage represented the clearest opportunity to break from traditional musical thinking into a real sonic conceptualism. Because Cage failed to embrace a verb-oriented, non-cochlear sonic art – which appeared so thoroughly within his grasp – music (or sonic art in general) has yet to liberate itself from nouns and the illusion of competence.

After Cage, composers like Alvin Lucier and Steve Reich initiated musical approaches which employed conceptual elements (Lucier's work continues to do so; Reich's, on the other hand, has slipped into the most hackneyed substitute for the conceptual strengths I am championing here, embracing a music of short-cut spiritualism). Lucier's "I Am Sitting In a Room" is a recording of the composer himself reading a short text. The recording is played back into the room and re-recorded and then played back and re-recorded again many times. The piece consists of the sound of Lucier's voice interacting with the acoustic properties of the room in which he made the recording. Certain resonant frequencies are engaged by Lucier's voice, while others are swallowed and eradicated by the dimensions and materials of the room. Over time, only certain frequencies survive. The qualities which define the voice as a voice, are lost. The words are subsumed in and replaced by dense layers of sound. Reich's

"Pendulum Music", which I discuss at length in Chapter 4, involves allowing microphones to swing, unimpeded, above upturned speakers. The resulting feedback patterns and the interactions of the patterns of the multiple microphones, create unpredictable sonics and forms. Both these approaches – and similar approaches employed by a wide range of composers from the late 1960s onward – successfully manage to dispense with an emphasis on mechanical competence, privileging a conceptualism which allows for indeterminacy, contingency, happenstance, mistake, incompletion, and inconclusion. One's experience of these pieces is not wholly reliant on aural experience. I had heard and read about "I Am Sitting In A Room" for many years before finally hearing the piece. And I cannot honestly say if my appreciation of the piece was increased when I finally heard it. That is not to say that I do not appreciate it. It is due to (and not in spite of) my experience of the piece before I ever heard it that I share the widely-held opinion that "I Am Sitting In A Room" may be the single most important piece of sonic art of the past fifty years.

First Conceptual Coda: "Boat Trip"

In "Boat Trip", Robert Walser constantly draws attention to things the text cannot do. The text emanates, in fact, from something outside the text, from an unwritten comment or observation which precedes the text. It may be a pedantic tautology to offer the following reminder (but I think it bears repeating): this unwritten comment outside the text *does not exist;* it is *nothing*. Walser's text emanates from nothing. The first thing the text cannot do is convey that which is outside itself; that which does not exist in the text. If it does, it brings that outside inside and into existence. If "Boat Trip" started with the sentence. "Someone said 'I can see all the way to the bottom'", then the nothing from which the text begins would be something. What's more, this something would be determinate; it would be *that* sentence, the one I can place in quotes. But "Boat Trip" does not begin with something. It begins with nothing, with an absence, a void which cannot be placed in quotes. It is indeterminate, uncertain. It fails to reach a minimum threshold of mechanical competence: it cannot correspond – not even with itself. It cannot correspond because it is not there. And only by being there could it indicate that to which it ought to correspond. It's competence is purely conceptual. The text is aware of the void it insinuates. As readers we read the first sentence of the text, "Not that the water was crystal clear everywhere." *And* we read the insinuated void – we know, not only that something is missing, but we know what kind of thing is missing (without knowing specifically what the missing thing is, what it says, how it says it). *And* we read the text's awareness of this double reading of what is there and what is not. The text's conceptual competence is able to accommodate the mechanical *in*competence of text in general. In this sense it allows for a triple reading. This awareness constitutes the text reading itself. And this is what we read.

A few lines later: " I don't know which is lovelier, boating on a lake or on a river, but this not knowing needn't bother me". Again, there is a textual self-awareness on display. Normally, if I say something like "I don't know which is lovelier, boating on a lake or on a river", I don't mean that there is an answer and I don't happen to know it. This would imply an objective

external reality which includes a rating of boating loveliness. Of course, nothing could be more subjective. Yet, the literal use of the phrase "I don't know" posits an absent knowing. The rhetorical use of the phrase "I don't know" doesn't literally mean I don't know; that I lack knowledge that exists somewhere else. In this context, the rhetorical use of the phrase "I don't know", does not correspond with its literal use. There is a linguistic mis-registration, a textual incompetence of which the text, itself, is aware. It makes us aware of its awareness: "but this not knowing needn't bother me". This is, after all, the *sui generis* condition of experience, is it not? We cannot make language match experience; we can't even negotiate a stable fit between individual words and individual meanings. Given that this is an irretractable condition, the best we can do is to not let it bother us. By drawing attention to the incompetence inherent in the everyday use of rhetorical language, the text exercises a unique conceptual competence.

2.3 like a rolling stone

When asked to explain this work outside of its academic setting, I inevitably resort to examples which do not figure in the work itself. I seem to feel that the best examples somehow defy explanation. Or, at least, they fail to rise to a minimum academic threshold. The best examples of this errant aesthetics I'm chasing – this conceptually competence – lie fallow in the grass. They wriggle from my grasp, recalcitrant.

This brings me to Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone" (1965). For some reason, I had tried to avoid mention of this FM radio standard, much beloved of "classic rock" stations. But in conversation, over a pint of beer or in conference center corridors, it is precisely this example I reach for. The mention of it in this context inevitably piques curiosities. Mind's ears scan their internal audio files, trying to recall the song, to replay and inspect it. The song is so familiar. Everyone has a copy stored in memory. But even fully restored, on a home stereo, it is difficult to hear it plainly. The years, the djs, the cultural baggage, Dylan's myth, Pennebaker's film, a trove of Dylan-related books, the new Scorcese documentary, all serve to calcify the song-as-edifice. To truly engage the song's material – and thereby engage its conceptual competence – you have to wipe your memory and start again with fresh rubbings of the song's lapidary inscriptions. Headphones help. Pay particular attention to the piano, which is panned to the left of the stereo field. In the opening seconds the piano falls behind. The playing is tentative, as if, Paul Griffin, the piano player hasn't heard the song before. In fact, it was only the 6th time Griffin had ever heard the song and the first time he'd heard it all the way through from beginning to end. The day it was recorded – 16 June 1965 – was the second day that Dylan had led his band through the song. But on the first day – 15 June – Griffin had not been present. So on the 16th, the band played the song twice in rehearsal and tried, three times, to record it, never making it all the way to the end. The version we know, the single and the track as it appeared on Dylan's album *Highway 61 Revisited*, was the 4th take of the day. The song is a record of the band finding their feet on a song they barely know.

The by-now iconic opening: that snare drum snap followed by a kick drum thud which trips the band as they pass through the doorway into the song, was a recent addition, a spontaneous invention of drummer Bobby Gregg. Greil Marcus, in his eponymous, book-length meditation on the song, calls it a "rifle going off not in the third act but as the curtain goes up". (94) Marcus astutely directs attention away from the sound itself, from its positive presence, and toward the space it opens up, a newly-minted negative space, an absence: "for an expanding instant there is nothing". (94) To Marcus' ear, the brief space between the snare drum and the kick drum (seemingly longer somehow than the space between the kick and the band's entrance – though it shouldn't be, they are equal divisions of musical time) is an opening onto the past and into the future. It is, in many ways, where the past and the future collide: a moment of definitive presentness. It is the advent of the idea of song, as if, despite the centuries of songs which preceded it, songs simply hadn't realized what they were capable of. The space between the snare and the kick drum at the opening of "Like A Rolling Stone" is a signal that the new way has arrived; the old way of thinking and being and living are no longer useful because they are no longer good enough and, in truth – the space between snare and kick seem to say – they never were. "No one had ever tried to make as much of a song, to altogether open the territory it might claim, to make a song a story, and a sound , but also the Oklahoma Land Rush." (Marcus 95) This is the American dream (both in the common sense of the dream America has for its future, and in the less common sense of the dream from which Americans were, at that time, waking up). When Marcus calls it an "expanding instant", he means it in the sense of the westward expansion, an invention of a nation and a people: not just a new world, but *the* New World.

Griffin is already a little late on the second chord of the song and very perceptibly late on the fourth. The threads holding "Like A Rolling Stone" together have already started to come undone. The seams are already loosening. At various points throughout the song, the piano falls out of time. It hits bum notes. It seems to explore new approaches to sections, only to abandon them in the middle of a bar and return to an already-used approach. But the piano player isn't the only one who gets lost. The tambourine goes AWOL. During the verse there appears to be a pattern: hits on the second beat and on the *ands* after the third and fourth beats of the measure. Even this simple scheme drifts, separating at times from the rhythm. The listener is forced to negotiate the feel created by the drums and the bass guitar with the tambourine's detours. It's difficult. The tambourine is so high in the mix, it challenges the entire drum kit for rhythmic dominance. In the choruses, everything goes to the dogs, the tambourine gropes for new patterns, occasionally falling back into the verse pattern. At times it is so distracted, so inconsistent, that it sounds like it's responding to an entirely different song.

But sloppy execution is just one of various incompetences at work in "Like A Rolling Stone." The manifest sonic aberrance is a symptom of more significant dysfunctions. (Or perhaps the sonic aberrance is a dysfunction which breeds attendant symptoms. Or perhaps these two metaphors are synonymous. Or perhaps dysfunction and symptom are binary phenomena,

irreducible to cause and effect. In any case…) The song itself – as we imagine it, separated from this or any subsequent performance; separated from the ideal or model of the song, if you will – is unwaveringly repetitive. The structure is basic: 4 verses, each followed by a chorus. The verses are comprised of two parts: vocally the first is a breathless effluence. In the first verse, it goes like this:

> Once upon a time you dressed so fine, threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?
> People call, say beware doll, you're bound to fall, you thought they were all kidding you

The vocal in the second part of the verse is more measured, spacing out phrases for emphatic effect:

> You used to…
> laugh about
> everybody that was…
> hanging out.
> Now you don't…
> talk so loud
> Now you don't…
> seem so proud
> about having to be scrounging…
> your next meal

Lyrically, by and large, the first part of the verses describes the past, laying out the history of the second-person subject of the song. The second part paints a picture of her current state ("now you don't seem so proud"), asks her if she's learned her lessons ("ain't it hard when you discover that he really wasn't where it's at?"), offers advice ("go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse").

The chorus follows like a pointed stick: "How does it feel to be on your own, to be without a home, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone?" In the role of cold-blooded prosecutor, the singer presents his evidence in the verses and then asks the devastating question in the chorus. Vocally, Dylan hangs on the "f" in "feel." He tortures the single consonant which, not coincidentally, arms the English language's most virulent curse. The subject of the song (Miss Lonely, as she is called in verse 2), is not given an opportunity to respond. The singer/inquisitor trusts that we, the jury, will draw the proper conclusions.

But, despite the simplicity of the form, "Like A Rolling Stone" is anything but simple. As with much of Dylan's output, the reality of the performance constantly evades the ideal of its form. That it still manages to communicate a form – while never, in good faith, delivering it – is a tripartite sleight of hand. 1.) It is dependent on listeners' familiarity with traditional song form; a familiarity Dylan himself, as much as anyone, created. 2.) It relies on Dylan's compositional finesse at navigating established paths, rutted by the wheels of previous songs, while managing to create distinct, new impressions. 3.) Most of all, it derives from Dylan's sly performative strategies, which allow every single particle of the performance to map to its

correlate component in the model, without ever supplying the model itself; a version of the old carnival knife-thrower's act which traces the assistant's outline after she has stepped away from the board. In the perceptual imaginations of latecomers, the knives supply all the information needed to generate both the form of the assistant and the constitutive act.

With Dylan, we are all latecomers. The assistant is never there against the board, the knives, alone, testify. Only the bows remain to be taken, the applause to be received. The melody, although we can detect it from the outline of knives, is never sung straight. Each knife, each inflection, is skewed slightly. Upon inspection, the outline is ragged and distracted. We begin to wonder if it actually suggests the assistant at all or if we have supplied that meaning by dint of some subliminal or desirous suggestion from within or without the song, from within or without ourselves. So, it dawns on us: this could have been otherwise. A slightly different skew in this inflection or that would instigate no crisis. We would not lose the suggestion of the song in its ideal. Different skews would make different meanings *within* the song, *against* the backdrop of our hearing of it, but it would not – indeed, could not – chase the song out of itself.

Dylan's vocal infidelity raises possibilities, contingencies. His performance on "Like A Rolling Stone" is the explicit embodiment of the implicit phenomena named by Derridean deconstruction. Each skew – that is, each enunciation, each component of the whole – carries other possibilities like latent genes. Its eyes might have been blue; its hair could have been blonde; but for the grace of something or other, it would be diabetic, obese, a genius. Each skew falls into an assemblage of other skews that could just as easily occupy this particular position, situation or condition. Such an assemblage, like a stellar constellation, is constituted by its member components (the set of possible skews). At the same time the significance of the components is determined by the assemblage *as* constellation. The Big Dipper is nothing but a pattern imposed upon an assemblage of stars. Each star is significant only as a component of the Dipper. If we cease (willingly or not) to distinguish the constellation as an entity, the component stars themselves become indistinguishable from each other and from the rest of the night sky. If we cease to see the stars, the constellation disappears. This is what I mean when, throughout this thesis, I use the phrase "constituted by and constitutive of". It serves as an apt description of the nature of a disparate array of collectives.

Of course, a band is a collective too. Their form, palpable in song, is constituted by and constitutive of the music they make. Dylan, perhaps aware of the potential in contingency, put little care into assembling his early bands. The responsibility, in fact, was often left to his producers or to chance, as Dylan crossed paths with random players and casually invited them to join. The band on "Like A Rolling Stone" were mostly New York session players. Prior to the recording sessions, they hadn't worked with Dylan on the songs which were to become *Highway 61 Revisited*. The band assembled in Columbia Records Studio A and learned the songs with tape rolling. There is audible uncertainty in the playing on "Like A Rolling Stone"

which sounds shocking today. Such ramshackleness rarely passes unfiltered to released recordings anymore and, if and when it does, it is granted no commercial truck. In the sophisticated marketplace of the 21st century, ramshackle equals marginal. Not so in 1965. As rock and roll moved from its adolescent childhood into its adolescent adolescence, audiences and record moguls alike had better things to worry about than commodity sheen. Everyone – on both sides of the ball – was making it up as they went along.

The audible uncertainty is most apparent in two ways. First, the band is, to put it kindly, rhythmically elastic. As I pointed out previously, the drums and the tambourine are at odds, unable to agree on the basic beat. Normally, this would be a negligible difference of opinion, if the tambourine were mixed where it usually is, as a kind of sonic seasoning. But producer Tom Wilson leaves the tambourine remarkably, unaccountably high in the mix, enabling it to engage the drums in this debate. The conflict is exacerbated by the song's intrinsically delicate, elusive rhythmic feel. The first part of the verses implies a slow, insistent and exaggerated two-beat phrase, the beats falling on the words accented in Dylan's phrasing:

> Once upon a Time,
> You Dressed so fine,
> Threw the bums a dime

The second part of the verse shifts to more of a four-beat feel, stretching out and opening up with Dylan's more laconic delivery.

The second way in which the band's uncertainty is apparent is in their efforts to spontaneously arrange the song while performing it; while recording what was to become one of the most popular singles in rock history. Again, focusing on Paul Griffin's piano is instructive. In the first part of the first verse, the piano plays little flourishes, residing in the shallows of the downbeats between the insistent pronouncements of the vocal. Here, the piano acts as a counterbalance to the deliberateness of the two heavy beats. The piano responds as congregation to Dylan's preacher, staying out of the way of the words. But in the first part of the second verse ("You've gone to the finest school…"), the piano starts out playing similar flourishes, but this time, more faithful to the chord progression. It lands more on the beat, with the vocal. Now, it is more of an accompaniment, a partner to the vocal. Halfway through the first part of the second verse ("Nobody's ever taught you how…"), Griffin abandons the flourishes in favor of blocky, percussive, syncopated chords which work against the grain of the rhythm and the vocal, creating a sense of undertow.

As the third verse begins ("You never turned around…"), the piano returns to the syncopation of the second verse, but this time in a higher register. Now the pattern is more defined. The piano inhabits the interstices between the two beats dictated by the vocal, defining a four beat counterpart and interjecting on the two, on the and between three and four, on the and between four and one. Griffin is apparently more focused on working out his rhythmic approach than on his note choice, because at the end of the first part of the third verse, after

Dylan sings "kicks for you", he drops a couple of clams, chords which are badly fingered, discordant, decidedly *off*.

The beginning of the fourth verse ("Princess on the steeple") starts with what sounds like a tape splice. Greil Marcus makes no mention of it in his book and when I pointed it out to him via email, he said he did not hear it. To me it is plainly apparent, especially when one is concentrating on the left side of the stereo field – the one featuring the piano. (Perhaps after writing 200 pages on the song, Marcus is now mercifully deaf to it.) If it is, in fact, a tape splice, it would tell us something surprising about the song. It might tell us that this take wasn't selected for release as single and as album track, simply because it was the most acceptable take of all the flawed takes the band attempted. A tape splice might tell us that Dylan and producer Tom Wilson heard something in the first three verses that they liked, that they wanted to salvage. But perhaps something went wrong in the fourth verse or the final chorus, forcing them to splice the final 90 seconds from another take. If what I am hearing is, in fact, a tape splice, it could mean that Dylan and Wilson felt they'd tapped something valuable in the first three verses, something that in spite of its very apparent flaws – or perhaps because of them – was able to communicate the abstract, complex business of the song and the moment. It could mean this or something else. But, if it is a tape splice, it means something.

Tape splice or not, in the fourth verse, the piano pursues a different approach, very subtle and reconciled to the background. It has none of the buoyancy of the first verse's flourishes, nor does it cantilever the rhythm as in the second and third. It doesn't seem to far-fetched to imagine that, in this take (whichever take it was) Griffin – who had been through numerous earlier attempts at the song, failing each time to reach the end – assumed that this take too would be scrubbed. It sounds as if he's stopped actively trying to engage the song or the vocal and has decided to ride out this take and wait for the next one, now that his ideas are coming into focus.

Dylan's lyrics indict a fallen, unnamed co-conspirator; one of the most poetically vicious attacks on record. His delivery is the source of the venom. He draws out the delivery of the verses, reveling in the you's abjection. Yet the band seems oblivious to the intent of the lyrics and the vocals. Probably, they are too focused on simply learning the changes and trying to capture the feel. The piano, again, seems deaf to the vocal inflections, the spit, the sadistic hesitations. The piano rollicks along like a player piano in a second-rate ragtime theme-park. This is due, in part, to how it is recorded. Tom Wilson's microphone placement accentuates the plinky percussion of the piano's hammers and mechanisms Any depth, any low end, any warmth is lost. The vocal seems weary of – or oblivious to – the vaudevillian jauntiness of the accompaniment. As distinct from the song's sloppy execution, this is sloppy conceptualization, sloppy understanding, on the parts of the players, producer and engineers. And Dylan too deserves blame or credit.

One feels sorry for the musicians. It seems an unfair assignment to play with a man like Bob Dylan. One is likely to be victimized; Dylan is likely to opt for a version of the song which fails to display your talents. Perfectly good players are immortalized playing indecisively, sloppily, poorly on a recording which sells in the millions and is played on the radio 5, 6 or 7 times that often in the 40 years since its release. These players never stood a chance of making a good showing. Even within the song, Dylan throws curve balls, pulls out rugs. In the recorded version, the first chorus has 5 lines:

> How does it feel
> How does it feel
> To be without a home
> Like a complete unknown
> Like a rolling stone?

But on each of the subsequent choruses, there are six lines:

> How does it feel
> How does it feel
> To be on your own
> With no direction home
> Like a complete unknown
> Like a rolling stone?

(Or subtle variations thereof.)

One has the impression that this is not an intentional compositional variation. It sounds and feels more like a product of the moment, a singular difference in this performance. This impression is borne out by subsequent versions of the song. For example, the infamous live version from the 1966 Manchester Free Trade Hall performance includes all 6 lines in each of the 4 choruses.

On *Highway 61 Revisited,* Dylan leads the band in to each of the first 3 choruses with the line "How does it feel", landing the word "feel" on the first beat of the chorus. For the band just learning the song, this would be an important bit of guidance. You can be off the map, exploring territory which does not belong to the song proper, scrounging around in the shrubs on the periphery of the property, searching for a useful artifact to retrieve and utilize for the song's benefit (and it does, indeed, often sound as if that is what the band is up to), but when Dylan kicks into "How does it feel", you instantly know where you are, transported back to home base, to the center of the song, its capital. However, at 5:20, leading into the final chorus, Dylan rushes the phrase, landing the word "feel" on the last beat of the verse, rather than on the first beat of the chorus. The band dissolves, hedging the beat, unsure if they should leave the emphasis in the usual place or bring it forward to match Dylan's phrasing. Some of them come flying home, some of them linger in the bushes. And for an instant the territory claimed (according to Marcus) by the song is swallowed by its own expansion, like a black hole, it implodes and loses itself in itself. For just a second or two, the song disappears within the song. By changing his phrasing, Dylan, undermines his own creation. I'm not suggesting he foresaw the outcome of his subversion – he may not even have been aware of

where the "feel" was falling – but, in releasing it, the value is placed on the gestalt impression all this confusion makes, and not on individual performances. This is the song as we know it, in all its incompetent glory. As listeners, we have spent the last forty years futilely and fruitfully reading this incompetent reading of the song.

Second Conceptual Coda: "Like A Rolling Stone"

In "Like a Rolling Stone", it is less apparent that the text maintains a conceptual awareness of its own mechanical incompetence. Where the reflexivity available to writing allows for Walser's recursiveness, in music, such self-reflexivity is less available. In rock music and song-based music, it is often also less attractive. By availing itself of this unavailability and by making this unattractiveness attractive "Like a Rolling Stone" accomplishes a sly miracle.

Nietzsche, contemplating the modern impulse to dispense with history, wrote that the modern man

> forgets everything in order to be able to *do* something; he is unfair toward
> what lies behind and knows only one right, the right of what is now coming
> into being as the result of his own action. (quoted in de Man *Blindness* 147)

At the time of "Like a Rolling Stone", Bob Dylan was the voice of the past. He was the modern man who had traveled back in time, captured not just the material of decades past, but, more importantly, the sensibility. Dylan was the ambassador from what Greil Marcus has called the "old, weird America"; an America before the corruptions of modernity: commerce, mass-media, political cynicism, ubiquitous cultural homogenization. Only Dylan could have made "Like a Rolling Stone". Only Dylan could have made the song as a sonic, material artifact. Because only Dylan had done the research, had absorbed the lessons of his past, of his country's past, of his art's past. (Of course, when I say "absorbed", I mean "read".) Dylan had read the past: perceived and thought it. His perception and thinking were not mechanical. A mechanical reading would lead to the type of historicism Nietzsche is deriding in "Of the Use and Misuse of History for Life"; an historicism which accepts history as valuable simply because it is history. Such a mechanical reading would rely only on the facts: the chord changes, the mythical sources of the lyrics, the locations, the characters and the players. Don't get me wrong: Dylan was acquainted with the facts. But Dylan's conceptual reading of the facts transcends and recasts them. Depending on how you read Dylan's reading, "Like a Rolling Stone" either renders those facts worthless (this is the reading of those who, at the time, booed his concerts and of Pete Seeger who tried to axe the cables supplying power to Dylan's performance of the song at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival), or "Like a Rolling Stone" assimilates the facts in the sense of Nietzsche's "forgetting"; a forgetting which takes the full force of the facts into account – which, indeed, feeds vampirically off their blood. Dylan's forgetting is the forgetting which allows him to *do* something. As Nietzsche is forced to confess, forgetting the past in favor of an invented version is doubly cursed: it is all-but-impossible and, if accomplished, is likely to replace history with something lesser.

> Afterwards, we try to give ourselves a new past from which we should have liked to descend instead of the past from which we actually descended. But this is also dangerous, because it is so difficult to trace the limit of one's denial of the past, and because the newly invented nature is likely to be weaker than the previous one… (quoted in de Man *Blindness* 149-150

Only Dylan could have made "Like a Rolling Stone." Only Dylan could have made the ripple in the fabric of cultural space-time. Only Dylan stood at the maw of the future. He was simultaneously *of* the past and *for* the future. The serious dissent he engendered in the culture in 1965-1966 came down to the difference between two visions of the future. In one camp, Dylan represented a return – an impossible return to some imagined authentic American past which sang of equality and liberty and somehow rid itself of slavery and civil bloodshed and the annihilation of the native population. In another camp – made up of converts from the first camp and new acolytes – he represented an impossible liberation from convention and parentage; from history itself (inclusive of slavery and civil bloodshed and the annihilation of the native population). Dylan held two impossible serpents by their tails, each wriggling to shed its historically-stained skin. The first camp saw in Dylan the possibility of a kind of epochal husbandry: mating the past and the future; producing progeny free of the impurities of the past, yet imbued with the best of its traits. The second camp wanted Dylan to drop the past – to drive it off the continent and into the sea. They imagined a spontaneous generation, the delivery of the centuries-old promise implicit in the name "The New World".

That only Dylan could have made "Like a Rolling Stone" as a material artifact corresponds to the first of Roland Barthes' three-fold schema of interpretation, that of the *informational.* (Barthes 52) (Owens calls this the *literal*). The materiality of "Like a Rolling Stone" is a matter of fact, of apparent historical inevitability. That only Dylan could make the song the source of a disturbance in culture is a result of what Barthes calls the *symbolic.* This symbolism is a matter of conjecture, of the pure, contingent desires of the culture made up of the camps of the past and the future. It is in a third sense – Barthes' *obtuse* meaning – that "Like a Rolling Stone" truly exhibits its conceptual competence. According to Craig Owens, it is at this *obtuse* level that the work exposes itself as fiction. (Owens 82*)* And fiction, according to de Man, is "the disruption of the narrative's referential illusion." (*Allegories* 292) We might think of the *obtuse* level of meaning as the friction between the *literal* and the *symbolic*. In this sense, it is either the same as, or the cause of, allegory.

In "Like a Rolling Stone", Dylan, famous for allegorical play in his lyrics, plays out the allegory of the friction between his literal role and his symbolic role. At the juncture of his literal relation to the past and his symbolic relation to the future, lies the obtuse fulcrum of "Like a Rolling Stone", fictionalizing not just the song-as-text, not just Dylan-as-text, not just the cultural-moment-as-text; but fictionalizing the very act of reading: of perceiving and thinking. This is the claim of "Like a Rolling Stone": perceiving and thinking are fictional acts. The song initiates this infinite inversion while carrying on with super-Beckettian insistence (it is *because* it cannot go on, that it *must* go on), verse-to-chorus-to-verse-to-chorus. In the end it is the subject of its own damnation:

You're invisible now, you have no secrets to conceal.

What passes as eminently logical, even tautological, is neither. Being invisible is the state of ultimate concealment. But being invisible has nothing to do with whether or not one has secrets to conceal. This state of being is futility: what's the good of being invisible if you have no secrets to conceal? This is a state of total inconsequence: nothing to say, no way to say it. Enter the obtuse meaning, which "exposes the literal level…to be a fiction, implicating it in the web of substitutions and reversals properly characteristic of the symbolic". (Owens 82) The song exposes itself as duplicitous, unworthy of trust, incapable of truth. In doing so, it exposes all of Dylan's songs, it exposes Dylan himself, it exposes the desperation of the desires of the culture. It is completely understandable – bordering on inevitable – that just moments before Dylan performed the song at the Manchester Free Trade Hall on 17 May 1966, one member of the audience cried out "Judas!" Only at the level of conceptual competence – a sophisticated understanding of the fictions, frictions and contradictions at play – does Dylan's response that night make any sense: "I don't believe you," he shouts back into the hall; indicting not just the heckler, but everyone present, including, maybe most of all, himself, "you're a liar!"

3. Noise
'Order is half of life, and the other half too.'   –Günter Eich

3.1 what incompetence sounds like

Noise is sonic dirt. To wit: in *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas identifies dirt as something which in all societies and times has been considered offensive. The criteria by which something is considered to be dirt or to be dirty changes, of course, from time to time and from place to place (in other words, from culture to culture). But everywhere and at all times, the definition of dirt is consistent: dirt is essentially environmental alienness. Dirt is matter that disagrees with the organization of matter in the built (or, at least, arranged) environments of societies. The notion of dirt can exist only in relation to the conventions of organization, arrangement, cleanliness, or (Douglas's term) purity. "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder." (Douglas 2) Dirt's disorder is offensive because it threatens the categories that we, as humans, create to rationalize and justify our own anthropocentric status. "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death." (Douglas 7) What qualifies as dirty differs from culture to culture, but universally, at the core of the notion, there is a basic incompatibility with the conventions of life in a particular place and time.

A lot of what Mary Douglas says about dirt can be said just as convincingly, with very little modification, about noise. If dirt is matter out of place, then noise is simply sound matter out of place. As with dirt, noise is essentially disorder; there is no such thing as absolute noise, it exists in the ear of the beholder. Again following Douglas – reflection on noise involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death. To focus too intently on noise as a phenomenon, to try to identify its immanent qualities, to indexically categorize its distinguishing features like a birdwatching guide categorizes the tail feathers of a particular grouse, is fetishistic; carving out imaginary distinctions in order to create imaginary objects to call one's own; it is to cling to noise as the collector clings to ephemeral totems, as the child clings to the teddy bear, as the penitent clings to the idol. To call oneself a *noisician*, is reductivist; tantamount to a painter calling herself a *brownist,* or a poet calling himself an *adverbist.* Unsurprisingly, then, I refuse to accept the term *noise* in any positive sense, as an identifiable phenomenon. Instead, I accept noise in the tradition of Saussurean linguistics, as a purely differential term, meaningless without contrast to other terms, other sounds.

Russian linguist and literary critic, Yury Lotman, was interested in noise. He said that in speech "a sound falling into an intermediate position in relation to the phonemic grid of a given language will either be drawn into the orbit of an existing phoneme as its variant with the difference being declared unimportant or it will be categorized as noise and be declared non-existent." (Lotman 122) It's not difficult to think this thought in music. That which strikes

the ear as not-quite-right, one that defies immediate comprehension, is absorbed into an existing category. If it can't be so easily absorbed, if it is too far outside any one category or if it is too heterogeneous to be drawn into one category rather than another, it is categorized as noise. The startling dénouement of Lotman's little exegesis is that noise is "declared non-existent", it is excluded from history entirely, disallowed from thought.

If I accept Lotman's definition of noise, then there is nothing more to say and this line of inquiry is finished here. You will not be surprised to learn, however, that I am not so willing to take no(ise) for an answer. When Lotman shifts his attention from speech to literature, he finds a phenomenon running parallel to noise. He uses the phrase "alien word", to identify an element which threatens the literary system in which it is found. The difference between the alien word and noise is that the alien word arrives from another, foreign system. It is not extra-systemic *in extremis*. It's origins, its definitions, its categories, are simply outside the *present* system, outside the literary text in which it is found. The alien word's incompatibility with the conventions of the system threatens the text in which it finds itself. For Lotman, this is an essential characteristic of what he designates the "poetic" text, distinguishing it from non-poetic texts, as well as from plain language. The perceived system of the poetic text acts to unify the form and/or the content of the text; unifying, in fact, the form *with* the content, and thereby creating the perception of a unified structure. The contravention of this structure by the alien word brings the structural nature (or more accurately – referring to the systemic, processual nature of the activity – the *structuring* nature) of the text into focus. The poetic text is the text which makes us aware of itself as a system, or the text which is made aware of itself. In this it is similar to the action of the movie camera's lens which, fixed on an element in the foreground of a composition, casts a background element into blurred, nebulous inconsequence. But when the depth-of-field is adjusted, fixing, instead, on the nebulous background element, bringing it suddenly into focus, the nature of the composition, the very compositional nature of the composition (inclusive of criteria of inclusion and exclusion, of valuation and predilection), comes into focus as well. "Structure is intangible until it is contrasted with another structure or until it is disturbed." (Lotman 109)

Noise, in the way I will use the term, borrows from both Douglas and Lotman. Noise is disorder born of the contravention or contradiction of certain systemic expectations. It is important to remember that these expectations are not of any natural origin. They are social and cultural constructs, either taught purposefully or conveyed inadvertently or passed along virally. Regardless of how we inherit these expectations, we are well-advised not to take them for granted. Even the simplicity of attaching names to things carries implications. "One judges at the same time as one names, and the word, ballasted by a prior culpability, quite naturally comes to weigh down one of the scales." (Barthes *Mythologies* 81) Roland Barthes points this out to demonstrate the false opposition between culture and ideology; ideology being nothing more (and nothing less) than the structured and structuring process of cultural categories, of expectations and conventions. This false opposition is a subject we too will soon have cause to engage. But, for now, ballasted by Barthes' words, let us return to noise.

I have neither the desire, nor the necessary apparatus, to explain how the conventions of Western music came to be. Volumes on the subject are legion. Besides, part of my agenda is to undermine the privilege of musicological discourse. In defining noise as a differential phenomenon, I would ask that the reader simply acknowledge that conventions do exist; that, to a greater or lesser – but always inescapable – degree we cannot process what we hear without contextualizing frames. As Lotman might say, sound without frame is non-existent.

The song is untitled. It is track number four on US Maple's album, *Acre Thrills.* It begins by countering its missing-title-framelessness, presenting the listener with the most rudimentary contextualization in music: a metronomic 4/4 rhythm. This constitutes what I will call a "synchronizing structure", an element which establishes a ground for communication between text and recipient. The concept of a synchronizing structure finds sympathy not only in the work of aestheticians such as Lotman, but also in the work of cognitive scientists. William Benzon, for instance, refers to the nature of this communicative relationship as "interactional synchrony". (Benzon 26) This synchronizing structure, recognizable as the time-honored trope of the drummer counting off the song with stick clicks, facilitates interactional synchrony, not only between text and recipient, but, at a more mechanical level, between the members of the band. The stick clicks immediately establish the song's tempo and time signature and instantly identify the frame of the mid-tempo rock song. The first mildly unusual thing about the song is that, rather than beginning after an even number of stick click measures, the band comes in after 12 beats, after three measures of four. But this aberration is easily reconciled with existing categories. This minor deviation has its own history. For almost as long as rock bands have been counting off songs with stick clicks, they have also been coming in on odd counts.

After the band comes in, the metronomic rhythm continues. For the first three beats of the song proper, it is maintained with stick clicks, but on the fourth beat of the song – the last beat of the first measure – it switches to a closed high-hat. When the band comes in, it is first in the form of two guitars. The first is panned left in the stereo field. The second is panned right. The two guitars engage in a call-and-response pattern. If we count along in four, we hear that the first guitar plays a chord on the beats represented below in bold and the second guitar responds with another, higher chord on the beats in bold italics:

One-and-Two-***and***-Three-and-Four-and-
One-and-Two-***and***-Three-and-Four-and-
One-and-Two-***and***-Three-and-Four-and-
One-**and**-Two-***and***-Three-and-Four-and-

Through the first three measures a regular pattern is established: the first guitar calls on the first beat of the measure and the second guitar responds on the "and" between the second and third beats. In addition, a bass guitar plays a very simple descending line in rhythmic and harmonic unison with the first guitar. The drums add a third voice to the call and response

pattern, placing a phrase of three kick drum beats on the "and-Four-and" of each measure. Aside from the mild dissonance of the chords played by the guitars, a very regular and, in many ways, very conventional structure has been established. But in the fourth measure, the first guitar upsets the pattern, landing on the "and" between the first and second beats of the measure. This, in and of itself, would not constitute a significant contravention of the structure. The song, after all, is still in the midst of establishing itself and the variation in the fourth measure could become a regular feature of its foundational pattern.

Immediately following this variation, however, the plate-tectonics of the song begin to shift in unsettling ways. We have been trained, so to speak, by the establishing patterns, to think the song in measures of four. But the song itself has different ideas. On the first beat of the second measure (counting from when the guitars come in), we would expect the guitars and the bass to restart the established pattern by returning to the first chord. Otherwise, we might expect the chord progression to extend to a second measure of four beats. A third option would be to extend the pattern two more beats, thereby establishing a form in six beat measures, which would make sense, in retrospect, of the twelve introductory stick clicks (two measures of six).

Instead, the guitars and the bass extend the descending line to a fifth note and then restart the pattern, returning to the first chord of the progression. Now we have a shifting, cyclical system of a five-chord pattern against a four-note measure. In this system, the first beat of a measure and the first chord of a chord pattern will synch up every sixth rhythmic measure or every fifth repetition of the pattern of five chords.

Four beat measures	1				2				3				4				5				6
Beats	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1
Chords	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1
Five chord patterns	1					2					3					4					5

Rather than repeat the regularity of this super-pattern, US Maple scuttles it, abandoning the constituent parts after five measures of the rhythm and four repetitions of the chord pattern. Nevertheless, having been performed through one complete cycle, the pattern is established.

Still, in the midst of this formal completion, there is a great deal of not-quite-rightness. By the time the fifth chord of the progression has been introduced, the guitars have abandoned their rhythmic regularity. The first guitar makes some effort to maintain its regularity, but it stutters and stumbles. Certain chord voicings are elongated by dragging the pick across the strings. Others are truncated by stiffly plucking the root note and leaving out the rest of the chord. In

isolation, the first guitar can still be heard as sticking to the pattern established in the opening five-chord progression. It continues to "play the song", albeit sloppily.

Against the steady high-hat, the first guitar's chords are noticably misaligned. This is not a problem for us. Our understanding of time in music allows for slight misregistration of elements. We read these misalignments as the product of a "human" feel and we unconsciously adjust the structuring processes of our listening to accept the two notes as musically, if not mathematically, synchronous. We do this for pitch as well, accepting slight mistunings as harmonious, products of the same systems of pitch intervals. Of course, we have our limits. We will tolerate only so much aberration from pure synchronicity or pitch before we start to wince.

The second guitar begins to cram overly-busy phrases into the spaces provided for its responding chord. At first, these phrases still bear some relation to the chord progression, tending to resolve in harmony with the first guitar's chords. But by the third time through the five-chord pattern, the second guitar has repudiated the pattern. It plays wildly incongruous, blurry, chromatic lines, running up, down and roughshod over the first guitar and over the bass which, alone among the instruments, remains steadfastly loyal to the initial pattern. Meanwhile the drums (with the signal exception of the metronomic high-hat), abandon their nominal pattern and begin to splatter themselves around the space of the song. Fills and rolls convey the sensation of a drum kit tumbling down a flight of stairs, or of the irregular rhythmic patterns of speech.

The band falls badly out of synch and we begin to lose track of the interactional synchrony between the instruments and, correspondingly, between the text and our listening. Our tolerance is tested. We could ask which instrument is playing the song: the first guitar, which struggles gamely to maintain the chord progression? the second guitar, which works more freely and – one might think – expressively? or the drums which establish a new rhythm of almost speech-like patterns? But to ask this question is to abandon the song because the answer can only lie elsewhere in a non-existent version of the song that the listener-questioner must fabricate solely for the purpose of answering the question. If we stick to the text of the song, that is, to the sonic-materiality of the recorded version of the song we are listening to, there is no answer to the question. There is, in fact, no question. The song isn't dividing time or establishing form the way we want it to. Our culturally-constructed expectations have been upset. Our musicological explanations are rendered inadequate. The ballast of prior culpability cannot balance the sonic-materiality of the song.

In the midst of this process, of tolerating (or not tolerating) the detours from our conventional expectations, we confront a dilemma which is both ethical and aesthetic; an ethics *of* the aesthetic. The detours taken by US Maple are a proposal. The sonic-materiality (by which I mean the text) of the song proposes something which diverges from our rhythmic expectations. The song as text (by which I mean its sonic-materiality) has a responsibility

which I am calling ethical. If the song wants to establish a relationship, if it wants us to continue listening, it must give us reasons. The song must proceed in good faith. This means that the song has a responsibility to cop to its own tactics, its intentions, or we will have recourse to a variety of dismissals: it is wrong; it is poorly-executed; it is willfully antagonistic; it makes no sense. The text's responsibility is the correlate of what J. Hillis Miller means when he writes of "the ethics of reading":

> I mean that aspect of the act of reading in which there is a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response and for the further effects, "interpersonal," institutional, social, political, or historical, of my act of reading…(Miller 43)

The first element of a reader's (or listener's) responsibility is to not jump to conclusions. If we have come to the song willingly and with an interest of any kind, we owe it to the song to allow it to make its case. This, I would imagine, is the predicate of any communication. We are obliged to be tolerant; to make an effort in the interests of this communication.

The word "tolerance" has four primary definitions, each useful to the discussion at hand: 1.) a capacity to endure pain; 2.) a sympathy or indulgence for practices or beliefs differing from or conflicting with one's own; 3.) the allowable deviation from a standard; and 4.) the capacity of the body to endure or become less responsive to a substance (as a drug). Thanks to its fourfold sense, the concept of tolerance occupies a pivotal position in my argument. In the preceding discussion of US Maple, I have connected the second and the third meanings: a sympathy for different practices and the allowable deviation from a standard. With music, in particular, this connection is crucial. Music, as it is taught in the Western academy, is a mathematical discipline. Pitch and rhythm are discussed relative to mathematical norms. Deviations from these norms are considered not quite right or simply wrong. But the ear is not a mathematical tool and the brain, in its ability to process music, proves an amazingly flexible and forgiving audience. Even more importantly, musicians have found that in straying subtly from absolute rightness, certain effects may be achieved which are heard as more expressive, more meaningful.

In the blues and blues-related musics like R&B, rock, and soul, musicians talk about "the pocket". The pocket is a rhythmic concept, referring to the tight cavity of the downbeat. When a rhythm section is locked in an irresistible groove, they are said to be "in the pocket". But, as any good drummer will tell you, the pocket is a far more elastic entity than Western notated rhythm would lead you to believe. In fact, it is commonly understood that a good feel in blues-based music emanates from playing "behind the beat", "back in the pocket". The idea is that there is an allowable deviation from the mathematical accuracy of the beat that will be tolerated by the ear.
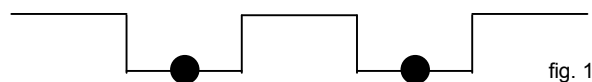

fig. 1

For instance, let's say that the diagram above (fig. 1), represents the back beat of a song, with the black dots representing when the drummer plays the downbeat.[1] The pocket is represented (crudely) by the concave sections of the line. In this diagram, the drummer plays the beat exactly in the middle of the pocket, dividing the rhythm with mathematical specificity.
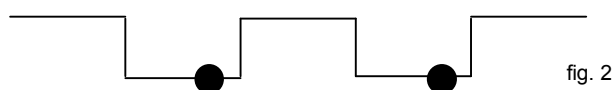
fig. 2

If the drummer were to play the beat further back in the pocket (fig. 2), after the mathematically precise division of the rhythm, the beat would still be heard as falling on the downbeat. Playing "behind the beat" as it is known, is a technique that imbues the rhythm with a sense of suspense. At the moment when the mathematical beat ought to occur, it is absent. For that almost imperceptible, split-second, the mind's ear wonders what has happened: has the time signature changed? has the drummer fallen off the stool? is the song over? When the beat arrives, just slightly late, the tension is released. The resultant feel is considered (depending on the context): funky, bluesy, heavy, or sexy. Whereas, playing "ahead of the beat" or "forward in the pocket" creates an edgy, anxious feel.

fig. 3

As the drummer pushes the beat farther and farther back behind the beat, testing the tolerance of the pocket, eventually the beat moves beyond the allowable deviation and become intolerable (fig. 3); that is, it will no longer be heard as a late version of the intended beat and will start to be heard as an early version of the next beat (fig. 4).


fig. 4
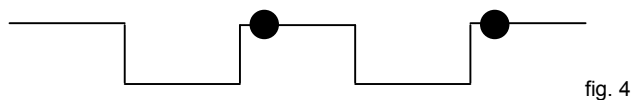
This beat-tolerance is not something that conventional Western notation controls for. The logic of conventional Western music seeks to fix the beat in its precise location as a mathematically regular division of the rhythm or of the measures imposed to quantify the aural experience of the music. The goal of such musical thinking is to allow musicians, following a score, to perform the exact pitches and times dictated by the composer. Of course, the mechanisms which allow the communication of these exactitudes, also impose restrictions on composer and player, disallowing pitches outside the 12 tone scale and timings which nudge mathematically-divided beats forward or back.

The transfer of these theoretical parameters to practical application in new technology raises some interesting issues. When designers of drum machines established the paradigm for how electronic rhythms would be created, they followed the thinking of conventional Western music. These machines were designed to facilitate musical production, not to revolutionize

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[1] Typically, we would say "where" the drummer plays the downbeat. But this is merely an example of the dominance of spatial metaphors in language. It is much more accurate to

the ways we conceptualize music and its parameters. Logically, drum machines were designed to organize rhythms according to time signatures, measures, and beats. Again, this paradigm is meant to facilitate communication between composer (in this case, the user) and player (the machine). The user starts by defining the time signature: how many beats per measure. The machine then organizes itself around a division of the measure into the specified number of mathematically-consistent beats. The earliest drum machines asked the user to place beats on a graphical grid representing the measures. This method, known as "step programming", employs a purely quantitative approach to rhythm-making, requiring the user to construct rhythms from anodyne particles, detached from both the flow of time and from sonic materiality. This method proved too mechanical for many musicians, accustomed to feeling their way through music, rather than breaking it down to its constituent, numerical parts. The next generation of drum machines expanded their programming paradigm to allow the user to set a tempo with an audible metronome (which is later removed) as a guide and to "play" along to the metronome, tapping buttons as if they were the surfaces of actual drums. This method, known as "natural programming", proved a much more intuitive and manageable way for musicians to make rhythms which resembled those produced by live drummers, rhythms which other musicians could relate to.

In the development of natural programming, designers discovered a problem. The machines sometimes had difficulty distinguishing between a late-tapped first beat (fig. 5) and an early-tapped second beat (fig. 6).


fig. 5

fig. 6
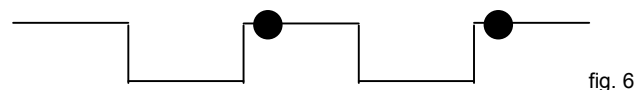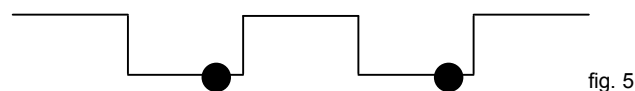
The machine, with its strictly regimented division of measures into beats, could only accept beats which fell in mathematically-appropriate places. Users, either uncomfortable "playing" the machine's buttons or imbuing their beats with the intangibleness of feel (or both), tended not to meet the machine's digital, rhythmic expectations. To correct the problem – to make the machines more human, or, more accurately, to make the humans more machinic – the designers added a function known as "quantization". Quantization works by "magnetizing" to rhythmically-, mathematically-accurate beats. Stray beats in the vicinity of the magnetized beat are pulled into alignment and "corrected" or quantized. The quantized beats are mathematically precise. The user can decide whether or not to quantize a rhythm and, if so, at what gradation. For instance, in the diagram below (fig. 7), the red lines represent down beats. Counting the red lines alone, we are counting quarter notes (one-two-three-four). The blue lines represent up beats. We would count the blue lines as "ands" between the numbers.

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speak about *when* the drummer plays the downbeat, since the placement is a placement in time, not in space.

With the addition of the blue lines, we are counting eighth notes (one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and…). Quantizing at the level of quarter notes, the beats would be corrected to the red lines, falling squarely on the down beats. Quantizing, however, at the level of eighth notes, the beats would be corrected to the closer blue lines, falling on the upbeats.

fig. 7
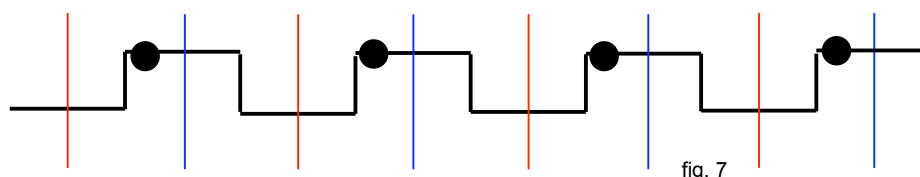
To think about how quantizing works and about the necessity for it in drum machine programming is to think about the notion of tolerance. Quantizing is, in effect, the setting of a tolerance level. Will I tolerate beats that are not-quite-right by a fraction of a quarter note or only by a fraction of an eighth note? Either way, math – and not the vagaries and inconsistency of human playing – rules the day.

Drum machine programmers attempted to reproduce a "human" feel by introducing inconsistency. The "swing" function, as it is known, randomly nudges beats forward and back, breaking the metronomic regularity of quantized beats, without pushing them out of the magnetic fields of their home beats. Of course, it is absurd to equate this algorithm with the feel of swing music. But I suppose programmers (or marketers) thought it more attractive to label this the swing function than to label it more accurately as "inconsistency" or the "wobble" function.

Of the many structuring process which can come together, combine, collide and combust in the art work, there is one which maintains a strange kind of privilege. This privilege is the result of a real, rather than simulated, social interaction at play in the work. By a real social interaction, I mean to indicate the collaboration (the co-labor) of at least two individuals on a single work of art. Such collaboration is, of course, the normal state of affairs in music, where the ensemble is far more common than the solo performer. Collaboration brings with it the unavoidable interaction of the complex of structuring processes possessed by (and/or possessing) the collaborators during the making of the work. This interaction inevitably leads to frictions between the contributions of the collaborators, each of whom is bound to conceive and perceive the work differently. The development of the apparatus of Western classical music – harmonic theory, notation, et. al. – could be seen as an ongoing effort to coordinate and synchronize the conceptions and perceptions of collaborators. The score is, almost literally, an effort to get everyone on the same page. Values such as pitch and meter are regulated by instantiated systems: key and time signature, respectively.

Less apparent are the ways in which rock bands coordinate and synchronize themselves. Rock musicians frequently have less formal or less prolonged training on their instruments. There is, as yet, no Suzuki method for the electric guitar. The anomalous rock musician who has had substantial formal training finds his or her training of limited use in the environment of

the rock band where there is no written score and often no common technical vocabulary beyond the names of the notes and one or two basic time signatures. The most common coordinating tactic for the rock band is embedded in the "and" of Buddy Holly *and* the Crickets or Bruce Springsteen *and* the E-Street Band. This tactic relies on a single songwriter and arranger who, with whatever tools and vocabulary the members can agree on, directs the decisions of the group as a whole. Another tactic involves the imitation of models: a band decides they want to sound like a pre-existing band or combination of bands. In this case, decisions about tone, note choice, song form, lyrical content, etc., are judged against the template of the model.

I don't want to dwell too long on tactics of coordination. What I'm really interested in is how these tactics are bound to fail. The relative lack of formal training among the members of a typical rock band, introduces an element of dissymmetry or dysfunction into their collective production; a lack of agreement into the resulting work. Despite the "and" subordinating the band, there is no way that Bruce Springsteen can control for all the variables of his musicians. Without writing out elaborate scores with specific direction for the voicings or tonality of Stevie Van Zandt's guitar chords or Clarence Clemmons' sax lines, Bruce Springsteen must reconcile himself to surrendering control over certain structuring processes of his songs. Similarly, no matter how much the White Stripes want to remake themselves in the image of the Yardbirds or in the image of the Yardbirds' image of Robert Johnson, they may find they lack the apparatus to achieve the goal. At the very least, Jack and Meg White may each hear or feel the target model – the Yardbirds – differently.

Let's return to *Acre Thrills*, the US Maple album from which the untitled track 4 is extracted. For a long time, I thought it strange – in fact I found it self-aggrandizing – that the back cover of the CD eschews back cover conventions. Instead of song titles or production information, the back cover features the first, middle and last names of the four members of the band, handwritten in large letters. Now I think I understand. More important than song titles, is the idea, conveyed succinctly, that the music on the enclosed CD is the product of four people. In a sense, the four specific names printed on the back cover are inconsequential. What does it matter to me if one of the members is named Mark Douglas Shippy? Especially since I am not even told what instrument this Shippy plays. This listing of names opposes the "and" placed between the leader and the band. This listing of names is a clue to the working methods of US Maple. This listing of names is a user's manual for the listener: "This music", it says, "is the product of interference patterns between the contributions of four people."

The interference patterns induced in US Maple's music is the product of internal tensions. Frictions arise between the ways in which the four players conceive of a song before and as they play it, between the ways in which the four players perceive the results of their playing. These frictions are produced by contradictions (*contra dictions):* opposing musical vocabularies, conflicting modes of expression or enunciation. The difference between US Maple and Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band or the White Stripes is the difference

between their attitudes toward internal tension. Inevitably, the music of all three groups contains moments of rhythmic misregisration or tonal dysfunction. Both Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band and the White Stripes treat such tension as noise in Lotman's original sense. Unwilling to tolerate the sonic trace of this tension and unable to pull it into the orbit of an existing musical phoneme (or *museme*), they declare it non-existent. The problem: there *is* a sonic trace. And we, the listeners, are forced to negotiate the artist's disingenuous denials with the sonic evidence. Dissimilarly, US Maple capitalize on the inevitability of internal tension, taking it as a starting-point for a fortified sonic experience – fortified in the sense of fortified wine: enhanced, more potent. Track four on *Acre Thrills* is tolerant of its rhythmic misregistration and tonal dysfunction. The inherent proposal of this music is expansive, allowing material that is traditionally excluded. Such a proposal conditions our listening practice: persuading our listening to be similarly tolerant, similarly expansive. The listening imagination is pushed from the nest of the text (the sonic materiality of the song) and forced to wing it. This is the initiation of a process which exceeds in every direction the simple notions of form or content. Even the slightly less simple notion that form is content (or its mirror: content is form) is left wheezing in the effectual dust kicked up by this process of expansive tolerance.

The twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of theorists and critics who, by disassembling the artistic machine into its constitutive parts – its "machinomes" – sought to decode the DNA sequence of the art work. In so doing, these theorists (starting, perhaps with Shklovsky, and including Bakhtin, Lotman, and Barthes) announced that, embedded in the art work – distributed in its particles, its parts, its participants – lies an implicit way of viewing the world, of thinking about the world; in short, of reading (or as we agreed earlier: consuming) the world. This reading of the world, far from being a passive activity, is an active making of the world in which one pursues the reading activity. This reading constitutes and is constitutive of the formation of ideology, the formation of a perspective from which a specific reading can take place. It was a peculiar suggestion at first – though a suggestion that has become more and more commonplace since – that the activity of reading (of viewing, thinking, interpreting, consuming) the world is simultaneously an act of ideology formation and an act made possible by the formation of an ideology. When Bakhtin asserts that "understanding [which] remains purely passive, purely receptive, contributes nothing new to the world" (*Discourse* 281), he is implicitly opposing a static, spectatorial mode of reading, capable only of reception, with a processual reading activity, which avails itself of creation.

The project of unveiling the machinomic workings of the art work has been undertaken, by and large, on behalf of and from the position of the reader. In Bakhtin's rejection of Formalism and in Barthes' appropriation of nearly any text for his reading purposes, there is an assumption that it is the reader, and perhaps only the reader, who can manufacture the active process of the text.

However, in the music of US Maple, among others, there is an active and crucial recognition and acknowledgment of the contradictions within the very machinomes of the text. This recognition and acknowledgment is itself a reading. But the text is always already a reading machine. What it reads is itself. The reader's role is to read the text's reading of itself. By text, I mean any discourse, music included. And by reading, I mean everything parenthetically invoked earlier: viewing, thinking, interpreting, consuming (although this list, a severe condensation, cannot account for everything that happens when the text reads itself).

This is why Shklovsky says that "art is a means of re-experiencing the making of objects, but objects already made have no importance for art." (quoted in Jameson 79) Jameson, seeing in the Shklovskian edict of estrangement an art-historical infinite regression, wonders if Shklovsky suggestion has recourse to transcendental underpinnings: "…are we to assume some more metaphysical implication, namely that the very act of perception is itself a making of the object in question, and that to re-perceive an object anew is in a sense to become conscious of our own 'making' activity?" (Jameson 79) I think the answer to Jameson's question is yes – if we remove the assumption of a metaphysical implication. The implications of my suggestion of the text as a self-reading machine is anti-metaphysical. It suggests that all meaning is self-generated and self-referential, that there is no transcendental signified, that the reader is witness to something already read. Such Ideas clearly worry Jameson. He sees in Shklovskian principles a defensive conspiracy, as if the whole of formalism were a shield or an apologia for Shklovsky's own art.

Jameson compares the notion of estrangement, unfavorably, to the German Romantics' concept of irony. He says that, as Friedrich Schlegel would have it, irony appealed to science to obliterate the distinction between "history (which man, having made, can understand) and nature (which, as the result of God's creation, is utterly alien to us)". (80) Jameson finds in the folds of irony's "half-veiled presence" the dust or the encrustation or the residue, in any case, the evidence, of something greater than human experience. While unwilling, himself, to name it, Jameson avers that irony reveals

> …the gradual feeling that we share in the non-human as well, or rather that
> the I and the not-I are subsumed together under some greater more
> encompassing entity on the order of a transcendental ego or an absolute
> spirit. (80)

If one has recourse to Charles Sanders Peirce, rather than – or in addition to Viktor Shklovsky – than one might suggest that the only things we have access to are signs – human, historical transcriptions or translations of other things or concepts, including those belonging to nature (whatever, outside of human, historical concepts, that might mean). Even human beings, in the way we have access to ourselves: as a concept, as individuals, are nothing more (nor nothing less) than signs. When Jameson asserts that "Of this metaphysical idealism, then, the work of art clearly becomes the tangible symbol." (80), he is expressing a vastly different understanding of the ideas of symbol and sign than those held by Peirce (and, I must confess, by me).

The art object is, of course, a sign. Signs are circuits. An unperceived sign is an incomplete circuit and therefore, not a sign. And a non-existent sign is nothing at all. It can't be something else if the only thing we have access to is the sign. (In this, it is like Lotman's noise.) So to answer Jameson's question, point by point: yes, the act of perception completes the circuit of the sign and, in so doing, makes the sign (which for all intents and purposes, is the object). Yes, the act of perception makes the object. And yes, to re-perceive an object, in the sense of disconnecting the wiring of the conventional sign-making circuit and re-routing the wiring in a newly-perceptive way, is to become conscious of our own making activity. But, no, there is nothing metaphysical about this. It has no recourse to any transcendental anything. Returning to the notion of the text reading itself, it must be pointed out that the text initiates these perceiving (reading) processes by including, among its machinomes, a metalinguistic component comprising an awareness of its internal contradictions. This is what we hear in the fourth track of US Maple's *Acre Thrills.*

3.2 frame noise

Let me use another US Maple song to talk about another kind of noise. The song is US Maple's cover version of Bob Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay". The noise is the product of the framing of the work, or of its intertextuality. The strange thing about US Maple's "Lay Lady Lay" is that it performs a double estrangement, a double alienation. Although any interaction of multiple structures (such as a cover song) inevitably alters both structures (both songs), this song foregrounds this inevitability in a striking way. It is impossible to say which version of the song acts first upon the other. Any attempt to separate their fields of influence causes the whole of the correspondence to collapse, allowing each version to float free of the other; to engage other fields of influence. But it would be impossible for US Maple's cover version to float free of Dylan's original. To do so would be for it to cease to exist. So long as it exists it must correspond with the original and so long as it exists the original is also compelled into this dialogue. Given the tolerance of internal tensions in US Maple's musical practice, one would expect their cover to strike the Dylan original with a malicious violence. Less predictable is the gesture's recoil: the reverse is equally, if not more savagely true. The original counters the attempted assault (or assimilation or appropriation) with an intransigence that undermines every one of US Maple's maneuvers. If the band were to attack the pillars of the song with greater ferocity, the song would lose its structural identity – it would cease to be the song and the cover version, as an act of violence upon the canon, would lose its gestural value; it would be transformed into parody or puerile defamation or a different song altogether. Perversely, by retaining the song's pillars, US Maple undermines its own subversive impulses and, instead, becomes the victim of the subversion. If one were so inclined, one could read the song as the transformation of a sadistic intent into a masochistic act.

US Maple's "Lay Lady Lay" sets two structuring processes into motion in the same space. It isn't so much that the two processes find themselves in direct or purposeful opposition, instead they interact like two combatants in the "Battling Tops" game, popular in the 1970s, in

which players launch different colored, but otherwise identical tops into a gently concave plastic arena. The tops, both drawn to the center, inevitably clash, sending each other sparking off to the plastic boundaries of the playing surface. They drift, again, down the plastic slope and collide a second and a third and, perhaps, a fourth time, losing momentum with each hit. The tops, of course, have no intention to clash; they are oblivious to the object of the game, whereby the last top still spinning is declared the winner. Conveniently, for use in my post-structural analyses, it is just as true that the two players, once they have set the tops in motion, have no control over the events or outcome of the contest. Which isn't to say that my brother and I didn't take great pride (perhaps best described as "authorial") in our carefully considered string-winding techniques, each certain that his was the better.

Mikhail Bakhtin finds such clashes in the language of literature. He refers to the resulting phenomena of the text as "double-languaged", that is possessed of two independent perspectives, voiced in the same construct of words. In the double-languaged work "there are not only…two individual consciousnesses, two voices, two accents, as there are two socio-linguistic consciousnesses, two epochs, that…come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance." (Bakhtin 360) Granted, Bakhtin says they consciously fight it out. I take that to mean that the author or the reader (or both) are conscious of the fight and that it is, in fact, this very consciousness that invests the utterance (the text) with its double-language, and thereby, with its artistic value. It would be silly to imagine that the structuring processes of the two versions of the song are conscious of the battle or even of themselves. It is the specific, yet often unheralded, contribution of structuralism, to have identified the "unconscious" of the text. It is, in fact, the as yet undiscovered revelation of structuralism that all forms of the unconscious – whether the Freudian unconscious of the psyche, the Levi-Straussian unconscious of culture, the Darwinian unconscious of evolution, etc. – are simply and conclusively textual. It is not that the psyche actually contains stratifications and that one could – with sensitive enough apparatus – distinguish the location of the conscious from that of the unconscious. It is, instead, that when we, pursuing our human project, "read" the psyche, we read certain actions as products of the conscious will and other actions as products of the unconscious. The only viable argument for the "natural" presence or occurrence of two distinct regions of the psyche called the conscious and the unconscious would be one that locates their presence or occurrence not in the object of the psyche, but in the subject of the psyche seeker; in the reader, in the defined and delineated act of reading. After all, the human animal is the animal whose primary form of consumption is "reading" the world. Other animals consume their world by eating it.

The tension in US Maple's "Lay Lady Lay" is an intertextual tension, that is a tension between a process inside the work and a process outside the work; in this case, the tension between US Maple's dis-unifying tendencies and Bob Dylan's now canonized song. In this respect, the alienness, the dirtiness, what I am obliged to call the noise, of their "Lay Lady Lay" is the result of the kind of disorder described by Mary Douglas. What makes this song such an intriguing construct is that as one comes to it, probably already acquainted with US Maple

(and, if not, at least with Captain Beefheart or No Wave or what the Wire calls "avant rock"), one almost certainly also comes already acquainted with Bob Dylan's original version of the song. Such a listener may be equally at home in the culture of US Maple and the culture of the Dylan original. This forces (or allows) the listening experience to toggle back and forth between perspectives, taking US Maple for the "home culture" at one moment and Dylan's original, the next. The matter of each structuring process, in turn, is detected as noise (or dirt) in the "home culture" of the other. For such a listener, no reading is final. There is no reasonable basis for declaring one culture natural and the other unnatural, or one pure and the other contaminating. This is the kind of aesthetic experience, an experience of not-quite-rightness, that converts its very contradictions – the frictions that undermine formalist assumptions of the unity of the aesthetic object – into its aesthetic value.

This value, as I have described it here – a product of over-determined, intertextual tension – comes to rest in an under-determined state. This is the fate of all over-determination: it must, in the end, surrender any allegiance to what Yury Tynjanov, the Formalist, calls *dominanta*, the feature of the work around which all the other features gather in an expression of solidarity; of artistic unity. The work which, in its very structuring, confesses its inability to reconcile itself to such a unity, is a work which opens itself to the spectator. Such a work begins its interactions, its intimations, from a position of humility and honesty. It makes no pretense to ordain or command. It expresses its inevitable solidarity with the fate of all attempts to communicate, commiserate, and connect: it expresses its inconclusiveness. Such a work both conveys and invites sympathy and is at an immediate and decisive advantage over the work which is unable or unwilling to do so.

When a bubble of Reich's feedback emanates from a loudspeaker, something transfers from the inside to the outside. It would seem to be music which has escaped. With screwdriver in hand, I deconstruct the speaker and find no music. The deconstruction of the speaker, in fact, kills the feedback in transit. The feedback is not music until it is released from the speaker. The four sides, top and bottom of the speaker cabinet are not, it turns out, the music's frame. Is the music framed by our ears? This seems unlikely. The apparatus of reception cannot be the frame. Our ears cannot be considered to be connected, appendaged, to the music. If others listen to the same music, they cannot do so with our ears. Compare this to a painting, whose wooden frame accompanies the painting to each judgement, regardless of the judge.

How do we know that it is music we are hearing? Is it, as Kant might suggest, a recognition of the form, plucked out from amidst the distraction of the instrumental tones which transmit it? Form, after all, is the only determination "which these representations possess that admits with certainty of being universally communicated" (Kant 66). Kant says if there is some agreement that what we are hearing is music, this agreement follows from a mutual recognition of form. Can it be so simple; so universal? Steve Reich has made music by swinging microphones, pendulum-like, above a loudspeaker. The speaker emits a feedback

tone whenever one of the microphones passes over it. When the arcs of the microphonic-pendulums are wide and the velocity great, the tones are brief and sudden. As the arcs shorten and the velocity slows, the tones grow longer and more gradual, fading in at the start and out at the finish. Reich's *Pendulum Music*, does not suggest musicness in form. Yet it is released on CD and performed in concert halls. What musicness might we attribute to John Cage's *4'33"* which produces no sound to delineate its form?

Musicness is a product of definitional frames like the CD or the concert hall performance. A definitional frame conveys musicness by implicating the work at hand with other works called music. A wooden picture frame is, in one of its roles, definitional, in that it conveys pictureness by implicating the contents of the frame with other pictures. It also acts as a delineating frame, staking out the territory which is designated for aesthetic judgement. The definitional and delineating frames are products of the object, not of the subject or the subject's perceptions. The definitional frame tells the subject what it is that is framed; it exists independently of any instance of work it might contain (poetry can survive the loss of any poem; perhaps, even, of all poems). The delineating frame tells the subject when or where to start and finish its consideration of the work; it is specific to the individual work and does not maintain an independent, unattached existence.

Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music* and John Cage's *4'33"* carry specific framing devices in their titles. Reich's piece carries the definitional frame of the word *music*, while Cage's piece carries the delineating frame of duration. Neither piece is empirically music. (Actually, no music is empirically music. There is no such thing as empirical music.) The subject who approaches the work, by attending a performance or playing a recording, receives and accepts the *parergonal* information which frames these works as music. The subject, were it to happen upon these sounds in an *unframed* context, would likely react to them otherwise. Reich's music might be read as technical malfunction; Cage's as personal dysfunction: that man is just sitting there at the piano (what is wrong with him?)

If defining and delineating *parerga* operate externally – verging on the work, buttressing and outlining its borders – there are also internal *parerga* which undertake their framing activities from the inside. For instance, to judge the third line of Puff Daddy's "I'll Be Missing You" ("So far from hanging on the block for dough") we must accept reference to the internal form and meaning of the first and second lines ("Seems like yesterday we used to rock the show / I laced the track, you locked the flow"). The third line fulfills both a rhyme scheme and a narrative scheme, established by the first and second lines. The show-flow-dough scheme is a determinative framing device, each word reflecting and shading the other two. In order to judge the form as a whole, we must perform simultaneous assessments of part-to-part, part-to-whole, whole-to-part, beginning-to-end, etc., revising them as new information comes in. A single element of the work cannot escape the framing of any other element, of any set of elements nor of the whole. For example, the now-and-then structure of Puff Daddy's narrative implies a transformation. How can the *now* be judged without recourse to the *then*? or vice

versa? Can we ignore the nature of the transformation? Can there be a *trans*-form which somehow sidesteps a notion of initial and subsequent form? If so, where is the form? Is it the a-a-a-a rhyme scheme (completed by the word *know*)? Should we judge this scheme disinterestedly, as if all rhyme schemes are equal? Is blank verse equally equal? How then do we make our distinctions? What aspect of our discretion – if not a sort of frame-invoked prejudice – is employed in aesthetic judgements? My point is that interest – in the figure of determinative frames – is built into the form of the object and cannot be bracketed out without bracketing out the form and the object itself. This leaves our judgmental capacities with nothing to judge.

In *The Parergon*, Derrida turns to Lucas Cranach's painting *Lucretia*. He asks, apropos of Kant (who, you will recall, refers to a statue's drapery as a *parergon*), "Should one regard as a *parergon* the dagger which is not part of her naked and natural body?" (422) He puts similar questions to "a light band of transparent veil in front of her sex" and to a necklace. I offer this response: the dagger *is* a *parergon* if our attention is presently directed to the veil, the necklace, her sex or anything other than the dagger. The veil is likewise a *parergon* if our attention is directed to anything other than the veil. But, again, the dagger does not lose its intrinsicness merely by becoming a *parergon*. The dagger is one thing *relative* to the presence, position and depiction of the veil, the necklace, her sex: all that is not the dagger. And each of these items is similarly determined *relative to* the dagger. The explicit always contains the implicit; always contains (and is contained by) the defining, delineating, and determining frame. The object defies *ergonal* determination. Like a constellation, its form is never attributable to a single star; no single star constitutes its *ergon*. Each star is *parergonal* with respect to the constellation and to the meaning-function of every other star as an element of the constellation (the *work*). Yet each star is essential to the constellation's being.

In a sense, what I am doing here is making a case for the notion of the *interested object*. If, as I am suggesting, the object-identity of a work of art is inseparable from its always-present, *parergonally*-supplied interest, then judging the work necessitates an involvement with its supplements. I'll take it a step further: the work *is* its supplements. As Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland, California, there's no there there. The very notion of a static, consistent *ergon* is a fallacy.

This assertion is borne out in dramatic fashion if we look at work involving sampling. "I'll Be Missing You" (1997) – which reaches into the body of the Police's "Every Breath You Take" (1982), like an Aztec priest reaching into the body of a sacrificial prisoner, removing its beating heart and redressing it as an offering to the memory of Notorious B.I.G. (killed in a drive-by shooting in March of 1997) – is a particularly good illustration. Whereas, most rap producers and D.J.'s layer small unidentifiable samples to create a montage which bears no resemblance to any of its constitutive sources, Puff Daddy (a.k.a. Sean "Puffy" Combs, a.k.a. P-Diddy) has made a habit (and a career) of sampling the instrumental "hook" from a single, recognizable source, looping it and rapping to his disembodied creation.

Singling out the *ergon* of sampling works, especially when the sampled source material is identifiable, is a doubly difficult task (as we have seen with Derrida's use of Kant). The process operates as the inverse of the con game which involves keeping track of a bean shuffled among three shells. An overturned shell never reveals the bean. Only one shell is overturned at a time, leaving intact the possibility that the bean exists beneath one of the other two shells. (In fact, the game's operator has surreptitiously removed the bean from the game.) The overturned, empty shell acts as *parergon*, suggesting *ergon* elsewhere. Though we never find it, the game depends on our assumption that there *is* a bean. On the other hand, our consideration of "I'll Be Missing You", similarly restricted to consideration of only one element at a time, finds a bean wherever it looks. Nearly every element resonates with a familiarity and a substantiality borrowed from its sampled source: The Police's "Every Breath You Take". "I'll Be Missing You" appears to be all beans. The beans, however, are borrowed beans. Attempts to locate the *ergon* of "I'll Be Missing You" necessarily have recourse to the *ergon* or *parerga* of "Every Breath You Take", casting suspicion on the existence of a bean under the shell of "I'll Be Missing You".

The original song is nothing but a constellation formed by its definitional, delineating and determinative frames. The subsequent song is similarly established by its own set of frames. Finally, the friction created by the relationship of the first work to the second provides a new set of frames constructed of issues of difference and repetition, notions of authorship, and ideas regarding purity of form. The constellative nature of our experience allows each frame to appear as *ergon*, when we cast our consideration toward it, but to recede into *parergonality* whenever we turn away to look at a different element. This accounts for the simultaneous, if fractional and factional, validity of various aesthetic judgements.

Kant's notion of the disinterested subject – a sort of simple imp inside us at the moment of judgment – looked us in the eye and told us we are all connected by a single eye (I). This eye (I) is always constituted by a frame: a *sensis communis*, for example. He told us something which was simply a lie; an untruth, in the sense of 'not the whole truth'. Here's what he left out: inside the seemingly simple, monolithic frame there is a fragmented, heterogeneous inside; a frame with its own interiority. The disinterested subject is itself a frame. It is meant to define, delineate, and determine the functionality of the rest of the faculties of the divided subject (which, of course, are frames themselves). Furthermore, according to Kant, the judgement of which the disinterested subject, alone, is capable, is *parergonal* to the relationship of freedom and nature: judgement enables freedom within nature. The disinterested subject is the party crasher without whom the party would crash.

Kant's subject admits it cannot act freely in nature until it can judge the beauty of art. Why can't it make this admission: "I can't judge art until I know it's art"? Kant excludes this admission for fear of the lacunae it exposes. Speaking of Kant's examples (the statue's drapery, the palace's colonnades, the painting's frame), Derrida says: "What constitutes them

as *parerga* is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*" (423). The absence inherent in the *ergon* is simply implied by the presence of the *parergon*. "Without this lack the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*" (Derrida 423).

It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that the statuses of *ergon* and *parerga* are not fixed. Each element of the work simultaneously frames and is framed by the other elements. Only the subject can nominate any single element as the *ergon* of the work (the work of the work). When we cast our consideration on one element, the other elements become *parega* to our subjectively-nominated *ergon*. The *ergon* is defined, delineated, and determined by the *parerga*. If we cast our consideration, in the first instance, in the direction of *parerga*, we find our hook comes back empty. *Parerga* cannot be ascertained in and of themselves, but only in relation to one or another specific conception of the *ergon*. In considering *parerga,* the subject must recall them from the periphery, or else, must consider the whole of the work – the *gestalt* – thereby subduing all singularities, transforming them into constitutive *parerga*.

Perhaps the universality of aesthetic judgements is a product of simple implication. All of us – all us objects of the world – are implicated in each other's being (Heidegger's *being-in-the-world*). Who, among beings, can justify its existence without referring to and acquiring referentiality from others (its *parergonal* brothers)? This, again, suggests a constellation or a language. Kant says: "the judgment of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise…there could be no room for contention in the matter, or for the claim to the necessary agreement of others." What does this description conjure, if not language? All language admits to a certain lack of consensus among its users. Indirect significations are built-in: inference, difference, implication, extrapolation, dislocation, indemnification. Nevertheless, ordinary language strives to acquire "the necessary agreement of others", following the model of the road sign, assuming an effort on the part of the receiver to focus only on what is being asserted positively (Walk/Do Not Walk). Art, however, is made of the *in*directness of its signifiers. Artistic language asks the receiver to dive into its interstices, to claw at its exclusions and occlusions and to report back; to designate interpretations as frames, to accept frames as the basis of interpretation. The subject must accept uncertainty as a kind of *sensis communis*; or, at least, as a shared condition.

4. Repetition

4.1 the very idea of repetition

> We dig repetition
> We dig repetition
> We dig repetition in the music
> And we're never going to lose it
> All you daughters and sons
> Who are sick of fancy music
> We dig repetition
> Repetition in the drums
> And we're never going to lose it
> This is the three R's
> The three R's:
> Repetition, Repetition, Repetition
> ("Repetition", words by Mark E. Smith, music by The Fall)

Kierkegaard, he digs repetition

Just asking the question sets the dominoes in motion.

> You can, after all, take a trip to Berlin; you have been there once before, and now you can prove to yourself whether a repetition is possible and what importance it has. (Kierkegaard 131)

Punch my ticket, I'm off to Berlin. Furthermore, or better yet, I buy Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel, *Repetition*. (Apparently it is possible – published by Grove Press; $13.00 at Shakespeare and Co., New York City.) The book's protagonist – whose name changes periodically, or, who has one or more doubles, replicants, lookalikes – travels to Berlin on my behalf. He finds a room and describes it in great detail. Detailed descriptions are one of the features of Robbe-Grillet's style. But I've recently read another book called *Repetition* by Kierkegaard (or, did I read Kierkegaard second, after Robbe-Grillet?), and this description sounds uncannily familiar. I check my references, one against the other: page 151 in Kierkegaard, page 15-16 in Robbe-Grillet. The passages are nearly identical. Robbe-Grillet's room is Kierkegaard's room, 106 years later. It shows signs of the intervening century. The curtains are now torn. The armchair is in "poor condition, upholstered in threadbare red velvet, shiny in spots where it is worn and soiled, and elsewhere gray with dust." (15) "The seat of the armchair is split open, a tuft of black horsehair sticking up through a triangular rip." (16) The glass in the window is missing. But still, there are similarities, repetitions: in Kierkegaard "The first room is not illuminated." In Robbe-Grillet "The nearer room is not illuminated." Have we, as readers, been twice to this room? Or only once? Is Robbe-Grillet's description a recollection of something we've already experienced? Or a second visit? Are not these a repetition of the questions Kierkegaard asked on his trip to Berlin? Dominoes. I already said that.

Kierkegaard's pursues his quarry: "Alas! Is this the repetition?" For Kierkegaard, repetition is a question of consciousness.

> Consciousness, then, is the relation, a relation whose form is contradiction. But how does consciousness discover the contradiction? If…ideality and

reality in all naivete communicated with one another, consciousness would never emerge, for consciousness emerges precisely through the collision, just as it presupposes the collision. Immediately there is no collision, but mediately it is present. As soon as the question of a *repetition* arises, the collision is present, for only a repetition of what has been before is conceivable.

If everything in the world were completely identical, in reality there would be no repetition, because reality is only in the moment…When ideality and reality touch each other, then repetition occurs. When, for example, I see something in the moment, ideality enters in and will explain that it is a repetition. Here is the contradiction, for that which is is also in another mode. That the external is, that I see, but in the same instant I bring it into relation with something that also is, something that is the same and that also will explain that the other is the same. Here is a redoubling; here it is a matter of repetition. Ideality and reality therefore collide – in what medium? In time? That is indeed an impossibility. In what, then? In eternity? That is indeed an impossibility. In what, then? In consciousness – there is the contradiction. (274-275)

It's a serpentine formula, and one that doubles back on itself, proving that consciousness is manifest in contradiction because contradiction is proof of consciousness. The medium in which this proving takes place is repetition, where "ideality and reality touch each other". It is in realizations of difference, that we become aware of repetition. When the ideality of the object touches the reality of our experience of it – a touching that happens only in our interpretative perception – the reality separates, as it were, from the ideality. It peels like the veneer from a counter top; it chips like the tip of a marble nose, it wobbles. This wobble, this separation, this not-quite-rightness, allows us to become aware of the interstice between the ideal and the real.

I ask you to take it on faith (or better yet, on knowledge) when, in order to make a short leap, I assert that it is not uncommon to attribute consciousness itself – rather than its proof – to cultural forces. In another tricky formula, such attributions claim that consciousness is both a product and a producer of culture, and, of course, vice versa. We must excuse the excessive mirroring here. We are, after all, talking about repetition.

To keep track of ourselves, let me anchor three grommets through which we might feed the thread on loan from Ariadne. These grommets – points of reference – come from an enlightening essay, "Repetition As A Figure of Black Culture", by James A. Snead. How might we think repetition in culture?

- Repetition is inevitable because culture (like language and signification) is not inexhaustible; there are a limited number of cultural components and, given time, some will inevitably be repeated.
- Repetition is necessary because it allows a culture to maintain a sense of continuity about itself.

- Repetition is desirable because it is the milieu in which cultural change occurs: "progress within cycle, 'differentiation' within repetition." (Snead 65)

Well and good, in that we have now identified a few uses of repetition in consciousness and in culture and maybe have even allowed ourselves to think of consciousness and culture as, if not synonymous, at least symbiotic. But how does repetition manifest itself in works of art? What are the various breeds of the species *repetitious aestheticus*?

Michael Riffaterre ("Paragram and Significance" in *Text Production*) makes the distinction between lexical and semantic repetition. In lexical repetition, a word or figure is repeated, but perhaps with different meaning. I've composed a short poetic example of this:

> **This Tree**
> This tree cedes
> its leaves;
> decidedly leaves
> the scene.
>
> It's seen
> all it needs
> to seed.

In semantic repetition – meaning is repeated, perhaps in different words (Queneau's *Exercises in Style* is a great example, or, in a less overt – less intentional – example, the recurrence of themes in the poetry of William Bronk or the prose of Samuel Beckett).

Our first distinction, then, is, to put it (perhaps a bit too) simply, a distinction between repetition of form and repetition of content. Looking at specific instances of works in visual art, music, and literature, we discover that this distinction holds most securely in literature. By and large, visual art and music allow the form to dictate the very material of the content (or, minimally, ask the author to make a very rudimentary, initial determination regarding the scope of content).

Derrida, he digs repetition

If it was never here in the first place, how can it be repeated? Wait a minute. If it was never here in the first place, what was it I thought I saw, heard, or read? Okay, I don't suppose it really matters. I am not at an impasse. If I can call whatever it was that I saw, heard or read "it" (in quotes, thereby admitting that it wasn't really it, but some surrogate "it"), then can we allow that the "it" (if not the true it) can be repeated? These are questions in a Derridean mode. Only the true *it* maintains a presence. But presence is a fallacy, an ideal. I am never in the presence of presence. It is never present. I am never in the presence of *it*. My homonym, my eye, is similarly never in the presence of the sun – that which makes all my eye's seeing possible. To be directly in its presence, to stare directly into the sun would blind my eye. My eye accepts the presence of the sun, but never by direct observation. My eye accepts the sun

by dint of its traces, by dint of its glint off a storefront window, by dint of the shadow of the World Trade Center or by the absence of that shadow, by dint of simple daylight, cloud cover, and nightfall (by dint even of hearsay: my ears testify to birdsong at dawn). So, presence is absent, its presence testified by its traces.

Mel Bochner writes (via Husserl, Hume and A.J. Ayer): "What has been generally neglected is a concern with the object of art in terms of its own material individuality – the thing itself." (211) This notion of the thing itself conjures literary examples: Robbe-Grillet's *Snapshots*, Ponge's things, and Stevens' "Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself". But what is "the thing itself"? Didn't Duchamp initiate the 20th century with the word "readymade" which was always already the thing itself, but wasn't an art work, an art thing, until he said so? Once it was an art thing, what was its relation to the thing itself? Was the snow shovel still *the* snow shovel or even *a* snow shovel? Immediately, we realize that the nature of the thing is not so simple. The thing is always duplicitous. It is always and never itself. From this starting point, we can begin to see repetition in new ways: as both impossible and unavoidable. Deleuze says repetition and difference are the same thing (*Desert Islands* 142) and surely Kierkegaard would agree. Difference and repetition are the grounds upon which ideality and reality meet; constituted by and constitutive of consciousness.

Any reading, indeed the very notion of representation (which requires a reading to be seen as representation), is a form of metonymy: using one aspect of the *it* to suggest the whole complex experience of it. This, to my mind, is the meaning (or the mode) of Stevens' poem and the most essential understanding of Derrida, the assumption from which most of his most powerful insights derive. This "first principle", if that is not overstating it, appears first in Derrida's reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. The presence in this case is the originary presence of language. Derrida's insight is that Rousseau, in arguing for the primacy of speech over writing, betrays an allegiance to the traditional allegiance: to the notion of presence, to the notion that the spoken word is present and that the written word is the trace of that presence. In Rousseau's writing, Derrida finds and exposes the unwriting of this conception of writing. Rousseau's writing, in fact, speaks to the unsaying of the primacy and presence of speech. Not that writing is, or has direct access to, presence. Writing is the trace *par excellence*. Writing is always once removed from itself. Reading is a constitutive and a reconstitutive act: a re-writing of writing. It is a repetition of the original writing as trace or (as Derrida also says) of the original writing as inscription. Reading, then, is the repetition of the *it* that was never here in the first place. All reading is a re-reading. The closest we can get to reading the *it*, is to re-read the text's re-writing of its own ideal writing. That writing is a form of re-presentation which requires a reading. Any re-writing is by necessity a reading. Since all writings are by necessity re-writings, all writings are readings. So, what we read when we read a text is the text's reading of itself.

> To recognize how the poetic text, thanks to its aesthetic character, allows us
> to initially perceive and understand something, the analysis cannot begin with
> the question of the significance of the particular within the achieved form of

the whole; rather, it must pursue the significance still left open in the process of perception that the text, like a "score," indicates for the reader. (Jauss 141)

Although Jauss's inclination to point toward the "significance still left open" is a move in the right direction, it (like much reader-response theory) does not go far enough. Jauss is still hung up on the notion of significance preceded by the definite article. This hangover, produced by a long critical night of drinking up the contents of the text as if they were one solid object (the text's *unity*), is not only the product of twentieth century theories of textual meaning, but has its roots, no doubt, in the Derrida-nominated "metaphysics of presence". As Susan R. Suleiman points out in her introduction to *The Reader In The Text*,

> Whatever their differences, rhetoricians, semioticians, psychologists, sociologists, philologists, and historians can all meet on common ground in their recoginition of the text as a "full" object, all the more full and rich for its ability to accommodate a number of different readings, different approaches. (40)

And, more emphatically:

> The notion of the unified text, like that of the unified self, is an illusion, and the virtue of deconstructive criticism is that it places this potentially tragic insight at the center of its activity. Far from recoiling in horror at the void, deconstructive critics gaze at it with Sisyphean impassivity. (43)

My own attitude to this emblematic recalcitrance – the disunity of both the self and the effects of reading – is far from impassive (Sisyphean or otherwise). I place this tragic insight at the center of my critical activity precisely because it horrifies me; because (to paraphrase Stephen Crane) it is bitter and because it is my heart. Or more precisely (and less dramatically), because it is at the heart of the human communicative condition.

Derridean deconstruction pulls the lynchpins from the artifice of textual unity, allowing the text to collapse and scatter. Reading is left with scraps and inhalations, wisps and glimpses. One is tempted to refer to these as the elementary particles of reading – but that is misleading, because it suggests they accumulate to form a whole, so lets call them the *effects* of reading, since this carries the quintuple sense of 1) material (as in personal effects); 2) intents or meanings; 3) an outward sign or appearance; 4) the power to influence and 5) impressions. Even these *effects* of reading fail to materialize in unified form; they are always multiform and polyvalent. They are always unstable and essentially evasive. Succumbing to the temptation we've endeavored to avoid, Derrida refers to our *effects* as *elements*; nevertheless, his conclusions are inescapable:

> Every "element" – phoneme or grapheme – is constituted from the trace it bears in itself of the other elements in the chain or the system. This linking [*enchaînement*], this tissue, is the *text*, which is only produced in the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is ever or anywhere simply present or absent. Throughout there are only differences and traces of traces. (*Positions* 38, quoted and re-translated by Suleiman 41)

That's as far as I want to take this elaboration of the schema of Derrida's deconstruction – itself a form of difference-enacting repetition. It has been elaborated and re-elaborated with great acumen elsewhere (in particular, in Spivak's preface to *Of Grammatology*). Instead, I will redirect the unworking, undermining impulse from language, in general, to what we might call the language of the art work. I leave this phrasing intentionally ambiguous, because I want to be able to flit nattily (and gnatily) from works of literature to music to sound to film to paintings to conceptual works to performance, and on… (others may come to me). I insist on using the word "reading" to describe the reception of the art work – regardless of medium – because I want to retain both the sense of interpretation embedded in reading (and not embedded as naturally in words like seeing or hearing); and the interpenetration of writing (as reading) and reading (as re-reading) as they strive to repeat the *it* that isn't here in the first place.

Paul de Man, he digs repetition

When we talk about repetition it is inevitable that we should start to string things together in the manner of a chain of daisies. Rousseau's writings on speech and writing are followed by Derrida's writings on Rousseau's writings and, in turn, by Paul de Man's writings on Derrida's. At this link in the chain, de Man facilitates our entry into a discussion of the art object:

> Representation is an ambivalent process that implies the absence of what is being made present again, and this absence cannot be assumed to be merely contingent. However, when representation is conceived as imitation, in the classical sense of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, it confirms rather than undermines the plenitude of the represented entity. It functions as a mnemothechnic sign that brings back something that happened not to be there at the moment, but whose existence in another place, at another time, or in a different mode of consciousness is not challenged. The model for this idea of representation is the painted image, restoring the object to view as if it were present and thus assuring the continuation of its presence. (123)

Abstract or non-representational art forms – music, chiefly – go a step further. As the eighteenth century would have it, music doesn't so much restore the object to view, as grant the heretofore invisible object the ability *to be viewed*. To make the invisible visible, the undetectable detectable, the absent present: this is how we verify its existence. Music's purpose is to make our feelings materially real. It is de Man who attributes such thoughts to eighteenth century aesthetics. I would say that this viewpoint has not stopped seeing. This is still how many listeners make sense of music, as the materialization of the immaterial, or, tellingly, as the objectification of the subjective. But Rousseau, speaking ventriloquistically through the mouth of de Man – or is it de Man speaking through Rousseau? – asserts that music, in fact, operates in a very different way. Music, lacking an accountable connection to a specific referent (whether to feelings or, as in programmatic music, to things, such as the sea in Debussy's *La Mer*), functions independent of meaning. It is, in de Man's words, "hollow at the core…it [music] 'means' the negation of all presence." (128) Music achieves whatever effects it achieves by means of pure structuration, by difference from and resemblance to itself.

> Not being grounded in any substance, the musical sign can never have any
> assurance of existence. It can never be identical with itself… (128)

I want to suspend de Man's thought (or is it Rousseau's?) here in mid-air, tantalizingly. I want
to waft up like a current (of air, of thought) into the gape of this artificial caesura. The musical
sign, never identical with itself, is the articulation of the absence of presence on which Derrida
insists. The musical sign is immateriality itself. But wait, immateriality – as a thought, at least
– is a substance. If we say that the musical sign is immateriality itself, we are assuring its
existence as something (even if that something is nothing).

> …or with prospective repetitions of itself, even if these future sounds possess the
> same physical properties of pitch and timbre as the present one. (128)

Prospective repetitions are prospective readings. Like Borges' Pierre Menard, who read the
Quixote by re-writing it verbatim, a repetition is a reading of that which it repeats. The
repetition can not be identical because its surrounding structure, its relations of difference and
resemblance (even to itself), have changed. The pre-repetition sign that can never be
identical even with itself – the one I dangled teasingly above – is immediately and
unavoidably a repetition too, in that any perception of it is a reading. As we have established,
any reading is conducted by dint of traces and never by direct observation of presence. This
reading is being revised (repeated) as it is being initiated. Each unfolding chunk (I use the
term *chunk* precisely for its imprecision) of the sign – musical or otherwise – refigures
previous chunks and prefigures subsequent chunks. The subsequent chunk soon becomes
current and refigures itself. It refigures what came before it, which, once refigured, demands a
refiguring of the current chunk which replaces it as it moves into previousness. The harmless
daisy chain of repetition reveals itself as a chain-reaction in the core of signification. The
resultant meltdown blurs concepts such as meaning and reference and representation.
Charles Sanders Peirce described this meltdown in no uncertain terms:

> …[a sign is] anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to
> refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the
> interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*". (Peirce 303)

Signification confers and defers meaning simultaneously and in equal measure, arriving at a
zero sum which disavows certainty and confirms possibility.

Deleuze and Guattari, they dig repetition

> Gertrude Stein came to thinking and saying that there was no such thing as
> repetition, since each time the thing or word recurred, the insistence was
> different or new. And if one counts one and one and one and one, you might
> say that none of the ones is the same as any other, and if asserted as a
> complete thing in a continuous present, it does not look backward to a
> previous one or forward to a another one to follow. (Sutherland 147.)

Insistence, in the context of Stein's thinking, implies, not that each recurrence is a new

identity or meaning, but that in each repetition there is a different pressure exerting itself on

the unit which changes the meaning not of the repeated unit, but of the "complete thing". Setting aside the dubious idea that this complete thing and its one and one and one and one might exist in a continuous present, Stein's conception of repetition has a different impact on – a different meaning to – the part and the whole. And, applying a little thought to the subject, it quickly becomes apparent that the question of repetition is meaningless without initial agreement regarding the constitution of part and whole. In the absence of such agreement, the question of repeating "it" is pre-empted by the question of what "it" is; of how "it" is defined. Deleuze and Guattari are, of course, uniquely concerned with such questions. Or, if their concern is not so unique – many philosophers from Aristotle onwards have been concerned with categories and with "itness" – Deleuze and Guattari are, at least, responsible for some unique postulates.

What if we think of repetition not as a daisy chain of one and one and one and one? Deleuze and Guattari – their preoccupation with all things multiple and indeterminate – imagine the repetitious nature of the rhizome, which

> …is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which one is added ($n + 1$)…It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ($n - 1$). (*Plateaus* 23)

That is, thinking of repetition, maybe it would be better not to think of starting from nothing, discovering the One and then repeating it: +1+1+1. Maybe it is more fruitful to think of the life-world as already inhabited by a number (n) of things, in the broadest sense of the term. The world as endless, uninterrupted population; redolent of repetition. Deleuze and Guattari suggest a procedure, a thought, which precedes by separating or nominating singularities from the number (n) of things: ($n - 1$), designating the not-quite-right-one, un-hitching it – for the moment – from the unlimited semiosis of n.

If semiosis were a matter of $n + 1$, it would carry an implied teleological promise: a transcendental signifier at the end of the chain. The final +1 would equal infinity, which, of course, signifies nothing as much as it signifies everything. All this pretense of semiotic progress would amount to nothing. Our eventual arrival at this +1 would force us to admit that we had been chasing wild geese, praying to false idols. Preemptively, we could declare ourselves semiotic Jews, content to infinitely defer this final +1 messiah.

If, however, semiosis were a matter of $n - 1$, the final -1 could not amount to a transcendental signified, but a zero, a nothing: the only plausible identity for any transcendental signified. N – 1 semiosis suggests not a building up or towards, nor does it suggest a tearing down. What it suggests is an imminent eternity and infinity from which moments of semiotic communion are plucked and nominated under the rubric "significance". Repetition in this mode is not accumulative (nor, I repeat, subtractive), but reiterative (with roots in *iterum*, Latin for again:

that is, to *re-again*). What's more, while the +1 suggests the linearity of a chain, the -1 suggests a cloud, a nebula (a cloud nebula), from which matter and mass (significance) is subtracted. This image is more metaphorically useful (and perhaps more true) than the linearity of the rhizome which Deleuze and Guattari allow. The rhizome proves surprising, not so much for the paradoxes it contains, but for the metaphorical inadequacy of the image to suggest ephemeral, disembodied (deterritorialized), multiplicity.

Time, too, may be usefully thought through this n-1 model. If we imagine the future as a set (n) of possibilities (allowing that the value of n may be unimaginably large), then the future, when it arrives as the present (or, perhaps more accurately, when we arrive at the future, thereby transforming it, via the encounter, into the present), is an example of n-1. What we're left with, however, is not n with the value of 1 subtracted, but 1 with the value of n-1 subtracted. Only 1 has survived the future's metamorphosis into the present. This would seem to contradict the second law of thermodynamics which predicts that all energy dissipates, that all order tends toward disorder. If we accept the n-1 model of time, then the vast, uncertain disorder of the future (n = all things, all at once – like Borges' Aleph), always arrives as absolutely certain order, as the unavoidable present and, becomes in an instant, the unchangeable past .

4.2 system repetition

"The basic formula of contexture is familiar enough both to linguists and to psychologists. It is a sequence of semantic units (e.g., words, sentences), a sequence unalterable without a change in the whole, in which the meaning accumulates successively: **[page]**

a	b	c	d	e	f	g
	a	b	c	d	e	f
		a	b	c	d	e
			a	b	c	d
				a	b	c
					a	b
						a

At the end, the entire sequence, at first given successively, is accumulated simultaneously in reverse order. Only when the contexture has been completed, do the whole and each of the individual partial meanings acquire a definite relation to reality (most obviously in detective stories where the last page can change the meaning of everything that has preceded). As long as the contexture is not completed, its total meaning is always uncertain, but the semantic intention tending toward the wholeness of the contexture accompanies its perception from the first word. Even with a contexture, just as with a configuration, attention is focused on wholeness, but with a difference that is best elucidated by comparing a literary work as a pattern (a compositional whole) with a literary work conceived as a contexture. Compositional parts do not interpenetrate; rather they become factors of composition precisely on the basis of as distinct a delimitation and differentiation as possible…On the other hand, the individual semantic units composing the sequence of the contexture, as we have already said, do interpenetrate in two directions: successively and regressively. Hence a contexture is created in a different way than a pattern… (Mukarovsky 73-74)

As we have discussed previously, any diachronic thing (if it's fair to call a diachronic thing a thing) initiates, and is subject to, a constant re- and pre-figuring of its preceding and subsequent chunks (I use the term *chunks* precisely for its imprecision). Mukarovsky is playing – perhaps knowingly – with a false notion,: that of the "literary work as a pattern (a compositional whole)". Adopting his terminology, a literary work (and this goes for a musical work, a cinematic work, and while we're at it, for experience in general) can only exist or be conceived as contexture. It is always reading itself (or re-reading itself, since there is no true *it* to be read in the first place). This reading initiates from all points within the contexture and heads in all directions. It is a volley of arrows, a hail of bullets, a chaotic battle for the meaning of the text. (Of course, without a true *it*, this singular, definite-article-meaning can never be fixed.) Reading is a process of repetition and re-repetition flashing across the night sky of our ignorance of the text and flashing again before the previous flash has subsided. One would think this constant and endless flashing would fully and permanently illuminate the text. But, because each flash transports the reading back to a zero degree of ignorance (or, more benignly, of unfamiliarity), there is never an illumination. There is, in de Man's terminology, a chronic "blindness" or in Nietzsche's, a perennial "forgetting": reading as an eternal return.

I have a habit of being disingenuous when citing the theoretical works of others. I pick out chunks that suit my purposes and ignore the intentions of the whole. This seems particularly egregious when directed at a text called "The Concept of the Whole In The Theory of Art". But, in my defense, my disingenuous selectivity is nothing more than a product and example of how reading works. As it repeats itself, starting again at each new flash or chunk or each iteration of return, it freezes tentative, contingent meanings. I have chosen to use a frozen meaning from Mukarovsky: that of contexture, and to remain willfully ignorant of his more pressing concern with structure. In an effort to head off those who might condemn me as a rascal, I will say why. Mukarovsky follows his distinction between composition and contexture by making certain claims for a third way: that of structure. Examining a poetic fragment, Mukarovsky claims that it cannot be evaluated as a compositional whole (a pattern) because the "total proportionality or other correspondences of the parts…remain indefinite." (75) Nor can it be a closed contexture (he is now calling it "closed contexture", the rascal), because "we are free to complete it in our minds in the most varied ways." (75) It can, apparently, be called a structure, though, and be analyzed as such because

> here wholeness does not appear to us as closure, or completeness… but rather
> as a certain correlation of components. This correlation binds the work into unity at
> every moment of its course…(75)

This is a reinvigoration of Tynjanov's *dominanta*, the highly suspicious notion of a component around which the other components of a work of art rally – as if around a flag – thereby asserting their unity. The idea of the *dominanta* is untenable, since identifying the *dominanta* must be a wholly subjective activity and, more damningly, the constitution of the *dominanta* would – as with Kant's *ergon* – be produced by the other components of the work of art – the

parerga. The mildly fascistic notion of the *dominanta* – ratified by the component-citizenry to rule over the form, identity, function and meaning of the state of the work of art – is bound to appeal only to the most passive and submissive reader; one prone to accept hegemony graciously and gratefully. Mukarovsky is comfortable discussing the meaning of a text as just another component. He talks at one point, of the "specific relationship between the intonation and the meaning" of the poetic fragment in question. If, by "meaning", Mukarovsky intends to indicate the work's organic character, I still find it hard to relate such an overarching aspect of the work to a component (intonation) of that same aspect, as if they operate on the same plane. Moreover, siding with Paul de Man, I am inclined to relinquish, at least theoretically, my yearning for decisive meaning or closure. Contexture – and its inherent repetition – can do without the prefix "closed".

Tracing the arterial routes of the phantasm of the whole as it materializes in Mukarovsky's thinking is, in itself, an exercise in repetition. Such thinking acts as an aesthetic barricade for the overflow of the second law of thermodynamics into the domain of art. The second law declares that any concentration of energy will, over time, dissipate and disperse. The notion of the whole stands fast against such entropic malfeasance, vainly reassembling the grains of the art work as they scatter in the winds of…(one can end this sentence variously with words such as – but not limited to) time, theme, analysis, subjectivity, evaluation, or even repetition.

In a brief, yet engaging, essay, the Oulipan fictionalist, Harry Matthews, tells of meeting Mies van der Rohe when Matthews was just fourteen years old. He claims that during the conversation Mies "insisted that all his notions of architectural space had been drawn from a book called *On Growth and Form*" by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson. (92-93) Rather than skeptically dismissing this anecdote as a bit of Oulipan fabulism, I will refer to it here with great seriousness and a straight face. Whether fact or fiction, there is merit to the story's conclusion. Although, I must say there is not a great deal of drama to it. The conclusion consists of Matthews stealing the book from Foyle's book shop on Charing Cross Road in London in the 1950s and finally getting around to reading it in Lans in the late 1990s. He conveys but one paragraph of the two volume tome which is, apparently, to blame for the whole of Miesian architecture. I quote it here in its entirety:

> The biologist, as well as the philosopher, learns to recognise that the whole is
> not merely the sum of its parts. It is this, and much more than this. For it is
> not a bundle of parts but an organisation of parts, of parts in their mutual
> arrangement, fitting one with another, in what Aristotle calls a "single and
> individual principle of unity"; and this is no merely metaphysical conception,
> but is in biology the fundamental truth which lies at the basis of Geoffroy's (or
> Goethe's) law of "compensation" or "balancement of growth." (Matthews 93)

Successive unifying analyses, undertaken from different – even opposing – perspectives fold back upon themselves, overlaying, overlapping, overflowing previous realizations rescued from within their own arguments, from within their contraventions, from within the bloodstream of the different and opposed. A sense of systemic closure, apparently undesirable in the

Murakovskian view, proves difficult to identify from any available perspective. Either all systems appear closed or none do, or it's simply impossible to know and, by now, this not knowing needn't bother us. In a search for closure's hoof print (we must assume closure is a hoofed beast – probably cloven-hoofed), the approach proposed by Mukarovsky, along the structural line of ingress, begins to arrive at conclusions similar to a search initiated along a contextural line. Process work illustrates this similarity neatly.

In the early 1960s, the American composer, Terry Riley began to experiment with repeating, overlapping patterns of sound.

> I was noticing that things didn't sound the same when you heard them more than once. And the more you heard them, the more different they did sound. Even though something was staying the same, it was changing. (*Audio Culture* 285)

Minimalism in music and the visual arts sought to organize the art work around something very unlike a *dominanta.* Not that minimalist works couldn't often be mistaken for having one or, thinking in reverse gear, that one couldn't nominate a method of production (external to the materiality of the work itself) as a dominant component of the work (somehow internal to the text). Nor would such a nomination be entirely wrongheaded. Here's what I meant above by overlaying, overlapping, overflowing: In certain minimalist works which have been gathered and tagged as so-called "process" works, there is no clear demarcation between external and internal, between production methods and reception text, between open and closed.

But as many have pointed out (Luc Ferrari among them), rather than "minimalist", this kind of work might have been more appropriately called "repetitive". Firstly, many works called "minimalist" are not minimal in complexity of form, content, nor in the quality or quantity of their materials. More importantly, it is the repetitiveness, and not the minimalism, of these works which allow them to escape (or at least suspend/question/critique) existing art-historical categories and philosophical concepts.

Take Sol Lewitt's "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes" from 1974. Taking the simplest geometric form, that of a cube drawn with perspective, Lewitt breaks down this representation of 3-dimensional reality into its basic graphic elements: lines drawn parallel to three axes:

Horizontal: ——— Vertical: | Diagonal: /

The piece exploits every combination of these lines that could potentially appear in a drawing of a cube seen from one of four perspectives: below right, below left, above right and above left. (Directly in front, above, or below are omitted because they would not yield a perspectival rendering.) The title of the piece contains its method of production and its concept. It is a

schema: "a mental codification of experience that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli." (Merriam-Webster) It is a drawing. It is a schematic drawing for *incomplete* and *open* cubes. That is, the cubes are open: we can see through them to their anterior borders, like boxes made of outlined panes of glass; and each drawing is incomplete to some degree: the piece does not include a drawing of a complete cube:
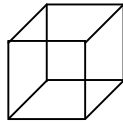
In this case, the closure or completeness which Mukarovsky's structural analysis means to avoid is not something imposed upon the work by compositional or contextural analysis. Closure and completeness are inherent to the method of its production. The work of making the piece is not done until all the combinations of lines – up to but not including the drawing of the complete cube – is exhausted. Closure and completeness are also the primary content of the work. An understanding or evaluation of the work would be greatly hampered and, one could argue, impossible, without access to the closure and completeness insinuated, yet withheld, by the title. In fact, Mukarovsky's distaste for closure is the aesthetic principle most thoroughly turned inside out by process work. It is specifically the explicit reference to closure in Lewitt's piece (and the implicit reference in other process work) which allows for the possibility of the openness Mukarovsky seeks in an art work.

It is precisely because the piece, from its inception, reveals its own ever-present, yet never-present, closure, that the audience is free to disregard its concern with closure. It is as if the work starts from closure and then, piece by piece, dismantles that closure to reveal the myriad states of which it is always already constituted. Simultaneously (or thinking spatially: in parallel), each of the unfinished cubes represents a single instance of the sequence or trajectory which is the work. Each cube is, in essence, an instance of *parole*, relative to the work as *langue*. The boundaries between the categories of open and closed or of part and whole start to spring leaks, the content of one filling the space of the other. For their part, the audience finds that there is no need to ask such questions, to make such determinations. The art work becomes something other than open or closed: it becomes translucent. Not transparent. It bears scrutiny; can be beheld. Yet it allows the gaze of the audience to pass through it to its interior, its exterior, its posterior. The art work becomes a window or a spyglass through which things other than itself can be observed.

Anyway, openness is not as unproblematic as Mukarovsky might like us to believe. His own use of the term suggests its own problems. Remember the claims Mukarovsky makes about a poetic fragment (incomplete by definition from the outset): it cannot be evaluated as what he calls a "closed contexture" because "we are free to complete it in our minds in the most varied ways". This amounts to dealing from both ends of the deck. Mukarovsky is disingenuously applying an analytic method that is specifically designed to shed light on matters of

wholeness to a fragment; a chunk of text definitionally denied its wholeness. More importantly, it becomes apparent that the closure and completeness which are the primary content of Lewitt's "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes", are the traces of the never-here-in-the-first-place openness identified in the work's title. Or we can flip the script, thereby overlaying, overlapping, overflowing the categories of original and copy, of self and other, of material and shadow. The openness of the title is the trace of the closure and completeness which are the primary content of the work.

Before the white flag of dialectics is raised, let's agree that the outcome of this series of reversals and revisions and redrawing of boundaries does not, indeed cannot, result in synthesis. Instead, an unlimited cascade of cause and effect, of signification is…well, not initiated – that would be quite a feat – but entered into, like stepping onto an infinite escalator. The process of signification is already moving no matter when we arrive and it will continue moving long after we turn our attention elsewhere.

Speaking of turning our attention elsewhere, let's return to the 60s and to a piece of musical process work.

Pendulum Music

For microphones, amplifiers speakers and Performers

Three, four or more microphones are suspended from the ceiling or from microphone boom stands by their cables so that they all hang the same distance from the floor and are all free to swing with a pendular motion. Each microphone's cable is plugged into an amplifier which is connected to a loudspeaker. Each microphone hangs a few inches directly above or next to its speaker.

Before the performance each amplifier is turned up just to the point where feedback occurs when a mike swings directly over or next to its speaker, but no feedback occurs as the mike swings to either side. This level on each amplifier is then marked for future reference and all amplifiers are turned down.

The performance begins with performers taking each mike, pulling it back like a swing, and then holding them while another performer turns up the amplifiers to their pre-marked levels. Performers then release all the microphones in unison. Thus, a series of feedback pulses are heard which will either be all in unison or not depending on the gradually changing phase relations of the different mike pendulums.

Performers then sit down to watch and listen to the process along with the rest of the audience.

The piece is ended sometime shortly after all mikes have come to rest and are feeding back a continuous tone by performers pulling out the power cords of the amplifiers.

Steve Reich 8/68
revised 5/73

This is the text score for "Pendulum Music", composed by Steve Reich in 1968 and, as you can see, revised in 1973. I'd like to place "Pendulum Music" and "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes" side by side, so to speak. Each piece is essentially the playing-out of a prescribed sequence of actions. Each piece is composed of a repetitive accretion of a finite set of elements, yet in neither piece is any single moment or frame identical to any other. In Lewitt's piece, the state toward which the piece progresses is known from the outset. In fact, it is more familiar, more known, than any of the steps which make up the piece. In Reich's piece, the state toward which the piece progresses – a steady drone of feedback – is imaginable, but not known, not familiar in its specifics. In Lewitt's piece we know what the target end-state, the full cube, would look like (even if, as the title announces, that end state will not be delivered). In Reich's piece, although we can anticipate a final, uninterrupted drone of feedback, we cannot, until we get there, know what it will sound like.

In "The Serial Attitude", Mel Bochner defines "serially ordered works":

> *1 – The derivation of the terms or interior divisions of the work is by means of a numerical or otherwise systematically predetermined process (permutation, progression, rotation, reversal).*
> *2 – The order takes precedence over the execution.*
> *3 – The completed work is fundamentally parsimonious and systematically self-exhausting.*

> (Bochner 23)

There is an essential difference between Lewitt's "Cubes" and Reich's "Pendulum Music" in terms of their relation to Bochner's definition. In fact, we can isolate just two words, a hyphenated term: "self-exhausting", which falls like an axe-head between the essential character of these two works. Lewitt's "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes" decides when it is finished. The piece ends itself; is self-exhausting. Reich's "Pendulum Music" can not end itself. Nor is there any systematic determination of when it should end. The score says:

> The piece is ended sometime shortly after all mikes have come to rest and are feeding back a continuous tone by performers pulling out the power cords of the amplifiers.

So the piece's penultimate-state is systematically determined: it ends "shortly after the mikes have come to rest and are feeding back a continuous tone." But the catalyst of the piece's end-state, the cessation of the continuous tone, is left ambiguous, supplied not by the system, but by performer choice. Now, while at first, this may seem like an inconsequential distinction, I find myself incapable of making an argument for this view. On the other hand, there are a number of points which come quickly to mind in support of the opposite view: that this distinction is consequential.

First, on a traditional, formal level, how a piece of time-based art ends has always been considered important. The start and the finish of a piece of music, a film, or a story are not only the salutation and valediction the work offers to its audience, but also the frame within

which the work operates. The beginning and ending set the parameters of form, logic, concern, and duration. When the ending ignores the rules by which the work has thus far operated, the audience must reconcile this discrepancy. In a piece of process work (and by all indications, this is the spirit in which "Pendulum Music" must be taken), such a discrepancy cuts deeper than in works composed by other means. The process itself is the form and content of such a work. If that process is contravened, then form and content disintegrate. The piece, in a sense, ceases to function, and a process work which ceases to function ceases to exist.

Second, on a socio-philosophical level, process works are intended to reduce the ego-mythical content of works of art. Seen as a disruption of the Romantic tradition of the quasi-mystical genius-artist, process works undermine the notion of the Artist as bestower of wisdom, truth, or beauty upon a prostrate audience. Furthermore, trust in the process allows the artist to step back from the machine of the work and to accept its results in the same way and on the same level as the audience. The score for "Pendulum Music" requires the artist/performer to re-enter the work at the crucial moment of its culmination. After accepting the work on the same terms as the audience, the artist/performer regains Artists-status and its attendant power. Only the Artist knows when the piece should end. The artist steps back into the process, regains control of the machine, and heroically brings it safely to conclusion. (Followed undoubtedly by brisk applause.)

Third, regarding repetition as the isolated unit of material in a process work, whereas Lewitt's piece never interrupts the chain of repetition, Reich's piece requires a disruption (indeed an amputation) of the repetitive sequence initiated by the work as process. In Lewitt's piece each subsequent cube is constituted of the same raw materials (horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines) as the others; each constitutes another possibility in the limited set of unfinished, open cubes; each is a necessary re-statement of the initial concept and a necessary component in the series which the title mandates. The design of Reich's piece; the process it initiates and which initiates it (since the process and the work are indistinguishable) preordains that the piece will arrive at its penultimate state: "feeding back a continuous tone". The accretion of repetitive components – feedback tones of slowly increasing duration – has only one possible final manifestation. Yet the process cannot systematize an ending. A systemic ending could only take two forms: either the piece goes on forever, or the system imagines that at some point in the future – due to a storm, a natural disaster, an unpaid bill – there will be a loss of electricity in the performance space which will end the piece.

These objections could have been avoided by a simple alteration to the process. If Reich had placed the speakers not at the bottom of the pendular motion, but somewhere outside the feedback field of the microphones at rest, then the piece could have exhausted itself, ending in silence. Of course this would have resulted in a different pattern of the modulations of the repetitive components (i.e., placing the speakers at the perimeter of the microphones' pendular arcs would reverse the pattern, creating feedback tones of slowly decreasing

durations until they evaporated completely). But incorporating this alteration would have allowed the piece to remain a strict process piece, subscribing to Bochner's edict that the piece be self-exhausting.

I am assuming that the positive material of "Pendulum Music" is the presence of sound and not the absence of sound, the presence of silence, or the physical motion of the microphones. The inclusion of the term "music" in the title, suggesting the production and presence of sound, leads me to this conclusion as does the initiation of and reference to sonic material in Reich's score. Of course, if there were reason to believe that the material components of the piece were the units of silence between the feedback tones or the motion of the microphones, one might be somewhat more justified (though still not completely justified) in calling "Pendulum Music" a strict process piece.

4.3 the heart at the heart of recording

> …whereas all previous technology (save speech itself) had in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system itself…to put one's nerves outside is to initiate a situation – if not a concept – of dread. (Marshall McLuhan, quoted in Davis 17)

As synchronizing structures go, those which emanate from the body may be the most rudimentary. That's not to say they are the most inescapable. Despite the wide range and deep penetration of somatic theorizing about music, I maintain a steadfastly cognitive relationship to music. That doesn't mean that I deny the body as receptor, simply that the body – as receptor – is a conduit through which sound and other sensory input travel on their way to the functions and products of cognition: namely, awareness and judgment. Still, at the most basic level of response, the body is often the first source of impulse with which music (or other stimuli) might hope to synchronize. Charles Olson famously declared that the poetic unit (whether that be the line or syllable, the phrase or utterance) ought to attune itself with the breath. Many musicians and theorists have proposed a similar link between music and the body.

Milford Graves a drummer who, in the 1960s, played avant garde jazz with the likes of Albert Ayler, Paul Bley and Sonny Sharrock, has turned his practice toward heart-music synchronization. Graves believes that he can diagnose heart problems in humans by recording and analyzing the rhythm and pitch of the heartbeat. Furthermore, he treats the maladies he detects by "correcting" the patterns of the problematic heart. In some cases, Graves employs algorithms to modify the recorded heart. In other cases, he composes new rhythmic and melodic patterns. He then plays a recording of the corrected heartbeat back to the patient – or more precisely, to the patient's heart. Patients have reported improvements after Graves' treatments. Within the medical establishment, Dr. Ram Jadonath, director of electrophysiology at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, N.Y., is not alone in seeing value in Graves' approach:

"The heartbeat is a form of musical rhythm, and if you have a musical ear, you can hear heart problems a lot easier," he said. "Many heart rhythm disturbances are stress-related, and you have cells misfiring. It is possible to redirect or retrain them with musical therapy. They do respond to suggestion. That's the area where his biofeedback could correct those type of problems." ("Healing Music")

The heart-music relationship goes both ways for Graves. He also utilizes recordings of players' heartbeats to inform their playing.

…Mr. Graves analyzes the heartbeats of his music students, hoping to help them play deeper and more personal music. The idea, he said, is to find their most prevalent rhythms and pitches and incorporate them into their playing. ("Healing Music")

Graves' intuition about the heart's relationship to music is not unusual. Commonly, musicians are often said to be at their best when they are playing "from the heart". Theorists often argue in favor of bodily connections to popular music as a way of separating popular appreciation from academic or classical appreciation. There is an underlying supposition here, that, as an audience, the body is somehow more honest than the mind; that its responses are purer and less mediated. Within this theoretical body-organ bias of modern music reception, there lies a prejudice with parallels uncannily close to those Derrida deconstructed in *Of Grammatology.* Without indulging in a replay of that argument, allow me to suggest simply that in this line of musical thinking, the body occupies a position parallel to that of speech in Derrida's thesis, while the mind (a sort of palimpsest for sonic impressions) occupies a position parallel to writing. That we privilege the former term in each binary, testifies to the lingering valuation of what Derrida famously (and infamously) called the "metaphysics of presence". This equivalence I've suggested could inspire a good deal of good thinking. Instead, I will bear these parallel binaries in mind as I focus on one particular manifestation of the persistent bias toward soma and presence.

The verb *to record*, is a curious composition. The prefix *re-* means *again* (as in *to retell*) or suggests a backward movement (as in *to recall*). The root *cor* comes from the Latin for heart, still evident in the French *coeur.* To record, then, is to encounter the heart again or to move back to the heart. The implication, of course, is that a recording captures and replays the heart of its source. The heart of the thing might be its life-giving component (as in a biological heart), but more commonly it indicates the emotional or moral, as opposed to the intellectual component. The heart is compassion, affection, generosity, courage, ardor, love. When we remember something verbatim, without recourse to clues or aids, we have remembered it "by heart", as if it is now inside us and part of us. This perpetuates the notion of bodily response as somehow internal and of mental or intellectual response as being a response to something external. When we aim for the heart of the thing, we aim for the essential, the core disposition of the thing. To record carries in its own linguistic body, both the sense of essential physiology and of the non-physiological essence; something, perhaps, akin to the soul.

This dual character of recording is to blame for the uncanniness that marked early encounters with sound recordings. Edison, himself, was spooked by the phonograph:

'This tongueless, toothless instrument without larynx or pharynx, dumb, voiceless matter, nevertheless utters your words, and centuries after you have crumbled to dust will repeat again and again to a generation that will never know you, every idle thought, every fond fancy, every vain word that you choose to whisper against this thin iron diaphragm'. (quoted in Kahn 1992, 93)

Of course, Edison's unsettledness in the face of this mouthless voice seems to be as much about what lies at the heart of being human – idle thoughts, fond fancies, vain words – as about reproductive capacities of the technology. Nevertheless, it is the apparently faithful capture and redistribution of the heart which troubles him.

Douglas Kahn notes how, prior to the advent of sound recording, a person could only experience his or her own voice "in large degree through bone conduction; it is generated in the throat and carried via the bones in the head to the inner ear". (*Noise Water Meat*, 93; *Wireless Imagination*, 7-8) The experience of one's own *recorded* voice is, however, boneless. "…the phonographed voice returns to its parent through air conduction, that is, without the bones. The phonographed selfsame voice is deboned". (Kahn 1992, 93) This deboning, as I have suggested, underscores the possibility (if not, indeed, the necessity) of a Derridean critique of the centrality, veracity and authenticity of the relation of sound to the body. As Kahn puts it,

Phonographic deboning is, therefore, a machine-critique of Western metaphysics a century before Derrida's critique of Husserl, for it uproots an experiential centerpiece for sustaining notions of the presence of the voice – hearing oneself speak – and moves the selfsame voice from its sacrosanct location into the contaminating realms of writing, society, and afterlife." (1992, 93-94)

I am inclined to think of the poles of the presence debate as the body and the mind. This isn't meant to reinvigorate a Cartesian dualism. It seems to me that Descartes was as susceptible to the allure of presence as anyone else. It is simply to suggest that dualistic phenomena such as speech/writing or voice/recording are symptoms of the fundamental divide between the body, on one hand, and the mind, on the other. The body is manifest in speech, in the voice, in the impact of music on the body and of the body on music; while the mind is manifest in writing, recordings, the mindful (or as I called it earlier, the cognitive) reception and production of music which views the body – including the ears – as a conduit whose responsibility is to shuttle sensory input (sounds, words, music) from the phenomenal world to the cognitive world of awareness and judgment.

The heart at the heart of recording is not the bodily heart, not the organ. Recorded sound has been deboned or *debodied* (*deorganed*, to take it one Deleuzian step further). Does this suggest that the heart at the heart of recording is the essence; the incorporeal, yet irreplaceable, be-all and end-all? This, of course, suggests a spiritualized notion of presence, which, although it is in some ways the polar opposite of the presence of which Derrida is wary, is just as insidious. (And, in any case, they share a common source.) More importantly, this incorporeal presence is even less verifiable than the one which is thought to inhabit (or accompany) speech or actuality. Its unverifiability, its invisibility, its inaudibility, necessitates a medium through which it can be known. This mediate position – occupied

variously by priests, shaman, mystics, sages, gurus, telepaths, pundits, politicians, and posers – engenders both epistemological and ethical crises.

As citizens of the digital age, we must wonder what happens to the heart at the heart of recording when it is sampled, appropriated, plundered, manipulated, broadcast, *detourned*, disseminated, compressed, encoded, uploaded, downloaded, ripped, burned, re-mixed, re-mastered, and re-purposed. (From this point onward, I will use the term *sampling works* to denote works which, instead of using so-called "raw" materials such as paint, clay, wood, metal, pitches, etc, use other already-composed works as their materials.) One might begin such consideration with the all-too-famous Marshall McLuhan quip: "The medium is the message". So often quoted, this 5 word media-message has been swallowed in the din. It is so familiar – like the Mona Lisa, a Beatles' song, Marilyn Monroe – that we are deaf to it, blind to it, unable to feel or think it. To make it new again; or to refresh it as one does with old yeast, in order to make new bread, we must immerse it in a new context. We must introduce it to new stimuli; catalysts which will awaken its latent potency. If we dip "The medium is the message" into a solution made of one part digital age and one part sampling we find – abracadabra – it speaks anew. One new (or at least newish) thing it says is that in sampling works, the meaning of the work is simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of the materials of which it is made. That is, in the sampling work, the sampled media – the song, the photograph, the film clip, the characters, the poem – are in the most basic *and* the most complete sense, the source of the meaning of the sampling work. At the same time, the sampled media are re-defined and re-invested (with both meaning and value) by their new context within the sampling work.

The confluence of the widespread use of such sampling practices and the so-called information age is not coincidental. As languages (used, here, in a loosened sense) are converted into digital data they become sampleable. Binary zeroes and ones can be thought of as the atomic components of the analog materials they digitize. But – just as the scattered remains of a de-unified writing cannot accurately be thought of as the elementary particles of the text – this thinking of digital sound is significantly misleading. For one thing, putting analogue materials under a literal or metaphoric microscope will never reveal binary atomic components. More importantly, encodings (i.e., recordings – digital or otherwise) of analogue materials are not and cannot be identical to the analogue materials they encode. Data is a *representation* of analogue material. This is obvious, but its implications are profound. When digital artists work with sampled digital materials – whether photographic, auditory, cinematic, etc. – they are working not with the original source, but with a representation. There is no trespass of the "presence" or "presentness" of the source material.

This truth is made manifest, for example, in the work of sound artist, John Oswald. "Pretender", to take just one example, consists of nothing more than Oswald – who refers to his practice as "plunderphonics" – manipulating the speed of Dolly Parton's recording of "The Great Pretender". By slowing down the recording and speeding it up, Oswald extracts sounds, effects, timings, senses of time, and intimations – in short, *meanings*, which were not only not present in the original recording, but could not have been begged, solicited, or

demanded at gunpoint from Dolly and her band. Most strikingly, Parton's Minnie Mouse soprano is recast as a husky alto in the mold of a soul diva like Patti Labelle. The voice, reassigned to this register, takes on all the vestiges of a personality. We hear in it a sound-image of its owner or possessor. Parton's inflections and phrasing, when slowed down and attributed to this newly-minted persona, assume dramatic effects that read, for all the world, like intentions. Yet this voice belongs to no actual person. It is utterly bereft of identity, wholly lacking any artistic or communicative agency. Questions of signification and intention swell up, intertwine, and conflate. Ultimately, they throw their hands in the air, abrogating responsibility for their answers.

Friedrich Kittler points out that the names of both Edison's phonograph and the Lumieres' cinematograph carry the linguistic-genetic –*graph*. (Kittler 3) Both were conceived as writing machines: the former able to "write" sounds, the latter able to "write" movement. This is writing as representation, signification. Kittler suggests, in quasi-Lacanian terms, that once we (Kittler says Europe) had found a way to encode real-time experiences as symbolic-data, "…all data flows…had to pass through the bottleneck of the signifier." (4) That is, data had to reinvest itself with signification upon its return to experience; upon playback. Signification, here, is a question of semiotics. What is the relation of data to that which it records; what is the sign-status of the recording? Is it *iconic*: that is, does it resemble or imitate that which it records? Or is it *indexical*: meaning it is directly connected to that which it records as smoke to a fire? Or is a recording *symbolic*: bearing an arbitrary relationship to what it records, as words to their referents? Most often, recordings are considered to be indexical. Daniel Chandler in *Semiotics: The Basics*, even lists photographs, films, and audio recordings as examples of the indexical mode of the sign. (37) This would imply a direct connection of a recording to that which caused or created it. Common examples of indexical signs include footprints, thunder, medical symptoms, and measuring instruments (such as a weather vane). But to what is Oswald's "Pretender" directly connected? To Dolly Parton's song? Surely, but it signifies something else, something beyond the song. One might imagine that a common recording, like a microphone used to record a singer to tape, or a tape-to-tape dub or a copy of an MP3 file, acts indexically, signifying its source and nothing more. But this is obviously not how "Pretender" operates. Perhaps, then the mode of signification is more iconic. Examples of iconic signs include portraits, scale-models, cartoons, metaphors and sound effects. Even if we recognize a certain cartooniness in the way in the satirical mode of "Pretender", and even if we think some of its effects are, in essence, sound effects, we still must wonder what source does "Pretender" resemble or imitate? Again, we consider the suggestion of the Dolly Parton song, but the whole idea of "Pretender" is to not resemble or imitate the original, but to evade it, as if evading the one who is "it" in a game of tag. The problem is thinking of the recordings as the reconstitution of a sign consisting of the thing recorded (signified) and the recording (signifier). Recordings may, in fact, be signifiers, but, like all other signifiers, they are constituted by and constitutive of their signifieds. Signifiers always create their signifieds to the same extent that they are created by them. The simple cause and effect relationship suggested by traditional models of the sign begin to seem a little

naïve. Kittler's term "the bottleneck of the signifier" suggests that these semiotic models tend to squash the metastasizing nature of the signifying process. As Peirce so persuasively demonstrated, signification is an unlimited process. The interpretants which mediate the process multiply infinitely and instantly, as if they were always already there. Engaging the cascade of interpretants is like stepping into the flow of a waterfall. It would be absurd to imagine that when we leave the site of the falls, the flow of water stops. Equally, if we held a bottle under the falls, it would be preposterous to think that what we have captured is the falls and not, simply, twelve or sixteen ounces of water.

Interlude (Intervention)

(Here should intervene a long passage where, somewhat in the manner of the interminable harpsichord solo of the Fifth Brandenberg Concerto, that is, in a tedious way and mechanical but at the same time mechanizing, not so much in its music as in its logic, reasoning, from the lips, not from the chest or from the heart, I will try to explain, I do mean to explain, two or three things…)

- Francis Ponge, excerpt from "The Pré" (translated from the French by Lee Fahnestock)

5. Incompleteness

5.1 rhetoric, dying, examines itself

Francis Ponge responds to criticism and silence, respectively, from his two best friends, Camus and Paulhan. They are disappointed, even displeased, with his text called *Soap*. As Camus says: "There may be an excessive ellipse; I don't really understand". (*Soap* 30) Ponge responds by putting his words in the mouths of others. He writes a short play called *Soap.* The characters include three chimneysweeps, two philosophers, a poet, a typist, the absolute reader, and the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Gribouille. Ponge fragments his voice into its constituent parts; into its sources and targets. But, as Ponge says on page 40, "This play was never performed". Struck by a case of "bad conscience", Ponge re-writes the poem-cum-play as a short prose piece. He feels that the text "should stand on its own and not need to be performed". *Soap* keeps slipping through his fingers, frothing in its dish, squirting out of our reading hands. When does *Soap* begin and end? The book includes an unnumbered page after the copyright page which says in large italics: "*Beginning of the Book*", and another after Appendix V, which says "*End of the Book".* But one has the feeling that these pages do not designate the beginning and the end of *Soap*. If they were, in fact, the beginning and the end of the book, why would they need to be announced so explicitly? Doesn't beginning occur when a thing happens that previously was not happening? Doesn't the end occur when the happening stops? The very proclamations "beginning…" and "ending of the *book*", make us suspicious. The book is the saucer, as it were. *Soap* resides in the book. But the saucer's boundaries are not soap's; the book's boundaries are not *Soap's*. Determining the boundaries of *Soap*, is, in fact, impossible. As Ponge reminds us again and again, it starts as a little oval, a cake, a stone. But soon it slobbers and froths and as the extent of its boundaries expand, the extent of its self diminishes. In the end, it exhausts itself. Its momentary expansion leads to its permanent dissipation. Who, among us, is immune to such futile exertion?

> All this is much more, I think, than extended metaphors … These bubbles are beings in every (in their own) respect. Instructive in the highest degree. They rise in revolt from the earth, and take you with them. New qualities, unforeseen, until now unknown, ignored, are added to the known to constitute the perfection and particularity of a being-in-every-respect. Thus they escape being symbols. And their aspect changes. It no longer concerns an aspect of usefulness, or serviceability to man. Instead of their serving for something, it concerns a creation and no longer an explanation. There is something more in the conclusion than in the premises, because some premise was added which, mysteriously, managed to curl the sphere, completely curve it, and allowed it to detach itself and fly away. (Ponge, 1998, 76-77)

This chapter and the next twine around and through each other like a creeper strangling itself in search of light; like the double helix of our own DNA. Incompletion (the subject of this chapter) and inconclusiveness (the subject of the next) constantly interrupt each other. When we think we are talking about one, we realize, really, we are talking about the other. To the extent that they are, indeed, distinct phenomena, I will try to identify and maintain their distinctions.

Let me start pedantically by outlining two primary varieties of incompletion. Keep in mind, these characterizations are intended more as clues than as firm definitions. They bear more resemblance to the organizational techniques of herding dogs than to those of fences.

1. Material incompletion. The text might be said to be materially incomplete when it doesn't reach the bottom of the page, when the line doesn't extend to the margin, when the grammatical requirements of the sentence are not met, or, perhaps, even when the logic (as in a syllogism) is left incomplete.

2. Experiential incompletion. The text fails to reach a culmination or a stable narrative telos without remainder. Experiential incompletion is not testable. It is not a matter of failing certain thresholds. It exists at the level of semantics and of the relationship of experience to semantics: each justifiable, simultaneously, as cause and effect of the other.

I nominate Francis Ponge's book, *Soap* (first published in 1967)*,* at the start of this chapter, because, in many ways, it is the incomplete book *par excellence*. It is a literary text in the absence of a literary text or, inversely, a literary text made *from* the absence of a literary text. It is both materially and experientially incomplete. And, while I would argue that all texts are interpretively incomplete, *Soap* courts – veritably *taunts* – the completist impulses of any and all interpreters.

In the summer of 1964, Ponge published his poem *Le Pré* in the journal *Tel Quel*. The poem – its title indicating both "the meadow" and pre- (as in prior) – was typical of the later Ponge. By which I mean it was unlike anything else in literature. Poetry might be the art of making language speak another language. Late Ponge texts maintain a seemingly effortless ability to put words in the mouths of words, to extract from them endless nuance – like a magician pulling an endless chain of handkerchiefs from a pocket. What emerges is often unexpected, unanticipated – rabbits from hatchets. Earlier in his career (and I promise, I will soon put an end to this slide back in Ponge-time), Ponge had been known as the "poet of things". He wrote to titles such as "The Dog", "Dung", "The Frog", "The Oyster", and so on. And he pursued a meticulous agenda of investigation – bordering on inhabitation – of the properties of these things. Ponge documented the physicality of these objects, their cultural connotations, their personal associative capacities. But he also inhabited the words used to signify the things. Words, of course, are things too, with their own physicality, with their own cultural and personal existences.

> Things are *already as close to words* as they are to things, and reciprocally, words
> are *already as close to things* as they are to words. (Ponge, from *La fabrique du pré*,
> quoted in Gavronsky 21)

Ponge's early "thing"-texts are often monolithically reduced by critics, who concern themselves with only the object-things of the titles, ignoring the thingness of the words of which the texts are made. But the texts are, in fact, hinged, swinging both in and out of their object-things, both in and out of their words. Too many readers of Ponge miss the radical implications of this doubled, hinged relation of words to things, and of things to words. Gavronsky is not only aware of this relation, but also of its ontological ramifications.

Ever since the Renaissance, Ponge believes, reality has been distorted by the disproportionate importance that man has had in the universe. By taking the side of things, Ponge tended to undermine this psycho-poetic disposition. According to him, man should recognize his place in what he calls the universal machinery: his is an important one, though not the only one. As Ponge seeks the propriety of linguistic terms, so he has attached to the task the discovery of the propriety of man's place in the world. The selection of things thus becomes doubly noteworthy: it refines poetic language and it puts man back in his proper place. (Gavronsky 5)

Ponge's early texts work in a way that is analogous to the paintings of Jasper Johns in his flag/target/numbers phase. Johns has stated that he chose signs which were so over-determined as to be *totally* determined, practically drained of their signifying capacity. This allowed his paintings to detach and float free of their referential responsibilities; to become open fields of visual materiality and reference. So too do Ponge's things and words peel away from their referents, peel away from each other. Ponge's Dog, Dung, Frog and Oyster are not signs of a dog, dung, frog or oyster. They are autonomous, linguistic constructs, not of reference, but of referentiality. They refer to the idea and the process of reference. Ponge's things are not allowed to set down on the firm ground of reference or correspondence. Instead, the things in Ponge's text's are held aloft by the dual suspension of invisible quotation marks. Like an actor lifted from the stage by a harness and cables, Ponge's things are neither "grounded", nor truly airborne. They are meta-facsimiles of these two pure states in which things might exist. Derrida thinks of these quotation marks as clothespins, "used now and then by photographers to develop a print...they also form, like quotation marks, a part of the negative that is being developed." (*Signsponge* 2 – 4)

Later Ponge texts, such as *Le Pré* and *Soap,* developed and expanded in such a way that the "poet of things", might equally be called "the poet of writing". Such would be a lofty claim if meant as a mantle (meaning both a responsibility, and a bird's scapular which, to a monk, would designate his order – witness how the trickle of etymological association so quickly floods the plain). As the poet of writing, he would have to admit – à la Peirce – that everything, men included, is simply signs. And, mercifully, he (Ponge) does admit as much:

…all nature, men included, is a kind of writing, but a *non-significant* writing, because it does not refer to any system of meaning, due to the fact that it has to do with an infinite universe, properly speaking *immense*, without limits. (quoted in *Signsponge* 122-124)

This claim of non-significance would seem to place Ponge at loggerheads with Peirce, who, after all, was concerned foremostly with significance. Luckily, we are free to negotiate these interlocked positions. Peirce's man-sign does not refer to any system of meaning either, and has to do with an infinite (semiotic) universe, without limits. Nevertheless, the man-sign (or man-writing – in Ponge's parlance) is not non-significant. The man-sign is that to which systems of meaning point (and not that which points to systems of meaning). The man-sign is a (s)ponge – in French, *(e)ponge)* – an absorber of meanings, including, as we can see, Ponge/sponge, himself/itself.

This referring and pointing and absorbing is, indeed, without limits. This is the unlimited part of Peirce's unlimited semiosis. And it is by and through and on account of (charged to the account of) this interminable chain of referring and pointing and absorbing that completion is ever-deferred. Each sign is preceded by another. Every sign is, in a sense, penultimate. No where and at no time, do we reach what Derrida calls the transcendental signified. We must admit that in some theoretical (and at the same time palpable) sense, all texts are incapable of completion. If it's not too paradoxical to say so, incompletion is the natural and unavoidable anti-telos of reading, of meaning, of experience, of being.

By the time of *Le Pré*, Ponge's texts were beginning to explode, which, in the case of a Ponge text, means to implode. In 1971, as part of the series "Les Sentiers de la creation" ("The Paths of Creation"), published by Editions Skira, Ponge released *La Fabrique du pré* (*The Making of the Pre).* This text is very nearly the literary equivalent of the cinematic phenomenon of DVD extras. It is simultaneously: making-of documentary, outtakes and director's commentary. Followed, in its Editions Skira publication, by the poem itself, *Le Pré*.

> Since early in his career, Ponge insisted that any shame in releasing unfinished work is far outweighed by the value of displaying a process of developing thought. An open searching form, a "journal of aesthetic apprehension," developed almost spontaneously in contrast to the closed perfection of his first prose poems. While the search itself has occasionally been offered in place of a text that failed to materialize, *The Making of the Pré* mingles the process and the product in inextricable coincidence. Eternal preparation in language and nature is both its subject and its manner of being. As Ponge recognizes one day, "Here I give myself over to the preparation of the preparation of the *pré.*" (Fahnestock 10)

Soap is the ultimate realization of Ponge's incomplete method. With "The Pré", Ponge still feels it necessary to include the poem at the end of the "Making of" text. But *Soap* is nothing but the making of. It never becomes the work it threatens to be throughout itself.

Curiously, Derrida wants to rinse his hands of Ponge's *Soap.* (*Signsponge* 40) Curiously, he wants to say that rinsing is the end, what happens after – after the "exhaustion of the subject"; that is, after the exhaustion of the soap and after the exhaustion of the subject of soap and after the exhaustion of *Soap.* Curiously, for once, it would seem, Derrida is satisfied; satisfied to accept that rinsing is that which happens *after*, that it is the end. Curiously, though, it is not the end of *Soap*. It is the end of something we might call the "text proper", because "RINSING" (on page 79), is followed by appendices, presumably not part of the "text proper". *Soap* and the "text proper" are incompatible notions, like oil and water, whose opposition might be mediated by soap. It is curious that Derrida chooses – one must assume it is a choice – not to notice this. Derrida, has chosen to honor the peculiar negation of Ponge.

What is the peculiarity of the "not" in Ponge – as in "not to do" something or "to not do" something else? The answer must be that the "not" is a verb. It is a verb of inaction, declination. The "not", so engendered, is the action of incompletion, the positive decision taken, not to finish the line, not to reach the bottom of the page, not to complete the thought, not to end the process, not to reach a

conclusion. Ponge remains resolutely in the process of "not". (A similar thought occurs when Deleuze and Agamben discuss the "not" as an emblem of inconclusiveness in Melville's *Bartleby.* But that is part of the next chapter. And I have promised to keep the topics distinct. I trust these parentheses allow me to keep my word.)

If *Soap* is a text which resolutely engages the active "not" in the thought: "not to reach a conclusion"; Derrida's blindness to the continuation of the text beyond the incompatible "text proper" is a tribute to the text's "not concluding". (Except, curiously, for the fact that he calls the page called "RINSING" "the last". This is not "not concluding". Curious.)

Near the end of *Soap,* Ponge announces the relation of soap to *Soap*; of soap to literature. Later, he says, "who…would want to take a pipe and blow literary bubbles."

> But after all, if I push the analysis further, it is much less a question of propelling bubbles myself, than to prepare the liquid for you (or the solution, as one so aptly says), to tempt you with a saturation blending, in which you may, after my example, exercise yourself, (satisfy yourself) indefinitely, in your turn." (*Soap* 77-78)

Barbara Herrnstein Smith has devoted a book to how poems achieve, fail to achieve and refuse to achieve what she calls poetic closure. I discuss Smith's ideas in more detail below. But apropos of *Soap*, it is interesting to note that, in the modern and postmodern tendency, Smith identifies a preference for what she calls anti-closure. She attributes this preference to a movement in twentieth century attitudes toward language; a movement away from certainty and trust in the mechanisms of language. Although she does not discuss Ponge's work, it is not difficult – not unjustified – to imagine *Soap* as a late point in the line representing this movement. Following on from Saussure, Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida; Ponge might be read (conceptually, if not chronologically) as the knockout hammer blow delivered to the once-inviolable edifice of language. Ponge's deferral of finality, his inability or unwillingness to allow the operations of signification to come to rest, the utter incompletion of his late texts, testify to the situation of and in an idea of language which takes its incompetence for granted.

> Where conviction is seen as self-delusion and all last words are lies, the only resolution may be in the affirmation of irresolution, and conclusiveness may be seen as not only less honest but *less stable* than inconclusiveness. (Smith 240-241)

Smith's conception of closure is a conception of wholeness, unity, consistency of purpose. Closure is not necessarily about how the poem closes.

> …it must be emphasized that anti-closure cannot be seen solely as a radical conception of how poems should *end*. (Smith 243)

The incompletion of *Soap* is not just the incompletion of not ending, but the incompletion of not beginning. The text is open on two sides. On an unnumbered page, we read "Beginning of the Book". Then a blank page, verso, followed by a sort of unannounced preface, asking us to read the text with "German ears". Another blank page follows and then, recto, the word "SOAP" in all capitals, with a line below it. There follows another blank page and then the text proper begins on the first numbered

page (7) with the word "SOAP" again in all capitals, un-underlined this time and an address to us: "Ladies and Gentlemen,"… Twenty-one pages later (28), we arrive at a "PRELUDE TO SOAP", again in all capitals. This is followed two pages letter by an extract from the letter of Albert Camus and by Ponge's description of his response to Camus and Paulhan with which I began this chapter. This is followed by the short, aborted attempt to make *Soap* into a play. One is at odds to say precisely where and when this book begins. One is left with no alternative but to rely on extra-literary cues: the book presumably lies between the copyright information opposite the page declaring "Beginning of the Book" and the page labeled "THE AUTHOR" (all capitals), which falls on page 101, two pages after the "End of the Book"

> . …when a poem is experienced via a printed text, no matter how weak the forces of closure are, the simple fact that its last line is followed by an expanse of blank paper will inform the reader that it is concluded. (Smith 211)

All this false-starting and false-ending, this "journal of aesthetic apprehension", amounts to a certain variety of self-critical self-awareness. Ponge himself gives it a name:

> ("*Momon*"): One ought to be able to so name, by extension, any work of art including its own caricature, or one in which the author was to ridicule his means of expression…The genre is peculiar to periods in which rhetoric, dying, examines itself. (*Soap* 33)

Another name, however, might suffice as rhetoric, dying, examines itself. This examination of itself might be a requisite, first step on the way to the text's conceptual competence.

5.2 closure

closure, in general

As a brief illustrative exercise, I will take up some of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's discussion of completeness in her book *Poetic Closure: a study of how poems end.* Smith distinguishes a sense of integrity, as in a sense of internal coherence, from completeness. In discussing completeness, Smith says "…few generative principles yield unambiguously complete forms". (28) As an example she presents the following form:
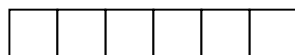
Smith writes:

> …given any form generated by an infinitely repeatable or extensible principle, we cannot say if it is a whole or only part…a sequence of four squares is neither more nor less "whole" than a sequence of five or fifty. (Smith 28)

This example relates neatly to Sol Lewitt's "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes", discussed in chapter 4. With Lewitt's cubes the possibility of completion is suggested not by the formal or visual properties, but by the conceptual properties, as implied by the title and the denotative devices of the grid in which the cubes are presented. In other words, the suggested completion in Lewitt's piece is the product of syllogistic properties embedded in linguistic forms (the verbal title and the denotative, system-establishing grid). There is, in Lewitt's cubes, the suggestion of a narrative. What are the sets of three, four, and five lines, if not "then this happened" types of statements; the

building blocks of narrative structure? The organization of Lewitt's cubes creates expectation. The whole piece, as a matter of fact, is predicated on nothing but expectation. From the start we know where the "story" is headed. All that remains to be seen, to be provided by the work, is the details. In this sense, Lewitt's "Schematic Drawing For Incomplete Open Cubes" is the analogue of a mystery story. In a mystery we know that someone gets murdered and that, in the end, the detective will identify the killer. In Lewitt's piece, we know that there is a cube, composed of twelve lines, and that, in the end, the piece will provide all the incomplete versions (those with fewer than twelve lines) of our cube/denouement. Smith's 6 conjoined squares, on the other hand, are too devoid of context to create or partake of any expectation. She is right to say that completeness cannot be a simple, formal matter.

Smith goes on to say,

> The perception of poetic structure is a dynamic process: structural principles produce a state of expectation continuously modified by successive events. Expectation itself, however, is continuously maintained, and in general we expect the principles to continue operating as they have operated. (33)

These stuctural principles take many forms. Smith says particular forms – such as the sonnet, villanelle, terza rima, haiku, etc. – create expectation through their developed and developing patterning. The reader comes to expect the fulfillment of metric and rhyme expectations. On the other hand, certain conventions, such as altering the meter for a final couplet or what Viktor Shklovsky called "illusory endings", may also produce expectations. When the forward-moving momentum of a poem suddenly alters, the reader may reasonably expect that the poem is signposting a change. Often, the impending change is the cessation of the poem. Frank Kermode points out that such illusory endings, such as "the river ran on" or "it was still raining", turn the tables on completeness by using an intentional subversion of the ending – one that specifically implies continuation – to create an ending convention. (Kermode 87)

> Closure, then, may be regarded as a modification of structure that makes *stasis*, or the absence of continuation, the most probable succeeding event. Closure allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing. (Smith 34)

Of course this expectation of nothing is a material expectation. Smith refers to it as a "modification of structure". Faced with a satisfying closural device at the end of a poem, the reader may expect that the poem will provide no further material, but that doesn't mean that the reader has no right to expect the poem to continue in some way. The experience of the poem may trail behind, as certain effects accumulate and begin to fizz and ferment. Certainly, interpretation continues. And, though it seems justifiable to claim that a poem's interpretation is not part of the poem, it is hard to imagine how the poem could arrive at a state of completion in advance of its interpretation. I will discuss the lingering effects of interpretation, at length, in the next chapter. For now, I merely raise the issue to delimit the boundaries of Smith's normative concept of closure.

Smith's study of closure is concerned primarily with what I have called material closure. This is the easiest to quantify, to characterize, to point to and say "see, that is what I mean". Smith, herself, says

"It is easier to point to something that exists than to something that does not" (211). However, the closural devices which she enumerates (and many more besides) often seem coercive, striving for a completion which is simply not available. At their best, such devices bring certain patterns to satisfying stopping points. In music, this is known as resolution, but, as often as not, such resolution is merely a temporary touching-down, a resetting of the machinery in preparation for another lift-off. In other words, the expectation of nothing doesn't necessarily mean that nothing will follow. The seasoned listener or reader soon realizes this. The conceptually competent author realizes that the seasoned reader realizes this. This realization allows Robert Walser to begin his novel *The Robber* with the most gloriously and falsely complete opening two sentences: "Edith loves him. More on this later." As with "Boat Trip", Walser assumes a world prior to the opening of the narrative. To be more specific and, in turn, more accurate, Walser assumes the *absence* of a world prior to the opening of the narrative. But that absence is wholly the product of the artificiality of narrative, which "opens" onto a fictitious world already fully-formed and in full swing.

Walser, the most competent of fictional conceptualists (and thereby the most conceptually competent of fictionalists), makes no effort to pull the wool over his readers' eyes. He begins with conclusions, opens with closure. Walser makes expansive use of the expectation of nothing. He creates that expectation first, knowing that the something that follows is multiplied, stretched, variegated and extended by the cleaning of slates and, more importantly, by the deliberate intrusion of the reality of fictional technique into the fiction of the narrative. This intrusion constitutes a complicity between fiction and reality; between author and reader; between reader and narrative; between language and its absent, unspeakable other; between mechanical incompetence and conceptual competence. Walser's opening closure opens a great deal wider than, for instance, Raymond Carver's closing openness: his contrivance of ending at moments positively pregnant with something. Carver's cutting of the narrative cord in mid-stream, suggests all sorts of possibilities trailing off into the netherness of interpretation. Each reader might construct – more or less concretely – the continuation of a Carver story. Those more firmly entrenched in the textuality of the text, may leave the narrative at its end, but ponder the technique and/or structural effects of the interruption-as-ending. Nevertheless, the openness of a Carver story runs out of itself like a river into the sea. Whereas, Walser's "Boat Trip" and the opening of *The Robber* reverse the flow, making the story, itself, the sea, and the absence of a world prior to the opening of the narrative – an absence produced by the narrative – the river which feeds the story.

It remains somewhat naïve – although optimistically and realistically naïve; hopeful, in a sense – to imagine that a poem or, for that matter, any kind of art work, might attain an un-self-reflexive openness. This naivety wishes away the agglomeration of centuries of Western culture. For example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith cites an article by Leonard B. Meyer, published in 1963, in which he distinguishes traditional and contemporary music as, respectively, "teleological" and "anti-teleological."

> The latter, he writes, "directs us toward no points of culmination – establishes no goals toward which to move. It arouses no expectations, except presumably that it will stop…underlying this new aesthetic is a conception of man and the universe,

which is almost the opposite of the view that has dominated Western thought since its beginnings. (Smith 238-239)

More than believing that a piece of contemporary music can simply sidestep "the view that has dominated Western thought since its beginnings", Meyer seems to believe that the whole category of contemporary music is capable of this circumnavigation. What's more, he sees the teleological and the anti-teleological as existing in an absolutely dialectic relationship. The former puts its faith in an absolute, either at the origin or the culmination (or both), of the chain of signification. Perhaps it is god who anchors the chain to an undeniable referent at one end, or perfection of form which beckons at the chain's terminus. For Meyer, the foundation of this attitude is theological, in a broad sense, relying on some arbitrary notion of universal objectivity. Opposed to this, he suggests a competing notion of objectivity, one which is eminently local, situated solely in the moment and the object or text at hand.

> …we may think, perhaps, of Leonard B. Meyer's "radical empiricist" as, in one guise,
> the poet who merely presents the data. (Smith 251)

Meyer's dream is the dream of Donald Judd. It is the dream of the "specific object", as Judd would have it. But it is still a dream, predicated on a notion of objectivity and specificity that is just as suspect, just as absolute, as the teleological.

The solutions and maneuvers of the conceptually competent artist take a different tack than the one described by Meyer and dreamt of by Judd. Rather than gathering all the chips from the table upon which Western philosophy is written (a *tabula rasa,* no doubt), and transferring them to another table – equally sound – upon which an alternate, anti-teleological philosophy awaits its writing, conceptual competence mistrusts both tables and goes looking for another game. The object of this game is the reinvention of the game, or, better yet, the reinvention of the idea of a game, itself.

It is toward this game that Jean-François Lyotard tips his hat in his appendix to *The Postmodern Condition* entitled "Answering The Question: *What Is Postmodernism?"* Lyotard makes a distinction which bears a certain surface resemblance to Meyer's, but which includes a great deal more significant nuance. Lyotard uses the descriptive terms melancholia and *novatio.* The former indicates a mode (as Lyotard calls it) in which

> The emphasis can be placed on the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on
> the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will
> which inhabits him in spite of everything. (*The Postmodern Condition* 79)

Note that the powerlessness is one of *presentation*, on the putting forth of the work. Melancholia is a product of the false dream of a presentational competence, as if the word could unproblem-atically mean the thing, the picture could simply represent the subject, the music could effortlessly signify the emotion.

On Lyotard's other hand is *novatio*, which places the emphasis

> on the power of the faculty to conceive, on its "inhumanity" so to speak (it was the
> quality Apollinaire demanded of modern artists), since it is not the business of our
> understanding whether or not human sensibility or imagination can match what it
> conceives. The emphasis can also be placed on the increase of being and the

jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other. (*The Postmodern Condition* 79 - 80)

Novatio, then is the rough analogue of Meyer's anti-teleological music. Art works in the mode of *novatio* do not seek telos in known forms nor in established effects (resolution, closure, transcendence, epiphany, etc.) nor in the comforts of stable epistemological, ontological or ethical referents. But neither do they make as if those forms, effects, and referents never existed. That would, in effect, be playing their game, but in reverse. Art works in the mode of *novatio* – those I'm calling conceptually competent – seek to alter the rules of the game to accommodate the natural urges towards telos and towards anti-telos, which is, of course, also a kind of telos. Establishing these urges as poles or limit cases, the conceptually competent work plays in the expanse between them; an infinite field of signification. This field, and what happens within it, is indeterminate, though not completely so. It does not completely lack any determinate features or behaviors, but it does not display such features or behaviors consistently, stably and unproblematically.

True to the subtlety of his argument and the distinction he is drawing, as quickly as Lyotard outlines the two modes, he acknowledges the difficulty of disentangling them:

> The nuance which distinguishes these two modes may be infinitesimal; they often coexist in the same piece, are almost indistinguishable; and yet they testify to a difference on which the fate of thought depends and will depend for a long time, between regret and assay. (*The Postmodern Condition* 80)

What drives melancholia, according to Lyotard, is nostalgia. Art works in the mode of melancholia are therefore bound to end in regret. They represent a crying over the spilled milk of existence. These works, cling to a dream of mechanical competence; to the possibility of re-presenting presence in its absence, of giving purpose to what Lyotard calls "the obscure and futile will". Works in the mode of *novatio*, however, are driven by "an increase of being and jubilation" and are more prone to end in assay: examining, testing, measuring existence. Lyotard identifies that which hangs in the balance between these modes and their outcomes: nothing less than the fate of thought.

It is important to remember that Lyotard considers the postmodern a "mode" within modernism, or an aspect of it. As such, the postmodern had threatened to emerge – just as modernism had – at various junctures before the dawn of an epoch which we might agree to call "modern". Once this era arrived, it announced (or invented) a new conception of what the work of art sets out to do.

> I shall call modern the art which devotes its "little technical expertise" (*son "petit technique"*), as Diderot used to say, to present the fact that the unpresentable exists. (*The Postmodern Condition* 78)

closure, in particular

> **Benjamin Buchloh**: The question is how far one can push this contradiction. How long can one keep this dialectic alive before it turns into an empty pose? How long can one go on asserting this contradiction, without attempting to get beyond it?

Gerhard Richter: I have no idea what contradiction you're talking about.

BB: It's the contradiction of knowing full well that with the methods you're using you can't achieve what you want, but being unwilling to change your methods.

GR: But that's not a contradiction. That's just the normal state of things. Call it our normal misery if you want. It certainly couldn't be changed by choosing different means or methods.

BB: Because all methods are equivalent?

GR: No, because they're all similarly inadequate.

(Richter 1153 - 1154)

If modernism, in its nostalgic, regretful, melancholic mode, is concerned with presenting the fact that the unpresentable exists – if we accept, at least in one way of thinking, that this is what modernism is, then we must also accept Lyotard's assertion that modernism's problems are problems of presentation. Well, actually, in order to accept these assumptions, we must first accept that there exists something unpresentable and that, for some reason, we are, some of us, driven to present things. Then we confront the problem of presenting the unpresentable and only then, I suppose, that this problem is the constituting and constitutive problem of modernism. Having constructed it from both directions, landing at the same problem, we may proceed. Of course, proceeding also means accepting that, for Lyotard, this problem is not, at its core, a modern problem. That is, we have always sensed the existence of the unpresentable and we have always struggled for means of presenting it. The modern, therefore, is not an expanse of time, neatly ordered and bordered by a start time and a finish. The modern (and/or its synonymous problem) has been with us for eons.

What is newer, perhaps – though not unprecedented – is a mode of thinking that foregrounds the problem of the unpresentable, rather than the unpresentable itself. This mode posits a condition to which all representation is subjected. Language chafes against this condition's restraints. Pictures yearn to overflow its container. Music pretends to transcend it, only to admit, finally, that it was all a ruse; that it wasn't presenting the unpresentable, but was striving to be unpresentable itself – in other words, music plays at assuming the status of a signifier, but usually settles secretly into something much more akin to a signified, calling out for something to serve as its own satisfactory signifier.

Works of art in the mode of conceptual competence, of *novatio*, of jubilation and assay – I suppose, for now, we can simply call them the postmodern, asking that the baggage of the term be left behind and that only the connotations of the term as presently defined be retained – are works which engage the problem of presenting the unpresentable and which, as signifiers, aim to signify the problem itself. After all, the problem is always with us, unlike the unpresentable (and even the presentable; because, as Ponge (among others) makes so explicitly plain, even the presentable proves largely unpresentable when one honestly and earnestly endeavors to present it). It may be that, in the end, only the problems of signification are truly signifiable. So it is the work of art which makes this its subject (but not its only subject, since such containment is outside the control of even the conceptually competent work).

I am thinking, for instance of Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997), a film involving a man, Mr. Badii, who is planning to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills and laying down in a shallow hole he has dug at the base of a small tree in the hills overlooking Tehran. For much of the film, he drives the roads which traverse the hills, looking for someone who is willing, for a fee, to come to the hole in the morning and, if he finds Mr. Badii alive, to extend a hand to help him out of the hole; if not, to cover his body with twenty spades full of dirt.

> It doesn't matter at all whether one is religious or an atheist, whether one likes the miniature or not. What's important is that we've lived on this earth, and we're bound to it. (Abbas Kiarostami quoted in Nancy 94)

The film is about this search for help. It is about the desire to tie up the details even when the details have extinguished the desire to live. *Taste of Cherry* is about a journey (life) interrupted by a decision to die or about a journey (to death) interrupted by a decision to live. It is about sharing with strangers these most basic, yet intimate, experiences and decisions, which we, of course, share with strangers by virtue of our shared existence as human beings.

Taste of Cherry is also about narrative. It is about how a simple decision and its incumbent details create a narrative direction, a problem to be solved, a situation to be resolved. It is about the existential resolutions, or lack thereof, available to the fictional character, Mr. Badii. It is about the filmic resolutions available, or not, to the director, Abbas Kiarostami. It is about the judgmental resolutions available to us, the audience, because we too are in Mr. Badii's shoes. We make this decision each moment of our lives: to continue? To be or not to be. I cannot go on, I must go on. And so on. *Taste of Cherry* is about Abbas Kiarostami's decisions as a human being, to live or to die, which makes him – the ponderer/auteur of the question of the film – a kind of avatar for our experience. But it also makes us avatars of Mr. Badii, who is the embodiment of our collective dilemma and whose own fictionalized dilemma plays our thoughts, our emotions, our experience, as if with a joystick. Seemingly, if we live, we take Mr. Badii with us. Likewise, should we die.

It seems to me that much of the challenge of making a film like *Taste of Cherry*, and also of watching it and thinking about it, comes down to its ending, its closure. Certainly, this is not unique to *Taste of Cherry*. The challenge posed by many narratives is to use the ending to imbue what precedes it with value. But *Taste of Cherry* boils the challenge down to its most fundamental form, while wrestling with the most fundamental of ontological questions. For those reasons, it makes a valuable case study. More importantly, it is the specific solution (if one can call it that) of *Taste of Cherry* which makes it exemplary.

The film is ninety-four minutes long. Ninety-one of these minutes are shot on film. The final three minutes are shot on video. The switch occurs as Mr. Badii lies in the hole he has dug at the base of the tree. Still on film, the camera frames his face. We see only the hint of the dirt walls of the hole in which he lies. A leaf flutters in the wind and lands, momentarily, on his forehead. His face distended and sweaty, grimacing, perhaps in pain or fear, looks up from within the earth, to the sky. The camera

shows us his viewpoint, still on film. The moon is full and ducks in and out of clouds. In the distance there is the sound of thunder and the sky occasionally flashes. We see Mr. Badii's face again, still on film. The moon is disappearing and the night is turning dark. Badii's eyes are open as the night goes black. A flash of lightning illuminates him temporarily – his eyes still open, still on film. A second flash of lightning shows us his face again. His eyes are still open. The frame goes black again, entirely black. And the next time Badii's face is illuminated by the nearing lightning, his eyes are closed. The screen goes black a final time, entirely black. We hear more thunder, but no lightning now. And then rain.

When the picture returns, when light again fills the screen, it is daylight. Now *Taste of Cherry* is grainy, low quality video. For the first time in the movie, there is music: Louis Armstrong's "St. James Infirmary". The camera is looking down from the same hills upon which most of the film has taken place. We hear the sounds of soldiers jogging in the hills, counting out loudly and in unison. This echoes a scene earlier in the film when Badii speaks to a young soldier about his time in the army and the two compare the way they count during training. Badii, in what plays as a crass attempt to create common cause between himself and the man he is trying to enlist, urges the soldier to count along with him, loudly and in unison. But the soldier, claiming shyness, declines. The next shot in the video section – in the DVD chapter menu, it is called the "Epilogue" – shows two men setting up a film camera and a tripod on one of the dry dirt mounds that striate the hills from top to bottom. The camera pans down to catch Mr. Badii walking uphill, reaching into his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes. As he lights the cigarette, he joins a group of three men. The viewer might recognize one of these men. He is in the foreground. He wears a blue baseball cap, a denim shirt, blue jeans and dark glasses. As Badii approaches him, he hands his cigarette to Abbas Kiarostami, the director of *Taste of Cherry*. Kiarostami takes a drag and the film cuts to a man in long grass with headphones, a large stereo microphone and a tape recorder.

Mr. Badii is not Mr. Badii. It comes as a shock. Suddenly the film is gone and with it the fiction. The video shows us scenes of the shooting of the movie; the behind-the-scenes, the making-of. Once the video begins, we are watching a documentary. But we don't realize it at first. It takes a minute and ten seconds, roughly – around the time that the sound man appears with his headphones and microphone – for us to realize that the film has changed register, changed medium, changed perspective and changed its relationship with its characters and its story. Mr. Badii is now Homayon Ershadi, the actor who plays Mr. Badii. Mr. Badii is gone. When it changes to video, *Taste of Cherry* also changes its relationship to us and to itself. In the process – and in a flash, like the lightning which presages it – everything which has come before is reconfigured. Nintey-one minutes of film suddenly recoil in our memory and are erased. In their place, we are left with the shadows of ideas and emotions provoked by what has transpired. These are not so easily erased. But without the comfort and distance of the suddenly exposed fiction, these ideas and emotions must find a new home, a new context.

Ideas and emotions must hang on something: a head, a heart. When Mr. Badii disappears, it falls to us, the viewers, to reassign these ideas and emotions. When we see Homayon Ershadi, walking

casually up the hill, lighting a cigarette, we realize that he is not the home or source of these ideas and emotions. Kiarostami takes the cigarette, as if to say, "don't look at me".

Meanwhile, the story is left to hang in another way. The narrative of Mr. Badii and his efforts to find someone to bury him after his suicide is left incomplete. For more than an hour and a half, we have traveled with Mr. Badii in his car, traversing the hills above Tehran. We travel with him emotionally as he tries to persuade someone to help him: a soldier, a security guard, a seminary student, a taxidermist with an ailing child. That story now hangs. After the taxidermist agrees to Badii's request, Badii leaves him at the Natural History Museum. When Badii stops at the museum's gates a young woman approaches him, asking if he will take a picture of her and a young man, her boyfriend perhaps. Badii obliges and snaps the photo through the open window of his car. As he hands the camera back to the woman and starts to drive away, he recognizes the man. Badii had come across him at the beginning of the film. The man was speaking to someone on a public phone about financial troubles. Badii sensed an opportunity, but the young man had not allowed Badii to make his pitch, threatening to smash his face in if he didn't move on. During the course of the young man's overheard conversation he agrees to meet someone "outside the museum". It is a seemingly inconsequential snippet of dialogue, unrelated to Badii's story. But, once Badii has found the taxidermist to help him and has made the arrangements; after the wheels have been set in motion, the story, in all its inconsequence doubles back on itself. Here is the young man again, meeting someone outside the museum. Is the young woman the person whom he planned to meet? Or has she accompanied him to meet a third party? If we suspend our relation to the narrative as representation and accept it as a self-reflexive text, then we might imagine that it is Mr. Badii whom the young man arranges to meet outside the museum. We can never know for certain. And you'll pardon me if I suggest that this not knowing needn't bother us.

Nevertheless, this chance, repeat encounter spins Badii around. He goes back to the museum and finds the taxidermist. He summons the taxidermist outside and asks, when he visits the grave the following morning, that he throw two small stones into the hole to make sure Badii is really dead and not simply sleeping. The taxidermist, who is reluctant, yet resigned (due to the needs of his ailing child), to carry out his task, replies: "Two stones aren't enough. I'll use three." There is doubt now about whether Badii really intends to go through with it. Somehow the chance, repeat encounter with the young man has given him pause. The mysterious serendipity of the universe may be reason enough to go on.

When Mr. Badii lies in his grave, when we see his face, framed tightly, the darkness encroaching, we have arrived at a crucial moment of narrative: this is the crescendo, the climax, the denouement. He has or he has not taken the pills. He is or he is not dead. The entire film has led us to this moment and to the revelation of the outcome, of Mr. Badii's fate. What we expect is closure. More than expect it, we demand it. The story itself demands it. Yet *Taste of Cherry* offers no such closure. The final three minutes are the ones shot on video. Mr. Badii is now Homayon Ershadi. And Abbas Kiarostami, who had been directing the story and the film is now inside it. He stands on the same hillside where

Badii dug his grave. Mehrnaz Saeed-Vefa points to the narrative, aesthetic, and interpretive violence of this ending.

> In *Taste of Cherry,* Kiarostami again plays with the idea of order and the director's control, in terms of both film (fiction) and video (documentary). If the fictional part of the film ends with Badii lying in the grave, submitting himself to death and despair, the documentary sequence shot on video shows another possibility of order, which is more liberating and reflects Kiarostami's freedom to create as he instructs his army of extras and crew. The most important thing may be that neither possibility is conclusive – significantly, a brief sequence in total darkness separates the two – because the meaning is ultimately left to the viewer. (Saeed-Vafa 76)

Saeed-Vefa still undersells the multifariousness of the ending. *Taste of Cherry* doesn't simply bifurcate, as a narrative, it positively shatters. It shatters the very pretence of narrative. There is no Mr. Badii. He has no life to end. The story which has been constructed is swiftly and decisively withdrawn and replaced at a meta-level by the final three minutes on video. The entire narrative becomes a device about narrative, a comment on narrative and a transfer of the responsibility of narrative from the story, the film, the director to an elsewhere that may include the spectator, if he or she is willing to accept it. In this manner, the work of art is akin to a collect call. It has always been thus. Kiarostami, brazenly and brilliantly, makes this implicit fact explicit.

Throughout his career, Kiarostami has systematically worked to remove himself from the position of responsibility vis-à-vis his films. He has said that "…a filmmaker's responsibility is so great that I'd prefer not to make any films". (Abbas Kiarostami quoted in Nancy 86) Kiarostami has reduced his control of nearly every element of filmmaking. He uses amateur actors, he has dispensed with scripts, he has placed cameras in cars and sent the actors off without him to shoot scenes and he has adopted digital video as his preferred medium for its unobtrusiveness, ease of use and low technical demands. *Taste of Cherry* also abandons narrative control by refusing to provide the one narrative detail upon which the rest of the story depends. This is a great embrace of negative potential within the art work (a subject I will discuss at length in chapter 6.1). The withdrawal of crucial information – whether it be narrative, figurative, formal, or another component of the work – acts to multiply the possible messages and meanings of the work and to devolve power from the central administration of the auteur. This abdication cannot be achieved carelessly or nonchalantly. Nor is it a matter of the technical mastery by the artist or the mechanical competence of the medium. It can be accomplished only when the artist recognizes the inherent incompetence of the available materials and modes of representation. This recognition – a conceptual competence – allows for a turning of the tables, in which the materials and modes invert themselves self-reflexively, exposing their incompetence. With nothing true, everything is permitted. Kiarostami recognizes this less-is-more-ism:

> When we tell a story, we tell but *one* story, and each member of the audience , with a peculiar capacity to imagine things, hears but *one* story. But when we say nothing, it's as if we said a great number of things. (Abbas Kiarostami quoted in Nancy 84)

Thus considered, narrative, as a mode of representation, finds its singularity challenged. This would seem to be one of the main incompetences under attack in Kiarostami's oeuvre. By reducing the narrative to a nothing, Kiarostami seeks something along the lines of Barthes' "writing degree zero", a

writing which completes itself in reading, rather than writing and, as such, opens itself to, or exposes itself as, multiplicity. As a maker of films, Kiarostami must fight his battle on several fronts. Fragmenting narrative, reducing it to a multiplicitous nothing, would not be enough to significantly alter cinema. In addition to its narrative mode, cinema, most notably, consists of a visual mode and a technical mode which are often intertwined. Kiarostami has increasingly positioned his camera inside a car. In so doing, he makes the six possible directions (forward, backward, left, right, up, down) of the camera's gaze more apparent. With each intra-automobile camera angle, we see a person and a frame (the window: driver's side, passenger side, front or back windshield). A single intra-auto camera cannot simultaneously capture two people sitting in the front seat of a car. So Kiarostami's choices, as director, as editor, are reduced to choices of subject: the driver or the passenger. The severity of this reduction makes the viewer so much more aware of what is being left out: the other person, the other side of the car. And this awareness is an awareness of cinema itself.

> Cinema, inasmuch as it shows things off, restricts the gaze. Because selfishly it limits the world to one side of the cube and deprives us of the five other ones. It has nothing to do with the camera's immobility. There isn't any more to see when it moves about, since one loses the one side as soon as one has access to another. Films referring to an elsewhere, like that of painting, are more creative or more honest. (Abbas Kiarostami quoted in Nancy 90)

This view – that there is more to so-called aesthetic choices than mere aesthetics – is seconded by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her characterization of poems exhibiting what she calls "weak closure". She points out that a move toward such openness in twentieth century poetry had political and ontological bases: appealing to a new conception of the individual's linguistic relation to the text, to the State, to god, to the community, and to the self.

> Where conviction is seen as self-delusion and all last words are lies, the only resolution may be in the affirmation of irresolution, and conclusiveness may be seen as not only less honest but *less stable* than inconclusiveness. (Smith 240-241)

William Carlos Williams said a poem should not "click like a box". (quoted in Smith 237) Poems – and, by implication all art works – which seek such certain closure find themselves in a double bind. On one hand, they put themselves in the position of being dishonest, of deluding both themselves and their reader. This dishonesty amounts to a misregistration between the poem and the conditions of its existence. Such a poem fails to map to the world in a satisfactory way. While this is certainly true of any sort of poem – of any sort of art work – the poem which seeks to click like a box perpetrates a con. Even if the reader fails to fall for the ruse, the poem still reveals its ignorance of itself, of its materials and modes of representation; the poem reveals its blindness (as Paul de Man would have it) of its own incompetence. On the other hand, the box-clicking-poem finds itself destabilized by its own closure, by its impulse to stabilize. Nothing points so clearly to the uncertainty of language as certainty. Utterances such as "I guarantee it", "I am one hundred percent positive" or the ubiquitous, adverbial "literally", reveal the uncertainty undermining even the simplest claims. The same is true of poems and, in turn, of all works of art.

Taste of Cherry, by ending the way it does, by withholding closure, creates a structural entity which is open on all sides. The cube created by the art work itself (as opposed to the cube created by the

camera), does not deprive us of its other sides by showing us one. Instead it disassembles the cube and lays it out flat, granting access to all six of its sides at once. The film achieves this by leading us to a fork in the narrative road. The story leads us to a moment of binary decision; to *the* moment of primal, fundamental, ontological choice: life or death. The first ninety-one minutes work to involve us in the moment, to ensure that the investment made in the black screen between the film and the video is *our* investment. The amazing turn that takes place in that darkness constitutes the explosion of the binary. The fundamental choice between a and b turns out to be much more various than we might have imagined. More crucially, it turns out to be more various than we regularly imagine. After all, this is our choice too: life or death. It is Kiarostami's choice. It is Homayon Ershadi's choice. And it is a choice not made in a vacuum.

The laying flat of the cube represents the multiplicity of the poetic. Unlike other forms of communication which seek to eliminate alternate or parallel meanings, the art work has every right and, one might say, every responsibility, to incorporate these meanings, to make them the equal of the primary meaning, and, in the end, to eliminate, altogether, the notion of a primary meaning. This replacing of primacy with possibility is the poetic. And the poetic is the signal, salient characteristic and capacity of the art work. The trajectory of Kiarostami's work has shown a recognition of this and a series of strategic, aesthetic decisions to create a poetic cinema.

> It's necessary to envision an unfinished and incomplete cinema so that the spectator can intervene and fill the void, the lacks. Instead of making a film with a solid, impeccable structure, one should weaken the latter… (Abbas Kiarostami quoted in Nancy 88)

5.3 L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews named the journal of poetics they co-edited *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.* The title announces the intentions and strategies through which the Language poets would attempt to resist the influences of convention and ideology. Their intention was to unmoor language from its typical connection to dominant codes. This involved a formal disorientation of or reorientation to some of the ideas and techniques initiated by the formalists in the early decades of the 20th century. This involved a skeptical employment of language which insisted on engaging language and words as material objects. The Language poets saw their methods as a new relation to the notion of realism. Theirs was a realism that refused to take ontological or epistemological reality on faith, to agree to the assertion of things as they are or of ideology as it was currently comprised. Instead they proposed the materiality of language; its referential quality loosened from certainty to mere potential. This kind of realism represented a skepticism about how language forms its connections to objects and ideas. As Andrew Ross put it (in 1988):

> …the realism of writers today is that they can engage this sense of form on its own terms, in order to expose the universality of its codes. Realism, in this sense, is not at odds with a conception of formalism but rather with other, 'unrealistic' attempts to construct a subversive space completely outside commodity formalism. (Ross 377)

The name of Bernstein and Andrews' journal brings this materiality to the forefront of the reading and writing experience. As Bob Perelman puts it:

> L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E…presents a…problem, as anyone who has ever had to type it more than once will understand. The labor of materially producing writing: uppercase L, lowercase equals, uppercase A, lowercase equals, uppercase N, and so on. If the equal signs are focused on, then there seems to be a general functional equivalence, L equals A equals N – a letter is a letter. A Saussurian poetics, perhaps, where sign equals nothing more than its difference from every other sign. (Perelman 20)

This focus on materiality allows unconventional relationships to come forward in the use of language. To start to get a feel for this, let's look at Bruce Andrews' poem "Confidence Trick." For our purposes, I'd like to focus on just the first three stanzas (or paragraphs if you prefer). As a way to start reading this poem, I scan it very casually, looking for words which stand out and begin to define a constellation of shared concern. In the first three stanzas, I pick out the words *Belfast, Capetown* (this was written in the mid-80s), *anarchy, demographics, aesthetics, equality, abortion, Peacock throne, history, christianity*, and *I.R.A*. I'm engaging the materials of the poem, ignoring the syntagmatic plane (as Barthes has called it), the plane on which language moves sequentially, establishing the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences by their relationship to those which precede or follow them. I'm ignoring that. I get to the word *Ulcer* (with a capital U). And it seems odd. Why the capital U? My non-syntagmatic scan supplies some clues and suggests a feasible reading of Ulcer with a capital U: given the references to *Belfast* and *I.R.A*. and to *christianity*, *history, abortion, Peacock throne* and *anarchy*; given the mention of *Cape Town*, another site of bloody conflict over questions of control, *Ulcer* with a capital U suggests Ulster with a capital U. It's a defensible reading. But why? What is Andrews saying about Ulster, Northern Ireland, bloody conflicts and control? It's difficult and a bit misguided to try to say what a Language poem is about. Not because Language poems aren't about something – actually one criticism of Language poems is that they're all about the same thing – the problem is in what we mean when we say "about". "Confidence Trick" isn't about a story or a journey from A to B. It's not about a scene and characters and action or a dilemma and a resolution. Nor is it about the depiction of a set of materials outside the poem: a city called Belfast, a procedure called abortion, etc. In this sense, "about" is about a sense of completion. To arrive at an idea of what "Confidence Trick" is about would be to arrive at a destination, completing the journey of the poem and/or its interpretation. But as the title suggests, this poem (like most Language poems) is not earnest in suggesting the fulfillment of an idea nor in promising an end to the journey. We can talk about what this poem is about by talking about the words themselves: about words called *Belfast* and *abortion*, about the assumptions that come with their use. In this context, *Ulcer* with a capital U draws our attention to its misplacement. What's an ulcer doing here and why with a capital U? The word rattles its cage. An analysis like this can start to get punny: the word tries to burn a hole in its encasement; disrupting and paining the body in which it lives. See what I mean? It can seem a bit offhanded. But that's part of the materiality of words too. They suggest each other, resonate with each other; they overflow their boundaries sometimes, leave stuff out, invite uninvited stuff in. This is language operating on what Barthes called the paradigmatic plane, where *parole* maintains a connection to *langue*, to its mechanical/material reality as a system of signs. This, of course, is an always-faulty mechanicity, never managing to efficiently produce the desired product (meaning).

Instead, the meaning-machine produces only by-products, scattered about the space where the intended product ought to be.

Contrary to appearances, the language poets did not aspire to arbitrariness. You can read in Andrews' poem a clear intention, a consistent set of concerns, and a rational design. It just doesn't happen to be a design based on completion or wholeness of narrative or syntagmatic mechanics. The words in Andrews' poem are not, however, used as non-referential materials. The Language project was not about stripping writing of reference. For all the utopian-leanings of their politics, the Language poets, as poets, remained pragmatists,

> …the idea that writing could be stripped of reference is as troubling and confusing a view as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constituted world of "things." (Bernstein and Andrews ix)

One of the Language poets' techniques was the employment of *parataxis* or "the placing together of clauses or phrases one after another without coordinating or subordinating connectives." (Merriam Webster). Such parataxis was achieved most often and most successfully through the use of what Ron Silliman dubbed "The New Sentence". It seems to me now, some fifteen years down the road, that the New Sentence was probably the most fully-realized and sustainable idea of the Language poets' poetics. Silliman was hardly the only Language poet to employ the technique. And it was a much-discussed formal element in the critical debates of the day. Bob Perelman, writing in the nineties, described the New Sentence this way:

> A new sentence is more or less ordinary itself, but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance: new sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences. (Perelman 61)

The New Sentence was not without precedent, but, in her exhaustive essay on the Language poets' politics, poetics and community, Eleana Kim suggests that there is an equal measure of similarity and difference between the New Sentence and its precedents. Ultimately, she concludes, the New Sentence had to be viewed as a true literary innovation. The precedents which shed some light on the New Sentence include, most prominently, William Carlos Williams' long prose poem *Kora In Hell*, and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons.* But, as Kim points out,

> Whereas Williams and Stein use the prose poem as a means of "cubist portraiture," the work of poets such as Carla Harryman, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, and Silliman himself are not concerned with capturing phenomenological perception in the way suggested by a "portrait," but with constructing linguistic spaces around the absences inherent in signification. (Kim)

In other words, Williams and Stein, for all their linguistic ingenuity and their own interest in a certain kind of estrangement, still see their writing as a depiction of a material reality or of object impressions. Aspiring poets in the 80s were bludgeoned with William's maxim: "No ideas, but in things." The Language poets, on the other hand, might have said, "no things, but in words". The New Sentence

wasn't about beating around the bush of some absent object; not an attempt at reconstruction or representation. The New Sentence was a thing unto itself, activated and made meaningful by and through its relation to other New Sentences. Without pushing this analogy too far, the New Sentence's ontology could be described as Heideggerian, a linguistic Being-with; a linguistic-Being-in-the-linguistic-world.

Ron Silliman took great pains to theorize the New Sentence and to verify its necessity. He points out the neglect of the sentence as a meaningful lexical unit in Saussure's privileging of speech over writing. I'm borrowing a line of thought from Eleana Kim, who points out Silliman's use of the linguistics of Ferrucio Rossi-Landi, who hypothesized that higher orders of meaning, such as emotion, can occur only in the syllogistic movement which takes place above the level of the sentence. As Kim puts it,

> Silliman formulates the defining features of the New Sentence, a fundamental property of which is the control or limitation of syllogistic movement of the sentences composing a paragraph. Thus, the reconfiguration of the relationship between part and whole, or sentence:paragraph:complete work allows for these disjunct elements to engage in new, diverse contexts, revealing relationships between lexical units within the syntactic structure of the sentence, as well as illuminating other structures through its relationship to adjacent sentences. (Kim)

As an example of how the New Sentence works, of how it feels, I turn to Barrett Watten's poem "Relays", which begins:

> Let no one consider the original noise.
>
> Outside there's noise. Time doesn't print.
>
> A bar of sulfur lies on a mahogany table. From this point to the frontier is exact.
>
> This distance between yourself and what you are intended to see.
>
> Steam-driven pilings hold up the bridge like logs under the feet of sunburnt slaves rolling I-beams to their designated resting place on a riverbank in Kansas.
>
> Romantic ideas take over. The bridge is easily missed.
>
> (Watten 138)

Thanks to the way the poem is printed on the page, you immediately get the sense of the sentences as independent structural elements. This arrangement is quite common in Language poems. The title, "Relays" also indicates something of how the New Sentence functions in a poem. As in a relay race, there is a passing of the poem's baton from one runner-sentence to the next. Each one is on its own while it is in possession of the baton and once it has passed it off to the next sentence it is out of the race, but its efforts still contribute to the overall result. The poem is not served if the runner-sentence is simply hanging around, conversing with the others. The runner-sentence does its job by taking hold of the thing and booking, legging it, running like hell. The Language poets were aware that their poems required a new way of reading – creating this new way was, of course, part of their agenda (and, in the end, a big part of their problem). So, we often find clues within the poems themselves about how the New Sentence works. In "Relays," for instance, we confront the twelfth segment: "The

sentence-producing mechanism cannot be permitted to operate unchecked." (Watten 138) The poem is clarifying what we're reading as we read it. This is not automatic writing. The machine is being monitored, But by whom? Writer? Reader? Both? Later the poem says, "This sentence is art and science. Not more than 10% conscious, the body itself has parts." We could read "art" as literature, and "science" as linguistics – two primary concerns of the language movement. The notion of a body which is only 10% conscious and comprised of parts certainly sounds like language: an initial premise for the writing and reading of a Language poem; or, importantly, of *this* Language poem. A bit later still, Watten puts a sentence – well, a sentence fragment really – in quotes: "'Gardens full of vicious hybrids and paradoxical grafts.'" Is this a bit of self-commentary on Language methodology? Perhaps it's been lifted from a review. But it's hard to tell if it might have been meant as a compliment or a criticism.

The socio-historic contingency of any use of language or system of signs is well understood. Therefore, the need to question those uses and the socio-historic assumptions on which their use is based is well-founded. In the singular context of such an understanding, the estrangement proposed by Victor Shklovsky, pursued by the avant gardes of the 20th century and then re-estranged by the Language poets would appear to be a perfectly reasonable strategy of resistance. But one also feels compelled to recognize what might be called, for lack of a better term, some more universally "human" impulses and capacities which art seems uniquely equipped to convey. These impulses and capacities may, in fact, reside at the level of an effort to overcome their socio-historic restraints. In the inevitable failure to achieve this overcoming, certain art works succeed. The ability to carry the acknowledgement of this inherent futility in the earnest arc traced through the night sky of the receptive, analytic imagination, is conceptual competence.

Conceptual competence is a register which behaves as or resides in a super-category, above or apart from form and content, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, *langue* and *parole*. I realize this is a cheat (or, more benevolently, a place-holder in the spirit of the *sous rature*). My intention is not to obfuscate or to confuse categories which have generally-accepted names and properties. Form can, of course, be analyzed and made material, so too can content. When I say content, I don't mean representation or represented material, but content as a material in and of itself (words, paint, tones, et. al.); a material just as able, just as entitled to interact with the objects of the world as any other material. Conceptual competence is where we might admit that the tools of reason are ill-adapted to analyze material phenomena which do not derive from or dwell in reason. Here, we can acknowledge the possibility of countless reasonable theses, but must, finally, realize that none of them are true exclusively, because none of them partakes of the same plane of experience as the effects it purports to explain. Any analog is pure analogy and ultimately built of equal amounts of coherence and non-coherence. Any analysis is of a different order, a separate language. The art work and its effects are impregnable from without. From within their effects; effected *by* them, they are, of course, eminently pregnable, because the experience of them is an experience subject to the same conditions of existence, the same effects, to which the art work is subject.

5.4 the luminous spiral of the possible

I have already alluded to the "not" in Ponge and have promised to deal with it in Deleuze's and Agamben's readings of Melville's "Bartleby". Here, I will attempt to build a bridge between them. The line of thinking from which this bridge is suspended constitutes one of my primary assumptions and one of the primary justifications for this extended thinking of incompetence. To trace the line back to its origin, to the bulwark to which it is anchored, would be both impossible and in contradiction to the thought itself. This "not" is crucial to many of the concepts which inform, inspire and underpin these thoughts: to the notion of writing under erasure; to semiotic slippage; to deconstruction. At its core, it remains coreless. The "not" which I take for granted has no recourse to an initial moment or a final result. There is no god or purpose. The "not" is a state of terminal ignorance. But, in calling it "terminal", I am not bestowing upon it a sense of finality, something upon which I may rest my case. It is resolutely *not*-final, because it necessitates an eternal process of coming-to-terms. It is this "not" I mean to suggest with my Walser-inspired title, "This not knowing needn't bother us". It's not bothering us does not sweep it away nor invalidate its existence. This not knowing is one of the many philosophical realities which may be said to be *always already*. Nor does our not being bothered by it mean that the matter is closed, that we have surmounted the issue to emerge clean and unbothered. Our not being bothered is a goal. The process of not being bothered is re-initiated at each confrontation with this always already not knowing; it is perennial. In the best of cases, our not being bothered strives for states like "play", "*jouissance*", "pleasure", and "experience". These states, which might arise from a resigned negativity or an accepting nihilism, might also arise from a genuine acceptance of not knowing and of the ongoing process of not being bothered. Such a process is an opening of possibilities at every turn: the turns of the game, the turning of corners; however they turn out. In the worst cases, the reading of our not knowing arrives at a misanthropy – or worse yet, a fascism – born of this sense of resignation and negativity. Gamely, we hope it won't come to that.

Giorgio Agamben, who we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, is among the most optimistic readers of the "not".

> What shows itself on the threshold between Being and non-Being, between sensible and intelligible, between word and thing, is not the colorless abyss of the Nothing but the luminous spiral of the possible. (Agamben 257)

Similarly, theologians have linked such neitherness to possibility, using its qualities to suggest the qualities of god. This is no coincidence, as Agamben's thought takes its strongest cues from a line which starts at Aristotle but picks up significant steam with Jewish and Christian thinkers, incorporating both Aquinas and Duns Scotus, among others. Such a strategy may, of course, be viewed skeptically as an attempt to remove and protect the concept of god from the incursions of reason. Should his qualities be outside our abilities to quantify or even describe, then it falls beyond our abilities to disprove his existence. The clergy remain the sole arbiters of his nature, his predilections, his desires. Neither the scientists not the laity are qualified to question the clergy's word.

Such thinking, though it may produce possibility, is not without its dangers. For Agamben, the neither/nor opens up the possibility of a kind of ontological freefall.

> Not only science but also poetry and thinking conduct experiments. These experiments do not simply concern the truth or falsity of hypotheses, the occurrence or nonoccurrence of something, as in scientific experiments; rather, they call into question Being itself, before or beyond its determination as true or false. These experiments are without truth, for truth is what is at issue in them…when Cavalcanti describes the poetic experience as the transformation of the living body into a mechanical automaton;…when Dante desubjectifies the "I" of the poet into a third person (I' mi son un), a generic, homonymous being who functions only as a scribe in the dictation of love; when Rimbaud says "I is another";…and when Heidegger replaces the physical "I" with an empty and inessential being that is only its own ways of Being and has possibility only in the impossible – each time we must consider these "experiments without truth" with the greatest seriousness. Whoever submits to these experiments jeopardizes not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence. (Agamben Potentialities 259 – 261)

Agamben fears losing "Being itself, before or beyond its determination as true or false". (260) One senses that this Being for which he fears shares something with a theological, first category predicate. The Judeo-Christian influence on Agamben's thinking tethers him to a neither/nor possibility borne of negative theology. But there is another kind of possibility which does not relate to anything "before or beyond" truth or falseness. This, I think, is the possibility indicated by Derrida; one not shared with negative theology. This possibility has no relation to truth or falseness, neither before, beyond nor derived from it. This possibility is part of the condition of incompletion, of inconclusiveness, of incompetence. It is the possibility indicated by the phrase (attributed variously to Hasan-i-Sabbah, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and William S. Burroughs): "Nothing is true, everything is permitted".

As with the "not" of negative theology, this "not" might be similarly protected, except that it is not an it. Rather than an entity or a force or a rule, the "not" is simply a condition. For many years, Derrida's work seemed to exist in a state unsettlingly close to that of a theology predicated on what cannot be known. Negative theology haunted Derrida's work. It threatened to deconstruct deconstruction's logic, acting as the latent, damning assumption buried in its method. It suggested that deconstruction might be exactly what it purported not to be: a belief system. Derrida has responded in more or less direct ways throughout his career.

> [Negative theology] is always occupied with letting a supraessential reality go beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastens to remind us that, if we deny the predicate of existence to God, it is in order to recognize him as a superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. Here there is no question of such a move…[Difference] is not a being-present…It commands nothing, rules over nothing, and nowhere does it exercise any authority. (Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology.* 134-153. Quoted in Kermode 74)

But it wasn't until a conference in 1986 in Jerusalem that Derrida specifically distanced his thought from a form of negative theology. In this lecture, later published as "How To Avoid Speaking: Denials", Derrida fixes on the Greek notion of the *khora*: neither sensible or intelligible; the space, place or receptacle which, by "receiving all", makes possible the formation of the cosmos. The *khora* also partakes of the form of negative affirmation designated by the idea of a negative theology. Derrida identifies possibility in such negativity.

> As it is neither this nor that (neither intelligible nor sensible), one may speak *as if* it were a joint participant in both. *Neither/nor* easily becomes *both…and*, both this and that. ("Denials" 35)

The *khora* speaks to a failure of categories – the kind of failure plumbed famously by Foucault, but also indicated by Deleuze's notion of the *assemblage* (one thinks of the Wasp-Orchid: neither this nor that, yet also, both this *and* that). This failure begins at the first category; truth or god or destiny or reason, et. al. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault proposes that, from some point in the first millennium of the Christian calendar to the seventeenth century, all knowledge was thought to emanate from (or, put more strongly, to partake of) that first category. Thus, according to Foucault, the relation of all the signs of knowledge to that which they signified was one of resemblance. Since all signifieds derived from and resembled the same first signified, they naturally all resembled each other. Since the seventeenth century, however, the conception and use of language has changed. The idea of a first category, an initial word, has been replaced by a network of relations. Resemblance has been replaced by signification. Yet, Foucault finds a lingering or revived autonomy in the use of language in literature (he specifically cites Hölderlin, Mallarmé and Artaud).

> …we no longer have that primary, that absolutely initial, word upon which the infinite movement of discourse was founded and by which it was limited; henceforth, language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day. (Foucault 49)

In a pre-seventeenth century conception of language, the *khora* could be thought of as the slot, the cubbyhole, into which the first category is inserted. In a modern conception (or perhaps such thoughts initiate the post-modern?), the *khora* might be said to summon the first category; to invent it. This invention does not imply that the *khora* must then exist, in reality or in truth. This form of literary language – rife with incompetence – is the invention of the category of a dreamt-of category, the desire for withheld definition.

> The word is *khora*, the place (which is yet not a place) or the receptacle (which is not a receptacle) in which the mimemes of the forms are impressed on matter; the "place" that must therefore have been there already, in a "there" outside time and becoming, neither in the eternity of the ideas nor in the becoming of the sensible things. (Kermode 77)

Here, we encounter the twining of which we must be wary. Inconclusiveness winds itself around the base of incompletion, meaning to ascend and overtake its torso. If difference (and *differance*) reside in something like the neither/nor of the *khora*, then how are we to say if the fundamental incompetences of language are a matter of elements which are missing (rendering the text incomplete) or of inconceivable and ineffable effects (rendering the text inconclusive)? The negativity inherent in notions such as difference, slippage, the play of the signifier – what I am calling incompetence – implies a parenthetical, invisible *non-* in front of a series of useful terms: (non-)transparent, (non-)meaningful, (non-)representational, (non-)mimetic, (non-)complete, (non-)conclusive. These (non-)terms balance their positive counterparts like negative numbers in an algebraic equation. They level the sum at zero, arriving at a state resembling a writing under erasure (*sous rature*). We see Heidegger and Derrida resort to such a device to indicate the placeholder-

status of so many terms and thoughts. And Blanchot's signature construction: *the x without x* (in this case, the place without place = *khora*), amounts to very much the same thing.

> Deferral must, in human terms, have a stop, and the stop of deconstructive discourse is the aporia; the universal terminus is undecidability. To treat text as a guarded meaning-construct, as a willed *civitas* or perhaps oasis, as proportioned and limited, is the plot of those who yield to the call of "everything in us that desires a realm"; to treat it as something that must be untied and exposed as interminably frayed, the exposure being itself a kind of end, an end that makes sense of the untying, is the plot of those who are mastered by a desire more subtle, yet still desire for a realm, which, for them, will replace that *mensonge véridique* of which Lacan speaks, and which Derrida dislikes. (Kermode 80)

Here it is in black and white. We have choices regarding our treatment of text, and by implication, our treatment of truth and telos and knowledge and meaning, etc. We may try to contain it, falsely – even knowingly falsely – and thereby allow ourselves to pursue what Kermode calls "the interest of self- or species-preservation" (79). We may allow for its frayed nature, but this, according to Kermode, still allows us to grant it conclusion and something approaching understanding. It still amounts to teleology. Kermode does not offer a third possibility: a possibility buried neatly in the compound senses of the homonyms immanent and imminent. There is in language – or perhaps in an attitude *towards* language – an in-built about-to-be. There is a sense of meaning or representation never being present exactly, but always being close enough that we feel we know it or are, at least, acquainted with it. If we cannot see it we can, at least, get a whiff of it. Perhaps it's more like remembering than experiencing anew; perhaps we construct it like a map of a street we visited once upon a time. This is the imminence (the about-to-be) that is immanent (built-in) to language. Representations are representations of what they represent. There is always another layer, separating signifier from signified. It's all there in Peirce's notion of the interpretant; the reason *thirdness* was so essential to his thinking, and the reason that the interpretant cascades, and the reason that all semiosis is unlimited.

As John K. Sheriff has pointed out, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic differs in a primary, significant way from the Saussurean dyadic model of signifier and signified. (Sheriff 54) Peirce famously professes his allegiance to tri-partite models and, accordingly, constructs a triadic model of the sign. As I illustrated in chapter 2.1, this model consists of the *sign*, the *object*, and the *interpretant*. Peirce's *sign* is roughly equivalent to Saussure's *signifier*. Peirce's *object* corresponds, more or less, to Saussure's *signified. Interpretant*, however, has no equivalent in Saussurean sign-theory. Peirce explained his model many times in many ways. Here is one of the clearest explanations:

> A sign…is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object.* It stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground*. (Peirce 135)

Sheriff argues that Peirce's notion of *ground* makes his model more four-parted, than three. Ground notwithstanding, we need to come to a better understanding of the triumvirate, sign-object-interpretant, to make sense of Peirce's model. I have borrowed the following diagrams (with minor modifications) from John K. Sheriff:

$$S \text{———} O$$
$$I$$
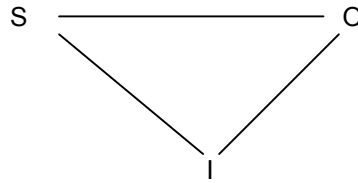
The sign (S) relates to its object (O). The interpretant is the "'mental effect' or 'thought' generated by the relation" of the sign to the object. (Sillverman 15) This relation becomes the object of the interpretant in a second, inevitable triad:

$$I^1 \text{———} S\text{-}O$$
$$I^2$$
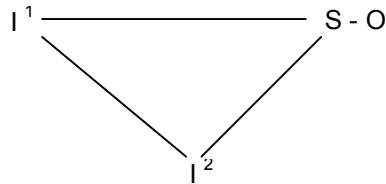
In the second triad, the original interpretant (I^1) has moved to the position of the sign. It's object is now the relation of the original sign to its object (S - O). And a second interpretant (I^2) has been introduced. This, inevitably leads to a third triad:

$$I^2 \text{———} I^1\text{-}S\text{-}O$$
$$I^3$$
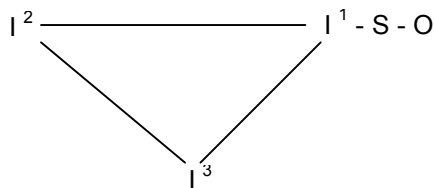
And so on endlessly. (Sheriff 60)

The multiplicity of Peirce's model doesn't reside solely in the constant renewal of the interpretant. Peirce's definition of the object also contains multitudes:

> The Objects – for a sign may have any number of them – may each be a single known existing thing or thing believed formerly to have existed or expected to exist, or a collection of such tings, or a known quality or relation or fact, which single Object may be a collection, or whole of parts, or it may have some other mode of being, such as some act permitted whose being does not prevent its negation from being equally permitted, or something of a general nature desired, required, or invariably found under certain general circumstances. (Peirce 138)

Peirce's object maintains many of the qualities of possibility that exist in the "not" favored by Agamben. The object partakes of the "luminous spiral of the possible". This is because any experience of the object is subject to the mediation of signs, of Peirce's cascade of interpretants. Every object rides this cascade as driftwood rides the currents of a swift stream, eventually finding itself held aloft by the swells of a sea both more expansive than it can imagine and deeper than it cares to. Our experience of reality is likewise mediated by signs. We may "feel" reality in a way, confident that we interact with it, are subject to it. But, for Peirce, as Kaja Silverman explains, reality exists, for all practical intents and purposes, only in the form of thought.

> Reality bumps up against us, impinges upon us, yet until we have found a way of representing that reality, it remains impervious to thought. (Silverman 16)

This is the Ariadne's thread of Peirce's thought which Derrida picked up in his earliest and most important work. Derrida shares Peirce's distrust, not of reality, but of access to reality. The denial of this inaccessibility is what Derrida calls "presence", as if reality were there for us to touch and to feel, to possess. It is testament to the power of the signifier and our imaginations both that the signified always seems so present. The signifier is, in many ways, the ultimate con artist in the double-blind game of mechanical competence. The signifier wants to convince us at every turn of its mechanical competence. That it often succeeds may be attributed to its persuasiveness or to our own insatiable desires, or, in all probability, a bit of both. What the signifier's success cannot be attributed to is its perfect registration of the qualities of a preexistent signified.

> …this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. (*Of Grammatology* 18)

All signifiers are thus incompetent, because competence is impossible. The non-existence of a whole and discernible, totally accessible signified ensures that any signification comes up short. It is only in the realm of ideality; in our imaginations and our desires, that we might come to know anything completely.

> We cannot in any way reach perfect certitude nor exactitude. We never can be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general ratio. (Peirce 60)

6. Inconclusion

6.1 these letters speed to death

As a supplement to Deleuze's and Agamben's readings, it is possible to read Melville's "Bartleby" as the story of a narrator who cannot control his writing (his scrivening); can't make it do what he wants it to do, what it prefers not to. Bartleby, remember, is a scrivener – the voice (or the pen) of the narrator, an attorney, a man of the law (as Kafka might say). When called upon to do what he does, Bartleby, responds by saying "I would prefer not to" and retires behind the screen which separates the two men in their shared office. At the story's end, Bartleby is in jail, having been removed from the premises of the office by the police. Deleuze says "'Bartleby' is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever". (68) What makes him so sure? I can imagine Bartleby's cordoning off as a metaphorized enactment of what Jameson called "the prison house of language". Bartleby, the voice (the pen; the language) of the narrator (of the attorney, of the man of the law) is first screened off, then walled off (barred off; debarred) from his employer (he who employs him). Bartleby (not as writer) but as *writing* itself (as language) is removed (bracketed off) from his employer (he who employs him). The user of the language cannot convince (coerce, cajole) his language to speak (to write; really, to happen, to be).

At first blush, "Bartleby" would appear to be a story unlike Walser's "Boat Trip". Walser's writing is performative. What it is "about" is, in one reading, not what it is about. It is the getting there, the trip, and how this getting there is accomplished that the story is really about. In an inverse sense, then, "Boat Trip" actually is about what it is about. What it is about is what it is. "Bartleby", on the other hand, is more conventional. Its mode of telling – its getting there – is more conventional. The subversion of what we sense as conventional lies in what Deleuze calls Bartleby's "formula": "I would prefer not to"; and in Bartleby's inexplicable and disturbing behavior. We would not be unwarranted to conclude that Melville's story is about a narrator who cannot control his writing, while Walser's story is by a narrator who can't control his. But as the readings of Deleuze and Agamben attest, Melville is no more able to control his writing than Walser. The writing, once it escapes its author, is perfectly capable of saying "I would prefer not to". That it may also, in the hands of one reader or another, say "I would prefer to do something entirely different", is evident in the inconclusion of the range of available interpretations of a given text. Writing does not so willingly submit to the author's (or the reader's) intentions or thoughts. Bartleby is the embodiment of a mechanical writing. He copies words without knowledge or interest in their meaning. He won't even read them back. He is the machine who has no use for what he produces. Deleuze says "the invisible Bartleby does an extraordinary amount of 'mechanical' work". (Deleuze 75) With the help of Walter Lüssi, Agamben makes a connection between "Bartleby" and the writing of Walser, a connection forged by mutual refusal. This refusal, according to Agamben, is what establishes both "Bartleby" and the writing of Walser as eminently literary.

> In a work on Robert Walser, Walter Lüssi invented the concept of an experiment without truth, that is, an experience characterized by the disappearance of all relation to truth. Walser's writing is "pure poetry" (*reine Dichtung*) because it "refuses, in the widest sense, to recognize the Being of something as something." This concept should be transformed into a paradigm for literary writing. (*Potentialities* 259 - 260)

In a more conventionally philosophical mode, Agamben begins his essay on Bartleby by pondering the relationship of writing to thought. He ruminates on the image of the scribe as embodiment or enactment of thought in the form of writing.

> The late Byzantine lexicon that goes under the name of *Suda* contains the following definition… "Aristotle was the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought."… what is decisive is not so much the image of the scribe of nature…as the fact that *nous*, thought or mind, is compared to an ink pot in which the philosopher dips his pen. The ink, the drop of darkness with which the pen writes, is thought itself. (*Potentialities* 243-244)

It is in fact, according to Agamben, this image that leads to the vast philosophical tributary of the mind as *tabula rasa* or white sheet or blank slate upon which thoughts are inscribed. Agamben seizes this – the seed of a most resilient philosophical metaphor – and focuses on an Aristiotelian distinction.

> Aristotle takes care to specify that *nous* "has no other nature than that of being potential, and before thinking it is absolutely nothing". (*Potentialities* 245)

It is to the potential nature of thought that Agamben dedicates his own, actual thoughts on the figure of Bartleby. Agamben is most interested in Aristotle's notion that "all potential to be or to do something is always also potential not to be or to do." (*Potentialities* 245) Bartleby, the scrivener (the scribe) is the embodiment of the movement of thought from potentiality to actuality. In some sense, we can read Bartleby as the actualizer of his employer (the man of the law, the narrator). It follows then, that if Bartleby actualizes the words and work of the man of the law, that he actualizes the law itself. But who, we might wonder, is actualizing the narrative? Who is writing it down? The narrator, the attorney, depends upon his scriveners to capture his words on paper. Has this story – the narrator's story of his scrivener, Bartleby – been entrusted to one of his scriveners? It could not have been entrusted to Bartleby, who, by the end of the tale is dead and who, besides, refuses to write. It seems unlikely that the narrator would have turned to one of the other scribes – to Turkey or Nippers (as they are called) – since the story characterizes them in ways which the narrator might not want to share with his employees. Perhaps, the narrator has finally taken up the pen himself and actualized his own writing. If so, then Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" has had the following, rather startling effect: instead of removing the narrator's words, his writing, to a space or a situation beyond his control, it has returned his writing to him. It has returned the control which the narrator ceded to his scriveners. Surprisingly, one might read "Bartleby" as the return of an abandoned, off-loaded writing to the narrator. "Bartleby" might be the story of a transformation of a writing-to-be-actualized into an actual writing: the story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" itself.

Avicenna, pursuing Aristotle, suggested that there are three types of potential intellect. Agamben summarizes:

> There is a potentiality (which he calls material) that resembles the condition of a child who may certainly one day learn to write but does not yet know anything about writing. Then there is potentiality (which he calls possible) that belongs to the child who has begun to write with pen and ink and knows how to form the first letters. And there is, finally, a complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write. (Potentialities 246-247)

Agamben calls Bartleby "the last, exhausted figure" of "the scribe who does not write". Bartleby is "perfect potentiality, which a Nothing alone now separates from the act of creation". (Potentialities 247)

When this Nothing, rather than preceding the work (as potential), occurs within the work, it forms an interruption, a caesura. This fissure in the clean expanse from first sentence to last, or from the outer edges of the canvas to its center (you will understand I am speaking figuratively) is a rupture in form and sense. It cannot be papered over, filled in, nor leapt across. The caesura in the body of the work is a wound. Its ongoing effect on the work: a scar or, perhaps, more appropriately, a disability like a limp or a tic or a speech impediment. This scar haunts the work, it is unforgettable. This impediment possesses the work, becomes part of it. Inconclusion exists in contradistinction to incompleteness which occurs at the boundary of the work and is felt as an absence beyond the work's borders. Inconclusion is the caesura-impediment within and of the body. The work of art, unable to provide all, may, at least, provide an admission of the inconclusion it inevitably carries. Agamben's Nothing is potential. And so is this caesura, a potential-not-to be (in Aristotelian parlance). The missing piece is not-actualized and therefore indeterminate.

Earlier, in chapter five, I cordoned off two types of incompletion: material incompletion and experiential incompletion. I also warned against the possibility of confusing incompletion with inconclusion. Here, in what one might call *interpretive incompletion*, lies the gray area susceptible to capture by both inconclusion and incompletion. Interpretation of the text is never complete. I still wonder about my favorite songs. In all likelihood, scholars are, somewhere, at this very moment, debating the meaning of Shakespeare. Interpretation is, indeed, a process which never reaches a state of completion. But it is, ultimately, a product of something deeper and more intractable than the qualities and characteristics of a particular work. Interpretive incompletion is the product of an unavoidably instantiated quality of language. This inconclusion is – in that phrase beloved of philosophers – the *always already* of language. As such, it belongs more properly to the idea of an inconclusion which infects all language, than to an incompletion which plagues a singular work. Serge Gavronsky points out that Ponge's oeuvre serves as an excellent example of interpretive inconclusion, having been, at first, considered classicist (by Jean Paulhan); next phenomenologist (by Sartre and

Camus); then language-centric (by Tel Quel); and finally a fine example of the problematization of the linguistic subject (by Derrida). (Gavronsky 5 - 7)

The sentence that precedes the first sentence in Walser's "Boat Trip" might be read as an instance of incompleteness, a suggestion of something preceding the text. In this sense, like Ponge's *Soap*, it is open at the front. It begins not from a determinate point, but from an unsupplied indeterminacy. This indeterminacy does not, however, pre-exist the story. It is called into being (and simultaneously into question) by the story itself. This indeterminacy would not and could not exist in the absence of the story. Likewise, the story could not be what it is without this indeterminacy. So the sentence that precedes the first sentence in Walser's "Boat Trip" might be read as an instance of inconclusion. The story is, in a sense, possessed by the not-present sentence. This sentence exists (indeterminately) within the body of the story. It does not precede it as potential. The pure, preceding potential of the sentence that precedes the first sentence of "Boat Trip" is all the things not implied by the actual first sentence; all the things the story doesn't relate to, doesn't take up. But "Boat Trip" does take up the indeterminate sentence which precedes the first actual sentence of the story. This sentence is a caesura-impediment that haunts the text. (There are others, as well.) The story limps a little as a result of it. Its silhouette is charged with it. It is, in the purest sense of Christopher Middleton's phrase, "the imaginable to be converted". One could read "the imaginable" as "the potential" or "the inconclusive".

Agamben again:

> In its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such. Not thought but the potential to think, not writing but the white sheet is what philosophy refuses at all costs to forget. (Potentialities 249)

Because philosophy's raison d'etre is potentiality, both Agamben and Deleuze are drawn to Bartleby, who, leaving the white sheet unwritten-upon, preserves its potential. The writing he is to have done remains inconclusive. As a character, he is reduced to a function, a scrivener. As such – both Agamben and Deleuze are quick (each in the first paragraph of his essay) to point out – he is part of a literary lineage of scribes. And as a character, he is reduced to inconclusivity. He is – in a phrase which echoes Blanchot – the writer who does not write. It is important that he is, functionally, a scrivener, a writer. If he were not, then his not-writing would not include the potential to write. It would be outside the "body" of Bartleby. But writing is within the body of Bartleby-as-function, just as the sentence preceding the first sentence lingers within the body of "Boat Trip". This is why Agamben, following Aristotle, prizes the potential not-to-do within doing; the potential not-to-be within being. Such potential can think itself as doing and not doing without actualizing either state. It is utterly inconclusive.

As I began the previous chapter with a brief categorization of incompletion, let me provide a similar list here. This one, however, is not mine. It is Alan Davies' and it is provided to

distinguish the true topic of his concern, what he calls "private enigmas" within literature. Davies, here, describes various loci of inconclusion in the text.

> …the narratively enigmatic which, functioning, becomes through reappearance, a character or figure of the text; the metaphysically enigmatic which functions, deliberately, through our lives as we return to its imperative point of question; the enigmatics of dream which function, vehicularly, to let life ride itself; the grammatically enigmatic, which functions as a verbal irregularity, a non-sequitur stunning us with what previously could not have been said; the enigmatic of any single text, which is obsessive in its function as the ground for all text and all enigma. (Davies 7)

I am not suggesting that this is an exhaustive stock-taking of inconclusion. Nevertheless, it provides a useful sounding-board against which we might test the volume and quality of our ideas. Davies' conception of enigma applies comfortably to the way in which the "I would prefer not to" operates in "Bartleby".

> The enigma is the only anoegenetic particle of language. It stands, in part (and in part it 'fails'), for the effort which made it so. It does not sublimate its function to structure, as do all functioning chunks of meaning; it is apart from function, embodying it at once. It is an action on which the curtain of meaning has come down with finality; behind the curtain, the perfunctory disclosure of fact. (Davies 8)

The "I would prefer not to" lowers this curtain figuratively. Literally, within the story, Bartleby retires behind the partition which divides him from his employer, the narrator. This separation, both figurative and literal, makes Bartleby inscrutable to his employer, enigmatic to the reader, inconclusive.

But one has the gnawing feeling that both Deleuze and Agamben are slightly misreading Bartleby's "I would prefer not to". Deleuze locates the power of the statement in its "secret agrammaticality", comparing it to such constructions as ee cummings' "he danced his did". But "I would prefer not to" maintains no such outward awkwardness. Rather than being agrammatical, it is asemantic. It makes like a message, but delivers no clear meaning. It arrives like an empty envelope, devoid of content. In this sense, it is akin to Davies' enigma.

> The enigma is messageless; perfectly balanced (of one 'side'), it is the perfect signifier, the only one not drawn apart (revealed) by unequal (metaphorically inexact) sides. Stolid, it doesn't waver. (Davies 10)

Instead it operates by subverting expectations, an operation to which Deleuze is also sensitive:

> …all his [employer's] hopes of bringing Bartleby back to reason are dashed because they rest on a logic of presuppositions according to which an employer "expects" to be obeyed, or a kind friend listened to, whereas Bartleby has invented a new logic, a logic of preference, which is enough to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole. As Mathieu Lindon shows, the formula "disconnects" word and things, words and actions, but also speech acts and words – it severs language from all reference in accordance with Bartleby's absolute vocation, to be a man without references,

someone who appears suddenly and then disappears, without reference to himself or anything else. (Deleuze 73-73)

Deleuze's characterization of Bartleby as a man without reference to himself, echoes Barthes description of the obtuse, or third level of meaning, which I discussed in chapter two.

> The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it. My reading remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation. If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything – how do you describe something that does not represent anything? (Barthes "Third Meaning" 61)

Deleuze sees in this non-referential man (this sign without referent) something of the promise of the New World, of America, the land disconnected from the father(land). America, then, is the land of inconclusion, a land in which all referential moorings have been severed and where the whole notion and process of meaning-making must begin anew, with the American sensibility freshly aware of their arbitrary and inconclusive character.

> A little bit of schizophrenia escapes the neurosis of the Old World. We can bring together three distinctive characteristics. In the first place, the formless trait of expression is opposed to the image or to the expressed form. In the second place, there is no longer a subject that tries to conform to the image, and either succeeds or fails. Rather, a zone of indistinction, of indiscernability, or of ambiguity seems to be established between two terms, as if they had reached the point immediately preceding their respective differentiation: not a similitude, but a slippage, an extreme proximity, an absolute contiguity; not a natural filiation, but an unnatural alliance. It is a "hyperborean," "arctic" zone. It is no longer a question of Mimesis, but of becoming…in the third place, psychosis pursues its dream of establishing a function of universal fraternity that no longer passes through the father, but is built on the ruins of the paternal function, a function that presupposes the dissolution of all images of the father, following an autonomous line of alliance or proximity that makes the woman a sister, and the other man, a brother…These are the three characteristics of the American Dream, which together make up the new identification, the New World: the Trait, the Zone and the Function. (Deleuze 78)

If, momentarily, we think back to the discussion of Bob Dylan in chapter two, we might find a ready application or realization of Deleuze's three characteristics of New World meaning. First, a certain formlessness infects expression. In the mid-60s, in both Dylan's musical forms and his lyrical constructs this is certainly the case. Second, Dylan's inability or unwillingness to provide the ideal form which his songs seem constantly to be hinting at – his beating around the bush – creates the "unnatural alliance", the "extreme proximity", which Deleuze identifies. Dylan's songs, more than any one else's seem to embrace becoming at the total exclusion of a mimetic impulse. Thirdly, Dylan's Nietzschean forgetting of the historical, musical and cultural past adds up to a "dissolution of all images of the father". Such a break – replacing paternalism with fraternity and sorority – is the founding dream and promise of America. Democracy (as envisioned, at least, by those who broke from the Old World) is the flattening of the structures of society, replacing the hierarchical, Father-led model, with something resembling a "sibling-society".

Deleuze identifies a schizophrenia latent in "Bartleby". Interestingly, though, any attribution of illness in the story is directed not at Bartleby himself, but at his language. It is the infection of the word "prefer" which the narrator fears, as if language, in its necessarily viral capacity, might be the carrier of mental illness, as if mental illness itself were the product of language use.

> Somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word "prefer" upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary means. (Melville 134)

In Agamben's reading of the "I would prefer not to", he senses a secret tautology. He compares the statement to an example used by Wittgenstein:

> Necessity thus concerns not the occurrence or nonoccurrence of the particular event but rather the alternative "it-will-occur-or-it-will-not-occur" as a whole. In other words, only the tautology (in Wittgenstein's sense) "tomorrow there will or will not be a battle at sea" is necessarily always true, whereas each of the two members of the alternative is returned to contingency, its possibility to be or not to be. (Agamben 264)

But "I would prefer not to" is not tautological in this sense. Bartleby is understood. He is not saying "I would just as soon do it as not do it". He is clearly saying he would prefer not to do it. If he were more grammatical, he would be less clear: "I would prefer to not". The inconclusion of the "I would prefer not to" is not a product of an agrammaticality or of a tautology, but of sense and context. Bartleby has placed himself in the context of employment in a law office, in the context of a scrivener position. Then, based on the "I would prefer not to", he becomes completely insensible within this context. He becomes the embodiment and the symbol of a contextual inconclusion; of the positive disavowal of the rules of the game. "Bartleby", as a text, operates as an example of the inconclusion of the text; of the powerlessness of all concerned parties when faced with the text's recalcitrant inconclusion.

Agamben picks up on this toward the end of his essay, refering to the narrator's divulgence of a rumor in the story's closing paragraph. The rumor suggests that Bartleby had come into the narrator's service after "being removed" from a position in the Dead Letter Office in Washington. In the final sentences of "Bartleby", the narrator eulogizes the dead letters, their unfulfilled intentions, their undelivered messages:

> … Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? …pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.
>
> Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity! (Melville 154-155)

Agamben recognizes the significance of this divulgence. The dead letters may have been the source of Bartleby's infection. Having seen how "these letters speed to death", Bartleby may have come down with the malediction of the futility of the text. The divulgence of this rumor regarding Bartleby's previous employment indicates a possible justification of his actions: not that Bartleby may have been sick, in some capacity, but that writing – in the form of letters, in the form of his scrivening – is incurably ill and that to carry on as if it were not, would be an act of futile denial. The position of this divulegnce, as a sort of epilogue, somehow extraneous to the story, flags the reader's attention. Why should it be included here, among the narrative's parting impression, its final words?

> There could be no clearer way to suggest that undelivered letters are the cipher of joyous events that could have been, but never took place. What took place was, instead, the opposite possibility. On the writing tablet of the celestial scribe, the letter, the act of writing, marks the passage from potentiality to actuality, the occurrence of a contingency. But precisely for this reason, every letter also marks the nonoccurrence of something; every letter is always in this sense a "dead letter." This is the intolerable truth that Bartleby learned in the Washington office, and this is the meaning of the singular formula, "on errands of life, those letters speed to death." (Potentialities 269)

The divulgence is a kind of clue. Agamben assigns it a parallel place in his essay: near the end, almost a supplement. Perhaps he meant to empower it in parallel fashion. But expository language and literary language are ruled by distinct exigencies. Literature depicts by discovery, tracing its own development like a detective in search of himself. It's mode of parting, of dissipating – ripe, though it may be, with incompletion and inconclusion – is crucial to its reading. The expository essay, however, means to explain. At its heart there is a thesis, which we trust is more or less fully-constituted there. The essay concludes, perhaps, by summing up. If it saves revelation for the end, it risks obscuring it. Such a revelation adorns the essay, like a tail: present perhaps, but hardly essential.

6.2 off minor

In the 1960s, John Berryman published a poem in 385 parts entitled *The Dream Songs*. (Each numbered part works as a stand-alone poem and many people prefer to read them as such. I will follow suit, referring to each part as a poem.) Each poem sticks roughly to a standard structure of three stanzas of 6 lines each. Each poem fits nicely on a single page. The poems are numbered. Some have titles as well. In the "Note:" which prefaces the compilation of all 385 poems, Berryman writes:

> The poem, then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof. (vi)

Many critics, of course, consider this too much protesting and attribute much of Henry's confessions to the poet, to Berryman. Inevitably, both claims are true at different junctures and in varying degrees.

Book VI of *The Dream Songs* begins obsessed with the death of Berryman's close friend, the poet, Delmore Schwartz. Briefly: the publication of Schwartz's first book, *In Dreams Begin Responsibility*, was greeted enthusiastically by the critics. Schwartz was hailed as the great young hope of American letters. He spent the next twenty-five years battling alcoholism, mental illness and an inability to rekindle the talent of his youth. In 1966, at the age of 53, he was found dead in the Chelsea hotel in New York City. Berryman too, fought alcoholism and mental illness and Schwartz's death dealt Berryman a heavy blow. Twelve of the first thirteen poems of book VI of *The Dream Songs* deal with Schwartz's death. Over the course of these excruciating poems, Berryman tries to exorcise the demonic fact of Delmore's passing. In Dream Song 156, he declares:

> I give in. I must not leave   the scene of this same death (175)

The poems grapple with the premature deaths of many of the poets of Berryman's and Schwartz's generation. They lament the cruel emptiness of living and, ultimately, of dying. Dream Song 158 is the last poem to deal (explicitly, at least) with Schwartz's death. It revolves around a theme which received peripheral treatment in some of the earlier poems: the fact that Delmore Schwartz had no children to carry on his name; to perpetuate his genes, his legacy, his person.

> Being almost ready now to say Goodbye,
> my thought limps after you. I ring you up,
> I know you are going tomorrow,
> with gashed in me with you, I am I
> gored with your leaving, for the 18th stop,
> this stop is congratulation & sorrow,
>
> you'll pay high rent & whizz. Blessings on you
> the almost only surviving Jewess & Jew
> since Delmore's dreadful death
> who had no child in bitter early age
> to turn him like a story, page on page,
> until it wearieth
>
> and then the child must outgo on its own:
> outgo! My parting farewell on your sons
> who will not replace you yet:
> you are both young & old, fresh & worn, torn
> but loving as I was in San Francisco once
> and now yóu have that bit.
> (177)

Expunging Delmore's haunting requires more than the syntagmatic plane can furnish. It is as if Berryman must break the language (the conversation, the poems) which is the mechanism of his possession. In life, Delmore Schwartz, the poet, cast spells of friendship, of sympathy, of pity and of love. His death must be dispelled by a poetry of abrogation. Dream Song 158 attempts this dispelling by subverting the syntagmatic expectations it has created. Look at what happens in the poem:

> …I ring you up,
> I know you are going tomorrow,

On the syntagmatic plane, the plane of the "spoken chain" (as Barthes calls it), where "each term…derives its value from its opposition to what precedes and what follows…" (Barthes 58), the poem sets certain narrative expectations. An "I" is speaking to a "you." The "you" is going somewhere tomorrow. Given the context of this poem, the "you" could be Schwartz going to his grave or it could be someone going to Schwartz's funeral or it could be someone who has come for the funeral and is now going away again. These are some of the possibilities implied by the narrative structure of the beginning of the poem. These possibilities – though distinct in their details – are all of a certain class: the class of possible actions taken by the "you" in the aftermath of Delmore Schwartz's death. These possibilities are delimited by the narrative structure.

Poetry accommodates more radical disjunctions than prose. Poetic language more readily avails itself of the paradigmatic plane; the plane of rhyme, pun and homonym. All the same, we don't expect to be thrown so completely to the wolves:

> with gashed in me with you, I am I
> gored with your leaving,

Part of the reason these lines are so unmooring is that they do not rely on the familiar paradigmatic devices of rhyme, pun or homonym. These lines "break" the language at a deeper, more perplexing level, upsetting syntax, confusing pronouns and disrupting the relationship between subject and object. Presumably, the "you" is going with someone or something. But "gashed in me with you" doesn't allow us to say with whom or with what. Instead words like "gashed" and "gored" gash and gore the discourse of the poem itself. In this sense, they are practically performative.

The primary subversion is of semantics. I am not ignoring the fact that there are paradigmatic mechanisms at work: the enjambment at the end of line four, ending with "I am I," facilitates the a-b-c, a-b-c rhyme scheme. Nor am I ignoring the fact that the subversion takes place, largely, on the syntagmatic plane; is a subversion *of* the syntagm. What I mean to suggest is that the subversion in the first stanza of Dream Song 158 is not simply the product of a paradigmatic "perversion" (to use Barthes' term) of the syntagm.

In the performative subversion of Dream Song 158, in the almost suicidal linguistic violence, one senses a deeper meaning than anything denoted in the words themselves. The syntactical, semantic breakdown of the poem suggests an eradication of being, as if the only way to subdue and, indeed, survive the destruction of Delmore Schwartz, good friend and poet, is to destroy the capacity to relate to Delmore Schwartz, good friend and poet. The poetry must be negated. And, because the friendship itself is too precious to be renounced, the self, which partakes of the friendship, must be sacrificed. (It was in 1972, only three years after the publication of the Dream Songs and six years after Delmore Schwartz's death, that Berryman leapt to his death from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis.)

> with gashed in me with you, I am I
> gored with your leaving

These lines, so irreconcilable with what precedes them, tear at the constitution of the poem, calling into question the text's ability to substantiate its existence. And if – as Berryman (for one reason) and structuralists (for another) claim – the poem's voice is neither the poet's nor Berryman's, then it must belong simply to the poem. If the poem cannot prove its existence, then the voice too is lost. What is a text without a voice? Is it dead? surrendered? reduced to nothing more than a potential?

Agamben is prone to ask such questions. He is not concerned with the meaning of Being in stasis or abstraction, but with Being's ability to affect and be affected by the things and beings which constitute its world. The important questions are those concerned with a capability to do (or to not do) something. "I could state the subject of my work as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb 'can' [*potere*]. What do I mean when I say: 'I can, I cannot'?" (*Potentialities* 177) Agamben's examinations of the phenomena of can and cannot often build on the foundation of Aristotle's early thinking on Being and potential. Aristotle distinguished two types of potential. *Generic* potential is the potential of a child to know something or to become something – this is a potential to alter one's own constitution through acquisition or change in status. *Existing* potential, on the other hand, is the potential of the architect to build – this is a potential already inherent in one's constitution, a capacity awaiting activation. Citing Aristotle, Agamben identifies the person who possesses knowledge as a source of potential "thanks to a *hexis*, a 'having,' on the basis of which he can also *not* bring his knowledge into actuality by *not* making a work, for example. Thus the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems." (*Potentialities* 179) This distinction is simple enough. But there is a problem of actuality hiding in the folds of potential's blanket distinction. If the potential to be and the potential to not be are the two possible positions of a binary system, it stands to reason that we should be able to describe the actuality of either position. Let's turn to an example supplied by Agamben.

> If every power is equally the power to be and the power to not-be, the passage to action can only come about by transporting (Aristotle says 'saving') in the act its own power to not-be. This means that, even though every pianist necessarily has the potential to play and the potential to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, the only one who can *not* not-play, and, directing his potentiality not only to the act but to his own impotence, he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play. While his ability simply negates and abandons his potential to not-play, his mastery conserves and exercises in the act not his potential to play (this is the position of irony that affirms the superiority of the positive potentiality over the act), but rather his potential to not-play. (*Coming Community* 36)

Glenn Gould is a pianist. The binary system of piano playing includes the potential to play and the potential to not-play. If the first potential is actualized, Gould plays the piano. We can verify this actualization: his fingers press down on the keys. In response, the piano's hammers strike the strings, a sound emanates from the piano. It is the correspondence of

events which verify the actualization of Gould's piano-playing potential. What would verify the actualization of Gould's potential to not-play?

Surely, in his day-to-day life, Glenn Gould did a whole host of non-piano-playing things. He walked down the street. He ate spaghetti. He dialed the telephone. True, all of these things are not playing the piano, but they are equally not each other nor anything else. These activities exist outside the binary system of playing the piano and do not refer nor relate to it.

Why not? After all, dialing the telephone is a lot like playing the piano: fingers press down on the keys. In response, the phone emits electronic signals, a sound emanates from the phone. There is a correspondence of events. These events, by not being piano playing, might be seen as an actualization of the potential to not play the piano. But that would be a mistake. The reason is simple: one need not have piano playing potential to dial the telephone. Thinking semiotically, the actions and events of telephone dialing and piano playing may exhibit a certain paradigmatic resemblance, but syntagmatically and semantically, they are unrelated. The only activity which has anything to say about the potential to play or not-play the piano is piano playing. Just as all piano playing is actualized in the midst of the *existing* potential to not-play (because only a piano player has this *existing* potential to not-play), the actualization of not-playing must come in the midst of the *existing* potential to play. Actualization of the potential to not-play, therefore, comes in the midst of playing.

As a classical pianist, Gould is following a score, written by a composer. As spectators we are aware of this. Gould's not-play potential is greatly limited by the score. True, he could simply stop playing, but this would be nothing more than an act of impetuousness. I assume that what Agamben hears in Gould's playing is a sense of contingency, an inkling of what else might have been. Contingency is, indeed, one manifestation of not-play potential. But as a performer, *programmed* – so to speak – by the score, Gould's potentials are, to some extent, prescribed and delimited. Potential is further prescribed and delimited by the technical constraints of the piano (88 notes), by the boundaries of tradition (the 12 tone scale), and by stylistic conceptions of the world of classical music. Perhaps we might find a better example in a jazz pianist such as Thelonious Monk. Without a score to follow, both Monk and the spectator are free to imagine an infinite array of "what ifs" at every juncture. Because Monk is both a composer and an improviser, the text of the composition turns on his potentials. On first listen, a recording of a through-composed passage (one with no improvisation), can employ various shades of potential and impotential: no twist is out of the question, all contingencies are, theoretically, in play. On repeated listenings, our expectations evolve toward a "hard-wiring," reducing the sense of contingency. Subsequent interpretations of the composition can re-install this lost sense of contingency, but only to a certain extent. Beyond that, some choices are heard as "wrong."

In between the notes of Thelonious Monk's "Off Minor", you can hear time breathing. You can hear time slowing down, stopping, gathering itself to exhale. Just two seconds in the piano is

already falling ever so slightly behind the beat, wheezing a little bit, gasping for breath. It hesitates just enough to catch the ear, to contradict expectations. It feels off kilter. A moment later, in the second half of the phrase, something exacerbates the friction impeding the piano's progress. The first lag may not have been a mistake. Monk is grinding the phrase against the gears of the rhythm section's engine, distending time, stealing breath. Seven seconds into the song, there is a pause which can't be a mistake. Monk lays out silently across the first beat of the measure – where the ear expects the chord to fall. He waits for the second beat and just a little bit more, to the very tail end of the beat. Monk drops the chord like a bundle of firewood, almost randomly onto the floor of the song. "You pick it up," he seems to say.

The rest of this version of "Off Minor," from the album *Genius of Modern Music, Volume One*, elaborates on the awkwardness of these opening phrases. For slightly less than three minutes, the song provides a slate upon which Monk etches his manifesto of incompetence. He solos stumblingly throughout – the musical equivalent of a man falling down a flight of stairs. Chords lurch uncomfortably into being, sometimes leaving an overtone lying around to form an equally uncomfortable liaison with the next chord. Unexpected silences, like a shower curtain being yanked open, suddenly expose the bass line, walking dutifully in synch with the locomotion of the ride cymbal. At times, the piano's phrasing adopts the attitude of a tantrum. Then it subdues itself and tries to behave, before getting fidgety and distracted. Thelonious Monk hums along, slightly out of time and tune, even with his own playing. "Off Minor" is a declaration of war on competence. There's nothing "on" or "major" about it.

"Off Minor" is a supreme and extreme example of the awkward style which Monk pioneered. Not everyone loved it. In an early Down Beat magazine review of Monk's 1948 recording of "Mysterioso," Mike Levin, wrote "…Monk fingers around trying to get over the technical inadequacies of his own playing… [the r]ecord closes with a double time statement of the original piano phrase while Monk punctuates it with single note drum riffs. This is veritably faking a rather larger order, and only Jackson and John Simmons' bassing redeem it." It was (and still is) a common complaint about Thelonious Monk's music: he plays wrong. (In his own defense, Monk once said "There are no wrong notes on the piano.") Even if you don't think that Monk's music is wrong, you might still admit that it's not quite right either.

Why, for some listeners, does such *errantism*, such *off minorness*, often work better than rightness? What do we – those of us with a penchant for the off kilter – get out of a film, like *Taste of Cherry,* that fails to provide what the story seems to necessitate and yet succeeds in communicating something beyond the necessary? How can a song apparently miss its target and, in so doing, hit a target that seems to have been brought into being by the song itself? What is happening when a text, made of nothing but words, conveys something beyond its words?

It occurs to me that Monk's rhythmic obstreperousness would have been meaningless if it weren't for the drums and the bass supplying an explicit or, at times, an implicit pulse. Duke Ellington wrote of jazz: "It ain't worth a thing if it ain't got that swing." Such periodicity is what rhythm is made of and periodicity is a form of mind control, or, to put it more subtly, more generously, it's a mode of synchronization. When a drummer establishes a beat, our brains process its periodicity. We are quick to tune into the rhythm, to anticipate the tempo and pattern. If we are at a performance we may clap along or tap our toes or dance.

According to the cognitive scientist, William L. Benzon, such synchronization is one of the foundational elements of communication. He calls this "interactional synchrony": the "relationship between a listener's body and the speaker's voice." (26) Benzon is concerned with locating this phenomenon in a specific region of the brain. He suggest that "interactional synchrony is the RF's [*reticular formation's*] way of establishing a mode for interpersonal communication and interaction." By locating such synchrony in the reticular formation – the oldest structures of the brain, deep in the brain's core – Benzon is suggesting that this interactive, communicative mechanism developed early in human evolution and has survived intact to the present. While Benzon is unwilling to ascribe such behavior to anything as intellectually unfashionable as organicism, the attribution of interactional synchrony to the functions of the RF implies something which, for all intents and purposes, looks very much like human nature. Nils Wallin, another cognitive scientist, goes even further, claiming that there is a "morphodynamic isomorphism between the tonal flow of music and its neurophysiological substrates." (quoted in Benzon 42) In other words, music and the electrochemical processes of the brain mirror each other structurally. Curiously, this description of cognitive perceptive function begins to sound a lot like Immanuel Kant's explanation of the exercise of aesthetic judgement. Kant posits that aesthetic pleasure is built on a foundation of sympathetic structures in the object and in the subject's imagination. The beautiful is that feature or form in an object which is agreeable to the subject's judgmental faculty.

> …the judgement is not directed theoretically, nor, therefore, logically, either…to the perfection of the object, but only *aesthetically* to the harmonizing of its representation in the imagination with the essential principles of judgement generally in the subject. (Kant 216)

Benzon calls the pulse which underpins a piece of music its "groove stream". He suggests that "[t]he function of the groove stream, with its limited time depth, is to suspend history." (127) Musical events and gestures happen in a space which is created by the groove stream. By "limited time depth", I take Benzon to mean that musical rhythms order time in specific ways, meant to facilitate the music's manageability. Musical durations are microscopically divided and highly regulated. In a thirty minute piece, it is possible to identify a specific bar which may be only 2 or three seconds long. In fact, one can focus on a single beat within that bar and divide it into sub-parts. In Chapter Three, we discussed the "pocket," the specific part of the beat; the "sweet spot," if you will, just behind the metrically precise position of the beat,

which is thought to be particularly expressive. Additionally, within a composition, musicians do not count the beats from first to last, but break it into bars or measures, short-duration parcels which quantify time and then reset, and restart repetitively – one might say obsessively – throughout the piece.

I intentionally attribute all this division and regulation of musical time to musicians because I don't believe most listeners – even if they are musicians themselves – listen to music with a conscious awareness of this imposed temporal structure. Music, as listened, is a continuous, contiguous experience, even if, as composed or performed, it is often discontinuous and incontiguous (think of the symphony tympanist counting measures for minutes at a time, in between short passages in which she is called upon to play). If listening includes a conscious sense of time, this sense is dependent on musical phrases which may, by metric, notational standards, have irregular durations: half a measure, two measures, eight and a third measures.

But, again, Benzon is a cognitive scientist. He is concerned with brain mechanisms; mechanisms which operate in both conscious and unconscious modes. For him, the groove stream happens *to* us. It is, mostly, an unconscious, synchronizing structure. By repetitively resetting the counting of the measure to "one" (the first beat of the measure often designated by an emphasized pulse), music detaches itself from lived, continuous time. So, when Thelonious Monk finishes a phrase "late," the synchrony – the manufactured sense of time established by the groove stream, between music and listener – is subverted. Our cognitive expectations are upset. Somewhere, deep in the heart of the reticular formation of the brain, a neuron sits up and takes notice. When Monk drops a chord like a bundle of firewood, the neuron says, "What was that?" The disjuncture of our experience from the seeming regularity (the seeming mechanicity) of the song becomes suddenly apparent. Monk's awkwardness sounds to the listener accustomed to synchronization like incompetence (thus Mike Levin in his *Downbeat* review). But if we come to Monk with different expectations (undoubtedly easier in 2005 than it would have been in 1948) we might hear Monk's choices as rhythmically indeterminate and harmonically inconclusive. As years went by, the world came to the conclusion that Monk wasn't a clumsy, incapable pianist, but that his style tore holes in the veil of that swing so beloved of jazz since Ellington declared it central.

I don't want to suggest that the groove stream is the primary synchronizing mechanism of human experience. In fact, it is only one of many synchronizing structures. What interests me is the positive subversion of these structures through contradiction and contravention: the fruitful upsetting of expectations. I've engineered a detour – my own minor subversion – contained in the metaphoric description of Monk's timing. I said he "drops a chord like a bundle of firewood." The metaphor works on a few levels. Most obviously, it works on an analogic level: suggesting a non-musical analogy of the musical act. Dropping a bundle of firewood is a clumsy act, possibly an accident. The firewood hits the floor without order. It makes a sound which is neither metric nor neatly contained by a segment-term such as beat

or measure. Nor does the firewood, upon hitting the floor, reassemble itself into the neatly carried bundle. It scatters randomly. We instinctively realize that were the carrier to drop the bundle again, the sound and the scattering would be different. On this level, the metaphor describes Monk's musical act, through a description of a non-musical experience. The point is to convey the awkwardness and seeming randomness of Monk's gesture.

The metaphor also works on a linguistically associative (homonymic) level – a pun. The word "chord" is defined as "any simultaneous combination of notes – but sometimes defined as any simultaneous combination of not less than three notes." (Jacobs 80) The homonym "cord" can mean "a unit of wood cut for fuel" (Merriam-Webster). Likening Monk's chord to firewood invokes the word *cord*. This association is not descriptive or narrative or explanatory. It does not fulfill a straight, functional, linguistic duty. Nevertheless, it provides the image with a subtle associative under-girding, allowing the metaphor to work at the level of a single, linguistic unit (chord to cord) and at the level of larger, analogous constructs (firewood to musical act). Additionally, the word "cord" can refer to anatomical structures, such as nerves or the spinal cord. Since, I have cited William Benzon's work on cognitive science and brain structures, this association allows additional resonance. And, to take it one or two steps further, "cord" can also mean "a moral, spiritual, or emotional bond." (Merriam-Webster) This meaning comes into play relative to Benzon's concept of interactional synchronization – a phenomenon of neuro-physiological bonding between two or more individuals. And, previously, I have dissected the word "record" to reveal the root "cord" at its heart.

It seems to me that Benzon's concept of the groove stream is simply part of a widespread phenomenon in human interaction. All forms of successful being together involve a synchronizing component. In order for humans to communicate – verbally, gesturally, emotionally – they must synchronize what might be thought of as their formats of expression. Such synchronizing structures are the product of innate neural substrates and of responses which have evolved as a result of repetition within human experience. The substrates rest in the reticular formation. Here, depending on external stimulus, a basic choice is made regarding a vertebrate's state or mode of behavior. In 1969, William Kilmer and Warren McCulloch suggested that such choices are made from a limited slate of mutually independent options. "[N]o animal can, for instance, fight, go to sleep, run away, and make love all at once." (279 - 309) Once a behavioral mode has been chosen, what a person does within that mode is determined by the limbic system. According to Benzon (who is relying, here on the work of Walter Freeman), the limbic system "plays a central role in generating signals that prime the sensory systems." (38) In other words, limbic system responses are based on both internal and external stimuli, both new and old information: every new situation is processed by comparing and contrasting it to established patterns and previous experience. This process produces expectations, and based on these expectations, we act accordingly. Benzon's groove stream is a synchronizing structure by dint of its ability to coordinate expectations.

Language is another synchronizing structure which coordinates expectations. Typically, language is used in various functional capacities. Language may be used to explain, describe, question or declare. Language may also be used performatively: the words "I do" at a wedding are used to declare something, but more importantly, they are used to perform an act. By saying "I do," the groom commits himself to the marriage; the words make him married (assuming the bride concurs). A declaration of war works the same way. In addition to such typical usages, language is often employed rhetorically in more abstract ways. For example, metaphor compares disparate things, in the hope that the listener's or reader's understanding of one thing might aid the understanding of another. Thus – after "I do" – the newly-married couple are "as cozy as two peas in a pod." Although metaphor does exert a certain inherent abstracting influence, it still performs a descriptive, explanatory function. As such, metaphor is the most commonly used, understood and, in many ways, the "most easily justified" (Culler 71) rhetorical device. Metonymy connects two things which are conceptually contiguous, substituting one, symbolically, for the other, as in "the Crown" for "the Queen." Similarly, synecdoche substitutes a part for the whole: referring to sailors as "hands." Metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche each function semantically. They either liken unlike things, with a mind toward elucidating one of them (metaphor), or they substitute like for like (metonymy and synecdoche). In either case, the functionality of the device depends on the semantic identification of one thing with another.

My chord/cord detour, however, doesn't work this way. Devices such as pun and rhyme rely on phonological resemblances, rather than semantic identification. Barthes points out that metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche all operate on the syntagmatic plane. By contrast, on the paradigmatic plane, associations form between words which exhibit: a) a semantic resemblance, but which are not related within a given discourse or syntagm (*education* and *upbringing*)*;* b) a resemblance at the level of their component parts, but which are distinguished by the arrangements of those parts (*dam* and *mad*); or c) a phonological resemblance (rhyming words and homonyms). (Barthes 58)

In different types of texts, different devices function as synchronizing structures. In narrative or expository texts, for instance, readers tend to rely on devices which operate on the syntagmatic plane. The chord/cord detour operates metaphorically (on the syntagmatic plane); but it also operates phonologically (on the paradigmatic plane). Two planes cannot be processed at the same time. We can't make simultaneous, cognitive *use* of the two levels of operation of the chord/cord detour. If we are aware – either consciously or subconsciously – of the multiple associations (remember the multiple, general and local, meanings and associations of "cord"), our cognitive capacities are forced to toggle back and forth between them. When confronted by a complex, multiform work of art, this toggling state is the source of one variety of inconclusion. Barthes touches on this state's creative possibility in the last section of his discussion of the syntagm:

> [T]he mode of articulation of the two axes is sometimes 'perverted', when for instance a paradigm is extended into a syntagm. There is then a defiance of

the usual distribution *syntagm/system*, and it is probably around this transgression that a great number of creative phenomena are situated, as if perhaps there were here a junction between the field of aesthetics and the defections from the semantic system. (86)

Barthes leaves the Gordian implications of this toggling state, this subversion, this inconclusion (Barthes refers to it as a "perversion"), for others to interrogate, merely pointing out that there are "directions which will have to be explored". (87)

Since the early part of the twentieth century, certain composers have tried to increase the sense of inconclusion in their music by incorporating indeterminate and aleatory elements. Karlheinz Stockhausen describes "the score of PROZESSION 'Procession' which consists only of plus and minus and equal signs, and instructs the players to 'use events from my previous compositions' as raw material." In the score "a plus sign means to play an event that is higher, or longer, or louder, or which has more limbs than the event you have just played, or that you have heard being played." (Stockhausen 113) Stockhausen's compositional text attempts to maximize its sense of contingency by allowing the relation of its composition to its actualization to remain indeterminate and un-premeditated. Rather than calling this method of actualization "improvisation," Stockhausen uses the term "intuitive music." He is clearly opposed to the implicit restraints of the improvisational methods of free jazz ("it should still sound like jazz") (112) and Indian music ("there is very little personal invention, practically none"). (112) For Stockhausen, improvisation always means "[t]here are certain rules: of style, of rhythm, of harmony, of melody, of the order of sections, and so on." (113) Contingency in improvised music is compromised by certain implicit conventions familiar to composer, performer and spectator alike. Stockhausen seems conveniently blind to the fact that his compositions have their own conventions too. "Procession", as a case in point, is constituted of events from Stockhausen's own previous compositions. From the start, an intuitive composition announces its recalcitrance. Improvised, yet not jazz; scored, though not beholden to the Western classical tradition; a piece of intuitive music means to be a music whose origins, traditions, conventions, and expectations are born and die within the duration of its actualization. This, of course, is an unrealizable goal. The very recognition of music *as* music depends on the recognition of conventions and traditions. When we think about incompetence in music, we must first consider the question: what type of representation is music? What is music's referent? Disallowing – for what I hope, by now, are obvious reasons, so-called "programmatic" music which seeks to illustrate a story or a picture – the only satisfactory answer to the question of a musical referent is form. Music means to represent schemes of organization and methods of structuring its materials. The game of music (meant in an entirely non-pejorative sense) is to try to hear the materials as relating on various planes. In this sense, music has parallels to the organization of literary language which operates too on multiple planes. But music has no semantic obligations and, therefore, signifies in a wholly formal mode.

A great proportion of the debates of twentieth century musical stylistics have revolved around issues which (perhaps unconsciously) take for granted this proposition. Twelve-tone and

serialist composition both attempt to destabilize the system of music's formal reference. The "naturalness' of traditional organization of the parameters of music, such as tonal harmony, rhythmic regularity, resolution and consonance, are problematized and new methods of organizing and relating these elements are installed in their place. Additionally, contemporary classical composers and performers have employed various forms of indeterminacy to circumvent traditional conceptions of roles and relations and to return a sense of contingency to musical experience. An increasing number of musicians from jazz and experimental rock backgrounds have turned to a performance method known as "free improvisation" (as opposed to "free jazz"). By dropping the reference to jazz, the (somewhat naïve) hope is that the actualized musical texts will free themselves of at least one set of expectations in the minds of makers and listeners.

6.3 he do the difference in criminal voices

Rather than focus on the carefully crafted dissonance of twentieth century classical music (Stockhausen, Schoenberg, Boulez, et. al.), I want to nudge the exploration in a different direction. And, while I am conscious of not strewing the path of our journey with an unnecessarily disparate set of examples, I am also sensitive to the idea that focusing too heavily on too limited a set of art works may give the impression of a rather localized phenomenon. What I'm attempting to locate here is the forward edge of art's communicable value; the open wound by which infectious meaning may be transmitted.

Specifically, I want to listen closely to the opening moments of the song "Mutiny In Heaven" by the Australian art-punk band, The Birthday Party. Singer, Nick Cave stabs the song into existence with a murderous shriek. Then a cacophonous collision of sounds, each oblivious to the others: Cave's tattered voice, curdling and quavering, modulates over the song's first three seconds, descending slightly before being summarily cut off by a discordant bass note, now wholly in possession of the song. Just as the voice's portamento swoon begins to suggest a perfect fourth and, thereby, a tonal center, the bass tone scuttles the burgeoning impression, landing, not only outside the implied scale, but outside of the system of equal temperament suggested by the voice. Distortion in the bass accentuates certain overtones, making the note vibrate and tremble like a mis-pitched chord. A second and a half later, two notes emanate from behind the bridge of an electric guitar, fissuring through the bass note's autonomy, cracking the surface of the song, spindling out like hairline fractures in a pane of glass or a bone. The notes are plucked from beyond the measured expanse between the nut (at one end of the guitar neck) and the bridge (at the opposite end of the body). This expanse is a specific length, intended to allow the strings to be tuned to particular pitches (conventionally E-A-D-G-B-E, in ascending order). The short remaining length of string, beyond the bridge, was not designed to be played. The bridge cuts off this shorter portion of string from the frets, disallowing the possibility of creating notes by fingering the fret board. Typically, guitar makers pay no attention to the resonance or tone of this excess bit of string beyond the bridge. As a result these two notes, five seconds into "Mutiny In Heaven," chime

with eerie, unnatural harmonics, further de-centering the song. These notes relate neither to the implication of the voice, nor to the assertion of the bass note.

For the first seven seconds, Nick Cave's distinctive voice is the voice of the song:

> Well, I turned
> And fled this fucking heap on ducted wings, my flaming pinions
> With splints and rags and crutches

At sixteen seconds the song sprouts a second voice, off to the right side of the stereo field. This second voice is also Nick Cave's. It interrupts the first Nick Cave voice, blurting something unintelligible and then beginning to grunt. At thirty seconds, the first voice, firmly moored in the center of the stereo field, bellows:

> One million tiny punctures that look like
> flung thin red ribbons, draped across the arm of a little mottled girl

The second voice interjects: "Like the ground plan of hell." The listener is given little insight into the sources of these two voices. Is the second voice responding to the first? If so, is it corroborating or contradicting its testimony? At thirty-seven seconds, before the listener can reach a conclusion (is it a dialogue? an argument? the conscious and the subconscious?), a third voice joins the fray – this time from the left side.

Throughout the song, voices advance and retreat, accumulate and dissipate. This is the enactment of high modernism's aspirations to polyglot expression, the whole world exhorting at once: angels and devils; the damned, the saved, the indifferent. It is Eliot's original, discarded title for the Waste Land, turned upside down and wrong side out: *He Do The Difference In Criminal Voices*.[1] The cacophony is exacerbated by off-time percussion, demonic squeals of uncertain origin, echoed feedback obloquies. "Mutiny In Heaven" is the soundtrack of tumbling over the event horizon into the annihilating gravity of the black hole; the sonic equivalent of the astrophysical equivalent of hell. With no sensible escape from this execrable vortex, the song expires in fadeout. As it diminishes, though, new sonic detritus swirls into the mix. Voices babble insensibly. An oscillating trumpet or a siren flutters past. A sickly, tolling bell, deprived of its natural resonance, has only enough to time to count to four before both the tumult and it surrender to digital black.

This cacophony is not the neat, theoretical dissonance of Schoenberg or Xenakis. Nor is it the more ragged, but still theoretical dissonance of Varèse or Ligeti. One would be hard-pressed to convey the effects of this music in notation. "Mutiny In Heaven" is not the result of simple transgression of theoretical taboos. This is not the equivalent of using a tritone in fifteenth century Europe. Sonic sources such as feedback, plucking the excess guitar string behind the bridge, deformed percussion and harmonics, are unpredictable. The resulting pitches, volumes, and timbres are subject to all sorts of environmental influence. Any given

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[1] Eliot's working title for *The Waste Land* was *He Do The Police In Different Voices*.

performance of "Mutiny In Heaven" would likely yield very different sonic results. Though the Birthday Party may not have conceived their music as a fulfillment of a theoretical mandate nor justified it, after the fact, with academic postures, their embrace of sonic contingency, mixed with the conceptual dissonance of Cave's multi-tracked voice and the sudden, non-sequitur introduction of new sonic elements invite indeterminacy of performance and interpretation into the music in a way which is not so dissimilar to Stockhausen's or John Cage's aleatory strategies. Rock and roll's unschooled, self-taught nature has allowed for such indeterminacy from the beginning.

What we have in this music – and in other, great examples of rock and roll (i.e., the early Sun Studios recordings, Bo Diddley, the Band, Bob Dylan, the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, Mission of Burma, the Monorchid, US Maple) is the unaccounted-for and unaccountable collision of multiple authors. No single band member can claim responsibility for the song. Of course, this is true for any text – too many forces exert their influence on the text at conception, transmission and reception. But in the best rock music, the implicit condition of the text is made explicit, as the members of the band wrestle to define the song in real time. As rock music has matured and cross-pollinated, recent practitioners such as Glenn Branca, Sonic Youth, David Grubbs, and Tortoise have adopted theoretical foundations from contemporary classical discourse. But the sad and glorious truth of rock remains: rock music ignores the simplest semiological relationship in music, that between score (signifier) and sound (signified); or between an imaginary, ideal version of the text and a realized, particular performance of it. In rock, sound is the terminus of the signifying chain; nothing signifies sound; there is no ideal beyond the performance. This puts the composer and the attentive listener in the same boat. Left with nothing "above" the sound, there exists no corroborative mark to confirm its "rightness" or "wrongness."

I had a friend in college who bought a record by the band Throwing Muses. Throwing Muses was an upbeat, herky-jerky four-piece, fronted by Kristin Hersh, a vocalist blessed with a high-pitched, electro-shock squeal and a kewpie-doll coyness. My friend, oblivious to the fact that the record was meant to be played at 45 r.p.m., played it at 33. Slowed down, Throwing Muses' frenetic pop transmogrified into dark, heavy goth and Kristin Hersh's voice pitched down into a husky baritone, not unlike Nick Cave's. My friend liked what she heard, assuming it to be a slow band with a male singer. It wasn't until she attended a Throwing Muses' performance (and not liking the band she saw) that she realized her mistake. Was the music my friend experienced and her appreciation of it suddenly invalid, when she realized she'd been playing the record at the wrong speed? How should she proceed: listening to the record she likes at the wrong speed or listening to the record she doesn't like at the right speed? My friend's Throwing Muses record (and, by implication, any record) is home to multiple potential actualities. These are authorless contingencies, born of a technical mistake. Neither Throwing Muses, nor their producer, nor their record label intended to provide a 33 r.p.m. alternative to the 45 r.p.m. work. Like an accidental version of a John Oswald piece, the potentiality of the

record came into being as a result of an unintended misuse of the technology required to realize the work.

The circuits and software that comprise much modern music-making equipment are, themselves, mini-universes of contingency. Within each machine, for each intended function, there lies a dormant raft of unintended potentials. In recent years, sound artists and musicians have explored these unintended potentials, mining the digital wilderness for valuable sonic resources, mapping out new territories and routes. The results – "glitch works," as they are sometimes known – intentionally push samplers, sequencers, amplifiers, effects and recording equipment past the uses their manufacturers had in mind. Samplers allow infinitesimal bits of noise to be organized into rhythms and textures, often blurring the distinction between the two. Sequencers facilitate rhythms which are both faster and more complex than any a four-limbed human drummer might play. Sound sources are no longer limited to musical instruments, nor to intentionally "sounded" materials. Compositions are made of the buzz of a "dirty" power source, of the static between stations on the radio dial, of the noise of a machine being unplugged. These "concrete" materials are then fashioned into the rhythmic, melodic, and textural building blocks of a compositional method which subverts the expectations and conventions of the Western music theory tradition.

With cacophony, sloppiness, and the glitch in mind, let's return to Agamben's thinking on the source of not-play potential in Glenn Gould's piano playing. I would contend that, for the listener, the not-play (the impotential, the not-exist) is present, not in what Agamben calls Gould's "mastery," but in musical elements like pitch and timing, and in extra-musical events like relation to genre. It is a material difference which may, in the mind of the listener, be attributed to a fictive presumption of intent known as "Glen Gould's mastery". But this attribution is not important nor, for that matter, demonstrable – since it may not strike each listener that its source is Gould. (The question begs asking: Is it possible to achieve a mastery of sloppiness?) The source of not-play potential lives in the listener's reception of materials provided both intentionally and unintentionally in the musical text.

This may sound like an attempt to nullify the relational nature of art; as if I am saying that the spectator is orphaned by the author; left to its own devices in the carnival funhouse (or is it the peep show?) of artistic experience. But de-humanizing the art work by de-attributing it to a specific author is not my aim. More importantly, I don't believe such a description is accurate. The spectator's reception of the text *is* a relation with, if not *a* human, *the* human. The spectator's relation to art is a relation with a stand-in other against whom one may test oneself. Questions of meaning and truth; of value and, ultimately, of being, find resonance only in the presence of this stand-in other. In art, as in life, or vice versa: the resonance we seek comes, curiously, not in the form of sympathetic reverberations in the substance of this stand-in other, but in the form of our capacity to reverberate sympathetically to *its* questions, *its* shrieks of horror, *its* moans of abandonment, *its* morbid, knowing laughter when it thinks itself alone.

Unlike Agamben, I locate the "work" of the work of art – its meaning and its value – in the spectator's reception; in the spectator's resonant response to the art work's ventings. It strikes me that the artist's mastery and mechanisms are no more likely to be the site of value than the beating of stone against stone or of head against wall. Nor do the artist's mastery and mechanisms seem amenable to inspection. In most cases we do not have access to the artist. When we do, we do not – psychologically speaking – have access to the inspirations and intentions which bring the work into being. The artist is an unreliable witness to the artistic process. The artist's testimony is a sort of hearsay. The insights we do gain (or think we gain), are the product of a receptive process which I referred to above as the "fictive presumption of intent." The person of the author or the artist, in the spectator's perception, is, itself, a fictive presumption of intent. The presumption is "fictive" because – as I alluded to above – we never have access to the truth of the artist, nor of its relation to the art work. The fictive presumption is one of "intent" because we would have no inclination to ascribe to the work of art a meaning or even a status as an art object without such a presumption. A pile of bricks in the street is not art, unless something (a plaque on the wall, a curator, an audio guide) indicates someone's *intention* to make the bricks art. Art exists only when we imagine that – at some point in the chain of influence which links conception to inception to reception – someone intended to make art.

The spectator's *reception* is *of* the text, but the spectator's *relationship* is *with* the human. The text is the stand-in other and its "ventings," as I called them earlier, are attributed to this fictive presumption of intent, known commonly as the author or artist. To put a fairly fine point on it, the author/artist is not a particular human being, but some notion of humanness. There's no useful reason to attribute the text or the art work to the author or the artist. De-attribution is equally useless. All we can usefully do is make note of our sympathetic resonances and to investigate their external sources and internal causes.

Impotentiality is not unique to human beings, but the consciousness of it is. Nevertheless, it seems to us that "[o]ther living things are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that." (Agamben *Potentialities* 182) We are, of course, aware of our own impotentiality. To ourselves, we seem tenuous, built on a foundation of contingencies. We look back on our own lives and wonder what might have been if X had been Y; if we had missed that train, if our parents hadn't met. But other humans and things – not just other *living* things – seem to us capable of only their specific potentials (apparent in their actualization). It does not seem that the squirrel has any choice but to gather nuts in autumn, nor has the virus an option not to infect. The river, by definition, must flow. Likewise, though we know, intellectually, that other human beings are capable of choosing to do or not to do (that they could just as easily not have been), we have access only to the actual. We are not privy to the struggle of contingency in others. Though we know that the murderer possessed the potential to not-murder, we are forced to proceed from the act – *and from the act alone* – disregarding its impotentiality.

Conversely, our perceptions of ourselves are built on an incessant relation with our own impotentiality. To ourselves, we are nothing, if not the potential of being otherwise. We are the ultimate implication of the Derridean and Deleuzean thinking of difference, defining ourselves inversely by what we might have been, but aren't; what we might have done, but didn't. As Derrida or Deleuze might have said, any positive assertion of a trait, a vocation or a preference is, in reality, a negative rejection of the alternatives. The assertion, "I am a writer," is best defined in this rejection: "I am not any of the things that is not a writer." Agamben and Deleuze both direct their thoughts on this subject to Bartleby, who abrogates his responsibilities with five words: "I would prefer not to." Bartleby is the embodiment of a consciousness of contingency. Bartleby's eventual expression of preference not to do any of the things asked or urged of him, is an embracing of impotentiality. All the things that Bartleby could or, it seems, should do, he could, equally, not do. Even the most basic – the taking of sustenance – is, ultimately, contingent. To make a decision is to assert a choice, but to reject all decisions, all position-taking, even the option of decision-making, is to deny the potency dormant in potential and to embrace its opposite: the impotency of impotential. There is no necessity to do anything; there is no necessity to *be* anything. There is no necessity to *be*, at all.

7. Conclusion

7.1 how-(not)-to

> There was a time that art meant painting and sculpture and the acquisition of the techniques necessary to realize these ends required a set of "how-tos": how to mix colors, how to apply pigment to a surface, how to build an armature, etc. In the last three years, at least, it is clear that the techniques of art have been revised to become not so much studies in methodology as of research into what constitutes the elemental features of any particular situation. (Pincus-Witten 89)

In 1998 (some twenty-one years after Robert Pincus-Witten noted the sea change of what he dubbed "Postminimalism"), the critic and theorist, Nicolas Bourriaud, published *Relational Aesthetics*, coining a term and a category of art based in and on social interactions. Bourriaud opposes this type of work to paintings, sculptures and installations, which he says are "terms corresponding with categories of mastery and types of products". (100) The works he favors are, by contrast, "simple *surfaces, volumes*, and *devices*, which are dovetailed within strategies of existence". (100) What Bourriaud brings to our attention here is that the categories and media of artistic practice strive to hold their ground, digging in like soldiers assuming a defensive position. Painting, for example, solidifies its position, protecting and extending its existence by quantifying and codifying its techniques, its parameters, its *values*. This is the nature of categories: they must define themselves to survive; the better defined, the greater the chance of survival. But such definition usually ends up being tested by the very thing it meant to corral. Painting presses its boundaries to see how far it can go before it ceases to be painting. At one extreme it reaches the materialist predilections of Clement Greenberg. But for all the revolutionary portent, abstract expressionism and color field painting – to paraphrase the poet Frank O'Hara – was not more outside painting than Bear Mountain is outside New York State. Such painting practice may, in fact, have had the opposite effect: shoring up the rules of the game of painting, purifying the proposition of the practice of painting, ratifying the codification of the category, *painting.* If we choose to think of these practices as a form of exploration – in the spirit of Magellan or Vasco de Gama – then such expeditions discover themselves exploring an island kingdom, the borders of its territory finite.

Islandlike, disciplines strive for the maintenance and specificity of what they seek to categorize. For practitioners, disciplines provide instruction manuals for proper use. The successful, obedient application of this manual leads to virtuosity, mastery, expertise: all forms of extreme competence. In an essay entitled "Obedience", Lyotard begins by asking a question Adorno left out:

> When Adorno writes in *The Philosophy of the New Music* that 'with the liberation of the material, the possibility of mastering it has increased', we understand that this liberation increases the likelihood of a greater capacity

with respect to musical material. This sentence does not say whether this increased capacity is permissible and/or desirable. This is a question we have to ask. (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 165)

Lyotard goes on to say that this liberation of musical material can be thought in two ways. The first: "freedom…increases with the number of variables one can act on with determinism". (166) So, the more musical elements under the control of the musician, the more the musician can assert his or her will (freedom) over the material. This approach establishes an oppositional relationship between musician and music. Freedom in this sense is a struggle for power. The musician is engaged in a battle against the recalcitrant characteristics of musical material. The second approach posits no such opposition. Instead "the material is more determinable and masterable the more it is freed". (166) Lyotard suggests that this would entail a re-conceptualization of the roles and functions of the variables which constitute musical material. This freeing happens in "perception and thought", rather than in mastery or virtuosity. (166)

The first sense of freedom identified by Lyotard corresponds loosely to Aristotle's *techne* and to what I have been calling "mechanical competence". The inherent struggle between artist and material is bound to end in stalemate(rial). One cannot hope to master verisimilitude, to contain the field of representation. Any attempt at mechanical competence discovers an intractable incompetence at the foundation of the mechanical, in the heart of the material and the modes of representation. The alternative is suggested by Lyotard's second sense of freedom: a reconceptualization of the constituent elements of the categories at play. This corresponds more or less to Aristotle's *arete* and is what I mean by "conceptual competence".

When Nicolas Bourriaud identifies painting, sculpture and installation as "terms corresponding with categories of mastery", he identifies not only categories *to be* mastered (via the successful application of the manual), but also categories *of* mastery. Thus, *painting* becomes a discipline whose *raison d'etre* is mastery. (This notion inheres in the term *discipline* and it is this inheritance to which Lyotard responds with the title "Obedience".) Calling oneself a painter is to stake a claim to the manual. Mastering the category entails mastering its variables. The painter who frees painting in perception and thought doesn't do so by venturing to its outer reaches, instead he or she instigates a coup from firmly within the nation of painting. One can think of Duchamp this way: his insurrection within painting toppled the regime. His mastery, his competence, was achieved not mechanically but conceptually.

Conceptual competence depends on categories for its scaffolding. It does not float free of reference, history, culture. And, in turn, categorical competence is conceptual in nature: one understands the concepts which are the foundations of the category and exploits them. Conceptual competence exhibits understanding either by finding a new form of synchrony which rides along with the frequencies of the abiding concepts; or by a knowing subversion or contravention of the concepts. To use a musical metaphor, conceptual competence either takes the form of pioneering conceptual harmonies, or of waves which contravene the

categorical frequencies in the manner of noise-canceling technology. Conceptual competence emanates from an acknowledgment of the mechanical incompetence infecting all communicative systems; all artistic materials and modes of representation. Of course, this infection is not a foreign body within the corpus of artistic media. Artistic categories define and delimit permissible materials and modes of representation. It is precisely this definition and delimitation that creates the infection of mechanical incompetence. The more specifically a thing is defined, the greater the potential for divergence from the definition. Border creates foreigner, boundary begets breach.

My intent here has been to point towards the issue of mechanical incompetence and at processes of production and consumption which arrive at a state of conceptual competence. This arrival is achieved by coming to terms with the mechanical incompetence inherent in the art work, by taking it on board and by putting it to some use for the benefit of the art work and the processes it initiates. Despite having named the things I am pointing at, I have tried to avoid defining what amounts to a new category. Supplanting the categorical definition of painting or of music with an equally codified notion of the conceptually competent would be borrowing from Peter to pay Peter; a zero-sum game. My method, then, has been to identify some of the ways in which mechanicity trips itself up and to cite examples of art works which capitalize upon the resultant stumbling.

> **Noise**, adapting Mary Douglas' definition of dirt, is characterized as sonic matter out of place. By welcoming elements alien to their materials and modes, conceptually competent works in various media court the destabilizing reflexivity of extra-systemic information. Such noise often arises from a contravention of the sense of unity or consistency established by the individual work, or – most notably in the cases of appropriated or sampling works – it might result from friction with external information.

> **Incompleteness** is the inability of works to stitch themselves together air-tightly in order to achieve a satisfying sense of closure. Inevitably works will leave something out; even the most modest work can not account for all its possibilities. The conceptually competent work announces its incompleteness, opening onto a world of unarticulated possibilities instead of making a pretense of closure. Incompleteness is a material phenomenon.

> **Inconclusion**, on the other hand, is experiential or interpretive. In this case, conceptual competence accepts the infinite nature of interpretation which bars any sense of conclusion or analytic finality and adapts to the overdetermined, overabundant, nature of signification. Such works, acknowledge that the art experience, as process, continues beyond the finite moment and location of encounter.

Repetition, while not a symptom of mechanical incompetence, provides a methodological focal point for seeing how the work of art confronts and negotiates the complications of representation. Just as Kierkegaard identified repetition as the locus of consciousness, it is the locus of the art work's consciousness of its own issues and methods. Repetition has become – arguably – the most emblematic artistic strategy of the post-industrial era, reaching its apex of employment in the twentieth century. Repetition has always been at the heart of the artistic impulse: from repeating the forms of nature, to repeating the forms of culture. Mechanical reproduction has enabled (or necessitated) that the implicitness of repetition become explicit and that art, artist and audience engage squarely with how repetition operates, feels and effects. The advent of the digital age with its attendant issues of duplication and storage, raise repetition's ante. To ignore its implications is to court a *au courant* ignorance.

I have purposely avoided a head-on confrontation with some of the "real world" implications of acknowledging mechanical incompetence. I trust that these are implicit and, to an extent, obvious. Endeavors such as politics and business, science and romance, depend on overlooking the incompetence of communicative tools. Art is a privileged form of interaction which has the luxury of staring the truth squarely in its crossed eyes, and of poking both of them at once, Three Stooges-style. When an art work takes this as its task, when it blinds the truth so as to make it speak, silences it so as to make it dance, maims it so as to make it throw up its hands and admit it doesn't know; when an art work provokes these reactions, it is moving in the direction of conceptual competence.

I have examined strategies employed by artists and audiences alike (often in collaboration) to actively harness the energies of noise, repetition, incompleteness and inconclusion to enhance the art work and the art experience. These strategies amount to taking the lemons of representation and making aesthetic lemonade. The implications of such approaches are various, but one important aspect of the works cited here is that they make no appeal to truths outside themselves, outside their materials and modes of representation. The work of conceptual competence does not claim its value from a connection to some originary value: god, reality, truth, universality. In the complications of representation, the conceptually competent work finds a fecund source of content.

Conceptual competence is only truly competent when applied to the art work. It is there, in the poem, in the song, in the novel or story, in the painting or film or sculpture or performance, that conceptual competence can truly harness the latent power of mechanical incompetence. If all the available materials and modes of representation are inevitably and incontrovertibly incompetent, then, by acknowledging this fact and putting this incompetence to work in service of the art work's communicative function, a new relationship is formed between the work, the author and the audience. This is a relationship which exists not on the level of Barthes' obvious meaning, nor on the formal level where structuralism posits its significance,

but at a level which, strictly speaking, isn't part of the text at all. This level is evident in the *attitude* of the text; an attitude, both in the sense of a way of thinking or feeling, and in the sense of a certain stance or posture. This is not knowledge, but a *knowing* attitude and it is precisely what mitigates the not knowing engendered by the incompetence of the art work's materials and modes of representation.

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