ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the end result of more classroom discussions, committee meetings, email chains, and hallway conversations than I could possibly do justice to in one page. Rather than attempt to name every member of the “village” behind this project, I offer here my sincerest thanks to every professor, graduate student, undergraduate student, and conference attendee who helped shape these ideas. It is my hope that all of you—both at TCU and elsewhere—understand how much your patience and generosity has meant to me over the past few years.

I feel a special debt is owed to committee members Dr. Ann George and Dr. David Colón, both of whom have provided invaluable support and guidance from the moment I first set foot on TCU’s campus in the fall of 2010. My fourth reader, Dr. Brian Reed, graciously agreed to join this project when it was still in its infancy, and his feedback has pushed me to think about poetry and poetics in entirely new ways. And to my director, the incomparable Dr. Sarah Robbins, I can only say that this dissertation would not exist without you in my corner. You have offered me direction and counsel and support more times than I can count, and I have drawn upon your expertise and experience in areas that extend far beyond the dissertation. Thank you so very much for everything you have done to help shepherd this project to completion.

To the A.W.F.U.L. study group—Rachel Johnston, Marie Martinez, Mary McCulley, and Peter Simes—this dissertation truly is a testament to the value of friendship (and caffeine).

And finally, I want to thank my wife, Lorianne, for listening to my endless commentaries on “avant-garde art” over the past five years. Your unyielding confidence and companionship has made all of this possible. I may not be able to convince them to add your name to my diploma, but I do promise to get you one of your very own. Goodness knows you’ve earned it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction: Rhetoricizing the Avant-Garde ......................................................... 1

II. Reading Without Violence: Erica Hunt’s *Local History*  
and the Poetic Foundations of Rhetorical Community ............................................. 31

III. “I Can Feel the Idea”: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* and the  
Poetics of Non-Discursive Form .................................................................................. 76

IV. The Ethos of Erasure: Jackson Mac Low’s  
“5 biblical poems” as Pure Persuasion ....................................................................... 118

V. “Waiting for Something Coherent to Happen”: A Rhetorical  
(Mis)Reading of John Ashbery’s *Girls on the Run* ................................................. 163

VI. Coda: How to Do Things with Poems; or, Rhetoricizing in  
the Twenty-First Century ............................................................................................ 211

VII. Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 216
## LIST OF FIGURES

1.1 *Local History* Contents Page ................................................................. 50

1.2 Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit” .......................................................... 55

4.1 *After M. Wurther Run* Glandelinians attack and blow up train carrying children of refuge. ................................................................. 178

4.2 Detail of *At Jennie Richee*. Storm continues. Lightning strikes shelter, but no one is injured. ................................................................. 178

4.3 Detail of *At Jennie Richee*. Assuming nuded appearance by compulsion race ahead of coming storm to warn their father. ................................................................. 180
INTRODUCTION

RHETORICIZING THE AVANT-GARDE

*Rhetoricizing theory makes it matter not only to historians or theorists but also to citizen-scholars responding complexly to their world. In treating theory as an act rather than an artifact, a rhetoricized treatment enriches the theory not merely to understand it better but also so that the theory can better, more fully, guide responses to contemporary situations.*

M. Elizabeth Weiser, *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism* (xiv)

*If it is a poem
It will affect people*

Jackson Mac Low, “Social Significance”
*Thing of Beauty: New and Selected Works* (17)

Postwar American Poetry: First as Mystery, Then as Persuasion

Of all the adjectives we might use to describe the postwar avant-garde in American poetry, “mysterious” probably wouldn’t rank near the top of the list. In fact, depending on the particular lineage we wished to trace, it might not even merit consideration at all. The New York School of John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, and Kenneth Koch may have alternated between the surreal and the campy, but these poems certainly aren’t “mysterious.” Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and other Black Mountain poets like Denise Levertov were often innovative and socially conscious, but “mysterious” seems a poor description of their work. And while Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian helped develop Language poetry into the most prominent expression of American vanguardism over the last three decades, their project is more philosophical or theoretical than it is “mysterious.” Given the term’s contemporary use as a descriptor for shadowy characters, powerful secrets, or elements of the occult, it seems far more
fitting for hardboiled detective novels or campground ghost stories than critical narratives regarding the poetic avant-garde.

And yet, if we trace *mysterious* back to its roots as a term for religious mysticism and divine revelation, a tenable notion of the “mysterious avant-garde” begins to emerge. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists as a definition for *mysterious* “[d]ifficult or impossible to understand, explain, or identify” (1880), and the postwar avant-garde is all of these things. This poetry is dense and difficult, obscure and opaque; like a shaman’s truth telling or a scripture’s parable, it offers us puzzles to solve and riddles to decipher without promising to sanction any of the solutions we generate. To call the avant-garde “mysterious” is thus to reaffirm that these poems refuse to signify in a straightforward fashion. As Craig Dworkin has noted, when dealing with otherwise illegible texts “form must always necessarily signify but any particular signification is historically contingent and never inherently meaningful or a priori” (xx). And while the absence of a priori meanings or messages may limit the audience for these poems, the resulting mystery also has the power to attract readers by suggesting the presence of a still-deeper meaning that awaits discovery via patient, deliberate close reading.¹ The avant-garde text presents us with a challenge, a dare, a quest: *Will you be the one*, the Sphinx-like poem asks, *to finally unravel my mystery?* In this way, mystery becomes both provocation and invitation; it represents “not so much a turning away as a direct challenge to readers to meet the poem on its own terms” (Clay 22). As the textual embodiment of that which we cannot explain or do not understand, the “mysterious” avant-garde tests both the limits of our language and the limits of our world.² Much

¹ Whether or not this “still-deeper meaning” actually exists, the mystery of the avant-garde text is based on the assumption that it does—that the poem’s chaotic surface must be a trick designed to camouflage something more meaningful behind it. For more on the tension between “surface” and “symptomatic” (i.e., close) reading, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s “Surface Reading: An Introduction” in *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1-21.

² cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s dictum in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (88, original emphasis).
like the Kierkegaardian leap into the absurd that underlies religious faith, these texts impel us into the realm of the unsayable and dare us to speak.

Or, as rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke famously put it, “[A]s students of rhetoric, we concede the great persuasive power of mystery” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 278). For Burke, this mystery has more to do with hierarchies of social and linguistic order than with poetic expression, but the core principle remains the same. Mystery invites and incites; it coerces and cajoles. Even if we wished to ignore it, the mysterious marks a gap in our understanding that demands to be noticed. And it is in these gaps, these moments where sense and meaning break down, that mystery’s persuasive power makes itself known. For despite the sheer “strangeness” of the avant-garde text, Burke reminds us that “the estranged must also be thought of as in some way capable of communion” (*RM* 115). The mysterious poem draws us in for a closer investigation of its strangeness and, in the process, cements the poet-poem-reader relationship. This relationship (or “communion”) then serves as the basis for future readings of the poem. For even the most innovative and experimental poems are, at bottom, poems—and as such they ask us to read them any way we can. Rhetorically, we might say that the avant-garde’s tendency toward difficulty and obscurity initiates a “courtship” with potential audiences, one that asks readers to become active co-producers of meaning through the hermeneutic endeavor. “And courtship,” Burke tells us, “however roundabout, is a form of persuasion” (*RM* 123).

---

3 See James L. Kastely’s “Kenneth Burke’s Comic Rejoinder to the Cult of Empire” (*College English* 58.3 (1996): 307-26) and James P. Zappen’s “Kenneth Burke on Dialectical-Rhetorical Transcendence” (*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42.3 (2009): 279-301) for more on Burke’s conceptualization of linguistic hierarchies and social order.

4 Burke’s use of “communion” here differs from Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s rhetorical concept of the same name in *The New Rhetoric*. While communion is, for Burke, a more general name for interpersonal communication, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca employ the term in cases where a community’s “[a]greement with regard to a value means . . . that an object, a being, or an ideal must have a specific influence on action and on disposition toward action and that one can make use of this influence in an argument” (*TNR* 74).

5 In Section III of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke discusses in detail the “principle of courtship” that makes rhetoric possible through “the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement” (208).
This dissertation project is rooted in a desire to better understand poetry’s persuasive courtship by exploring the argumentative possibilities of the mysterious avant-garde. Admittedly, this requires a fundamental shift in our understanding of rhetorical argumentation, which for too long now has been restricted to either the ancient model of orators and their publics or the contemporary model of advertisers and their customers. It necessitates a reorientation of our attitude toward the poetic as well, shifting away from models of aesthetic autonomy and toward a more political, more socially engaged conception of the poem as a site for staging strategic interventions in a culture’s dominant discursive practices. If, as Lyn Hejinian claims in the essay “Barbarism,” experimental poetry performs “new ways of thinking” that eventually make “new ways of being possible” (The Language of Inquiry 322), then we need a rigorous method for explaining how the avant-garde poem precipitates change in the extra-poetic realm. Recognizing the persuasive forces that animate such a shift thus becomes an essential task for poetry scholarship in the twenty-first century—one that has the potential not only to combat persistent assumptions regarding the “death” of contemporary poetry, but also to reinvigorate the historical avant-garde’s original desire to bring the poetic and quotidian closer together.

---

6 As John Ramage makes clear in Rhetoric: A User’s Guide, contemporary culture’s popular distrust of rhetoric stems in large part from a tendency to only see argumentation in these two ways (speeches and advertisements). “Indeed,” he argues, “rhetoric’s strong identification with advertising and politics accounts for much of its unsavory reputation. Advertising is the primary medium through which unwholesome readymade identities are promoted; and frequently the means used to promote those identities are even less wholesome than the identities on offer. Taken as a whole, advertising acts as an immensely powerful propaganda tool for a consumerist ideology that may impoverish our psyches almost as readily as it empties our wallets” (193). When people see rhetoric as little more than a tool for “unwholesome” propaganda or “consumerist” profiteering, it becomes that much easier to insist on the exclusion of argument and persuasion from discussions of literary expression.

7 As for the “death of poetry,” Alexandra Petri’s aptly-titled “Is Poetry Dead?” (The Washington Post, Jan. 22, 2013) represents merely one of the latest entries in a series of recent eulogies for contemporary poetry. For more on the avant-garde and everyday life, see Peter Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde for one of the most widely cited discussions of the historical avant-garde’s attempt to “reintegrate art into the praxis of life” (22)—though it should be noted that he considers this attempt ultimately unsuccessful (54). Hal Foster’s response to Bürger in The Return of the Real (MIT Press, 1996), as well as Bürger’s counter-response in the Autumn 2010 issue of New Literary History (“Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde,” pp. 695-715), help shed further light on these issues.
Yet rather than inventing an entirely new critical vocabulary for this task, I see here an opportunity to rehabilitate the strained relationship between poetry and rhetoric by building upon their shared interest in language as symbolic action. Over the last century, rhetorical theory—especially the strain commonly referred to as “New Rhetoric”—has been focusing more and more on the “great persuasive power” of symbolic acts in all their various forms. What has not yet been attempted, however, is a systematic integration of New Rhetoric’s concepts and theories with the innovative and experimental poetics of the postwar era. Though rooted in a rich (if largely unacknowledged) tradition of rhetorical investigations of literary texts, the following chapters break new ground within this tradition by approaching the avant-garde from what I am calling the rhetoricizing perspective—that is, from an interpretive stance that values a symbolic act in proportion to the intensity of its appeal for new ways of writing or thinking about the world. As a hermeneutic method, rhetoricizing seeks to make explicit those moments in a text where poetic mystery challenges our expectations for ordinary language use and, in the process, functions as a strategic act undertaken by a specific agent seeking to alter the social conditions within a particular scene. At the microscopic level, rhetoricizing works to understand the persuasive nature of the symbolic act by applying key rhetorical concepts from throughout the last century. From a macroscopic point of view, rhetoricizing blends together elements of rhetorical and literary analysis to provide both casual readers and professional critics new ways of responding to texts that have long resisted traditional methods of inquiry.

---


9 These italicized terms correspond with Burke’s dramatistic pentad, a model for the analysis of human motivations that focuses on act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose. For a brief overview of the pentad, see Burke’s Introduction to A Grammar of Motives (xv-xxiii).
Rhetoricizing the avant-garde does not solve the puzzle of poetic mystery, nor does it suggest a one-size-fits-all approach to interpreting these difficult texts. Instead, it offers a model for reading vanguard poetry as a category of symbolic action with the potential to inaugurate gradual but meaningful shifts in the linguistic practices that give shape and meaning to everyday life. The readings of Erica Hunt, Lyn Hejinian, Jackson Mac Low, and John Ashbery featured in this dissertation highlight key rhetorical concepts that enable us to recognize even the most mysterious symbolic act as a viable strategy for social change. Taken together, these chapters suggest that, wherever the poetic avant-garde announces its presence, the rhetoricizing heuristic makes it possible to appreciate both its mysterious and its persuasive possibilities.

**Rhetoricizing as Critical Praxis: Assumptions and Methods**

In the now-famous opening line of his 1981 text *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson implores readers to “Always historicize!” (9). Given Jameson’s ultimate goal—to replace the ahistorical interpretive practices of New Criticism with the radically historical methods of Marxist literary critique—this imperative works on many levels. It establishes a clear area of emphasis, suggests an immediate course of action, and draws upon a terminology (that of historicism) that was quickly gaining influence in the early 1980s. And while it would be presumptuous of me to echo Jameson with my own sloganeering (“Always rhetoricize!”), this dissertation does set out to, at the very least, invite further conversation about how terms like “rhetoric” and “persuasion” are used in contemporary poetry criticism. For Jameson, historicizing serves as a necessary corrective to criticism’s “specialized interpretive codes whose insights are strategically limited” by their devotion to a single theme or motive (21). For the current study, rhetoricizing is less a corrective measure than a new set of questions regarding the
discipline’s longstanding reluctance to acknowledge the rhetorical aspects of even the most illegible poetic texts. Before entering into a discussion of the literary and rhetorical traditions that inform these questions, however, I think it important to further clarify what the critical practice of rhetoricizing entails. And in order to clearly delineate my use of the term, I want to begin by establishing two foundational assumptions regarding poetic language that make “rhetoricizing the avant-garde” possible in the first place.

First and foremost, rhetoricizing represents a method of reading and interpretation that assumes the inherent persuasiveness of all language use. The selection of specific terms from a specific vocabulary; the arrangement of these terms in unique patterns on the page; the combination of these patterns to create larger and larger semantic units—each of these is not merely an exercising of one’s linguistic abilities, but also a form of persuasion that makes subtle claims about how terms and patterns and units should be brought together in everyday communication. Though very little of their work has been translated into English, French linguists Oswald Ducrot and Jean-Claude Anscombre have been making variations of this claim since the 1970s, and their more recent theories consider all language “argumentative” because of its tendency to “lead the listener or reader, often implicitly, to a certain conclusion” (van Emeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans 315). For them, the use of connectives, operators, and sentence predicates in even the most objective-seeming utterances implies certain orientations toward the content of these utterances. And since the argumentative nature of an utterance is derived from its linguistic components (and not from any explicitly rhetorical design or motive), Ducrot and

---

10 For more on Ducrot and Anscombre, see Corinne Iten’s “The Relevance of Argumentation Theory” (Lingua 110.9 (2000): 665-99) and Christian Plantin’s “Argumentation Studies and Discourse Analysis: The French Situation and Global Perspectives” (Discourse Studies 4.3 (2002): 343-68).

11 In Ducrot and Anscombe’s system, the term connective refers to words like “therefore” and “but” that are used for “introducing relations between states of affair” (van Emeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans 315). They classify words like “little” or “nearly” as operators that can be used to steer readers toward certain conclusions regarding the discursive content included in any utterance (315-16).
Anscombe’s findings apply just as readily to poetic language as they do to ordinary conversation. If anything, innovative and experimental uses of poetic language are even more argumentative than conventional discursive expression, designed as they are to open “the possibility for certain ways of talking” that may not have been made available otherwise (313).

Granted, this dissertation is not a study in linguistics, nor is rhetoricizing so narrow a heuristic that it focuses only on the minutest operations of diction and syntax. What the work of Ducrot and Anscombe does offer, however, is a broad rationale for closer investigations of the persuasive capacities of poetic language. In order to bring their research into the province of New Rhetoric (and, by extension, into the rhetoricizing project itself), I want to look briefly at Kenneth Burke’s more canonical work on rhetoric and interpretation in Language as Symbolic Action. Two moments in particular stand out for their relevance to the current study. First, in his oft-cited “Definition of Man” essay, Burke links the use of words to the influence of ideology, which he describes as “a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways” (LSA 6). The link between words and deeds here is immediate; it is inherent in the relationship between human agents and the symbols they use to communicate. As Burke writes later in the essay, any “given terminology contains various implications, and there is a corresponding ‘perfectionist’ tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications” (19, original emphasis). This phrasing calls to mind both Ducrot and Anscombe’s theory of argumentativity and Burke’s own thesis in the essay “Terministic Screens,” where he explores the “necessarily suasive nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures” (45,

---

12 Burke grounds many of his rhetorical concepts and theories in the difference between motion and action. While the former refers to objects that “can only move, or be moved,” the latter involves “the human body in conscious or purposive motion” (A Grammar of Motives 136; 14). This distinction is a crucial one for Burkean rhetorical analysis, for only action affords insight into the motivations behind human behavior and communication. For more on the motion/action pair, see Burke’s “(Nonsymbolic) Motion vs. (Symbolic) Action” (Critical Inquiry 4.4 (1978): 809-38). Debra Hawhee’s Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edge of Language (U of South Carolina P, 2009) provides further insight into Burke’s conceptualization of rhetorical movement and action.
original emphasis). According to Burke, the terms we use to describe the world have an often unacknowledged impact on our attitudes toward it, and his essay seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how language’s inherent rhetoricity gives shape and meaning to our purportedly natural, objective, or unfiltered perceptions of everyday life.¹³

The second assumption, which builds directly upon the first, views the avant-garde poem (and artistic expression in general) as a form of what Burke calls “symbolic action.” Just like physical actions, symbolic acts are capable of making a real, lasting impact on the extra-poetic world. In the same way that a patriotic song elicits an emotional reaction from listeners, or that a controversial painting instigates sweeping changes to a national arts funding program, the poem-as-symbolic-act is very much embedded in the social, political, and historical fabric of quotidian experience. Yet unlike the physical act of shaking someone’s hand or rolling up a newspaper, symbolic action is not bound exclusively to its embedded context. As an artistic form composed of symbols, it can be acted and reenacted over and over again by multiple agents in various rhetorical situations. As Burke explains in “Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats”:

To consider language as a means of information or knowledge is to consider it epistemologically, semantically, in terms of “science.” To consider it as a mode of action is to consider it in terms of “poetry.” For a poem is an act, the symbolic act of the poet who made it—an act of such a nature that, in surviving as a structure or object, it enables us as readers to re-enact it. (A Grammar of Motives 447, original emphasis)

¹³ “Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (LSA 46, original emphasis).
The symbolic act is, for lack of a better term, infinitely recyclable. It can be played and replayed, inhabited and re-inhabited, in an endless series of aesthetic experiences. Considered rhetorically, these recyclings continually emphasize and amplify the argumentative elements that inhere within the symbolic act’s uses of poetic language—serving to naturalize these uses, no matter how radical they might be, in the process. By approaching the illegible poem as a form of symbolic action, rhetoricizing attempts to unite the aesthetic and the social realms by establishing a vital link in the chain of movement from text to action.

Given these two assumptions, what does “rhetoricizing the avant-garde” actually look like? The short answer is that it looks like whatever it needs to look like based on the poem in question. Echoing Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (105), rhetoricizing deploys whichever concepts, theories, or strategies seem necessary in order to make visible the arguments embedded in these avant-garde texts. It resembles what Sonja K. Foss calls “generative” rhetorical criticism, which operates by “generat[ing] units of analysis or an explanation from [an] artifact rather than from previously developed, formal methods of criticism” (387). Instead of approaching the avant-garde poem with a specific theory or concept in mind, the rhetoricizing critic adapts her interpretive strategies to best fit the text before her.

To give the longer answer, then: methodologically, rhetoricizing is a process for focusing our attention on what avant-garde poems do as symbolic acts rather than what they mean as aesthetic objects. Like traditional close reading, this requires attending to every verbal and visual aspect of the poetry as it appears on the page; unlike close reading, it does not prioritize the search for a poem’s discursive (or non-discursive) meaning.\textsuperscript{14} Accordingly, the case studies that

\textsuperscript{14} Admittedly, it would be impossible to banish semantic meaning from the equation entirely—and understanding an utterance’s meaning is often a key step in the discovery of its rhetorical purpose. But unlike traditional close
make up the bulk of this dissertation resist leading with questions of meaning and instead open by asking what this particular poem may have been designed to accomplish. This approach invites sustained dialogue with the New Rhetorical tradition—a tradition that, at least since the publication of I.A. Richards’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* in 1936, has been pursuing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language and action.\(^{15}\) In order to more fully explore these symbolic acts and their potential impact on contemporary social relations, then, rhetoricizing borrows liberally from various strains of literary, rhetorical, and philosophical thought that enable us to recognize how mystery can be deployed as a strategic intervention in cultural practices. More specifically, I draw upon the work of rhetorical scholars Steven Mailloux, Ann George and Jack Selzer, and M. Elizabeth Weiser to develop a hybrid model (i.e., both literary and rhetorical) for reading mystery as a form of argumentation in postwar avant-garde poetry. The end goal is a new critical heuristic that accepts the illegible for what it is rather than attempting to make it over (via allegory and paraphrase) into something more legible.\(^{16}\) In both method and practice, rhetoricizing assumes a more open, less appropriative stance toward the avant-garde text—one that, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, both can and should be mirrored in the social realm, especially as it pertains to traditionally marginalized subject positions.

---

\(^{15}\) Burke’s *Counter-Statement* (1931) predates Richards’s *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1936) by a half-decade, but at the time, Burke was widely considered a literary rather than a rhetorical critic. In fact, rhetoric makes only one appearance in *Counter-Statement*—and this occurs in a brief discussion of the divide between literature and rhetoric in the closing pages of the book (210-12).

\(^{16}\) Cleanth Brooks’s chapter “The Heresy of Paraphrase” from *The Well Wrought Urn* (Harcourt Brace, 1947) remains the most famous discussion of these concerns, but his longstanding association with New Criticism places his work somewhat at odds with the current study. For more recent work on the dangers of paraphrastic reading practices, see Brian McHale’s “How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery’s ‘The Skaters’” (*Poetics Today* 21.3 (2000): 561-90).
Steven Mailloux’s *Rhetorical Power* (1989) and Ann George and Jack Selzer’s *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s* (2007) establish important ground rules for analyzing the arguments that take place both within and around key cultural texts. For Mailloux, the term “rhetorical power” captures “how various discourses—literary, critical, and theoretical—function in producing the specific historical effects they do” (xii). In order to examine rhetorical power in action, he proposes a “rhetorical hermeneutics” that “views shared interpretive strategies not as the creative origin of texts but rather as historical sets of topics, arguments, tropes, ideologies, and so forth which determine how texts are established as meaningful through rhetorical exchanges” (15). In constructing his analysis of the sociohistorical processes by which texts acquire meaning—and, hence, wield their rhetorical power—Mailloux develops an extensive case study of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, citing the work of twentieth-century rhetoricians I.A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Wayne Booth in the process. George and Selzer extend this work by focusing not on a specific text from Burke’s *oeuvre*, but instead on a specific decade in his career to reveal how “Burke’s extensive writing projects in the 1930s fundamentally emerged from and contributed to the cultural conversations enacted within and among . . . various groups and publications” (3). By focusing on the associative networks that informed Burke’s ideas and helped publish and promote his theoretical writings, George and Selzer provide a more comprehensive (and, perhaps, more comprehensible) portrait of Burke’s nascent thinking on the rhetorical concepts that would come to define his legacy in future decades. In both their work and Mailloux’s, the object of analysis only comes into focus after being situated in a larger rhetorical context—one that enables us to recognize the object as an act that has been undertaken to achieve a specific purpose within a given scene.
No text, however, has had a larger influence on this dissertation’s methodology than M. Elizabeth Weiser’s *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism* (2008). Building upon the work of Mailloux, George, and Selzer, her project situates Burke’s dramatistic theory within the bellicose climate of the 1930s and 40s in order to more fully understand this theory as a strategic response to a particular exigence at a specific moment in time. For Weiser, rhetoricizing represents a kind of “theoretical historiography” that “involves practicing rhetoric by using history to do theory” (xiii). In other words, it returns rhetorical theory to the cultural context of its inception in order to better ascertain what this theory was designed to accomplish. At its core, rhetoricizing “recovers the exhortation behind the description, the desire to say *let us act* springing from *it is this*” (xiii, original emphasis). As part of this process, Weiser examines Burke’s published writings, his private correspondence, work published by Burke’s closest friends and colleagues, and historical documents that help reconstruct the broader context in which dramatism was developed. The end result of such an approach, as Weiser remarks in the book’s epilogue, is a “fully engaged conversation” between theory, history, and practice that helps “re-expos[e] ourselves to a text we think we know thoroughly” (148).

There are, to be sure, significant differences between Weiser’s project and my own—not the least of which is the emphasis she places on archival and historical research, which plays a far smaller role in the current dissertation. Yet if we take her thesis and, with a surprisingly few changes in terminology, adapt it to the current study, the areas of overlap between these two critical approaches become immediately apparent:

---

17 Ideally, a comprehensive model of rhetoricizing would situate these vanguard texts in their social, historical, and cultural contexts through extensive archival research. However, given the longstanding tendency to read and discuss these works only for their literary qualities, the current study attempts the more foundational task of demonstrating their rhetorical nature by placing them in conversation with twentieth-century rhetorical theory. Once this initial hurdle is cleared, future attempts to “rhetorize the avant-garde” would be well served to more fully explore the Burkean “scenes” in which these innovative and experimental works were initially created.
Rhetoricizing [poetry] makes it matter not only to [readers] or [critics] but also to citizen-scholars responding complexly to their world. In treating [poetry] as an act rather than an artifact, a rhetoricized treatment enriches the [poetry] not merely to understand it better but also so that the [poetry] can better, more fully, guide responses to contemporary situations. (xiv)

Whereas *Burke, War, Words* represents an extended meditation not only on the wartime origins of dramatism but also on its potential relevance for present-day readers, *Rhetoricizing the Avant-Garde* aims to have a similar impact on contemporary attitudes toward poetry that challenges our expectations for aesthetic experience. By opening the discourse surrounding innovative and experimental poetics to a new critical methodology—one that reads illegibility as much for the argument that it makes as for the sense that it does not—rhetoricizing has the potential to make these texts accessible to more readers while, at the same time, opening new lines of conversation regarding the political importance of the literary avant-garde. All this talk of mystery is, in essence, a way of making the rhetorical possibilities of poetic innovation all the more clear. The current study is thus rooted in a larger tradition of scholarship that asks just how different the poetic and the rhetorical uses of language truly are from one another.

**Bridging the Divide between Poetry and Rhetoric**

Since at least the time of Aristotle, the poetic and the rhetorical uses of language have been separated from one another in both popular and scholarly accounts of human

---

18 This decades-long debate over the degree to which avant-garde artworks impact the political sphere remains just outside the boundaries of the current study. In addition to Theodor Adorno’s theorizing of “autonomous” versus “committed” works of art in *Aesthetic Theory* (U of Minnesota P, 1997) and the essay “Commitment” (*Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, 2007), see José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton UP, 1968), Renato Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Harvard UP, 1968), Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minnesota UP, 1984), and Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* (Indiana UP, 1986).
communication. At times it almost seems as if, by splitting his Poetics and Rhetoric into separate works, Aristotle foreclosed any possibility of their being reunited in the future. It is true that, in defining poetry as “the medium of imitation” and rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any case the available means of persuasion” (5; 105), Aristotle does not leave open many avenues for bringing the two together.¹⁹ Yet as numerous commenters have pointed out over the past century, these restrictive definitions have not precluded elements of rhetoric from making their presence felt in poetic works, and vice versa.

One of the earliest twentieth-century critics to note the blurring of boundaries between poetry and rhetoric was Charles Sears Baldwin, who in 1924 argued that, while some ancient critics still insisted on Aristotle’s separation, “generally ancient poetic was more and more warped toward rhetoric” (4). As rhetorical training became the dominant model for formal schooling, poetry served as a valuable tool for the instruction of composition, memorization, and delivery. And as the ranks of the formally educated grew, so too did the acceptance of “a poetic strongly tinged with rhetoric” (15). Nearly sixty years after Baldwin’s piece first appeared, Charles Kauffman published “Poetic as Argument” in the Quarterly Journal of Speech. And while Kauffman is here concerned with poetry only in the strict Aristotelian sense (i.e., as drama), his essay develops a compelling portrait of poetic and rhetoric as “interdependent forms of discourse” that can be combined to “speak to moral, ethical, and social problems which seem to inhere in human society” (407; 413). For both Baldwin and Kauffman, Aristotle’s distinction between poetic and rhetorical speech should be viewed more as a taxonomical convenience than as an accurate representation of the natural order.

Jeffrey Walker’s *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (2000) expands on the work of his predecessors by documenting in extensive detail the so-called “literaturization” of poetry in ancient times (152). This literaturization had two disastrous effects on the relationship between poetry and rhetoric: first, it removed poetry from the public sphere and isolated it within the educational environment (273); and second, it stripped away whatever rhetorical elements such poetry might have possessed by stripping away its public audience (328). Walker offers a counter-narrative, however, that emphasizes the similarities between poetry and epideictic oratory and enthymematic argumentation, two rhetorical concepts that managed, at least in some places, to escape the literaturizing process.20 "In a rhetorical poetics,” Walker asserts, “the function of poetry is not so much to 'teach lessons,' in the sense of a preceptive didacticism, as to persuade, or to engage the audience in a suasory encounter; the ethical-paideutic effect lies in the audience's act of being persuaded or not being persuaded, its responsiveness. Pindar and Sappho do not 'teach lessons'; they argue positions” (293, original emphasis). In spite of the challenges that rhetorical education posed for efforts to maintain a more argumentative conception of ancient poetry, Walker reminds us that poets and their publics were in fact entering into rhetorical negotiations more often than is commonly assumed.

Were the trajectory established by Baldwin, Kauffman, and Walker to have continued unimpeded into the present day, it is doubtful that a study like this dissertation would even be necessary. But given the widespread influence of anti-rhetoric voices within the modernist and New Critical establishments during the first half of the twentieth century, it is not all that

---

20 Walker defines the epideictic as “that which shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives” (9). Rhetorical poetry serves an epideictic function when it reinforces these communal beliefs—but also when it “work[s] to challenge or transform conventional beliefs” through suasory discourse. The role of enthymemes in Walker’s analysis of rhetorical poetics is even more pronounced, as this is the foundational structure for using poetry to elicit powerful emotional responses from audiences (175). As a form of argumentation that relies on audience participation in order to complete the enthymeme, this type of persuasive poetry reinforces Walker’s claim that “rhetorically effective lyric argumentation necessarily must be to some degree a bilaterally negotiated construct” (207).
difficult to understand the skepticism that still surrounds rhetorical approaches to poetic texts. In “‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama,” T.S. Eliot summarizes the low opinion of the term “rhetoric” in the 1920s: “[W]e begin to suspect that the word is merely a vague term of abuse for any style that is bad, that is so evidently bad or second-rate that we do not recognize the necessity for greater precision in the phrases we apply to it” (44). Yet even this ostensible attempt to rescue rhetoric from its detractors ends by further reifying a degraded account of rhetorical speech. After discussing examples from the plays of Shakespeare and Rostand, Eliot concludes by offering a provisional definition of rhetoric as “any adornment or inflation of speech which is not done for a particular effect but for a general impressiveness” (48, original emphasis). With rhetoric thus relegated to embellishment or self-aggrandizement, it should come as no surprise that there was no room for the rhetorical in Ezra Pound’s vision for poetry as “the highest degree of linguistic precision” (Lan 46), or in William Carlos Williams’s idealized poetics of “no ideas but in things” (W.C. Williams 6). Add to this skepticism the more general anti-tradition tenor of modernist ideology, and Aristotelian conceptions of rhetoric as the high art of persuasion stood little chance against what Charles Altieri has called “the Modernist expulsion of rhetoric from lyric practice” (“The Place of Rhetoric” 127). If modernism saw as its mission the “defiance and finally violent rejection of tradition: the insistence on a clean break with the past” (R. Williams 52), how could a 2500-year-old system of formal argumentation be seen as anything other than a worn-out tradition in desperate need of being “made new”—or scrapped altogether?

It is important to note that this expulsion was not limited to modernism’s radical voices. At the same time, adherents of the more conservative New Criticism were “mov[ing] away from biography, history, and culture toward conceptualizing an independent text” (Kirsch 44). In other words, they were moving away from any rhetorical concerns that might cloud their vision of
literary texts as timeless, context-less aesthetic artifacts. The New Critics, much like Eliot, Pound, and Williams, wanted to strip away all unnecessary distractions from the study of the literary object—this despite the fact that, as Robert Connors points out, “New Criticism, with its emphasis on explication and the search for predetermined qualities such as irony or ambiguity, was a species of rhetorical criticism” (204). This singular focus on texts and tropes rankled Kenneth Burke, and when he published *The Philosophy of Literary Form* in 1941, he did so in part “as a prod . . . to the New Critics to go beyond a consideration of the poem as ‘verbal icon’” (George and Selzer 197).\(^{21}\) Not everyone, it seems, was prepared to write off the link between rhetoric and poetics just yet.

Yet other than Burke’s publication of *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966 and a few assorted essays from the 1950s to the 1970s, scholarship in the mid-twentieth century seems to have accepted the modernist/New Critical status quo.\(^{22}\) The few texts that did challenge this established order typically employed the classical rhetoric of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine (or perhaps even the bellettristic rhetoric of Hugh Blair, George Campbell, and Adam Smith) rather than the more contemporary New Rhetoric—a choice that may, in some cases, have actually reinforced the traditionalist, essentialist claims of New Criticism. Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), for instance, makes a compelling case that Aristotle was not completely opposed to “the rhetorical dimension of poetry” (92), but it rarely engages with

\(^{21}\) Burke’s connections to New Criticism have been the subject of numerous articles and books in recent years. In addition to George and Selzer’s *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*, see David Tell’s “Burke’s Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in ‘Four Master Tropes’” (*Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34.4 (2004): 33-54), M. Elizabeth Weiser’s “Dramatistic to the Core’: Allen Tate and *A Grammar of Motives*” (*Space Between: Literature & Culture, 1914-1945* 5.1 (2009): 33-52), and Dries Vrijders’s “History, Poetry, and the Footnote: Cleanth Brooks and Kenneth Burke on Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’” (*New Literary History* 42.3 (2011): 537-52).

prominent mid-century New Rhetoric ideas. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) discusses rhetorical concerns at length, but it does so only in the context of treating Signifyin(g) as a “rhetorical game” relying on age-old tropes like irony, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche (78). The 1998 collection *Landmark Essays on Bakhtin, Rhetoric, and Writing* contains only three brief references to Burke, and its sister volume *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and Literature* (1999) devotes but one of its twelve chapters to contemporary rhetorical theory. As valuable as these brief border crossings were for demonstrating the viability of interdisciplinary projects, the close of the twentieth century saw the critical discourse surrounding poetry and rhetoric continually reinforce the longstanding practice of treating these two fields as distinct areas of inquiry.

One final reason for the reluctance to recognize rhetoric’s place in the study of poetry (and literature as a whole) concerns the evolution of the modern English department on college campuses nationwide. As a site for both the study of literature and the study of writing, English departments must constantly make difficult decisions about the allocation of increasingly precious institutional resources (professors, classrooms, educational technology, etc.). In James Berlin’s account, these decisions often come down to questions of prestige, and those on the literary side have enjoyed a much easier time “establish[ing] their own distinguishing and superior characteristics” than have their peers in rhetoric and composition:

---

23 In fairness to Booth, the first edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was published in 1961, and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric* was not translated into English until 1969. Yet even the revised edition of Booth’s text, which appeared in 1983, still does not mention Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca, or Susanne Langer by name, and this is consistent with other hybrid studies of the past few decades.

24 That said, the book’s second chapter, “The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning,” does include a chart of various rhetorical devices that would make for an interesting parallel to Burke’s “Four Master Tropes” essay (*A Grammar of Motives* 503-17).

25 This one essay serves as the book’s concluding entry, Kenneth Burke’s “The Range of Rhetoric” (225-41). Interestingly, “The Range of Rhetoric” reprints a similarly-titled section of Burke’s *The Rhetoric of Motives* (3-23) — a section that Burke himself advised readers to “go lightly through . . . with the intention of not taking hold in earnest until they come to the general topic of Identification, on page 19” (*RM* xiii, original emphasis).
To demonstrate the unique and privileged nature of poetic texts, it has been necessary to insist on a contrasting set of devalorized texts, the kind of texts described in current-traditional rhetoric. . . . In tacitly supporting the impoverished notion of rhetoric found in the freshman writing course, academic literary critics have provided a constant reminder of their own claim to superiority and privilege. (30)

Over time, this institutional hierarchy becomes self-perpetuating: academic literary critics convince a generation of students that the study of rhetoric is inferior to and/or irrelevant to the study of literature, and when these students eventually become critics themselves, they convince a brand new generation of this same conclusion. Susan Miller’s discussion of disciplinary boundaries in Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition (1991) echoes Berlin’s analysis while also reminding us that these debates over privilege and value often have a human cost as well: “Persistent questions (and persistent answers to them) about composition’s status as a discipline . . . coerce those around it to perceive themselves differently, in ways they often find insupportable” (170). When both professional and personal identities are wrapped up the continuation of institutional hierarchies, it becomes far more difficult to argue for different ways of thinking and writing about the relationship between poetics and rhetoric.

Starting in the early 2000s, however, critics on both sides of the divide began thinking again about what it might mean for a more rhetorical model of poetry scholarship to challenge the now decades-old New Critical paradigm.26 This renewal of interest in the rapprochement between literary and rhetorical study has yet to fully embrace the theories and concepts of New Rhetoric, but it has produced some fascinating juxtapositions of modern and contemporary

poetry with elements from throughout the classical rhetorical tradition. One of the earliest of these studies, Walter Jost’s *Rhetorical Investigations: Studies in Ordinary Language Criticism* (2004), unites literature, rhetoric, and philosophy in a far-ranging exploration of contemporary literary criticism and the poetry of Robert Frost. Although the book eschews sustained engagement with New Rhetoric, it draws heavily upon Burke’s theory of identification and at various points mentions Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s conception of epideictic argument. Most importantly, Jost’s conception of Burkean rhetoric as the study of “the ways all linguistic acts of understanding and interpretation are tied to the practical interests and values of people” opens a pathway between poetry and rhetoric that had previously been closed (13). Despite the fact that Jost admits to using rhetoric as only a “middle term” between the two poles of the literary and the philosophical (7), *Rhetorical Investigations* represents an important step in the process of returning rhetoric to field of literary study.

Two recent essays by Charles Altieri have further aided this process by arguing for rhetoric as a potential vehicle for reclaiming poetic resources that were rejected by the most ardent strands of modernism. Specifically, these resources would restore to the poet methods for introducing rhetorical concepts like ethos, sincerity, and identification into the text. In “The Place of Rhetoric in Contemporary American Poetics: Jennifer Moxley and Juliana Spahr” (2011), Altieri contends that, like rhetoric, poetic speech produces “affective urgencies that will provoke response to particular situations or beliefs” (131). By developing and amplifying these urgencies through the use of various rhetorical devices, innovative poets like Moxley and Spahr attempt to construct a communal ethos of “shared political participation” among poets and their audiences (140). Altieri’s later essay, “What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry” (2012), offers a more rigorously theoretical take on these same
topics, adapting J.L. Austin’s speech act theory to contemporary avant-garde texts through the notion of “demonstrative” speech acts that serve as powerful examples for future action (77-78).\(^{27}\) When we finally recognize poetry as a form of action, Altieri argues, we see how even the most vanguard poems can exhibit the qualities of rhetorical persuasion.\(^{28}\)

The work that Jost, Altieri, and others have done in laying a new foundation for scholarship in rhetorical poetics has helped make possible studies like Dale Smith’s *Poets Beyond the Barricade* (2012) and Sharon Kirsch’s *Gertrude Stein and the Reinvention of Rhetoric* (2014). For Smith, the study of how American poetry moved out of the private and into the public sphere in the years following World War II demonstrates how overtly argumentative poems “can lead to better visions of what is possible in the world” by “initiat[ing] inquiries and revisions of civil and global practices” (138).\(^{29}\) Rhetorical poetry thus becomes a form of polemic or protest that has clear designs on specific changes in the sociopolitical climate from which it springs.\(^{30}\) Kirsch takes a quite different approach in her examination of Gertrude Stein’s relationship with Sophistic rhetoric, avoiding talk of specific social or political action and, instead, identifying the poet’s idiosyncratic language use as the source of her work’s rhetorical

\(^{27}\) For Altieri, a demonstrative speech act serves as a persuasive model for future action by “performing” in one of three ways. First, it displays “various stylistic or psychological traits that constitute an ethos” to be modeled for an audience (77). Second, it “calls attention to expressive states intended to elicit the affective engagement of others.” And finally, the demonstrative speech act can serve a pedagogical function by “show[ing] concretely how something can be done.”

\(^{28}\) Although his work with language and action mirrors Kenneth Burke’s, Altieri seems to have a fairly restricted view of Burke’s applicability to the broader argument in “What Theory Can Learn.” At one point, Altieri even claims that his own “model of authorial activity requires us to bring into play a language of motives that goes well beyond the standard goals of rhetorical persuasion” (78, emphasis added)—yet there is no mention here of either of Burke’s most important rhetorical works, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950).

\(^{29}\) Smith’s contention that “a rhetorical poetics can lead actors to engage public situations with new and meaningful strategies for communication” (14) echoes throughout Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray’s recent anthology, *The New American Poetry of Engagement* (McFarland & Co., 2012). This collection, which focuses exclusively on work published during the first decade of the 2000s, resists the New Critical tendency to read poems as autonomous objects and instead positions them within “a larger cultural shift toward a view of poetry as responsive to and responsible for the world outside the self” (5).

\(^{30}\) According to Smith, “a poem is meaningful to public knowledge insofar as it is capable of preparing an audience for the possibilities that are latent in how circulations of discourse and other symbolic forms are valued” (14).
power. “Stein’s writing,” Kirsch insists, “shares the Sophists’ focus on how uses of language arise in particular circumstances and through particular practices and how uses of language can be *kairotic*—that is, responsive to what is happening right here, right now” (2, original emphasis). For Kirsch, Stein’s *kairotic* conception of language ultimately restores the possibility for meaningful action by situating everyday reading and writing practices in a “continuous present [that] continually emerges” (120). In framing poetry as a space for the reimagining of contemporary publics (both politically and linguistically), Smith and Kirsch return to a more classical conception of rhetorical communication to explain how these publics emerge from the conversations surrounding American poetry in the twentieth century.

Given this trajectory of increasing convergence between literary and rhetorical study, my dissertation contributes to nearly a century’s worth of revisiting (and perhaps revising) Aristotle’s inaugural distinction between the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. At the same time, it breaks new ground by extending these conversations into the avant-garde and New Rhetoric traditions, two areas of inquiry that have only been tangentially associated with this project before now. By proposing a rhetoricizing heuristic for the study of innovative and experimental poetry, my dissertation offers a new way of reading avant-garde texts that blends the formal, aesthetic emphasis of New Criticism with the persuasive, social concerns of New Rhetoric.\(^{31}\) It also suggests new ways of thinking about the rhetorical concepts and theories of Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, Susanne Langer, and Kenneth Burke. Most importantly, the current study takes seriously Burke’s claim that the realm of rhetoric includes any act involving “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 41). It is only by rhetoricizing the avant-garde, I contend, that we

---

\(^{31}\) Or, perhaps, it *recovers* a way of reading the avant-garde that was lost when New Criticism and New Rhetoric split from one another during the 1930s and 1940s.
come to a full awareness of how mystery functions as a rhetorical act capable of persuading readers to embrace more open, more communal, more ethical modes of conceptualizing the world in which they live.

**Reading the “Mysterious” Avant-Garde**

The case studies that make up the dissertation’s middle three chapters have been organized with two key principles in mind. First, each chapter pairs one avant-garde poet with one rhetorical theorist whose work helps elucidate the poet’s use of specific persuasive strategies. As a way of indicating the broad applicability of the rhetoricizing lens, the poets discussed in these chapters represent a range of time periods, subject matter, styles, and public visibility; the only trait they have in common is their commitment to innovative and experimental poetics. And while some of the poet-theorist pairings do share a historical or cultural connection, these are incidental rather than intentional. The primary reason for joining, for example, Jackson Mac Low and Kenneth Burke in Chapter Three is their questioning of the role that ethos plays in acts of communication—not their associations with the New York literary scene or involvement in leftist political organizations. For more on these similarities between Burke and Mac Low, see Jack Selzer’s *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931* (U of Wisconsin P, 1996), Jerome Rothenberg’s Preface to Mac Low’s *Representative Works: 1938-1985* (Roof Books, 1986: v-x), and Joan Retallack’s “Chance of a Lifetime: Joan Retallack on Jackson Mac Low” (*Artforum International* 43.6 (2005): 35+).
how strategic interruptions of the meaning-making process resist the appropriative gaze of a culture’s dominant discourse (and the power structures it makes possible). In other words, poetic mystery forestalls interpretive consensus and, instead, invites the “dissensus” of many different readers voicing many different interpretations simultaneously. Taken together, these three case studies outline a clear program for applying the rhetoricizing heuristic to innovative and experimental texts. My final chapter then models this program by employing concepts, theories, and insights from throughout the dissertation in a comprehensive reading of John Ashbery’s *Girls on the Run* (1999).

Chapter One (“Reading Without Violence: Erica Hunt’s *Local History* and the Poetic Foundations of Rhetorical Community”) pairs poet and activist Erica Hunt’s 1993 collection *Local History* with two key concepts from Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s landmark study, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1969). The first of these concepts, “presence,” considers how a rhetor’s decisions regarding which elements to feature in her argument can shape the audience’s perception of the relative importance these elements possess (*TNR* 116). By focusing so intently on the words women use to give voice to their lived experiences, Erica Hunt’s poetry endows language with a rhetorical “presence” that shapes the poet’s investigations of domesticity throughout *Local History*. This leads directly into my

---

33 In “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin singles out poetry (and especially lyric poetry) as the literary genre most guilty of limiting speech to “one unitary and indisputable discourse”—which he refers to as poetry’s “monologic steadfastness” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 286). Through their innovative and experimental uses of language, however, the poets featured in this dissertation resist this conception of the lyric form and instead explore the *heteroglossia* that Bakhtin associates with the modern novel.

34 My use of “dissensus” here relies heavily on the work of Jacques Rancière and Ewa Ziarek. For Rancière, literary dissensus “works on changes in the scale and nature of individualities, on deconstruction of the relationships between things and meanings” (*The Politics of Literature* 43). Rancière recognizes in art and literature a way of multiplying those “connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies”—in other words, a way of making possible new “dissensual communities” (*The Emancipated Spectator* 72; 59). Ziarek’s model of dissensus shares a similar interest in the relationships between bodies, yet she focuses her attention on “experimental praxis” as a method for “the overcoming of historically constituted identities” by inventing new ways of being (*An Ethics of Dissensus* 42). Ziarek insists that the rejection of consensus is necessary for the “elaboration of [a] nonappropriative relation to the Other that is based on responsibility and accountability rather than on power and knowledge” (5).
discussion of the second term from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “communion,” which the rhetoricians define as a shared sense of “particular values recognized by the audience” that can be used by rhetors for “purposes of amplification and enhancement” in their arguments (TNR 51). Focusing specifically on Hunt’s rhetorical construction of the poem “Verse,” I examine how the poet capitalizes on the sense of communion she has developed in the first two-thirds of *Local History* to claim that true community can be experienced only when readers step outside a speaker/rhetor’s influence to “Choose your / own words to hear yourself speak” (61). The poems in *Local History* thus embody a radically oppositional stance—what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would call an argument “establishing the structure of reality” (TNR 350)—that attempts to change the current state of social relations by making visible the values, beliefs, and experiences of marginalized communities. It is only by examining the role of presence and communion in Hunt’s argument, I contend, that we can fully appreciate how innovative language practices have the potential to unite community members and then persuade them to resist the totalizing pronouncements of a culture’s dominant discourse.

Chapter Two (“‘I Can Feel the Idea’: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* and the Poetics of Non-Discursive Form”) brings Lyn Hejinian’s 1987 edition of *My Life* together with Susanne Langer’s theory of non-discursive symbolization as developed in *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and *Feeling and Form* (1953). Drawing upon Langer’s assertion in *Feeling and Form* that the “poet uses discourse to create an illusion, a pure appearance, which is a non-discursive symbolic form” (211), I contend that Hejinian’s book-length poem constructs a Langerian “illusion of life” (213) out of what appear to be simple, straightforward propositions regarding everyday experience. For both Langer and Hejinian, this “illusion” affords unprecedented access to affective (read: female) experiences that have typically been treated as less valuable than their
logical (read: male) counterparts. Non-discursive texts like *My Life* counter this tendency through the composition of works imbued with a “dynamic pattern of feeling” (*FF* 241) that simply cannot be represented in discursive language. As Hejinian’s speaker remarks, these non-discursive patterns are “a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view—so that we are ‘coming from the same place’” (*My Life* 21-22). By shifting its organizational logic from the discursive unit of the sentence to the non-discursive unit of the paragraph, *My Life* ultimately argues for a more ethical relationship among poets, texts, and readers—one that remains perpetually open to the full range of human perception, emotion, and imagination that Langer claims is the domain of non-discursive experience.

Chapter Three (“The Ethos of Erasure: Jackson Mac Low’s ‘5 biblical poems’ as Pure Persuasion”) reads Mac Low’s earliest example of chance-generated composition as an exploration of Kenneth Burke’s theory of pure persuasion. Regarding the most illegible texts in the dissertation, I contend that the “5 biblical poems” utilize chance and erasure as rhetorical strategies for securing unending dialogue within a community by sacrificing both the poet’s control over the text and the reader’s control over its interpretation. After a general discussion of Mac Low’s “chance operations,” I argue that this compositional method represents the nearest poetic analogue for Burke’s pure persuasion, a rhetorical act involving “the saying of something, not for an extra-verbal advantage to be got by the saying, but because of a satisfaction intrinsic to the saying” (*RM* 269). As Mac Low’s poems systematically erase large sections of their source...
text—the Hebrew Bible—these textual gaps produce the “self-interference” and “standoffishness” necessary to approach the realm of Burkan pure persuasion and suspend the play of signification indefinitely (RM 269). The “5 biblical poems,” that is, secure the grounds for unending dialogue by instantiating a community that operates according to a polyvocal rather than a monovocal model of ethos. Mac Low’s chance-generated series shifts rhetorical ethos from a quality to be possessed by an individual speaker to a characteristic to be demonstrated by an entire discourse community. In this way, the poems attempt to transcend the limitations of a single speaking voice by offering a richer, more complex sense of poetic community—thereby bridging the divide between radical poetics and radical social relations.

The dissertation’s closing chapter, ““Waiting for Something Coherent to Happen”: A Rhetorical (Mis)Reading of John Ashbery’s Girls on the Run,” combines elements from each of the preceding chapters to present a comprehensive rhetoricized reading of the book-length poem, Girls on the Run. This 1999 text, like others from the so-called “late Ashbery” period, has routinely been overlooked or dismissed by Ashbery scholars. In order to redress this oversight, the chapter engages in what the poet himself has called “misreading”: the practice of reading against a poet’s stated wishes for the interpretation of her work (Other Traditions 101). Given the poem’s digressive, episodic structure and nuanced relationship with the paintings of outsider artist Henry Darger, I “misread” Girls as an extended argument regarding the precariousness of queer childhood and the need for escaping binaristic conceptions of gendered identities. In spite of Ashbery’s insistence that he never writes “to [give] someone a specific message” (“An

36 It has become commonplace in recent years to refer to the bulk of Ashbery’s work since the early 1990s as one singular mass of indistinguishable poems. As I argue in Chapter Four, however, this tendency elides important differences between these texts and, as is the case with Girls on the Run, minimizes their impact on popular perceptions of Ashbery’s oeuvre. See Roger Gilbert’s “Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery’s Recent Poetry” (Contemporary Literature 48.2 (2007): 195-226) and Brian Glavey’s “Reading Late Ashbery” (Criticism 50.3 (2008): 527-32) for more on the “late Ashbery” period.
Interview” 40), this chapter demonstrates that there is in fact a message here, one that sees the illegible poem, much like the Vivian Girls themselves, as always “on the run” from the threat of final interpretive closure. The poem’s success or failure, then, depends largely upon how effectively it can persuade readers that closure and certainty are inimical to the long-term health of both the aesthetic and the social realms. Above all else, this chapter of the dissertation illustrates the range of critical possibilities made available by rhetoricizing the avant-garde.

True, the poems featured in this study would fail most conventional tests of argumentativity. Their claims are not laid out in a clear and logical manner, and evidence is rarely (if ever) provided to support these claims. They follow no obvious propositional or syllogistic structure. At times, they seem to ignore their audience altogether, withdrawing into hermetic displays of incomprehensible expression. And there is no denying that, if we continue to insist upon a model of rhetorical communication grounded in the traditional image of public oration—or even the more contemporary images of political campaigns, legal proceedings, and corporate advertisements—there remains little room for poetry of this kind in the canons of rhetoric. The fundamental claim of this dissertation, however, is that these models represent neither the most productive nor the most accurate method for making sense of the postwar avant-garde. The poems discussed in these chapters evince powerful similarities to the kinds of rhetorical interaction that are most difficult to quantify or explain, those “mysterious” interactions that, according to Burke, derive “great persuasive power” from the very fact of their incomprehensibility. These symbolic acts call to us, appeal to us, reach out to us for our best guesses as to what they might be doing, and rhetoricizing offers a way of recognizing these appeals for what they are and responding to them both as poetry and as rhetoric. These poems may not “persuade” audiences in the traditional sense of that term, but this does not mean that
they fail to make arguments. Indeed, these poems argue by selection, arrangement, juxtaposition, parataxis, and disjunction—not to mention presence, communion, non-discursive form, and pure persuasion. They make their arguments, that is, through those very same innovative and experimental language practices that have come to define the mysterious American avant-garde over the past seventy years.
CHAPTER ONE

READING WITHOUT VIOLENCE: ERICA HUNT’S LOCAL HISTORY AND THE POETIC FOUNDATIONS OF RHETORICAL COMMUNITY

There is no simple doorway into the practice of this kind of radical poetry. The stakes are high; one risks illegibility, sometimes to the very audiences that one most wants to address. But I think that more writers have to face risk, be willing to stare down the lies that are intended to domesticate a wilder more social art practice.

Erica Hunt, “Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde”

This is why we will consider argumentation above all in its practical effects: oriented toward the future, it sets out to bring about some action or to prepare for it by acting, by discursive methods, on the minds of the hearers.

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric (47)

Exordium: Making Room for the Blanks

In her 1988 lecture “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” Erica Hunt opens by observing that one of the defining characteristics of post-World War II global politics is the “illusion of a world at peace” (198). Recalling a recent magazine article celebrating the world’s longest period of peace in centuries, the poet marvels at how easily such “popular wisdom” denies or discounts violence at any level below the global (197). Citing international statistics on increases in military personnel, disproportionate government spending on defense forces, and a rising number of refugees displaced from their homes by violence, Hunt suggests that the “New War” of the late-twentieth century has been at least as disastrous for the global community as was World War II. And yet, she states, hardly anyone ever notices. The reason for this oversight? Hunt locates it in something she calls the “peaceful world illusion,” which reassures those living in
industrialized nations that the lessons of Europe have been learned and that the world is now safer than it has ever been before.

From our current vantage point in 2015, this illusion has lost much of its persuasive power. In the late 1980s, however, Hunt argued that the widespread belief in a world at peace was displacing contemporary military violence from the public consciousness and enabling those in positions of power to “anesthetize desire and resistance” and maintain the status quo (199). If the status quo depicted in the news magazine had been true—if the world really had been experiencing an unprecedented era of global peace—then perhaps the anesthetization of political and artistic opposition could be tolerated. But at the level of the local, at the level of homes and families and neighborhoods and communities, the cracks in the peaceful world illusion were beginning to demand a different kind of response. Hunt argued that this new response must be powerful enough to transgress both geographical and ideological boundaries:

The violence of the New War doesn’t just occur in the Third World, that other planet, but erupts internally and scabrous in exhausted cities and nerve-dead rural areas, seeping into the lives of the nominally less marginal. In America, one of the seats of power that has brought such “peace,” the majority are complicit, often unconsciously, with the New War, and as the borders of countries dissolve and nations become more interdependent, the violence spreads and entangles. (198)

For Hunt, the “brimming void in which visionary culture confronts power” must be reimagined in such a way as to break through the illusory status quo and promote “a critically active stance against forms of domination.” The challenge for those poets and artists who would seek to re-animate “desire and resistance” then becomes one of method: how does one begin to confront an illusion that, by definition, conceals the very fact of its existence?
In response to this question, Hunt proposes that the key to resisting the peaceful world illusion—or any other all-too-convenient narrative that ignores the voices of those living at society’s margins—lies in an “oppositional poetics” that exposes the illusion’s cracks and seams. As she argues throughout “Notes,” conventional uses of language come to seem so “entirely natural” that they can be used to “bind and organize us” by those who control the dominant discourse (199). “The codes and mediations that sustain the status quo,” Hunt declares, “abbreviate the human in order to fit us into structures of production. There is a place for everyone, even the subordinate, if they know their place” (200). To resist such abbreviation, oppositional writing (re)asserts the presence and importance of the “barely discerned or discussed relationships” that exist between marginalized writers, groups, or artistic styles—relationships that the dominant discourse has a vested interest in suppressing (204). Rather than align itself with a mainstream literary culture that utilizes the forms, tropes, and ideologies of this dominant discourse, oppositional poetics explores “a more fluid typology” that employs “plural strategies to remove the distance between writing and experience, at least as it is socially maintained by the binarism of fact and fiction, of identity and nonidentity” (199).1 Oppositional texts, that is, resist the monoculture’s silencing of disparate experiences by reaffirming the range and the value of these experiences in our everyday lives. And since an illusion’s effectiveness is in large part determined by the extent to which it denies alternative explanations, the proliferation of oppositional strategies and relationships (not to mention the communal networks these relationships make possible) poses a direct challenge to any master narrative that would deny the presence of marginalized persons. As a method of cultural intervention, Hunt’s oppositional poetics works to highlight the cracks in the presumed naturalness of prevailing

1 When discussing mainstream literary culture, Hunt at times uses the term “conventional poetics” as a foil for her own notion of oppositional poetics (199). As a label for poetry that takes few aesthetic and political risks, Hunt’s term shares many similarities with Charles Bernstein’s “Official Verse Culture” (My Way 249).
social structures by persuading those living along the fault lines to unite their voices in a dissenting cacophony.

Or, as Hunt argues in the opening poem of *Local History*, “Preface,” these voices can only combat a culture’s longstanding illusions once they “enlist sense to illumination and make room for the blanks” (*LH* 10). The “blanks” referenced here—both in the poem “Preface” and in the omissions of the peaceful world illusion—suggest a silence that has yet to be voiced, an absence that has yet to be recognized. According to Hunt’s speaker, what the poem and the world need most is a mirror powerful enough to shine a light in these dark places and reveal the true interconnectedness of contemporary life. As she writes in the poem’s first two paragraphs:

I was thinking that if the ceiling were mirrored we would have to watch what we say about what we feel. That we could not use curtains to conceal what we know. That we could watch without leaving the room or the chair.

We could eliminate the ritual of walking around ourselves, meet head on, relying on how pure coincidence transforms trial and error. That we might even be in the same version of the same country speaking the same language at the same time.

(9)

The darkness of a room without a mirror is both comforting and confining: it enables the speaker and her companion (friend? lover?) to enjoy an easy intimacy with each other, yet the poem suggests that this intimacy is less honest or genuine than it should be. Only if the mirror were present, the speaker claims, would both persons stop “conceal[ing] what we know” and start “speaking the same language at the same time.” The darkness, much like the peaceful world illusion, permits only a partial awareness of things as they are. In opposition to this half-truth, the
mirror works to “remove the calvinist [sic] and other secret furniture from the language” and reveal “the barely contiguous unfamiliar” that unites the marginalized and the oppressed.² All the oppositional poet has to do is find the right strategy—the right “mirror”—for bringing light into the darkness so that we may recognize the communal relations that connect us to one another.

Of course, the actual work of poetic “illumination” is more easily called for than accomplished. For Hunt to simply replace one illusion (that of a world at peace) with another (that of collective enlightenment) would be to short-circuit the oppositional project right from the start. And for readers to demand a straightforward list of action steps would be to abdicate their role in the collective “get[ting] down to work” that poems like “Preface” call for (LH 9). Just how exactly does one craft an oppositional poem without merely reproducing the dominant language?³ How does the oppositional writer avoid taking on the problematic role of the Romantic poet-prophet?⁴ How, in other words, does the innovative poet make room for her readers to enter the poem as well—to become what Hunt calls “an intimate collaborator” in the collective project of oppositional writing (25)?

As a formally innovative text in the avant-garde tradition, *Local History* does not provide a step-by-step blueprint for addressing these questions. In lieu of easy answers, I want to

---

² This image of oppositional communities as “contiguous” groupings of previously “unfamiliar” individuals underlies much of Hunt’s argument in “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics” as well. According to the poet, “Contiguity, as a textual and social practice, provides the occasion to look beyond the customary categories of domestic and international, politics, history, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on. As a social practice it acknowledges that the relationships among groups who share an interest in changing the antidemocratic character of the social order is not as oblique as their individual rhetoric would represent. As a reading and writing practice, it suggests new synthesis [sic] that move out of the sphere of a monoculture of denial; syntheses that would begin to consider the variance between clusters of oppositional writing strategies with respect for what has been achieved by each and a sense of the ground that holds it in place” (“Notes” 205).

³ cf. Audre Lorde: “Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women . . . know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (112, original emphasis).

approach Hunt’s text as a form of poetic argumentation, one that, in the words of rhetorical theorists Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, “sets out to bring about some action or to prepare for it by acting, by discursive methods, on the minds of the hearers” (The New Rhetoric 47). My rationale for pairing Hunt’s poetry with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s rhetorical theory is twofold. First, the rhetoricians’ model of argumentation holds that speakers and audiences must perceive themselves as members of a common “intellectual community” if rhetorical discourse is to be effective (TNR 14). This premise closely mirrors Hunt’s own commitment—in her art and in her career as a non-profit organizer—to the role that communities play in the project of opposition. Second, both The New Rhetoric and Local History emphasize the need to reject “definitive, unalterable revelations, whatever their nature or their origin” (TNR 510). By pairing Hunt with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, I argue that poetic opposition is founded upon innovative language practices that bring together members of an intellectual community and then persuade them to resist the “definitive” and the “unalterable” pronouncements of a culture’s dominant discourse. This rhetoricized reading of Local History attempts to understand the poem-as-argument “in terms of the action for which it paves the way or which it actually brings about” (TNR 54).

More importantly, rhetoricizing offers an opportunity to address the link between radical poetic methods and radical political action. The current chapter lays the groundwork for the dissertation’s larger claims about innovative poetry and symbolic action by focusing on two of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s most important rhetorical concepts: presence and communion.

---

5 Although early scholarship on Chaim Perelman’s rhetorical and philosophical writings often minimized—if not entirely excised—Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s role in the creation of The New Rhetoric, more recent work has demonstrated that she played a vital role in the project’s conception and execution. Of particular note is David A. Frank and Michelle K. Bolduc’s “Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s New Rhetoric,” which relies on extensive archival research to illustrate the extent to which the two authors of The New Rhetoric were true collaborators: “Perelman brought to the collaboration an expertise in philosophy and logic, and Olbrechts-Tyteca contributed her command of literature, literary criticism, and the comic” (56).
The first of these, presence, concerns the increased importance that words, phrases, or examples acquire simply by virtue of being included in a rhetor’s argument (TNR 116-17). After an initial analysis of the persuasive effects associated with presence, I offer close readings of Local History’s contents page and the four-part poem “City” to illustrate how Hunt makes present the need for a new oppositional language. I then turn to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of communion, which the rhetoricians define as a shared set of values and beliefs that rhetors can rely upon for “purposes of amplification and enhancement” in their arguments (51). Focusing on the poem “Verse,” I examine the role that communion plays in Hunt’s call for a language of “Fire” powerful enough to illuminate the ties that unite various marginalized communities (LH 61). Rhetoricizing Hunt’s oppositional project thus reveals how texts like Local History argue for a socially conscious poetics that strengthens the avant-garde community’s shared commitment to social change through innovative and experimental writing.

Re-Imagining the Poetry Community: Erica Hunt’s Local History

For the speaker of Hunt’s prose poem “Counter,” persuasive communication is not a theoretical consideration; it is a practical necessity born of occupation and oppression. The poem frames this occupation metaphorically, as the speaker’s home is taken over by “[s]ome kind of circus [that] sets up tent in the middle of the living room” and speaks “a jargon of cause and effect” that none in the audience can understand (LH 60). This surreal depiction of the living room circus takes on a far more serious tone as the performers begin to assert their control over the speaker and her community:

They paper reason, say that from now on we have to earn it. At the close of their set they announce “now we’re going to start over.”
We sense something is terribly wrong but since we opened the doors to let them in twice we believe we can do no more than study the fray of the curtains or the pop in the latest dessert.

The townspeople “sense something is terribly wrong” but are in no position to resist the circus’s control over the local landscape. Much like the political refugees mentioned in the opening of Hunt’s “Notes,” the citizens in “Counter” suddenly find themselves displaced from their own living rooms and dependent upon the mercy of the occupying forces. The speaker and her companions are stripped of their agency and can “do no more” than function as passive observers in this situation. Yet as the poem moves toward its conclusion, there appears to be at least the potential for corrective action through the use of oppositional speech:

We stand outdoors, matching wind for wind, wearing the sweater of exile, talking hands punch the air for emphasis. Speech intense enough to light the night of the state, yet practical enough to interrupt sunset to replace the burned-out bulb.

This image of “talking hands punch[ing] the air for emphasis” suggests that resistance might still be possible. Despite their marginalization, the citizens possess the ability to produce speech “intense enough to light the night of the state”—speech ultimately capable of lighting up the darkness (“replac[ing] the burned-out bulb”) and uniting the townspeople in a “Counter”-insurgency all their own. The poem closes with an image of hope, even as it leaves open the question of whether or not these acts of resistance pose any significant threat to the circus performers.

In this short poem, Hunt gives voice to one of Local History’s fundamental concerns, namely, the extent to which the personal experiences of multiple individuals can be marshaled into a collective force for resisting oppressive systems, mindsets, and ideologies. As a second (or
perhaps even third) generation participant in the San Francisco poetry scene, Hunt’s interest in the poetics of community continues the work of writers like Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan—writers who “were politically active from the outset, and as counterculture figures, they brought attention to alternative modes of community” (Davidson 31). In a poem like “Counter,” for instance, the quotidian nature of these countercultural experiences is reinforced through the use of prose form. The speaker describes the community’s language as “intense enough” to encourage oppositional tactics, yet “practical enough” to remain aware of the demands of everyday life.

Kathy Lou Schultz has remarked on how Hunt’s poems “converge at the dialectic between the personal (including the ordinary facts of daily life) and global power structures” (Schultz par. 3), and in “Counter” we see how Hunt highlights both the threat and the opportunity that such convergences present to individual subjects. Tyrone Williams expands this idea even further, arguing that, instead of merely concerning herself with individual subjectivity, Hunt’s poetry seeks to redefine racial and political networks by “deploy[ing] avant-garde forms and methods to uproot politically retrogressive values within and without black communities (literary and otherwise)” (147). In these responses, Schultz and Williams suggest that texts like *Local History* have been designed with profoundly rhetorical ends in mind. Hunt’s communal rhetoric thus harkens back to the San Francisco poets of the 1940s and 50s just as readily as it recalls her own “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics” from the late 1980s.

Despite the publication of two poetry collections and two chapbooks, “Notes” remains the most discussed entry in Hunt’s body of work, in part because of the essay’s assertion that oppositional writing depends as much upon formal innovation as it does upon “the roles that

---


7 *Local History* includes only five poems written in verse, all of which are included in the book’s third and final section (‘Surplus,” pp. 55-73).
writers play in ‘forming new social consciousness’” (Marsh, *Democracy* 38). And by and large, the critical response to “Notes” has been positive. For Evie Shockley, Hunt’s essay is a vital part of the recent trend toward “dismantling the false dichotomy” that persists between groups of poets who share a common artistic style and groups who share a common race or gender (14). Linda Kinnahan praises “Notes” for problematizing the relationship between poetic forms of resistance and identity politics while, at the same time, recognizing the need for even more oppositional projects (166). And fellow poet Harryette Mullen has argued that Hunt’s work calls attention to the “meaningful syntheses” among variously marginalized groups that can be “combined through mutual commitment to work in solidarity for a shared social vision” (181). Allison Cummings offers a slightly more critical response to Hunt’s essay, lamenting the poet’s reluctance to offer more specific examples of the strategies that provide innovative and experimental poetry its “political teeth” (23). If, as in Nicky Marsh’s reading of “Notes,” the goal of oppositional writing is to “rewrite the public sphere” and “imagine the new kinds of identity and relationships that would make this [rewriting] possible” (*Democracy* 37), then Cummings desires a more thorough explanation of how such “re-imagining” might occur in contemporary poetic praxis. In the current chapter’s rhetoricizing of Hunt’s first poetry collection, *Local History*, I contend that we should look for these re-imaginings not in Hunt’s statement of oppositional poetics, but in the rhetorical construction of her oppositional poems themselves.

Of her four creative works, only *Arcade* (a collaboration with artist Alison Saar published in 1996) has received extended critical attention, most notably in the scholarship of Kinnahan and Mullen. By comparison, *Local History* (1993), *Piece Logic* (2002), and *Time Slips Right Before the Eyes* (2006) have been the subject of only a handful of blog posts, online reviews, and
academic conference papers. Some of this neglect may be due to Hunt’s thirty-year career as a social activist and non-profit organizer—a career that has prevented her from devoting more time to writing, speaking, and promoting her own work. Cummings suggests that the shortage of critical commentary may also be due to the poet’s avoidance of “direct statements about race or gender” that tend to attract “readers or teachers on the lookout for poetry that treats African American experience directly” (17). The poems in Local History rarely (if ever) signify as part of the twentieth century’s African American literary tradition, featuring neither the vernacular speech popularized during the Harlem Renaissance nor the trenchant radicalism made famous by the Black Arts Movement. And other than the author photograph on the book’s back cover, nothing about this text specifically identifies Hunt as a “black poet.” Although she is, along with Harryette Mullen, recognized as part of a group of innovative poets “whose works interrogate what literary society perceives to be blackness, what languages and what forms are critically associated with constructions of cultural blackness” (Nielsen 168), her refusal to explicitly acknowledge these concerns in her poems may be at least partially responsible for her continued marginalization within the larger poetry community.

The poet’s oblique considerations of gender may also be to blame for this oversight, in spite of the fact that many of the poems in Local History identify the speaker as female or feature

---

8 For an example of these online conversations, see Kathy Lou Schultz’s “Rock and a Hard Place: Erica Hunt and the Poetics of African-American Postmodernity” in HOW2 1.5 (March 2001). When Local History is mentioned in critical essays and book chapters relating to Hunt’s work, it typically occupies an ancillary position with respect to Hunt’s other publications—or, as in the case of Samantha Pinto’s Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic, it is referenced merely as an entry point into a larger discussion of how certain innovative strands of black women’s writing “offer tentative, experimental economies of form and a set of aesthetic practices that flow unevenly across national and geographic borders” (3).

9 After spending twelve years as president of the New York-based Twenty-First Century Foundation, an organization devoted to philanthropic projects funded by and for African American communities (Thurman), Hunt left the non-profit sector in 2010 and is now focusing full-time on her writing career.

representations of stereotypically gendered activities (cooking, cleaning, letter writing). These representations, however, are rarely straightforward depictions of daily life; even a poem so obviously “about gender” as Hunt’s “Woman, with wings” frames its exploration of sexual power within the double metaphors of a trip to the library and a drive down the highway (71-72). As if in response to Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s call in *The Pink Guitar* for a feminist poetics that “change[s] the authority relations to the text and possibly to language” (173), Hunt’s poems defamiliarize the domestic sphere and open the text to a plurality of meanings that must be continually (re)negotiated among poet, text, and reader. For some readers, the fact that this plurality does not lend itself to convenient sound bites or calls for political action will limit the text’s appeal. But for DuPlessis, it is vital that avant-garde representations of gender promote “[n]ot ‘otherness’ in a binary system, but ‘otherhow’ as the multiple possibilities of a praxis” (154). Hunt’s poems explore the multiple possibilities of gender (and of race) in ways that become increasingly important the more we focus on reading the poem as a rhetorical act rather than an aesthetic artifact. As she writes in “Response to Race and the Avant-Garde”:

[T]he chief claim I make as “I” in a series of I’s, is always “Black woman poet,” whose inclinations are infused with a corresponding refusal to let curiosity or inclination be scripted. I have had to invent the person for whom poetry is possible. For me, writing and reading have always been inseparable from the radical project of freedom: imagining, engaging, and rehearsing in the space of freedom’s stuttering and insistent gait toward radical potential; taking inspiration from other artists who have planted the north star *freedom* as a psychic, material, and existential open-ended value in an aesthetic domain. (Original emphasis)
The multiplicities that define race and gender in Hunt’s poetry mirror the multiplicities that define race and gender in Hunt’s own existence. The “radical potential” Hunt’s poetry strives toward can only remain radical insofar as it refuses to authorize a fixed image of “blackness” or “womanhood.” To limit the expression of these identities to a single voice—however politically expedient—would be to replicate the monologic discourse of the dominant cultural power.

Instead, I want to argue that these concerns over how to properly categorize Hunt’s triply marginalized poetry—as black, as woman, as innovative—also serve as the source of its rhetorical power. The poems collected in Local History celebrate resistance and defiance as integral aspects of Hunt’s socially conscious poetics. They speak from a position so far outside the dominant poetic culture—which has traditionally been imagined as white, as male, as lyric—that the mere fact of their existence raises serious questions about the presumed naturalness of the established order. Hunt’s poems emanate from what Maria Damon has called “the dark end of the street,” that cultural and artistic space on the outskirts of society where “the marginalized, ostensibly most expendable members of the American socius [produce] its truly vanguard literature” (xi). Writing poetry at the dark end of the street comes with a distinct set of challenges, not the least of which is a limited readership for one’s body of work.11 But it also affords poets a greater degree of freedom to explore those potentially transgressive uses of language that mark the oppositional text. In order to fully embrace “a wilder more social art practice” (Hunt, “Response to Race”), Hunt’s poetry retains this wildness rather than trading it in for a stereotypically “black” or “feminist” aesthetic. In the process, Local History attempts to persuade readers that the social and linguistic codes underwriting these aesthetic stereotypes must be reimagined in order to make room for new ways of being in the world with one another.

11 Paul Naylor argues in Poetic Investigations (Northwestern UP, 1999) that even though “the audience for this kind of writing is probably between five hundred and five thousand readers,” we must not make the mistake of assessing “the effect of this work by the standards of mass consumption it intends to critique” (39).
Before turning to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca for help in understanding how Hunt’s argument unfolds, I want to look at a brief example of this “wildness” in action. In the first section of *Local History*, the two-part poem “Voice 1 / Second Voice” models the difference between domestication and opposition by exploring the interior landscape of the speaker’s consciousness. The first voice is both “thirsty” and “exhaust[ed],” unable to summon the energy to do anything other than “soak up conversation, your kind regard, the dullest thought explicated a dozen times in different ways” (*LH* 11). The image is one of complete acquiescence, a total passivity brought about by “a confusion of muddy clouds that never pour never drown out this thirst.” The thirst and heat are so exhausting, in fact, that the speaker refrains from joining in the conversation, content to exist merely as a “head nodding with the phrases.” But then the second voice enters the poem, and as a “magnet of light draws my eyes up,” the speaker realizes that she “was standing already” and primed for action. This shift is strikingly abrupt; the speaker transforms from wilting spectator to self-motivating agent almost instantaneously. And when a “voice in head gets personal” just before the poem’s closing paragraph, everything changes:

I have to hold myself up or I’ll fall. Pinocchio didn’t know what fear meant. I come flying out of the elevator, out of my container, out of my box. I am myself, not the product you asked for, not the one you pointed out on the shelf. This one, not that one. No strings and anything might happen.

The speaker’s desire to be recognized as an individual—and especially as an *unpredictable* individual—requires the severing of whatever “strings” might be attempting to control her. No longer content to passively “soak up conversation,” the speaker seeks the self-actualization of a marionette-turned-person. This radical shift in her outlook is necessarily sudden: the breaking of the strings requires a level of violence that cannot be contained by the puppeteer. By refusing to
remain “the product you asked for,” Hunt’s speaker attempts to claim a subjectivity that reflects her desires—not the desires of her unnamed master.

Rhetorically, “Voice 1 / Second Voice” draws its persuasive power from what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca classify as an argument that establishes the structure of reality. As opposed to arguments based on the current structure of reality, which “establish a solidarity between accepted judgments and others which one wishes to promote” (TNR 261), this type of appeal aims to alter our perception of the world by pointing to examples and models (as well as counterexamples and anti-models) that highlight deficiencies or inconsistencies in the current worldview. Much like Hunt’s oppositional poetics, rhetors employing this method of persuasion often highlight the existence of an “invalidating case”: a counterexample that so thoroughly challenges the status quo that it “requires the rejection or at least the modification of the rule to which it is opposed” (Perelman 107). The speaker’s defiance in “Voice 1 / Second Voice,” her outright refusal to be constrained by the limitations placed upon her, serves as a powerful model for future action by those in similarly marginalized positions. “In the realm of conduct,” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca state, “particular behavior may serve, not only to establish or illustrate a general rule, but also to incite to an action inspired by it” (TNR 362). Despite the absence of any direct call for resistance or opposition, the poem argues for a new way of being—a new structure for reality—simply by imagining a community in which the status quo no longer applies and, as a result, “anything might happen” (LH 11).

This is only a brief example of how Hunt re-imagines the contemporary poetry community. But even in this one poem, we begin to see how Local History capitalizes upon the rhetoricity of everyday language use to argue for a new kind of world, one that recognizes the presence of even the most marginalized persons. The key to sustaining this oppositional work
lies in creating larger and larger networks of individuals committed to resisting the current status quo—and this requires uniting communities of poets and readers around sets of shared values. As “Notes” suggests, innovative praxis is about more than aesthetic radicalism; Hunt’s work attempts the far more ambitious project of moving off the page and into the world she inhabits with others.12 Reading Hunt rhetorically thus enables us to better appreciate how poetry as a form of address “creates a circle along which authority may pass from writer to reader and to the person at next remove, moving by degrees, further from the immediate circles of familiarity to wider social realms” (Hunt, “The World” 21). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of presence provides us the vocabulary necessary to begin appreciating the rhetorical strategies Local History utilizes to develop this participatory ethos and build the new public communities that are so essential to Hunt’s oppositional project.

Poetry and “Standing-Out-Ness”: Presence as a Rhetorical Strategy

As a text operating at the boundary between rhetoric and philosophy, The New Rhetoric has one overarching purpose: to correct the perceived deficiency of persuasive methods that cannot be logically verified or rationally deduced. If one assumes that “reason is entirely incompetent in those areas which elude calculation,” then there can be no explanation other than “irrational forces, instincts, suggestions, or even violence” when people must be persuaded to act in situations where science and logic can provide no objectively clear answers (3). To address this concern, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca propose a rhetorical system that positions argument as the key to restoring rational free will to the human enterprise:

12 In this way, “Notes” evokes comparison with Kenneth Burke’s discussion of the U.S. Constitution in A Grammar of Motives, about which Burke declares, “a Constitution, as a ‘substance’ (hence, as a structure of motivation) propounds certain desires, commands, or wishes” (360). Hunt’s lecture also acts as a kind of “constitution” for oppositional writing: it propounds its own “desires, commands, [and] wishes” regarding the kinds of texts and relationships that are necessary to give voice to previously marginalized writers and communities.
Only the existence of an argumentation that is neither compelling nor arbitrary can give meaning to human freedom, a state in which a reasonable choice can be exercised. If freedom was no more than necessary adherence to a previously given natural order, it would exclude all possibility of choice; and if the exercise of freedom were not based on reasons, every choice would be irrational and would be reduced to an arbitrary decision operating in an intellectual void. It is because of the possibility of argumentation which provides reasons, but not compelling reasons, that it is possible to escape the dilemma. (514)

This “New Rhetoric” aims to explain how we argue effectively with one another and why such argument is necessary in the first place. In the face of ever-encroaching scientism, psychologism, and logicism in the years following World War II, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca sought a theory of argumentative practices that could “provide a foothold for shared understanding and consensus” without relying on formal or empirical verification (Warnick 23).  

In order for any meaningful consensus to emerge, however, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contend that a shared recognition of community among interlocutors must first be established. “[A]ll argumentation,” they write, “aims at gaining the adherence of minds, and, by this very fact, assumes the existence of an intellectual contact” (14). Hunt’s *Local History* has at least one distinct advantage in this regard: as a publication of Roof Books, a small New York press specializing in avant-garde and academic texts, the collection was virtually guaranteed to

---

13 As Warnick’s essay makes clear, the extent to which The New Rhetoric succeeded in this regard has been a matter of intense debate since the book’s translation into English in 1969. For a more extended discussion of these concerns, see Raul De Velasco’s “Rethinking Perelman’s Universal Audience: Political Dimensions of a Controversial Concept,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35.2 (2005): 47-64; and Christopher W. Tindale’s “Ways of Being Reasonable: Perelman and the Philosophers,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43.4 (2010): 337-61.
reach readers eager to enter into this “intellectual contact” with each other.\textsuperscript{14} And since a willingness to read or listen to a rhetor’s appeals indicates “a willingness to eventually accept his point of view” (17), the act of reading Local History represents the first (and perhaps the most essential) step in opening the dialogue necessary for the creation of oppositional communities. The challenge for these poems, then, is to construct upon this initial shared ground a rhetorical “exigence” expressing “an imperfection marked by urgency” (Bitzer 6) that readers can be mobilized to redress. And in this process, the poet-rhetor’s most immediate tool is presence.

Section 29 of The New Rhetoric focuses on the role that choice and selectivity play in the creation of rhetorical discourse. In oral argumentation, factors such as a common language, listener attention span, and even venue acoustics play a role in determining the “data” (115) a rhetor selects for the occasion. The composer of written argumentation, however, has little control over how, when, or where her message will be received by the intended audience; selection and arrangement therefore play a vital role in the rhetorical impact of a text on its readers.\textsuperscript{15} Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca coin the term “presence” to explain the persuasive force information acquires simply by virtue of having been introduced into an argument:

\begin{quote}
By the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied. Indeed, such a choice endows these elements with a presence, which is an essential factor in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Roof Books has been associated with the avant-garde literary scene in and around New York City since 1976. As publisher of both the original L=A=N=G=U=A=T=E journal (1979-81) and The Politics of Poetic Form (1990), the press has demonstrated a long-running commitment to the promotion of innovative and experimental poetry.

\textsuperscript{15} Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca acknowledge a distinction between spoken and written argumentation but stress that “in view of the importance of and the role played by the modern printing press, our analyses will primarily be concerned with printed texts” (6). Additionally, they attempt to clarify the relationship between a rhetor’s audience and the medium of argumentation by asserting that, for both written and spoken discourse, a “text is always conditioned, whether consciously or unconsciously, by those persons [a rhetor] wishes to address” (7).
argumentation and one that is far too much neglected in rationalistic conceptions of reasoning. (116, original emphasis)

The key verb in this excerpt is “selecting”: the specific words, phrases, and images a rhetor makes present will determine what has value within a given rhetorical situation. Robert Tucker refers to presence as “standing-out-ness” (397); if a rhetor wishes to “help the audience ‘see’ the world in a particular way” in order to “move them towards action,” then she must ensure that her important points “stand out” enough to guide her listeners’ attention. In most cases, what counts or stands out for a particular reader will exist within a fairly predictable field. “For each audience,” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca claim, “there is a set of things that are admitted, and all of them are liable to have an effect on its reactions” (115). The rhetor’s role in selecting data is crucial—especially if this data is not typically present in the minds of her intended audience. “Presence is a consequence,” Gross explains, “of the need to select from a mass of material and a variety of persuasive means” (“Presence as Argument” 5). Likening presence to “verbal magic” (117) involving the selection, construction, and interpretation of data (120), Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that an understanding of presence is essential for the production of action-inducing rhetoric.16

In order to get a better sense of how presence operates within a rhetorical document, I want to look at Local History’s table of contents as an early example of the “verbal magic” Hunt employs in her own oppositional writing. While the contents page may seem a curious place to

---

16 Though Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca go on to develop the concept of presence in their own unique way, strong parallels could be drawn here between presence and both Kenneth Burke’s notion of terministic screens and Jacques Derrida’s conception of angustia in written speech. In developing the concept of terministic screens, Burke contends that every vocabulary is simultaneously a reflection, a selection, and a deflection of reality. Because of this, “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (Language as Symbolic Action 45). For Derrida, the term angustia refers to “the necessarily restricted passageway of speech against which all possible meanings push each other, preventing each other’s emergence” (Writing and Difference 9). The force of a written text, then, derives from the “anguish” one experiences in having to choose one word over all others, coupled with an awareness of the loss of any opportunity to return to the moment of choosing and repeat (or revise) the choice that has already been made.
begin a rhetoricized reading of Hunt’s poetry, this is precisely where readers themselves first encounter the text-as-argument—and according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, order in argument “is bound to be important” (491) because “the place allotted to the elements alters their significance” (494). Whether these six words and three numbers have been placed at the beginning of the text/argument due to publisher convention, author choice, or pure chance is immaterial; the sheer fact that they are placed here is enough to endow them with a heightened level of significance for the book’s readers.

Rhetorically, then, the contents page asserts the presence of three key elements—“Local History,” “Correspondence Theory,” and “Surplus”—that will shape and define the discourse that constitutes the rest of the book (see Figure 1.1). In addition, because readers are provided no other context for Hunt’s poetry in the book’s front matter—no images, no review excerpts, no introductory or biographical materials—these three titles represent a preliminary codex through which the poems in each section can be read. The titles’ perceived importance as hermeneutic guideposts augments the presence of each even further. In Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s words, “order ensures that particular premises are given sufficient presence for them to serve as starting points for reflection” (493). The presence

Figure 1.1 Local History Contents Page
these titles receive from their inclusion on the opening pages of *Local History* ensures they will “serve as starting points” for the ensuing intellectual contact between Hunt and her readers.

But what about the individual titles themselves—what kinds of reflection are they liable to engender? That “Local History” is both the title of the book and the title of the first section of poems suggests not only the central importance of both the “local” and the “historical” to Hunt’s collection, but also the seeming necessity of a link between these two terms, the notion that a “both/and” relationship exists here rather than the more typical “either/or” dialectic. And, on a more basic level, the repetition of “Local History” on the book’s first pages further amplifies the importance of this term. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss repetition as one of the “simplest figures for increasing the feeling of presence” in a rhetorical address (174). More conventional (i.e., literary) methods for reading Hunt’s text are likely to treat the appearance of “Local” and “History” on the book’s cover—and then again on pages 1, 3, 5, and 7—as little more than the result of contemporary publishing conventions. Yet when we approach the text as a form of persuasive appeal, as an argument that starts the moment a reader picks up the book and begins to read, it becomes far more difficult to deny the “increased presence” that results from an immediate “avalanche” (144) of these two terms.

The title of the book’s second section, “Correspondence Theory,” suggests the importance of the dialogic relationship between poet/rhetor and reader/audience. If the book’s opening poems focus on the “local” history of individual bodies, these poems enact the process of reaching out to others as “correspondents.” The section’s title seems intentionally ambiguous, as both the epistolary and the philosophical meanings of “Correspondence Theory” appear possible on the contents page.17 This ambiguity extends to the poems themselves: each opens

---

17 In philosophy, the term “correspondence theory” has been used in various ways by a host of philosophical and metaphysical systems, but most generally it refers to the “view contending that truth is an agreement between a
“Dear” or “Dear Dear,” but the indeterminate nature of these “letters” raises a host of questions (Who is “Dear”? Why are there so few proper nouns in the letters? Why does each letter seem more and more detached from its addressee?) that might be better answered via a philosophical theory of truth than a social theory of letter writing. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca consider indeterminacy a vital concern for the establishment of presence, especially since the “clearness of a text is conditioned by the possibilities of interpretation that it offers” (125). And although clarity would normally be considered a desirable end for rhetorical discourse, the fact that there exists a choice at all in interpretation serves to ensure that “the conclusions of an argumentation are not binding” (TNR 132). In much the same way that The New Rhetoric rejects scientism and logicism in favor of a more dynamic, open-ended system of rational assent, Hunt’s polysemous title suggests that she seeks to cede her position as Mikhail Bakhtin’s monologic authority and instead offer her readers a choice of poetic journeys through her text.

The kinds of reflection suggested by the enigmatic title of the book’s third and final section, “Surplus,” are a bit more difficult to pin down. In his analysis of Hunt’s poetic negotiation of personal and cultural identities, Tyrone Williams claims that the poet’s chaotic pronoun use suggests multiple subject positions operating within the text simultaneously (149). Like these pronouns, the title “Surplus” signifies in multiple directions at once. In its most common usage, “surplus” simply refers to excess or remainders, as if the poems in this final section represent the “leftovers” or “misfits” that could not be properly integrated into the

---

18 One of the Language poets’ favorite philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, discusses an early version of the correspondence theory of truth in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921). See especially §2.04, §2.21-§2.222, §4.063, and §4.1-§4.11.

19 Bakhtin’s contention in “Discourse in the Novel” that the “language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed” leads him to declare that the monologic voice of the poet is “authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative” (The Dialogic Imagination 286-87).
previous two sections. Philosophically, the term comes out of a line of inquiry investigating how the differential relationships inherent in large, structured systems (ideologies, economies, governments, languages) necessarily result in “a system of disequilibrium, that is, a system that always produces a surplus” (Kordela 1). And linguistically, the term recalls Hunt’s loose association with the Language poets and their belief that signification cannot be understood as a one-to-one correlation between the sign and the signified. All three of these equally plausible meanings of “Surplus” are present on the book’s contents page, yet without any additional context or guidance, there is no reliable method for choosing between them. Rather than bemoan this lack of specificity, however, Local History celebrates it by integrating the word “Surplus” into the titles of five out of the twelve poems featured in the book’s closing section. By repeatedly making present the unavoidable (over)abundance of meaning, Hunt’s text argues for the poet/rhetor’s inability to control the reading experience right from the very first page—thereby establishing an immediate contrast between the role played by mystery and indeterminacy in Local History and the restrictive worldviews underlying the peaceful world illusion and logical positivism.

In a maneuver not unlike the exordium in classical oratory, the table of contents prepares readers for the rhetorical negotiations to follow by making present its own surplus meaning(s), generated from only six words of text. And while traditional methods of literary close reading would (in all likelihood) overlook these six words in order to get to Hunt’s poems, a rhetoricized

---

20 Bruce Andrews’s “Text and Context” provides at least a general idea of the Language poets’ skeptical attitude toward structuralist notions of signification:

- Surplus of signifier = the floating signifier. Mana. Trace.
- Engulfment, flooding of signifiers without predetermined signification. Instead, the clichés of existentialism—freedom, surplus of signifiers, choice as constitutive & we do it ourselves.
- Politics not concealed any longer. (36)

21 See Book 3, Chapter 14 of Aristotle’s Rhetoric for a more extensive discussion of the exordium and its role in “show[ing] what the aim of the speech is” and “mak[ing] your hearer receptive” (471; 473).
reading encourages us to take note of every facet of the book’s construction in order to explore its full persuasive potential for readers. In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s expanded understanding of argumentation entails the validation of critical inquiry into the many different ways speakers work “to induce or to increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for its assent” (4)—not simply those reducible to logical proof or empirical observation. In argumentation, text and image both act “directly on our sensibility” to “enhance the value of some of the elements of which one has actually been made conscious” (116-17). Rhetorical presence is thus “first a psychological phenomenon” (117), one whose success is dependent upon the communication of a gestalt between rhetors and audiences. Much like the oppositional writing strategies Hunt calls for in “Notes,” the “poetics of presence” she employs throughout *Local History* makes present those values, beliefs, and attitudes that unite members of various marginalized communities. To do so, the text relies on innovative language and forms to unite marginalized communities through the rhetorical negotiation of textual meaning, a hermeneutic process Paul Ricoeur likens to the opening up of new worlds:

What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse but what points toward a possible world. Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his or her situation. It wants to grasp the proposed worlds opened up by the references of the text. . . . [T]hink of the sense of the text as an injunction starting from the text, as a way of looking at things, as an injunction to think in a certain manner. (165)

---

22 In her analysis of the role that identity politics plays in the poetry of Hunt, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Harryette Mullen, Allison Cummings briefly discusses the visual impact of *Local History*’s back cover, noting that Hunt’s author photo is the only indication of her ethnicity contained within the text (17).

Much like Ricoeur’s contention that each text contains an “injunction” to see the world in a new light, the poetics of presence is ultimately a rhetorical strategy that utilizes ambiguity, illegibility, and mystery to move readers toward new understandings of their positions in the world—understandings that can only be grasped through communal, subjective hermeneutic approaches (as opposed to the ideological/objective methods of Hunt’s peaceful world illusion). In other words, innovative works like *Local History* promote community by requiring that readers become “intimate collaborator[s]” (*LH* 25) with one another if they wish to resolve the difficulties of the text and discover the new worlds “disclosed in front of it” (Ricoeur 165).

According to Robert Tucker, however, the role of presence in this process of communal collaboration is not fully explained in *The New Rhetoric*. More specifically, Tucker argues that presence can actually *limit* our ability to interpret the world around us. In his account, presence enables a rhetor to show “the audience ways to ‘see’ ambiguous experience as meaningful by emphasizing certain aspects of that experience” (399). But there is no guarantee that the rhetor will present this meaning or these experiences to us in good faith. Tucker discusses three images famous for their deceptive nature to illustrate his point, the most famous of which is philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit” sketch (see Figure 1.2). Since it is

![Figure 1.2 Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit”](image)

24 Like Tucker, Louise Karon finds it surprising that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not include a more complete explanation of how presence enables communities to generate consensus about “the real” (106). In her reading of *The New Rhetoric*, presence eventually generates a communal consensus strong enough to result in *conviction*, and this sense of conviction “fills the consciousness with a judgment that excludes all others” and eventually becomes “the quintessence of presence” itself (107). Conviction operates as a new kind of certainty, and this presence-driven certainty compels individuals to act according to their beliefs about the real.
nearly impossible to see both the duck and the rabbit simultaneously, images like this one require that a viewer chooses between multiple equally viable interpretations of the visual data before him. Tucker suggests that, much like our experience with the picture of the duck-rabbit, the longer that any one interpretation remains “present” to us, the more difficult it becomes to recognize the other, equally valid interpretation contained within the original image. Presence thus becomes a rhetorical vehicle that can be used to exploit “our inability to consciously render meaning in more than one way at once” (397).²⁵

Tucker’s critique touches on both the epistemological problem of certainty in deciding between arguments and the rhetorical problem of reliability in producing them. For the authors of *The New Rhetoric*, certainty and reliability can only be secured through a community’s commitment to the shared negotiation of experience. Ideally, this negotiation results in “an agreement on the use of terms, no less than an agreement about the conception of reality and the vision of the world” (513). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do acknowledge, however, that this agreement is “not indisputable” and may always be revised via future argumentation. And in Hunt’s poem “City,” it is precisely because of the malleability inherent in our perceptions of and agreements about the nature of reality that we possess any degree of freedom at all. The element of conscious choice in perception and deliberation remains the only guarantee that we are not “already too late to pick out favorites” (*LH* 25), that we will not suffer from “the disease of not knowing or seeing for oneself but having it told to you” (28). Hunt’s exploration of this “disease” results in an extensive list of side effects that impair one’s ability to navigate the city effectively. By examining this poem more closely, we can see how Hunt utilizes the poetics of

---
²⁵ Despite these criticisms, both Karon and Tucker conclude by emphasizing the central importance of presence in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s “New Rhetoric” project. Karon sees presence as a potentially revolutionary way to “conjoin the rhetorical with the epistemological” (110), and Tucker recognizes its value as a heuristic for understanding “the ways in which we try to make sense of life” (411).
presence to make visible the need for languages of opposition strong enough to resist the onset of these pernicious side effects—as well as the greater disease of which they are a part.

“City” is broken into four sections, each of which details a particular stage in the speaker’s adjustment to life in the proverbial “big city.” The first paragraph introduces the disorienting doubling effect that immediately greets the unnamed city’s residents:

One lives inside the replica of a city materializing from the sum of its inhabitants’ aspirations, fluctuating on a dial of pluses and minuses. The replica city commands a momentum separate from the city for which one bought a ticket. The real city swallows the evidence of your arrival, while in the other, where exemplary forgeries abound, it is difficult to read the intention that launched you here, as the words themselves, now realized, dry in their new positions. (25)

The poem’s opening lines suggest violence and instability. Hunt’s language continually places the speaker in an object rather than a subject position, as verbs like “fluctuating,” “commands,” “swallows,” and “launched” strip away any pretensions to agency or autonomy. Rhetorically, the repeated use of second-person pronouns recruits the reader as an ally in the precarious navigation of the foreign cityscape. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, this shared negotiation of the real assumes its rhetorical force from “the quality of the minds which adhere to certain arguments” about it (8). That is to say, we navigate our everyday lives according to a “critical rationalism” that places its faith in only those facts, values, and beliefs that have been agreed upon by the people we trust (514). In Hunt’s strange new city, however, there is no larger consensus to appeal to as speaker and reader make their way through this “zone of detachable parts” (26). At first, the poem suggests that this newfound freedom can be intoxicating. But in the caesura
between the poem’s third and fourth paragraphs, the thrill of this new, double life gives way to the anxiety of not knowing what comes next:

At an early age, one is already too late to pick out favorites. It is a little like choosing hormones or which animal shall produce wool.

Nevertheless, life is thought to consist of making such choices and leaving one’s stamp on nature. In this first march, one is the master of one’s happiness, no matter how it is described. When one ceases to attend to it, one is no longer an intimate collaborator but a footdragger behind an abstract protagonist. (25)

In these chaotic new surroundings, the knowledge that one is always already “too late to pick out favorites” indicates that the burden of choosing has been lifted from both the speaker’s and the reader’s shoulders. This elimination of personal responsibility, however, has been purchased at the high price of renouncing one’s role as an “intimate collaborator” in the “march” through life. Now reduced to a mere “footdragger,” the speaker struggles to conceal an “emotion which desires to know its own location and the location of others’ feelings, no matter how impossible the possession of any degree of certainty” may be (26). This first section of the poem makes present not only the nightmarish city’s propensity to rob inhabitants of personal agency and communal bonds, but also the acute need for each of these two things if city dwellers wish to take control of their path through the world.

In the poem’s second section, however, Hunt’s speaker begins to feel more at home in her new surroundings, buoyed by the discovery of “an antidote brought by my eyes from a previous landscape of surfaces seemingly free from gravity.” A shift in pronoun use to the first-person plural suggests that speaker and reader are now fully united, and their “turn[ing] to study as opposed to practice” leads to reflective observations about everything from housing
accommodations to sex to the relationship between one’s shoes and one’s route to work. In fact, this growing sense of community improves things so much that the city ceases to feel strange and, instead, becomes “a dialect . . . a distinct manner of speaking”:

We were startled as if we had heard a stranger using our mother’s habits of speech, a turn at once familiar and uncanny, that made us fall into an intimacy with our neighbors, joined by a mother tongue, despite it being a lingua franca of a different era. (27)

Familiarity and intimacy come into existence at the precise moment that a common language emerges from the city’s background noise; as we saw in Local History’s opening poem “Preface,” the foundation of community begins with the realization that “we might even live in the same version of the same country speaking the same language at the same time” (9, emphasis added). These lines call to mind Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s remarks on “the social aspect of language” in the closing pages of The New Rhetoric (513). Since all “language is the language of a community,” they assert, then “[a]dherence to particular linguistic usages normally expresses the explicit or implicit adoption of certain definite positions” shared among that community. As her language use and behaviors begin “imitating the habits of the people in our surroundings” (LH 27), the speaker (and, by proxy, the reader) grows accustomed to her new community and prepares herself for the possibility of a genuine future there.

Whereas the second section of “City” emphasizes the positive impact that presence can have in making visible the ties that bind members of the same community, the poem’s third and fourth sections explore the negative consequences of this same process. Here we see the unavoidable phenomenon of losing one’s ability to focus on anything that is not directly present at a given moment. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca state at numerous points throughout The New
**Rhetoric** that as one makes present “certain elements on which the speaker wishes to center attention in order that they may occupy the foreground of the hearer’s consciousness” (142), other elements are necessarily forced into the background and come to seem less relevant to the speaker’s argument. Much like Tucker’s discussion of optical illusions, the sense of community that joins speaker and reader in “City” can persist only for as long as a sense of shared language, behaviors, and customs remains fully present in the poem. Yet as the speaker continues to narrate her journey through the replica city, she gradually loses the ability to focus on those other persons who inhabit this communal space with her—including the reader:

You know, I don’t think anyone teaches you how to glaze the eyes. I think that acting as if you don’t see what’s in front of you is a matter of taking a walk backwards, mentally, from the person who confronts you.

The past tense of read is read.

See. (27)

As the eyes relax their focus, present and past tenses of the verb “to read” become blurred and the ability to refocus—to “See,” as the next line commands—is contingent upon whether or not one chooses to continue walking backwards from “the person who confronts you.” As a path toward total self-absorption, the loss of presence reaches its apotheosis in the closing line of section three: “One becomes accustomed to thinking within one’s own noise” (28). At this point, a state of alienation between self and world is achieved; the mind is free to wander wherever it wants without paying attention to the presence (the “noise”) of other persons. In the poem’s final section, the obstacles to surmounting this break become reified in the disease of total passivity, the inaccessibility of any experience not directly “told to you.” The poem’s language here recalls the violence and instability of section one, suggesting a sense of relapse rather than release:
We found in separate editions an unexpected glut of disasters. It was not possible to read without violence. Certain poisons have the distinction of being palatable in small doses while proving toxic later. The result was wisdom without liberation, risk without lyricism. (28)

Hunt’s notion here of reading with violence implies the pervasiveness of conscious (or at least partially conscious) omission whereby individuals select as recognizable only the features that matter to them. The burgeoning sense of community present in the poem’s second section is, in the end, destroyed by an awareness that “the population . . . was slowly dividing into a them and an us” as the result of “our primitive fears . . . of strangers.” By choosing to focus on difference rather than similarity, neighbors become strangers and the speaker feels compelled to withdraw almost entirely from the “place we made home but which we refused to call by its name” (29). The poem closes not with an image of unification between speaker and reader, but instead with a portrait of a city powerful enough to reduce this nascent community into little more than a loose collective of “acquaintances” (28).

On its surface, “City” appears rather dismissive of the oppositional project. Given the urban environment’s pervasive assault on communal relations, it seems unlikely that a poetics of presence could offer anything more than a temporary bulwark against apathy and isolation. Without some kind of communal consensus to give shape and direction to one’s journey, the “noise” of the city’s “detachable parts” requires the constant reorientation of one’s interpretive focus—and, as the poem demonstrates, this chronic flux makes it nearly impossible for individuals to recognize sameness as much as difference. Yet from a rhetorical perspective, the poem serves as a vital link in Local History’s larger argument because it establishes the core exigence these poems address: namely, the need for an oppositional language capable of uniting
a broad collective of poets and readers in resistance to the status quo. The key to creating just such a community can be found in the poem’s second section, where the city’s interminable noise briefly registers “as a dialect, as a distinct manner of speaking” for both the speaker and reader (27). In order to pose a serious threat to the “disease of not knowing or seeing for oneself but having it told to you” (28), the oppositional community would need more than just a dialect, however; it would need an entire language “made for resistance” (“Notes” 200) and generated from the experiences of those marginalized by existing discursive systems.

In order to achieve this common language, the members of these marginalized communities must first decide to take action together. As “City” makes clear, this is no easy task. The temptation to withdraw from community, to locate acceptable “substitutes for immersion” (LH 28), can lead even the most committed audience members to seek out a private existence diametrically opposed to Hunt’s vision of community. As we have seen, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s notion of rhetorical presence can temporarily overcome this tendency toward isolation by revising the perceived importance of what gets made present within one’s current perceptual schema. For the poetics of presence to generate more permanent opposition, it must be grounded in a set of core principles and values strong enough to provide community members with a shared heuristic for perceiving the world. Within any one poem, such a heuristic would be nearly impossible to develop; in “City,” for instance, the speaker’s shared sense of “intimacy with our neighbors” (LH 27) is so tenuous that it can be sustained for only one of the poem’s four sections. Within a larger series of poems, however, it might be possible to make present a set of values and beliefs powerful and coherent enough that it “strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (TNR 50). When this occurs, we have what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca refer to as “communion,” or “a sense of solidarity or communal
spirit among the members of the audience” addressed by rhetorical discourse (Graff and Winn, “A Case of Convergent Evolution” 109). By examining more closely the relationship between presence and communion in *Local History*, I want to show how Hunt’s poems argue for the construction of this “communal spirit” through a shared language and a shared commitment to the project of opposition.

**Hunt’s Local History as an Act of Communion**

Despite the difficulties inherent in creating and sustaining an oppositional heuristic via the poem-as-argument, the trajectory of Erica Hunt’s career as a poet and non-profit organizer indicates a consistent willingness to engage this problem head-on. Hunt uses her writing as a method for the “writerly production and readerly co-creation” of languages that displace the categorical limitations associated with assigned “roles” in society (Hunt, “The World” 21; 17). She details this process of co-creation between poets and readers in the poem “Science of the Concrete” from her second volume, *Arcade*:

people “make”

the people around them

and they write

to write

the reader

out of retreat,

out of distant austerity

concealing this same

fragile activity
people make
each other
part by part
then whole

into whole. (32, original emphasis)

If poetry represents the archetypal activity of making, as its etymological origin in the Greek term poïesis ("to make") suggests, then the poetics Hunt describes in the above lines writes people into existence as individuals first ("part by part / then whole") before making these "wholes" into one, unified whole. This conception of poetry as a world-making enterprise is not unique to Hunt’s work, but it takes on special prominence in Local History as a result of her continued emphasis on the role that poetry must play in our attempts to “enlist sense to illumination and make room for the blanks” (LH 10). As one of the most overtly rhetorical poems in Hunt’s collection, “Verse” demonstrates the extent to which this search for “illumination” is carried out via Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of communion.

An examination of communion, however, presents significant challenges for readers of The New Rhetoric. Despite its fundamental role in the authors’ theory of argumentation, communion is not discussed in as much detail as are some of the text’s other key terms. As Richard Graff and Wendy Winn point out in their 2006 article, “Presencing ‘Communion’ in Chaim Perelman’s New Rhetoric,” this concept is both “an expansive and somewhat slippery notion” and “a vital, if understated” part of the New Rhetoric project (46). Essentially,

26 These lines from Hunt’s work in Local History and Arcade echo especially some of Gloria Anzaldúa’s comments regarding conocimiento, the enlarged worldview that results from “[b]reaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception” in order to “link inner reflection and vision . . . with social, political action and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges” (542). For more on this term, see “now let us shift . . . the path of conocimiento . . . inner work, public acts” in This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002): 540-78.
communion serves two rhetorical functions: it unites individuals around commonly held values and beliefs, and it promotes these same values through education and/or propaganda (TNR 51-54). Regarding the constitutive role that communion plays in bringing together the members of a discourse community, the opening pages of The New Rhetoric declare that certain preconditions must be met in order for argument to be effective—indeed, to take place at all:

For argumentation to exist, an effective community of minds must be realized at a given moment. There must first of all be agreement, in principle, on the formation of this intellectual community, and, after that, on the fact of debating a specific question together. (14)

In addition to shared space, shared time, and shared purpose, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contend that a shared language is also an “indispensable minimum” for the foundation of an argumentative community (15). Here, some thirty-five pages before the word “communion” first appears in the text, the authors provide a sense of its importance to deliberative discourse: communion develops out of and continually reinforces a group’s awareness that they belong together. And for a theory of rhetoric founded on the principle of adherence—on the idea that argumentation aims to “induce or to increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for its assent” (4)—this sense of belonging together holds immense value as a tool for understanding how a “community of minds” (55) is likely to respond to specific persuasive appeals.

Communion’s second function—which is closely associated with Aristotle’s notion of epideictic oratory—focuses on the values and beliefs that form this core attachment between members of a community. As Jeffrey Walker explains in Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity, the epideictic function of rhetoric was originally “identified with . . . speeches performed at festivals and ceremonial or symposiastic occasions, and it was typically conceived as the discourse of
praise and blame” (7). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca build upon this early conception of the epideictic to contend that communion “strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (50). When members of a community come together to debate important issues, these values can be called upon in rhetorical discourse to move an audience toward desired courses of action:

[T]he values lauded in any particular epideictic speech are presumed to command the assent of the audience addressed by the discourse. As such, the discourse fosters a sense of solidarity or communal spirit among the members of the audience who share these values. (Graff and Winn, “Presencing” 49)

The normative effects of this “solidarity” and “communal spirit” will vary, but Christopher Tindale argues that both play a role in determining what will be considered “reasonable” within a given community. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are fairly clear on the degree to which “hold[ing] an opinion deviating from that held by everyone else is to impair a social communion” (57), and later in The New Rhetoric they remind rhetors seeking to establish communion with an audience of the impact “references to a common culture, tradition or past” can have in argumentative discourse (177).

That this reminder appears in a section detailing the rhetorical uses of literary devices like allusion, quotation, and apostrophe suggests an ideal fit between communion and the poetics of

27 For Walker, however, this tells only part of the story. In his account, epideictic rhetoric has the potential to “challenge or transform conventional beliefs” through the shaping of “the fundamental grounds, the ‘deep’ commitments and presuppositions, that will underlie and ultimately determine decision and debate in particular pragmatic forums” (9). See Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity, pp. 7-26.

28 Graff and Winn briefly take issue with the degree to which “Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s characterization of the classical account of epideictic is probably misleading” because it unnecessarily restricts Aristotle’s insights to “a matter of judging the speaker’s skill” (“Presencing” 48), but they quickly shift from blame to praise as they note that this initial mischaracterization leads, in the end, to a “rich and provocative” account of epideictic rhetoric throughout The New Rhetoric.

29 In Tindale’s account, it is imperative that a rhetor holds an accurate view of an audience’s sense of the reasonable, because these communal values provide “the shared content for the basic premises in which we ground our arguments” (356).
presence in Hunt’s *Local History*. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca remark on the following page, “Communion is also increased by all those figures whereby a speaker endeavors to get his audience *to participate actively in his exposition*, by taking it into his confidence, inviting its help, or *identifying himself with it*” (178, emphasis added). The active participation referenced in the first part of this quote is precisely the kind of response Hunt seeks from her readers; “One of the definitions of being a person,” she writes in the poem “In the Corner of the Eye,” “is that another person is talking to you” (*LH* 12). Thus, the identification Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca envision calls to mind the poem’s closing lines:

> The person is particular, unlike that diffuse group of people you don’t spend time with who are all pronouns. This person is the source of certain facts but not the facts that she ever speaks out loud. This person you become accustomed to: her buckle, our buckle, her pins, our pins, her ankles, our ankles, her limp, our limp.

> Your person or her person, it doesn’t matter in the dwindling middle ground. (12)

The “dwindling middle ground” here is itself a form of communion, a sense that the two persons referenced by the poem’s speaker have come to represent a distinct community that shares items in common and may soon come to share values and beliefs as well. Yet as the pronoun “our” becomes increasingly prominent, the direction of Hunt’s address appears to shift from within the poem to without, indicating that poet and reader are also growing closer together. Through the poet’s persuasive appeal and the reader’s active participation in the production of meaning, “In

---

the Corner of the Eye” hints at the possibility that these two persons will also come to view one another as members of the same community.

Of all the poems in *Local History*, “Verse” provides the most comprehensive picture of how the constitutive and the epideictic roles of communion shape the poem-as-argument. As the first non-prose poem in the collection, “Verse” breaks quite radically with the formal expectations Hunt establishes during the first two-thirds of the text. The poem’s first two stanzas suggest this break is not merely formal but also thematic and rhetorical:

It’s all in profile
what the shadows cast
on the floor. Can you see?

When pushed to the wall
paper our habits seem trivial,
a record of the body’s lost accidents. (61)

The allusion here to Plato’s allegory of the cave simultaneously establishes a physical location for the poem’s action and an ideological framework within which the “shadows cast / on the floor” take on a heightened metaphysical importance. More importantly, the question “Can you see?” initiates an overtly dialogic relationship between speaker and audience. Taken together, these two features indicate a transition from the book’s previous consideration of the local/domestic/historical to a new interest in the global/dialectic/philosophical. This shift is mirrored in the poem’s second stanza, as the “record of the body’s lost accidents” (i.e., the most “local” of histories) appears nothing more than “trivial” when examined on the cave’s wall (i.e., the place of philosophical reflection). The poem’s initial lines, then, establish a sense of communion between speaker and audience, between poet and reader, based upon the presence of
a shared set of behaviors (“our habits”) and a similar concern with blindness (“Can you see?”). Although the nature and cause of this blindness is not specified beyond anything more than a reference to “shadows cast / on the floor,” it might profitably be read as a counterpart to Hunt’s peaceful world illusion in “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics.” Both serve to keep individuals in the dark regarding the true facts of the world’s (or the cave’s) present condition, and both effectively obscure or conceal the source of their all-encompassing power. Both, that is, operate according to Hunt’s “principle of cooptation,” which holds that “dominant culture will transfer its own partiality onto the opposition it tries to suppress” (“Notes” 202). When “pushed to the wall” (LH 61), the prevailing darkness renders every voice—oppositional and mainstream alike—nothing more than “trivial.”

Opening with the lines “We found that we could not be strangers / anymore,” the poem’s third stanza details the speaker’s initial attempt to take a stand against the cave’s imposition of blindness. As the longest section of “Verse,” spanning thirteen of the poem’s thirty lines, this stanza argues for the necessity of communion between the speaker and her audience if they are to pose any real threat to the blindness that confronts them. Much like the deceiving images discussed in Tucker’s essay on presence, the darkness of the cave can be perceived as either a threat or an opportunity. Hunt’s speaker chooses the latter over the former, rallying her audience around a call to action based in the appeal of the unknown:

Instead we carried ourselves
unrehearsed into the arms of the unexpected
continuity, using our sense to head
where we are going.
The word “continuity” here seems especially important, given not only its enjambed placement but also the extent to which it resonates with both Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s term “communion” and with Hunt’s own use of “contiguity” in her “Notes” essay. Much like the shock of hearing “a stranger using our mother’s habits of speech” that Hunt describes in the pivotal second section of “City” (27), the sense of intimacy and community in “Verse” is both “unrehearsed” and “unexpected” (61). And if it is to mean anything in the group’s crusade against blindness, it must be both mysterious and unpredictable. This is the only way to ensure that these newfound communal relations will not be immediately co-opted by a dominant culture that maintains control by “reducing social and political problems into pathologies” (“Notes” 202). The search for Hunt’s “unexpected / continuity” in “Verse” is essentially hermeneutic in nature, as the community joins together in the reading of an unnamed text, “work[ing] from the beginning to the back / end tracing where the author left her / prints on the text” (LH 61). Yet the goal of this search seems not to consist in explaining or understanding the text itself, but in tracing the presence of a “surplus // divinity,” as if this surplus—this potentiality that inheres within the text but which can never be exhausted by readings of the text—holds the key for oppositional writing as a mode of political resistance.

Rhetorically, the stanza break that occurs between “surplus” and “divinity” suggests another oppositional potential for this silence. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the true test of communion occurs at precisely the moment when a group’s shared set of values seems most at risk:

The intensity of adherence, aiming at effective action, cannot be measured by the degree of probability attributed to the accepted argument, but rather by the
obstacles overcome by the action and the sacrifices and choices it leads to and which can be justified by the adherence. (49)

Hunt’s speaker and her readerly co-creators in “Verse” find themselves beset by a host of “obstacles” that require great “sacrifices” and difficult “choices” to overcome, yet the text indicates no wavering in their adherence to a shared set of values. And since readers can only negotiate the gaps between words, lines, and stanzas if they share a sense of communion with the speaker, these silences also reinforce the group solidarity that Local History has been building between the poet and her readers—as well as among the readers themselves—over the course of the previous sixty pages. As Hunt writes just a few pages earlier, “The perfect proof of desire is risk” (LH 53). The risks that the cave dwellers in “Verse” are willing to take indicate a level of desire and commitment commensurate with the challenge of engaging in the oppositional project together. The poem’s fourth stanza affirms the group’s leap of faith:

divinity. And when the right word
appears out of nowhere
it leads back here.

What word were we looking for? (61)

That the “right word” appears so suddenly and “out of nowhere” suggests parallels with the “verbal magic” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca associate with rhetorical presence (TNR 117). In order to make this magic meaningful, the poem must do more than simply amaze; it must show us what we were “looking for” by restoring the community’s ability to see for itself once more.

The poem’s final stanza begins by revealing “the right word,” the word Hunt’s speaker and her audience have taken numerous risks to uncover: the primal, elemental word “Fire” (61). Fire brings both light and warmth, and it provides the glazed-over eyes from “City” something to
focus on, something to direct their attention. Fire also provides a level of freedom entirely absent in the previous shadow vocabulary:

In this light we appear
to be doing what we want, waving
the baton with the mind. If you want
to move your feet find something
there over the bridge of your
nose to attract you. Choose your
own words to hear yourself speak. (61)\(^3\)

The new vocabulary consisting of “your / own words” finally makes visible the “decay in language” that had threatened previous attempts at community formation because it left too many voices unrecognizable (\(LH\) 10). The language of fire is the language of opposition; it would finally allow the speaker in “Preface” to “enlist sense to illumination and make room for the blanks.” After rejecting the fixed position of objectivity imposed by a dominant discursive system that perceives racial and gender identities as thoroughly scrutable, Hunt implores the members of her oppositional community to claim full subjectivity by proclaiming the language of fire “as if each inflection belonged to you instead of containing you, or treating you as if you were commotion in the path of progress” (15). As a direct call to action, “Verse” seeks to impact the world beyond the poem by instantiating a community of fire-breathing poet-readers who recognize one another due to their common, shared language. In so doing, Hunt articulates a

\(^3\) In the poem “the voice of no” from Hunt’s second collection of poems, \(Arcade\), the first lines of the final stanza from “Verse” (“In this light we appear / to be doing what we want”) appear once again, although this time without the light and warmth of any “fire” to guide them:

No need to be contrary, I put on a face.
No use for muscle, the workers stand on line for hours.
No need to read, 24 hours of the shopping channel.
No fire, we have the illusion of doing what we want. (28)
network of marginalized voices that can resist the “grand illusion” of the postwar era through a poetics of presence. This poetics combats appropriation and cooptation by making visible only the right word at only the right moment while simultaneously concealing those communal values and beliefs that unite oppositional writing. These “right words” combine to form “the new languages that must be made for resistance” (“Notes” 200).

**Peroratio: Poetry as a Form of Rhetorical Intervention**

In Section 10 of *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca announce the ultimate goal for rhetorical discourse:

> An efficacious argument is one which succeeds in increasing this intensity of adherence among those who hear it in such a way as to set in motion the intended action (a positive action or an abstention from action) or at least in creating in the hearers a willingness to act which will appear at the right moment. (45)

According to these guidelines, acts we have traditionally considered rhetorically—campaign speeches, legal deliberations, political manifestos—retain their importance as documents worthy of careful study, and *The New Rhetoric* affords us ample resources for understanding how and why these arguments impact the values, beliefs, and actions of their audiences. When faced with a text like Erica Hunt’s *Local History*, however, a text that fails to conform to our expectations for “rhetoric” at the same time that it appears to be doing something other than what we might expect “poetry” to do, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concepts of presence and communion enable us to see how Hunt’s work also exhibits many of the characteristics of “efficacious argument.” Accordingly, we can read the closing lines of “Verse” (“Choose your / own words to hear yourself speak”) as an actual command or entreaty as opposed to a merely poetic flourish.
As Hunt herself declares in “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” the purpose of oppositional writing is to move “beyond the speculation of skepticism to a critically active stance against forms of domination” (198). The poems in Local History embody this critically active stance through the poetics of presence, directing readers’ attention to a key rhetorical exigence—the need for a new oppositional language—and the possibility of modifying this exigence via the passionate vocabulary of fire.

In this regard, Local History represents a particular kind of rhetorical intervention in contemporary culture. As poet/rhetor, Hunt establishes a sense of communion regarding the project of opposition—a project carried out in a language familiar enough to resemble the “dialect” of a “mother’s habits of speech” (LH 27), yet mysterious enough so that “anything might happen” (11). For it is this volatility, this sheer unpredictability, that ultimately protects the language of opposition from appropriation by the dominant discursive system. “The way out of the library isn’t always / clear,” Hunt writes in one of Local History’s final poems, “Woman, with Wings” (71). But once the “cars ahead of us have disappeared,”

Finally the way is clear, we have come to a way out;
past the flocked walls, the manipulated
seams, past the unzipped feeling, the tacit
violence between its teeth,
the trick with the mirrors and speed. (71-72)

These lines might represent the best way of thinking about the relationship between presence, communion, and Hunt’s oppositional poetics. The poem exists as a “trick with the mirrors and speed” that reflects and refracts lived experience in ways irreducible to the kinds of “violence” that inhere within a culture’s dominant linguistic practices. Hunt has said of her own work that
she enjoys poetry “that disturbs the surface,” poetry that questions the perceived naturalness of the existing order by encouraging readers “to make connections between things that seem like they’re very distant” (“Close Listening”). By making these connections present to her readers, Hunt embraces a rhetorical poetics that “preserves broken links, ties to origins and derivations” (*Piece Logic* 10). If, as Perelman argues in *The Realm of Rhetoric*, a rhetor is “to be praised when he draws attention, through the talent of his presentation, to events which, without his intervention, would be neglected but now occupy our attention” (36), then *Local History* deserves substantial praise for the work it performs in making present the need for new ways of resisting the silencing of marginalized voices.

Still, some may feel that oppositional poetry must go beyond the strategies of presence and communion to develop more radical arguments against the dominant forms of discourse. In turning now to the work of a poet even more closely identified with Language poetry than is Hunt—Lyn Hejinian—I contend that we can begin to address this concern by building upon Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s initial expansion of rhetoric’s purview to include the symbolic content of all forms of aesthetic production. And for this purpose, our best guide is philosopher Susanne Langer, whose theory of non-discursive symbolization enables us to understand how writers like Hunt and Hejinian utilize the “trick with the mirrors and speed” to model new ways of seeing the world in their poems.
CHAPTER TWO

“I CAN FEEL THE IDEA”: LYN HEJINIAN’S MY LIFE AND THE POETICS OF NON-DISCURSIVE FORM

But am I, in my sentences (and my use of lines to expand their capacity and accuracy), in pursuit of change? Do I want to improve the world?

Of course. If so, it will have to be in sentences, not by them. The sentence is a medium of arrivals and departures, a medium of inquiry, discovery, and acknowledgement.

Lyn Hejinian, “Comments for Manuel Brito”
The Language of Inquiry (196)

The material of poetry is discursive, but the product—the artistic phenomenon—is not; its significance is purely implicit in the poem as a totality, as a form compounded of sound and suggestion, statement and reticence, and no translation can reincarnate that.

Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (261-62)

Exordium: Daring to Write Poetry After Auschwitz

In her 1995 lecture “Barbarism,” Lyn Hejinian offers an account of early Language writing that frames such work as a direct response to the civil rights, women’s liberation, and anti-war movements in America during the 1960s and 1970s.1 Allowing that such texts rarely engaged in overtly political rhetoric, she instead locates the mechanism for social intervention in the risks that poets like herself were willing to take with syntax, prosody, diction, and structure.

If, Hejinian proposes, one of the fundamental tenets of Language writing is that “the structures of language are social structures in which meanings and intentions are already in place,” then any question that a poem can raise about language is, mutatis mutandis, also a question about society itself (The Language of Inquiry 323). By rejecting contemporary culture’s “complete failure to examine political language and indeed any language at all,” Hejinian and others set out to create

---

1 Hejinian’s lecture, delivered at the Curtin Institute on Language Writing at the Curtin Institute of Technology, was part of her month-long visit to Australia and New Zealand in the spring of 1995 (LOI 318-19).
works that “explo[ed] new ways of thinking by putting language (and hence perception) together in new ways” (*LOI* 324). The Language poem, that is, serves as an instrument of social transformation by quite literally re-forming the linguistic practices that make it possible for individuals to interact with one another on a daily basis.

But how, a skeptical reader might ask, does a single poem—or even an entire subgenre of poems—facilitate the kind of paradigm shift that Hejinian suggests is possible in “Barbarism”? The lecture clearly outlines a straightforward path of influence: the poem uses language in new ways, these new ways change our everyday language practices, and these new practices make possible new ways of experiencing the world. What it fails to provide, however, is a more pragmatic account of how specific poetic texts exert this level of influence. What is it, precisely, about a poet’s flouting of grammar and syntax that prompts a more ethical relationship between individuals? What power does disjunction or parataxis wield over the dehumanizing systems and institutions of (post)modern society? And, most importantly, how does the Language writing community transcend its very small readership to make an appreciable difference in everyday life? As seriously as one might wish to take Hejinian’s claim that “it was through poetry that a series of reinventions of language could be initiated” (324), the text of “Barbarism” offers little evidence that these reinventions have in fact altered the post-Language poetry world.

And yet: to search Hejinian’s essay for systematic explanations of “claims” and “evidence” is to judge Language poetry according to the very same standards of traditional rationality that such work seeks to question—and ultimately, to reject. As her title suggests, Hejinian equates the radical rethinking of language and perception with a kind of aesthetic “barbarism,” a word simultaneously recalling its Greek etymology (*barbaros*, or “foreigner”) and Theodor Adorno’s famous pronouncement that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz
barbaric” (Adorno 34). Echoing Adorno, Hejinian calls for new “barbaric” poetries that will no longer “speak the same language as Auschwitz” (LOI 326, original emphasis). For the Language poem, barbarity signals the eruption of a new language that recasts the old in a radically different light. Such poetry would constitute a fluid and dynamic borderland between the familiar and the foreign, between the old language and the new. No longer bound to any one set of epistemological and ontological commitments, the barbaric poem invites readers to consider the world differently by countering the dominant logos of a single speaker/tradition/ideology with the polyvalent pathos of multiple voices, each one refusing “to deny or suppress the otherness of others” (LOI 332).

In order to better understand the potentially transformative impact of “barbaric” poetry, this chapter proposes a rhetorical model for reading Hejinian’s magnum opus, My Life, that demonstrates how the text can function as an instrument of political engagement. As the poet herself suggests, the socially conscious text is not a collection of radical propositions or propagandist statements; instead, the relationship between poetry and social change exists “in sentences, not by them” (LOI 196, original emphasis). Poets intervene in cultural practices and ideological debates by creating sentences that reject prevailing assumptions about the “correct way” to write, or to speak, or to think. And from a rhetorical perspective, our best guide in these matters is someone Hejinian herself names in one of My Life’s final poems: philosopher and rhetorician Susanne Langer. Her theory of non-discursive symbolization unites both artist and audience in a model of aesthetic experience founded upon shared affective states. Drawing upon Langer’s work, I argue that the rhetorical process in My Life is ultimately reader-oriented: it seeks to modify social relations within the larger public sphere by reshaping the micro-relations that exist between words and their meanings, between poets and their readers. In Juliana Spahr’s
assessment, *My Life* is an inherently political text because it “cultivates readerly agency by opening an anarchic space for reader response” (148). The poet inscribes multiple possibilities in her sentences and paragraphs, and this multiplicity, in turn, models for readers more complex ways of imagining the world around them. By acknowledging the role of readerly agency in aesthetic experience, Langer’s work helps illustrate not only the constructed nature of Hejinian’s poems, but also their intimate connection to the “[p]ermanent constructedness” of everyday life (*My Life* 94).

As part of that borderland between the old language and the new, *My Life* challenges readers to embrace the barbarous poem’s difficulty and complexity as evidence of its “sincerity” (*LOI* 331).² The sincere poem represents multiple perspectives without appropriating them; it acknowledges the presence of other voices without presuming to speak for them. And while “Barbarism” remains vague on the specific poetic strategies that would make sincerity possible, both Hejinian and Langer see in poetic expression a means for providing individuals with new ways of understanding the world. Their work also suggests that without some way to communicate these new perceptions to a wider audience, the transformative potential of Language writing cannot be fully realized. Traditional systems of discursive communication seem inadequate to this task, loaded as they are with historical, cultural, and ideological baggage. Langer’s conception of non-discursive symbolization, however, raises the possibility that one might be able to explore poetic barbarism through “the inexpressible realm of feeling” that exists outside the narrow field of discursive thought (*Philosophy in a New Key* 86). The realm of the non-discursive, that is, makes a “sincere” poetics possible by opening the poem to a vast array of responses, interpretations, and reading experiences. Langer’s theory of non-discursive experience

---

² Hejinian borrows the term “sincerity” from George Oppen and the Objectivists, defining it as “the ethical principle by which the poet tests words against the actuality of the world, the articulation of our status as presences in common (and only in common) with other presences in the world” (*LOI* 331).
suggests that illegibility can be strategically deployed in order to shield the text (and its readers) from the authoritative pronouncements of discursive reason and logic.

In this way, Hejinian’s *My Life* challenges common understandings of poetic language by engaging in a rigorous exploration of non-discursive symbolization. For Langer, the value of the non-discursive lies in its ability to “articulate knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experiences that are not *formally* amenable to discursive projection” (*Feeling and Form* 240-41, original emphasis). *My Life* attempts to grant both the poet and her readers access to this knowledge by enacting a new, non-discursive method for seeing the world—something akin to what Langer would call aesthetic “responsiveness” or “intuition” (*FF* 396; 397). By disrupting traditional logics of discursivity, Hejinian argues that we must reimagine the sentences and the paragraphs we use to talk about the world if we ever hope to reinvent the way we live within it. And as the present chapter will show, this reimagining and reinventing ultimately reveal *My Life* as a rhetorical project that attempts to replace a restrictive devotion to *logos* with a more open-ended model of *pathos*. Through the creation of Langer’s “symbol of *life completely lived*,” Hejinian’s text invites multiplicity, indeterminacy, and mystery as a defense against “be[ing] impoverished by the assignment of any one import” (*FF* 226, original emphasis). *My Life* thus demonstrates how a barbaric “language of inquiry”—a potentially transformative “medium for experiencing experience” (*LOI* 3)—can be shared with wider and wider audiences through the poetics of non-discursive form.

“A word is only introduced under very tight restrictions.”

“A moment yellow,” *My Life* begins, “just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger,
thinner than when he had left, was purple—though moments are no longer so colored” (7). This opening sentence is, in many ways, emblematic of Hejinian’s text as a whole.³ The juxtaposition of familiar images alongside vague sentiments. The paratactic interruption of clauses and phrases. The failure to resolve ambiguity before reaching a terminal punctuation mark. Sentences like this manage to be both declarations and hesitations at the same time, offering readers just enough information to realize how little has been offered. And if one looks to subsequent sentences in hopes of locating additional context, the result is bound to disappoint:

Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of prenecessity. The better things were gathered in a pen. The windows were narrowed by white gauze curtains which were never loosened. Here, I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes. (7)

In the very first lines of My Life, Hejinian presents readers with a choice regarding the hermeneutic strategies they will use to navigate these poems. Is meaning located at the level of the individual word or sentence? At the higher level of the paragraph or poem? Or is it perhaps a function of the work as a whole, requiring one to read all 45 poems in order to make sense of the text? To answer these questions, readers must choose their own path through this material—and this choice in many ways determines how “barbaric” a role Hejinian’s My Life can play in altering the post-Holocaust world.

Originally published in 1980, My Life blurs traditional distinctions between poetry and prose at the same time that it questions the separateness of biography and memoir. The text’s liminal presence at the boundary between multiple genres only adds another layer of difficulty to

³ Although multiple editions of My Life have been released since the book was first published in 1980, the current chapter focuses on the second edition (1987) because it includes the first appearance of Susanne Langer’s name in the text on page 112.
the challenge of reading these poems for the first time. The initial edition, written when Hejinian was 37 years old, includes 37 untitled prose poems, each of which consists of 37 sentences; the book’s second edition, written eight years later, includes 45 untitled poems that are each 45 sentences in length. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, each section appears to correspond to a year in the poet’s life—though the text’s composition as “a collage made up of numerous interpolations” means that a strict one-to-one correlation between any given section and a specific year is unlikely (162). In addition to these numeric principles, each poem is preceded by a short clause or phrase that appears repeatedly (though often in slightly altered form) throughout the text. The first lines from My Life’s opening poem illustrates the dynamic between these words and the poems themselves:

A pause, a rose, something on paper

A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple—though moments are no longer so colored.

Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity. The better things were gathered in a pen. (7)

Not quite titles yet not exactly epigraphs, these phrases—ranging from “A pause, a rose, / something on paper” to “‘Altruism / in poetry’” (ML 113)—play a choral role in My Life, drawing the reader’s attention to the Derridean “repetition with a difference” that structures the text. “The recurrence of these leitmotifs,” Perloff contends, “has an oddly reassuring effect” for

4 In “Comments for Manuel Brito,” Hejinian uses “poem” and “paragraph” interchangeably to refer to each of My Life’s 45 sections (LOI 186). As a way of suggesting both of these words simultaneously, then, I am choosing to refer to each section as a “prose poem.”

5 Although Jacques Derrida’s notion of repetition with a difference appears at various places throughout his body of work, one of the most succinct statements occurs early in the essay “Ellipsis”: “The return, at this point, does not retake possession of something. It does not reappropriate the origin. The latter is no longer in itself” (295). And
both the poet and reader (167). They function as signposts that provide a level of familiarity to the ebbs and flows of Hejinian’s sentences. For Paul Naylor, these phrases also call “attention to the process of the text’s composition” in order to foreground Hejinian’s epistemological and ontological concerns regarding the “signifying process” that “composes the ‘I’” (121). The constructed Self, like the constructed poem, contains numerous fissures that individuals attempt to paper over by repeating reassuring statements about selfhood and identity. Thus, by making the text’s construction such an integral element of the reader’s experience, My Life suggests the need for a more open dialogue regarding how individual subjects compose both their selves and their experiences of the world.6

Hejinian has referred to these methods as “composition by juxtaposition,” a process that involves “present[ing] observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting also to represent the matrix of their proximities” (LOI 155). In the essay “Strangeness,” Hejinian contrasts her metonymic poetics with the more metaphoric style of other writers: “Metonymy moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection. Compared to metaphor, which depends on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship” (LOI 148).7 For Hejinian, the text’s constant shifting from idea to

6 Nicky Marsh’s discussion of My Life pursues this line of argument even further, claiming that the overarching goal of Hejinian’s text “is to discover the ‘agency’ that exists in the articulation of everyday existence: to exploit the point at which the subject’s own self-evident knowledge of experientiality and the subject’s discursive constructedness collide” (“Infidelity to an Impossible Task” 73). Marsh, however, does not attempt to connect this thesis to the repeated phrases that begin each of My Life’s poems.

7 Although she does not mention them by name, Hejinian here seems to have in mind conceptions of metaphor similar to those of I.A. Richards and Ernst Cassirer. For Richards, metaphor hinges upon the “borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts” (94, original emphasis), while in Cassirer’s work metaphor results from a synthesis of two terms “which actually contain[s] the power, significance and efficacy of the whole” (92). These definitions are unsuitable for Hejinian’s purpose in “Strangeness,” however, because both
idea, from sentence to sentence, is the result of a conscious attempt to capitalize on the metonym’s ability to conserve the particular qualities of discrete entities. This “poetics of scrutiny” refrains from totalizing pronouncements that elide the differences between individual persons, ideas, or objects (159). *My Life* reads more like a scrapbook than an autobiography: each poem contains a series of seemingly unrelated snapshots from Hejinian’s life, and these “images” have been placed next to one another without an attempt to synthesize their relationship into a simplified narrative for the reader.

Simultaneously dazzling and disorienting, “composition by juxtaposition” has helped make *My Life* one of the most widely cited examples of Language poetry. Craig Dworkin’s extended analysis of the text compares Hejinian’s method to the “patchwork” process of quilt making; the poet “transforms fragments of worn-out, quotidian, common language into an extraordinary, unique, and individual text” (62). In Megan Simpson’s account, the political work that *My Life* performs is generated by the “subtle disorienting effect [that] results from disjunction *between* rather than *within*” the poet’s sentences (17-18, emphasis added). This lack of cohesion continually threatens to tear apart the poem-as-quilt; for Simpson, this is where the “epistemological potential of uncertainty” contributes to Hejinian’s feminist project of challenging the phallogocentrism of contemporary discourse (18). More recently, Ming-Qian Ma has also focused on the jarring transitions between *My Life*’s sentences, arguing that these “gaps” indicate memories and experiences which have not been accounted for in Hejinian’s narrative.8 As “a text of gaps,” Ma contends, the silences inscribed in these poems demand a level of “radical reflection” regarding readers’ typically uncritical relationship with language, time, and

---

8 Ma’s reading of *My Life*’s gaps is inspired by a line from poem 10 that reads, “The gap indicated that objects or events had been forgotten, that a place was being held for them, should they chance to reappear” (*ML* 31).
memory (169). For all three of these commenters (as well as for Perloff and Naylor), the “very tight restrictions” under which My Life has been composed represent the most salient feature of Hejinian’s groundbreaking text.

With the possible exception of Simpson’s feminist reading of Hejinian’s work, this critical conversation surrounding My Life has focused almost exclusively on the text qua text rather than on the work’s rhetorical potential as an instrument to, in Hejinian’s own words, “improve the world” (LOI 196). In many ways, this oversight is understandable. As I discussed in my Introduction, New Criticism’s influence on literary studies left little room for analyses of poetry that consider the text as anything other than an aesthetic work. Yet in this particular case, the reluctance to acknowledge My Life’s social implications is quite surprising, given that Hejinian provides a key to unlocking this dimension of the text when she mentions the work of Susanne Langer. According to the unnamed speaker of the collection’s penultimate poem:

One summer I worked as a baby-sitter and lived with a family and its babies at the beach . . . and I remember hearing about Susanne Langer, whose grandchildren I was taking care of, who, years before, day after day, when working to complete her distinction between discursive and non-discursive symbols, oblivious to the occasional rain or cold, would come to the beach and sit, knocking two rocks together between her hands, staring out at the waves, and the image attracted me, symptom of obsession, but I could see it must have been hard for her children.

(ML 111-12)⁹

At 138 words, this is one of the longest sentences in My Life—and also one of its clearest, most lucid descriptions of a specific moment or memory from the poet’s lifetime. Yet in spite of its

⁹ Although the “I” referenced throughout My Life is never explicitly identified, the poet’s previous remarks on this work, as well as the history of scholarship related to it, strongly suggest that the text is autobiographical. In order to avoid unnecessary confusion, I consider the two figures coincident throughout this chapter.
unique characteristics, this sentence has been largely ignored in commentaries on the poet’s work. Hejinian establishes her own personal connection to Langer at the same time that she situates this connection within the broader context of Langer’s work with non-discursive symbolization. The poet prompts audiences to read *My Life* through the lens of Langer’s aesthetic theory, but such considerations have yet to take place.

The most likely causes for this oversight include the aforementioned bias against rhetoric in poetry criticism and the relative obscurity of Langer’s work. Despite a diverse corpus that ranges from aesthetic theory and language philosophy to musical form and cognitive psychology, Langer remains a largely marginalized figure in contemporary accounts of twentieth-century American philosophy and modern rhetorical theory. Arabella Lyon finds this marginalization especially ironic given the commercial success of Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), which ranks among the highest-selling volumes published by Harvard University Press (267). The critical response to her work among aestheticians and philosophers has been generally positive as well. Arthur Berndtson’s early review of Langer’s aesthetic theory celebrates its “genuinely philosophical” investigation of form and technique (489), and Arthur C. Danto’s later analysis of Langer’s philosophy of mind concludes by asserting that she has made “as immense and transformative contribution to philosophy as I can imagine” (647). Yet until feminist recovery projects essentially rediscovered Langer in the 1990s, she was rarely considered an important voice in critical conversations regarding aesthetics, philosophy, or rhetoric.11

---

10 For a rare, brief mention of the link between Hejinian and Langer, see the online transcript of Hejinian’s 2005 visit to the Kelly Writers House (“I am suddenly aware that phrases happen,” *Jacket2.org*, Posted 9 Mar. 2012).

11 Despite this recovery work, extended analyses of Langer’s philosophical and rhetorical considerations are still quite limited. Robert Innis’s *Susanne Langer In Focus: The Symbolic Mind* (Indiana UP, 2009) remains the only book-length study of her work, and references to Langer in recent articles and essays have tended to focus exclusively on her discussions of music and cognitive psychology (see, for example, Felicia E. Kruse’s “Emotion in Musical Meaning: A Peircean Solution to Langer’s Dualism,” *The Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 41.4 (2005): 762-78; and Donald Dryden’s “The Philosopher as Prophet and Visionary: Susanne Langer’s Essay on
Lyon suggests that Langer’s early texts may have been overlooked in part because of their similarities to the writings of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (268). As Cassirer’s student and translator, Langer developed a conception of discursive and non-discursive symbolization that bears a clear resemblance to his work on rational, scientific language and mythical, religious thought. Yet as Langer’s thinking evolved, she abandoned Cassirer’s suggestion of a hierarchical relationship between reason and prelogical thought that marks the former as the “final culmination” of the latter.12 As she initially claims in Philosophy in a New Key and then states more emphatically in Feeling and Form (1953), the discursive and the non-discursive realms are equally valid, equally important ways of perceiving, interpreting, and sharing human experience. Langer views the ability to create and utilize symbols in human communication as the defining characteristic that “makes [man and woman] lord of the earth” (PNK 26). The task she undertakes—or, as she states in Philosophy, the “whole world of new questions” that she asks (13)—involves examining the role that language and art can play in rectifying philosophy’s longstanding bias against the prelogical, non-discursive mode of symbolic thought.

In Langer’s system, neither side of the discursive/non-discursive divide should be considered “higher” or more “refined” than the other; the two are simply arranged and organized according to different logics. And the quantitative “logic” that separates the discursive from the non-discursive is grammar. Langer explains that grammatical structure plays a pivotal role in

---

12 In Language and Myth, Cassirer does not specifically state that prelogical thought is subordinate to reason and fact, but the text strongly implies that a progressive evolution of thought occurs between these two modes. “For all the concepts of theoretical knowledge,” Cassirer asserts, “constitute merely the upper stratum of logic which is founded upon a lower stratum, that of the logic of language” (28). And then again, near the end of the book, “This emergence from the vague fullness of experience into a world of clear, verbally determinate forms, is represented in the mythic mode, in the imagist fashion peculiar to it, as the opposition between chaos and creation” (81). For more on the relevant differences between Cassirer’s work and Langer’s, see Lyon, pp. 277-78.
symbolic communication because it enables us to synthesize vast amounts of information and then communicate this synthesis via a (relatively) stable and reliable syntactic unit (PNK 67). Borrowing a term from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Langer refers to language’s synthesizing tendency as “projection,” as the “transformation that facts undergo when . . . the relations in [sentences] are turned into something like objects” (80, original emphasis). In much the same way that a symbol “names” a relationship between multiple objects or persons, the sentence “projects” a relationship between multiple symbols—something akin to summary or paraphrase—that can itself be treated as an object. And since a “sentence is a symbol for a state of affairs, and pictures its character” (73), symbolic language builds itself up from signs to symbols, from symbols to sentence-symbols, and so on, until even the most complex phenomena can be projected for further discussion and analysis. The ever-expanding reach of discursive symbolization enables us to communicate with one another about dynamic experiences like “[c]ausal connections, activities, time, and change” in ways that static pictures or images simply cannot replicate (73). In nearly every social context, Langer contends, human interaction requires the “powerful, supple, and adaptable symbolism of language” if it is to result in anything more than vague gestures in the direction of specific objects or persons.

For all its suppleness, however, the grammatical “symbolism of language” also restricts the sequential development of linguistic expression—and this restriction gives rise to Langer’s division between discursive and non-discursive forms. Beginning with our commonsense understanding that “words have a linear, discrete, successive order,” Langer demonstrates how words must be “strung one after another like beads on a rosary” if they are to be combined into
intelligible units (80).\textsuperscript{13} If only one word can be spoken or written at one time, then each word must build off of the word before it and lead into the word after it in order for an utterance to accumulate meaning. “This property of verbal symbolism,” Langer declares, “is known as discursiveness; by reason of it, only thoughts which can be arranged in this peculiar order can be spoken at all” (81, original emphasis).\textsuperscript{14} Over time, then, the association between syntax and order, between discursiveness and logic, comes to seem natural to those who use this language on a daily basis. The end result of these associations, Langer argues in \textit{Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling}, is nothing less than the assumption that discursive logic represents the only acceptable logic for grammar and language (102).

This perceived “naturalness” of discursive language does guarantee a certain level of stability and predictability for symbolic expression. At the same time, these properties also make it possible to claim that “any idea which does not lend itself to this ‘projection’ is ineffable, incommunicable by means of words” (\textit{PNK} 81-82). As Langer points out, this realm of the “ineffable” includes our most powerful emotions, our hopes and desires, and even our immediate sensory experiences (86). And if the logical, sequential requirements of discursive form rendered these feelings and intuitions meaningless, then some of the most vital parts of the human experience would have to remain trapped in our own consciousness because of the impossibility of properly communicating them to one another.

The discursive logic of conventional grammar is thus the embodiment of Hejinian’s assertion in poem 24 of \textit{My Life} that “A word is only introduced under very tight restrictions” (64). For Langer, the only way to break free from these restrictions is to move from the realm of

\textsuperscript{13} In developing this understanding of discursive form, Langer draws upon the philosophical work of Rudolf Carnap, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Langer’s theory of non-discursive form emerges throughout \textit{Philosophy in a New Key} as her answer to the narrow view of linguistic meaning espoused by the logical positivists.

\textsuperscript{14} In addition to these concerns about order, discursive form is also restricted by time/chronology. Or, as Hejinian claims, “Language, like life, is saturated with time, and everywhere it shows time’s effects” (\textit{LOI} 167).
the discursive into that of the non-discursive—a move she compares to the experience of wading into the deep waters of the ocean:

At best, human language is but a tiny, grammar-bound island, in the midst of a sea of feeling expressed by “Oh-oh” and sheer babble. The island has a periphery, perhaps, of mud—factual and hypothetical concepts broken down by the emotional tides into the “material mode,” a mixture of meaning and nonsense. Most of us live the better part of our lives on this mud-flat; but in artistic moods we take to the deep, where we flounder about with symptomatic cries that sound like propositions about life and death, good and evil, substance, beauty, and other non-existent topics. (PNK 87-88)

Langer’s metaphor derives its explanatory power from the stark contrast between the solid ground of the “grammar-bound island” and the mysterious depths of the “sea of feeling.” Non-discursive forms are capable of “conceptualizing the flux of sensations, and giving us concrete things in place of kaleidoscopic colors or noises” in ways unavailable to traditional discursive expression (PNK 93, original emphasis). As Joddy Murray details in his examination of non-discursive rhetoric, the value of a non-discursive text “is that it thrives and derives its meaning-making from the complexity and ambiguity of its medium, whereas discursive language works best when it reifies and reduces complexity and ambiguity as it goes along” (5). Murray’s distinction echoes Hejinian’s remarks on closed and open texts in “The Rejection of Closure”; in each case, the non-discursive/open text “resists cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix

15 Drawing upon our experiences of visual and aural sensation, Langer speculates that non-discursive forms present entire fields of information to us at once. Because sight and sound “do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously” (PNK 93), they are not limited by the strictures of discursiveness and can communicate richer, more nuanced symbolizations at any one moment.

16 As his book’s title implies, Murray’s Non-discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition is less concerned with texts than with the non-discursive properties of image. Murray argues throughout the book that we must find better ways of utilizing visual media to access Langer’s “ineffable” realms of intuition and emotion.
material and turn it into a product” (LOI 43). Unlike the sequential, grammatical development of
discursive thought, non-discursive symbolization presents to us a total, unified, “significant
form” that only has meaning if it is represented in its entirety (PNK 261).

Before returning to My Life, it is important to note that Langer expands this conception of
non-discursive symbolization in Feeling and Form, a text that builds upon Philosophy to offer a
comprehensive aesthetic theory. “A poem,” in Langer’s words, “always creates the symbol of a
feeling . . . by weaving a pattern of words—words charged with meaning, and colored by literary
associations—akin to the dynamic pattern of the feeling” (FF 230). Langer contends that since
this pattern stands at such odds to our traditional (i.e., discursive) ways of talking about the
world, poetry has the potential to access non-discursive experiences and emotions through the
“virtual life” it creates (212). The dynamism of this virtual life is its greatest asset. No longer
bound to the sequential order that gives meaning to discursive form, the poet can range far and
wide in search of the symbols she needs to present an “illusion of experience” to her readers
(245). The poems of Hejinian’s My Life exploit this dynamism to the fullest possible extent,
weaving together images and experiences from throughout the poet’s life to create a “dynamic
pattern of feeling” (FF 241) that elevates the realm of non-discursive experience to a status
coeval with that of its discursive counterpart. Like Dworkin’s patchwork quilt, Langer’s pattern
metaphor suggests that non-discursive symbolization can be used to represent myriad
experiences simultaneously without synthesizing them into a single discursive translation. In this
way, non-discursive form is ultimately metonymic rather than metaphoric in nature—much like
Hejinian’s poetic method of composition by juxtaposition.

17 For Langer, the notion of a “virtual life” is key to understanding non-discursive form. Whereas discursive texts
merely represent someone else’s experiences for the reader, their non-discursive counterparts create an “illusion of
life [which] is the primary illusion of all poetic art” (FF 213, original emphasis). This illusion essentially creates a
world in which readers can experience the poet’s virtual life as if it were their own (FF 228).
Writing Across the Discursive/Non-Discursive Border

As the “medium of arrivals and departures” (LOI 196), the poetic sentence represents for Hejinian a strategic site for navigating the borderland between the discursive and the non-discursive. At first glance, however, the 45 sentences that comprise each of My Life’s 45 prose poems appear surprisingly simple—and entirely discursive in form. Nearly every sentence contains both a subject and a verb, and many adhere to standard conventions for grammatical predication. Take, for example, this sentence from the opening poem: “On her walks she stepped into people’s gardens to pinch off cuttings from their geraniums and succulents” (ML 7). When isolated from its poetic context, this sentence is unlikely to strike readers as anything other than the ordinary talk of everyday life. It has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and as the poet’s words follow one after the other, a mini-narrative emerges. Yet when the sentence is reinserted into the poem, the interpretive task becomes far more difficult:

Here, I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes. Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition. The shadow of the redwood trees, she said, was oppressive. The plush must be torn away. On her walks she stepped into people’s gardens to pinch off cuttings from their geraniums and succulents. An occasional sunset is reflected on the windows. A little puddle is overcast. If only you could touch, or, even, catch those gray great creatures. (ML 7)

Thematically, the language of nature (“trees,” “gardens,” “geraniums and succulents,” “sunset”) and the language of depression (“shadow,” “oppressive,” “overcast,” “gray great creatures”) feature prominently in these eight sentences. But outside of a few general connections, what could a reader possibly say this excerpt is “about”? To borrow Ming-Qian Ma’s terms, the gaps
between these sentences appear so large and shift so rapidly that they become *sites* for the production of poetic illegibility. Without something to guide readers across these gaps in a consistent and coherent fashion, the non-discursive text risks slipping into meaninglessness.

For Hejinian, this is precisely the point. In order for poetry to stage a rhetorical intervention in contemporary culture, it must first expose—or, in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s vocabulary, *make present*—the limitations of the prevailing social structures. An attack on conventional syntax thus entails a similar attack on the social conventions these sentences make possible. As Linda Kinnahan notes in her study of experimental women’s poetry, “intervention is a key thread within these various [poetic] projects as they seek to articulate new relations of production and reception shaped by feminist proclivities” (xix). In order to stage these interventions, women writers have had to pose direct challenges to a “critical and poetic discourse still experienced by many as privileging the words and practices of men.”

The disorienting feeling one experiences while attempting to read *My Life*’s ostensibly simple sentences is, in many ways, a natural response to the poem’s strategic offensive against conventional methods of writing, reading, and responding to texts. As Hejinian writes in the book’s second poem, “To follow the progress of ideas, or that particular line of reasoning, so full of surprises and unexpected correlations, was somehow to take a vacation” (*ML* 10). The aforementioned risk of slipping into meaninglessness—the “vacation” one takes from the restrictions of discursive logic—is necessary if the poem is to fulfill its rhetorical and political purpose and pose any threat to a culture’s dominant discursive practices.

---

18 Kinnahan references Lyn Hejinian at various points throughout *Lyric Interventions*, but she does not discuss the poet’s work in detail. Although no specific rationale is provided, it appears that Hejinian does not engage directly enough with feminist politics to align with the work of poets such as Barbara Guest, Kathleen Fraser, Erica Hunt, and Carol Duffy (8-9).
In “Materials (for Dubravka Djuric),” Hejinian associates this risk with her own early attempts at “non-referential writing,” which she describes as “a term that I and others used (or, let’s say tested) in the mid-seventies, not to identify something already existing but to upset entrenched, unquestioned notions about the relationship of words to things (including ideas, ideologies, and emotions)” (LOI 168, original emphasis). And though she admits that nothing concrete developed from this approach, Hejinian credits the term with encouraging her to venture “farther and farther into unforeseen aspects of the world” in her writing (169). This subversive journey into the unforeseen in many ways mirrors the attempt to leave Langer’s “tiny, grammar-bound island” of discursive thought (PNK 87). But if, as we have already seen, Hejinian’s My Life is a collection of prose poems which have been composed in sentences, how can this work also represent an exploration of non-discursive rhetoric? When is a sentence not a sentence, but, in Langer’s words, “a means of creating a virtual experience” (FF 228)?

The answer, it would seem, is that not all sentences are created equal. In the second half of Philosophy in a New Key, Langer addresses poetry’s unique relationship to the discursive/non-discursive divide by declaring that the “material of poetry is discursive, but the product—the artistic phenomenon—is not” (261). Despite the fact that each of the poet’s lines and sentences is itself divisible according to the discursive logic of syntax and grammar, the work’s aesthetic “significance is purely implicit in the poem as a totality” and cannot be divided into smaller units (261-62). In a recent essay on poetry and epistemology, Margaret Freeman builds upon Langer’s theory to argue that poetic language is “made to work not discursively, to create meaning, but aesthetically, to capture the precategorical essence of experience that makes a poem an icon of felt reality” (230). Langer traces this distinction even further in her analysis of the non-discursive properties of music, locating artistic import in the “formulation and representation of emotions,
moods, mental tensions, and resolutions” (PNK 222, original emphasis). Music’s “content has been symbolized for us,” she declares, “and what it invites is not emotional response, but insight” (223, original emphasis). The non-discursive song, much like the non-discursive poem, presents to us a symbol of affective experience capable of generating insight into everyday life. However, since the “import of an art symbol cannot be built up like the meaning of a discourse,” these acts must be “seen in toto first” before interpretation “gradually reveals the complexities of the piece, and of its import” (FF 379).

Langer’s argument here is vital for understanding how non-discursive texts like My Life work to bring about social change. Although non-discursive forms afford access to emotions and experiences that cannot be represented in discursive language, this does not mean that the realm of the non-discursive is dedicated solely to emotion. This realm also includes knowledge about the emotional and mental processes that constitute the vast majority of human life.

“I strongly suspect,” Langer proposes, “though I am not ready to assert it dogmatically, that the import of artistic expression is broadly the same in all arts as it is in music—the verbally ineffable, yet not inexpressible, law of vital experience, the pattern of affective and sentient being” (257). For Langer, one of the most important contributions art can make in our everyday lives is to provide us access to those ineffable emotions and experiences which discursive thought is incapable of representing. Poetry, music, dance, painting—each of these does more than simply express an emotion. Each projects a complex “insight” about the “vital experience” of human life by (re)presenting a “pattern of affective and sentient being” that cannot be broken down into its component parts. Accordingly, non-discursive texts like My Life do not easily lend themselves to

---

19 Langer’s three-volume work, Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, focuses specifically on the connection between the act of creating artistic symbols and the processes of mental intellection. “Elements in art,” Langer avers, “have not the character of things, but of acts. They are ‘active,’ act-like, even when they are not ‘acts’ in the dramatic sense . . . Taken this way, the term has an instrumental value for building up a coherent and adequate concept of mind, and on that pragmatic basis I use it in the broad sense here” (202).
pithy quotation. The challenge for both readers of and commenters on this text, then, is to represent the depth and complexity of My Life’s engagement with non-discursive symbolization without resorting to overly reductive syntheses of the work’s artistic import.

Take, for instance, the initial three sentences of poem ten in My Life: “If it were writing we would have to explain. I say that as much to comfort myself as to state something I think to be true. Dashing up out of the dark basement, pursued by the humid fear” (ML 30). Despite the lack of a proper referent for “it” in the opening line, the first two sentences stand in a logical, discursive relationship to one another, expressing a clear connection between the expository burden of written communication and the speaker’s metacognitive process. The third sentence, however, immediately complicates this reading by introducing a place (“the dark basement”), an action (“pursued”), and an entity (“humid fear”) that bear no obvious relation to the speaker or her writing. Perhaps the “humid fear” chasing the speaker from the basement represents a memory she doesn’t want to explain. Or perhaps it represents the presence of a deep-rooted anxiety regarding her abilities as a writer. No matter what this detail might signify, its presence marks a source of narrative disruption, one that violates the logic of conventional discursivity—and one that would, in most other cases, be rejected by readers as an illogical or inappropriate inclusion in Hejinian’s quasi-autobiographical tale. And yet in this case, it is precisely because of this disruption that the attentive reader is compelled to embrace alternative hermeneutic

---

20 Previous scholarship on My Life has addressed this problem in one of two ways. Some studies, like those of Craig Dworkin (“Penelope Reworking the Twill,” Contemporary Literature 36.1, Spring 1995) and Alex Houen’s Powers of Possibility (Oxford UP, 2012), have relied on brief quotes from individual sentences throughout Hejinian’s text. Alternatively, Marjorie Perloff’s analysis in Radical Artifice (U of Chicago P, 1991) utilizes one complete and one near-complete facsimile of Hejinian’s poems to demonstrate the range of their effects. The current chapter employs both approaches in order to create as comprehensive a portrait of Hejinian’s poetic method as possible.

21 In Obligation toward the Difficult Whole (U of Alabama P, 2004), Brian McHale laments overly reductive approaches to “the postmodernist long poem” (3) that “proceed by selecting ‘key’ lines or passages” and then “treat these as interpretive centers or ‘nodes’ around which to organize the heterogeneous materials of the poem” (139). McHale acknowledges that, short of reprinting entire poems, there is no way to completely resolve this issue. The best we can do, he suggests, is embrace a critical praxis that acknowledges this dilemma “with eyes wide open” so that scholarly analyses remain open about their own inherent limitations.
strategies that afford access to a fuller intellectual and emotional understanding of this scene. The rejection of discursive form, that is, acts as a catalyst for new ways of reading and thinking about the poem.

For both Hejinian and Langer, this journey across the discursive/non-discursive border has important poetic, rhetorical, and social implications. If poetic language can be used to “construct alternative views” of one’s own history and identity (LOI 187), then it poses a direct challenge to the dominance of conventional linguistic practices. Hejinian’s use of non-discursive form shares many similarities with fellow Language poet Ron Silliman’s “new sentence,” which involves the deployment of parataxis and disjunction to “identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning” (Silliman 93). By stripping the utterance of whatever grammatical form or contextual material would be necessary for the reader to follow the chain of signification from signifier to signified, the new sentence forces readers to focus on individual words in order to determine linguistic meaning. This “limiting of syllogistic movement,” Silliman contends, “keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language” (91). Hejinian specifically mentions the new sentence as one of many important influences on her own poetic methods, and in the prose poems of My Life we can clearly see her using the “effects [that] occur as much between, as within, sentences” (Silliman 92) to create Langer’s non-discursive “pattern of feeling.”

22 According to Saussure, “[T]he two elements involved in the linguistic sign are both psychological and are connected in the brain by an associative link. . . . A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern” (66). Both Silliman’s new sentence and Hejinian’s non-discursive form aim to disrupt this associative link in order to shift the reader’s attention away from the process of signification and onto the individual signifier (i.e., word) itself.

23 In her introduction to the essay “Happily,” Hejinian acknowledges her “creative indebtedness” to writers who utilize the new sentence in their work, singling out Barrett Watten, Carla Harryman, Bob Perelman, Jean Day, and Silliman himself for special recognition (LOI 385).
Much like the normative impact that discursiveness has had on our commonsense understandings of language, the influence of the new sentence on a reader’s experience of My Life is both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it introduces a level of ambiguity and polysemy into Hejinian’s discursive sentences that is typically reserved for the non-discursive poetic line. On the other hand, this process also contributes greatly to the text’s illegibility, generating mystery and obscurity at nearly every turn. However difficult Erica Hunt’s Local History may seem to first-time readers, Hejinian’s disjunctive text requires even more patience, even more attention, and even more active participation in the meaning-making process if readers are to successfully navigate this text. There is no gentle introduction, either; each poem moves rapidly from sentence to sentence, and the various memories depicted in poem 1 are just as disjointed and loosely connected as those in poem 45. Writing about the propulsive momentum of “positive motion” in Hejinian’s poetry, Carla Harryman notes that the poet’s methods produce “a language of memory bounded to the process of selection within the domain of the flow” (122). This flow of thoughts and memories and reflections is both irreversible and unceasing. “If the writing paused to assess the contexts it depends on to create its own momentum,” Harryman continues, “the motion would stop and its fabric would tear.”

Or, as Hejinian writes in poem 31, “The general form tends to grow quite naturally under the hand that writes it, but until a thing is completed, it needs to be explained” (ML 79). My Life’s engagement with non-discursive form generates significant epistemic doubt—the text constantly “needs to be explained.” But it also persuades the reader to adopt radical hermeneutic approaches in response to these doubts. And as an initial step toward the resolution of this uncertainty regarding textual meaning, these poems invite readers to reconsider the relationship between two of the most fundamental elements of discursive form: syntax and chronology. A
key reference to this relationship appears in one of the sentences previously quoted from poem 26: “A paragraph measured in minutes doing the sort of thing I can’t do” (ML 67). Hejinian here suggests the possibility of a language measured not according to traditional standards of syntax and grammar, but instead according to units of time.24 “A paragraph is a time and place,” the speaker asserts in poem 39, “not a syntactic unit” (ML 96). This shift away from a syntactic understanding of the paragraph and toward a temporal one is something the poet “can’t do” because she herself is bound by the discursive properties of language. She is, in Langer’s formulation, restricted to a “clearly defined field, governed by the requirement of discursive projectability” (PNK 86). Hejinian must compose in sentences because the sentence represents the minimum threshold for prose composition—and My Life is, after all, a series of prose poems. But if each of the paragraph-length poems in this text could instead be written so as to compel readers to “measure” the paragraph in “minutes” rather than in sentences, then Hejinian could make it possible for readers to do “the sort of thing I can’t do” and experience each poem as a unified duration of time rather than a collection of independent sentences. And, in the process of exchanging syntax for chronology, the reading experience crosses the border from the realm of the discursive into the realm of the non-discursive.

The potential connections between Hejinian’s unified duration of time and Langer’s dynamic pattern of feeling are numerous. Both are indivisible into their component parts. Both resist synthesis and simplification. Both constitute a form of virtual life that draws power from the mediated experience of others. From this perspective, the organizational strategy of the paragraph operates as a bridge between Hejinian’s method of composition by juxtaposition and

---

24 In Silliman’s study of the new sentence, he emphasizes the relationship between paragraphs and duration: “The paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument” (91).
Langer’s theory of non-discursive form. As each of the prose poems resists closure by deferring synthesis, readers must continually expand the hermeneutic search for meaning in order to accommodate larger and larger units of text. This search “turns reading into an act of choosing among multiplicities. It is reader-centered in that it requires its readers to bring multiple interpretations to the work” (Spahr 142). The simultaneous co-presence of these “multiplicities” requires a move outside the sentence if one wishes to make sense of this text. There simply is not enough context within each sentence, or within each small group of sentences, for the reader to generate a coherent narrative without looking to the larger unit of the paragraph for assistance. Whatever discursive properties they may lack, Hejinian’s poems do possess a “[c]ontinuity, not so much of ideas as of assumptions, or attitudes, a style one simply can’t break away from” (ML 27). This continuity of style propels the reader from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, until certain patterns begin to emerge. In the process, readers adopt wider and wider frames of reference as they navigate their way through the text. To read My Life at the paragraph level, then, is to recognize and participate in Hejinian’s metonymic compositional process.

This reading experience is ultimately conjunctive in nature, as Hejinian’s self-proclaimed “language of inquiry, pedagogy of poetry” (ML 114) teaches readers to experience these poems as an ever-expanding network of associations. Composition by juxtaposition utilizes the paragraph to suspend syntactic closure by inserting sentences into larger and larger matrices of

---

25 Hejinian, it should be noted, resists this approach to her text: “My Life is written in sentences, not in paragraphs” (LOI 195). And from a compositional standpoint, it is difficult to argue with this statement. The discursive limitations placed on the writing process demand that prose texts be composed word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence. I am arguing, however, that if we examine the text from a rhetorical, audience-oriented perspective, the paragraph serves as a more useful heuristic for reading My Life as a work of non-discursive symbolization.

26 Alex Houen contends that, because of My Life’s disjunctive construction, there is no one “correct” way to create these patterns. Readers can choose whether they wish to organize their experience of the text “in terms of objects, or subjects, or phonetic sound, or syntax” (205). The reader’s choice of strategies is, for Houen, less important than the process by which Hejinian “induce[s] the reader to see particular kinds of pattern in the sets of related words and phrases she scatters, as well as to make relations between those patterns.”
Hejinian’s speaker comments directly on the role conjunction and association play in the reading process in the closing lines of poem 34: “An extremely pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from conjunction, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader’s mind to content in a writer’s work. But not bitter” (ML 85). The poet’s intuition that her sentences could be “opened” by expanding to the level of the paragraph reflects Langer’s characterization of the artistic symbol in Feeling and Form: “The artistic symbol, qua artistic, negotiates insight, not reference; it does not rest upon convention, but motivates and dictates conventions” (22). In order to generate this insight, Hejinian’s symbolic “negotiation” of a life’s worth of experience must be at least as rich and complex as those real-life experiences themselves. And this is why, according to Langer, the dynamic pattern of feeling presented by a work of art so closely resembles the dynamic pattern of this feeling as it is experienced: without a similar level of complexity, the art object is little more than an inert sign gesturing toward the feeling, not a dynamic symbolic (re)construction of that feeling.

At the same time, the concentrative power of the symbol—the fact that it can, like a picture, present a thousand words of information to us instantly—means that the complexity of this dynamic pattern is radically “simplified, and at the same time much more fully perceived and evaluated than the jumble of happenings in any one person’s actual history” (FF 212). The non-discursive symbol is not bound by the restrictions of grammatical order, and it takes full advantage of connotative association to suggest myriad images, sounds, thoughts, and emotions through the deployment of just a few words. Hejinian’s shift from the sentence to the

---

27 For Srikanth Reddy, Hejinian’s method “imagines alternative, experimental, and provisional protocols of discursive continuity” that help “heighten a reader’s sensitivity toward hidden or mystified logics of sequence and consequence that heretofore may have gone unnoticed under our normative reading practices” (56-57). Despite their different terminologies, Reddy here echoes Langer on the contrast between discursive and non-discursive form.  
28 In Philosophy in a New Key, Langer defines denotation as “the complex relationship which a name has to an object which bears it” (64), and connotation as “the more direct relation of the name, or symbol, to its associated
paragraph, then, enables her to exceed the grammatical and conceptual limitations of the sentence in order to compose non-discursive paragraphs that more accurately capture the full complexity of human thought, memory, and emotion. Like a differential calculus of human subjectivity, *My Life* maps the chaotic flux of lived experience via the condensed formulas of non-discursive symbolization: “One thing beside another, or and then another, x times y, x dividing y, x plus you” (*ML* 64).

Ultimately, for any reader seeking to solve these formulas, attention must be shifted from the discursive *things* of language—signs, symbols, words, sentences—to the non-discursive *processes* of language, the movement and flow of sensation carried through the text via the multiplicities Hejinian has created. Or, in the poet’s own words: “But the emphasis in poetry is on the moving rather than on the places—poetry follows pathways of thinking and it is that that creates patterns of coherence” (*LOI* 3). This is a truly rhetorical poetics, a “grammar” that is radically open, radically contingent, radically indeterminate. Meaning is always already on the way, in process; it does not wait to be found but is, instead, discovered by different readers differently, depending on a host of textual, social, and historical factors. The non-discursive text thus remains in a state of “constant becoming, because partially developed forms seem to be still unfolding” as readers navigate these poems (Langer, *Mind* 206). Much like Canadian poet Steve McCaffery’s notion of the “protosemantic,” language reaches a kind of chaotic stasis in which the text itself appears relatively stable, yet the relationships between and among the linguistic components of that text remain in a constant state of turbulence.²⁹ For many readers, such chaos...
is bound to be frustrating—and this frustration invites attempts to arrest the chaos and make definitive statements about these poems. The desire for coherence, for the text to mean something, compels readers to construct a recognizable discursive order out of the flux of experience.\textsuperscript{30} To counter this desire, the text attempts to teach readers how to resist the impulse toward “[o]rganizing a lot of material into a general view” (\textit{ML} 34) by arguing that multiplicity provides a more comprehensive portrait of subjectivity than does the projection of a unified singularity. Generating a responsible reading of \textit{My Life} thus requires a constant search for more language and more context—and this search finds its ultimate end in a move outside the limitations of the text and into a larger community of readers who can enrich our understanding of these poems. This search is, in short, an ethical argument for encountering the Other as an equal co-creator of textual meaning. From the interplay between these two forces—the desire for coherence and the push for multiplicity—emerges what I am calling the illegible poem’s “invitation to encounter”: an ethical, non-totalizing way of seeing the world that utilizes non-discursive forms of art to create (and then sustain) conversations between the members of an interpretive community. And in the case of \textit{My Life}, this invitation represents a key strategy in Hejinian’s effort to claim a barbaric new voice for contemporary Language writing.

\textbf{The Illegible Poem as an Invitation to Encounter}

Returning to the essay “Barbarism,” Hejinian argues that every encounter between individuals produces at least a brief moment of shared contact, an experience of “coexistence...” postulates the existence of dissipative structures that have their origins in “far-from-equilibrium conditions” that catalyze “transformation[s] from disorder, from thermal chaos, into order” (Prigogine and Stengers 12).\textsuperscript{30} For Jacob Edmond, Hejinian’s text produces this desire by “simultaneously inviting the reader to seek a perfect interpretation, to know, understand, or bound them perfectly, and [then] refusing to fulfill the promise of that invitation in order to assert their unbounded openness to the world” (242). For more on the tension between openness and closure in \textit{My Life}, see “The Pleasures of the Open Text: Lyn Hejinian’s ‘Paradise Found’” in \textit{Contemporary Literature} 50.2 (2009): 240-72.
which is also an occurrence of strangeness or foreignness” (*LOI* 326). In these moments, the individual on either side of the encounter is faced with a choice, one that mirrors the hermeneutic choice readers must make as they navigate *My Life*’s non-discursive poems. On the one hand, individuals can retreat from strangeness and return to their previous worldview; on the other, they can embrace foreignness and create “a new picture” of the world that accounts for this experience (328). Hejinian’s poetry and essays repeatedly argue that the only ethically responsible solution to this dilemma is the embrace of alterity, the continual renegotiation of one’s linguistic, epistemic, and ontological borders within the social sphere. By choosing the title “Barbarism,” then, Hejinian seeks to transform Adorno’s critique into a call for new communities of “poet-barbarian[s],” each willing to become:

[A] rigorously attentive observer and active participant in the interminable newness of poetic language, a language which generates an array of logics capable, in turn, of generating and responding to encounters and experience. . . .

It is the logics of these new connections that provide poetry with its enormous mobility and its transformative strategies. (*LOI* 328)

Speaking of both her own work and that of other Language poets in the 1970s, Hejinian refers to this boundary-breaking, other-seeking art form as the “poetry of encounter.” Such poetry refuses to imagine the self or the other as isolated, coherent entities but, instead, “engage[s] the poet in her affiliations—her attachments to others and through which she, too, is other” (330). The non-discursive poem facilitates an “uneasy” relationship between poet and reader that must be continually constructed and reconstructed (329). And while some may recoil from the unease of this cooperative endeavor, it is a necessary step in the poetry of encounter. This sense of disquiet

---

31 This interpretive dilemma also features prominently in Hejinian’s essay “Strangeness,” which is included in *The Language of Inquiry* (pp. 135-60).
catalyzes the process by which “emotions are freed from the limits of the singular ‘I,’ allowing for a poetry of complex and densely layered affect as well as intelligence” (330). Much like the actual encounter between Self and Other, the poetry of encounter represents an opportunity for new social relations.

As in Aristotle’s description of pathos, which aims at “putting the audience into a certain frame of mind” (105) in order to “change men [and] affect their judgments” (245), My Life embraces non-discursive form as a way of opening these poems to new frames of mind and new judgments for both the poet and her audience. The poetry of encounter “is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view—so that we are ‘coming from the same place’” (ML 21-22).

Rather than symbolize an experience solely from the perspective of the speaking subject, Hejinian’s non-discursive poetics creates a dynamic pattern of experience that both Self and Other must construct together according to whatever new logics this pattern makes possible. And when “new, unexploited possibilities of thought crowd in upon the human mind,” Langer argues, “the poverty of everyday language becomes acute” (PNK 149). The poems of My Life not only make our encounters with other readers possible—they make our encounters with other, more barbarous languages possible as well.

This notion of the possible is vital for the poetry of encounter; as Alex Houen explains, possibility “opens one to ethical relations, an other’s potential, while suggesting that those relations are open to construction and ‘must lead to new work’” (206). Hejinian’s desire for a situation in which poet and reader are “coming from the same place,” however, must be carefully monitored. If the poet is not mindful, this encounter can quickly devolve into an unequal power dynamic that reasserts the privilege of the speaking subject. Building upon the work of Jacques
Derrida, Ewa Ziarek contends that the best way to mitigate this concern is through the calculated deployment of linguistic breakdown—what she terms “the rhetoric of failure”—that ensures neither speaker nor audience can claim authority over the communicative act. “By suspending the capacity of grammar to calculate the unpredictable in advance,” Ziarek claims, “the figural instability of language . . . allows for the coming of the unanticipated alterity” (106). In other words, non-discursive texts like My Life leave room for both the poet and her readers to “speak” because neither can claim access to a definitive interpretation of the text. Hejinian and her reader “share a point of view” (ML 21-22) not because the poet communicates her point of view to the reader, but because both are equally invested in constructing new points of view from the non-discursive text before them.

In Langer’s terms, the shared point of view presented via the non-discursive art form “is designed to abstract and present forms for perception—forms of life and feeling, activity, suffering, selfhood—whereby we conceive these realities, which otherwise we can but blindly undergo” (FF 395-96). In the case of My Life, the non-discursive symbol presents abstracted forms of the poet’s experiences as a child, as a woman, as a poet, and as a mother that she and her readers must conceive anew in each encounter with the text. If, as the speaker in poem 10 declares, “It is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences originated” (ML 30), then each reading of the text requires both poet and reader to “conceive these realities” anew. And while Langer does not use the words “rhetoric” or “rhetorical” in this context, her discussion of aesthetic “responsiveness” (396) and “intuition” (397) suggests that these faculties develop over time as we are persuaded or convinced to see the world differently. According to Langer, art “shapes our imagination of external reality according to the rhythmic forms of life and sentience, and so impregnates the world with aesthetic value. . . . Life as we see, act, and feel
it is as much a product of the art we have known as of the language (or languages) which shaped our thought in infancy” (399). In these lines from the closing pages of *Feeling and Form*, Langer arrives at the dual *raisons d’etre* for non-discursive symbolization: the shaping of human apperceptive faculties and the merger of the aesthetic and the social realms. Non-discursive artworks ultimately teach us how to see the world differently, suggesting the immense scope of aesthetic perception and intuition once we grow accustomed to the insight these processes provide. And while Langer does not address the issue directly, both *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Feeling and Form* suggest that these new understandings will require perpetual revision if they are to remain relevant to changes in the historical, political, and social circumstances of a given time. The point here is not that non-discursive symbols afford access to timeless, universal truths about the world. Instead, a text like *My Life* works to change how readers perceive the world around them so that they will remain open to new encounters with that world in the future.

Hejinian echoes these insights from Langer most clearly in her comments on the origins of the Language writing community in the early 1970s. In “Barbarism,” Hejinian explains her own understanding of the relationship between poetic language and social activism:

To counter such hypocritical strategies (which are no less than forms of fraud) requires now as it did then a comprehensive examination of language, one which challenges its “naturalness,” discloses the world view (and ideology) secreted not only in our vocabulary but at every linguistic level including the ways in which sentences are put together, and explores new ways of thinking by putting language (and hence perception) together in new ways. (*LOI* 324)

---

The broad, overarching concepts that stand out here—new, language, together—are as applicable to Hejinian’s poems as they are to Langer’s aesthetic theory. For both, a rhetorical artwork is not one that makes sweeping pronouncements regarding specific political acts but, instead, is one that makes the world differently by making statements about that world differently. The rhetorical text (in Langer’s words) “shapes our imagination of external reality” (FF 399) by persuading readers to engage in creative, communal interpretations of its artistic import.

A particularly instructive example of the interpretive decisions Hejinian’s readers are faced with occurs at the end of poem 16:

Mother dimension; sex. She observed that detail minutely, as if it were botanical.

As if words could unite an ardent intellect with the external material world. Listen to the drips. The limits of personality. It’s in the nature of language to encourage, and in part to justify, such Faustian longings. Break them up into uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions. (46)

At first glance, these seven sentences appear to relate a rather commonplace story about a young girl’s sexual awakening—about the moment she realizes (through her own “botanical” observation) that she too possesses the “mother dimension” common to the members of her “sex.” Yet even in this brief excerpt, there are moments where meaning breaks down and the conceptual space between sentences must be reevaluated if they are to make any sense for Hejinian’s readers. Considering that the sentence before “Mother dimension; sex” involves the speaker’s attempt to read “the little marks which constitute Persian,” it’s possible that the detail being “minutely” observed is linguistic rather than sexual. And what relationship do “words,” “drips,” and “personality” share with one another—or with the notion of a young girl’s sexual awakening—in sentences three, four, and five? The “Faustian longings” referenced in the sixth
sentence are never explained, and the pronoun “them” in sentence seven could refer to almost any other noun or pronoun contained in this excerpt. The poem refuses to resolve its own ambiguities, and this interpretive instability invites readers into further dialogue with the text (or with each other) in order to negotiate these mysteries. And if the “continuous and voluminous digressions” of non-discursive form raise this many questions about a relatively cogent excerpt from My Life, one can see how the entirety of Hejinian’s text represents a compelling argument for reaching outside the isolated self to discover new ways of reading and responding to otherwise illegible poetry.

As part of the invitation to encounter, My Life also questions the relationship between discursive practices and the politics of gender. Hejinian’s critique of the discursive reflects her particular life experiences as a woman—as someone whose speech has all too often been “regarded as trivial, second-class, since it is held to originate not in the public world (of free men) but in the private and domestic sphere (maintained by women and servants)” (38). Rather than embrace a gynocentric poetics that would entirely exclude the “public world” of men, Hejinian wants to open both spheres to each other so that the male/female, inside/outside binaries can no longer be held up as examples of an immanent “natural” order. This conception of

---

33 There is a possible connection between the poem’s “Faustian longings” and Hejinian’s 1994 essay, “La Faustienne” (LOI 232-67), which considers gendered ways of knowing as represented by the literary characters Faust and Scheherazade. Additionally, the sentence, “It’s in the nature of language to encourage, and in part to justify, such Faustian longings” appears verbatim in her 1977 essay, “The Rejection of Closure” (LOI 40-58). Within the specific context of My Life, however, these connections are not available for the reader of poem 16.

34 For more on the influence that gender has had on the development of Language writing, see Ann Vickery’s Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing (Wesleyan UP, 2000); Steven Vocys’s Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture (U of Toronto P, 2013); and Anne Dewey and Libby Rifkin’s edited collection, Among Friends: Engendering the Social Site of Poetry (U of Iowa P, 2013).

35 Ann Vickery’s Leaving Lines of Gender echoes Hejinian’s comments on the male/female, closed/open dichotomies. “Language writers were concerned not so much with describing the world as with interrogating the possibilities of the social. The public nature of Language writing stands in direct contrast to the privacy of the workshop poem and its therapeutic enabling of the individual. Whereas the workshop poem constructs the poet as self-determining viewer of the world, Language writing emphasizes the existence of ‘multiple conflicting perspectives.’ Furthermore, it seeks to understand how relations of power that inform the everyday are disseminated and veiled through language” (6-7).
openness is key for readers of *My Life*, who must be careful not to draw interpretive connections that unnecessarily foreclose alternative ways of knowing. If we take the speaker in poem 10 at her word that “An other is a possibility” (31), then the ethical dimension of non-discursive symbolization can only remain so if the poem preserves the possibility of other voices—male or female—contributing to the interpretive community.

In “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian contrasts the traditional/conventional/masculine “closed” texts popular in the mainstream poetry community with the more radical/experimental/feminine “open” texts that she creates. The closed text is “one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it” (*LOI* 42). It is often clear and direct in its meaning, and this directness “delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity” (42-43). The open text, however, remains perpetually “open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies” (43). And because “[w]riting’s forms are not merely shapes but forces” (42), the open form of *My Life*—the gaps between sentences, the enigmatic epigraphs, the repetition with a difference—generates the force by which the text and its readers can intervene in traditional gender hierarchies.36

As a final example of Hejinian’s open, non-discursive poetics, here are the first twenty lines of poem 37—a poem that marks the “boundary” between *My Life*’s 1980 and 1987 editions:

```
The run, that if
you broke it,
you’d have none
```

Nothing good to see in the city, but the rain is some good thing to hear.
If “I love to hear the waves” and “I love to hear you talk.” Carton little

36 Hejinian further refines the relationship between form and force by framing poetic intervention in the vocabulary of Jacques Lacan: “If the established symbolic order is the ‘Law of the Father,’ and it is discovered to be not only repressive but distorted by the illogicity of bias, then the new symbolic order is to be a ‘woman’s language,’ corresponding to a woman’s desire” (*LOI* 54, original emphasis). The similarities between Hejinian’s model of a “woman’s language” and Erica Hunt’s call for a new vocabulary in *Local History* suggest the need for continued study of the rhetorical relationship between language and gender in vanguard poetry.
dialogue, heard on the street. Baby! baby! baby!—that’s normal. If there is a story at all, accounted for, a settled thing to have experienced, it’s nothing of the kind. The obvious analogy is with music as with words. A sense of definition (different from that of description, which is a kind of storytelling or recounting, numerical, a list of colors) develops as one’s sense of possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience, closes with the years. So I gave it away. I can offer only the apologies I have committed. When we first moved in, the neighbors on the left complained about the saxophone, but eventually, as we became familiar, they began to feel well-disposed toward us, friendly, until the noise was what they liked about us, since it proved them tolerant and generous. Planes of information intersect, coincide. Words in which we care to be also. (ML 90)

Like previous excerpts dealing with her father’s return from war (poem 1) and adolescent sexuality (poem 16), the topics referenced here—nature, music, parenthood, neighbors—are never united into a cohesive narrative. In spite of this limitation, certain thematic and connotative associations indicate the potential for a greater degree of coherence. The neighbors’ complaints about saxophone noise suggest a communal space where noise carries well. This aural motif continues in statements about the pleasurable sounds of rain, waves, and conversation, in addition to an “obvious analogy” with both music and words—which the speaker picks up on again in the excerpt’s final sentence with a gesture toward “words” as dialogue. Additionally, the poem defines a story that can be “accounted for” as one that involves “a settled thing to have experienced,” but the only example of storytelling in this excerpt features the decidedly unsettled nature of the neighbors’ misunderstanding about saxophone playing. In much the same way, the notion of “possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience” promises more than the speaker delivers; this possibility “closes with the years” and settles into the prescriptive practice of “definition.” At nearly every turn, the poem offers readers the potential for closure—and then it immediately rescinds this offer, thereby extending the play of symbolization.
indefinitely as both poet and reader continue to experience and then re-experience the full range of their aesthetic encounter.

Hejinian’s non-discursive poems thus confront readers with a degree of illegibility that demands new understandings of the communicative relationship between poets and their audiences. If this new understanding is not reached, as philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer details in “Man and Language,” then communication itself cannot occur: “Whoever speaks a language that no one else understands does not speak. To speak means to speak to someone” (65, original emphasis). The “noise” of the saxophone in poem 37 initially upsets the speaker’s neighbors because it does not speak to them—it is not truly “language” at this point. Yet once the two sets of neighbors encounter one another and “bec[o]me familiar,” the music transforms into a language capable of communicating friendship and tolerance and generosity. Hejinian makes a similar point about speaking and listening in her 1983 essay, “Who is Speaking?”:

The question “Who is speaking?” implies, then, yet another question: “Who is listening?” Consideration of how speaking is being heard and what is being heard in and of it involves another address to power. Listening accords power to speech. It grants it its logic by discovering logic in it. In listening as in speaking, both meaningfulness and meaning are at stake. To trace the lines of reciprocity through which they are established is to map a social space, a community. (LOI 38)

This notion of community, which rests upon a shared commitment on the part of speakers and listeners to discover the logic in one another’s utterances, ultimately explains how we can account for the open, non-discursive text’s rhetorical nature. In order to overcome the text’s

---

37 Admittedly, the text of poem 37 implies that this encounter has at least a hint of self-service about it—the neighbors tolerate the saxophone playing because it serves as proof of their own good nature (ML 90). Yet the fact that it communicates anything other than noise is evidence that a non-discursive symbol (in this case, jazz) can become an effective stimulus to interpersonal communication.
initial illegibility, a work like *My Life* must effectively persuade readers to adopt new ways of thinking about linguistic, symbolic, and poetic meaning. In turn, these new ways of thinking about meaning argue for new ways of conceptualizing the processes by which meaning is generated, communicated, and interpreted in the “social space[s]” we inhabit with one another. And while the poet cannot actually “hear” the responses of her readers, the non-discursive text functions as a kind of social contract that commits all members of the community to more ethical ways of speaking and listening in the future. The new interpretive strategies we develop in our attempts to make sense of *My Life* should, therefore, also be applied in our attempts to make sense of everyday experiences. How we learn to appreciate the aesthetic symbol, that is, impacts how we learn to appreciate the everyday world.  

As Susanne Langer demonstrated throughout her career, this is precisely the reason that we must better understand non-discursive symbolization. Her conception of art as the projection of “*scenes* in which we can *enact* important moments of the life of feeling” requires that aesthetic interpretation be viewed as “a process of performative envisagement” (Innis 105, original emphasis). As audiences experience the non-discursive symbol, they “perform” the intellectual and emotional “roles” presented via the symbol’s dynamic pattern of feeling. These performances are not solely imaginative, either; they represent real-world acts undertaken by real-world agents. And since “every realized act changes the pattern and range of what is possible” (Langer, *Mind* 206), the performance of aesthetic appreciation is itself a means of effecting change in the world. Arabella Lyon argues that Langer’s aesthetic and philosophical theory is ultimately rhetorical in nature because of its concern with “the motivation of the speaker, the powerful aspects of language that affect people, and the relationship between the

---

38 Gadamer makes a similar point in the essay “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” claiming that “[h]ow nature pleases us belongs . . . to the context that is stamped and determined by the artistic creativity of a particular time” (98).
speaker and her community” (272). Our interactions with non-discursive symbols like My Life require a reorientation to the world around us, and this reorienting process generates a large portion of the symbol’s transformative or oppositional potential (Liddy 151-52).

In theory, the rationale behind and ethical purpose of non-discursive symbolization seems simple enough. In practice, the process of adequately responding to the poem’s invitation to encounter can be difficult and, at times, quite frustrating. Yet such difficulty is necessary, writes Hejinian, because it represents “the material manifestation of the work’s mutability, its openness, not just a form but, more importantly, a forming, a manifestation of what the Objectivists would have termed its ‘sincerity’” (LOI 331). This “sincerity” is, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, best understood as a commitment to the social aspect of language. The sincere poem articulates “our status as presences in common (and only in common) with other presences in the world.” The final sentence quoted from poem 37—“Words in which we care to be also”—conveys this ethical connection between poets and readers: both “care” enough to create and sustain relations with one another without attempting to claim authoritative control over the text (ML 90). The “[p]lanes of information” mentioned in the penultimate sentence not only “intersect” but “coincide,” and in the case of My Life, this co-incidence extends to both the linguistic material in each poem and the cooperative hermeneutic project that poet and reader must undertake in order to make this material meaningful. As Langer argues in Feeling and Form, the “poet’s business is to create the appearance of ‘experiences,’ the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of virtual life” (212, original emphasis). The working through of these experiences, the living of this virtual life, can only acquire its transformative rhetorical power if it seems real to us, if it engages the non-discursive realm of “sentience, feeling, emotion, and the
élan vital itself” in a way that simply “has no counterpart in any vocabulary” (374). Hejinian’s *My Life*, that is, creates a dynamic pattern of affective experience that enables the reader to proclaim that, much like Hejinian’s speaker in poem 33, “I can feel the idea” (*ML* 83).

**Peroratio: The Possibility of a Non-Discursive Ethics**

The poetics of non-discursive form, as theorized by Langer and practiced by Hejinian, argues for new ways of constructing and interpreting relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the world in which we live. In order to do so, the poems of *My Life* must remain perpetually open to new encounters and experiences. Hejinian’s composition by juxtaposition shifts the organizational logic of the reading experience from the syntactic, discursive unit of the sentence to the temporal, non-discursive unit of the paragraph, thereby opening the poem to the full range of human perception, emotion, and imagination—in other words, to the realm of the non-discursive itself. This results in an artistic symbol that, in Langer’s formulation, presents readers with “the rhythms of life, organic, emotional and mental . . . which are not simply periodic, but endlessly complex, and sensitive to every sort of influence” (*FF* 241). As the preceding excerpt from poem 37 demonstrates, the endless complexity of Hejinian’s non-discursive forms means that we cannot easily summarize or paraphrase the poems in *My Life*. Rather than detract from the reading experience, however, the open text provides for us one of the few poetic spaces in which we can freely investigate meaning alongside other readers. The non-discursive poem enables us to suspend the search for determinate meaning indefinitely and, instead, ferret out multiple and contingent interpretations according to the myriad pathways the text affords us. Like the speaker in poem 14, we have a unique opportunity to linger, to
experience the text’s multiplicities and acknowledge our “wanting to have experienced many, many things” (*ML* 42).

Rhetorically, these mysteries are a key factor in the poems’ attempt to unite readers in the communal negotiation of textual meaning. According to Nicky Marsh, one of the most prominent changes wrought by Language writing within the larger poetry-reading community has been the creation of “a group of readers who know *how* to attribute significance to this difficult material” (*77*, original emphasis). In Langer’s terms, repeated exposure to non-discursive texts like *My Life* “molds the objective world for the people” by altering readers’ aesthetic sensibilities (*FF* 409).³⁹ Or, as Hejinian’s speaker in poem eight declares, “And how one goes about educating that would-be audience may very likely determine the history of that moment, its direction, the qualities that become emphatic and characteristic of its later influence” (*ML* 25). The open, innovative poems that Hejinian and others have been publishing since the 1970s have managed to “educate” an increasingly large community of readers over the past forty years, offering multiple strategies for the shared interpretation of non-discursive forms. And as the Language community has steadily increased in size and influence, Hejinian’s ethical imperative to change the world “in sentences” has reached a far wider audience than anyone could have anticipated nearly 35 years ago.

In this way, Hejinian’s *My Life* might be best understood as an example of poet and theorist Joan Retallack’s “poethical wager”: a commitment among avant-garde artists “to act against the odds in composing contemporary language” so that poets and readers can “see things anew, to notice fresh possibility despite the empirical odds against this” (13; 14). More will be

---

³⁹ In the closing pages of *Feeling and Form*, Langer directly addresses the issue of vanguard art and audience reception: “Even a person who produces a work so unfamiliar, so difficult and original that he has no hope of meeting with intuitive understanding from his fellows, works with the conviction that when they have contemplated it long enough the intuition of its import will come” (*FF* 392).
said about Retallack’s conception of avant-garde ethics in the following chapter on Jackson Mac Low; with respect to *My Life*, however, the poethical wager is a calculated risk that attempts to faithfully represent the chaos and complexity of everyday language despite a keen awareness that to do so is to court difficulty, obscurity, and meaninglessness. In return, poet and reader are rewarded with a more accurate, and ultimately a more ethical, understanding of the challenges facing real-world communities—provided that both remain open to the influence of the other. As a non-discursive exploration of the poethical, Hejinian’s *My Life* implores audiences to participate in the difficult task of making sense of the post-World War II, post-Civil Rights, post-Cold War, post-*everything* world in which we now find ourselves. Once the traditional guideposts have fallen, poetry is a barbarous wager that must risk meaninglessness if it is to convince us otherwise. “Still,” Hejinian’s speaker declares, “I felt intuitively that this which was incomprehensible was expectant, increasing, was good” (*ML* 84).
CHAPTER THREE

THE ETHOS OF ERASURE: JACKSON MAC LOW’S “5 BIBLICAL POEMS”

AS PURE PERSUASION

Words must be read soberly and seriously, but without fake solemnity or any other artificial type of delivery. Even in the pulse-beat methods, the regular beat ought not to seem mechanical. Silences must never be hurried. Jackson Mac Low, “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems’” Representative Works: 1938-1985 (17, original emphasis)

Insofar as a choice of action is restricted, rhetoric seeks rather to have a formative effect upon attitude . . . Thus the notion of persuasion to attitude would permit the application of rhetorical terms to purely poetic structures; the study of lyrical devices might be classed under the head of rhetoric, when those devices are considered for their power to induce or communicate states of mind to readers, even though the kinds of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome. Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (50, original emphasis)

Exordium: Making Poetry Otherwise

For Jackson Mac Low, the adverb “otherwise”—a word he employed repeatedly in essays and interviews—has multiple meanings. At its most basic level, “otherwise” refers to Mac Low’s decades-long commitment to creative practices that allowed for the attenuation of the poetic ego in his work. After spending his early years (1937-1954) writing formally innovative texts via traditional writing methods, Mac Low devoted the next half-century to experimenting with compositional systems that integrated everything from chance operations and deterministic procedures to computer programs and I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden’s BASIC language.1 Mac Low seems to have always been searching for, in his own words, new ways of “making poems in other ways—otherwise—than others do” (Thing of Beauty xxix); his work rehearses, again and

1 See Jerome Rothenberg’s Preface to Representative Works: 1938-1985 (Roof Books, 1986: v-x) for a brief overview of Mac Low’s various compositional methods.
again, a clinamenic poetics that continually swerves from convention and tradition. This constant shifting leads to a second understanding of “otherwise,” one that derives from the relationship of Mac Low’s own poetry to itself. His longtime partner/editor Anne Tardos points out in her foreword to Thing of Beauty that “there were never any hard-edged transitions in Jackson’s ways of working” (xxiii). And yet the constant evolution of Mac Low’s craft resulted in an oeuvre so diverse and multiform that it often reads as the work of several different poets. In much the same way that Mac Low made poems otherwise than did the vast majority of his contemporaries, he also made poems otherwise than himself.

There is, however, a third understanding of “otherwise” worth exploring, one that represents the central focus of this chapter. In the 2002 essay “Poetry and Pleasure,” Mac Low reflects on his career as an artist and identifies two central motives for aesthetic production: the sheer act of engaging in artmaking, and the pleasure of making or experiencing artistic forms (TB xxvii). Mac Low then devotes a significant portion of the essay to discussing the potential for aesthetic experience to help channel perceptions of pleasure (as well as their corollary, perceptions of pain) into collective reassessments of the structures that govern a community’s everyday lives:

Artworks that cause pleasure can also—just because they give pleasure and because of the kinds of pleasure they give—cause shifts in social and economic arrangements, sometimes subtle shifts that may be partially caused by changes in the ways the materials of the arts are used and shaped. . . . The politically aware artist can hope that what gives her pleasure and what gives her pain will give others the kinds of pleasures and pains that may help engender more positive social arrangements. (xxviii-xxix)
In Mac Low’s estimation, the pleasures of poetry are not merely waiting to be experienced via some passive relationship between an artwork and its audience; they are themselves catalytic agents with the power to set in motion processes of social melioration. As people suffer from the “kinds of pain” that Mac Low associates with “clumsy social, economic, and political arrangements” (xxvii), the pleasures of art suggest alternative understandings of these same arrangements. The poem made otherwise, that is, helps create the conditions necessary for a society made otherwise by attempting to imagine abstract concepts like “the good” and “the pleasurable” differently.

Much like Susanne Langer’s notion of aesthetic import, in which non-discursive, affective relations are experienced via a community’s shared store of music, painting, dance, and poetry, Mac Low locates aesthetic value precisely in the networks of pleasure and pain that exist among poet, text, and reader. “Artworks are valuable,” he states, “both in themselves and because they cause pleasure—kinds of pleasure not usually available from other sources. And ‘otherwise’ artworks are valuable because they bring about new kinds of pleasure” (xxxii). Mac Low never explains, however, precisely how these new kinds of pleasure bring about the social changes he has in mind. As the poet wonders later in the essay, “[W]hat guarantees that speaking differently will change our culture in ways we would find desirable?” (xxxiii). By Mac Low’s own admission, the aesthetic reformation of contemporary society “is seldom something that can be aimed at directly” (xxviii). He quickly dismisses the efficacy of agitprop artworks, deriding such projects as “dismal failures” in their attempts to engineer “social sanitation.” He sounds only slightly more hopeful about the prospects of classical tragedy, where an audience’s initial feelings of horror and repugnance are converted into a cathartic sense of pleasure by the end of the play. For Mac Low, propagandist literature demonstrates too narrow a focus on content to be
of much social value, and tragic drama relies too heavily on form for its effects to be long-lasting. Instead, “Poetry and Pleasure” proposes that the only way to properly conceive of the relationship between art and social change is not through form or content but via the materials of art themselves. In order to understand how the poem made otherwise works to bring about a society made otherwise, Mac Low argues, we must focus on the act of making—on the fusion of the linguistic material that constitutes a poem—and discover how shifts in this material might be transferred from the aesthetic realm into that of the social. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how such a transfer might occur by aligning Mac Low’s poetics of chance operations with rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke’s concept of pure persuasion.

Unlike the previous paring of Lyn Hejinian and Susanne Langer, Mac Low and Burke share no obvious historical connection. Despite both a considerable overlap in their publishing careers and a common interest in avant-garde forms of music and literature, Mac Low never mentioned Burke in his poetry or his essays, and Burke never turned his critical eye in the direction of Mac Low’s creative works. The two men, however, shared numerous similarities. Politically, both were devoted pacifists who believed in the power of words to mitigate violent conflict and competition. Mac Low avers in “Poetry and Pleasure” that “now more than ever there is a pressing prevailing need to change these [social] arrangements and to prevent warfare and other causes of unnecessary suffering” (TB xxviii), and Burke opens his 1945 text *A Grammar of Motives* with the portentous epigraph, *Ad bellum purificandum* (“Toward the

---

2 In “Poetry and Pleasure,” Mac Low suggests that the catharsis of classical drama is a contrivance of the tragic form that rarely “stick[s] with” the members of an audience after the curtain falls (TB xxix).

3 Mac Low’s earliest poems were written in 1937, and he was working on new material up until his death in 2004. Burke began writing literary reviews in the early 1920s, and his first book of criticism (*Counter-Statement*) was published in 1931. Yet in the nearly fifty-five years between Mac Low’s first poems and Burke’s death in 1993, the two do not appear to have crossed paths—personally or professionally. Mac Low’s name is not included on any lists of correspondence maintained by the Burke Archives at Penn State, and Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber’s encyclopedic collection of Burke’s published reviews, *Equipment for Living: The Literary Reviews of Kenneth Burke* (Parlor Press, 2010), contains no references to Mac Low anywhere in its 660 pages.
purification of war”). This commitment to language as a means of social improvement suggests a common entry point into their distinct systems of thought.

The two also merit joint consideration because of similar shifts in their poetic and rhetorical writings. As previously mentioned, Mac Low initially relied on conventional methods of authorial composition—what he would later call “direct expression” ("Museletter" 27) or “intuitive choices” ("Language and Politics" 219). Then, in December of 1954, he began a decades-long exploration of various aleatory and deterministic procedures that are commonly referred to as “chance operations.” Though much more will be said about these procedures in the following section, it is important to note here that, according to Tardos, Mac Low embraced these new methods in order to “make works that were (to the greatest extent possible) free of his own individual taste, memories, and psychology” (TB xvii). Mac Low’s search for poetic freedom in many ways mirrors Burke’s investigations of the “genuine ‘freedom of rhetoric’” through his concept of pure persuasion (RM 271). Described as “the farthest one can go, in matters of rhetoric” (267), pure persuasion “involves the saying of something, not for an extra-verbal advantage to be got by the saying, but because of a satisfaction intrinsic to the saying” (269). Unlike his more famous concept of identification, which Burke often compared to a ritualistic courtship intended to bring individuals closer to one another, pure persuasion interposes distance between speakers and their audiences through a “principle of interference” that prolongs this courtship indefinitely (271). And because this interference is supplied by language itself—not by the speaking subject—pure persuasion essentially transforms

---

4 For a more detailed discussion of Burke’s epigraph and its relation to the entirety of the Motivorum trilogy, see Richard H. Thames’s “The Meaning of the Motivorum’s Motto: "Ad bellum purificandum" to "Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore" (KB Journal 8.1, Spring 2012).

5 Burke argues that pure persuasion is ultimately a formal property of language, one that exists “logically prior to any one persuasive act” (RM 252). More will be said about the “intrinsic” relationship between language and pure persuasion in the third section of this chapter.
communication into a self-motivating act that can “go on eternally” like a Platonic form (274). If Mac Low’s compositional methods were aimed at freeing poetry from the control of the poet’s ego, then Burke’s notion of pure persuasion makes it possible to conceive of a rhetoric freed from the control of the rhetor’s ethos.

By focusing on the 1954 series, “5 biblical poems,” this chapter traces Mac Low’s engagement with chance operations back to its origin in order to realize a more open, more ethical model for reading poetic mystery. More specifically, I demonstrate how the “5 biblical poems” participate in what I am calling the ethos of erasure: a sustained critique of Aristotelian ethos that utilizes chance operations and textual elision to destabilize the privileged position of the speaking subject. As Mac Low’s poems systematically erase large sections of their source text—the Hebrew Bible—these textual gaps produce the “self-interference” and “standoffishness” necessary to approach the realm of pure persuasion and suspend the play of signification indefinitely (RM 269). Over time, as readers continue to grapple with what these poems might mean, the sacrificial loss of hermeneutic certainty argues for the adoption of a more ethical commitment to perpetual dialogue and conversation. The “5 biblical poems,” that is, secure the grounds for unending dialogue by instantiating a community that operates according to a polyvocal rather than a monovocal model of ethos. If the universe is, as Burke argues in Permanence and Change, best conceived as “a Making rather than a Made,” then it becomes all the more vital that we seek to understand it “from the ethical, creative, poetic point of view” (260, original emphasis).6 Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” make such a view possible by inviting the Other into an ongoing process of reading and acting together—thereby bridging the divide between otherwise poetics and otherwise social relations.

6 Burke refers to this maximally observant point of view as “the comic frame” in his 1937 text, Attitudes Toward History (166-75). See also James L. Kastely’s “Kenneth Burke’s Comic Rejoinder to the Cult of Empire” in College English 58.3 (1996): 307-26.
Sacrificing the Ego: Jackson Mac Low’s Chance Operations

The constant shifting and searching that marks Jackson Mac Low’s career as a member of the American vanguard finds its “Point Alpha” in the uncertain life prospects the poet was facing in the mid-1950s. In the Introduction to Representative Works: 1938-1985, Mac Low recounts his decision to return to school at Brooklyn College in 1955 after realizing that “my economic situation had become intolerable at age 33” (RW xvi). Referring to these years as a period in which “a kind of crystallization took place in my life,” Mac Low points to various artistic and educational influences that weighed heavily on his reconsideration of poetic methods—none greater than the first chance-generated compositions of his friend John Cage (“Jackson Mac Low” 255). And though he admits to initially feeling “strong reservations” about Cage’s aleatoric procedures, Mac Low eventually began work on his first chance-generated text, the “5 biblical poems,” in December of 1954. “[N]ot much later,” he concludes, “I found myself employing systematic-chance methods of my own—and composing both determinate and indeterminate works with them—with great pleasure and gusto” (RW xvi).

As a compositional method, chance operations relies on randomized procedures for the selection and arrangement of the elements contained within a work of art. Unlike the Symbolist notion of le mot juste, which charges the poet’s imagination with the task of generating just the right word at just the right moment, chance operations aims to eliminate the poetic ego by utilizing rolls of the dice, random letter or number sequences, and byzantine procedural systems to populate the aesthetic field. The text of Mac Low’s “Sade Suit,” for example, was generated by applying chance operations to an English translation of the Marquis de Sade’s The Bedroom

---

Philosophers (TB 46). Each of the thirteen poems in this series corresponds to one member of a suit of playing cards (Ace, 2, 3, etc.); the number of words in each line was determined by consulting either a series of random digits, the number on the face of a playing card, or a roll of the dice; and the integers placed at the end of each line—which represent durations of silence—were generated from a table of random digits. The end result of these intricate procedures can be seen here in the first four stanzas of the poem “A(ce)”:

The celebrated Archbishop with horror upon them who practices those crimes.  
Let us to be destroyed by the Chevalier’s casuistries.  
She am suggests to use personal hatreds,  
Revenges,  
Wars,  
Him.  
At any rate,  
The lovely one is and I will embugger my sister state will forever be to filch something from the man who has everything:  
“Tat,”  
Say I,  
“And there’s an to him herself.”

According to the logic of chance operations, whatever “truth” or “beauty” these lines may possess is largely beside the point. Non-egoic composition replaces the traditional Romantic search for truth and beauty with the chance-generated process of poetic self-development. As Mac Low states in “Muselette,” chance operations enabled him to “let [artworks] become themselves, watch them grow & take shape without one’s pushing & shoving them around too much” (26). Much like a Rube Goldberg machine, the artist establishes procedures that will eventuate in a poem and then allows the system to run its course. What results is, in the words of Brian McHale, a kind of “machine writing” that “functions to circumvent and outflank

---

8 This represents merely a streamlined version of Mac Low’s procedures for the “Sade Suit” poems. The full account of his method can be found on pages 46-47 of Thing of Beauty.
contingency” by embracing the contingent as a fundamental element in its own procedural operations ("Poetry as Prosthesis” 15). Writing on Mac Low’s mentor, John Cage, Ming-Qian Ma takes McHale’s machine analogy one step further, claiming that chance operations represents a unique epistemology—one “governed by its own logic, organized by its own procedure, operated by its own mechanism, and guaranteed of its own recoveries” (121).

Mac Low’s decision to embrace these machine-like methods was precipitated as much by his economic and aesthetic concerns as by his newfound interest in Eastern philosophy. Recent work by Jonathan Stalling points specifically to the Zen Buddhist principle of “No Mind” and the Daoist concept of *wuwei* as important influences on Mac Low during this time period. Having studied at Columbia under D. T. Suzuki in the early 1950s, the poet adopted his teacher’s understanding that the process of silencing one’s mind could lead “the practitioner into a powerful realization of *satori*, a Japanese Buddhist term for ‘lasting awakening’ gained through a direct experience of sunyata, or emptiness” (Stalling 94). By pairing this teaching with Daoism’s *wuwei*—a principle holding that all things must come to be on their own terms, without unnecessary interference from outside sources (91)—Mac Low created his own “fusion of Daoist ethics and Buddhist metaphysics” that saw art as the ideal means of attaining both collective participation and individual enlightenment (102). The poet who can effectively remove himself from the poem makes room for the Other to self-actualize (*wuwei*); in the process, the poet experiences a personal epiphany by emptying the poem of his own ego (*satori*). Mac Low’s chance-generated works like “Sade Suit” or the “5 biblical poems” erase more than the words of their source texts. They also erase the monological voice of the poet-as-master, the voice of the omniscient, omnipotent author who seeks to control a reader’s experience of the text.
Or, at least, that was the original idea. The more Mac Low utilized chance operations in his work, the more he came to understand that “my choices of means, materials, &c., can’t help being influenced by [my] emotions, & I’d be foolish if I thought they weren’t” (“Museletter” 27). As the preceding explanation of “Sade Suit” suggests, whatever “erasure” or “silencing” of the poetic ego that the text accomplishes is only made possible by the poet’s prior conception and execution of a series of constitutive choices. Mac Low alone chose the Marquis de Sade’s The Bedroom Philosophers as his source text; he alone established the procedures for selecting words and phrases from Sade’s work; and he alone decided how the text would utilize punctuation and durations of silence to guide his audience’s reading experience. Writing about Words nd Ends from Ez (1983), which utilizes a form of chance operations to “write through” Ezra Pound’s The Cantos, Jennifer Scappettone remarks on how effectively Mac Low’s text “displaces Pound’s imperious personhood” through a compositional method that “stultifies modernism’s ultimate recurrence to a monumental will” (189). And yet, in the process of “displacing” and “stultifying” Pound, Mac Low’s text testifies to the uniqueness of his own “monumental will” as the poet-architect responsible for designing the procedures that reduced Pound’s magnum opus to a shell of its former self. Borrowing McHale’s analogy between chance operations and machine writing, one might say that, no matter how large a role chance is allowed to play in a poet’s operational systems, there remains always a ghost in the machine.

---

9 Originally published in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine and then reprinted in The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book (Southern Illinois UP, 1984), “Museletter” consists of a brief series of responses to queries from Charles Bernstein regarding Mac Low’s poetic methods. In his answer to the question, “Are you interested in having emotion in your process-oriented, programmatic poetry?” (26), Mac Low takes Bernstein’s word “emotion” to mean any one of a number of egoic activities—everything from intention and expression to feeling and desire.

10 Mac Low often employed the technique of “writing through” well-known texts in his chance-generated poems. Pound’s Cantos actually served as a source text for both Mac Low and his good friend and mentor, John Cage. As Susan Vanderborg notes in Paratextual Communities: American Avant-Garde Poetry since 1950 (U of South Carolina P, 2001), the poets’ shared interest in the Cantos functions as both “a tribute to Pound’s collage techniques—and as a tacit critique of his attempts to impose coherence in his literary and political writing” (21).
The presence of this ghost haunts even the most rigorously composed texts, which Mac Low and Tardos have referred to as his “deterministic” works. Unlike chance operations, which generates a different text each time a set of procedures is applied, deterministic composition guarantees the same result every time, provided no errors are made along the way (TB xix; xxx).

The aforementioned *Words nd Ends from Ez* represents an example of deterministic composition: Mac Low used the letters EZRA POUND to write through *The Cantos* by selecting only words that have the same letter in the same letter position (e.g., the first word begins with the letter “E,” the second word features “Z” as its second letter, the third word has “R” as its third letter, etc.).

Once the poet omits any words or letter combinations that fail to adhere to these requirements, the remaining text becomes the material for a “determined” treatment of Pound, as illustrated by the opening lines of Mac Low’s rewriting of Cantos CX-CXVII:

- oZier’s cuRve he wAll,
- Phin hOut exUltant
- seeN impiDity,
- Exultance,
- aZ loR r-
- leAf
- Paler rOck- *(RW 323)*

Assuming the poet’s infallibility in following this method, multiple applications should result in completely identical renderings of the source text. And yet, in much the same way that “chance operations” can be understood as implying too large a role for chance in the writing process,

---

11 Again, this is a streamlined explanation of the process by which *Words nd Ends from Ez* was composed. Fuller accounts can be found in *Thing of Beauty* (181-82) and Scappettone (185-89).
12 Mac Low in fact never claims to have achieved this level of perfection. “I sometimes made some mistakes of this kind,” he declares in “Poetry and Pleasure,” “before my methods were automated as computer programs—and sometimes I still do when I use unautomated methods—so chance may creep in willy-nilly” (TB xxx).
“deterministic” seems to attach too small an importance to the influence that contingency—as well as the poetic ego itself—wields in the unfolding of Mac Low’s work. The poet may be said to have determined a rigorous procedure for extracting one particular text from the infinite possibilities contained within the language of The Cantos, but a line like “Phin hoOut exUltant” is only made possible by the unpredictable interaction between Mac Low’s determined, intentioned procedures and Pound’s particular arrangement of words. Recognizing the co-presence of chance and choice in these texts seems essential to a properly rhetoricized reading of Mac Low’s work.

Michael O’Driscoll points to precisely this duality as one of the most overlooked features of the poet’s always-evolving compositional methods. Shifting his focus away from the more deterministic elements of chance operations, O’Driscoll finds Mac Low’s “persistent questioning of the limits or purity of the twin poles of subjective, intentional writing (or ‘making’) and objective aleatoric/deterministic methods (or ‘letting be’)” a far more interesting entry point into his work (112). Viewed in these terms, Mac Low’s poetry explores the liminal space between these two poles via experiments that demonstrate “the unavoidable, but always modified and modifiable, role played by intention in a world of chance and determination” (131). Mac Low himself came to value this feature in his poems, noting in “Poetry and Pleasure” that “in the course of using such methods for several decades . . . I realized that these methods, too, and the actions of utilizing them, are products of the ego, that the ego is inescapable” (TB xxxii). Or, as conceptual artist Kenneth Goldsmith has argued, the “choosing and reframing” of existing texts (akin to Mac Low’s use of the Old Testament in the “5 biblical poems”) is equally as expressive of individual personality as is the composing of entirely new poems, stories, or novels (9). “[T]he suppression of self-expression is impossible,” Goldsmith declares. “Even when we do something as seemingly ‘uncreative’ as retyping a few pages, we express ourselves in a variety of ways.”
So where, then, does the focal text for this chapter, the “5 biblical poems,” fit into all of this? In “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems,’” Mac Low declares that the first two poems in this series “are the first works I composed by means of chance operations (30 Dec 1954-1 Jan. 1955)” (RW 16). Yet despite their historical importance as the mark of a radical break in Mac Low’s writing methods, the “5 biblical poems” have received very little critical attention over the past sixty years. According to Mac Low, the series was composed by employing an aleatoric process involving two primary components: a copy of the Jewish Publication Society Hebrew Bible, which served as the poems’ source text, and a single die that was used to determine how text would be selected from the Bible and then arranged in each of the five resulting poems (TB 39). By rolling the die, Mac Low generated a randomized sequence of numbers that then became the title of each poem (“Jackson Mac Low” 255); the first two poems in the series, for example, are “7.1.11.1.11.9.3!11.6.7!4., a biblical poem” and “4.5.10.11.2.8.4.2., the 2nd biblical poem” (RW 18; 22). Taking the process one step further, each number in the sequence determined how many “events”—words or silences—would appear in each line of a particular stanza. When an event was to be read or performed as a silence, it was denoted in the printed text by a simple symbol (“/___/”) that, according to Mac Low, is “equal in duration to any word the reader chooses” (RW 16). Every stanza in the first poem, for instance, follows the pattern established in its title by opening with a line that includes seven events, to be

---


14 Due to the unwieldy nature of Mac Low’s titles, I will streamline subsequent references to individual members of the series by excluding the chance-generated number sequence and including only the number of each poem. I retain, however, Mac Low’s idiosyncratic use of ordinal numbers and lowercase letters.
followed by a one-event line, an eleven-event line, another one-event line, and so on, until the
stanza concludes with a final line of four events:

In /___/ /___/ wherein the /___/ /___/

made

/___/ /___/ eat lest they /___/ and taken /___/ /___/ the
eight

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

/___/ /___/ /___/ left           (RW 18)

Mac Low’s randomly generated sequences were also used to establish the number of stanzas in
each poem: each additional integer in the poem’s title corresponds to an additional stanza in the
poem. Because there are eleven total numbers in the title for the first biblical poem, that poem
consists of eleven stanzas. If we lay out the procedures for the “5 biblical poems” in table form,
then, the architecture of Mac Low’s first poem looks like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Events Per Line</th>
<th>Stanzas in “7.1.11.1.11.9.3!11.6.7!4., a biblical poem”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each entry in the series bears its own signature structure: the fourth poem is by far the longest (twelve stanzas in total, with lines as long as 22 events), while the third poem consists of only five short stanzas laid out according to a 5-2-3-6-5 event pattern. In nearly every facet of their conception as otherwise artworks, the “5 biblical poems” rely upon chance-generated series of numbers to determine how the form of the religious source text will be “translated” into the form of Mac Low’s poetic series.

Regarding the poems’ content, “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems’” fails to specify how the events that make up each line were selected from the Old Testament. In a 1991 interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, however, the poet provides a detailed explanation of the coordinated series of die casts he employed to make these compositional decisions:

For each event I first threw the die to determine whether it would be a word or a silence. If it was to be a word, I used the die to determine whether to count lines from the top or the bottom of a column. (I moved from column to column, obtaining one word from each successive column of the Scriptures.) Die throws then determined which word in which line was to be taken into the poem. (255)

According to this method, each event in the “5 biblical poems” was selected via a sequence of multiple die casts: (1) roll to determine how many events will appear in a given line; (2) roll to determine whether a given event will be a word or a silence; (3) if a word, roll to decide whether to count from the top or the bottom of the page column; (4) once decided, roll to see how many lines to “count off” in order to arrive at the desired line; (5) roll to select one word from the line arrived at in the previous step.15 Much like his work with “Sade Suit” or Words nd Ends from Ez,
Mac Low utilized labyrinthine procedures for the selection and arrangement of the linguistic material that constitutes the “5 biblical poems”—material that was appropriated from one of (if not the) most widely recognized texts in the world, the Hebrew Bible. In each of these artworks, chance plays an immense role in the negotiation between Mac Low’s procedures and his source material. In this particular instance, the chance operation “converts the text of Biblical narrative by means of ‘value-neutral,’ random procedures” into a disjunctive script awaiting readerly performance (Watten 174). By working out such complex “conversion” systems for the composition of these poems, Mac Low’s voice fades into the background, achieving, at least momentarily, his stated goal for both his poems and the public performances thereof: namely, “that one may make meaningful choices while being choicelessly aware and fully respecting others’ choices” (“Language and Politics” 219). When the act of content selection is carried out by an agency—the roll of the die—and not the agent himself, the dialectical relationship between choice and choicelessness appears to suspend itself indefinitely.

And yet, much like the divine influence that is believed to have shaped the Scriptures upon which the “5 biblical poems” draw, traces of the poetic ego mark every line of Mac Low’s text as a product of his making—or, at least, as a product of some making. Even a line as seemingly devoid of content (and thus ego) as poem 1’s “/____/” (RW 19) could only be possible within Mac Low’s system; the line-as-silence testifies to the poet’s act of erasure just as certainly as would any line-as-words. Chance operations may “wreck the ordinary operations of signification,” but there can be little doubt that the text’s “partial emptying out of meaning . . . allows other things to come through” (Kotz 130). In order to better understand the social and

Steps 3 and 4 could be achieved in a single cast of the die, but since Mac Low provides no commentary to support this possibility, it makes more sense that two separate rolls were used to make these two separate determinations. 

16 As Watten’s use of quotation marks indicates, whether or not Mac Low’s compositional procedures are actually “value-neutral” is a matter of debate.
political dimensions of these “other things,” we need a way of reading this unique relationship among poet, text, and reader that affords the radically illegible text its rhetorical power. Unlike Erica Hunt’s *Local History*, which employs mild forms of illegibility to give presence to values around which marginalized communities can unite; and unlike Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*, which more thoroughly engages with the illegible in order to access the non-discursive realm of emotion and explore new ways of conceptualizing social relations; Jackson Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” presents itself as an almost completely illegible series of poems capable of frustrating all but the most general hermeneutic pronouncements. If we look to Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory of pure persuasion, though, we can see how poetic illegibility perpetuates the kind of “self-interference” that converts the isolated reading process into a site for the communal negotiation of textual meaning (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 269). Somewhat paradoxically, it is only by sacrificing his own ethos that the poet can bring about the kinds of social change Mac Low sought in his work. Art made otherwise, that is, requires a rhetoric made otherwise in order to change the world.

**Sacrificing the Appeal: Kenneth Burke’s Pure Persuasion**

Although he began his career as a literary critic, Kenneth Burke is now widely considered one of the most influential 20th century theorists of rhetoric and communication. From his earliest critical work in *Counter-Statement* (1931) to his last major publication, *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966), Burke evinces a clear and consistent commitment to examining texts as rhetorical acts, as particular arrangements of words designed to “produce a desired impression upon the reader or hearer” (*Counter-Statement* 210). By the time he published *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), Burke’s definition of rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of
inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” had taken on considerable
nuance and scope (RM 43), but the core principle remained unchanged. For Burke, texts are
written with specific purposes and audiences in mind, and the interplay of communication’s three
main components—speaker, speech, and spoken to—is inherently rhetorical in nature.

In much the same way that Mac Low attempted numerous experiments with chance
operations in his search for a method that would displace the poetic ego from his work, Burke
continually sought new ways to account for language’s inherent rhetoricity.17 In *A Rhetoric of
Motives*, Burke initially locates the essence of rhetoric in identification—the attempt to bridge
the divide between individuals through rhetorical appeals that illustrate “common sensations,
concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes that make them *consubstantial*” (21, original emphasis).
Rhetoric, that is, appeals to audiences by emphasizing sameness while minimizing difference.
“*You persuade a man,*” Burke writes, “*only insofar as you can talk his language by speech,
gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his*” (55, original
emphasis). Despite its centuries-long reputation as an agonistic discipline, Burke (re)positions
rhetoric as a powerful means of unification, as the primary method for overcoming difference
and division. And on this point he is especially clear: if, in some ideal utopia, individuals were
no different from one another—if there were no such things as “difference” and “division”—
there would be very little (if any) need for rhetorical persuasion (22).18 Until such a world exists,

17 Burke offers one of his clearest statements on the relationship between language and rhetoric in his “Terministic
Screens” essay: “*Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the
terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the *‘observations’ are but implications of
the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as observations
about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms*” (*Language as
Symbolic Action* 46, original emphasis).
18 See Chapter 7 of Ross Wolin’s *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke* (U of South Carolina P, 2001),
especially pages 179-82.
however, rhetoric will continue to be present whenever and wherever members of the human race must rely on each other to accomplish a common goal.\(^{19}\)

Yet in one thirty-page section near the end of the book, Burke goes beyond his merger-division pair and wonders if there might be an even more fundamental force at work in his model of rhetoric-as-identification. According to this model, maximally effective persuasion would perfectly unite a rhetor and her audience, while maximally ineffective persuasion would position the rhetor as far from her intended audience as possible. Thus, Burke’s conception establishes a continuum upon which all persuasive acts could (theoretically) be plotted:

As rhetorical appeals aimed at identification move from left to right on this continuum, they become more successful at overcoming the sense of separateness that exists between rhetors and their audiences. Yet as Burke’s exploration of this basic model deepens, he notes the presence of an unsettling paradox: *the more successful rhetoric becomes, the more fully it erases itself as rhetoric.* “Rhetorically,” Burke asserts, “there can be courtship only insofar as there is division” (271). If an appeal recruits every member of its audience, it ceases to be an appeal; there is no longer any division to be overcome, and so it loses that which made it rhetorical in the first place. Theoretically, a “perfect” rhetoric would entail no division between individuals—but no division

\(^{19}\) Given Burke’s definition of man in *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) as “the symbol-using animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection” (16), it seems highly unlikely that the conditions for a rhetoric-free utopia would ever present themselves to humankind.
entails no rhetoric. For Burke, the answer to this dilemma lies in one of his most abstruse concepts, pure persuasion. As “a motivational ingredient in any rhetoric, no matter how advantage-seeking such rhetoric may be” (*RM* 269), pure persuasion is associated with the necessarily addressed nature of linguistic communication. All speech acts—even those internal acts addressed solely to the speaker—are directed at a particular audience. According to conventional understandings of these acts, speech comes into existence because of some “ulterior” motive on the part of the speaker, some “extra-verbal advantage to be got by the saying” (269). Every utterance is, at the very least, both a collection of linguistic material (i.e., the purely verbal motive for speech) and an appeal to be heard by an audience (i.e., the minimum extra-verbal motive for speech). Granted, most speech is motivated by other ulterior motives in addition to simply being heard. Speakers also wish to entertain their audiences, or to inform them, or to persuade them into some future course of action. The important point here is not which motives are present or which advantages are sought in a particular utterance, but simply that these motives and advantages exist in even the most altruistic-seeming discourse. And in order for such discourse to be successful in achieving these ends, it must enter into a “courtship” with the members of its audience (268).

---

20 I use “perfect” here not as an evaluative term but, instead, as a way of suggesting a persuasive appeal that successfully establishes a sense of consubstantiality between a speaker and each and every member of her audience. As James Zappen (among others) has noted, this “perfect” case is only possible in the abstract. Practically speaking, “when we identify with another person, idea, or group . . . we thereby also divide ourselves from someone or something else” (289). A rhetorical appeal that reduces the distance between person A and person B, for example, simultaneously increases the distance between person B and person C. From a wide enough perspective, even the most successful acts of identification generate their fair share of division.

21 Burke asserts in the 1958 essay “The Poetic Motive” that “implicit in the very idea of language as a medium for communication there is the fact that the design of *speaker* and *speech* is not completed until we add a third term, the receiver or auditor” (58, original emphasis).
From a Burkean perspective, then, every speech act is rhetorical in nature because every speech act seeks to reduce the distance between the speaker and her audience in order to facilitate this courtship. It matters not whether one is addressing a crowd of political supporters, arguing a case before the Supreme Court, or composing a poem according to the strict procedures of chance operations; “all of these modes of expression,” Burke explains, “are ‘impure,’ and seek advantage” of some kind over an audience (268). The use of “impure” here can be a bit misleading, as the term carries with it a suggestion of inferiority with respect to pure persuasion. Burke is careful to point out, however, that he is “not offering this concept of ‘pure’ rhetoric as the highest ideal of human conduct” (271). Instead, the term “impure” merely refers to everyday speech acts carried out in service of a speaker’s ulterior motives. But since these appeals can only succeed by canceling their status as appeals, Burke theorizes pure persuasion as an ultimate motive, one that represents “the essence of language” itself (252). In what is probably his most succinct explanation of this ultimate motive, Burke likens pure persuasion to a necessary “interference” that prevents rhetoric from complete self-negation:

We would only say that, over and above all such derivations, there is, implicit in language itself, the act of persuasion; and implicit in the perpetuating of persuasion (in persuasion made universal, pure, hence paradigmatic or formal) there is the need of “interference.” For a persuasion that succeeds, dies. To go on

---

22 Ever the dialectical thinker, Burke explains in A Grammar of Motives (1945) that the “substance” of any object or concept can only be determined by examining both what that object is and what that object is not (23). This so-called “paradox of substance” (21) enables Burke to analyze human behavior through verbal (i.e., symbolic) acts—to, in essence, define humans not by what they are, but by what they say. Because “we necessarily define a thing in terms of something else” (33), this fundamental dialectic permits us to treat substance and non-substance as equally valuable (and valid) concepts. Thus, while Burke’s constant shifting between “impure” and “pure” persuasion in the closing section of A Rhetoric of Motives might seem convoluted, this move is predicated upon a set of theoretical assumptions previously formulated in the Grammar.

23 “We are saying that, as the ultimate of all persuasion, its form or archetype, there is pure persuasion. . . . The important consideration is that, in any device, the ultimate form (paradigm or idea) of that device is present, and is acting. And this form would be the ‘purity’” (RM 273-74, original emphasis).
eternally (as a form does) it could not be directed merely towards attainable
advantages. . . . Here, we are suggesting, would be the ultimate rhetorical grounds
for the tabus [sic] of courtship, the conditions of “standoffishness.” (274, original
emphasis)

Without this standoffishness, it would be theoretically possible to create an appeal that leads to
complete identification, total consubstantiality, and the end of rhetoric. Pure persuasion ensures
that this complete state of consubstantiality can never be reached, thereby precipitating an
ongoing series of appeals between individuals if they are ever to feel they are truly “acting
together” (21). Whether couched in the language of courtship or identification, pure persuasion
acts as a bulwark against the potential perfectibility of rhetorical argumentation.

Thus, in its role as a “form or archetype” for rhetorical communication (273), pure
persuasion guarantees the “genuine ‘freedom of rhetoric’” in all of its formulations (271). Like
an ideal form of “pure love” or “pure hatred,” pure persuasion represents “the absolute, and
therefore nonexistent, limit” of rhetorical interaction (268-69). It inheres in every possible
instance of persuasion but is itself unrepresentable and untranslatable. Because of this, pure
persuasion cannot be thought of as a specific strategy or tactic to be deployed through speech or
writing. It is, as Bryan Crable has argued, “best understood not as a critical tool, but as a ‘mythic
image,’ or a non-empirical, imagistic portrayal of the formal conditions underlying persuasion,
the origin of rhetoric” (216). In Burke’s terminology, pure persuasion thus becomes a “god-
term” that embodies the “ultimate transcendence” of the entire category of persuasive action and
speech (RM 276, original emphasis).24 It is “disembodied and wraithlike” (291), a haunting

24 For Burke, a “god-term” represents the ultimate term for a particular category of experience. As we explore the
hierarchies of language by dialectically transcending the limitations of our everyday vocabularies, we strip away
false assumptions and normative practices to reveal the “god-terms” that give structure to these hierarchies. In A
Rhetoric of Motives, Burke likens the concept to “the over-all Title of Titles” (252), and in The Rhetoric of Religion
presence not unlike the “ghost in the machine” that characterizes Mac Low’s chance-generated texts. And while Burke offers concrete examples of pure persuasion ranging from Lewis Carroll’s “puzzles that tease as well as entertain” in *Alice in Wonderland* (267) to the series of punishments visited upon the citizens of Babylon in the eighteenth chapter of Revelation (291), he admits that to “talk about [pure persuasion] by citing particular examples of rhetoric is always to find it embodied in the ‘impurities’ of advantage-seeking” (285). The necessarily addressed nature of rhetorical interaction entails that any example of persuasion will include both a rhetor and an audience—a situation that, in turn, entails the presence of impure advantage-seeking in even the “purest” of examples. Pure persuasion is thus present everywhere and nowhere at the same time; it is “always to be on the verge of being lost, even as it is on the verge of being found” (285). Once it makes persuasion possible by interposing distance between individuals, rhetoric immediately seeks to transcend that distance and erase the very grounds of its existence. Like the physics of magnetism, it repels in order that attraction may occur.

This stabilizing tension between a rhetoric that appeals and a rhetoric that repels complicates Burke’s more popular formulations regarding persuasion-as-identification, and over the years, analyses of the *Rhetoric* have tended to minimize (if not ignore outright) the role of pure persuasion in the Burkean system (Crable 215-16). And yet, according to his own dialectical conception of symbolic communication, we cannot have “impure” persuasion without pure persuasion. Unless rhetoric is to be the instrument of its own demise, there must exist within every rhetorical interaction a certain amount of distance, a certain degree of erasure, that forestalls the perfect consummation of the persuasive courtship. Burkean pure persuasion thus relies upon “a deliberate withdrawal from the communicative act, so that the symbol system one

---

(1961) he draws an analogy to the relationship between a book and its title: “Insofar as the title of a book could be said to sum up the nature of that book, then the breakdown of the book into parts, chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words would be technically a ‘fall’ from the Edenic unity of the title, or epitomizing ‘god-term’” (175).
employs requires no reception—and no commensurate validation—from another. It is language which locates its acme solely in its own utterance” (Butler 260). Despite the vital role it plays as a formal condition underlying all persuasive acts, pure persuasion lacks the discursive embodiment necessary to announce its presence via concrete examples or illustrations of its rhetorical power.

Jackson Mac Low’s work with chance operations suggests another way of thinking about Burke’s elusive concept. A rhetoricized reading of the “5 biblical poems” not only enables us to “see” pure persuasion in action, but also to develop a fuller understanding of how Mac Low’s otherwise poetics creates the conditions for social change. Burke insisted again and again on the need to recognize the “intensely moral” nature of language—to see how even the most ordinary speech is built upon “names for objects [that] contain the emotional overtones which give us the cues as to how we should act toward these objects” (PC 177). And, much like Mac Low, he maintained that new linguistic arrangements argue for new attitudes toward the world.25 But the “5 biblical poems” represent more than simply a “new linguistic arrangement”; their radically illegible forms challenge every preconception about language and meaning that Mac Low’s audience is likely to possess. As the quintessential example of Burkean “impiety,” these poems disrupt readers’ meaning-making processes and demand a new hermeneutic orientation.26 This new orientation, we will see, argues for a more open, more ethical reading praxis that models a more open, more ethical attitude toward social relations.

25 Burke discusses this relationship in multiple works, but the most sustained treatment appears in Permanence and Change. “In this sense,” Burke writes, “any new way of putting the characters of events together is an attempt to convert people, regardless of whether it go by the name of religion, psychotherapy, or science. It is impious, by our definition, insofar as it attacks the kinds of linkage already established. It attempts, by rationalization, to alter the nature of our responses” (86-87).

26 In Permanence and Change, Burke argues that our understandings of the world are shaped by the “orientations” we adopt toward it. Any act or speech that fits within the bounds of a given orientation is considered “pious,” while those that challenge this orientation are “impious” in nature. See Part II of the text (“Perspective by Incongruity,” pp. 67-163) for Burke’s extensive exploration of the pious-impious conflict and its effect on social relations.
Reading Chance Operations as Pure Persuasion

In order to focus more fully on the relationship between Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” and Burke’s concept of pure persuasion, I want to ask a question fundamental to the rhetoric of poetic illegibility: *Just how, exactly, are we supposed to read these poems?* As chance-generated texts that reject the normative strictures of conventional diction, grammar, and syntax, the “5 biblical poems” provide readers neither the innovative calls for oppositional communities featured in *Local History* nor the experimental forays into non-discursive symbolization that give structure to *My Life*. For both Hunt and Hejinian, the avant-garde poem rarely manifests illegibility at the level of the individual line or sentence; it is when we read in larger units (multiple lines, complete poems, entire sections of a book) that we begin to notice the inadequacy of conventional meaning-making strategies. As previously noted, however, Mac Low’s work with chance operations attempts to disrupt reading at its most basic and fundamental level by altering the linguistic material of the poetic line itself. In order to become intelligible, the line made otherwise requires a reading made otherwise—and it is precisely this new relationship between texts and readers that Mac Low believed could trigger new understandings of “pleasure” and “pain” that might ultimately lead to significant changes in social relations. A properly rhetoricized reading of the “5 biblical poems” should explore these changes by taking into account not only how we make our way through these illegible texts, but also why we are placed in this position as readers and who has ultimate control over the performance of Mac Low’s poems. In the process of addressing these concerns, a rhetoricized reading also reveals how the text works to make the world otherwise through the Burkean rhetoric of pure persuasion.

With lines like “/___/ this along Anak—/___/” in the 2nd biblical poem (*RW* 23) and “In no it so /___/ the and the /___/ /___/ that hosts: upon of the /___/ even /___/ /___/ /___/ /___/”
The /___/ so /___/ eye /___/ ass, /___?/” in the 5th (33), Mac Low’s poems provide readers very little guidance for negotiating their tumultuous terrain. In fact, much of Mac Low’s text appears to be little more than a random collection of words and silences. As readers, we are immediately asked to decide between a host of interpretive strategies for approaching these texts; the poems’ refusal to communicate in any recognizable form or language tasks readers with the burden of charting their own way through this linguistic material. By placing so much responsibility on the readers’ shoulders, obscure and/or indeterminate works like Mac Low’s assert their “irritating presence, pleasurable or not, as radically unfinished thought. They give the reader real work to do” (Retallack 48). The difficulty of such work can fluctuate dramatically within the same poem, or even within the same stanza. Take the fourth stanza of the 1st biblical poem, for instance. The tenth line (“And Lord the pass right /___/ the”) appears relatively straightforward, following basic rules of grammatical predication and containing only one silent event (RW 19). Yet the line directly preceding it (“/___/ /___/ /___/ of /___/”) contains only one word—a preposition with no object—and five silent events. Even with extensive knowledge of the poem’s source text and the context provided by the surrounding lines, the amount of work required to read this stanza is likely to strike readers as something more akin to the irritation rather than the pleasure Retallack refers to in her analysis of “radically unfinished” poetry.

Given this situation, what is a reader to do? Any attempt to uncover some hidden discursive meaning—either by guessing at the words and phrases omitted in each of the text’s silences, or by searching for a copy of the Jewish Publication Society Hebrew Bible in order to replicate Mac Low’s compositional method—misses the point of chance operations altogether. The text is not a code to be broken or riddle to be solved. And even if it were, one need only pick up a nearby Bible and read the Old Testament in order to “solve” the problem of the missing
text. No, what is needed is a way of reading that shifts our focus off the *message* of these scriptural palimpsests and onto the *materials* of each poem instead. Mac Low does offer a few suggestions for enacting this shift in a brief essay entitled “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems,’” but most of the guidelines provided therein pertain to public performances rather than private readings of his work. One notable exception, however, does seem applicable to individual readings, especially as it pertains to the silences contained within the poem:

Lines may be read at any tempo within the limits of normal conversational speech, and within these limits the tempo may change freely, and individual words, including those determining silence durations, may have *any duration*, but the spoken words must always be coherent and intelligible. . . . Words must be read soberly and seriously, but without any fake solemnity or any other artificial type of delivery. Even in the pulse-beat methods, the regular beat ought not to seem mechanical. *Silences must never be hurried.* *(RW 16-17, original emphasis)*

By emphasizing the need to read both the words and the silences that appear in each of the “5 biblical poems”—not to mention the need to read both events at a similar speed—Mac Low suggests an equivalence between presence and absence that contradicts many of the core assumptions underlying traditional Western thought. Whereas a line like “/#/#/#/#/#/#” may initially appear to consist of only one word (and thus to contain only one significant event), Mac Low wants readers to treat the line as if it contains six equally important words, none of which should be read more hastily than the others. Whether a six-event line consists of six words (like “me households I Beriah and How” from the previous stanza) or one

---

27 The suggestions Mac Low offers for performing the “5 biblical poems” mirror those listed in his more widely cited essay, “Methods for Reading and Performing Asymmetries,” which first appeared nearly a decade later.
word should make no difference to the text’s readers. In each case, the poet asserts, we must read at roughly the same pace and take note of exactly the same amount of material.

This move has significant ontological and ethical ramifications for how audiences experience these poems. If how we read is determined by what we read, and if Mac Low can persuade readers that both words (presence) and silences (absence) should “never be hurried,” then even the most illegible moments in the poem—those of the silent event—cannot remain so for very long. And once the absence of linguistic content can be read as its own special kind of presence, the poem establishes a new reading paradigm that renders even the quietest lines fully audible. Granted, readers are unlikely to feel confident in their ability to “read” the poem’s silences: Do I simply hesitate for a beat before moving on? Do I say the word “silence” in my head? Do I replace the word “silence” with some other kind of place-holding sound? Yet no matter which strategy an individual reader chooses, the “5 biblical poems” establish a basic set of ground rules for a new, more egalitarian form of reading that considers all poem-events equally present and valuable.

According to this new paradigm, the text of Mac Low’s poems signifies not on the discursive level of thoughts, messages, or meanings, but instead on the formal level of a verbal structure that can be appreciated for its intricacy and design. In other words, the chance-generated text does not result in poetic language that means something, but rather in poetic form that does something. In Reading the Illegible, Craig Dworkin calls attention to the role that form

---

28 Mac Low’s “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems’” provides some guidance in this regard, but since he offers (at minimum) seven different methods for the performance of this text, each reader is required to make numerous strategic decisions on his/her own.

29 I use the term poem-event in this context to avoid potential confusion between the “events” that form the basic building blocks of Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” and the “events” that make up everyday life. I am not claiming that these poems immediately transform the extra-textual world into a more egalitarian or democratic place. Instead, I want to suggest that, if we approach them from a rhetorical perspective, they have the potential to serve as a model for new ways of thinking about (and using) language in our everyday lives.
plays in our ability to make sense out of seeming nonsense, contending that “form must always necessarily signify but any particular signification is historically contingent and never inherently meaningful or a priori” (xx). Thus, any interpretation a reader might advance for the line “Lord, thy /___/ Saul /___/ /___/ cut unto /___/ away /___/” from the 4th biblical poem (RW 25) must be understood as a product of that reader’s radically idiosyncratic subject position. Given the widespread impact of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought over the past half-century, this is not a novel claim. What makes the “5 biblical poems” so unique, however, is the degree to which Mac Low’s use of chance operations and textual erasure inscribes Dworkin’s “historically contingent and never inherently meaningful” theory of signification directly into the text itself. An ontology that recognizes the co-presence of both words and silences requires that we read each event equally. Yet absent any coercion from outside sources (Mac Low’s paratexts, critical commentaries, other readers), there is simply no way to read the gaps in “Lord, thy /___/ Saul /___/ /___/ cut unto /___/ away /___/” without recourse to one’s own private (i.e., contingent) thoughts. And since, somewhat paradoxically, the “very act of recognizing moments of illegibility cancels their status as such” (Dworkin 155), these poems become most legible at precisely the moment we realize the constitutive role that erasure (as absence, as silence) plays in the formal composition of Mac Low’s work.

For readers unfamiliar with these texts, Mac Low’s methods may seem counter-intuitive. Why go to all this trouble—and, in the process, risk alienating potential audiences—to argue for better ways of living in the world with one another? The answer, at least as Kenneth Burke would have it, is that each and every “persuasion that succeeds, dies” (RM 274). In order to be maximally effective, rhetorical art cannot simply advance an argument and wait for its audience

---

30 See, for example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory (Harvard UP, 1988) on the contingent nature of literary interpretation and evaluation.
to act; once the audience becomes consubstantial with the speaker/author and they agree to act together, the distance necessary for argumentation disappears. Given Burke’s conception of persuasion-as-identification, then, avant-garde poets like Mac Low can only make lasting changes in the structure of society if they produce arguments capable of “go[ing] on eternally (as a form does)” by creating within the argument some degree of interference which can prevent the full consummation of the appeal (RM 274). The chance-governed deployment of erasure in the “5 biblical poems” provides just this kind of interference, fracturing the word of God according to the laws of chance—and not according to the whims of either the poet or the reader. This fragmentation creates a triple silencing effect within each performance of Mac Low’s text: the poet’s ego silences God by writing through the Old Testament; chance silences the poet’s ego by determining the form and content of each poem; and the reader silences the text by imposing her own historically contingent interpretation on the “5 biblical poems.” And with no single voice capable of claiming authoritative control over the poems’ meaning, the resulting hermeneutic instability creates the conditions for a Burkean “unending conversation” in which a rotating chorus of voices will make themselves heard in perpetuity (PLF 110). The peculiar combination of chance and silence that marks the composition of these poems results in a work that embodies the concept of pure persuasion by inviting readers to make sense of the chaos.


32 Often referred to as the “Burkean Parlor,” this image remains one of Burke’s most recognizable passages. “Where does the drama get its materials? From the ‘unending conversation’ that is going on at the point in history when we are born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. . . . However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress” (PLF 110-11).
while, at the same time, erecting barriers to readerly interpretation that ensure no definitive “answer” or “reply” to the text’s appeals can ever be made.

One of the best examples of how this process plays out within the “5 biblical poems” is the opening stanza of the first poem in Mac Low’s series. Beginning with the first word of Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning…”), the first seven lines of the stanza seem familiar enough that readers might be tempted to try and “solve” the puzzle of Mac Low’s text:

```
In /___/ /___/ wherein the /___/ /___/ made
/___/ /___/ eat lest they /___/ and taken /___/ /___/ the eight
/___/ twenty /___/ /___/ shalt waters the ark /___/ /___/ /___/
heart any /___/ /___/ servant same sons /___/ /___/
And and of (RW 18)
```

Given the frequent appearance of words (rather than silences) in these lines, the poem invites readers to develop interpretations of the text through the use of conventional reading strategies. This appeal is likely to be especially strong for readers well-versed in Christian theology, as words like “twenty,” “waters,” “ark,” “servant,” and “sons” recall important details from Old Testament narratives related to the fall of man and the life of Noah. And, much like those “puzzles that tease” which Burke saw as one of the primary appeals in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, these opening lines foster a kind of “social intercourse” between text and reader that suggests a common ground may eventually be reached as the reading “courtship” plays out (RM 267-68). Yet just when the poem’s “Mad Libs” form begins to seem manageable—when the
reader feels as though she will be able to solve this Biblical riddle—the silences overtake the poem in lines 8-11 and disrupt conventional reading strategies:

\[
/\_\_\_/ \_\_\_/ \_\_\_/ in \_\_\_/ thou against unto took \_\_\_/ \_\_\/_
/\_\_/of \_\_\_/ \_\_\_/ Kadesh \_\_\_/  
be that and \_\_\_/ and \_\_\_/ \_\_\_/ 
\_\_\_/ \_\_\_/ \_\_\_/ left  
\]

(RW 18)

Other than the name of the ancient city “Kadesh” in line 9, the stanza closes with a series of prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and silences that offers scant evidence of any message or meaning related to Mac Low’s source material. Without warning, the interpretive “clues” embedded in the first seven lines are stripped away by the poet’s rolls of the dice. In their absence, audiences must discover new ways of reading the text before them.

This last point is vitally important if we are to understand why, as readers, we have been placed in such an unfamiliar position in relation to the text. Rather than continuing to perpetuate an authoritarian aesthetic in which the poet’s monologic voice dictates the terms of social change (a la literary propaganda), the open, unfinalizable nature of these poems fosters an egalitarian reading process that invites readers into the text as co-creators of poetic meaning.\(^{33}\) The passive receiver thus becomes an active maker, acquiring both the agency and the responsibility that attend this new role—one closely resembling that of Burke’s ideal rhetorician:

A rhetorician, I take it, is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one

---

\(^{33}\) In *Poetic Revolutionaries: Intertextuality & Subversion* (Rodopi, 2014), Marion May Campbell contends that intertextuality and fragmentation play a pivotal role in creating the necessary conditions for social change. This argument grows out of her primary claim that “the further ironising and macro- and micro-shattering of intertextual play within the text open out a space which might go from the ironising room for maneuver, with the shifts of desire which this effects in the reader, to a more forceful and potentially subversive critique of the host culture. As readers in turn speak and write their *othered* desire back to the culture at large, might this not incrementally lead to radical shifts in the desiring collectivity?” (14, original emphasis).
another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly
developed, can lead to views transcending the limitations of each. (“Rhetoric—
Old and New” 203)

And while we see similar shifts in the work of Hunt and Hejinian, Mac Low’s systematic and
sustained use of silence inscribes within the “5 biblical poems” a degree of indeterminacy
unmatched in the work of his peers. To read the poems’ silences is, in effect, to consign the text
to a permanent state of unknowability. Or, returning to the work of Craig Dworkin, we might say
that “reading the illegible nullifies its own account in the precise moment of its construction and
obliterates the very object it would claim to have identified, creating a new space of erasure
which cannot itself be read” (155). The game, the play, the mystery of continual erasure that
marks Mac Low’s text is, from a Burkean perspective, a driving force in the poems’ appeal.

“[A]s students of rhetoric,” Burke writes, “we concede the great persuasive power of mystery”
(RM 278). That such “mystery” is primarily generated through the non-egoic process of chance
operations only serves to cement the poems’ standing as an embodiment of pure persuasion—as
a type of self-motivating appeal that acquires meaning “only by prolonging or delaying the act”
of acquiring meaning (RM 273).

What this perpetual delay grants us, however, remains uncertain. Burke himself was less
than forthright regarding the telos of pure persuasion, remarking only that the “standoffishness”
it generates is instrumental in “perpetuating [the] genuine ‘freedom of rhetoric’” (RM 271).

Subsequent applications of the concept have explored this “freedom” in various contexts. In a
study of Chinese Nüshu performance, Lin-Lee Lee sees in pure persuasion a ritualistic means of
attaining “personal or symbolic transcendence, expressing or reaffirming community, or
maintaining social bonds” (405). More recently, Dale M. Smith has explored the social utility of
“pure” and “impure” persuasion in his study of the anti-war poetry and correspondence of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. Regarding the “5 biblical poems,” however, I propose that Mac Low eschews these more local concerns in favor of a far-reaching critique of authorial ethos—one that raises serious concerns about understandings of the speaking subject that trace all the way back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In order to construct a more ethical model of contemporary discourse communities, these poems argue, we must find a way to undermine the power and privilege associated with the one who is speaking. And the primary catalyst driving this critique is the “sacrifice” of poetic legibility brought about by Mac Low’s signature admixture of chance operations and textual erasure.

**The Ethos of Erasure, The Ethics of Illegibility**

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle establishes what has long been the dominant model of rhetorical ethos. Quoting from Book 1, Chapter 2:

> The first kind [of persuasion] depends on the personal character of the speaker . . . Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. (105-07)

Aristotle’s emphasis on the speaker here should in no way be surprising. As a collection of lessons intended for the instruction of nascent orators, the *Rhetoric* displays an understandable

---

focus on the actions and characteristics of the ideal speaking subject. And while the text clearly states that ethos emerges out of what a rhetor says (i.e., the perceived character of the *speech*) and not who a rhetor is (the perceived character of the *speaker*), subsequent applications of Aristotle have tended to gloss over this distinction in favor of a conception of ethos that is embedded in individual bodies or personalities. Over the centuries, such elision has been at least partially responsible for two troubling developments. The first is the near-automatic ennobling of the speaking subject. The second involves the concomitant silencing of the Other—those ostensibly nameless, faceless bodies for whom traditional models of discourse have left no room to speak. Aristotelian ethos is thus a double-edged sword: powerfully effective for analyses of the speaking subject’s persuasive capacities, but alarmingly reductive with respect to the identity this subject is assumed to possess. Any attempt to establish a more open and ethical “otherwise” poetics—not to mention an “otherwise” rhetoric—must make a radical break with Aristotelian understandings of ethos that focus too narrowly on the “personal character” of “good men.”

In the case of Jackson Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems,” this break is carried out via the “sacrificial” interplay between non-egoic composition and pure persuasion. The link between

---

35 Judy Holiday’s “In[ter]vention: Locating Rhetoric’s Ethos” (*Rhetoric Review* 28.4 (2009): 388-405) suggests that a shift away from these reductive conceptions of rhetorical ethos has been underway for the past two decades. These new understandings incorporate “the social nature of ethos” and move beyond “simplistic or modernist definitions of ethos as individual ‘character’—where character might denote a rhetor’s reputation, a rhetor’s intrinsic character, or a textual performance enacted and controlled by a rhetor” (389, original emphasis).

36 The translator’s use of terms like “personal character” and “good men” has no doubt contributed to this development (Aristotle 105-07). See the Introduction to Bradford Vivian’s *Being Made Strange* (SUNY Press, 2004) for a more extended discussion of Aristotelian ethos and the assumption that “an outward display of virtue corresponded to an analogous inner state” (10).

37 Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, U of Illinois P, 1988: 271-313) is perhaps the most famous commentary on this dilemma. Of particular interest to the current analysis of Mac Low and Burke is Spivak’s argument that attempts to study “the mechanics of the constitution of the Other” offer greater potential for social intervention than do “invocations of the authenticity of the Other” (294, original emphasis). For a more recent analysis of the role of the Other in American poetry, see John Wrighton’s *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry* (Routledge, 2010).
pure persuasion and religious sacrifice finds its roots in Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives*, where he likens rhetorical “interference” to the symbolic enactment of self-sacrifice (269). Burke argues that religious self-abnegation involves “a kind of sacrifice, a willed variant of dying, dying to this or that particular thing (‘mortification’), not because of those things in themselves, but because the yielding of them represents the principle of sacrifice in the absolute” (266, original emphasis). For sects founded upon ascetic principles, “attaining transcendence [requires] dying ‘dialectically’”—in other words, killing off a part of oneself so that the remaining parts may attain a higher spiritual plane. Both theologically and rhetorically, these principles are infinitely repeatable: as long as the devotee never engages in complete self-sacrifice, there will always be room for the continued “deliberate, disciplinary ‘slaying’ of any motive that, for ‘doctrinal’ reasons, one thinks of as unruly” (*RR* 190). Each successive act of self-denial moves the devotee higher up the spiritual hierarchy, but anything short of the ultimate sacrificial act—the Crucifixion—leaves room for future attempts at mortification (*RM* 266; 293).

Pure persuasion, as a form of self-abnegation, operates according to the same logic as the sacrificial motive. Just as religious asceticism enables one to transcend the human realm and approach that of the absolute Godhead, rhetorical communication involves a “dialectical transcending of reality through symbols” which “culminates in pure persuasion, absolute communication, beseechment for itself alone, praise and blame so universalized as to have no assignable physical object” (275). Burke’s discussion of pure persuasion considers the rhetorical

---

38 At this point in the text, Burke hints at yet another parallel between sacrifice and pure persuasion: the necessary *interference* provided by “religious injunctions against suicide in the literal sense” (*RM* 266). In order to perpetuate the sacrificial motive, forms of religious self-denial must contain within themselves an absolute, unreachable limit that can act as a check on the extent to which the individual will go in search of spiritual transcendence. Much like the self-interference of pure persuasion that secures the “freedom of rhetoric” (271), the suicide prohibition attempts to guarantee the “freedom of sacrifice” by ensuring that total identification with a belief in self-denial (or with a specific religious martyr) will not result in the taking of one’s own life.

39 Burke does add a caveat to this comparison, noting that, “while not essentially sacrificial, [pure persuasion] *looks* sacrificial when matched against the acquisitive” (*RM* 269, original emphasis).
and the sacrificial motives as both originating “in a form, in the persuasiveness of the hierarchic order itself” (276, original emphasis). This shared origin, in turn, allows us to recognize elements of each motive in the mechanisms of the other. Every instance of sacrifice argues for one’s attainment of a higher or a purer spiritual ground—just as every instance of rhetoric sacrifices at least a portion of its effectiveness in order to attain its immediate ends. The imbricated nature of these motives is, in Burke’s estimation, ultimately productive of an even more comprehensive model of rhetorical communication: “The mere fact that a withholding, or an interposing of distance, is worked into a system (as it is with the athleticism of the ascetic), makes for an intellectual fullness which may then be transformed into an instrument having new possibilities of gain” (272).

Borrowing, then, from this conception of rhetorical self-sacrifice, we can read Mac Low’s use of chance operations and textual erasure in the “5 biblical poems” as a method for sacrificing the privileged authority of both his religious source text and his own poetic ego. In the process, the poems evoke Burke’s “instrument having new possibilities of gain” by removing the specter of authorial control and creating an open space in which the reader must assume a large share of the responsibility for the production of textual meaning. Mac Low’s illegible text thus makes evident what is always latent in the rhetorical transaction between speaker and audience: that the “hierarchical relation between the two is reversible in both directions” (Wess 212, emphasis added). Unlike the one-way relations that characterize Bakhtin’s model of monologic discourse, the “5 biblical poems” make possible a dialogic exchange in which the “speaker defers to his audience to persuade it to defer to him, each in effect taking turns stepping down and stepping up in a game of hierarchical chairs” (212). These alternating deferrals of

---

40 For more on Burke’s extensive investigations of the ordered hierarchy underlying his theory of pure persuasion (and symbolic action as a whole), see Bryan Crable’s “Distance as the Ultimate Motive: A Dialectical Interpretation of A Rhetoric of Motives” in Rhetoric Society Quarterly 39.3 (2009): 213-39.
authority function, in Robert Wess’s reading of Burke, as sacrificial acts capable of securing “the possibility of rhetorical grace”—the capacity to speak and to be heard within a discourse community that recognizes the speaking and the hearing of multiple subject positions (215).

The self-sacrifice that defines both chance operations and pure persuasion ultimately produces a situation in which, as Bradford Vivian argues in Being Made Strange, ethos is no longer understood as “the representation of an essential human identity” (103-04), but results instead from “the discursive production of subject positions through transformations in ways of thinking, knowing, and speaking” (103). Vivian’s model of ethos relies on a conception of rhetoric’s “middle voice” which positions the rhetorical agent as a discursive construct in need of perpetual maintenance. By recognizing the speaking subject for what it does (speaking) rather than for what it is (subject), rhetoric in the middle voice “suggests a conception of being as an occurrence, not an essence; as an event without origin or telos; as a phenomenon without essential meaning” (91). This destabilization of being entails a similar destabilization of ethos, which now must be continually renegotiated via rhetorical discourse. And for Vivian, the ethical quality of this discourse is determined by its ability to foster ongoing social and political conversations that invite contributions from the entire range of subject positions (100-01).

---

41 Vivian contextualizes these remarks in the Introduction to Being Made Strange, claiming that he “will argue for a conception of ethos no longer based on either ‘character’ or ‘custom,’ on either a private or a public self, but generated by the discursive practices that engender such categories and infuse them with meaning and value in social, political, and ethical contexts” (14-15, original emphasis).

42 “The most dramatic ramification of the middle voice, therefore, is its ability to undermine the dialectical logic opposing subject to object upon which basic metaphysical ontology is predicated. To develop a conception of rhetoric in the middle voice is to develop a conception of rhetoric in which the rhetorical agent is not a subject exterior to the order of discourse but a form of subjectivity that is itself discursively engendered, maintained, and transformed” (Vivian 60).

43 Although less concerned with rhetorical ethos than with philosophies of being, Ewa Ziarek’s An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy (Stanford UP, 2001) takes a similar approach to reimagining traditional models of subjectivity. “I argue that the emphasis on discontinuous becoming shifts the ethical problematic from the concern with the universal norms of ethical behavior to the task of transforming the subjective and social forms of life beyond their present limitations. Consequently, the ethos of becoming poses and redefines the question of agency and freedom of historically constituted subjects: no longer seen as an attribute or a possession of the subject, freedom is conceptualized as an engagement in praxis” (15).
the “5 biblical poems,” Mac Low’s erasure of The Word compels readers to participate in the conversation by filling in the blanks, just as the presence of these blanks compels meaning beyond mere “filling in” and toward a more dynamic, more mutable system of signification.

The erasures that mark the closing stanza of the “3rd biblical poem” suggest a key entry point into the kinds of “unending conversations” imagined by Burke and Vivian:

/___/ in men of /___/

we /___/

/___/ /___/ /___/

/___/ /___/ unto /___/ /___/ man

prayed /___/ /___/ /___/ /___/ /___/ /___/ (RW 24)

According to conventional reading methods, this stanza contains the least “content” of any included in Mac Low’s series. Of the 21 poem-events, only seven are words; the rest consist of randomly generated silences standing in for columns of scripture that appear somewhere between Judges 6:4 and First Samuel 1:10. And yet if we take the silences seriously—if we do not “hurry” them in our reading of the text—then the stanza must be read as no less meaningful than any of the other stanzas in the poem. Each silent event is wholly indeterminate, bounded only by the individual reader’s perception of duration as she attempts to read each gap in the text. The poem’s ethos is thus determined by the multiplicity of voices, readings, interpretations, and subject positions that its discursive formation allows. Once the “normative authority of an ideal and original subject position” is overturned (Vivian 102), the lack of a single, God-like voice to direct persuasive discourse toward impure advantage-seeking makes it possible for each and every member of the audience to join the conversation.44 This active cooperation between reader

---

44 Vivian emphasizes the role that difference and heterogeneity play in his new conception of rhetorical being, arguing that “the ethos of a discourse does not reflect the inherent reason or virtue of a transcendental human
and poem is, in turn, essential to bridging the divide between the aesthetic and the social realms.

“Poetry is a kind of action (symbolic action, a purgative exercise enjoyed in and for itself)” Burke writes. “And the reader, with varying degrees of fidelity, does symbolically reenact the poem by such kinds of inchoate ‘suffering-with’ as are called sym-pathy or em-pathy” (“Watchful of Hermetics” 39-40, original emphasis). Reading together is acting together, and acting together fosters communal identifications rooted in the symbolic structures of shared experience. As a text that calls for open, social reading practices, the “3rd biblical poem” embraces its own illegibility in order to create the necessary conditions for “suffering-with” or “enjoying-with” one another in a truly polyvocal ethos.45

Nowhere is this polyvocal acting together more apparent than in the fifth and final poem in Mac Low’s series, whose title suggests a unique reading process: “21.21.29., the 5th biblical poem (for 3 simultaneous voices) the 1st biblical play” (RW 32). Mac Low’s “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems’” acknowledges this difference, stating pointedly that, while the previous four pieces “may be performed as solos or simultaneities,” this poem “must be read by three voices” (16, original emphasis). Any public performance of the text, then, would guarantee at minimum the simultaneous co-presence of three distinct speaking subjects, as seen here in the opening lines for each of the poem’s “voices”:

VOICE I:

/___/ /___/ /___/ one Lord children /___/ /___/ My the /___/ /___/ /___/ /___/

Lord, /___/ lying, /___/ /___/ /___/ unto

............

______________________________

subject, nor on [sic] a transhistorical essence. Its ethos is produced by discursive differences rather than the representation of an essential identity” (101).

45 This model of polyvocal ethos answers Vivian’s plea to “consider the category of ethos in terms of difference rather than identity, multiplicity instead of unity, and mutation instead of essential continuity” (15).
By giving voice(s) to those very same social reading practices that the “5 biblical poems” have been arguing for all along, this poem/play dramatizes a decentered, destabilized ethos that refuses to privilege any one voice over the others. This performative experience is unique in that it makes plain the need for reading and acting together, for endeavoring in a communal act that emphasizes speaking and listening to one another. Granted, simultaneous oral performance can offer no more insight into the poem’s “message” or “meaning” than can a private reading, especially if the performers follow one of Mac Low’s suggested reading methods and “all read [the poem] from beginning to end, so that their different choices of tempi and durations produce a canon with irregularly varying relations between the voices” (RW 17). What it can do, however, is bring together multiple speaking subjects in the joint exploration of a rhetorical utterance that, much like Burkean pure persuasion, is spoken solely for the pleasure that such speech provides. And when an utterance is cooperative rather than competitive, it models a more ethical relation between Self and Other that remains open to further dialogue at all times.46 Or, as Mac Low himself states in “Methods for Reading and Performing Asymmetries,” “Performers

46 See Timothy Richardson’s Contingency, Immanence, and the Subject of Rhetoric (Parlor Press, 2013). For him, the act of writing initiates “a continual appeal to the Other that both covers over the lack that constitutes the act—its fundamentally contingent nature—and reveals its mechanism in/as necessary repetition. Writing is a way of amplifying the gap in the written (as that essential, formal aspect of which all writing shares) while trying at the same time to cover over the gap by shifting from the temporal to the logical, from narrative to ultimate terms” (100).
should try always to be both inventive and sensitive. As in all my other simultaneities, the most important ‘rules’ are: ‘Listen’ and ‘Relate’” (RW 115, original emphasis).

The final biblical poem thus exemplifies Joan Retallack’s poethical wager in its willingness to risk unintelligibility as it “creates a working ethos of attempting—to the utmost—the improbable” (63). In the previous chapter, we saw how Lyn Hejinian’s non-discursive forms advocate for a more poethical stance toward both the aesthetic and the social realms. Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” press this issue even further, stretching commonplace assumptions regarding what is “probable” in poetry past their breaking point. A line like “/___/ /___/ /___/ one /___/ /___/ /___/ /___/ the /___/ the /___/ oil /___/ them, /___/ respond /___/ /___/ /___/” (RW 34) confronts both performers and audience members with fifteen silences and only six words; its presence—not to mention its meaning—is as improbable as anything in Mac Low’s catalog of chance-generated works. And while the more probable nature of contemporary lyric poetry secures a wider audience by shielding readers from uncertainty and simultaneity, avant-garde artists like Mac Low risk not being read in order to secure new ground for the realm of poetic expression. For all its difficulty and obscurity, the poethical text opens the composing, reading, and performing processes to one another and “awkwardly, if good-humoredly, nods to its limitations as it beckons toward the reader for help. A collaborative making of meaning is its only redemption” (Retallack 63). This collaboration extends the poem’s performance beyond an audience’s merely being together into an acting together—and this is the only way to read/redeem the text as anything other than an illegible collection of random words and silences.

“The demands of poethical [performative] praxis,” John Wrighton claims, “would allow not just a recomposition for the audience, nor a recomposition by the audience, but active participation, as part constitutive of the composition” (195, original emphasis). As a text that not only suggests
an obligation toward the Other but also inscribes that obligation into its own composition and performance, the 5th biblical poem opens itself to an array of subject positions in the indefinite play of ethical conversation.\footnote{Ziarek links this obligation to the “freedom” of everyday existence: “By contesting the binary opposition between freedom and responsibility, I propose to redefine freedom in relational terms as an engagement in transformative praxis motivated by the obligation for the Other” (2).}

**Peroratio: “The Pause at the Window, Before Descending into the Street”**

As he looked back on his life’s work in the 2002 essay “Poetry and Pleasure,” Mac Low explained that he eventually came to see chance-governed “methods, and the works made with their help, valuable in themselves. Things happen while using the methods—valuable things—that probably could not have come about without them” (TB xxxii). Readers encountering the “5 biblical poems” for the first time are likely to find the “things” that chance operations makes possible confusing, disorienting, and perhaps even a bit unsettling. Yet over the course of his lengthy career, Mac Low never seemed interested in a poetics of pure shock value. For him, the social significance of these poems originates in their ability to challenge readers’ assumptions regarding poetic form and linguistic meaning. With the “5 biblical poems,” Mac Low deconstructs conventional reading practices and offers readers the freedom to choose their own methods for (re)assembling the language of the Old Testament. To some, this may seem a pointless academic exercise—or perhaps even a blasphemous display of artistic hubris. Yet for Mac Low, the pleasure readers receive from the active, cooperative process of putting language together in new ways is uniquely valuable. It is, first and foremost, an individual pleasure to be treasured in and of itself. But it is also a social pleasure that, over time, may lead to new ways of living and working in the world with one another.
In this chapter’s rhetoricized reading of the “5 biblical poems,” I have attempted to explore both of these “pleasures” as they operate within the text. Much like Burke’s concept of pure persuasion, the poems make no answerable appeals and, instead, revel in the creation of new and unique discursive formations sheerly “because of a satisfaction intrinsic to the saying” (RM 269). But the poems do more than simply “puzzle” or “entertain.” They utilize chance operations and textual erasure to argue for displacing the monologic voice of the poet-as-master (not to mention the voice of God-as-Law) and opening an anarchic space for the negotiation of meaning among poet, text, and audience. As such, it becomes nearly impossible to determine who is speaking at any one time—which in turn makes it nearly impossible to fixate on a speaking ethos for the poems. Are these the words of God? Of Mac Low? Of the poems’ readers? And while the absence of a clearly defined speaker/ethos may lead some to discount the rhetoricity of these texts, I have argued that the poems’ displacement of author-ity actually extends their connection to Burke’s “rhetoric of rhetoric,” pure persuasion. By sacrificing the source text’s control over content, the poet’s control over language, and the reader’s control over interpretation, the “5 biblical poems” perpetuate an appeal that can never be definitively answered because it undermines that appeal in the very process of advancing it. Instead of a self-canceling rhetoric, however, Mac Low’s experiments result in a more ethical discourse that acknowledges its own limitations by incorporating silences in which we can recognize the presence of myriad voices.

Much like the shift from meaning to doing that marks poetry as symbolic action, the “5 biblical poems” shift rhetorical ethos from a quality to be possessed by an individual speaker to a

---

48 The loss of the traditional speaking subject raises important questions about the kinds of argumentation that a text like the “5 biblical poems” can support. Although such questions fall outside the scope of the current chapter, the fact that Mac Low’s text so thoroughly disrupts the conventional tripartite model of the “rhetorical triangle” (speaker, speech, and spoken-to) means that future work is needed to understand precisely what “rhetoric” can look like when produced via chance operations and/or pure persuasion.
characteristic to be demonstrated by an entire discourse community. In this way, the poems attempt to transcend the limitations of a single speaking voice by offering a richer, more complex sense of poetic community.\(^{49}\) Never one to get swept up in utopian fantasies, Burke himself was not fully convinced of the pragmatic value of pure persuasion, cautioning that “no material world could be run on such a motive, not even a world genuinely supernatural in its theory of motives” (\textit{RM} 294). Yet perhaps what is most important about chance-generated artworks like the “5 biblical poems” is not the systems or the motives they provide for running the material world, but the areas of possibility they secure for the pursuit of otherwise social relations. By showing readers how the world \textit{might} be run (and not how it \textit{should} be run), Mac Low’s poems argue for a radical openness toward the world as it exists both within and without the illegible text. In a way strikingly similar to the closing image of the “Pure Persuasion” section in \textit{A Rhetoric of Motives}, the “5 biblical poems” seek to expand the possibilities for ethical action by persuading readers to take full account of “the pause at the window, before descending into the street” (294). For it is only in the pause prior to action—or in the silence prior to speech—that we make way for the Other to accompany us down the staircase and out into the world.

\(^{49}\) Writing on Burke’s uses of the dialectic in \textit{A Rhetoric of Motives}, James Zappen notes that “[s]trategies of this kind do not aim at persuasion in the old or traditional sense or even at identification in its new but simple and limited sense as an identification of a speaker with an audience. Rather, they aim at identification in its larger and more complex sense as transcendence—a ‘co-operative competition’ that has potential to bring together multiple and conflicting assertions in generalizations that are larger and richer than any one of them alone” (295).
CHAPTER FOUR

“WAITING FOR SOMETHING COHERENT TO HAPPEN”: A RHETORICAL (MIS)READING OF JOHN ASHERBY’S GIRLS ON THE RUN

What then are we to do with a body of poetry whose author warns us that we have very little chance of understanding it, and who believes that poetry itself is a lie? Why, misread it, of course, if it seems to merit reading . . . This is what happens to any poetry: no poem can ever hope to produce the exact sensation in even one reader that the poet intended; all poetry is written with this understanding on the part of poet and reader.

John Ashbery, “The Unthronged Oracle” (Other Traditions, 101-02)

He broke off, not wanting to bestir the others, who had in fact ceased to hear, so monotonous was the noise of his voice, like rain that flails the spears of vetch in Maytime, to reap a tiny investment.

So we faced the new day, like a pilgrim who sees the end of his journey deferred forever.

John Ashbery, Girls on the Run (53)

Exordium: Reassessing the “Illegible” Ashbery

As one of American literature’s most celebrated contemporary poets, John Ashbery challenges the common assumption that, in order to be considered “innovative” or “experimental,” a poet must also be obscure. Over the course of a prolific career that stretches back to the mid-1950s, Ashbery has published 25 collections of poems, won nearly every major award a poet can win (including 1976’s “Triple Crown”: The Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Award, and The National Book Critics Circle Award), and attracted a large following of critics and scholars who have made his work the subject of countless reviews, monographs, journal articles, and dissertations. His body of work, like that of his literary forebear Walt Whitman, contains multitudes; his content, according to Andrew DuBois, “is meant to be virtually
“everything” (xiii). As a result, the last half-century has witnessed the birth (and perhaps even the death) of many different poets all bearing the name “John Ashbery.” First, there was Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom’s “Romantic” Ashbery, followed closely by Marjorie Perloff and Bruce Andrews’s “linguistic” Ashbery.\(^1\) John Shoptaw and John Emil Vincent’s “queer” Ashbery dominated the field for a time, but DuBois and Brian Glavey’s grandfatherly image of “late” Ashbery seems to have become the most common framework for discussing his work in the twenty-first century.\(^2\) More than any other postwar American poet, Ashbery’s poems represent a kind of critical Rorschach test, inviting readings that often reveal more about the critic than they do about the text.\(^3\) As David Lehman explains in *The Last Avant-Garde*, “[I]t is Ashbery’s singular fate to come to seem so much the poet of his age that his poetry appears to illustrate all the popular shibboleths of the zeitgeist” (354).

Despite his commercial and critical popularity, there is little debate that the vanguard impulses underlying so many of Ashbery’s poems contribute significantly to the challenge of reading these texts. The poet’s famed “difficulty”—which Glavey links to “the fact that his particular forms of experimentation resist the discourses used to describe avant-garde poetry just as much as they evade traditional understandings of lyric” (528)—manages to excite readers just

\(^1\) For a recent discussion of the “Romantic” Ashbery, see Timothy A. DeJong’s “Mystical Kingdoms: The Postromantic Self in Early Ashbery” (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 57.1 (2015): 1-30). Though less recent, Jody Norton’s “Whispers out of Time’: The Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery” (*Twentieth-Century Literature* 41.3 (1995): 281-305) features a representative investigation in the “linguistic” Ashbery mode.\(^2\) This model of “queer” Ashbery heavily informs Christopher Schmidt’s 2012 essay, “The Queer Nature of Waste in John Ashbery’s *The Vermont Notebook*” (*Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 68.3 (2012): 71-102). See Roger Gilbert’s “Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery’s Recent Poetry” (*Contemporary Literature* 48.2 (2007): 195-226) for an extensive consideration of the impact humor and playfulness have on the poetry of “late” Ashbery.\(^3\) In “Normalizing John Ashbery” (*Jacket* 2, January 1998), Marjorie Perloff discusses the growing impulse among critics to claim different parts of Ashbery’s corpus for their own purposes. She points in particular to a string of pieces written in the 1990s that argue for Ashbery as the literary heir of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. By “take[ing] short extracts from a given Ashbery poem . . . and treat[ing] these extracts as containing within themselves the ‘meaning’ of the poem in question,” these revisionist assessments twist the texts to fit whatever model the critic has in mind. And while Perloff was writing nearly twenty years ago, her critique of these partial readings that support wildly divergent interpretations seems as relevant to Ashbery scholarship in 2015 as it was in the late 90s.
as much as it vexes them. In the poem “No Way of Knowing,” Ashbery even offers, in his own oblique way, a bit of metacommentary on the supposed difficulty of his style:

There is no way of knowing whether these are
Our neighbors or friendly savages trapped in the distance
By the red tape of a mirage. The fact that
We drawled “hallo” to them just lazily enough this morning
Doesn’t mean that a style was inaugurated. Anyway evening
Kind of changes things. (SPCM 56)

With an Ashbery poem, there is often “no way of knowing” precisely what the poet is up to: superficial pleasantries (“hallo”) quickly give way to deeper complexities, and the “mirage” of understanding vanishes as “evening / Kind of changes things.” In recent years, this indeterminacy has become perhaps the poet’s most defining characteristic. Perloff describes Ashbery’s poetics as a “pattern of opening and closing, of revelation and re-veiling, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment” (Poetics 262), and Vincent contends that these oscillations “are as impossible to ignore as intentional effects of applied poetic craftsmanship” (John Ashbery and You 7). As readers, our encounters with Ashbery require sifting through the detours and digressions, the backwaters and blind alleys, in order to construct some provisional “way of knowing” that can be used to navigate our way through the poet’s multitudes.

Unlike the three poets previously discussed in this dissertation, Ashbery occupies a dual position within the larger poetry community. He is both difficult and revered, avant-garde and mainstream, marginal and central. Given the mountain of critical commentary that already exists, it would be a stretch to call his body of work “illegible”—yet his meanings escape definitive analysis again and again. And for some in the “late Ashbery” camp, the slipperiness of these
meanings has finally lost its appeal. One of the most damning of these critiques appears in the penultimate chapter of Andrew DuBois’s *Ashbery’s Forms of Attention* (2006), which lumps all of Ashbery’s work after *Flow Chart* (1992) into one long string of quasi-senile “dotages.” DuBois pulls no punches here, concluding his assessment with the observation that “what is most strongly suggested, when taken together with the deterioration of form, the almost total loss of surface coherence, the fanciful stories, and the reversion to childhood, is the notion of Ashbery as one who can no longer hear nor transcribe with accuracy those conversations going on in his head” (135). For DuBois, Ashbery’s patterns and oscillations have become so mysterious that they no longer have the power to entertain us. In their wake, readers are left with little more than the random jottings of an enfeebled mind.

I want to propose, however, another way of reading this “illegible turn” in Ashbery’s more recent work. By approaching these poems as rhetorical acts undertaken with specific arguments and purposes in mind, I see here a *kairotic* moment for reassessing the illegible Ashbery as a distinct stage in his evolution as a voice of poetic innovation. Yes, the poems of the past two decades do seem less concerned with surface coherence than did Ashbery’s work in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet rather than bemoan the purported failings of this new(er) style, this chapter focuses its rhetorical reassessment of Ashbery’s illegible turn at the level of the individual poem—specifically, the 1999 text *Girls on the Run*—to discover what argumentative purposes such a shift might be serving. As we will soon see, the critical response to this 55-page poem has been limited; what little commentary has been published is fairly dismissive of the book. My analysis challenges the conclusions of these early evaluations by engaging in a

---

4 It should be noted that the “late Ashbery” who has been the focus of so much recent criticism is nowhere near as difficult to read as the author of 1962’s experimental poetry collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*. For more on this text, see David Herd’s “An American in Paris: The Tennis Court Oath and the Poetics of Exile” in *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Palgrave, 2000) and Daniel Kane’s “Reading John Ashbery’s *The Tennis Court Oath* through Man Ray’s Eye” (*Textual Practice* 21.3 (2007): 551-75).
rhetoricized reading of the poem—one that takes seriously both the bizarre tale of the Vivian Girls’ life “on the run” and the even more bizarre source material the poem is loosely based on, the artwork of noted outsider artist Henry Darger.5

Given the rhetorical nature of this approach, it might be more fitting to say that what I am after here is not a reading of Girls on the Run that will negate the criticisms of DuBois and others, but an Ashberyian misreading of the text that focuses more on poetic argument than on poetic meaning. Ashbery raises the possibility of “misreading” in his Charles Eliot Norton Lecture on the poetry of Laura Riding, a legendary “control freak” (his words, not mine) who attempted to dictate readings of her work “with caveats of every sort in the form of admonitory prefaces and postscripts” (Other Traditions 101).6 As seen in the epigraph that opens this chapter, Ashbery then asks, “What then are we to do with a body of poetry whose author warns us that we have very little chance of understanding it, and who believes that poetry itself is a lie? Why, misread it, of course.” For him, misreading involves neither the willful avoidance of the author’s intentions nor the deliberate appropriation of the poem’s content. Instead, misreading emerges out of a tacit (or, in the case of Riding, an explicit) understanding that no reader can ever be expected to faithfully adhere to the poet’s intentions for her creative acts. To misread a poem is to acknowledge the limitations of any one particular reading and then to read on regardless of these hermeneutic boundaries. “One must misread Riding in order to be enriched

---

5 In a recent essay on the philosophical and aesthetic implications of outsider art, David Davies defines the genre as “a kind of art that is marked by its spontaneity, its rawness, and its idiosyncratic and obsessive motifs” (27). Davies notes, however, that these same qualities can be seen in numerous works of art produced by “insiders,” so he adds the qualification that the creators of outsider art are “distinct only in their lack of formal training.” As an untrained artist who devoted his life to creating hundreds of massive, mural-sized paintings and a 15,000-page novel—none of which were intended to be made public—Henry Darger has become one of the most famous outsider artists of the twentieth century.

6 Appropriately titled Other Traditions, Ashbery’s published lectures almost completely ignore his own career as a poet and focus instead on the work of six writers he feels have been unfairly overlooked and understudied by the critical establishment: John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Raymond Roussel, John Wheelright, Laura Riding, and David Schubert.
by her” Ashbery concludes (119), and the same could be said for his own poetry as well. Thus, I want to position my misreading of *Girls* as an argument for an “enriched” understanding of Ashbery’s text that sees more in this poem than the unfortunate aftermath of the poet’s increasing age and productivity.

From a rhetorical perspective, *Girls on the Run* is ideal for exploring the persuasive capacities of the illegible because it appears to offer little (if any) message and little (if any) meaning. Although at times individual lines and sentences appear to make perfect sense, the text’s highly digressive structure challenges readers to generate anything beyond reductive paraphrases or allegorical interpretations of the poem’s twenty-one sections. The task of teasing out the rhetorical implications of these constant shifts between sense and non-sense thus calls for a more comprehensive approach to rhetoricizing Ashbery’s text, one that builds upon the readings performed in previous chapters. By combining the rhetorical insights of Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, Susanne Langer, and Kenneth Burke, my closing chapter takes full advantage of the interpretive resources made possible by the rhetoricizing heuristic to argue for the fundamental role of *perpetual play* in Ashbery’s reimagining of Henry Darger’s Vivian Girls paintings.

After a general overview of the text and a discussion of its source material, I offer a two-part analysis of the poem that positions *Girls on the Run* as a complex argument for the necessity of this “perpetual play” in our efforts to make sense of the world around us. Drawing upon the concepts of presence, communion, non-discursive form, and pure persuasion, I explore how the poem’s foreboding narrative and episodic structure develop a portrait of childhood (and especially queer childhood) lived under the constant threat of erasure. For both the poem’s main characters and its readers, the text argues, the only way to stave off annihilation is to reject the
tyranny of fixed meaning and embrace the infinite play of signification. An experiment in the rhetoric of perpetual return, *Girls on the Run* offers a unique take on one of Ashbery’s career-spanning motifs: the paradoxical belief that, as he states in “Late Echo,” we must “write about the same old things / In the same way, repeating the same things over and over / For love to continue and be gradually different” (*Collected Poems* 673). Relying on textual analysis of Ashbery’s poem, visual analysis of Darger’s paintings, and rhetorical analysis of the poem-as-act, I argue that, much like the Vivian girls themselves, the illegible poem is always “on the run” from the threat of final interpretive closure. By focusing on a series of “tiny investment[s]” that mark key moments in the text, I want to illustrate how *Girls* positions Ashbery’s reader “like a pilgrim who sees the end of his journey deferred forever” (*GOTR* 53). The poem’s success or failure, then, depends largely upon how effectively it can persuade readers that closure and certainty are inimical to the long-term health of both the aesthetic and the social realms.

“Are You Listening . . . / Or Just Insane?”

Even with the additional interpretive freedom that a term like “misreading” grants us, Ashbery’s contemporary poems present numerous challenges for the rhetoricizing critic. Not the least of these challenges is the poet’s own resistance to the idea of messages or arguments in his work. “I guess I don’t think in terms of messages very much,” he claims in a 2011 interview with Christopher Hennessy. “I think more in terms of: I’m going to sit in this room and write something, and when I’m done, we’ll see what it is. I don’t think I ever write out of the feeling of

---

7 cf. Jacques Derrida in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”: “Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. . . . The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (*Writing and Difference* 280).
wanting to [give] someone a specific message” (40). The typical Ashbery poem—if such a thing even exists—manifests this disinterest in conventional models of communication by opting instead for a ludic topography of ever-shifting speakers, registers, and potential audiences. To read anything resembling an “argument” in these “stops, starts, rewinds, fast-forwards, or frank contradictions” (Vincent, JAY 11) requires forgoing conventional predispositions toward order and coherence in rhetorical communication. Otherwise, as one of the many characters to appear in Girls on the Run points out, the reading experience boils down to a pointless game of waiting for something that will never come: “He started. / They all did waiting for something coherent to happen. / Then it was all over” (47). Any rhetorical reading of an Ashbery poem will have to reconcile the absence of an overt audience or message with commonplace understandings of persuasive discourse as a vehicle for convincing someone of something.

In addition to this general concern regarding Ashbery’s reluctance to acknowledge that his poems convey specific messages to readers, Girls on the Run is not one of Ashbery’s more celebrated collections. The book is often glossed over in discussions of his lengthy career, and even his most devoted commenters have remained relatively quiet about the poem. Other than John Emil Vincent’s chapter in John Ashbery and You: His Later Books (2007) and Michael Leddy’s 2002 essay in Jacket magazine, responses to the text have been limited to book reviews and scattered references in considerations of the “late Ashbery” corpus. Among this small cast of respondents, assessments of the text differ significantly from one another. While Brian M. Reed

---

8 Ashbery professes a similar lack of interest in the scholarly publications his large body of writing has inspired. When asked by Mark Ford if he reads much of the criticism related to his work, Ashbery replied, “No. . . . The whole question [of criticism] bores me—except it seems to generate a lot of interest in my work, so I’m quite happy about it” (Ashbery, et al. 58).

9 Marjorie Perloff published a tepid review in Stand (December 1999), and Harold Bloom is quoted on the book’s back cover as believing that Girls “will make its readers happier and wiser”—though this sounds more like a half-hearted bromide than an honest assessment of the text. Ashbery’s other longtime supporters (Helen Vendler, Charles Altieri, John Shoptaw) have not published responses to the work.
calls *Girls* “the edgiest, funniest, and most peculiar Ashbery book since *The Tennis Court Oath*” (177), Roger Gilbert is more restrained in his praise, celebrating the poem’s “purely fabulistic energy” while, at the same time, noting that it lacks the “rhetorical eloquence” of Ashbery’s more famous ekphrastic poem, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (213). Michael Leddy’s initial review lauds the book as “beautiful, comic, and mysterious” (714), but his later, more expansive analysis in *Jacket* virtually ignores Ashbery’s poem and instead focuses on the poet’s “deeply personal identification with Henry Darger” (“Life and Art”). John D’Agata, on the other hand, calls *Girls* “a diary, a dream, a dump, a dead end” in his review, and we have already seen how quickly Andrew DuBois dismisses the text as evidence of a once-great poet in decline. Given the range of these responses to the book—not to mention Ashbery’s prolific output in the 1990s and 2000s—it is little wonder that *Girls on the Run* has not been more widely considered by the poet’s critics. Whatever “messages” Ashbery may or may not be attempting to transmit, the lack of anything approaching a critical consensus suggests the need for another way of reading the Vivian Girls’ narrative.

One possible explanation for these disagreements concerns the text’s relationship with the work of artist Henry Darger, whose watercolor paintings and expansive writings serve as the impetus for Ashbery’s project. While no one questions Darger’s influence on the characters and themes of *Girls*, the degree to which his creations should be used to explain or interpret Ashbery’s poem remains a matter of some debate. Leddy’s “Life and Art” essay frames the text almost entirely in terms of Darger’s influence on Ashbery, while both Vincent and Forrest Gander suggest that it would be a mistake to draw too many direct parallels between Darger’s artistic creations and the events that play out in Ashbery’s adventure story. “Ashbery’s references to Darger’s art,” Gander observes, “thread together radical shifts in tone, quick-change
juxtapositions of the campy, the philosophical, the lighthearted, and the poignant. But such references are fleeting and invariably spliced with other concerns.” In order to read the text rhetorically, however, I think it vital to recognize the fertile middle ground that exists between these two positions. We should be able to read *Girls on the Run* with one eye on Ashbery and the other on Darger, keeping always in mind that this particular incarnation of the Vivian Girls narrative belongs to the poet, not the painter. It is on the very first page of the text, after all, that the unnamed speaker/author picks up a pen and heeds Tidbit’s call to “Write it now . . . / before they get back” (*GOTR* 3). The presence Ashbery affords Darger and his creations throughout the text is surely no accident, and a fuller appreciation of both the poem and its source material is necessary in order to provide a comprehensive misreading of its rhetorical motivations.

As a poem, the picaresque narrative of *Girls on the Run* spans twenty-one sections and features an ever-expanding collection of poetic set pieces. The text’s capaciousness is more than just a simple trick or gag; it creates the space necessary for an Ashberyan children’s adventure story in which each episode never comes to a complete end because new capers are always awaiting the book’s protagonists. And in this particular story, the protagonists are a group of “sisters” belonging to the Vivian family who find themselves constantly fleeing an impending disaster of some kind. I put the word *sisters* in quotation marks here to emphasize that, while Ashbery’s text and Darger’s paintings indicate that these children are female—that the main characters are, in fact, sisters—gender proves a fungible attribute in both artists’ versions of the Vivian Girls. 10 Regardless of their gender, every one of the Vivian children are, as the poem’s title indicates, quite literally “on the run” at all times. In keeping with the book’s episodic narrative, the threats the children must escape change constantly; at various points the girls are

---

10 Art critic Sarah Boxer captures the instability of gender in Darger’s paintings with the pithy observation that he “drew tribes of little girls, and gave some of them little penises” (“He Was Crazy Like a . . . Genius?”). Much more will be said about representations of gender in the third section of this chapter.
avoiding a giant storm, an invading militia, a house that keeps exploding, and a mysterious character (“Shuffle”) who may or may not be intended as a reference to Darger himself. Each of these impending disasters seems serious enough to warrant more extensive description, yet the text is far less interested in exploring the precise nature of the threat than in creating a world where everyone accepts the inevitability of a threat as a basic fact of existence. This acceptance manifests itself in the characters’ repeated refusal to be proactive with respect to the threats that confront them. As in the heading above the book’s opening section (“Girls on the Run after Henry Darger”), the girls are always “after” something important—both in the sense of chasing or seeking something, and in the sense of their perpetual belatedness (3, original emphasis). As the narrative jumps from scene to scene, from disaster to disaster, the stakes never rise any higher and the panic never grows any deeper. “[A]ll we’ve got to do is roll over / and the dream will be over,” one of the children proclaims in section eight (17), and the text’s digressive, dreamlike structure suggests that this assessment might be even more accurate than any of the poem’s characters realizes.

As a way of reinforcing this sense that the Vivian girls’ adventures will never end, Ashbery peoples the textual landscape with a cast of more than ninety different characters. Names and descriptions proliferate seemingly at will—though most of these characters are mentioned once and then never referenced again. And while it’s easy to lose track of the individual names while reading, characters in Girls do sort rather neatly into three main

11 In “On Henry Darger,” photographer Nathan Lerner describes his former tenant as a “shuffling old man, a recluse who never had visitors.” Lerner and his wife are credited with preserving Darger’s work after he was moved to what Lerner describes as “a Catholic old people’s home.”
12 John Emil Vincent suggests that “after Henry Darger” may indicate the presence of an actual chase involving Darger and his creations (JAY 132). As odd as this might sound, it does help explain why “Henry” plays such a small role in Ashbery’s poem: he is chased offstage by the Vivian Girls in the first two pages of the text.
13 Because of Ashbery’s reputation for using various nouns and pronouns to refer to the same subject, many of the characters in Girls on the Run may simply be different iterations of the same person. By my count, the text includes 98 different names, some of which are so generic (e.g., “the mad neighbor” on page 36) that they could easily refer to other characters in the text.
categories: (1) young children belonging to the Vivian family; (2) adult family members and
neighbors who associate with the children; and (3) adult soldiers who are either threatening or
defending the children during an unnamed conflict that erupts at various points throughout the
text. Of course, as is often the case with Ashbery, readers can rarely be certain which characters
should be assigned to which category. On page fifteen alone, the text introduces six new
names—Angela, Bunny, Philip, the preacher, Aunt Clara, and Spider—but remains unclear about
the characters’ roles or associations. Since the first three characters “all wanted to know why it
goes on / all the time” (15), readers can assume that Angela, Bunny, and Philip are members of
the Vivian family. The preacher and Aunt Clara seem to be the adults in this scene, answering
the children’s questions (“it was due to bats”) and admonishing them to either quiet down or
“take it outside.” Yet just as a quaint picture of family order seems to be emerging, the text
introduces a new character who challenges this nascent dynamic:

    Aw, but it’s raining, someone grumbled,
    why can’t we stay inside and have school?
    Yes but the quitter must go far out into the bogs. It’s time for the badgers to nest
    and who is that coming over the hill this time? It’s
    Spider, Angela suggested. (15)

This is the only mention of Spider in the entire poem, and it hardly conveys a clear picture of
who or what this character might be. Angela’s familiarity with Spider implies that s/he is most
likely another member of the Vivian clan, but the name could just as easily refer to an adult
neighbor, a member of the military forces currently protecting the Vivians, or perhaps even the
anthropomorphic incarnation of an actual spider. (The poem features quite a few animal
characters.) A more menacing interpretation is also possible: Spider may be a member of the
enemy forces, who are often said to be gathering just beyond the horizon in preparation for an imminent attack. On its surface, readers encounter a text that seems to operate according to a relatively straightforward typology of character names and descriptions. But as Ashbery introduces more and more characters capable of undermining the boundaries separating each of these types from the others, the poem destabilizes its own organizing principles and calls into question our ability to read markers of identity as stable, fixed quantities.

This hermeneutic instability is, as we have seen, a quintessentially Ashberyan trait, but it also signals an area of convergence with the poem’s source material, the art of Henry Darger. In his work as a writer, painter, and collagist, Darger devoted himself to the creation and expansion of a fantasy world free from the restrictions of everyday life. Ashbery captures a sense of this personal rebellion in the poem’s opening section, which shows “Henry” lashing out at “the Principal” for commanding him to “slop sewage over the horizon”:

What do you want me to do, said Henry,

I am no longer your serf,
and if I was, I wouldn’t do your bidding. That is enough, sir.
You think you can lord it over every last dish of oatmeal
on this planet, Henry said. But wait till my ambition
comes a cropper, whatever that means, or bursts into feathered bloom
and burns on the shore. (4)

That the Principal seeks to banish Henry from a land of his own creation is doubly important. It suggests both a lack of authorial control over his characters—characters that are now being written by Ashbery—and a desire to remain always off-camera, “shuffling” around in the distance in order to better observe his creations. Despite Henry’s protestations, he does, for all
intents and purposes, disappear from the poem after this altercation. And when he reemerges later in the poem as “Shuffle” or “the Creator,” he fails to provide any additional stability to the narrative. “I don’t want to be around when the gang erupts,” Shuffle informs Dimples in section three (8). And then, as if to cement the marginalized position he occupies within his own fictional world, he “sat, eating a cheese sandwich, wondering if it would be his last, / fiddled and sank away.”

Reconciling the version of Henry Darger that appears in Girls on the Run with what we know about the historical figure doesn’t “explain” Ashbery’s poem for us, but it does offer the possibility for insight into the poem’s composition. Born into a poor family just before the dawn of the twentieth century (1892), Darger worked throughout his life as a janitor for various Chicago-area hospitals. He was extraordinarily reclusive, keeping very few friends and spending nearly every hour of every day absorbed in one of three tasks: working at the hospital, partaking in Catholic Mass, or creating terrifyingly beautiful works of art in his apartment. These artworks were, to the best of anyone’s knowledge, never shared with others. They became public only in the final days of Darger’s life, after he had moved out of his apartment and into an elderly care facility; while cleaning out his room, Darger’s landlords found his life’s work and knew they had stumbled upon something of great importance. As a painter, he received no formal training. Darger devoted himself to the project of developing skills in drafting, painting, and collage by imitating the styles of popular Sunday comics and experimenting with watercolor

---

14 The name “Henry” only appears three times in the text: once in the note that opens the first section, and twice on page four. Given their descriptions and actions, Ashbery probably based two other characters on the real-life Darger: “Shuffle” (pp. 8, 34) and “the Creator” (p. 40), both of whom appear in later sections of the poem.

15 For a far more detailed chronicling of Darger’s life experiences, see Jim Elledge’s Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist (Overlook Duckworth, 2013).

16 Darger initially instructed his landlords (Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner) to destroy his belongings when they went to clean out his vacant apartment. According to Elledge, “Initially, Lerner thought Henry was referring to the ‘junk’ that littered the place, but then, after what seemed like an archeological dig, what Henry was really thinking about [his paintings and manuscripts] became crystal clear” (304).
techniques and photographic enlargements of his drawings. According to Clare Carolin and Sherman Sam, Darger sought to retain:

the charm and innocence of the cartoons and colouring books that inspired his compositions . . . He would select a figure or motif from one of these sources, have it photographically enlarged and use this as the basis for his character studies. These were then incorporated into long horizontal compositions drawn on several sheets joined end to end to form a large hinged page. These large compositions—of which Darger made an estimated three or four hundred—are executed mainly in black pen and watercolour, and contain a visible wealth of obsessive craftsmanship and inventive technique including carbon transfer, tracing and collage. (Grayson, Carolin, and Cardinal 58)

His paintings—many of which are more than a foot tall and nearly six feet in length—depict scenes from his 15,000-page novel, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (see Figure 4.1). Often referred to by the shortened title, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, Darger’s epic follows the Vivian Girls and their butterfly-winged, ram-horned angelic protectors as they seek to free hordes of child slaves from the evil Glandelinians (see Figure 4.2). As fantastic as it is graphic, the novel views the never-ending battle between Good and Evil through two separate lenses: the religious struggle between Catholics and atheists, and the national struggle between the Union and the Confederacy during the American Civil War. For Darger, these contests over religious and national identity needed to be constantly re-fought in order to ward off the impending threat of yet another “war storm.”
Figure 4.1 *After M Whurther Run Glandelinians attack and blow up train carrying children of refuge.*

Figure 4.2 Detail of *At Jennie Richee. Storm continues. Lightning strikes shelter, but no one is injured.*
In addition to the acts of sheer violence that feature so prominently in Darger’s artwork, his depictions of the female body—always child-like, often naked, and almost always drawn with male genitalia—problematize commonplace assumptions regarding age, social propriety, and gender (see Figure 4.3). Shortly after the publication of *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery distanced himself from “the more gruesome aspects of [Darger’s] work”—but he was just as quick to note how powerfully the artist’s depictions of young girls evoked the “illustrated children’s books I had when I was very young” (Ashbery, et al. 64-65). As a practical matter, Darger introduced popular images of characters from the Sunday comics to compensate for his own lack of skill as a draftsman. Rhetorically, however, Darger’s paintings capitalize on the sense of nostalgia they create to render adolescent childhood simultaneously familiar and abhorrent. While the faces of the Vivian girls appear to have been stolen from a dream or memory that we all share, their bodies have been defamiliarized beyond recognition. More to the point, these bodies have been irredeemably “queered” in the artist’s attempt to visualize the complex challenges of identity (re)formation. Whether running, fighting, or succumbing to the various torments of the Glandelinian forces, the young female body shows itself to be male in many of the most harrowing scenes from Darger’s narrative.

Most disturbingly, the juxtaposition of brutality and innocence that marks both the discursive and the illustrated versions of *In the Realms of the Unreal* cannot be resolved through appeals to the artist’s original “funny pages” source material. Once Darger appropriates an image for use in his work, it becomes so fully integrated into a system of violence that viewers are forced to recognize both the inherent violence of the comic and the inherent comedy of the violent. Darger, argues Michel Thévoz, “takes [images] out of context, disorients them, and reenchants them. Indeed, he uses these images to reconstruct another narrative ensemble, but in
Figure 4.3 Detail of *At Jennie Richee*. Assuming nuded appearance by compulsion race ahead of coming storm to warn their father.
the process, the images do not reject their origin but persist like foreign bodies, bodies with a disquieting strangeness” (17-18). More than simply unsettling our sense of gender identities, Darger’s fantasy realms unsettle the sense of collective nostalgia that gives shape and meaning to our shared memory of the past. As a practitioner of what Thévoz calls the art of “elliptical deviancy,” Darger critiques universal understandings of gender and history by creating entirely idiosyncratic artworks whose “pathology points out the logic of psychological or mental processes” (19). Whether we find such deviancy compelling (as do Carolin, Sam, and Thévoz) or revolting (as do many of Darger’s critics) seems in large part to depend on our willingness to accept either the “pathology” or the “logic” as a representative term for everyday experience.

Ashbery’s decision to set *Girls on the Run* in this “pathological” realm has important ramifications for our experience as readers. As a text both literally and figuratively littered with names, descriptions, jump cuts, and switchbacks, the poem never allows readers time to pause and reflect on the narrative logic undergirding the Vivians’ adventures. This stands in direct contrast to many of the newspaper comic strips that seem to have influenced Darger’s paintings (*Gasoline Alley*, *Dick Tracy*, and especially *Little Annie Rooney*), in which narrative development is guided by a fairly rigid storytelling pattern.¹⁷ Even though readers know from the outset that their favorite characters are going to encounter and resolve a weekly conflict, share a good laugh in the process, and then set out for new adventures, the comics’ narrative logic compels further reading as events progress toward the always-present next installment. The serialized nature of the newspaper comic promises (and delivers) both conflict and resolution each and every week. Yet for Ashbery’s Vivian Girls and their adult companions, each of the poem’s “installments” serves only to strengthen the sense that their constant fleeing from

¹⁷ See Chapter Three of Michael Moon’s *Darger’s Resources* (pp. 79-99) and Chapter Five of Jim Elledge’s *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy* (pp. 153-95) for more on the relationship between Darger’s creations and their Sunday comics inspirations.
unknown terrors will never be resolved, that it will remain “ever this way / until it was past time to become ‘normal’ again” (GOTR 12). As more and more characters within the poem come to recognize the illogic behind their existence, the text deepens its engagement with Darger’s “realms” and exposes the everydayness of its pathology. Many of the children (and more than a few of the adults) see the absurdity of their situation and compare their lives to “dreams” (5), “fantasies” (10), or a “daydream” (26). An unnamed narrator in section four takes this self-awareness one step further, asserting that “our doom ringing with half-realized / fantasies, is a promise of a new beginning on another continent. / Only we must get out of here” (10). Yet the text continually refuses to release the Vivians, their protectors, and their persecutors from its dreamlike enchantment, preferring instead to repeatedly reset itself with a new scene, a new stable of characters, and a new threat with which to menace them. This constant multiplying of alternative scenarios may in fact be the most “real” threat facing the sisters and their companions. When a character in section eight asks, “Are you listening . . . / or just insane[?]” (26-27), the poem leaves open the possibility that both options are simultaneously correct—that to listen to the text is to be insane.

Yet no matter how “insane” this text, its author, or its “Creator” Henry Darger might be, to read the presence of pathology as a contaminant—that is, to treat the poem as diseased rather than as a poem—is to miss an opportunity for better understanding the illegible artwork as a viable strategy for argument and persuasion. Once we begin to examine these choices as rhetorical acts that have the potential to invite certain responses on the part of Ashbery’s readers, debates over the “sanity” or the “pathology” of the text become moot; the only criteria of importance is our assessment of how successfully the symbolic act persuades others to join in “the dancing of [its] attitude” as they read the poem (Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form 9).
In turning now to my rhetoricized misreading of *Girls on the Run*, I want to look first at how Ashbery’s text utilizes Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s notion of presence to argue for increasingly fluid representations of gender and sexuality. Then, in the chapter’s penultimate section, I want to extend this analysis (via Susanne Langer’s non-discursive form and Kenneth Burke’s pure persuasion) to explore how *Girls* develops an even more fundamental argument for the never-ending “play” of linguistic signification. Taken together, this two-pronged approach demonstrates the full range of interpretive possibilities that the rhetoricizing lens makes available not only to readers of John Ashbery’s more recent work, but also to those interested in the broader category of the mysterious avant-garde.

“All This / Always / A Land of Misfits”

Although Ashbery’s own homosexuality is a matter of record, the extent to which this knowledge should inform interpretations of his poetry remains unsettled.18 For the purposes of this misreading, however, I want to set aside the question of whether or not we should read *Girls on the Run* as a poem “about [Ashbery’s] lonely queer childhood during the Depression” (Reed 187) and focus instead on the argument we see the text making about the construction, representation, and reproduction of gendered identities. And there certainly is an argument to be found here. Yet in order to fully appreciate this argument, we must first recognize Ashbery’s

18 John Shoptaw’s “homotextual” reading of Ashbery in *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry* (Harvard UP, 1994) marks a turning point in critical attempts to bridge the poet’s homosexuality with his “misrepresentative poetics” (3). According to Shoptaw, although Ashbery “leaves himself and his homosexuality out of his poetry, his poems misrepresent in a particular way which I will call ‘homotextual.’” Rather than simply hiding or revealing some homosexual content, these poems represent and ‘behave’ differently, no matter what their subject” (4). In *Queer Lyrics*, John Emil Vincent builds upon Shoptaw’s thesis to argue that while many critics briefly discuss “homosexual moments” in Ashbery’s poetry, their lack of sustained engagement threatens to elide vital differences between homosexual and heterosexual desire. By treating one simply in terms of the other, such readings ignore the fact that these two forms of desire “have entirely different available narratives, legality, forms of expression, as well as different available relations to abstraction, specification, self-definition, community, ritual, temporality, and spatiality” (30).
deployment of two key rhetorical strategies from Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric*: presence and arguments that establish the structure of reality. Once the former has made visible the limitations of traditional gender binaries—and, in the process, introduced the need for new understandings of queer childhood—the latter suggests a more open-ended model for conceptualizing gender and sexuality. And while the poem never offers a clear-cut solution to the questions that it raises about queer childhood, I contend that this is not a sign of the text’s shortcomings but rather a signal of Ashbery’s commitment to poetic mystery as a strategy for escaping definitive pronouncements regarding the text’s meaning or message.

As we saw in the discussion of *The New Rhetoric* from Chapter One, rhetorical presence operates by “selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience” in order to emphasize their “importance and pertinency” to the argument under consideration (116). The more presence a speaker can develop for a given term or concept—through repetition, arrangement, explication, amplification, or any of the other methods discussed in *The New Rhetoric*—the more “weight” it will take on in the minds of audience members as they consider the speaker’s argument. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, presence is also vastly underrated for its ability to introduce into the rhetorical situation sets of values, beliefs, and attitudes that can exert a tremendous influence on the audience’s willingness to act (117). Presence thus works to establish not only the terms that will be used to frame the rhetor’s argument, but also the value system(s) that the audience will use to evaluate this argument as it unfolds. Rhetorical presence is, in sum, a form of microargumentation that seeks to persuade listeners, viewers, or readers of certain foundational assumptions by making these assumptions audible, visible, or legible.

And for readers of *Girls on the Run*, there is no more “present” set of assumptions underlying this text than the writings and paintings of Henry Darger. Links to his work appear on
nearly every page of the book: from the front cover, which prominently displays one of Darger’s paintings; to the juvenile characters and threatening events featured in the poem’s twenty-one sections; to the book’s back cover, which explicitly acknowledges Darger’s influence on Ashbery’s “similar[ly] childlike world of dreamy landscapes, lurking terror, and veiled eroticism.” As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s analysis makes clear, the extent of these connections throughout *Girls* continually reinforces their “importance and pertinency” to the text’s development. Were this a one-off allusion, or perhaps merely an epigraph, the leap to Darger’s paintings would provide an interesting but not altogether instructive lens for reading the text. But in choosing to make Darger’s work so fully present, Ashbery invites more extensive associations between his poem and the artist’s creations. These associations in turn argue for a set of values and assumptions that is bracketed on all sides by Darger’s dreamscapes—by his “Realms of the Unreal.” And even if we accept Ashbery’s disavowal of the more brutal aspects in Darger’s work, there is much more going on in the Vivian paintings than sheer violence. Most notable, at least for the purposes of this particular poem, are the artist’s hermaphroditic depictions of the Vivian Girls as young, naked females with male genitalia.

Without the ability to represent gender through visual cues, *Girls on the Run* relies on naming as a crude sorting device: in most of the poem’s twenty-one sections, gender presents itself to readers through the femininity or masculinity implied by the characters’ names. Thus, “Judy,” “Laure,” “Dimples,” and “Larissa”—each of whom is introduced in the book’s first two pages—immediately register as female. Other early-book characters like “Mr. McPlaster,” “Henry,” “Pete,” and “Stuart Hofnagel,” immediately register as male. As one would expect

---

19 As do Vincent and Gander, Marjorie Perloff frames the relationship between Ashbery’s poem and Darger’s artwork as one of indirect, almost accidental influence. “Similarly, *Girls on the Run* is based, though more tenuously and intricately, so far as the layering of disparate materials is concerned, on the work of the ‘outsider’ artist Henry Darger” (“Just Their Pot Luck”).
from Ashbery, however, this neat-and-tidy approach to determining character genders can only remain reliable for so long. In fact, the fourth name listed on the poem’s opening page, “Tidbit,” suggests but does not definitively indicate the character’s gender. The name’s prominent vowel sounds and diminutive connotations appear to signal the presence of a female character, and Tidbit is described as wearing a “housecoat” in section two of the poem (GOTR 5). Given only this information, readers are likely to assume that Tidbit is a “she.” But, as Brian Reed has recently argued, drag is a recurring trope in Ashbery that plays an even more central role in our reading of this particular text due to Ashbery’s intense “identification with the Vivian Girls” (187). Add to this the fact that Ashbery is known for a playful—some would say devious—inconsistency in his use of pronouns, and what once seemed an open-and-shut case with respect to Tidbit’s gender suddenly becomes a far more complicated determination to make. And Tidbit isn’t the only character lacking a clearly specified gender. Names like “Pliable” (19), “Cupid” (19), “Hopeful” (51), and “Young Topless” (54) substitute descriptive appellations for more conventional “male” or “female” monikers, and the lack of reliable pronouns complicates attempts to locate gender in the names’ immediate contexts.

In any other poem—and especially in any other Ashbery poem—these confusions and complications might be read as the result of the poet’s desire to conceal meaning within the folds of textual ambiguity and misdirection. Yet because Girls on the Run goes to such great lengths to make Henry Darger’s macabre paintings so fully present in the reader’s mind, these slippages

---

20 While these names may prove unreliable, they also indicate the poem’s rhetorical potential for further expansion and development. As Vincent has argued, the chronic “instability of names in Girls on the Run resists the reader’s desire to make the poem into a linear narrative. . . . The proliferation of names, concurrent with its alienation effect, sponsors, conversely, a quite comfortable sense of infinite imaginative resources” (JAY 138-39, original emphasis).

21 Luke Carson’s “John Ashbery’s Elizabeth Bishop” (Twentieth-Century Literature, Winter 2008) explores the poet’s “conversational” and “notoriously slippery” use of pronouns as a strategy for experimenting with various modes of address (448). Ashbery’s playfulness with names and pronouns, Carson argues, enables him to craft poems that remain “loyal” to a wide range of “nameable persons who haunt [his] books and poems” (467).
immediately call attention to themselves as interpretive aporias—as rhetorical sites for the contestation of commonplace assumptions regarding masculine and feminine identities. The central question of these identities (What are they?) mirrors itself across Ashbery’s poem and into Darger’s paintings, and neither source seems willing to offer a clear-cut answer. As a result, the Vivian Girls inhabit an indeterminate middle ground between “male” and “female” that prompts further queries regarding their ontological status. How does the gender readers ascribe to Tidbit or Pliable, for instance, change our understandings of these characters as the narrative unfolds? Does the Darger painting At Jennie Richee. Assuming nuded appearance by compulsion race ahead of coming storm to warn their father. (Figure 4.3) depict a group of young girls “on the run” toward home with a message for their father—or a group of young boys attempting to do the same? And how might our perception(s) of gender in Ashbery and Darger constrain our reactions not only to individual characters, but also to their creative projects as a whole?

In response to these concerns, Girls on the Run argues for a more robust model of identity that would allow characters like Tidbit and Young Topless to exist somewhere between the twin poles assumed by heteronormative discourse. Much like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s model of arguments that establish the structure of reality, the presence of Vivian Girls who upset our expectations regarding gender—in other words, the presence of queer children—has the effect of making us “conscious of [an] invalidating fact” that challenges previous understandings of gender as a binary (TNR 356). Yet in order to move from the invalidating

---

22 In Part Three of The New Rhetoric, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca develop a model of rhetoric based on two fundamental approaches to persuasive discourse: arguments rooted in current understandings of how the world works (“Arguments Based on the Structure of Reality”), and arguments that attempt to build new understandings of how the world works (“The Relations Establishing the Structure of Reality”). Ashbery’s critique of existing gender categories in Girls would fall under this latter approach, which relies on example (350-57), illustration (357-62), model and anti-model (362-71), analogy (371-98), and metaphor (398-410) to achieve its ends.
case to the adoption of a radically new “both/and” orientation, Ashbery’s poem suggests that we must be prepared for the inevitable backlash such a choice will engender:

And yet it’s always treasonable
to be in the middle. H’m, there are objections to that,
just as I thought. This might help. Yes. But the color
of this paint is too fabulous, I’d asked for something more fragmented
like sea-spray. In that case we cannot be of service to you. Farewell. (7-8)

The characters’ “treason” of remaining “in the middle” between masculinity and femininity is met with neither approving glances nor supporting words. Instead, the decision invites “objections” that, if we read the subsequent debate over paint colors allegorically, may have their origins in a refusal to accept gender as “something more fragmented” than could possibly be captured with one color—no matter how “fabulous” that color might be. Although the text never indicates who is speaking these words (the “I” in section three can easily be read as either one of the Vivian Girls or as a proxy for Ashbery), the speaker’s revelation of a fragmented identity takes the form of a failed “coming out” narrative, complete with the listener’s ultimate rejection of this attempt to claim a middle (again, read: queer) identity. “Look, this is what I am, what I’m made of,” the speaker declares in section seven (14), but the text stubbornly refuses to acknowledge this declaration in any meaningful way. The characters immediately move on to other concerns and enjoy the remainder of their day “shut off / from what really happened” (15).

Of all the characters who populate the text of Girls on the Run, none inhabit this treasonous middle ground more fully than the two whose names simultaneously register as both male and female: “Uncle Margaret” and “Larry Sue.” While neither character plays a major role in advancing the poem’s adventure plot, their presence in the text further undermines
conventional expectations for gender performance. Uncle Margaret, one of the adults assisting
the Vivian Girls in their perpetual escape, appears briefly in sections eight and sixteen to play the
“mother hen” role, offering the children warnings about personal hygiene (17) and “showing off’
(41). Larry Sue enters the text shortly after Uncle Margaret’s first appearance—but only for one
line, and only as part of a larger group of Vivian Girls who grow so tired of waiting for
something to happen that they leave the family’s encampment:

Some of us got up to go,
the others stayed behind
in what positions one wants to know.

Larry Sue said bye bye. (21)

The group’s departure has no immediate repercussions for the sisters, but Larry Sue’s decision to
leave suggests an irreconcilable difference that cannot be accommodated within the current
group dynamic. Much like his name, Larry Sue’s choice to mark himself as radically “other”—
to quite literally stand apart from the rest of the Vivian community—makes fully present the
inadequacy of gender binaries within the world that Ashbery has created. Larry Sue, like Uncle
Margaret, thus becomes the textual embodiment of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s
“invalidating case” (TNR 355). And since their very presence in the text poses a direct threat to
dualist, essentialist constructions of gendered identities, these two cases (in addition to the cases
of Tidbit, Pliable, Cupid, and others) offer a compelling argument for the need to embrace a
broader typology of gender and sexuality that makes available an entire spectrum of inhabitable
subject positions.

23 It is also possible to read the line “Larry Sue said bye bye” as indicating that he stayed with the core group of
Vivian sisters and was merely saying “bye bye” to the children who were departing (GOTR 21). Yet the fact that
Larry Sue doesn’t appear in any other part of the poem indicates that he joins the group that chooses to leave.
What this argument fails to offer, however, is a clear message regarding how readers should go about securing these positions for the real-life “Uncle Margarets” and “Larry Sues” whose lived experiences are all too often marginalized or ignored in contemporary culture. Not that we expect such pragmatism from Ashbery, of course; the last thing readers of Girls on the Run should be seeking is a “how-to” guide for living in the twenty-first century. But the fact that the text argues for a more open dialogue concerning gender politics without confronting the practical realities of actually holding such a dialogue is likely to strike some readers as an evasion of the poet’s/poem’s ethical responsibilities. What good is a rhetorical poem—legible or otherwise—if it refuses to offer a way of resolving the exigence that prompted its creation?

While this is a valid concern, I think it is more profitable to read the persistent illegibility of gender categories in Ashbery’s poem as an extension of (rather than a dereliction of) the text’s attempt to develop an argument “which aim[s] at establishing the structure of the real” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 191). The use of character names that signify both genders or no specific gender at all opens a gap in the text that must then be negotiated by Ashbery’s reader. The range of “play” within this negotiation is staggering. Given the poem’s rapid pacing and constant shifting between scenes, characters are rarely developed into anything more than a name—or, at best, a name and a brief description or a line of dialogue.24 The text provides so few additional clues, in fact, that characters are nearly free to become whatever a reader might want them to be; the name “Uncle Margaret” is, after all, equally as fitting for a male character as it would be for a female character. By leaving interpretations of gender so radically indeterminate, Ashbery’s text utilizes illegibility to convert cultural assumptions about the essential characteristics of

24 Tom Sellar links the characters’ constant movement in Girls on the Run to Darger’s artwork, noting that while Ashbery’s narrative “does not directly take up the battle cry of Realms,” the poem evokes a similar sense of panic by showing the girls moving “through time as it alters our perception of the present, through places that hold only fleeting associative meanings, through the fluid pool of words in which the mind swims” (104).
“masculine” and “feminine” identities into an open field of infinite possibilities. Yet again, we see Girls on the Run operating in the same vein as Darger’s Vivian Girls paintings by questioning and “queering” the assumed naturalness of gendered behaviors. As Michael Moon suggests in his discussion of Darger’s unique style:

The enduring scandal of Darger’s work may be not that it endowed girls with diminutive male genitals, but that being successfully “masculine” in Darger’s world in the most obvious and unchallengeable ways (by being a champion athlete and a courageous soldier) is a role that can be played exceedingly well by a child, especially by a little girl. (9)

In representing categories of gender as fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and static, Darger and Ashbery make it possible for little girls to be “masculine” and little boys to be “feminine.” In these artworks, the boundaries separating genders appear far more permeable than they seem in the actual world. Given this newfound freedom, why ask the dream-text to offer a prescriptive method for escaping gender binaries—or, worse yet, to propose a third, “queer” category that would incorporate the identities of characters like Tidbit and Larry Sue? These lines of appeal, founded upon the current structure of reality, would immediately negate gender’s hard-won fluidity and re-inscribe the ontological necessity of categorical boundaries. Instead, Ashbery’s Girls seeks to establish a new structure for reality by making present multiple characters whose names and attributes resist our attempts to assign them one gender or the other. As long as a character’s gender remains at least partially illegible, that character remains free to move among multiple identities without fear of being fixed or trapped within one of the two gender categories currently legible within contemporary discursive praxis.25

25 For Vincent, “Ashbery’s misrepresentative poetics are partly symptomatic of what types of articulations around gay desire are available in culture and language, but they are also willful refusals to settle into narrative, lyric, or
Ashbery may resist the notion that he writes poems with the intention of conveying a particular message or idea to his readers, but characters like Tidbit, Uncle Margaret, and Larry Sue so thoroughly disrupt gender expectations that their presence in the text—the sheer fact of their existence—functions as a powerful form of poetic argumentation. Furthermore, while the characters’ failure to perform stereotypical gender roles marks them as radically “other,” the text does not attempt to silence or erase this difference; rather, it calls upon the reader to step in and do the hard work of negotiating these identities as they exist within the poem’s dreamlike world. And in this interplay between poem and reader, Ashbery’s text argues for an understanding of gender that, much like Henry Darger’s paintings, remains always just beyond the realm of the legible. As Fred the truant officer explains in section fourteen, the Vivian Girls and their adult protectors need to see themselves in the image of an aquatic diver (“let’s call her Josephine”) who never stops plumbing the depths of the ocean’s vast resources:

Does that make her any more coquettish than we are? More sure-footed?

No but and here’s what I was going to say

all along, must we recast ourselves in the image of the ocean floor:

To wit, are we not shipshape entities? Have we not corollas? (35)

The contrast between “coquettish” and “sure-footed” not only mirrors conventional stereotypes regarding feminine and masculine characteristics, but it also suggests the vast range of identities these characters (as “shipshape entities”) can “recast [them]selves” as whenever necessary. A second contrast—that between the hard, fixed surface of the “ocean floor” and soft petals of a flower’s “corollas”—expands upon the first by adding in the potential for these identities to blossom into even more spectacular possibilities later on. As we will see in the next section,

imagistic wholeness without registering by disjunction and breakage the realness, specialness, and particularity of gay meanings and lives” (QL 38).
these images of perpetual movement and motion are paramount to the poem’s larger argument concerning the precariousness of queer childhood. Under constant threat of erasure by the nameless, faceless instruments of heteronormative oppression, *Girls on the Run* argues that one’s safety cannot be secured merely by establishing a more open typology of gendered identities. True survival can only be guaranteed by remaining forever “on the run” from the specter of final interpretive closure.

“*But We Must Learn to Read, ‘And That Ain’t Easy’*”

Depending on one’s reading preferences, John Ashbery is either really quite good or really quite bad at ending his poems. His closing lines tend to break in one of two directions—pithy comedy or eloquent thoughtfulness—though both of these approaches refuse to neatly resolve the ambiguities Ashbery has set up in the rest of the poem. Yet for many readers, it is precisely because of this inability to pin down any final meanings that Ashbery’s work acquires a special kind of intensity. His poems invite second, third, and even fourth readings that take on a rhythm and a life all their own. This does not mean that “anything goes”; despite their openness to a range of interpretations, Marjorie Perloff reminds us that “images do coalesce to create, not a coherent narrative with a specific theme, but a precise tonality of feeling” (*Poetics* 259-60). For much of Ashbery’s catalog, then, the key to a successful reading—or, in the case of *Girls on the Run*, a successful misreading—lies in learning how to read what the poem offers rather than demanding what it does not. To do so, the attentive reader must participate in the manufacturing of sense and coherence on each page of the text, enacting and re-enacting the poet’s symbolic act in a dance of hermeneutic inquiry. And while every poem—in fact, every work of art—demands

---

26 While not specifically focused on Ashbery’s closing lines, Brian McHale’s “How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery’s ‘The Skaters’” (*Poetics Today* 21.3 (2000): 561-90) offers a compelling account of the difficulties Ashbery presents for readers seeking resolution and closure in his work.
a certain level of participation on the part of its audience, the “difficult poem requires the reader to construct it as a poem” (Vincent, QL xv, original emphasis). Ashbery’s evasive endings thus do more than simply please or annoy his audiences. They teach us how to read poetic illegibility as an invitation to participate in the making and the shaping of the text we see before us.

So, while Girls on the Run is a far more legible text than Jackson Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems,” difficulty, obscurity, and the lack of final closure still play an integral role in shaping the reading experience. The text mirrors Mac Low’s work in its collage-like assemblage of various words and phrases, each stitched to the next in a barely recognizable pattern of narrative coherence. Liz Kotz comments on precisely this similarity between the two poets, noting how Ashbery’s collage techniques in The Tennis Court Oath make explicit those moments of intertextuality that define the practice of “writing through” in many of Mac Low’s chance-generated projects (102). This image of Ashbery as master collagist—as perhaps even the twentieth century’s associative poet par excellence—has become a familiar refrain in critical assessments of his decades-long career. Where the comparison with Mac Low breaks down, however, is in the different metacognitive experiences their work engenders. Mac Low so thoroughly undermines conventional interpretive processes that his audience is always aware of how tenuous its grasp on meaning and sense remains. Yet with Girls on the Run, the dreamlike quality of Ashbery’s language and imagery suggests that we are never too far from the realm of logic and sense. If only we could wake up, pay more attention, or read more closely—then we would be able to solve the poet’s riddles.

In fact, a more apt comparison might actually be drawn between Girls and Lyn Hejinain’s non-discursive text My Life, which demonstrates a similar ability to put language

---

27 See David Sweet’s “‘And Ut Pictura Poesis is Her Name’: John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde” (Comparative Literature 50.4 (1998): 316-32) and Michael Clune’s “‘Whatever Charms is Alien’: John Ashbery’s Everything” (Criticism 50.3 (2008): 447-70) for two different ways of reading Ashbery as an “associative poet.”
together in ways that never seem to coalesce into larger units of meaning. Even though a reader may have no difficulty making sense of the individual words before her, these isolated moments of lucidity never quite “add up” in the way we expect them to. And the more vigorously one attempts to integrate these individual scenes, the more resolutely Ashbery’s text resists such accumulation, falling like a pulled thread or eroding like polished silver:

The thread ended up on the floor,
where threads go.

It became a permanent thing, like silver—
every time you polish it, a little goes away. (GOTR 13)

As a disjunctive poem in the mode of Susanne Langer’s non-discursive symbolization, Girls rejects logos in favor of pathos, building a complex system of affective relations among the poem’s many characters.28 The adventures that make up this otherworldly narrative feature an abundance of conversation between Ashbery’s characters, but, like much of the dialogue in Hejinian’s My Life, the true purpose of the talk seems less about communication than about making visible the interior turmoil of the speaking subject. In this way, the image of threads on the floor from Girls on the Run echoes one of the more widely cited poems from the early stage of Ashbery’s career, “Soonest Mended”:

This is what you wanted to hear, so why
Did you think of listening to something else? We are all talkers
It is true, but underneath the talk lies
The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose

28 Although he does not mention Langer by name, John Emil Vincent echoes the rhetorician’s theory of non-discursive form when discussing the importance of pathos in readers’ experiences with Ashbery. While reading his more difficult poems, Vincent declares, we become acutely aware of the possibility that “knowing isn’t the only pleasure or final endpoint in reading poems. Not knowing, especially in Ashbery, is often a greater pleasure or more deeply felt affect” (JAY 7).
Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor. (CP 185)

The reader looking for “tidy” meanings is bound to be disappointed; the real work of these poems takes place “underneath the talk” and within the non-discursive realm of affect and desire. In fact, the secretive quality of Ashbery’s *Girls on the Run* recalls his own commentary on Raymond Roussel in *Other Traditions*: “No one denies that Roussel’s work is brimming with secrets; what is less certain is whether the secrets have any importance” (50). As I argued in this chapter’s previous section, the importance of the “secrets” in Ashbery’s Vivian Girls saga lies in the text’s ability to challenge conventional gender categories via illegible representations of queer identity. The rhetorical strategies outlined by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric* offer readers a way of reading this illegibility as a strategic intervention at the level of the poetic word/image/line. In this second half of my misreading, I want to explore the rhetorical dimension of these secrets as they operate in larger units of text—at the level, that is, of the poetic stanza/section/work—through the more comprehensive lenses of Langer’s non-discursive form and Kenneth Burke’s pure persuasion.

Recall that, for Langer, the divide between discursive and non-discursive symbolization impacts both the structure of linguistic material and our interpretive responses to that material. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, she argues that the “meaning of a term is . . . a function; it rests on a pattern, in which the term itself holds the key-position” (55). Discursive symbols (and the forms they work to create) present this “pattern” to us in such a way that we can quite readily observe the accumulation of meaning and logic as a sentence moves from start to finish. With the non-discursive symbol, however, this pattern is broken so as to disrupt the functional relationships we normally use to ascertain logical meaning. In other words, non-discursive forms require that we “read” them differently—and this difference unlocks a pathway to the kinds of emotional,
affective meanings that conventional theories of language tend to ignore.\(^{29}\) The artistic import of poetry, painting, music, and dance resides almost entirely in the access these forms afford us to the “inexpressible realm of feeling” that resides beyond the reach of discursive reason and logic (PNK 86). And while Langer admits that the “material of poetry is discursive,” she also contends that “the product—the artistic phenomenon—is not; its significance is purely implicit in the poem as a totality, as a form compounded of sound and suggestion, statement and reticence” (261-62). Most importantly, she argues in *Feeling and Form* that the non-discursive artwork “makes a revelation of our inner life” at the same time that it “shapes our imagination of external reality according to the rhythmic forms of life and sentience, and so impregnates the world with aesthetic value” (399). The non-discursive symbol therefore asks not only that we read *it* in a new way, but also that we read *the world around us* in a new way.

Throughout *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery invites readers into Langer’s non-discursive realm by playing with the basic structure of linguistic patterns. Section fourteen frames the poem’s general approach to these patterns in terms Langer would no doubt have approved: “It was just play, they dreamed, / tomorrow will be another day, and different” (36). By moving our focus into the children’s dream-world, Ashbery asks us to relinquish any desire for discursive accumulation and, much like the Vivian Girls themselves, to revel in the constantly shifting experiences provided by each new “day.” Yet while the message of these two lines seems clear enough to be interpreted according to conventional reading practices, the subsequent lines immediately rescind whatever offers of meaning their predecessors might have made:

For after taking off from the spring, the squirrels

---

\(^{29}\) As Joddy Murray argues in *Non-discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition* (SUNY P, 2009), there is still much work to be done in moving past the “hegemony of discursive text and orality” (8) in order to make room for non-discursive texts that demonstrate how “emotions are as much a part of our capacity to reason as they are part of our mental lives” (187).
touch earth again and die. Much that is lovely
may be voiced then, though not exclusively. The mad neighbor
pursues a fish; desperate, islands collapse,
and it’s all vertigo now on the railroad. Yes, chained
to a post, I might have agreed with that. But now, the bees
come. See how fast they come,
suspecting the glad harbor holds opals for them.

But the wish for truth is denied. (36-37)

As readers, we can choose to read sections like this literally or allegorically, but—and this is vital for our understanding of the text’s rhetoricity—the poem never indicates which reading strategy should be applied. Though we “might have agreed with” either approach if forced to (if “chained / to a post”), the poem so thoroughly plays with our expectations for meaning that we quickly realize any “wish for truth is denied.” Much like the argument to expand the range of inhabitable subject positions on the gender spectrum, *Girls* does not attempt to claim special privilege for one particular way of reading. Instead, its form embodies a larger openness and playfulness with respect to linguistic meaning that, according to Langer’s model of non-discursive symbolization, argues for a similar openness and playfulness in our attitudes toward the world.

From this perspective, we can more confidently read the poem as a form of rhetorical play and not, as DuBois suggests, evidence of Ashbery’s deteriorating mental acuity. This play is not merely structural/formal, either; at least ten separate references to “games” or “play” are scattered throughout the text, and many of these go on for multiple lines at a time. The purpose of these episodes initially appears to be a desire to mask the girls’ growing fear that “[t]he stealth
of the horizon / nears us” (17). As a form of escape—either from the looming threat over the horizon or from the marginality of their own queer identities—play helps remind both the poem’s characters and its readers that this is, after all, a children’s adventure story. Even at night, when the Vivian family’s terror should be at its peak, Girls emphasizes that “the night season is good / for all and sundry, to children especially, and plays a game without brains” (45). Yet if play functions merely as a form of brainless, mindless frivolity, then how do we explain Trevor’s ominous declaration in section fourteen: “What games the malevolent play” (35)? Or what about the odd question, “Did the game of stealing please any?”, put forth by the poem’s speaker in section seven (14)? As we would expect from Ashbery, the presence of play within the text serves a purpose beyond entertainment or distraction. Furthermore, by couching this play in the language of non-discursive form, the poet refuses to offer readers a hermeneutic framework for resolving this dilemma. The poem’s playfulness resists interpretive closure while, at the same time, its lack of closure resists attempts to discover a logic behind this playfulness.

As the final movement in my rhetorical misreading of the poem, I want to propose that the “logic” behind Ashbery’s non-discursive play is rooted in the Vivian Girls’ need to escape being permanently fixed within the world of Ashbery’s and Darger’s creation. The “games” that Girls on the Run plays with both its characters and its readers—the repeated stopping and starting of the narrative; the jump-cuts and unexpected digressions; the proliferation of names and plot twists—are all in service of the text’s fundamental argument: namely, that in order to secure any “freedom for play” in their own lives (45), queer children must remain forever “on the run” from the heteronormative gaze of contemporary discourse. The poem argues for a rhetoric of perpetual return that recognizes value and meaning in the endless repetition of similar
experiences. This rhetoric is against closure, against finality, against telos in all its forms. It values the endless deferral of meaning not as some postmodern parlor trick, but as a viable rhetorical strategy for warding off reductive appropriations of marginalized experiences by the dominant languages, cultures, or ideologies of a given sociohistorical moment.

This interpretation is indebted to Vincent’s claim that the greatest threat to the Vivians—the lurking terror that actually drives the poem—is stasis, is being “seen and fixed in place. Being seen would freeze the characters in the world where they will be celebrated one day and consigned to a basement drawer the next” (JAY 135). Yet while Vincent contends that the only place for characters to escape this stasis exists beyond the horizon of the text and away from the speaker’s/reader’s gaze (143-44), I see this space as already existing within the text itself as a product of the poem’s engagement with non-discursive forms of play. Such play is decidedly serious: it acknowledges the radical precariousness of the “Vivian Girl” persona (as child, as victim, as queer) and works to avert erasure by situating this identity in the relational dynamic of the game construct. This construct, as outlined in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “On the Problem of Self-Understanding” (1962), views play as an intersubjective relationship in which the players’ individual identities dissolve into a “unified form of movement as a whole that unifies the fluid activity of both” (54). And while Gadamer is generally considered a philosopher, not a rhetorician, his explanation of the link between play and hermeneutics takes a decidedly

---

30 Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of unfinalizability affords further insight into how Ashbery’s text engages with the rhetoric of perpetual return. In “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” Bakhtin argues that there “is neither a first or a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of the past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue” (Speech Genres and Other Late Essays 170, original emphasis). Like a never-ending dialogue, Girls on the Run remains unfinalizable via the promise of ever more adventures and escapes for the Vivian Girls.

31 Vincent does raise the possibility that the Vivian Girls’ safe haven could be “[a] place where inchoateness escapes teleology, a place for endless reflection. A place something like this poem” (144). Yet he stops short of declaring that Ashbery’s poem is this space—which is precisely the argument I am making in this chapter.
rhetorical approach.\textsuperscript{32} Using “the relation between the speaker and what is spoken” as a model for the dynamics of play (50), Gadamer sees in the game a momentary loss of self that enables players to enter into a truly dialogic relationship where “the game of giving and taking—the real dialogue—begins” (57). As co-participants in play, neither the poet/rhetor nor the reader/audience can claim control over the game; both must give themselves over to the dialogic relation by embracing “a reciprocal behavior of absolute contemporaneousness” (54). The game construct, then, requires only one thing from its participants: for as long as the game continues, the players must remain absolutely and completely “in” the moment of play.

Or, as Henry/Shuffle says to Uncle Philip in section eight, “If it’s to play in, why not. But if it’s to play over and around / then I don’t see why you need to, and indeed shall expend every effort / to see that you don’t” (\textit{GOTR} 16). The prepositions are key here: as one of Ashbery’s proxies for the Vivian Girls’ original creator, Shuffle has a personal interest in keeping the characters “in” the play relation, not “over” or “around” it. In order to assert control over the game, he commands his characters to stay within the narrative frame and play the game according to his rules. As we might expect, this attempt to dominate the game backfires because it violates the dialogic nature of play. Shuffle’s characters quickly turn on him and demand that he leave the poem: “and a third time they shouted at him: / You can go. / And he betook himself on his two legs” (17). Henry/Shuffle doesn’t stick around long enough to see the game come to fruition, but the girls’ other creator seems to have learned from Shuffle’s mistake. By opening the text to a freer understanding of play, Ashbery creates a landscape in which nothing can be final or fixed because closure is consistently averted through the rhetoric of perpetual return.

\textsuperscript{32}“Ludic rhetoric” is a growing sub-field within rhetorical studies that focuses on the persuasive uses (both actual and potential) of play-based interactions. See Albert Rouzie’s “Beyond the Dialectic of Work and Play: A Serio-Ludic Rhetoric for Composition Studies” in \textit{JAC} 20.3 (2000): 627-58.
The possibility that the Vivians’ playful adventures may continue indefinitely is initially raised in the poem’s second section, where one of the children asks what will happen if “they don’t want to play / according to our rules” (6). The poem never specifies a referent for “they,” but the reply given by one of the other (unnamed) characters indicates that the point of whatever game the group is playing does not extend beyond the mere fact of their continuing to play it:

Anyway, this is all just an excuse for you to leave your posts,

(toying with anagrams, while the real message

is being written in the stars. To go ahead,

it says, but be watchful for scouts

but as the spirit of going is to go, I can’t

control you, advise you much longer. Just keep on

persevering, and then we’ll know what we have done matters most to us. (6)

These lines introduce three key elements that Ashbery will use to perpetuate the text’s adventure narrative: the bifurcation of characters into an “us” and a “them”; the distinction between mere play (“toying”) and serious work (“the real message”); and the inherent value of “go[ing] ahead” in a state of continual motion (“the spirit of going is to go”; “keep on / persevering”).

Once introduced, each of these elements gets recycled in various ways throughout the subsequent nineteen sections to move the poem forward while, at the same time, diverting the narrative from ever reaching a final destination. The us/them dichotomy perpetuates a state of elevated fear among the Vivian family, but it also remains so generically nondescript that the long-awaited outbreak of violence never seems close to erupting. The distinction between play and real work makes it appear inevitable that, at some point in the text, the girls and their adult
companions will stop “playing around” and actually take the threat against them seriously. Yet every time the poem suggests that a game is ending, one of the Vivian Girls short circuits this closure by asking a variation of the same question: “Does anyone still want to play?” (49). And though the text’s valorization of always “going ahead” implies a shared sense of a final goal or destination to keep the characters moving, the only movement sanctioned within the poetic narrative is the act of returning to the start in search of new adventures:

But as for leaving you all without a tale to tell, I would be daft, nay derelict, not to insist on where the others have gone. Isn’t there a place to stop, that we’ll all know about when we come to it?

Yes there is, she said, we’ll just all have to back down into the gloom, and bait our hooks with peanut butter. (15-16)

In order to locate “a place / to stop”—a place where the girls’ endless meanderings may finally acquire meaning—the speaker suggests neither a new course of action nor a new path of adventure, but instead implores the group to return “back down / into the gloom” to visit previous haunts. Ashbery’s poem subtly transforms the movement forward into a movement backward, and the trope of narrative circularity twists the Vivian Girls’ story into an endless “game” of episodic loops.33

Throughout Girls on the Run, the text symbolizes this never-ending game of looping back to begin anew in one of two ways: as an oceanic tide that retreats from and then returns to the shoreline with clock-like regularity or as an ongoing dance that feels celebratory and portentous

33 Michael Davidson has recently described Ashbery’s recursive poetics as “a kind of verbal inertia that promises progress yet endlessly diverts closure through subordination, parentheses, and compound constructions” (217). The speaker’s command to go “back down / into the gloom” in section seven of Girls (15-16) functions as precisely this kind of subordinating diversion for readers of this text.
at the same time. The tides are mentioned in multiple sections, and each time they appear to conceal a message that Ashbery’s speakers recognize but can’t quite fathom:

The tides were still active, one coming in
as another was going out, and one’s thinking got caught
in these shifts, too positive some days, too blank the next,
and it all did matter somehow, though it didn’t seem to compute at any given moment. Pink shrouds fell on the pansy jamboree,
mocking the circular nature of events with its own kind of back-to-the-beginning free fall. A few pansies got drowned. (43)

The perpetual motion of the tides plays a hide-and-seek game with its audience, appealing to onlookers with the promise that “it all did matter somehow” but preventing anyone from ever fixing this meaning in place. Within the fluid dynamic of play—the contemporaneous shifting of the tides and the character’s/reader’s mind—the act of computing an isolated meaning “at any given moment” is actively discouraged because it would violate the dialogic nature of the game. The consequences of this violation are made apparent in the image of “[p]ink shrouds” that mock the game’s circularity and drown a few “pansies” in the process. That Ashbery selects the polysemous word pansies is important: the term simultaneously signifies as a beautiful flower and a derogatory name for effeminate or homosexual men. Given this second potential meaning, the “shrouds” mentioned just two lines prior can also be read as burial coverings for the gay men whose lives have been lost due to the “mocking” of the game’s playful circularity. Through the deployment of non-discursive form and tidal imagery, the poem develops a hauntingly

34 The poem’s vague phrasing leaves open the possibility that the pansies drowned by accident or as the result of their own actions. Yet by placing the word pansies in the object position, Ashbery suggests that they “got drowned” by an unnamed subject—and the most likely culprit(s) here are the “pink shrouds” from the preceding lines.
compelling argument that any attempt to arrest or “compute” queer identities outside the logic of the game can only result in the erasure of these identities.

Like the image of the ocean tide, the symbolic dance motif appears throughout the text and further highlights the necessity of never-ending play. The first mention occurs in section fourteen, right after a brief discussion of Josephine the diver. Trevor responds to Fred’s call for a more fluid conception of identity by remarking on the inescapability of life’s vicissitudes:

Whoa, Trevor responded, these dances of life—
always pissing, and shitting, and waking up in the great grapefruit
as in a trundle bed, breathless following how it goes, leads
to the great here and there. (35)

For Trevor, identity is best understood as a “dance” of experiences—some banal, some wondrous—that takes its final steps only in death (“the great here and there”). By itself, this observation adds little to the poem’s argument for perpetual play. But when coupled with the second reference to dancing in the poem’s final section, Girls complicates this picture by casting the “dance” not as a closed set of lived experiences, but as an open practice of infinite circling
best represented by a painted horse’s rotations on the playground carousel:

A horse wanders away
and is abruptly inducted into the carousel,
eyes flying, mane askew. There is no end to the dance,
even death pales in comparison, and at the same time we are forced to take into account the likelihood of the moment’s behaving badly, the eventual cost
to our side in terms of dignity, compromised integrity. (52)
Like Trevor’s portrayal of “these dances of life,” the carousel horse continues circling around and around in spite of the likelihood that some moments will “behav[e] badly” or perhaps even compromise one’s “dignity” and “integrity.” Yet unlike Trevor’s dance, the horse’s movements have no end, no “great here and there” to guide or control the dancing. The horse gives itself over to the dance, loses its sense of self in the dance, and ultimately becomes a player in “the ongoing game in which the being-with-others of men occurs” (Gadamer 56). The dialogic relation between carousel and horse (or between horse and rider) formalizes the game construct and protects both participants from the “death” of being fixed in place. *In exchange for the momentary loss of self that the game requires*, the carousel proposes, *this circular dance will shield you from the permanent loss of self that is “the great here and there.”* 

In this proposal—one might call it “Ashbery’s Wager”—the poem evokes Kenneth Burke’s notion of pure persuasion. As we saw in Chapter Three, the closing section of *A Rhetoric of Motives* theorizes pure persuasion as a way of escaping rhetoric’s impulse toward self-negation. Since rhetorical appeals can only exist if there is distance between interlocutors, a “pure” appeal would sacrifice identification in order to enjoy the satisfaction of uttering “puzzles that tease as well as entertain” (267). The distance (or “standoffishness”) generated by these puzzles thus enables rhetors to “court continually, thereby perpetuating genuine ‘freedom of rhetoric’” (271). With this model in mind, we can see how pure persuasion helps us understand the role of perpetual play in Ashbery’s poem. The constant shifting of gendered identities, the tide’s ebbs and flows, the dance’s never-ending circles—each of these acts as a puzzle or riddle that interposes distance between the Vivian Girls and our attempts as readers to fix their meaning in place. The narrative’s vaguely defined threats, the poem’s non-discursive form, Ashbery’s refusal to offer definitive closure—each of these creates even more distance by sending readers
always back into the text to search for alternative answers or missing clues. Most importantly, the “game” or the “play” of pure persuasion that animates each of these appeals suggests that the narrative has no end, that the Vivian Girls already inhabit a landscape of infinite escapes, reversals, and adventures. By remaining forever “on the run” from final closure, the family at least appears to have a chance of avoiding any permanent end to their narrative. As the poem’s third reference to the image of the dance suggests, the girls’ constant movement is not only a means to an end, but an end in itself: “They danced, and became meaningful to each other” (49).

The inherent meaningfulness of this dance is asserted once again in the poem’s enigmatic closing lines. Once we recognize the presence of Burkean pure persuasion—not to mention the text’s rhetoricty as a whole—these final lines take on even more importance as a result of the representative image they develop for Ashbery’s rhetoric of perpetual return:

Does this clinch anything? We were cautioned once, told not to venture out—yet I’d offer this much, this leaf, to thee.

Somewhere, darkness churns and answers are riveting,
taking on a fresh look, a twist. A carousel is burning.

The wide avenue smiles. (55)

Once again, we see the text directing readers back into the story, persuading them to trek into the churning “darkness” where “answers are riveting” and awaiting discovery. The carousel mentioned previously in section twenty-one is now aflame, and even though the speaker has been warned “not to venture out,” the endless game of searching for answers (for yet another “fresh look”) seems too compelling to ignore. The image of the smiling avenue further evokes the inevitability of return as it curves off into a not-too-distant, not-too-different future. The only thing these lines “clinch,” in fact, is the text’s desire to fold back into itself and begin again.
By the time Ashbery’s readers reach the ending that is not really an ending, the hope is that the text’s non-discursive play has taught them how to read differently—even if, as Trevor laments in section fourteen, “that ain’t easy” (36). And as a potential model for these new cooperative reading strategies, dancing represents the dialogic nature of game playing and carries with it kinetic associations that accord well with the Vivian Girls’ perpetual state of running. Additionally, dancing calls to mind Burke’s claim in The Philosophy of Literary Form that “[t]he symbolic act is the dancing of an attitude” (9, original emphasis). As poet and text and reader “dance” together, they also act together in a cooperative “way of life” that makes them consubstantial with one another (Burke, RM 21). Like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of communion, this dancing-together argues for a shared set of values that unites all participants in the pursuit of further adventures:

So we faced the new day,

like a pilgrim who sees the end of his journey deferred forever.

Who could predict where we would be led, to what extremes of aloneness? Yet the horizon is civil. (GOTR 53)\(^{35}\)

For the first time in the poem, the horizon appears “civil”—and we might (mis)read this as the fortunate consequence of the new sense of community that the poem has been arguing for all along. The Vivians, however, no longer need to find a safe haven somewhere over the horizon, somewhere out of the reader’s gaze. The text’s extensive engagement with non-discursive play and pure persuasion has already created a space to explore the “genuine freedom of queer childhood” right here in the pages of Ashbery’s poem.

---

\(^{35}\) As discussed in Chapter One, communion involves a sense of group solidarity arising from “particular values recognized by the audience” (TNR 51). Like epideictic rhetoric, it unites the members of a community and “strengthens [their] disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (50).
Part adventure story, part ekphrastic meditation, part digressive experiment, *Girls on the Run* represents an ideal text for “misreading” according to the procedures of rhetoricizing that I have been discussing throughout this dissertation. The sense of play generated within the text is all the more essential for children wrestling with their own queer identities, as the process of maturing into adulthood poses an immense threat to those who fall outside the accepted boundaries of heteronormative social praxis. In much the same way that the “rules” of adolescence and adulthood signal an end to the freedoms of childhood, the catastrophes and near-catastrophes that befall the Vivian Girls (and their many companions) result from the imposition of a narrative order that seeks to contain those who would transgress established boundaries. The children are, like their sister Dimples, aware that “something was coming undone” (4), but they spend the majority of the poem struggling to come to terms with both the scope of the threat and the extent of their ability to do anything about it. As a way of combating their passivity, the poem utilizes the rhetoric of perpetual return to argue that, for Henry Darger’s Vivian Girls, the only way to escape the threat of erasure is to keep moving, keep shifting, keep playing so that the queer child never becomes permanently fixed in adulthood.

Ashbery’s is thus the quintessential “mysterious” poetry, concealing a level of symbolic complexity beneath a never-ending array of surface difficulties that continually frustrate even the most expert audiences. Unlike readers and critics seeking new ways to uncover what the loose narrative of *Girls on the Run* means, however, this chapter’s rhetorical misreading of the text has been far more concerned with what the poem does, with its capacity to function as a symbolic action of the poet’s creation. In order to explore the argumentative aspects of *Girls on the Run*, I have strategically misread the poem from a rhetoricizing perspective—that is, from an
interpretive stance that values a symbolic act in proportion to the intensity of its appeal for a specific way of seeing or interacting with the world. As Ashbery writes in one of his more recent poems, “Uptick,” poetic language has the unique ability to demand that readers “pay attention / to what’s up ahead” even as it slips through our grasp:

Therefore poetry dissolves in
brilliant moisture and reads us
to us.
A faint notion. Too many words,
but precious. (*Planisphere* 128).

However frustrated readers and critics might be with Ashbery’s practice of crafting lines that “dissolve” when we interpret them, rhetoricizing offers new ways of discovering what is most “precious” in these lines by focusing on language as an act. Rhetoric doesn’t explain the poem’s meaning or offer a sense of final closure, but it does reorient these concerns so that we can begin to embrace not knowing as a compelling (if also discomfiting) form of argumentation.

And perhaps this is the best way to understand the “illegible” Ashbery’s resistance to coherence, his interest in collage techniques that juxtapose seemingly unrelated scraps of text and image: such work enacts representations of community untainted by a dominant telos or ideology. The collage’s component parts—much like the Vivians themselves—can merely *be together*, acting and interacting in a recurring drama that promises nothing more than that it can never be fixed in place or finalized in meaning. Seen in this way, *Girls on the Run* argues for a more avant-garde sense of community, one that places its faith in perpetually open-ended understandings of both the aesthetic and the social realms.
CODA

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH POEMS; OR, RHETORICIZING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

"The unreadable text is a temporary autonomous zone: one which refuses the permanence of its own constitution, and which calls on readers to account for the semantic drives that they cannot, in the end, resist—and for which we must learn, as readers, to take responsibility.

Craig Dworkin, Reading the Illegible (155)

In this sense, any new way of putting the characters of events together is an attempt to convert people, regardless of whether it go by the name of religion, psychotherapy, or science. It is impious, by our definition, insofar as it attacks the kinds of linkage already established. It attempts, by rationalization, to alter the nature of our responses.

Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change (86-87)

In many of John Ashbery’s poems, the lack of clear meanings and conclusive endings precipitates a reader’s return to the beginning—back to “the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago” (Collected Poems 186). And during the first of his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University, Ashbery momentarily pulled back the curtain to offer his audience a few thoughts about how poems begin and end inside his head while writing:

For me, poetry has its beginning and ending outside thought. Thought is certainly involved in the process; indeed, there are many times when my work seems to me to be merely a recording of my thought processes without regard to what they are thinking about. If this is true, then I would also like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps kin to Dr. [William Carlos] Williams’s “No ideas but in things,” with the caveat that, for me, ideas are also things. (Other Traditions 2)
Ashbery chooses not to elaborate on this notion of a poetry that begins and ends “outside thought,” but his correlation of “ideas” and “things” in the final sentence has significant implications for our ability to read his work—and the work of other similar poets—rhetorically. In fact, Ashbery here sounds eerily reminiscent of Kenneth Burke, who, it should be noted, enjoyed a long correspondence with William Carlos Williams throughout the first half of the twentieth century.\(^1\) If an idea is also a thing, then “poetic objects” have the potential to produce thing-like effects on the world around them. Things have to be accounted for, and it is in this accounting process that the poetic object (what Susanne Langer would call art’s “aesthetic import”) can begin to influence the way we respond to the world around us. For each of the poets and theorists discussed in this dissertation, the poetic idea is neither decorative nor inert. It is a method for doing things in the world—things that, over time, can have a lasting impact on how we think and feel and write and read about the world we share with one another.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, rhetoricizing the avant-garde does not “solve” the problem of poetic mystery, nor does it suggest a one-size-fits-all approach to mastering these difficult texts. Instead, it offers a way of reading the poetic objects of vanguard literature as a category of symbolic action that has the potential to inaugurate gradual but meaningful shifts in the linguistic practices that give shape and meaning to everyday life. The rhetoricized readings of Erica Hunt, Lyn Hejinian, Jackson Mac Low, and John Ashbery that constitute the bulk of this dissertation highlight key rhetorical concepts that enable us to recognize even the most illegible symbolic act as a viable strategy for social change. With Hunt’s *Local History*, my focus on Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric* illustrated how bringing certain linguistic practices to the reader’s attention endows these

---

\(^1\) This correspondence has been collected and published in *The Humane Particulars: The Collected Letters of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke* (Ed. James H. East, U of South Carolina P, 2003).
practices with a presence that can be used to rally readers around a shared set of values. These values, in turn, help create the sense of communion necessary to mobilize marginalized subjects in opposition to a culture’s dominant system of discourse. For Hejinian and Susanne Langer, I read a moment of overlap in their respective biographies as an invitation to examine a conceptual overlap in their respective careers: the rhetorical concept of non-discursive form. By shifting the basic unit of composition from the discursive sentence to the non-discursive paragraph, Hejinian’s My Life explores the aesthetic openness of these forms to argue for a reading paradigm that rejects the pleasures of interpretive closure in favor of a more open hermeneutic strategy. This openness is pushed to its breaking point in Jackson Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems,” which utilize chance operations and textual erasure to create a radically indeterminate artwork that exemplifies Burke’s widely overlooked concept of pure persuasion. Drawing upon Joan Retallack’s notion of the poethical wager, I argued that the “5 biblical poems” offer readers a more ethical interpretive stance that remains forever open to the presence of the Other. And my closing chapter on Ashbery’s Girls on the Run featured the dissertation’s most comprehensive application of these ideas, utilizing rhetorical concepts and strategies from each of the first three chapters to argue for the fundamental role that perpetual play serves in the poet’s reimagining of Henry Darger’s Vivian Girls paintings. Despite the numerous differences that mark these four texts, they all share a fundamental commitment to innovation and experimentation as strategies for making things happen—both in the aesthetic realm of the poem-as-object and in the social realm of the poem-as-act.

But there is still far more work to be done in refining and expanding the critical practices that I have brought together under the heading of “rhetoricizing.” Transnational studies focusing on the rhetorical strategies of the Russian futurists, the European Dadaists, or the French
situationists would expand the current area of inquiry both globally and historically.² Hemispheric projects examining the persuasive appeals made by the work of Brazil’s concrete poets or Toronto’s “Four Horsemen” would have a similar impact.³ The rhetoricizing lens might also offer new insights into the programmatic methods of Oulipo and conceptual poetry.⁴ And this is to say nothing of the rhetorical elements at play in twenty-first century digital poetry, a genre that has been evolving just as rapidly as the development of new software and hardware will allow.⁵ As a heuristic that provides both scholars and casual readers a critical vocabulary for examining the arguments advanced by the mysterious avant-garde, rhetoricizing reminds us that “meaning” and “doing” are two separate sets of questions that require two separate sets of answers. “If we would have new knowledge,” Langer argues in Philosophy in a New Key, “we must get us a whole world of new questions” (13). Future investigations into poetic experiment and innovation would do well to heed Langer’s advice and continue asking new questions about the relationship between vanguard poetry and forms of social and political action.

This project’s approach to rhetoricizing the avant-garde thus serves as one of many possible entry points into a larger conversation about the relationship between rhetoric and poetry—a conversation that, as I argued in the Introduction, we have been needing to revisit for

---

² While numerous studies of these three literary and artistic movements have been published over the last half-century, especially influential works include Marjorie Perloff’s The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture (U of Chicago P, 1986), Hans Richter’s Dada: Art and Anti-Art (Thames & Hudson, 1965), and Guy DeBord’s Society of the Spectacle (Black & Red, 1983).

³ For more on the Brazilian concrete poets, see Paulo Franchetti’s “Poetry and Technique: Concrete Poetry in Brazil” (Portuguese Studies 24.1 (2008): 56-66) and Rachel Price’s The Object of the Atlantic: Concrete Aesthetics in Cuba, Brazil, and Spain, 1868-1968 (Northwestern UP, 2014). Although there is still no comprehensive study of the “Four Horsemen” (a group of Canadian sound poets that included Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery, and bpNichol), the University of Pennsylvania’s PennSound archive features a rich collection of audio recordings from their performances in the 1970s and 80s (http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/4-Horsemen.html).

⁴ Warren Motte’s Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature (U of Nebraska P, 1986) and Marjorie Perloff’s “The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall” (Textual Practice 18.1 (2004): 23-45) provide a sound introduction to Oulipo’s goals and methods. For more on conceptual writing, see Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place’s Notes on Conceptualisms (Ugly Duckling Press, 2009), as well as Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing (Northwestern UP, 2011).

quite some time now. I hope my work with Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, Susanne Langer, and Kenneth Burke has helped open this discussion to readers of the contemporary avant-garde. In order for rhetoricizing to become more than just another critical tool, however, it must continue to welcome in new voices that develop this dialogue beyond convenient entry points and narrow conclusions. It must open new paradigms that give structure to extended analyses of argument and persuasion in even the most radically inventive texts. It must offer a hermeneutics of the symbolic act, one responsive enough to account for the near-infinite variety of combinations and permutations that make up the category of the avant-garde. It must, above all else, push the current conversation beyond questions about how and what a poem means so that we can ask new questions about how and what a poem does.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Edmond, Jacob. “The Pleasures of the Open Text: Lyn Hejinian’s ‘Paradise Found.’”


Tindale, Christopher W. “Ways of Being Reasonable: Perelman and the Philosophers.” 

Tucker, Robert E. “Figure, Ground and Presence: A Phenomenology of Meaning in Rhetoric.” 


VITA

Personal
Thomas Guy Jesse II
Background
Born December 11, 1980    Fort Worth, TX
Son of Thomas Jesse and Barbara Martin
Married Lorianne J Wright on June 20, 2009

Education
Ph.D.  American Literature
      Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, 2015
M.A.  Secondary English Education
      University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, 2005
B.A.  English and Philosophy
      University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL, 2003
      Diploma, Melbourne High School, Melbourne, FL, 1999

Experience
Assistant Professor of English
      University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, La Crosse, WI, 2015
Graduate Teaching Fellow
      Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, 2014-15
Graduate Instructor
      Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, 2011-2014
Ida M. Green Doctoral Fellow
      Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, 2010-2011
High School English Teacher
      Oviedo High School, Oviedo, FL, 2005-2010

Professional Memberships
Modern Language Association
Rhetoric Society of America
National Council of Teachers of English
Pacific and Ancient Modern Language Association
The Kenneth Burke Society
ABSTRACT

RHETORICIZING THE AVANT-GARDE: THE ILLEGIBLE AS ARGUMENT

by Thomas Jesse, Ph.D., 2015
Department of English
Texas Christian University

Dissertation Director: Dr. Sarah Robbins, Lorraine Sherley Professor of Literature

Dissertation Committee: Dr. Ann George, Professor of English
Dr. David Colón, Associate Professor of English
Dr. Brian Reed, Professor of English

Capitalizing on a renewal of interest in the rapprochement between literary and rhetorical study, this dissertation examines the avant-garde’s illegible (or “mysterious”) nature as a form of argumentation that calls into question prevailing systems of linguistic, political, and social control. It is my primary contention that reading vanguard texts through the lens of rhetorical theory enables us to fully account for the connection between radical changes in poetic language and radical changes in social relations.

In my first chapter, I pair poet Erica Hunt with Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca to argue that poetic opposition is founded upon innovative language practices that unite members of a community and then persuade them to resist the totalizing pronouncements of a culture’s dominant discourse.

Chapter Two explores the connections between Lyn Hejinian and philosopher Susanne Langer. This chapter suggests that, by embracing non-discursive form, Hejinian’s *My Life* argues for a more ethical relationship among poets, texts, and readers that remains perpetually open to the full range of human perception made possible via aesthetic experience.
In Chapter Three, I argue that Jackson Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” utilize chance and erasure as strategies for securing unending dialogue within an interpretive community. Similar to Kenneth Burke’s pure persuasion, Mac Low challenges the privilege of the speaking subject and opens the space necessary for new understandings of rhetorical ethos.

The dissertation’s closing chapter draws upon each of these theorists to present a comprehensive rhetoricized reading of John Ashbery’s *Girls on the Run*. I demonstrate how *Girls* argues for new conceptions of gender and community rooted in the belief that closure and certainty are inimical to the long-term health of the aesthetic and the social realms.

In dedicating each chapter to a specific poet and theorist, this dissertation illustrates the extent to which the illegible becomes readable when viewed as a rhetorically motivated act. These pairings demonstrate that the New Rhetoric of the twentieth century offers both a method for reading the avant-garde’s famed difficulty and a vehicle for opening lines of cross-disciplinary communication between the field of rhetoric and the field of literature.