

So this is what I was thinking when I wrote “that sentence”

Introduction

“To use an automotive metaphor [Timothy] Morton introduces early in his book: “Objects in mirror are closer than they appear,” which in this case is more a temporal than spatial illusion, one convex mirror reflected in another, the object-oriented metaphysics of modernity seeing the object-oriented ontology of post-postmodernity and vice-versa, the vacuum of subject-oriented epistemology foreshortening the interim that separates them, just as relativity predicts would happen near the speed of light that each of these books indexes in some way to make its case.”

“That sentence,” from “The Medium is the Hyperobject”

Last night I Zoomed for a couple of hours with a friend who enjoys my work and wanted to find a way into “The Medium is the Hyperobject,” which she hadn’t yet read. She proposed reading it aloud, stopping as necessary to wander off on whatever byways it opened. She has such a pleasant voice, so enjoyable to listen to, so that sounded great to me. She read the first few pages at a normal cadence, a few brief asides. But this sentence was a sticking point. We spent over an hour on it. It is riven with the sort of slippery gibberish clotted up with fuzzy buzz words that academics often turn to either to cover over a paucity of genuine knowledge or to

impress/intimidate readers with faux insight. I knew that I had spent a considerable amount of time choosing all the terms I use there very carefully and intentionally. And, over the course of that hour or so, she invited me to explain them. This essay originated with that conversation. I wrote it in part to explicate that sentence, hoping to demonstrate that it's not just empty verbiage. But more so I think to sort some of this out for myself. I've made headway toward that in many of my previous books and essays, this piece, that piece. I'm hoping now to put it all together in one place for myself and for any reader curious enough about this process to entertain using it.

An essay I wrote 40-some years ago called "Reading Poets" opens this way: "In *A Defense of Poetry* (1595) Sir Philip Sydney sharply differentiates the philosopher, 'who teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him,' from the poet, who opens truth to the eyes of all." That essay goes on to make an argument on behalf of poetics as a sort of bridge between poetry and philosophy with poetry the apex discipline. This is another such. It started off innocently enough as an explanatory footnote to that particularly turgid sentence my friend and I had just talked about, a belated attempt to unpack in practical detail the abstruse philosophical terminology I chose to make my initial point. I've tried my best along the way to resist my temptations toward pedantic blather, which all too often win the day, and be as matter of fact as I can about how and why I used this arcane terminology.

My guiding principle, following Sydney, is that I am a practicing poet, not a philosopher. I read a lot of that latter kind of work but bristle at the obfuscation inherent in philosophical discourse and, especially, the dialectical progress-narrative that animates the discipline. Neither am I a literary critic aspiring to translate, for uninitiates, opaque poems into lucid

prose alternatives. I read a lot of that kind of work, too, and write about it. I was an English professor, after all. But it's just not my jam. Poems seem to me to say quite clearly exactly what they mean, so I chafe instinctively against any such attempts by outside authorities—most especially those who are not practitioners of the art they claim expertise with—to teach me how to “appreciate” them. I prefer to figure that out *for myself*: their effects, yes, but mostly how they achieve them. Sometimes so I can do something similar with my own inventions, but more often just out of curiosity, without any ambition toward emulation, the way a tinkerer likes to figure out how any machine operates, whether he intends to use it or not.

There are two primary techniques I use toward that end: First, I don't read single poems as one-off experiences, a la Cleanth Brooks, e.g. I read *poets*, i.e., many poems by an individual author. Thus the title of the essay I quote from above, “Reading Poets,” which morphed into the trope that served as the title for a book I wrote about 30 years later, called *Rereading Poets*. To figure out the dynamics of a poet's system and enter it as fully as possible—what I describe in several of my books as a merger or fusion of identities—I need to absorb a significant sample of their work relatively quickly. Only then, from the inside, do I feel confident that I can deduce their “recipes,” which I then do through the close examination of individual poems, as you'll see below.

Such a transmigration of identities can be initiated by many different kinds of media: visual art, music, even the natural world, and of course all sorts of linguistic interactions, including intentional conversations, like those in the classroom. The opening sentence of my book *Writing/Teaching* is “To teach is to change.” I certainly hoped to promote change among

my students, but I especially appreciated when they promoted change in me. In fact, I believe that the first effect is unlikely if the latter is not invited. All that such interactions require are assiduous listening—by which I mean stilling as completely as possible the chronic noise in one’s own head to make room for someone else’s—and pertinent responses—the sort that arise synthetically from the moment and not those that are pre-scripted. Do that for a few minutes with anyone, and you will become more them as they become more you. Quite enjoyable.

Among linguistic media, poetry has a special power to effect change of that sort. The main advantage poetry has, vis-à-vis other literary genres, is that, like music and dance, rhythm is a primary rather than secondary element in its operations. Rhythm is basically a way of orchestrating time, in my opinion the most foundational element of human experience in this particular universe. While most of our habits of temporalization are inherited from culture, everyone (I believe) has a unique permutation of it, like fingerprints. Poets simply have the ability to record theirs quite precisely in verbal sequences. To adapt to someone else’s “timing” requires a willingness (even an eagerness, as in my case) to yield your own temporal habits to another. Walk, dance, sing with someone else, and it takes ongoing intuitive adjustments to get and keep on the same wavelength. Same with poetry. The reading “quickly” part may seem counterintuitive. Why not slow down, go poem by poem, piecemeal, making certain to get it right? Well, take the examples of walking, dancing and singing. You can learn how to do these things better by studying of course. But walking, dancing, or singing with another person happens at the speed of life, the joy of it, not the speed of school. And that’s why I read a lot of poems by a specific poet quickly. Less me, more them.

To see how this works, read 30 Shakespearean sonnets quickly aloud. When you next start to think, it will be, guaranteed, in iambic pentameter and often in the rhyming patterns he preferred. Or read big chunks of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* quickly. Soon you will be thinking in fourteener-style quatrains. Even if you don't assimilate one iota of their "content," your headspace will be re-timed. As to 20th century poetry which generally eschews these traditional organizational motifs? Every poet I know from that era has a distinctive rhythm they prefer. Some of them work quite hard to describe what it is, like William Carlos Williams who talks about the descending "stepped" "triadic" line and "variable foot" that organize time in many of his poems. Charles Olson talks about how his time moves "instanter," Ezra Pound how his follows the "the sequence of the musical phrase." Etc., etc. And poets who don't talk about their temporal preferences still have distinctive rhythms that, independent of the "content" or "meanings" of their poems, a reader can easily adapt to experientially. Again, pick any one, read 30 poems quickly, and you'll see what I mean. Sometimes I enjoy reading poems in languages I can't speak simply to adapt myself to their rhythms. Just do that and you'll understand how much of the freight of a poem's meaning inheres to its rhythms.

Once I rejigger my own inner rhythms, I am primed for the sort of identity-blurring that I crave. Which is to say again: When I read poets I want to be less me and more them. Becoming more-other promotes the intention-driven liminality that is foundational for genuine love of any sort, especially of the unconditional variety, where self and other coalesce, which is what I'm talking about here, and it is not only useful but essential, counterintuitively, to becoming more oneself. Lao Tzu, Jesus (both of whom I talk about

specifically below) and many, many other gurus across history pretty much agree on that. And I agree with them.

Secondly, I read all kinds of statements, manifestos, treatises, essays, aphorisms, notes, etc., that those poets write to try to explain how and why they make what they make, anything that might facilitate the kind of merger I crave. Some poets are quite astute about their methods, others less so, but they are all interesting to me. “Recipes,” the term I use above, may seem like a trivializing concept. But you have to remember: Great poets create strikingly original pieces that challenge discursive norms, leaving a wide gulf between their innovative expressions and the extant conventions for reception commonplace to the moment. They want/hope, despite that, to be understood. Laying out some sort of a bridge, even if it’s rickety, to close that transactional gap is one way of accomplishing that.

To see a good example of this, read the sequence of prefaces that William Wordsworth wrote for the book of “experiments” he co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, first published in 1798. In that first edition his preface is a two-page “Advertisement,” a “defense” of their enterprise that is literally, almost comically, defensive. He says, for example:

Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.

[http://www.viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/viscomi/coursepack/wordsworth/
Wordsworth-1798_LB_Advertisement.pdf](http://www.viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/viscomi/coursepack/wordsworth/Wordsworth-1798_LB_Advertisement.pdf)

Basically, he's saying that apprehending this new work through the lens of the readerly conventions of that moment (the neoclassicism of the late 18th century) is a "you can't get there from here" experience. A mere two years later, his reputation having gotten some purchase, this little piece evolved toward the grandiloquent manifesto of Romantic poetics that Wordsworth ultimately became famous for. How Wordsworth made that transition so quickly from apologist to oracle is as much a mystery to me as how Walt Whitman made the transition from itinerant journalist to mystical singer of "myself." But both happened. They became, via poetry, something other than they were. Which is as I said what I want, too. And part of what makes that possible is trying various types of such recipes.

For example, whenever I taught Wordsworth I took students to this paragraph in his next preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, written in 1800, just two years later:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so

that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.

https://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/viscomi/coursepack/wordsworth/Wordsworth-1800_LB_Preface.pdf

If you follow that prompt step by step, you will end up with a Romantic poem in Wordsworth's style. Try it and see. I do the same with T.S. Eliot's definition of "the objective correlative," which I quote below. Same thing: Follow the directions, an Eliot-like poem will ensue. May not be a good one, but you get my point. And the same goes for many other such "recipes."

This interrelationship between poems and poetics, which is the subject of this essay, becomes more complex once you get to the 20th century, when taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about the order of things—what I'll call myth in my treatment of modernism, below—are no longer broadly shared. These secondary "bridges" operate then like little guidebooks to help one navigate a way through an alien universe. The difference between the late 18th and early 20th century was that in the former case, the equation, old to new, was one-to-one. In the latter case it was one to many, each one unique.

I say all of this to both justify and distance myself from the discourse I use in the sentence that serves as my epigraph, which relies heavily on a hyper-compressed sort of philosophical discourse to warrant the distinctions I want to make among the three "epochs" of poetic enterprise that cover the last century or so. In one way, what follows here is a very extended translation of that sentence via poetics, "teaching" it all less "obscurely," I hope! It would be absurd to insert it in place of that sentence in the original essay. But I think it's useful

to write it in any case so that sentence is not so easily dismissed as cryptically absurd, maybe provoking an engaged/enraged reader to quit the essay in frustration.

Part 1: Modernism

I differentiate among these three historical periods I reference in that troubling sentence (modernism, postmodernism, post-postmodernism) using three traditional terms for types of philosophical inquiry—metaphysics, epistemology, and ontology. There are all kinds of ways to arrange them in relation to one another. Some sources, for example, say that as ways of approaching “being,” metaphysics and ontology are essentially the same thing. Or that epistemology—as the study of how we come to know “being”—is implied by metaphysics. So separating the terms categorically, as I do here, is problematic. But I do, and did it for a reason, as I’ll explain. I also use two conventional Western concepts for dividing up primary modes of human experience—subject and object—a clunky binary. It is a dizzying assemblage, to be sure. So let me try to unpack it in terms of the practical poetics I prefer.

Probably the most contentious term among these is “metaphysical,” which I assign as the primary philosophical project of modernism. Here’s why: In the aftermath of the devastation of WW1, both “the mind of Europe” (to use Eliot’s phrase) and its body, ground-level literal I mean, were in a shambles. All of the commonly shared tropes, motifs and matrices that held that culture together—what I’ll call “myths” in the broadest sense of that word—during the 19th century were leveled. And they were clearly never going to be set upright again, let alone resuscitated. Every one of the major modernist poets (and artists and intellectuals of all kinds) recognized that. And they all set about creating alternative “myths”

of their own. One longstanding literary genre for doing that via poetry is the epic. So poets wrote them. For Pound it was the *Cantos*, for Eliot *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets*, for Williams *Paterson*, for H.D. a series of collections that strove to recover ancient religious traditions and recast them toward a feminist modernity. All of these are epic, not lyric, in scope and ambition.

Even those poets who didn't write "long poems" of that sort found unifying motifs to promote a renewed mythic vision for the modern experience. For Wallace Stevens it was "Imagination." For Robinson Jeffers it was the "Wild." And as essential companion pieces to help explain how to read and understand those myths, these poets also created prose texts that laid out the structural principles underwriting their visions. Pound did most of this secondary work in little blasts of manifestos, especially early on, and then in the *Cantos* themselves. Eliot wrote *The Sacred Wood*. Stevens wrote *The Necessary Angel*. Williams wrote *In the American Grain* and *Autobiography*. H.D. wrote *Notes on Thought and Vision*. Jeffers wrote lengthy tracts of prose in the midst of his poetry books. And that's how you create a "myth" when there are no commonly shared cultural tropes: You write an epic and then try to teach readers how to read it. Which, to me, is a (possible) textbook definition of a metaphysical enterprise. Yes, there are epistemological and ontological elements in play, but all in the service of this larger, grander vision for regenerating a habitable mental "world" when the one in place has been demolished. And that's why I used that term that way.

I'll turn next to the "object-oriented" modifier that, I say, modernist and post-postmodernist approaches share in common, starting with modernism. As I said, my background and expertise are with poetry, not philosophy, so I'm going to couch my argument

in that body of evidence. What modernist poets said about and did with “objects” is quite different from what Object Oriented Ontologists say about and do with objects these days. Most generally, early modernist poetry is a reaction against late Romanticism, which the new generation felt was driven primarily by the vagueness of “emotion” and an obsession with grandeur. The antidote they proposed was a return to a very specific kind of classicism (unlike Pope’s 18th century version in almost every way.) The program that became foundational to modernist poetics is one vested in “things,” that enigmatic keystone of the first of Pound’s “Three Tenets” of imagist poetry—“Direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective”—which appeared in his little manifesto “A Retrospect” in *Poetry* (1912) (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69409/a-retrospect-and-a-few-donts>), kicking off the imagist movement that soon became all the rage—in England first, via various American ex-patriots, most importantly H.D., Pound’s protégé, and then later in America, a much softer version (championed by Amy Lowell) that Pound derided as “Amygism.”

So what are these two varieties—subjective or objective—of what Pound calls a “things?” What do they share in common and how are they different? Good questions, which he doesn’t answer specifically. Making headway on them takes some additional reading. For example, one of the foundational documents for Pound’s tenets was an essay written by T.E. Hulme, part of Pound’s London coterie in the pre-WW1 London. That essay, “Romanticism and Classicism,” written in 1908, is both a radical critique of romanticism and a fascinating cultural meander that touches in the most interesting ways on figures as diverse as Darwin, Pelagius, Savonarola, Calvin, Racine, Swinburne, and Nietzsche, among many others. Here

are a few of the things Hulme says about the transition (from romanticism to classicism) he wants to promote:

I want now to give the reasons which make me think that we are nearing the end of the romantic movement. . . .

We shall not get any new efflorescence of verse until we get a new technique, a new convention, to turn ourselves loose in. . . .

Although it will be classical it will be different because it has passed through a romantic period. . . .

On the one hand there is the old classical view which is supposed to define it as lying in conformity to certain standard fixed forms; and on the other hand there is the romantic view which drags in the infinite. I have got to find a metaphysic between these two which will enable me to hold consistently that a neo-classic verse of the type I have indicated involves no contradiction in terms. It is essential to prove that beauty may be in small, dry things. . . .

There are then two things to distinguish, first the particular faculty of mind to see things as they really are, and apart from the conventional ways in which you have been trained to see them. This is itself rare enough in all consciousness. Second, the concentrated state of mind, the grip over oneself which is necessary in the actual expression of what one sees. . . .

Poetry . . . is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations

bodily. It always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process. . . .

Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language. Verse is a pedestrian taking you over the ground, prose—a train which delivers you at a destination.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69477/romanticism-and-classicism>)

Pound boils all this down to that first “tenet” of imagism (“Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective”), a gnomic pronouncement, to be sure; but one that Hulme’s essay gives some dimension to, this “new technique” that will find “beauty . . . in small dry things,” seeing them “as they really are,” via a “concentrated state of mind” that issues forth in “language visual and concrete,” vested in “sensations bodily,” that “arrest” attention so it might “see a physical thing,” not an “abstract process.” And the vehicles for this thingness are “images [that] are not mere decoration,” as in romanticism, but “the very essence of intuitive language.”

This “new technique” gained immediate traction in Pound’s circle, which included many of the major poets of his generation, morphing into the two primary kinds of “thing-based” poetry that defined modernist poetics. Most simplistically, one approach works outside-in, transmuting “objective things,” which retain, for the most part, their “natural” relationships with one another, into images the poet then arranges to make another kind of “objective thing” called a poem. The other works inside-out, transmuting “objective things” *without* any regard for their “natural” relationships with one another, into images the poet

arranges to make “subjective things” communicable as poems, which are also objects in their own right. In both cases then, object-based images are deployed, but in two very different ways, to produce poems, which are objects of new kind. Thus my term “object-oriented,” where the ultimate objects are the poems.

The latter method—subjective things dominant—was worked out in detail by T.S. Eliot, one of Pound’s protégés, who became the scion of American modernism for almost two generations. It is primarily via his work that I settled on the term “metaphysical” to characterize modernist poetics. It all began early on for Eliot, with his dissertation, entitled “Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley.” Bradley was a proponent of a very austere kind of monistic idealism, a metaphysics, that Eliot indexes in one of his infamous footnotes to *The Waste Land*:

Also F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 346:

“My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. . . In brief, regarded as an experience which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.” (47)

Yikes! The implication for a poet is that their “experience,” especially “feelings”—which Eliot says, following Bradley, are the proper province of poetry—are cut off from direct expression, a pretty extreme sort of solipsism. So how then can it be possible to share those inner

perturbations of the “soul” with other “souls?” In *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot offers an elaborate “recipe” for accomplishing exactly that.

He lays out most of his program in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where he compares the poet’s mind to the platinum catalyst in that famous chemical experiment where a different compound is produced without assimilating anything new, essentially the way a catalytic converter works in contemporary cars:

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. (104)

“The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum,” the catalyst that creates something new without adding any taint of itself to the resultant compound, an “inside” element, both generative and inert by its very nature, the essence of an “object-oriented metaphysics.”

This radical depersonalization of the poetic process is Eliot’s trademark. As he explains, with a snide twist at the end:

There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal." Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape

from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (107)

Okay, poetry is an “escape from emotion [and] personality.” What that means in practice begins to emerge from his critique of Wordsworth’s conception of feelings and emotions in the sentence I quote above (“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.”) Eliot counters:

The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not "recollected," and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is "tranquil" only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. (107)

Feelings are what poems are about and for, but they are insubstantial and incommunicable directly. To get these ineffables across to another “soul” requires “new emotions,” and they need not even be one’s own, which is Wordsworth’s wheelhouse. Understanding and accepting this radical distinction between “feelings” and “emotions”—the

latter secondary, merely suggestively allusive toward the former, which are primary—is crucial to understanding Eliot’s poetics. Here he doesn’t even mention Wordsworth’s name, he is that dismissive. And by “inexact” he means Wordsworth’s assertion is absolutely, entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose. Wordsworth’s definition of emotion may be vanquished. Only to be replaced by one still working from the inside out. In other words, subject still trumps object, just in a different way.

The most practical element of Eliot’s “recipe,” little more than an aside in his essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” is what he calls the “objective correlative,” which became the cornerstone of his brand of modernist poetics. As he explains it:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (141)

Here is a perfect illustration of the inside-out dynamic I describe above. The “feeling,” which cannot be expressed directly, comes first. The outside world is like an old attic, filled with an inventory of specific “things” that a good poet can piece together and render into images to ferry a simulation of that feeling into another properly attuned consciousness. The feeling is everything. Things are functions. The poem is a sort of sophisticated telegraphy to send coded messages from one “peculiar and private soul” (the poet’s) to another (the reader’s.) As I said above, start with Eliot’s initial assumption about our primal isolation from one another, apply this recipe, and poems like his are inevitable.

If you're wondering why anyone should be bothered paying attention to these arcane arguments among poets nobody reads: Eliot's recipe for making a good poem was translated into a pedagogy for appreciating good poetry by the American New Critics, a process that began with that weird and troubling book by the "Twelve Southerners" called *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and culminated with Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon* (1954), which perfected Eliot's text-based biases by officially exiling the author (via the "intentional fallacy") and the reader (via the "affective fallacy") from the interpretive transaction. This became the standard template for teaching not just poetry appreciation but critical reading itself in K-12 classrooms for two generations, including mine. That's how broadly impactful a poet's work can turn out to be!

There are, on the other hand, a variety of kinds of "objective-things-based" poetry in the modernist movement that sought to reverse this dynamic, replacing it with something closer to an outside-in application of Pound's founding principle, objective over subjective. William Carlos Williams is the most famous practitioner of this model. As a fervent advocate of things "in the American grain," especially the poetics of Walt Whitman, Williams was devastated by the publication of *The Waste Land* (a poem vested in what Eliot calls "the mind of Europe"). His response to Eliot was his little book *Spring and All*, published almost immediately in its aftermath.

Here's what he says later in life about what was happening at that moment:

Then out of the blue *The Dial* brought out "The Waste Land" and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.

To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated. (*Auto*, 174)

If Eliot's poem was like an atom bomb, Williams' response to it is at least a stick of dynamite. Even his definition of "the imagination," an ongoing trope in *Spring and All*, has a curiously objective aspect to it: "To whom then," he asks, "am I addressed? To the Imagination" (3). There is that odd "to whom," he is being "addressed," which is not the conventional way of orchestrating our relationship with what is traditionally considered a mental faculty, an interiority. Here, the imagination is a being in its own right, both inside and outside at the same time, rhetorically speaking. A couple of pages later, he adds time to the equation: "The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are and will be dedicated" (5), further emphasizing that the imagination is transcendent, not personal. All of which, in my view, amounts to another kind of object-oriented metaphysics.

Williams' most famous expression for this enigma is "No ideas but in things," from his epic *Paterson*, a pronouncement just as gnomic as Pound first "tenet." In Williams's system, "things" clearly maintain some sense of their own status and identity, their own inherent privileges, once they enter the poem. But the purpose of the poet is to discern their "ideas" and use them to create a poem that can take its own place among them, as an "object" in its own

right. Williams does not suggest that poetry is (merely) descriptive of “reality.” He actually says the opposite. It is at that juncture between words and “reality” where “things” reside, along with their “ideas.” He says:

When in the condition of imaginative suspense only will the writing [sic] have reality, . . . Not to attempt, at that time, to set values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures, but to write down that which happens at that time— (*Spring*, 48)

Like right then, he means, in the moment, the force of imagination fusing world and word, creatively. So the key to me in understanding Williams is not to focus solely on the “things” that illuminate his poems, like that “red wheel/barrow/ glazed with rain/water/ beside the white/chickens;” but on the “so much” that “depends upon” them, the poem itself.

He says later:

[The poet] holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature’s composition with his own

Poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms as additions to nature. . . .(50-51)

To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. . . .

Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore . . . it creates a new object. (91)

The work of the poet then is to create artifacts that are “objects” even more “real” than the actual objects they comprise. That, too, is an object-oriented metaphysics.

To close, I want to swing back around to the term “image,” one Romantic poets used almost never and then only vaguely in relation to their poetic method. Suddenly, via Pound, it became the cornerstone of a new poetics. Here is some of what he says about it in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” published in *Poetry* (1913).

An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . .

It is the presentation of such a “complex” instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/58900/a-few-donts-by-an-imagiste>

Figuring out what an image is and is for in his system is as vexing as the “tenet” that generated it. But the key point is that for him it is “an intellectual and emotional complex,” all subjective. Its effects are subjective as well: “sudden liberation,” “freedom from time . . . and space,” “sudden growth,” all of which are alienated from the natural world of things, the province of imagist poetry in the Asian traditions Pound is indexing, here and elsewhere. Take

Pound's meme-famous imagistic hokku-manque, "In a Station of the Metro," published in *Poetry* (1913), which became a template for his method, that "one Image" that initiated his "lifetime" of "voluminous works," for "better" or worse:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
petals on a wet, black bough.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12675/in-a-station-of-the-metro>

Pound's poem has too many syllables and too few lines to qualify as a hokku, but it seems clearly to be aspiring to *act* like one. Here, though, the traditional hokku relationship between nature and observation, is inverted. Rather than being the focal point of the poem, the "wet, black bough" is secondary, snapped off as it were from its natural setting, and held up not to help you see *it* better but to see the *apparition* better, its role merely functional. That is a perfect example of the inside-outness of Pound's method that informed Eliot's way of using "objects." And as in the case of Eliot's critique of Wordsworthian emotion, it is "entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose," at least in relation to the hokku imagist tradition.

Pound's primary protégé early on was Hilda Doolittle, another American ex-pat, whom he rebranded as H.D., "Imagiste" par excellence! Her imagist poems, unlike his, retain the outside-in dynamic of the traditional hokku, though, they, too, don't follow that form. Here's one from her first book *Sea Garden* (1916), called "Sea Violet:"

The white violet
is scented on its stalk,

the sea-violet
fragile as agate,
lies fronting all the wind
among the torn shells
on the sand-bank.

The greater blue violets
flutter on the hill,
but who would change for these
who would change for these
one root of the white sort?

Violet
your grasp is frail
on the edge of the sand-hill,
but you catch the light—
frost, a star edges with its fire.

<https://poets.org/poem/sea-violet>

Here the violets retain their organic connection to their natural locations, and they are the centerpiece objects of the poem, which is designed to help a reader see *them* more vividly; the poet doesn't assert an obvious presence until her question at the end of the second

stanza and the figurative gestures she proffers in the last line. This is the outside-in method that became Williams' *metier*.

I bring this up here in part to highlight the distinction I've been talking about, and its importance for distinguishing two very different kinds of object-orientation. But even more so to introduce one of the more deleterious aspects of modernist poetics in general: its tacit gender-bias. By tacit, I mean it is masked by a discourse that presumes that the "universal" position and voice, aspirational for all the modernists, is, by default, male. I'll say a bit more about this later. Its explicit effects become clear if you look at how H.D.'s extraordinary body of work was largely shunted aside during the modernist moment. Here's what I say in *This Fall essays on loss and recovery*, about her astonishing little book *Notes on Thought and Vision*:

This is a book almost no one reads. I don't think I've ever run across anyone who had read it before I taught it. As is the case with H.D.'s work generally, that staggering and magnificent oeuvre produced over her lifetime, clearly, to me, equal in innovation, scope and eloquence with anyone in the top-tier of male poets from her generation—Eliot, Williams, Pound, Stevens, any of them. As the magnitude of her accomplishments became more and more evident to me over the years, just through more and more exposure to the work, I started wondering why I hadn't been apprised of her status when I was in college, reading all of those Modernist master-poets in my first survey course. So I went back to the *Norton Anthology* I used that term. I have no idea why I still have it, but I do. This iconic compilation, the gold standard for surveys back then, three inches thick, containing a little bit of everyone and a

lot from all the big boys. I wanted to see what part of H.D.'s work was there.

Well, it wasn't, none of it, nothing. I couldn't believe it. And now, further, why don't we read this little book I was reading. We read Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*, all those short, sharp blockbuster essays, and Williams' *Spring and All*, every bit as eccentric, serendipitous, outlandish as H.D.'s little book, tuned to the masculine register of tropes. But not *Notes on Thought and Vision*. (80-81)

This is again to say that the relationship between poetics and culture is deep, and sometimes troubling. The patriarchal bias of Western culture certainly preceded modernism by millennia. And modernism simply adapted to it, largely unconsciously, via the inbuilt duplicity of its preferred discourses. It took two generations for H.D. to gain a spot in the anthologies that record the "major" work of that era. That is simply a fact worth including in a treatment of this sort. Poetic ideologies may promote dramatic change via the poems they make possible. They also remain captive to their cultural moments in ways that, looking back, are pernicious. Pound set in motion new ways of orchestrating "things" to create some badly needed myths. He also made radio broadcasts in Italy to promote fascism during WWII. Trying to sort out how that can be somehow all of a piece is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses more on how poems are made. But it is a part of the whole picture, adding a cautionary note: "being unconscious where he (sic: the patriarchal discourse) ought to be conscious," to repurpose Eliot's snide observation, can lead not only to "bad" poetry, but to other kinds of bad thinking as well.

I refer above to the "inbuilt duplicity" of language, and to the inbuilt duplicities of ideology and discourses many times in this book and throughout my work. I want to stop

briefly here to comment on what I mean by that. Most commonly, the word duplicity implies deception for nefarious purposes. But I use it in its more balanced root sense, which is literally “double-braided.” All language—from the most complex ideological discourses to everyday words—is *always* performing two acts at once, inextricably entwined, like twisted licorice sticks: disclosing and hiding, declaring and denying, revealing and obfuscating. It is only a matter of how the balance of these binaries plays out: more toward the front sides and the chances one’s words will have salutary effects are increased, more toward the back sides and the chances one’s words will have “pernicious” (the word I use above) effects are increased.

A common sports reporters’ meme applied (ironically now) to great athletes is “you can’t stop him, you can only hope to contain him.” Same with language. That’s why, as I say later in this essay (and throughout my work) almost all “gurus” of historical consequence are dismissive toward language as *the* path toward enlightenment. Just the opposite is what they say: the “light” part, to the extent it is possible to attain it, begins to emerge before language arises and becomes self-evident only after language, whose role is transactional, is silenced. For them, “containing” language to its proper province is paramount. It may seem counterintuitive for a poet to endorse such a position. But I think otherwise: poetry in its essence (to me) is a way to contain language in the service of the light.

We all, of course, swim in the nearly transparent discursive waters of our cultural moment, absorbing unconsciously vast arrays of cultural tropes—religious, political, economic, nationalistic, ethnic, et al. Becoming fully conscious of everything those tropes are hiding, denying or obfuscating, things that a generation or century hence might be seen as

deficiencies, lies, even atrocities, is of course impossible. The trauma of that insight might be lethal. But remaining utterly oblivious to them leads to death(s) of other kinds: in one's own spirit and in the literal deaths of other living beings who are, via those tropes, presumed to be expendable. In the example I use above, the trope is patriarchy, which has been the tacit bias of Western discourses since time immemorial, one we struggled fitfully to become more conscious of during the 20th century, progress that has been put in reverse in the 21st, thanks to the Trump-inf(lect)ed Supreme Court. Which is to say that change is just as hard to effect, and sustain, at the cultural level as it is at the personal level. Hiding, denying, and obfuscating work the same way collectively as they do individually.

So why, you might ask, point out scathingly this bias in an historically remote discourse that can't see it? Well, because doing that work with discourses one can examine relatively dispassionately—as in those that are outmoded or defunct—can instill a set of critical habits and skills that are transferable to contemporaneous systems, making the current water at least somewhat more visible. It is the intellectual equivalent of Archimedes famous claim: “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it and I shall move the world.” Time can extend our critical lever outside the paradigm of the moment toward remote fulcrums that then allow us to move the world we live in, opening a way to translate unconscious reflexes into conscious intentions. That's one of the main reasons I've spent so much of my time and energy studying literary history, including writing this essay. As Edmund Burke warns: “Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it,” which presumes, via “doomed,” that this is a pretty terrible fate. I've studied enough history in my own bailiwick to agree with him.

What differentiates the object-orientation of modernist poets from the one I assume will begin to emerge from the context of Object Oriented Ontology is that the poet/creator, whether as first person voice in the lyric mode or narrator in the epic mode, is writ large. Very large. The egoism of Modernist poets seems a defining feature of their agenda. Robinson Jeffers is a good example. His work, much of which laments the destructive impact of humans on a “wild” spirit-saturated natural world, has a contemporary “ecocritical” feel about it. But his own presence as a spectral force gazing out from his self-made stone “castle” on an escarpment on the west coast, overwhelms everything. The real hero of his poems seems to me to be the poet and not all the natural places, birds, etc. his poems celebrate. OOO would/will (I hope) make that domineering mode taboo.

And that, in a nutshell, is why I chose the moniker “object-oriented metaphysics” to characterize the modernist moment, and why it is so important to me to differentiate it from the “object-oriented ontology” that is likely to animate post-postmodernism, should the real thing ever arrive.

Part 2. Postmodernism

The moniker I chose for the postmodernist era replaces “object” with “subject,” which is what I believe all postmodernist ideologies, both critical and poetic, did systemically. Given that, I assign to it the primary philosophical activity that subjects engage in: knowledge-acquisition and -formation, i.e., “epistemology.” So why do I call postmodernist poetics “subject-oriented” when two of the “schools” I’ll discuss—deep imagism and projectivism—

seem at least tentatively inclined toward “objective” realms? Two reasons: Postmodernist philosophical and critical ideology begins with the foundational assumption that word—language, discourse, whatever—precedes world, which makes it subject-oriented by fiat. And why epistemology? Well, the way one comes to understand what texts of this sort “mean” is via something akin to psychoanalysis, as if texts themselves are subjects dreaming away their unconscious desires through the intricacies of language. We readers are their analysts. That makes the hermeneutic process, which is epistemological, central both to writing and reading. That’s why.

I’m going to open with a mode of invention/theorization that may seem way far afield from postmodernist poetic systems both historically and conceptually. But it seems (to me) in one way or another foundational to all of them: surrealism. Yes, I know, what? Well let me try to explain. There are four primary movements or schools that, in my view, emerged during the early formative stage of the postmodernist epoch, each of which privileges subject over objects in a different way: the confessional poets, the language poets, the deep imagist poets, and the projectivist poets. All of them in my view end up being dissociative in much the same way that postmodernist theory is. For the confessional poets, that dissociation is psychiatric; for the language poets linguistic, for the deep imagists oneiric, for the projectivist poets, mythic. And that, in general, is their shared connection with surrealism.

There are two distinct versions of surrealism that informed poetics in the latter half of the 20th century, each with a different way of orchestrating the subject/object relationship. One has its roots in the French tradition, one in the Spanish. Both of them rely on the metaphor of the “dream” to enact their method. A dream in its essence is a mechanism that

uses outside material to do some meaningful work “inside.” For the French, the vector is pointed in, for the Spanish it is pointed out. That’s a big difference with significant implications. But a dream is still a dream. This is the postmodernist version of Pound’s subjective-objective conundrum in his first tenet: two alternatives, inside-out or outside in, pick one.

The name itself came into currency via the “Manifesto of Surrealism” written by Andre Breton in 1924. He says early in the essay:

Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.

There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another... And, indeed, hallucinations, illusions, etc., are not a source of trifling pleasure. The best controlled sensuality partakes of it . . .

So, imagination, madness, hallucinations, illusions. That’s a pretty fierce “final four,” and a pretty good window into the variety of inside-out visions spawned by mid-century postmodernism.

Breton then offers a cogent critique of “the realistic attitude” which he equates with positivism, and the opening move to his alternative for it:

We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. . . Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may

rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer -- and, in my opinion by far the most important part -- has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. . . The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them . . .

[https://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil330/MANIFESTO OF SURREALISM.pdf](https://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil330/MANIFESTO_OF_SURREALISM.pdf)

Again, superstition, fancy, the forbidden, the dream, all legitimate counters to the overbearing “reign of logic” Breton so laments. The invocation of Freud and that potentially “victorious battle” against surface concerns is especially telling. For Freud, a dream does not find its origin and meaning in external objects or facts. It culls the object-symbols it needs from “out there,” strips them of their organic connections to where they come from and uses them to serve the purposes of the unconscious.

Breton defines surrealism itself this way:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other

manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

You can see that inside-out dynamic here. Unconscious thought (absent imposed controls) is first, words arise, almost instinctively, to depict it, connected to some out-there only in the most tenuous way, if at all. Breton goes on:

Not only does this unrestricted language . . . not deprive me of any of my means, on the contrary it lends me an extraordinary lucidity . . . I am not talking about the poetic consciousness of objects which I have been able to acquire only after a spiritual contact with them repeated a thousand times over.

His examples seal the deal:

This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.

No, he is clearly not talking about poetic consciousness of objects. Everything is vested in words. Existence is elsewhere. This is a long and wild argument, worth looking at just for its rhetoric, its dynamism. If you read it as a “recipe,” following its very specific sequence of directions for writing a poem, you will produce as surrealist composition, guaranteed. The overall point is clear. The poem starts inside, finds automatized ways, via words disconnected from objects, to get out, and then awaits, untranslatable in ordinary terms, for the analyst-

writer-reader to interpret, or just experience and enjoy, its own brand of non-Platonic madness.

For the “confessional” school (an after-the-fact misnomer via M.L. Rosenthal, a literary critic) that emerged in the 1960s, the surrealistic “dream” is nightmarishly manic: objects, unmoored from any natural setting, swirl around in the dark psychic realms of the poet’s mind, becoming either functional stand-ins for disturbed mental states or, more oddly, becoming “subjects” themselves haunting their disoriented subject-authors. Robert Lowell, the movement’s godfather, was pretty much a late-modernist poet in every way until he was in his forties, when he wrote *Life Studies*, his attempt to come to terms with the psychological baggage of his family history (among his ancestors were James Russel Lowell and Amy Lowell, of “Amygism” fame) and his history of personal traumas. This new material begins to emerge in his strange and impertinent (for that time period) prose memoir in the middle of the book, “91 Revere Street.” There he depicts his childhood growing up a household that was both highly privileged and profoundly dysfunctional. It’s really not until the last two sections of the book, though, a series of searingly private poems, that the originary moment for confessionalism arrives dramatically on the scene. The final poem in the sequence, “Skunk Hour” (1959, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47694/skunk-hour>), where Lowell announces “My mind’s not right/. . . I myself am hell;/ nobody’s here,” is archetypal. There is something scarily dystopian about this “landscape,” and it arises not physically, from the outside-in (though skunks, rummaging through garbage here, have a bad rep culturally), but psychically, from inside-out, a disoriented mind cobbling together distorted perceptions to make sense of its pain, which is what confessionalism came to represent more broadly.

One of the weirdest techniques common to confessional poetry is how disturbed mental states end up inverting “things” that we “normally” consider animate with those that are inanimate, and vice-versa. Sylvia Plath, Lowell’s understudy, takes this feature of postmodernist poetics to a whole other level, as in a poem like “Tulips,” from her book *Ariel* (1965, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49013/tulips-56d22ab68fdd0>.) The living beings in the scene, a seemingly serene hospital setting, are dismembered, inert, their amputated parts littering the scene, subjects reduced to objects in a grotesque way. The narrator is “nobody,” a “name” a “history,” an “eye between two white lids,” a “pebble,” a “cargo boat,” a “cut-paper shadow” with “no face.” The nurses are “gulls,” “white caps,” interchangeable. Her husband and children in the bedside picture are like “smiling hooks.” The setting sounds more like a charnel house or abattoir than a hospital. On the other hand, the tulips are wildly animate, they “hurt” her, they “breathe,” “like an awful baby,” they “watch,” their “redness talks,” they have “sudden tongues,” they “eat [her] oxygen,” “like dangerous animals.” There is an opposite-world horror to this apparently routine scene, haunted by ordinary “things” that take on a frighteningly electric vitality by contrast to the poet’s static inner deadness.

It’s possible, of course, to see all of this (and you can find the same sorts of Inversions, if less densely and dramatically rendered, in all the confessional poets: Sexton, Berryman, Snodgrass, et al.) as simply the inevitable extension of the modernist nightmare of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. But I tend to see it as something new, what happens to the world of “things,” of “objects,” once they are fully detached from their “natural” settings and consumed by a mind in a disordered dream-state, objects-turned-subjects, nightmare qua madness. A. Alvarez’s

The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (1971) is a good companion piece to read with these poems, proposing that the only escape from the self-stultifying ennui induced by the post WWII 1950s is a self-absorption that prompts self-annihilation.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry relies on an alternative mechanism for “absorption,” what Charles Bernstein ultimately calls “artifice” in a poem/paper he first published in 1987. The movement, which took its name with the publication of the first issue of *This*, in 1971, a collaborative effort between Robert Grenier (the east coast anchor) and Barrett Watson (the west coast anchor), highlighted disembodied interiority in this much “saner” way, basically by dissociating words from any inherent referential connection to embodied things. Grenier’s mini-manifesto “ON SPEECH” from that issue declares the agenda succinctly and straightforwardly:

“My poems exist in my head. They need not be spoken or written.”

–Randolph Dud

It isn’t the spoken any more than the written, now, that’s the progression from Williams, what now I want, at least, is the word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the ‘vast’ silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time*, as waking/dreaming, words occurring and *these are the words of the poems*, whether they, written or spoken or light the head in vision of the reality language wakes in dreams or anywhere, on the street in armor/clothes. . . .

Why imitate 'speech'? . . . To me, all speeches say the same thing . . . I HATE
SPEECH . . .

<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/SPEECH/speech.html>

"ON SPEECH" was written at almost exactly the moment that French poststructuralist theory was first finding its way, via translations, into the American academy. So I'm assuming Grenier was not familiar with those texts yet. But you can see the same ideological imperatives guiding his thinking here: the movement away from embodied language (especially speech) to scribal "discourses," which in this case, eerily, serve as reservoirs for the "'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time*, as waking/dreaming, words occurring and *these are the words of the poems*, whether they, written or spoken or light the head in vision of the reality language wakes in dreams or anywhere, on the street in armor/clothes." Those unresolved binaries that postmodernist critical systems became so adept at exploring, in this case silence/noise, waking/dreaming, armor/clothes, "are" Grenier says "the words of the poems," as if the disturbed mind that afflicted the confessionals is projected, calmed, and (dis)stilled, into the austere waking dreams of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E..

The Freudian dream-stuff is gone. But not the dissociation. The poems become more like works of abstract art. Some of them are almost palpably sculptural, as Susan Howe's often are (she was also a sculptor). In her "Cabbage Gardens" for example (1979, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43253/cabbage-gardens>) there are many "things" vividly rendered—"fringe/ of trees /by a river/ bridges black /on the deep/ the heaving sea"—but they are "overtaken" by the "alien force" of "the past," which displaces things both

temporally and spatially to serve a psychic function, the poet inhabiting “a forest/ of myself,” “her ship moving away.” In the end, “thick noises/merge . . . dissolving and defining” the scene into abstractions of “spheres/ and /snares.” The severe line breaks amplify this dissociation of things from their contexts. Other Language poems have a poignant tenderness about them, as in these two snippets from Larry Eigner’s “Six Poems” (1964, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=29605>), also an evocation of the past via memories of things. The hardscape of the scene—the “space along the/wall,” “the cellar/full of cans and the sun,” “the turf of flowers at the pane”—floats up through “the heat of absorption” still intact but distorted, as if by a thick the pane of glass that mediates sensation, in this case, again, as much a temporal as spatial effect. The only static image is the author/reader standing witness “on one foot/ like a tree,” another layer of figurative displacement. All of them, though, highlight surface artifice at the expense of reference, sometimes even legible meaning, language eerily alienated from both the rational mind and the objective world, subject turned into object turned into subject via “the words of the poems.”

“But there is another method,” as John Berryman said, quoting Olive Schreiner in an epigraph to his *Dream Songs*. Something akin to surrealism had been afoot in Spanish poetry for some time in the early part of the 20th century, and in the 1920s there were interactions with French Surrealism. But to me at least, the poetry coming out of Spain—Juan Ramon Jimenez, Federico Garcia Lorca, Antonio Machado during this era—looks and acts differently from the French, or Pound’s and Eliot’s for that matter. The Spanish also use the figure of the “dream” to locate their approach, but for them the dream starts out there, in the world of

things, then migrates inward, a kind of inhalation, where it is transmuted into images, not thoughts, and slowly, via some hidden alchemy, finds its way back out in words. The world is in the poem from beginning to end. And the method is not automatized in any way. It actually shares some of the meditative aspects of Wordsworth's method.

I'm going use a piece by Jose Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish philosopher of this era (https://monoskop.org/images/5/53/Ortega_y_Gasset_Jose_1925_1972_The_Dehumanization_of_Art.pdf), not so much because it details an alternative poetics—it is primarily a critique of Romanticism and, to some extent Modernist (over)reactions to it, which he is hopeful are on the right track for what's next and new—but because it came out almost simultaneously (1925) with Breton's piece. There are moments in this long essay where what I want to get at seems to rise up out of the mire of that critique. He says, for example:

It is a perfectly simple matter of optics. In order to see an object we have to adjust our eyes in a certain way. If our visual accommodation is inadequate we do not see the object, or we see it imperfectly. Imagine we are looking at a garden through a window. Our eyes adjust themselves so that our glance penetrates the glass without lingering upon it, and seizes upon the flowers and foliage. As the goal of vision towards which we direct our glance is the garden, we do not see the pane of glass and our gaze passes through it. The clearer the glass, the less we see it. But later, by making an effort, we can ignore the garden, and, by retracting our focus, let it rest on the window-pane. Then the garden disappears from our eyes, and all we see of it are some confused masses of colour which seem to adhere to the glass. Thus to

see the garden and to see the window-pane are two incompatible operations: the one excludes the other and they each require a different focus. (68)

He wants the glass in, but he doesn't kick the garden out entirely to get it there, it remains, "confused masses of colour." He goes on:

It will be said that it would be simpler to dispense altogether with those human forms – man, house, mountain – and construct utterly original figures. But this, in the first place, is impracticable. In the most abstract ornamental line a dormant recollection of certain 'natural' forms may linger tenaciously. In the second place – and this is more important – the art of which we are speaking is not only not human in that it does not comprise human things, but its active constituent is the very operation of dehumanizing. In his flight from the human, what matters to the artist is not so much reaching the undefined goal, as getting away from the human aspect which it is destroying. It is not a case of painting something totally distinct from a man or a house or a mountain, but of painting a man with the least possible resemblance to man; a house which conserves only what is strictly necessary to reveal its metamorphosis; a cone which has miraculously emerged from what was formerly a mountain. The aesthetic pleasure for today's artist emanates from this triumph over the human; therefore it is necessary to make the victory concrete and in each case display the victim that has been overcome. (71)

Here is the Spanish “victory,” the triumph over “the human” in its demodé Romantic forms; though, as I said, Ortega y Gasset seems to see this as an interim point on the way to something else. And his examples are, tellingly, visual—looking and painting—rather than verbal (differentiating his system fundamentally from the French), oriented outward rather than inward, toward things rather than words.

The main point is this: He doesn’t want things to be routinized, and that is only possible via modes of radical defamiliarization, the dreamwork of the artistic imagination. The world is still there, it is just dramatically estranged in a way that forces us to pay attention not only to it, in its representational sense, as a scene, say, but to what it holds and withholds, its spirit, its imaginative grip on those who know it well and live in its grasp, what Lorca calls “duende,” an earthy irrationality inflected with vitality, darkness and death.

A good example of this use of objects is the short surrealist film *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), a collaboration between Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel. If you have seen it, you will never forget the brief scene which shows a full moon in the sky, a thin cloud moving toward and then across it, and then jump-cuts to a straight razor slicing into a pried open eyeball. It may be a clunky way of demonstrating what I’m getting at here, that movement outside-in. But it works. You remember the eyeball, but you remember even more vividly the cloud-sliced moon that invoked it. The scene starts out there and then gets estranged. Not to get you to see the eyeball in a new way, but the moon. That kind of dreamwork is neither Freudian nor Bretonian. It is something other entirely.

All of this got processed through Latin American literature, what became by the mid-50s something called “magical realism,” a term first used by a German art critic, Franz Roh,

also in 1925. I won't go into all of that because it pertains primarily to fiction. I want to talk instead about the subsequent transition of this mode of surrealism into American poetics by one school of poets that was called variously the American surrealists, the deep imagists, or, to use Robert Bly's term, the "leaping poets."

The deep image movement (the name I prefer) originated in the 1960s, and ran parallel with, but became more mainstream than, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. James Wright was the originary poet, Bly the theoretician who defined the foundational feature of the method as "a long floating leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known." You can see the dynamic here: conscious (which for these poets is usually rooted in perceptions of "things") to unconscious and back again. The poem may take root out there, and the composition of it is a conscious process. But it all takes place inside a human head. That's what justifies its name as a mode of surrealism.

Bly's book *Leaping Poetry* (1972) expressly established the link to the Spanish poets I named above, one that Wright had put into practice and then made famous with his breakaway book *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963). Wright's early work, like Lowell's, was modernist looking and sounding, long lines, rhymes, formal, Frostian. After he read the Spanish and Eastern European poets that enact the sort of dream state I describe above, all that changed. See his poem "A Blessing" for a wonderful exemplar of his new inside-outside fusion (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46481/a-blessing>). In the poem, the two ponies are there, literally not symbolically, but are deep and mysterious, having been dreamed out of and then back into themselves via the poet's "leaps." There is a soft, dreamy

“beauty” of this sort in all the poems made via this method, no matter how ugly or violent the subject matter, a tendency foreshadowed in Wright’s “Autumn Begins in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio” (1963), where high school football players “grow suicidally beautiful/ At the beginning of October/ and gallop terribly against each other’s bodies.” Carolyn Forché (*The Country Between Us*, 1981) writing subtly about the horrors in El Salvador and Yusef Komunyakaa (*Dien Cai Dau*, 1988) writing lyrically about the horrors in Vietnam are two good examples of this method being used with that effect in book-length studies. Their subject matter is brutal. The poems are beautiful. As I said, one of the alternative names for this school was American surrealism, obviously in the Spanish rather than French tradition, which in my view makes it subject-oriented by definition.

The projectivist poets take a different tack toward the interiority of language. Their originary guru at Black Mountain College was Charles Olson, whose manifesto “Projective Verse” lays out both the ideology and the “recipe” for this mode of poetic invention. That brief essay published in 1950 transformed the Black Mountain poets into the projectivists. Here are the two most practical of his three principles for “COMPOSITION BY FIELD:”

A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. . . .

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER
PERCEPTION perceptions . . . must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON
ANOTHER! (16-17)

Olson was a big fan of the UPPER CASE, which tells you something about the size of his personality. BIG! As was his influence. For him the poem is a medium for transferring energy “from where the poet got it” over to the reader, directly, perception after perception moving “instanter” in sequence. A couple of pages later Olson comes to his most radical core-set of propositions for open field composition:

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (19)

The second of these was the one that took off in relation to the mechanics of poem-making: line breaks determined by breath patterns, instead of the million other ways you can regulate temporality a poem in an OPEN FIELD once rhyme and meter are no longer in control. Poets as different-breathing as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov took this aspect of his method as the mantra for timing their work. Each one, not surprisingly, had a unique rhythm. So projective poetry is the opposite of Language poetry in relation to speech. As Olson says:

For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he (sic) can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he (sic) has done to his (sic) own speech and by that one act

indicate how he (sic) would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his (sic) work. (20)

(This essay, written in 1950, remains as captive to the masculine register as modernism was. Thus, all the “sics.”) The most astonishing application of this resurrection of Pound’s third “tenet” of imagism (“As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome”) is in Louis Zukofsky’s *A* which is literally scored for musical performance, with specific instrumentation, “stave and bar” and all!

Nobody as best I could tell paid much attention to the first “half” of Olson’s equation above, which is far more radical, hard even to think about let alone to do. It places the semantic center of a poem not at the level of sentence or phrase, the line or even word, all of the traditional ways of locating meaning or sense in linguistic constructs. But on the syllable, that single, distinct sound that has no intrinsic “meaning” in the conventional sense, on each little bit of noise as it gets extruded along the way. And the import of the syllable is not simply aural, physical, the vibrating wave part, as has always been the case for poetry, the interplay of sounds resonating in the ear, alliteration, assonance, those sorts of things. It is intellectual: the head, he says. This is like Language poetry taken to a surreal extreme, not words but sounds the primal material for sculpting poems.

Olson would likely be aghast to have his work associated with surrealism. He claims in fact that his project is even more radical than the “objectivism” championed by Zukofsky, inventing what he called “objectism:”

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his (sic) soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man (sic) has interposed himself (sic) between what he (sic) is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man (sic) is himself (sic) an object . . . (20)

This sounds on the face of it like a precursor to Object Oriented Ontology, that far ahead of its time! But I want to insist that it’s not. First of all the “object” in “objectivism” refers to the poem not to what’s outside it. And projectivist poetry, in the execution, the poems themselves, may be the most radically “I”-based of all the postmodernist approaches. How could a poem built around breath and simple sounds, which is intelligent noise, be otherwise? Olson’s own epic, *The Maximus Poems*, opens this way, asserting its “I”:

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
the present dance

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47496/i-maximus-of-gloucester-to-you>

The original editions of this multivolume work were printed on oversized, cardstock thick, vellum-textured paper, each page likely handset, and unique. On one, there is only one tiny word centered. On another, the page is densely packed with words, margin to margin, some of them skewed awry, some circling the edges, almost unintelligible. Reading the book

is a trip. Speaking of which, Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* (1968-71), one of the many "long poems" that became a career-defining trope for second generation projectivists, written mostly in the late 60s, is as wild a poetic ride as you're likely to find from that or any era. It sounds like it was written by someone who had taken acid and speed-read Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (which of course he couldn't have, unless it was in French.) It is *literally* a "trip," capturing the nervous breakdown that characterized that moment not on an individual but a cultural level, more like the sort Joan Didion describes in her essay "The White Album" than the personal ones the confessionalists specialized in, a stream-of-consciousness sort of surrealism. Here is a little snippet:

The Ego
is costumed as the road manager
of the soul . . .
I got there ahead of myself
I got there ahead of my I . . .
This alone constitutes
the reality of ghosts.
Therefore I is not dead.

[\(https://gravyfromthegazebo.blog/2016/01/05/edward-dorn-gunslinger-1-2/\)](https://gravyfromthegazebo.blog/2016/01/05/edward-dorn-gunslinger-1-2/)

It took 20 years to go from Olson/Maximus' monolithic "I" to Dorn/Gunslinger's identity fission. This multiplication and dissolution of the "I," via discourse, is, to me, one of the most scintillating motifs in a poem vexed with countless conflicting others, projectivist poetics taken to the extreme in the most riotously disorienting ways, the ultimate extension of Olson's

method, and subject-oriented epistemology in general. My analysis of projectivism would, I'm sure, be considered anathema by Olson: "inexact," to borrow Eliot's term, i.e., entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose. But, following my method—reading tons of poems fast—I can come to no other conclusion. Sorry, Charlie!

A couple of profound changes, more paradigmatic than technical, were made not only possible but, I think now, inevitable by postmodernist poetics. One derives from the diversity of the various approaches, a side-effect of which was to shatter the patriarchal "glass ceiling" that defined modernist poetics. The overall aversion among the major modernists to addressing inequitable gender- and race-related power dynamics can be summed up in the New Critics' valorization of the "universality" of poetry, which if you actually read the arguments—as in that influential book I mentioned, *I'll Take My Stand*, where a contemporary ear hears the racism and sexism blaring—functions as simply a discursive proxy for White-male privilege. That's why a poet as extraordinary as H.D. was barely noticed until the 1960s!

You'll note that I've mentioned along the way a number of female poets who were early players in each of these postmodernist "schools." Since I've focused for the most part on the 1960s-1980s while they were first taking shape, the primary spokesmen were, in fact, men. By the 90s, though, that gender-landscape had shifted tectonically, a trickle turning into a torrent. Name your favorite "major" poets of that era (1990-2010). They will be primarily women, many of them women of color, or queer, or working class, or intersectional, all demographics that modernism precluded by fiat. Each of these new approaches undermines the hegemony of that agenda in one way or another, by shifting the focus to the personal, for example, sometimes the extremely personal, including the most intimate bodily functions; or

by prioritizing ideological identity-related systems, like feminism, especially Black feminism (via figures like Audre Lorde and the amazing poet-in-spirit bell hooks), queer theory (not simply bringing alternative sexualities, i.e. NOT straight male-superior hetero-, out of the closet, but spotlighting them) and “working class” poetry (which became a genre of its own during this interim.)

The other change derives from their systemic commonalities, allowing the various modes to hybridize so generatively, which they clearly did. You can pretty much put any two of these four together, think about what kind of poetry a poetics of that sort might promote, and find it being practiced by a diverse group of poets, some famous some not-so, often unawares of one another. I have not (until right here) made this democratizing process a pivotal axis of my argument because, as an old, straight, White male I simply don’t feel authorized to delineate that more recent history. Read the poets who are and did. Which is to say again: If you think poets don’t change culture in dramatic ways, think again. They are in my opinion not simply avant-garde voices for their own generation but seers for the next.

And that is why I chose “subject-oriented” and “epistemology” to name the poetry of the postmodernist moment. And why I think surrealism, in one or another of its modes, is as good a portal into its mechanics, its various “recipes,” as any other. I lived through that historical moment, mostly drug-free. It was still surreal; and these four modes of capturing the permutations of that state of mind are good portals for understanding what it was like to “be there.”

Part 3: Post-postmodernism

That of course leaves post-postmodernism which I say will be guided by an object-orientation I describe as ontological. What does that mean? Obviously I am borrowing that terminology from the OOO movement in philosophy, not from practices I see any current poets using in common. So what I have to say will be speculative. For one thing, this new epoch has not yet fully fledged. Both modernism and postmodernism emerged quite suddenly in the aftermath of global events that effectively dismantled the ideologies—geopolitical, economic, and social—that had kept their respective cultural matrices stable. WWI did it with the longstanding caste- and empire-oriented cultural systems that were the latticework organizing national identities in the 19th century. Postmodernism emerged out of the chaos the late-60s, precipitated by a similar global crisis that festered up from the war in Southeast Asia. Right now, pretty much anywhere you look, the world is at a similar tipping point. The charge is primed. All it will take is a match to light the fuse, opening a way toward what's next and new, assuming we survive the explosion. Just this week, a 60s-size demonstration at Columbia University protesting the ongoing crimes against humanity in Gaza has spread like wildfire to college campuses across the country and around the world, provoking militant police responses. Maybe that's the flashpoint. Or the war that incited those demonstrations. Maybe it will be a second Trump presidency. Maybe it will be the next pandemic (the last one seems to me to have created more chaos than transformational change.) Or maybe something somewhere we're not even thinking about today will detonate instead. In any case, since it hasn't happened yet, I have no clear sense of how this next era

will ultimately be organized. That requires a rearview mirror. When I glance to my right, “objects in the mirror are not just closer than they appear,” they are still either right next to or in front of me. So I’m going to go back to my foundational principles for this portion of the essay.

First, I believe that poems come second, the poet comes first. A new kind of poetry, then, will require a new kind of poet. If I want to write that new kind of poetry, I need to become that new kind of poet, which to me means I will have to become a new kind of person. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do since I retired six years ago and flew out west here with nothing but a carry-on bag of clothes, not in search of a new life (too old for that), but in search of the new person I hoped to become. Second, I am a poet not a philosopher. OOO may offer one template for promoting a body of poetic work fundamentally different from what the postmodernists left behind. I’ve read a few of the books by that school of philosophers, but nowhere near enough even to enter into their conversations let alone presume to implement their imperatives. Some of Timothy Morton’s concepts, like “intimacy,” “uncanniness,” the “no-self,” even “gooiness,” sound promising to me as ways to evade the no-win binaries of the 20th century. But only if I can assimilate all of that into a whole person who can write those poems. Toward that end, most of my reading over these last six years has been of much more ancient wisdom texts.

I have no ambition to become a spokesperson for any sort of new poetic movement. Part of that has to do with what I said a few pages back: As an old, White, straight male, I am simply not authorized to play a role like that in the new order. And part of it is temperamental, my in-built desire to live reclusively, “hidden” in a way I’ll describe shortly here. Besides, the

20th century was rife with larger-than-life egos claiming to know the way, and look where it got us. I hope the next two generations will look back and say: Hey, let's not do that again!

The only way I know to make some headway against those tendencies toward self-aggrandizement, as I say in the essay this one comments on, is to realize, in every fiber of my being, that "it's not about me now, never was, never should have been," my boiled-down essence of what OOO is trying to get at. If I had to boil down the essence of Western culture over the last 1500 years, most especially the current American version of it, it would be: "It is about me, always was, always should be." Overriding that cultural imperative is like trying to resist a powerful rip current. You can't swim against it, or you'll drown. You can't swim with it, or you'll end up lost at sea. You can only swim askance to it and hope you have enough stamina to survive until you reach calmer water. That takes an enormous amount of self-discipline, patience, faith, and, yes, time, all of which are in short supply in a cultural moment like ours, rife with all the manic urgencies in our political, intellectual and spiritual arenas. And in my own lifespan! But making the effort is the only path I see toward becoming the kind of person I might admire. Which I'm hoping then will help me become the kind of poet I aspire toward. And maybe (though this is less important) write some poems that demonstrate all of that. So I swim askance and keep hoping. And writing.

In a nutshell: My personal poetic project since I retired has been animated by a desire to become comfortable enough among all those other not-me-objects-out-there, the ones I meet on my long, daily walks, that, from time to time, they will tell me what they want to say about themselves, to become in their presence something like the "no-self" Morton describes in *Hyperobjects*. It's relatively easy, once you get a knack for it, to achieve that state of self-

transcendence as a witness, always my goal when I'm out walking, head empty of words, contemplating "things." But it's really hard to render what I witness in their words instead of mine, saturated with subjectivity. That's why so many historically significant sages and gurus have contempt for language, the enemy of absence and silence, which are the ground-level conditions for genuine transcendence toward otherness, just another object among the objects we're among here. When I get into that state of mind, those other "things" sometimes (I feel) proffer a few of the words they prefer for rendering themselves visible, not so much to me as to the universe they inhabit, which is as curious as I am to come to know them. I explain what this sort of curiosity means to me in "The Curious Cosmos: Taoism and Quantum Mechanics" (in *waking up: reading wisdom texts*), which I reference below. That may sound implausible, even delusional, presuming as it does that I can somehow override my presence with absence so that things can emerge from absence into presence. But that's my plan.

The best way to delineate how that process works for me is via a pastiche of quotes from some of my recent books. It is almost comically self-contradictory, I know, to document my progress toward that no-self by writing about myself! You may be tempted to just stop reading right now, thinking, what a joke, the way I did the first time I read Whitman's "Song of Myself" as part of my schoolwork in the 10th grade, and every time thereafter I was obliged to read him in college. It took me almost a decade, and multiple mis-readings, to realize I had gotten it all wrong. Here's how I document that reversal of thinking in *This Fall*:

There was, for me, for years, a big snag I hit right at the second of line of "Song of Myself:" "What I assume, you shall assume." Sounds like a

command to me. “Think what I think.” I don’t like commands. They’re like advice, but harsher. They set my teeth on edge, so off-putting, this one for example, making it hard for me to loosen up and love the wonderful long poem that ensued from it. I just couldn’t get over that hump. Until late in my graduate studies. Then, all at once, I saw it: He didn’t mean “assume” as in his assumptions, what he believed and thought, how you’d better just take all that at his word, stop thinking for yourself. No, not that at all. He meant “assume” as in “taking in,” what I have taken in from the world, all of these wonderful, loving perceptions, stories, relationships, I lay them out for you, who can enlarge yourself by assuming them as well, my gift to you, the purpose of which is not to fill you to the full but to whet your appetite to go out and “assume” your own life, as lushly, as lavishly, day after day, down to the finest detail, with loving eyes. What goes into me goes out to you. He says basically that all through the poem. What could be more generous than that?

Today, every day, if I am open enough, a small part of the world will take possession of me. If I can contemplate it lovingly enough, I will assume it, into myself, like [this] great poet . . . If I can carry some portion of all that into my words, you can assume it, too, if you want, no pressure, just there for the taking. (104)

If you’ve gotten this far now, maybe I’ve persuaded you to keep going.

Let me start with where I started when I decided, after I got here to my new home in Washington, that the key to my self-renovation was to become “smaller in all the right ways” (*First, Summer*, 73.) As I searched my books today with the keyword “small,” I was stunned by how many dozens of examples I found, which is telling. Here are a couple of the most pertinent:

These [huge, old growth] trees, not surprisingly, make me feel "small." But in all the right ways. In my last year or so in Pittsburgh, as I fantasized about a new life in a place I might make a home, one of the things I knew I wanted was to become "small."... I wanted to be just another person, not "Professor," or "Doctor," or "Poet" or "Author," just "paul" was how I named that feeling. Small p. And now I am. When I can, I even write my name with a small "p" and skip the last name entirely.

...

These trees I see are fully worthy, and they know it. When I am with them, I feel fully worthy. They could relate to me as if I were nothing, a piece of lint floating by. But they don't. Maybe they just don't live in a culture that differentiates big from small to mark hierarchy or social class. The fir and the fern are co-equal colleagues. . . . They are just as happy being exactly what they are, "fir" or "fern," as I am being "paul." One of these days I know I will feel quite at home among them, small in all the right ways, making friends . . .

(*First, Summer*, 45-48)

...

The way I coded all of that disrobing of baggy identity markers in previous books was I would get “small, just paul, that’s all.” “Just a guy trying to get by” was another phrase I liked for it. I thought that process would be relatively easy, smooth, even pleasant. It wasn’t.

I soon realized that the process I was engaged in was not simply making someone big become small, someone arrogant become humble, a relatively straightforward transactional exchange. I became preoccupied with both the concept of and the feeling of being “nothing,” which I experienced quite vividly and painfully, an absence of “I am”. . . So right from the outset, “nothing” seemed to be at the core of my search for becoming something, a necessary stage along that path. I don’t mean “nothingness” in any conventional philosophical or religious sense. I mean nothing in the sense of nobody. . . .Nobody. (*Living Hidden*, 89-90)

. . .

Another keyword for me was solitude, which was inevitable for me in a city where I knew no one but my daughter and her husband. This was amplified by the enforced isolation of the pandemic, which was so soothing to me, the first time in my life I felt that my inbuilt reclusive temperament was normal and healthy. I spent a lot of that time reading those ancient wisdom texts I mention to reinforce those feelings. Here are a few passages pertinent to that theme:

That period [the pandemic] of mandatory quietude was a joy, one I wanted to try to sustain going forward. To facilitate that I decided to read philosophical material that might translate my temporary mood into the fabric of my daily life. I chose the Stoics for that, . . . mostly Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, first and second century CE Romans. Since Seneca derives much of his inspiration . . . from Epicurus, a Greek philosopher from the 3rd century BCE . . ., I also read what I could find of his work. Seneca’s style is epistolary, Aurelius’ and Epicurus’ aphoristic, but all are relatively plain speaking, preferring quick, pithy insights or assertions, memorable and therefore memorable, . . . ideally suited to the sort of self-transformation I was in the midst of. (*Living Hidden*, 194). . .

One of [Epicurus’] nuggets of wisdom is [“*lathe biosas*”], which has been translated variously as “live anonymously,” or “live in obscurity,” or most literally, and my preferred version, “live hidden.” . . .

I have been living “hidden,” at least in relation to my published work, for . . . years now, when I made initially, and then kept repeating, a decision to self-publish my work online for free or in print versions at cost. (*Living Hidden*, 195-6)

. . .

[T]his passage [from Seneca] says it all in relation to my settlement.

Retire into yourself as much as you can. . . [T]here is no reason why any pride in advertising your talents abroad should lure you forward into the public eye, inducing you to give readings of your works or deliver lectures. (Seneca, 18) . . .

And Marcus Aurelius says, similarly:

Or is it your reputation that's bothering you? But look at how soon we're all forgotten. The abyss of endless time that swallows it all. The emptiness of those applauding hands. . . .
so keep this refuge in mind: the back roads of your self. Above all, no strain or stress. (Aurelius, 38)

The abyss of time on either side of our puny lives is, of course, endless by comparison. And it swallows everything. . . [I]n the seemingly grand context of our minute here, the applause inevitably fades, including for the most famous among us, and the hands creating it at its apex are, by definition, empty, as are the promises they make. Aurelius goes on:

Then what is to be prized? An audience clapping? No. No more than the clacking of their tongues. Which is all that public praise amounts to—a clacking of tongues. (Aurelius, 72)

Verbal praise may seem more valuable and durable than applause, especially when it's in print, the cash register that keeps tabs on the currency of celebrity in Western culture. But that, too, is short-lived, leaving us short-changed in the end.

Along these same lines [to repeat in an earlier iteration some of the things I've already said in my "Afterthought" to "The Medium is the Hyperobject"] one of the most stunning quotes I encountered is this one from Seneca:

Equally good is the answer given by the person, whoever it was (his identity is uncertain), who when asked what is the object of all the trouble he took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a few people, replied: 'A few is enough for me; so is one; so is none.' (Seneca, 19) . . .

I have said repeatedly that my primary desire for what I write is that it will find at least one reader who really needs, really loves it, and that has happened more often than not. More lately, I have come to believe that the one reader who most needs and loves what I write is actually me, the part in there that just can't seem to learn what he needs to know on his own, requires all of this additional remedial help just to keep afloat, to change himself. For real, I mean. Which gets me back to the quote above. What, anyone including me might fairly ask, is the value of a text that only the writer reads? It seems pointless. The writer must already know what is being written, so why bother writing it for no one else to read? But I have written repeatedly, and believe, that such a characterization of the relationship between what one "knows" and what one writes is nonsense.

For me, unless I make the effort to write, I can't ever know what I end up writing. The process of composition, all this finger-flapping on the keys, is the vehicle for it to come into being. I have almost no idea what I'm about to write when I'm writing. I just start typing, and this is what comes out. It might as well be, and may well be, someone or something else entirely that tells my fingers which words to pick, I feel that far removed, consciously at least, from the transaction. Then I get to read it, just like you do here, assuming anyone else but me ever reads this. And I learn what I need to know, having been taught by a version myself "living hidden," or some other agency for which myself is the conveyance, also living hidden, what I need to know right now. That is the value of a text that "no one" ever reads. . . . I am the "no one" whom my "nobody" writes for and with. And happily so. . .

Here is a further bit of wisdom from Seneca along these lines:

'For whose benefit, then, did I learn it all?' If it was for your own benefit that you learnt it you have no call to fear that your trouble may have been wasted. (Seneca, 18)

No, my trouble has not been wasted, not by a longshot. (*Living Hidden*, 198-203)

. . .

My process was guided as well by a study of Taoist texts. I was particularly attracted to the belief that everyday states of mind can awaken to and then awaken the cosmos we inhabit.

Here are some passages that explain this:

One of the things I like about the Taoist tradition is the assumption that “enlightenment” is not considered a rare transcendency achieved only by an elite few via extended, arduous labor. It is everyday perception, consciousness in effect. The universe can, then, become awakened to itself via any individual life form, from the most complex to the most rudimentary, all of which establish sensory connections to their immediate surroundings, if only to nourish themselves, replicate, and stay alive. Human mind may not, in fact, be the preeminent vehicle for this awakening, simply one among many. Once, though, one considers one’s presence in the world in this light, a certain kind of self-reflexive awareness begins to emerge, the sense that one’s experiences of/in the cosmos are not exclusively or entirely “personal;” that one can, in fact, serve as a portal for this broader kind of awakening on behalf of the cosmos, even if that portal is very tiny, local, and momentary in its nature. When such a self-consciousness (a consciousness of this consciousness) begins to emerge, poetry becomes not only possible but, in some respect, inevitable. It is, in effect, the poetic sensibility in motion, even if/when it never culminates in the production, distribution, or reception of things we might recognize as actual poems. That part of the process is not necessarily irrelevant, but it is not essential. A poet is simply one who

chooses to use perception, and sometimes language, in some way to report, even if only to themselves, what their individual consciousness accomplishes on behalf of the cosmos' awakening. . . .

Certainly, not all poets and/or poems intend to establish mutually beneficial relations with the curious cosmos. Most don't or can't. I personally write many different kinds of poems with many different kinds of ambitions, some of which have specifically to do with my "self" in its narrow worldly sense. But some do in fact invite me to diminish or abandon that self-based identity-center and its many discourses to encounter the world at large in some legitimately meditative or ecstatic (literally, a standing outside-of-myself) sense. In effect, when I approach the world this way, I begin to engage in a mirroring dialogue with what's outside of me. We begin to "see" one another through the other's eyes, in the same way that mutual self-revelation is the outcome when we have a real conversation with another person, each party not just getting to see the other, but also getting to see themselves via reflections in another pool or mirror. When I engage with what is immediately present to me from the cosmos, there is a similar sort of mutual self-learning that I feel going on, one that allows me to experience my seemingly trivial vantage point as extraordinarily valuable, and that causes the local version of my self to begin to evaporate. This is, I believe, a partial and small-scale

example of the genuine transcendence that mystics and gurus experience routinely and more fully. (*waking up*, 200-3)

...

I also spent a lot of time reading early Christian texts, especially the “lost” gnostic gospels, all with an eye toward what Jesus actually said rather than what has been made of what he said in the meantime. In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus names four fundamental changes one must effect to enter what he calls “the Kingdom of Heaven:” become childlike, escape from binary thinking habits, override gender distinctions, and liminalize the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Here are some passages from the Gospel of Thomas pertinent to each, with brief commentaries from my book *waking up*:

(1) childlikeness:

[Jesus said]: “*The man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become one and the same.*”

This one concerns the need to return to the ultimate state of innocence, childlikeness, where language is no longer a factor in perception and learning, an image akin to the one Pelagius uses over and over, the child’s face, to represent the radiant state of sinlessness we are born into. Here “a small child seven days old” becomes a font of wisdom for “[t]he man old in days,” the stage of life I’m at now, when one begins to realize something of consequence about both wisdom and innocence: that it is a matter of what

kind of eyes one looks at the world through that determines what one sees, an alternate sensory version of the “ears to hear” trope [that Jesus uses repeatedly]. A child so new to the world clearly “knows” nothing about it and has no way to share its vision. Yet its eyes see and gather everything equitably, which is what the old man here aspires to do as well. It is at these two extremes—very old and very young—that, Jesus says, first and last (in this case, newborn and elderly) become simultaneous. (*waking up*, 164)

(2) escaping from binary thinking habits:

[Jesus said]: "*When you make the two one, you will become the sons of man, and when you say, 'Mountain, move away,' it will move away.*"

“ . . . and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom.”

This pair makes clear how the power dynamic is supposed to work: When you “make the two one” you can rebuild yourself from the ground up, replacing a culturally induced identity with a true one. “[T]hen you will enter the kingdom” which is right here, right now. (*waking up* 177-80)

(3) overriding gender distinctions:

Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, because women aren't worthy of life."

Jesus said, "*Look, am I to make her a man? So that she may become a living spirit too,*

she's equal to you men, because every woman who makes herself manly will enter the kingdom of heaven." . . . [You must] "make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female . . ."

Jesus is having none of Simon Peter's misogynistic bluster, rebuffing it immediately and forcefully, in what may look initially like a self-contradictory manner, by turning Mary into a man. It seems absolutely clear to me, though, that Jesus is not interested in indoctrinating Mary or his female disciples into an ideology of patriarchy, one that will permanently subordinate them to male domination. He is talking here, I believe, about a form of androgyny, one he recommends to the men among them as well, the merger of male and female identity features, such that neither dominates, both resonate companionably, leading to a transcendence of the oppressive gender binary that makes it impossible to "enter the kingdom of heaven. (*waking up*, 176-7)

(4) inside=outside:

[Jesus said]: *"If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty."*

I've tried repeatedly over the years to describe in my own words what it feels like when I enter one of my ecstatic states while walking in the woods. One of the features all those descriptions have in common is the blurring of the lines between what I normally experience as my "inside," my personal identity, and the "outside," the forest around me, as if the customary boundaries between those two realms of being are fully permeable, one becoming the other and vice-versa. I describe it this way in "The Time Has Come":

As soon as I entered the forest itself, all of that amplified considerably. Every walk in this place is emotionally meaningful to me in some way: soothing, restorative, illuminating, relaxing, thought-provoking, etc. Every now and then, though, one of them is literally ecstatic, in the etymological sense of that word: I am released from "myself" and enter into a deep sense of communion with everything around me. There are no boundaries between and among us any longer. It is a wonderfully liberating feeling. The phrase that kept repeating in my head today was "I love you," and I couldn't tell whether it was coming from the inside-out toward the forest or outside-in toward me. They were in fact exactly the same thing. (*waking up 168-9*)

...

And finally, I simply thought about how to minimize my “footprint,” the way we use that term ecologically. Here’s a passage from “Seeing Another Way Past Self-Extinction,” focused on global warming:

So now that this essay is awake again, it is telling me to argue fiercely that one way forward for humankind—if there is any way at all to avoid our own demise—is to change how we look at the world. Now. For real. It is not scattered around us, an array of disconnected spectacles; or outside us, a bounty of resources to consume visually or materially. It is part of us, we are part of it, in it, with it. . . [L]ose yourself—your “self,” that cultural fiction invented to launch humankind “out of this world”—until you become a part of what’s there and what’s there becomes a part of you, no inside-outside, no top-bottom, no spirit-matter, no binaries at all, no boundaries at all, the kingdom of heaven embodied right here and now. (*Waking Up*, 257-8)

You might rightly ask why I am not including any of my own poems as outcome-products of this inner work. My answer is simple. Read my poems the way I read other poets’ poems: If you want to adapt to my rhythms and enter my world, read a bunch of them fast, which is not a huge investment of time since I call many of them “slights” to emphasize their simple brevity. Some of them actually started out as texts to friends, that slight! Less me, more not-me, a no-self that strives to say what it hears instead of hear what it says. Simple as that. There is a volume of poems by that eponymous title on my website, poems I wrote between 2018 and 2021 (https://paulkameen.com/?page_id=4735), or you can visit my YouTube site

where I created a series of weekly mini-readings of my “tiny poems” in 2022:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X542aeGS2wA&list=PL7FmiLSKG6RRcSKmu2>

[qvHwZXiWjzmfm2o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X542aeGS2wA&list=PL7FmiLSKG6RRcSKmu2)), or you can visit my Instagram site where, for a year (2023), I

paired my tiny poems with images and sounds at a two-post-a-week clip

(<https://www.instagram.com/paulkameen/>). Another volume of my most recent

poems is circulating right now, titled *the other side of the light*, my paradoxical trope

for the sort of identity-blurring experiences I’m striving toward. I hope it will find a

way into the general marketplace, a companion piece with this one.

Finally, the visual metaphor within which my primary philosophical terms are ensconced is, admittedly, tortuous. I wanted to suggest both the commonality that modernism and post-postmodernism share via their interest in “objects” and the radically different ways they orient toward them. The discombobulation created by convex mirrors—if they could distort the perception of time instead of space, which they can’t—seemed like a good vehicle to conjure that effect, an illusion further complicated by the vacuity of the subject-oriented postmodernist interlude (again, temporal rather than spatial) that separates them. “That sentence” may merit the withering critique Sam Johnson directed at 17th century “metaphysical” poetry, where, he says, “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” But it prompted this essay, which I enjoyed writing and, I hope, redeemed it.

So, in summary: That’s why I chose each of those cryptic monikers to characterize the poetic epochs of the last century or so, as well as the figurative frame I set them in. And, more

generally, that in a nutshell is what I was literally thinking when I wrote the clunky sentence that forced me to write all of this to unpack it.