

Nomos and Lyric: On Poetry and Justice

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Abstract

Nasser Hussain often attended to the relation between law and poetry and this article begins with a reading of his brief paper “Auden’s Law like Love.” In a famous essay, “Nomos and Narrative,” Robert Cover linked the communication and the application of legal norms to narrative. This article presents an alternative, anti-normative, and anti-narrative, notion of the relation between poetry and justice that one might call “a-nomos and *lyric*.” It argues that an alternative conception of “poetic justice” persists in the fundamental, paradoxical sociality of a poetic language that resists consumption and subsumption as it does coercion. In its very redundancy, in both the semantic and economic senses of the word, poetry renders to us an apprehension of what “justice” might be as opposed to law. Where law determines, decides, and pronounces sentence, justice opens the space of attentiveness that necessarily suspends the decision of the law. This idea of poetry unties the knotting of nomos to narrative as it stages the indeterminacy of the sentence and of the bounds of experience. Through its redundancy, condensation and proliferation of meaning through tropes, and its delay of the arrival of sense, poetry offers a different understanding of the relation of law and literature than arguments based on narrative can attain. It offers a model of justice beyond the law.

Keywords

Law, justice, poetry, Nasser Hussain, Robert Cover, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Medbh McGuckian, W.H. Auden

“Take all the names of law seriously, David, and it may take you to a thicker place of poetic law and the place of the poem.” Nasser Hussain.

Even now, so long since his untimely death, I am at a loss to know how to do justice to Nasser and the way he lives on for us. To be sure, as his colleague Adam Sitze has said,

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it will be his as-yet uncalculated legacy to have changed forever any analysis of modern law by insisting on its colonial genealogies.¹ It was, indeed, Nasser who first pointed my thinking toward such questions and initiated the occasionally interrupted yet always ongoing dialogue that continued between us for many years. I had the good fortune to take Nasser on as a research assistant in Berkeley at the beginning of the 1990s for a project I was then working on, on violence and the novel. Nasser surveyed for me the extensive historical literature on agrarian and other social movements in nineteenth-century Ireland that earned that land its indelible reputation for violence. But Nasser taught me, and I use the word advisedly since he really did teach me in the most exemplary sense of the expression, to read the historical archive in a counter-sense and to understand how those movements represented, not mere unruliness, but a counter-legal alternative to British colonial law. It was this counter-legality, rather than any especially excessive outrages, that constituted the effect of violence that the state saw in them. And then Nasser nudged me to read Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," introducing me to an essay that has fundamentally informed my thinking ever since and which became a constant reference point in our subsequent conversations. The dialogue in which we engaged has marked my own work in more ways, I suspect, than I can register, exceeding all that I learnt from his extraordinary *Jurisprudence of Emergency*, and marked as much by the irrepressible wit of his conversation as by his incisive intellectual insights. His voice stays with me in all its resonance and gaiety, its indignation and its bite. But it is strictly irreplaceable. So perhaps the only way I can even approach this occasion is by speaking of justice and by doing so in a way that continues an ongoing dialogue that I, we all, had been engaging with Nasser in the years before his all too unexpected passing.

What I want to do here, then, is no more than reflect on the possibility that Nasser's life-long preoccupation with the intimacy of poetry and law, and therefore with the proximity of law and love at every level, opens a no less uncertain conversation on poetry and justice, which is also to say, between the limits of law and the im/possible manifestation of justice. In Nasser's reading of W.H. Auden, a conception of law was intrinsic to poetry, in "the laws of language and poetry itself, grammar and meter."² But, as Nasser so long ago taught me to see, there is for every law, one or multiple "counter-legal" spaces that embody both the imagination and the practice of alternative modes of life. Cutting against its own laws, an alternative conception that we might call "poetic justice" persists in the fundamental, paradoxical sociality of a language that resists consumption and subsumption as it does coercion. In its very redundancy, a term I intend in both its semantic and its economic senses, poetry renders to us an apprehension of what I will begin at least by terming "justice."

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1. I paraphrase loosely here the conclusion of Adam Sitze's memorial essay for Nasser, "That Curious Privilege of Immunity", in this volume.
 2. Nasser Hussain, "Auden's Law Like Love," in this issue, p. 7. This brief talk, which Nasser sadly never had time or occasion to prepare for publication, focuses on Auden's 1939 untitled poem that opens "Law, say the gardeners is the sun." For this poem, see W.H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 154–6.

“Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?” – the question has been posed, in diverse ways, since art’s self-emancipation that was necessarily coeval with its commodification: what are poets [good] for in desolate times, or, as we speak now, in times of austerity?³ Emancipated into autonomy through the emergence of an independent aesthetic sphere, the artist, and not least the lyric poet, appears as the instance of freedom in an otherwise utterly heteronomous society. Art, poetry, became the alibi of rationalization, the space in which we find the freedom denied to us in other spheres. The vanity of the poet, as of those of us also who are committed to the teaching of poetry, may be tickled by a delusory conviction, which is the illusion that one represents for oneself and others a space of uncoerced labor, of freedom and spontaneity, unavailable in the exploited modes of labor that others perform for the Man. Sustained as it is by the real economic costs of outsiderliness, or threatened increasingly by the social devaluation of the *work* of art and the teaching of poetry, this remains an illusion, bound as the freedom of the artist must be to the division of labor within which it finds its sense.

Nonetheless, the moment of the lyric that represents spontaneity, freedom, non-coercion – just as it represents privilege, specialization, commodification with distinction – still contains a moment of truth. The dialectic of its illusion is no less that of its negation of social values, of that which, “in dürftiger Zeit,” seems relentlessly to subdue everything to a value that is found only in exchange. The intrinsic ephemerality of the contemporary lyric differentiates it from the built-in obsolescence of other forms of cultural and material product precisely in representing the moment of its inexhaustibility. That ephemerality has intimately to do with the element of unsubsumed particularity which, as Adorno puts it in “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” is the resistant matter of the lyric even if its formal exigencies return the particular to what he persisted in seeing as the universal.⁴ I doubt I am alone in finding myself returning over and over to any poem that has resonated for me (and this has been tested in my own case by years of returning to the same poems in teaching) only to be baffled and delighted another time by constellations of meaning that I have not yet assimilated. I may remember, as I do only a very few poems, the whole thing, but I will have failed to see or forgotten the relays of sense that vibrate through it. The unsubsumable in the lyric is the unconsumed. Nothing in that helps one to escape the persisting ideological investment in the idea of poetry as freedom, but then nor does that recognition of the ideological usage to which the lyric may be put finally erase the moment of freedom or of reconciled sociality that is historically predicated upon it.

My task here, then, is to reflect on the possibility that the social life of poetic language – and I will necessarily be offering a denser sense of what I would mean by

3. This phrase appears in the [last] stanza of Hölderlin’s “Brot und Wein” stanza 7, in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments* (Michael Hamburger, tr.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 250 and suggested the title of an essay by Martin Heidegger, “Wozu Dichter?” (1946), in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950), pp. 269–320.

4. Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (Rolf Tiedemann, ed., Shierry Weber Nicholson, tr.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 37–54.

poetic language – persists in the fundamental, paradoxical sociality of a language that resists consumption as it does coercion. In its very redundancy, a term I intend in both its semantic and its economic senses, it renders to us an apprehension of something we can tentatively call “justice.”

I. Le Mot “Juste”

What does it mean that in (post-)modernist lyric, *le mot juste*, the word one seeks so often in vain and with endless revision, must, almost inevitably, be the word that designates the undecidable? The one that frays or splays the threads of meaning rather than determining a single sense? Is not this in direct contradiction with the essence and concept of justice, *le mot “juste,”* which surely demands decision, arbitration, the ending of legal ambiguity in the determination of what is right? Is not justice served also by what determines, not only for the present instant, but also with force for the future case? Whereas lyric, for us now, enacts the suspension of time, of rule over the future, residing in the indeterminate. Perhaps also the interminable: as Nasser noted in his essay, citing Hannah Arendt, law, *nomos*, originates in the drawing of limits, in determination.⁵ *Le mot juste*, however, is the word that sets in suspension the possibility of any determination of meaning by acting as a relay or switch point for many tracks of meaning whose concurrence and condensation, whose shifts from foreground to background, dominance to reserve, displace any fixed perspective and defy summary.

In a famous essay, “Nomos and Narrative,” Robert Cover linked the communication and the application of legal norms to narrative:

The codes that relate our normative system to our social constructions of reality and to our visions of what the world might be are narrative. The very imposition of a normative force upon a state of affairs, real or imagined, is the act of creating narrative ... To live in a legal world requires that one know not only the precepts, but also their connections to possible and plausible states of affairs. It requires that one integrate not only the “is” and the “ought,” but the “is,” the “ought,” and the “what might be.” Narrative so integrates these domains. Narratives are models through which we study and experience transformations that result when a given simplified state of affairs is made to pass through the force field of a similarly simplified set of norms.⁶

In this article, I want to begin an approach to an alternative, anti-normative, and anti-narrative, relation to the word “just” that one might call “a-nomos and *lyric*.”

For W.B. Yeats, rhetoric, in contradistinction to poetry, comes from the quarrel with others; implicitly, then it vents in prose.⁷ Prose is the domain both of argument and of narrative, the two dimensions of any staking of claims – to a right or for justice. It

5. This notion of *nomos*, from *nemein*, to divide or distribute, was clearly of importance to Nasser: he first drew my attention to it at a meeting of the Anti-Colonial Machine Collective, Amherst College, September 2012, citing Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (G.L. Ulmen, tr.) (New York: Telos Press, 2003), pp. 70–71.

6. Robert M. Cover, “The Supreme Court, 1982 Term – Foreword: Nomos and Narrative,” *Harvard Law Review* 97(4) (1983–4), 10.

7. W.B. Yeats, “Per Amica Silentia Lunae,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 331.

arrives as and at the sentence. As Cover has it, recognition of one's peculiar claims before the law comes from the capacity to tell a (perhaps competing) story and to base the argument for one's rights or customary practice on that. It assumes a determinate history and the determination to tell it, "a theme single and of determined bounds."⁸ The poem, on the other hand, issues from the space of indeterminacy and dwells there. It needs silence and suspension of the will to enter and even the will to write a poem is not hospitable to it. *Carmina proveniunt animo deducta sereno*.⁹ If the poem is the space of a suspension, of the suspension of determination, it is also that in which the sentence is permanently suspended or, at the least, the sense of the sentence is subject to a stay: it stays. The poem stays.

Giorgio Agamben, in "The End of the Poem," is probably right to claim that the peculiar quality of delay in the poem derives from the poetic law by which "All poetic institutions participate in [the] noncoincidence, [the] schism between sound and sense."¹⁰ The homophony of rhyme no more corresponds to the identity of meaning of the rhyming words than metrical recurrence does to the unit of sense: for Agamben, unlike Yeats, or Paul Valéry, "the possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose" [109]. Accordingly, the end of the poem, where the metrical unit for once coincides with the unit of sense, also puts an end to that which makes it poetry, "as if for poetry the end implied a catastrophe and loss of identity" [112]. The formal work of poetry accordingly becomes that of delay, agreeing with Mallarmé's insight that the poem is *un être de suspens* [110], committed to the deferral of its own decease. And it is literally a matter both of life and death and of the law:

As if the poem as a formal structure would not and could not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically withdrawn from it, since the end would imply a poetic impossibility: the exact coincidence of sound and sense. At the point in which sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense, the poem looks for shelter in suspending its own end in a declaration, so to speak, of the state of poetic emergency.¹¹

For Agamben, this specific *crise de vers* is provoked by the condition of closed forms like the *canzone*; moreover, the outcome his law of non-coincidence rests on an assumption that sense unfolds linearly, unidirectionally, through the poem or through the sentence to arrive at the *sententia*. But the delay of poetry derives no less from the schism

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8. Wordsworth, *Prelude*, Book I (1805–6), 668–9, in *The Prelude: A Parallel Text* (J.C. Maxwell, ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 70.
 9. Ovid, *Tristia*, I. 39: "Song comes fine spun from a soul at peace." In Ovid, *Tristia. Ex Ponto* (Arthur Leslie Wheeler, tr.), 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 4–5.
 10. Giorgio Agamben, "The End of the Poem," in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics* (Daniel Heller-Roazen, tr.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 110.
 11. Agamben, *End of the Poem*, p. 114, invokes St. Paul, for whom the *katechon*, the one that withholds or "slows and delays the advent of the Messiah," protects "the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the breath of his mouth, and bring to nought by the manifestation of his coming." *II. Thessalonians*, 2: 6–8.

between sense and sense that is internal to the word and which governs the distribution of meaning across the whole spatial matrix of the poem.¹² From both conditions of the poem stems the possibility of its perpetual stay of judgment, of decision, that has made of poetry's declaration of emergency not an exception, but a rule, to paraphrase Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Its suspension of the law, however, is not a decision made for the sake of the Law, in defense of the law, but the sign of poetry's commitment to a radical indecision that affirms not only the non-coincidence of sound and sense, but the non-coincidence of sense itself with itself, the fundamental inadequacy of the sentence.

In this, the poem stays for the advent of justice and is counter to law. Law determines, decides, pronounces sentence. It must cut, and in cutting kill.¹³ In this respect, even any non-violent struggle that stakes its claims on law has a lethal aspect. It does seek to deliver the fatal blow, if only in "mental strife": it reaches for the decisive blow. Justice is not contrary to the necessary decision of the law, but opens the space of attentiveness that necessarily suspends the fatal decision of the law.

And yet poetry is intimate with both law and justice: it forces at every moment those acts of judgment and decision that are *reading* even as it demands, in the unfinal instance, the suspension of decision that depends upon, hangs on, the inner equilibrium of the poem's work.

Narrative is path, poem place, or better, passage. How does one resolve the dialectic, or is it the aporia, the impossible passage, between law and justice, politics and poetry?

Attentiveness, "natural prayer of the soul," is the disposition to let things be in their places.¹⁴ But it is not passive. It is relational and profoundly so, both in comprehending how things relate – and in this the counterpart of dialectics – and in apprehending their insistence, the resistance in being-there that is the thingliness of things. Things take place in this provisional passage that is here and could be elsewhere – a u/topia – and are vibrant both with the histories that mark them and with their relation, of dependence as of displacement, with the things that are around them, near and far, stepping away into indeterminate distances, both of space and of time.

Attentiveness registers both what harmonizes things and what is awry in them. It registers the unjustness in their histories and their relations – the skew and torsion that is the record of violence and coercion we call, wrongly, the law of nature or natural law. The space of attentiveness is not quiet. It admits pain and wrongness and takes the measure of what is out of joint. The space of attentiveness is therefore not a space of peace: it is unsettled before the dis-articulation of things and rubs up against all the discordance of wrong. One cannot take possession of a utopia even if one dwells there for a moment, squatter in aporia. Utopia is a thing that resists possession in order to remain, to stay, this

12. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 153: "une différence intérieure [au mot]."

13. See Robert Cover, "Violence and the Word," *Yale Law Journal* 95 (1986), 1601: "Legal interpretive acts signal and occasion the imposition of violence upon others."

14. Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Hannah Arendt, ed., Harry Zohn, tr.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 134. Benjamin is citing the French theologian and philosopher Nicolas Malebranche.

space of unsettled attentiveness that is infused not with a passive acceptance of things as they are, but by the awareness that the advent of justice – the uncoerced relation of things in their differences – has yet to come.

Thus it is impossible to dwell in the utopian space that attentiveness announces, though one may perhaps stay there. The image of the just in the poem, that the poem is, is subject to the counter-knowledge of the wrong that inhabits words as it inhabits things, the torsion that continually skews words in their accumulated histories from the relation to things, call it naming, that might have been just, allowing things to dwell in a language adequate to them. Poetry cannot exist in a space dissociated from wrong, not extrinsically, because it would be unethical, compensatory, a lie, but because its very material prevents it. Wrongness infects its medium. The poem that sought to dwell in a space apart would bear with it into that space the very violence it sought to efface, in the violence of its effacement.

So much haunts Auden's "Precious Five," the poem with which Nasser ends his essay "Law Like Love," doing so with that canny compression by which he always left the traces of a counter-thought within his thinking. It is a poem in which the speaker revolts against the violent indifference of the world to human sensuous existence, but seems to end by finding resolution in the assumption of what Nasser names "gratitude":

The sky would only wait
 Till all my breath was gone
 And then reiterate
 As if I wasn't there
 That singular command
 I do not understand
 Bless what there is for being,
 Which has to be obeyed, for
 What else am I made for,
 Agreeing or disagreeing?¹⁵

And yet the sententia, the *mots justes*, with which the poem seems to resolve, splits in itself at least three ways, establishing separate tracks of meaning that undercut what might have been an unwarranted consolatory conclusion:

- 1) Bless what there is (just) for being;
- 2) Bless what there is because it is what is there;
- 3) Bless what is there on behalf of or for the use/exploitation of being.

Reconciliation is haunted by the possibility of the return of relations of domination – "it is what it is" – or of consumptive use, even as it is by the relation of command and subordination that follow: "which has to be obeyed." Poetic justice lies in this reckoning with the discrete returns of law in the guise of love or gratitude, in the aporia of indecision, even as it introduces, in the divided senses of the word, the possibility of a counter-legal response to the conclusions of the law.

15. Auden, "Precious Five," in *Collected Shorter Poems*, p. 288.

That is why there always seems something not only false, but even offensive in the poem that reaches for a premature reconciliation. The conclusion of a well-known poem by Seamus Heaney, “The Harvest Bow,” offers an instance of such a willed resolution, a pastoral version of what Adorno calls *erpreßte Versöhnung*, reconciliation under duress:

The end of art is peace
 Could be the motto of this frail device
 That I have pinned up on our deal dresser—
 Like a drawn snare
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.¹⁶

Resolution can only be attained here by the excision of an ambiguity, by the willed suppression of the discomfiting awareness that if art indeed aims at peace – and that is by no means certain – it is shadowed by the possibility that peace, in which every thing would be in its designated place, would spell the end of art itself. Art, poetry above all, on account of the saturation of its medium with the echoes of abuse, demands the unsettled disquiet that registers the very wrongness that art, haunted by the image of uncoerced right relation, accommodates as the mark of its own shortfall.

Two versions of justice are in play then, balance and sword. The justice that seeks the space of equilibrium, in which its sway recedes from the determination of things in their unsettled relations with one another; the justice that grates against the wrongness that is in the grain of things, would rage against the violent law of things as they are even in the name of things as they might be: the utopian advent of the poem in its indeterminacy. So the poem dwells in injustice, is the teller of what is awry; so the poem shapes the space of justice in its dwelling.

II. The Experience of the Poem

Every poem takes off from its occasion, whether that occasion lie in an experience or in the uncanny arrival of a phrase or an image: *ça décolle*, as the French might say. But what does “experience” here mean? It could mean no more than a grounding in empirical fact, in the well-observed detail much beloved of certain critics, the acutely rendered phenomenon or phenomenological relation, which certainly entails the experience of the writer in the sense of reproducing a transaction with an object. But generally experience implies something different, having reference less to the mode of rendering the object than to the reflection on the disposition or responsiveness of the subject. In this sense, experience implies a passage through a world, the subject put at risk, if momentarily, in that passing. Etymologically, experience is simply empirical, the putting to test or trial of

16. Seamus Heaney, “The Harvest Bow,” in *Field Work* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1979) p. 58; Theodor Adorno, “Reconciliation under Duress,” in Ernst Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 151–76. Heaney’s own discomfort with the phrase, borrowed from Coventry Patmore via Yeats – is apparent in his interview with Randy Brandes, *Salmagundi* 80 (Fall 1988), 21.

a thing or proposition, equivalent, as it still is in French, to an experiment. But the trial of passing through, *ex-periri*, is shadowed by a peril if, following Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, one “understands the word strictly” in its Latin sense as “the passage through a danger – and guards especially against referring to the thing as something ‘lived,’ or to some anecdote.” *Erfahrung*, then, and not *Erlebnis*, to use the German distinction in which *Erfahrung* retains the sense of passing or crossing – *fahren* – registered in the Indo-European root “Per-.”¹⁷ A sense of risk or endangerment seems endemic to the phenomenon of passing or crossing over, experiences deeply associated with a trial or a test, but no less resonant with the possibility of a fading, failing or “passing” of the subject. One is tempted to say that if the pun is the oscillation of sense between two meanings, then metaphor – *meta-phorein*, transference, passing over – is that perilous passage where meaning slips into another likeness.

In its received sense, however, experience repossesses the moment of passage in the form of an accumulation of appropriated moments, hedging against the experimental moment of indecision in which this subject must test its ground. The initiating experience in which the subject is thrown into disarray returns as the object of that subject’s appropriation, much as John Stuart Mill’s famous passages on the individual render that subject as the product of repeated appropriations of the other, “the ascertained results of human experience” used and interpreted in his own way. That appropriation and accumulation of experience is what Mill, paraphrasing Wilhelm von Humboldt, designates “the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole,” the subject utterly restored to itself after the passage through alterity.¹⁸ This fundamentally liberal conception of experience, disseminated through a very British commitment to empiricism, pragmatism and good sense, also gives the law for what is generally regarded as the “well-made poem”: experience appropriated and rendered out of its strangeness.

But just as practical criticism, that critical exercise that develops in the subject what Mill calls the capacity “to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision” [262], generally concludes, must conclude as William Empson puts it, in the moment of tactful arrest of meaning’s possible proliferations, so experience understood in this sense cuts its path determinately through the open and unraveling field of potentialities.¹⁹ “The road lies plain before me ... Single and of determined bounds” is the capture of experience from the frayed potentials of a fallen world, a reappropriation of a world which once “was all before them, where to choose. ...”²⁰ But as the poem *takes off* from its

17. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Poésie comme expérience* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1986), pp. 30 and 30-31n, where he cites Roger Munier’s extensive comments on the etymology of *expérience* and *Erfahrung*.

18. John Stuart Mill, “Of Individuality,” Chapter 3 of *On Liberty* in *Essays on Politics and Society*, vol. I, *Collected Works*, vol. 18 (J.M. Robson, ed., intro. by Alexander Brady) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 261.

19. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 244.

20. The former passage in Wordsworth, *Prelude*, Book I (1805–6), pp. 668-9, thus recapitulates the conclusion of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, 666 in *Poetical Works* (H.C. Beeching, ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 448.

experience, it is also the place of an unfolding differentiation of senses for which what counts as experience is that sense of affective and passing disarray Brian Massumi designates “intensity,” the “inassimilable.” Poetry might be the trace of an experience of sheer virtuality, where multiple potentialities, generated out of a momentary disequilibrium that the subject passes through, imperilled, in a “pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies.”²¹ The poem, out of this experience, generates a redundancy of possible meaning that is the trace of an experience recalcitrant to appropriation.

This is a redundancy utterly at odds with prolixity, its principle and economy lying in the internal fissuring of the word. “In the beginning was the pun,” says Beckett’s Murphy. Following Massumi’s thinking about affect, the pun would be the site of an “intensity” out of which the lyric act emerges and in which the valence of the word remains in a state of suspended suspense. But can the pun, as the model of the poetic speech act, actually effect a pure suspension of meaning in undecidability, or is what it produces rather an incessant flip-flop of the senses, between mutually exclusive decisions as to meaning which utterance demands at the expense of the undecidability of the sense? Is there then a possibility of destabilizing sovereignty through the vibrato of alternating decisions, a kind of campy utterance able always to suggest the possibility or shadow persistence of the excluded meaning in the provisionally sovereign one? Indecision, punning and the insovereign are intimately linked: it is in the figure of the indecisive sovereign that Benjamin, according to Agamben, locates a subversive response to Carl Schmitt’s magisterial “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”²² His prototype is Hamlet, arch-punner, archetype of indecision and delay.

Reading confronts this proliferating redundancy of potential sense with a certain dismay, inclined as it is to the moment of decision, discrimination, singling down to determinate bounds in the containment of meaning. This moment of sovereign decision, which adjudicates among possible readings in the name of verisimilitude or good sense, is the law of reading, even where it is disguised as that most class-marked virtue, tact. It is not something the reader can easily avoid: reading as sense-making activity is necessarily an act of singling down or out even as it strives on occasion to hold several possibilities in mind in order to do justice to the undecidable potentialities of the poem.

The appeal to experience as the “way in” to a poem is the correlative of this necessary grounding in singling-down, possibly as necessary in itself as the decisive act of reading. But it does not do justice to the poem, which is where lyric forces the non-identity of law and justice. If experience is the act of trial and testing, what it governs is the return to decisions as to the proper, against the trajectory of the poem’s flight from its ground. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s “The Swan” proactively shreds any sense of the foundational originality of experience, layering instead multiple possible domains of reference and registering the preformation of apparently spontaneous relations by transferrable patterns:

21. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 30–33.

22. Giorgio Agamben, “Gigantomachy Concerning a Void,” in *State of Exception* (Kevin Attell, tr.) (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2005), pp. 55–6.

He calls it their stage, which echoes our first misrecognition of unity. Instances of false unity, he calls the imaginary, and he locates in them sites of her dreams, out of which she is able to want him. The way stage lighting can be a story by itself, now she makes time for a story, not coming from her or her coming from her story, but both from before, seeing a flock of birds fly up from a frozen pond, while you stand in the wind, instead of hearing wind about to arrive across a huge space, so that her train passes a lagoon in Connecticut, *and* she sees swans swimming at the edge of ice piled against the shore, feminine swans. Remembering what I heard you say and fixing my desire for you simultaneously, a meaning of instability, not hesitance, holds you *and* the swans accountable for making the desire, although the meaning of the desire existed prior to being desired.

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "The Swan" in *I Love Artists: New and Selected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 52.

The long, wavering and embracing lines make space for the play of pronouns – he, she, you, I – that in their capacity as “shifters” unsettle the sites and origins of any given experience. The “stage” that appears as a particular epoch in a relationship or the stage of a journey is simultaneously the theatrical stage on which performers take their cue, enacting “a story, not coming from her or her coming from her story, but both from before,” as dreams prior to any given experience shape the possibilities of desire. The poem’s title, which inevitably recalls a whole tradition of symbolist evocations of the swan, from Baudelaire to Mallarmé to Yeats, and the ever-present French pun on *cygne* and *signe*, announces instead an undoing of the symbolist law by which the particular experience becomes incandescent with the whole: the apparently specific experience of seeing “a flock of birds fly up” becomes a metonymic series of contingently related events (an emphatic “and, and, and”), its possible resemblances structured by desires whose experiential basis is always staged prior to the advent of the subject. The feminine swan, or *pen*, marks the punning “meaning of instability” that dissolves the experiential law of identity into the coexistence of metonymically associated events, domains or spheres of life. Here, lyric that stages the contingency of story troubles “the very imposition of a normative force upon a state of affairs” that tie precepts to experience: it unties the knotting of *nomos* to narrative as it stages the indeterminacy of the sentence and of the bounds of experience.

III. *Dichten* = *Condensare*

Basil Bunting once remarked that *Dichten* = *Condensare*, a chance observation circulated by Ezra Pound in the *ABC of Reading*.²³ Retrieved from Pound’s imagist residues, with their fascistic insistence on communicative efficiencies, the formulation is attractive, and certainly describes one characteristic of whatever one would now think of as the practice of “lyric.” Condensation is of lyric’s nature: that may mean its commitment to a maximum of compression, the reduction of whatever seems extraneous discourse, reflection, digression. In his lyric long poem *Briggflatts* Bunting compares this process of

23. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 36.

paring down to the work of the mason – “Brief words are hard to find,/ shapes to carve and discard” – or to the composer’s economy – “how Domenico Scarlatti/condensed so much music into so few bars,/with never a crabbed turn or a congested cadence.”²⁴ Or it may mean what is surely a more essential aspect of lyric and of the ways it lends itself to reading: its capacity or its drive to condense in the Freudian sense, layering figure upon figure, tracks of signification upon other tracks, as if laying a complex set of musical themes one upon the other, “to thread, live and alert, Schoenberg’s maze” [*Briggflatts*, 47]. In the poem, as opposed to musical composition, repetition and development take place along lines that are at once those of sound *and* sense. Condensation in this sense is almost the opposite of paring down, even if its economy is equally conducive to a certain spareness of form. It maximizes the proliferation of sense, elaborating from any word its possible relays of meaning, linking that word to disparate nodes in a network of multiple significations.

The excess of meaning – and by excess one means not a surfeit but an abundance beyond communicative efficiency – correlates with the divergent registers on which, and not only as metaphor, any given work can signify. The pun is its principle, but strictly it is not punning, but a deployment of the inner divergences of the word. It resembles ambiguity in the range of possibilities Empson discovered in that term, but an ambiguity that is not necessarily emotional or attitudinal, but may merely (merely?) set in play the obscure relations among separated spheres that “usage” holds apart, as an effect of the divisions of labor and of practice. In this respect, a practice of writing that resembles or functions through metaphor sets in motion effects that are those of metonymy: effects of displacement among registers that are simultaneously, if at different depths of field, active in the same moment of apprehension. It pushes back against the moment of identity that metaphor reduces to, infiltrating a noisy dissonance back into the consonance of figure and sense. So Paul Celan inverts Nietzsche’s dictum on truth, that mobile horde of dead metaphors and metonyms:

Ein Dröhnen: es ist
 die Wahrheit selbst
 unter die Menschen
 getreten,
 mitten ins
 Metapherngestöber.
 A booming: it is
 truth itself

24. Basil Bunting, “Briggflatts,” in *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 42 and 54.

stepped
 among humans,
 right in the middle
 of the metaphor-flurry.²⁵

The play of interference, of a booming or buzzing like radio static, that Celan is attuned to signals that the effect of truth in the poem finds its place not *in* the metaphor, as the identity that emerges from difference, but *amidst* [mitten ins] metaphors. The interplay of metaphors across divergent fields establishes – over and above any meaning that interpretation can isolate – a shuttling movement of truth across the space of the poem, conveying a sense of things held in relation rather than a *sententia* at which we arrive.

In such metaphorical interplay we may also locate the discrete politics of the lyric that has likewise nothing to do with the utterance of statements or commitment to program. In lyric, the subject of decision and expression dissolves into the suspension from which the poem and the possibilities it sets in motion can take flight. Medbh McGuckian's "The Over Mother" takes off from the suspended animation of Irish political prisoners (her "cleverly dead and vertical audience") who in face of their indefinitely extended sentence under a state of exception managed to create an alternative circuit of communication, performative and metonymic, out of which other, fugitive conditions of speaking and relating emerge:

In the sealed hotel men are handled
 as if they were furniture, and passion
 exhausts itself at the mouth. Play kisses
 stir the circuits of the underloved body
 to an ever-resurrection, a never-had tenderness
 that dies inside me.²⁶

Detained in "the sealed hotel," in corridors along which the prison resonates with other closed disciplinary spaces, convent or cloister, school or barrack, prisoners whom the law deprived

25. Paul Celan, "Ein Dröhnen," from *Atemwende* (1967) in *Gedichte II* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 89; Celan may have in mind Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum that truth is "a mobile horde of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms...." See Paul de Man's discussion of this comment from Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 239–62.

26. Medbh McGuckian, "The Over Mother," in *Captain Lavender* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1995), p. 64. On the communicative resources of the protesting prisoners in Northern Irish prisons, see David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Chapter 4.

of personhood – “handled like furniture” – found the means to disseminate their words as contraband, with the peculiarly erotic charge that the dismantling of subjecthood releases:

words fly out from your climate of unexpectation
 in leaky, shallowised night letters—
 what you has spoken?

The famous, somewhat outworn symbol of the prisoners, the lark, becomes the allegory for the flight of the poem itself, or rather, the allegory of the poem *as flight*, secularizing popular iconography’s christological representations of the naked, bearded prisoners in the outstretched wings that frame the poem’s “ever-resurrection”:

I keep seeing birds
 that could be you when you stretch out
 like a syllable and look to me
 as if I could give you wings.

Identification of the historical or political materials the poem draws on does not anchor its meaning. On the contrary, this is the matter from which the poem departs, summoning into play across the network of metaphors erotic or religious “passions” that in turn transform political reference into figurative resources far in excess of their occasion.

Dichten = Condensare is a formula for this discrete abundance that characterizes the productivity of lyric even in its reduction. But in its implication of a certain kind of compression or compactness, the formula does not address the equally definitive dimension of lyric that is silence, blank space, gap and break. What of the line break where sense is suspended, if only for a second’s hesitation, perhaps for a long and, once registered, unignorable duration, over an abyss? Where enjambment is not just the carrying forward of sense across the break but its momentary interruption and uncertainty? “I keep seeing birds | that could be you. . . .” What of moments where the break or gap is an unspoken, unarticulated site where meaning is dissolved and is changed, skipping to another register or taking on a new direction defined by the abrupt performativity of the poem? Are these the antithetical moments of the “poemwork,” those of displacement rather than condensation? If so, they seem to work by a principle quite different than that of “contiguity”: the break, like missed-beat syncopations of the unconscious, ruptures continuity, connectivity, where the trajectories or vectors of meaning in the poem snap or shift track abruptly, and in a manner or through an operation – a working – no longer if ever accessible to explication. Such moments resemble rather the passage of a charge across a gap like synaptic transmission – “Void but even there a spark plays”²⁷ – or the workings of gravity across enormous spaces. In this, they are no less essential to the poemwork than

27. John Wilkinson, “Dressing-Up Box,” *Blackbox Manifold* 18 (Summer 2017): <http://www.manifold.group.shef.ac.uk/issue18/JohnWilkinsonBM18.html>.

the operation of condensation and no less constitutive of the constellation that the poem constructs.

Are these gaps and breaks more difficult for the poet to control in the act of composition than the effects of condensation, which can involve preconceived elements of the construction? Are they the traces of unanticipated and unpredictable paths of arrival of sense, possibly inarticulable sense, that oblige a sudden shift of register or direction that remains unaccountable even if, at some point, it comes to make a certain inevitable sense? This may suggest the difference between a paratactic assemblage that appears arbitrary and of low energy and one that seems peculiarly charged, no matter how arbitrary the procedure that has determined the sudden arrival of a conjunction may appear to be. In this respect, the effects of “hiatus of form” that Adorno locates in his essay “Parataxis: on Hölderlin’s Late Poetry,” that eliminate the “middle element . . . as being external and inessential,”²⁸ produce quite different effects from thinly motivated assemblage. But the question remains as to why, why the charge in one case and not in the other? At some point, that question must open onto the peculiar modality of truth in the poem, truth unlike any other kind, propositional or empirical, though both are generally drawn into the force-field of meaning as the poem organizes it. Truth as and in the justice of the poem.

IV. Constellation

In his work on German tragedy, Benjamin proposes that truth in the Idea manifests not so much, if at all, as adequation, in the identical proposition, but arrives in the form of a constellation, as the “configuration of elements.”²⁹ It is in this manner that one would have to conceive of the way in which truth arrives in or to the poem. The poem does not contain, possess, or express a truth – as Benjamin puts it, “Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession. . . . For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object – even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth it is self-representation and is therefore immanent in it as form” [29–30]. To put it another way, Adorno’s, “The truth of the poem does not exist without the structure” [112]. Truth comes to (in) it not as an epiphany valid and possessed for all time, nor as the *sententia* with which it concludes. It comes out of (and here the instability of the prepositions I am using marks precisely the shifting process by which the truth of the poem by turns is produced by *and* arrives in the space it makes) the relations of force established by the disposition or constellation of its elements. In that case, it is not only in the language but no less through the gaps, the empty spaces of the poem, in its spacings where there is nothing to be possessed, that the articulation of the elements, their gravitational rhythmic relations, are set in play.

28. Theodor W. Adorno, “Parataxis: on Hölderlin’s Late Poetry,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (Rolf Tiedemann, ed., Shierry Weber Nicholson, tr.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 129 and 133.

29. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (John Osborne, tr.) (London: Verso, 1985), p. 34.

In this respect, it is not only a matter of what is said, but also of the distance between words, the speed or delay of their arrival, their sequence, in the arrangement of the poem. The rhythm of the poem is never only a question of its metrical patterns, free or recurrent, or of its beat, but lies also in the overall movement of rush and delay – and particularly of delay. The slowing of apprehension, the suspension of meaning, is a crucial element of the integration of sound and sense in the poem. In that way, the notion of lyric as speech set to music retains its force even for poems written with only the remotest expectation of their being read aloud. They conform nonetheless to a movement, fundamentally physical, of tongue, lips, teeth, mouth, of the breath that moves through them, and of the body swayed to music on which the opacity and density of the body as matter brakes any forward flow of sound, any rush to sense. Articulation is necessarily delay, just as the distance from one term in the poem from some other to which it relates – as echo, fulfillment, correspondence, rhyme, transformation, as any node in a signifying mesh – delays and relays meaning across multiple possible networks. The poem militates against the will to immediacy, whether in the form of the identical proposition, the utterly adequate and possessive incarnation of the Idea in the concept, or in the form of communication, the portable packet of sense.

This is the manner in which not only Benjamin's location of truth in the constellation, but also the corresponding conception of "pure language" that he develops in "The Task of the Translator" comes to bear on lyric: not as the Adamic and innocent ur-language for which the name and the named are indivisible, but in its capacity to make and unmake sense, its way of being at what Benjamin describes as that movement where "all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished."³⁰ In this space of the dissolution of meaning, "pure language" makes the space for the arrival of poetic truth.

This notion of the advent of truth in the poem suggests less the form of a solar illumination, of a Word or an origin, than it resembles the truing of a wheel, or allowing a plumb line to fall true in a meeting of measure with matter. The truth that arrives in the poem is the truth of "true love": a displacing mix of uncanny recognition and vertiginous estrangement. Love will tear us apart, again. True love does not affirm the subject, but sets the subject utterly at risk. The true here is the roll of the dice for the ultimate stakes, not the abolition of chance. True love must always be in some degree a missed encounter, the recognition it offers never being far from a sense of what comes too late, in delay, even if it is "right".

Was uns
zusammenwarf,
schrickt auseinander,
ein Weltstein, sonnenfern,
summt.

30. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Hannah Arendt, ed., Harry Zohn, tr.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 80.

That which
 threw us together
 startles apart,
 a world-boulder, sun-remote,
 hums.³¹

If, as Lacan suggests, the model of “true love” is the transference, the true indicates the insistence of a form, not a destination arrived at or a being possessed:

A flock of birds flying up acquires the shape of her arcs above the ice, a mirror stage
 echoing our first misrecognition or the imaginary, to look again and then look,
 so if he says or she says, my dream about you is older than my knowing you,
 does that mean it was dreamed before your meeting him or her? ...
 Its story is light that moves from cue to cue as over ground.

[Berssenbrugge, 53]

One could say that the truth of the poem, then, or truth *in* the poem, truth as it happens in the poem, happenstance, is not propositional but designates a shaping or arrangement, that event where “nothing will have taken place but the place.”³² In that place, perhaps, something like justice may come to be, as the passage of an event, not the enunciation of a sentence.

31. Paul Celan, “Was uns,” from *Lichtzwang* (1970), *Gedichte II*, p. 276; (Michael Hamburger, tr.) in *Paul Celan: Poems* (Selected, translated and introduced by Michael Hamburger) (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), p. 237.

32. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés* in *Mallarmé: The Poems* (Keith Bosley, tr.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 292–3.